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BOYS, WRITING, AND THE LITERACY GENDER GAP:  
WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW

A Dissertation Presented

by

Nancy Disenhaus

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education  
Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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## ABSTRACT

The existence of a persistent gender gap in literacy achievement, and particularly in writing, is not in dispute: boys trail girls in every assessment at state, national, and international levels. Yet although this basic fact is not in dispute, nearly everything else concerning the gender gap in literacy achievement—its causes, consequences, and potential solutions—remains hotly contested, particularly in the public and professional discourse. Scholarly research offers insights that frequently challenge the prevailing public discourse, but this research has been conducted primarily in the U.K., Australia, and Canada, leaving the experiences of U.S. students largely unexplored. Herein lies the problem: an inadequate (or worse, inaccurate) understanding of the context, causes, and realities of boys' writing experiences can lead to proposed policy and pedagogy solutions that range from the ineffective to the potentially harmful, with unintended consequences for both boys and girls that may worsen the underlying conditions implicated in boys' literacy underachievement. Equity demands that we address, in particular, the poor writing achievement of boys of low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is important that policy-makers consider the question of "which boys," as the writing achievement gap is far more dramatic for boys from a background of poverty than for middle-class boys.

This study employed qualitative methods and a phenomenological lens to explore the writing experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of 21 young men currently enrolled in four colleges and universities in two New England states, including first-year and senior-year college students. The data collected from interviews and writing samples contradicted a number of the generalizations about boys prevalent in the public discourse, and offered a more nuanced view of the role of gender in boys' writing experiences than that presented in much of the scholarly discourse. The results of this study also challenge a number of commonly held beliefs about boys' and young men's writing motivations and preferences. The study's findings can contribute toward the ultimate goal of improving educators' and policy-makers' responses to the gender gap in writing by offering a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the writing experiences of boys and young men.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **The Persistent Problem of Boys' Low Literacy Achievement**

I have come to the understanding that it is not one problem, but several. The problem is caused by poverty, immaturity, inattention to tasks, less than robust expectations by parents and school staff coupled with a “let’s give them the gift of time” attitude, and above all, the laissez-faire view that “boys will be boys,” they will catch up when they mature—but they don’t.

(Ken Page, Vermont Principals Association President,  
cited in Leadership Champlain, 2012, p. 5)

If we do not want to live in a society where a large segment of the population is missing the joy and understandings that are available through literature and critical reading, writing, and thought, then we cannot afford to take these issues lightly.

(Taylor, 2004, p. 291)

The existence of a persistent gender gap in literacy achievement, and particularly in writing, is not in dispute: boys trail girls in every assessment at state, national, and international levels.<sup>1</sup> This gap matches or surpasses the achievement gaps of our society’s most historically oppressed and marginalized groups, including racial and ethnic minorities (Newkirk, 2003; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Taylor, 2004). Yet although this basic fact is not in dispute, nearly everything else concerning the gender gap in

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<sup>1</sup>Vermont’s New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) results for 2010 showed 11<sup>th</sup> grade girls outperforming boys by 18 percentage points in terms of the number achieving writing proficiency, and by 14% in reading proficiency (Vermont Department of Education, 2012). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores for 12th graders remained virtually unchanged from 1971-2008, with girls maintaining a 10-point scale score lead over boys (NAEP, 2008); in the NAEP 2002 assessment, 21% fewer boys than girls scored at or above proficient in writing at grade 8 (Smith & Wilhelm, 2009). International reading scores show girls outperforming boys in reading in nearly every country assessed (PIRLS 2011, 2006).

literacy achievement—its causes, consequences, and potential solutions—remains hotly contested.

Herein lies the problem: an inadequate (or worse, inaccurate) understanding of the context, causes, and realities of boys' writing experiences and achievement can lead to proposed solutions that range from the ineffective to the potentially harmful, with unintended consequences for both boys and girls that may worsen the underlying conditions implicated in boys' literacy underachievement. Many widely disseminated proposals for improving boys' literacy achievement are grounded in a view of masculinity as a "natural," essential quality of all boys. This view gives rise to generalizations and stereotypes which lump all boys into one group—one heteronormative version of masculinity, a construct which "essentializes male-female difference and ignores difference and exclusion within the gender category" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836), constructing all boys as a homogeneous, heterosexual group conforming to socially dictated norms of masculinity. This leads to proposals ranging from single-sex schools to classroom bookshelves divided according to gender.

Scholars, on the other hand, tend to view gender as a socially constructed pattern of sanctioned gender performance behaviors specific to a particular culture (Alloway, 2007; Davies, 1997; Young, 2001; Butler, 1988). Scholars have disputed the essentializing view that masculinity is inborn and "natural" to all boys, instead arguing that masculinity and its expression are a series of learned behaviors, a complex performance enacted by boys to accord with culturally sanctioned roles. These scholars argue that addressing boys' underachievement in literacy requires addressing the social

construction of masculinity. According to this view, we must explore the ways this socially constructed gender role affects literacy performance and engagement, rather than adopting a generalized approach to “boys” as a unified group who experience their identities (including their literacy attitudes and beliefs) in a single way. (These views will be elaborated in the literature review, below.)

Yet understanding the social construction of masculinity and its effects on boys’ literacy achievement is only part of the solution, for the boys who populate our classrooms today are a product of the social conditioning of their culture, which leads many—but not all—boys to perform a heteronormative version of masculinity, carefully adhering to what Pollack (1998) has called “the Boy Code.” For such boys, some of the suggestions for improving boys’ literacy achievement that come from an essentializing and generalizing perspective, although they do not apply to all boys or to only boys, may nonetheless offer educators ways to engage some boys in school literacy because they address the realities of the many boys in our classrooms right now who are striving to enact the culturally sanctioned heteronormative version of masculinity.

### **The Present Study**

Many unfounded assumptions permeate the popular discourse concerning boys’ and young men’s literacy beliefs, attitudes, preferences, and identities. These assumptions factor into the policy decisions crafted by educational leaders, at both the local and state levels, to address the literacy achievement gender gap. As a consequence, policy responses can be ineffective or, at worst, harmful for many boys, and often ignore factors besides gender that are fundamental to literacy achievement—in particular, issues

of class and the social construction of masculinity, as the literature review below will indicate.

My own experience as an English teacher of high school and college students has led me to question many of the assumptions on which the popular discourse is commonly founded (see the literature review below for discussion of the popular discourse). Scholarly research has refuted many of these assumptions, as well as the proposed solutions they lead to, and offers a compelling set of alternative ways to understand and address the literacy gender gap.

My study employed qualitative methods to explore the writing experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and self-concepts of boys and young men enrolled in writing courses in several higher education settings in two New England states, in their own voices. The study's findings can contribute toward the ultimate goal of improving educators' responses to the gender gap in writing by offering a more accurate understanding of the writing experiences of boys and young men. I employed a qualitative approach, building on the findings of my 2011 pilot study (Disenhaus, 2011) of the writing experiences and attitudes of young men enrolled in introductory and advanced writing courses at a New England university.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Whitmire (2010) has noted that "writing is the one area where the gender gap is roughly the same as the racial gap" (p. 65) on the new SAT and that the new SAT, which allocates one-third of the test's total score points to writing, has raised new alarm about boys' writing skills. Whitmire pointed out that even science and math majors need to be able to write well in college, and College Board data indicate that the new SAT, with the added writing portion, is a more accurate predictor of first-year college students' success than the older test. However, the newest redesign of the test (2015) makes the essay portion optional.

My overarching research purpose—to determine, from the perspective of young men themselves, what writing experiences have either enhanced or impeded their engagement with writing, both in school and outside of school— leads to my main research question: What can we learn from young men themselves about boys’ and young men’s lived experience and view of themselves as writers, both within and outside of school contexts? Sub-questions focused on the influence of family, teachers, and peers in my participants’ development and sense of themselves as writers.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Context: Competing Discourses, Social Realities

Mass media and academic journals alike are filled with discussions of boys' lagging achievement in literacy in the United States. And the concern is not limited to the U.S.: similar discussions and research have been widespread in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Alloway, 2007; Hall & Coles, 1997; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Wallace, 2010; Watson, Keleher, & Martino, 2010). In the U.S., the discussion intensified in 2005 when the substantially altered "new SAT" added a writing section weighted equally with the verbal and math sections, yielding scores which revealed a significant gap between boys' and girls' writing achievement (Klein, 2006).<sup>3</sup> But this recent focus is only the continuation of over a decade of attention to, and concern over, boys' literacy achievement.<sup>4</sup> In a headline typical of much media coverage, the Alberta (Canada) *National Post* (2003) announced, "Almost Half of Canada's 16-Year-Old Boys Write So Poorly That Their Answers to a National Writing Test Were Barely

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<sup>3</sup> In the first two years after the introduction of the "new SAT," girls' writing scores exceeded boys' by 11 points (whereas boys' reading scores exceeded girls' by 2-4 points). The writing achievement gap increased in subsequent years: For the 2009, 2010, and 2011 SAT, girls' writing scores exceeded boys' scores by 12-14 points (Klein, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> In fact, boys' academic underachievement was the subject of concern as far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a series of books that "decried apathetic boys with no direction" (Weaver-Hightower, 2009, p. 3). At that time, boys' underachievement was attributed to failures of schools, while girls' underachievement was attributed to their sex. Young (2001) attributed this differential concern and rationale to a political agenda rather than to specific areas of underachievement in themselves (Young & Brozo, 2001). See also Hall & Cole (1997) on the long-term existence of a gap in actual reading between boys and girls. Weaver-Hightower (2005), noting that "gendered test score gaps have not changed at all (both boys' and girls' scores have gone up) since 1971," points out that "the gap in reading achievement scores for boys was a concern since at least the 1930s" (p. 2)—which does not, of course, negate the need to address these gaps.

Comprehensible” (Sokoloff, 2003). Another press report on the same Canadian study (Blair & Sanford, 2003) conveyed a somewhat (though guardedly) more reassuring message: “Study Says Boys May Actually Be Literate” (Van Acker, 2003). In the U.S., a *Newsweek* cover story titled “The Boy Crisis” (Tyre, 2006) followed *Bloomberg Businessweek*’s coverage of “The New Gender Gap” (Conlin, 2003). Weaver-Hightower (2008) noted that “Panic discourses are. . . .beginning to be used by high-profile politicians” (p. 192). The tone of the discourse has ranged from concern to calamity.

Concern about boys’ lagging literacy achievement is set within a larger context of increasing social unease, reflected in popular press articles like *The Atlantic*’s “The End of Men,” which explored at length adult men’s declining success in society as a whole (Rosin, 2010; see also Rosin, 2012 for her book-length treatment of this topic). As Rosin documented, in recent years the deep economic recession and accompanying high unemployment have hit men harder than women, with the disappearance of manufacturing jobs which once offered a safe berth in the middle class to men with a high school education. According to Whitmire (2010), over 80% of those laid off in the recent global recession were male workers.<sup>5</sup> In a post-recession era when it is widely acknowledged that “College is the new high school” (Whitmire, p. 15), such statistics

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<sup>5</sup> Whitmire (2010) also noted an unexpected shift in the wage gender gap in certain areas: Among New York City full-time workers between ages 21 and 30, “regardless of education levels, women outearn men” by 17% (p. 168). A new “marriage deficit” has been noted as well, with the percentage of men without a college degree who have never married up by 10% over the past 25 years (Whitmire). Some have attributed this to a dearth of men who are economically viable partners for women.



have special resonance in the popular discourse of concern for boys' lagging achievement.

Discrepancies between men's and women's employment rates are echoed in the growing gender gap in rates of college entrance and graduation, attainment of professional degrees, participation in growth fields in the current economy, and other gateways to financial and social success (Rosin, 2010).<sup>6</sup> An article in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (Smetanka, as cited in Weaver-Hightower, 2005, p. 1) reported that the number of doctoral degrees at the University of Minnesota attained by women had surpassed those earned by men for the first time, saying, "Pack it up, guys. The takeover is complete." The diction may be flippant, but the undertone of concern is clear: When female students surpass males in achievement, attention must be paid.<sup>7</sup>

### **From "Condition" to "Problem": Equity, Class, and the Importance of Definition**

. . . the debate over issues begins with whether something is a problem, about which something can be done, or a condition, about which little can be done.  
(Birkland, 2011, p. 170)

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<sup>6</sup> Scholarly research supports Rosin's assertions: for example, gender, as well as socioeconomic status (SES), is strongly associated with college degree completion (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; see also Rowan et al., 2002). NAEP statistics reveal similar trends (NAEP, 2005). In the popular press, a 2010 *USA Today* article noted that while many colleges strive to maintain a gender balance, "national data in recent years show a 57%-43% split favoring women, both in enrollments and graduation rates" (Marklein, 2010). Whitmire (2010) noted that in a recent national assessment of adult literacy, a major decline in literacy skills among college graduates was confined to male graduates only. Further, "the lackluster college graduation rates—those who actually earn a diploma within six years after enrolling as freshmen—are due primarily to men floundering in college" (Whitmire, p. 184).

<sup>7</sup> Titus (2004) pointed out that "if boys outperform girls, a taken-for-granted 'order' is achieved. When girls outperform boys, [this leads to] 'moral panic because boys cannot be the 'second sex,' [which would constitute] a threat to the social order itself" (pp. 145, 148, cited in Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010, p. 358).

A problem well stated is a problem half solved.

(C.F. Kettering, cited in Lucky, 2011)

[I]nequality permeates the fabric of the culture. . . America may be the land of opportunity, but it is also a land of inequality.

(Lareau, 2011, p. 3)

Class position matters every step of the way.

(Lareau, 2011, p. 160)

One of the most disturbing and persistent aspects of the literacy gap involves the intersection of class with gender in student achievement. Vermont's NECAP writing scores reflect an enormous disparity in achievement based on the intersection of gender with socioeconomic status (SES): for example, in 2009, only 27% of 11<sup>th</sup> grade boys eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL) wrote proficiently—compared to 45% of non-FRL boys; and FRL boys scored a staggering 40% below non-FRL girls, a gap mirrored in the gender + SES gap in reading proficiency (see Appendix A, Vermont Department of Education, 2012). Results for the following two years were virtually unchanged (Vermont Department of Education). As Sara Mead of the think tank Education Sector contended, “There’s no doubt that some groups of boys—particularly Hispanic and black boys and boys from low-income homes—are in real trouble. But the predominant issues for them are race and class, not gender” (cited in Whitmire, 2010, p. 90). Clearly, in students’ literacy achievement, socioeconomic status and ethnicity, as well as gender, matter.

In her study of inequality in American children’s lives, Lareau (2011) explored the ways class affects many vital aspects of family life, including language use and cultural capital. Her work challenges the view of American society as “classless” and

demonstrates the powerful effect of class-based cultural and social practices on children's experiences with schooling. The effects of this class dynamic are evident in literacy achievement, with important implications for children's later success in paths to college and work.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, the intersection of class, gender, and literacy achievement has enormous implications for equity in students' lives long after their schooling has ended.

Equity is intricately bound up with the particular way a problem is defined. Definition is often at the heart of the contest in policy debates (Stone, 2002), including the current debate over the literacy gender gap. As Thomas Szasz (1973) pointed out in the context of a different social policy debate, "The struggle for definition is veritably the struggle for life itself.... Whoever first defines the situation is the victor" (p. 113). The literacy gender gap has been variously framed in ways that serve competing agendas: while some actors promote a view of "masculinity under fire" and call for gender segregation as a remedy, others look to recent successes in addressing the gender gap in math (an area in which boys' achievement for many years outpaced girls') as evidence that focused attention and targeted interventions can lead to a new state of gender equity in literacy outcomes as well.<sup>9</sup> In addition, multiple definitions of literacy and masculinity are central to scholarly as well as popular discourses concerning the literacy gender gap. For example, the operational definition of literacy measured in large-scale achievement assessments includes only traditional, print-based reading and writing, whereas scholars

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<sup>8</sup> Processes of sorting and gatekeeping are also at play in the outcomes for students with poor literacy achievement and limited cultural capital. See also Bowen et al., 2009.

<sup>9</sup> See Cavanagh (2008) and Robelen (2010) for details of current gender parity in math.

have pointed to the importance of non-traditional literacies in understanding boys' actual literacy skills (Gee, 2000; Scribner, 1984). Similarly, masculinity is variously defined as an essential, "natural" quality inherent in all boys, or as a social construction which may be expressed in a range of ways, from a socially sanctioned heteronormative model to more marginalized or resistant ways of "doing boy." Clearly, the way a problem is defined is key to the range of policy solutions we consider. Taken-for-granted assumptions may blind us to possible means to address the problem of boys' literacy achievement—means that might ultimately contribute to greater equity in terms of broad outcomes (Stone, 2002).

How we define equity also has important implications for the allocation of financial resources, and definitions are thus a point of struggle, as Stone (2002) noted. Stone pointed out that, "Distributions are at the heart of public policy controversies. . . . [E]quity is the goal for all sides in a distributive conflict; the conflict comes over how the sides envision the distribution of whatever is at issue" (p. 39). Financial resources available for education are always in limited supply, and in the current economic and political climate, resources are particularly scarce. How these resources are to be allocated is a site of struggle among actors with divergent views of the proper role of educational agencies and of the very meaning of "equity": Does equity require equal opportunities? Equal outcomes? Equal expenditures? (Stone, 2002).

Such fundamental questions of definition have dominated education debates for decades, as issues ranging from school integration to affirmative action to the gender achievement gap in math have taken their place in the public discourse over definitions of

equity. No consideration of the gender gap in literacy should ignore the intertwined issues of class, literacy, and equity for low-achieving girls as well as for low-achieving boys. Definition matters—and definitions of equity, literacy, and masculinity remain key areas of contest in current discourses surrounding the literacy gender gap.

### **Themes in the Professional and Public Discourses**

Before examining the scholarly literature on boys and literacy, I will briefly review the professional and public discourses that school leaders and other stakeholders are responding to, in order to locate scholarly discussion in relation to these other important discourses that form the context in which education policy decisions are made.<sup>10</sup> It is crucial to understand these discourses concerning boys and literacy, as they play a major role in shaping the concerns of parents and other stakeholders to whom education leaders must respond.

#### **What School Leaders are Reading: The Discourse in the Professional Press**

The issue of boys' literacy achievement has clearly been on the radar of school leaders and policymakers over the past decade, as seen in the pages of periodicals targeting this audience. In *Educational Leadership*, "Helping Boys Succeed" (Taylor & Lorimer, 2002) was followed by "With Boys and Girls in Mind" (Gurian & Stevens, 2004), then two years later "Bridges to Literacy for Boys" (Brozo, 2006) and "Teaching

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<sup>10</sup> Both Weaver-Hightower (2008, 2009) and Whitmire (2010) have noted the relative lack of research and policy initiatives in the U.S., in contrast to initiatives taking place over the past decade in the U.K., Canada, and Australia. In the U.S., such initiatives tend to arise at the local (rather than state or national) level (Maine's 2007 Task Force on Gender Equity in Education report is a salient exception). As a result of the policy vacuum, "popular-rhetorical texts dominate the debate" (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 101), and more general structural change is precluded.

to the Minds of Boys” (King & Gurion, 2006). Similar attention has been paid to the issue in *Education Week*, whose March 2006 issue featured “Concern Over Gender Gaps Shifting to Boys” (Viadero, 2006); more recently, the same publication, in an article titled “Boys Trail Girls in Reading Across States,” noted that, while the gender gap favoring boys in math has been narrowing (Cavanagh, 2008; Robelen, 2010), scores in reading reveal that boys lag behind girls in every state, with at least a 10-point gender gap in several states, including Vermont (Robelen). In *The American School Board Journal*, Gurian (2006a) again was featured in a piece titled “Learning and Gender.” The *School Library Journal* was also on board, with a 2007 article by Leonard Sax titled, provocatively, “The Boy Problem: Many Boys Think School Is Stupid and Reading Stinks; Is There a Remedy?” Clearly, boys’ literacy has become a policy problem, not an abiding “condition” (Birkland 2011; Stone, 2002). And policy, as Weaver-Hightower (2008) noted, sets the ground for discourse, wielding significant control over what is thinkable, what is seen as correct and legitimate, “the facts,” as well as “who counts as ‘experts’” (p. 10).

In contrast to most proposals in the public and professional discourse, Australia’s Success for Boys program counters the view that sex differences in achievement should be attributed to neurological and hormonal differences and recommends that, rather than focus on a deficit model—a belief that boys “have too much testosterone to sit still and pay attention . . . [and] too little operational capacity on the left side of the brain” (cited in Alloway, 2007, p. 600)—educators should instead focus on how the social

construction of masculinity affects boys' responses to school-based literacy activities (see also Whitmire, 2010; Hall & Cole, 1997).

### **What Parents and Other Stakeholders are Seeing: The Discourse in the Popular Press**

School leaders, of necessity, are affected by what parents are seeing in the popular press, where arguments and assumptions concerning the causes of, and appropriate responses to, the gender gap in literacy achievement tend to be questionable, and the discourse often quite vehement in tone. An anti-feminist backlash discourse can be heard most forcefully in Christina Sommers' *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men* (2001), which employs a narrative of victims, villains, and disempowerment (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Stone, 2002; Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010), attributing boys' poor achievement in school to the work of feminists like Carol Gilligan who, according to this narrative, drew excessive attention to the academic and emotional problems of girls in the 1980s and '90s.<sup>11</sup> Weaver-Hightower (2005) pointed out that such writers as Sommers and others whose work has been widely disseminated have "established a limited discourse about boys that has circulated widely," despite little evidence for their "decidedly traditional and conservative" contentions (p. 1). For example, Sommers urged a "return" to "basic values, well-proven social practices, and

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<sup>11</sup> Alloway (2007) offered several disturbing examples of the extreme and polarizing tone of this discourse in the Australian press, including this comment by an unidentified father quoted in a 2005 *Sydney Morning Herald* article on school reform: "You might as well just cut off their balls. . . What agenda is being pursued here? Is it feminism gone mad?" (p. 584). Alloway saw the conflation of female success with male emasculation as a broad trend in Australian public commentary, calling the tone of much of the discourse "histrionic if not reprehensible" (p. 584).

plain common sense” to counter an educational system that no longer addresses the “natural proclivities and needs of boys” (as cited in Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 182). Weaver-Hightower (2003) noted that the voices reflected in the popular discourse, which includes the “backlash blockbusters” by Sommers and by psychologist William Pollack (1998) “rely heavily on arguments rooted in a ‘battle of the sexes’ . . . biological determinism, and the notion that boys have a ‘toxic’ self-harming gender role to perform” (pp. 473, 475).<sup>12</sup> Sommers’ book, which had a wide audience and was originally serialized in *The Atlantic*, has been blamed for instigating a backlash (a backlash to her anti-feminist backlash, so to speak) that characterized all who drew attention to boys’ low literacy achievement as politically right-wing (Whitmire, 2010) and made any focus on boys’ achievement a subject of political controversy.<sup>13</sup>

Not all voices in the popular press express a backlash perspective. In an interview in *USA Today* (Marklein, 2010), Whitmire, author of *Why Boys Fail: Saving Our Sons from an Educational System that’s Leaving Them Behind* (2010), remarked, “I do not think the gains of girls have come at the expense of boys” (as cited in Marklein, 2010). Noting that “many countries have the same problems,” Whitmire suggested that the U.S. Education Department “should do what the Australians did more than seven years ago, which was launch a national investigation into why boys are losing interest in school

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<sup>12</sup> Weaver-Hightower (2008) has pointed out that backlash politics concerning the issue of boys’ literacy achievement can be attributed to anxiety over recent displacements in the economy, with the traditionally female service sector expanding and manufacturing jobs in decline, and the “‘masculine mystique’ . . . no longer paying out the ‘patriarchal dividend’” (p. 43). See also Rosin (2010, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Sommers (2010) recently told Whitmire that “if granted a do-over she’d drop the inflammatory subtitle” suggesting a feminist “war against boys” (p. 138).



(para. 8). Whitmire went on to note that “The largest gender gaps are found in writing skills. Schools may overlook that—part of the ‘boys will be boys’ attitude—which means parents have to compensate. Writing matters” (as cited in Marklein, 2010, para. 9). Though acknowledging the central importance of writing for all students, a troubling aspect of Whitmire’s comment is that it elides the question of how non-middle-class families may fare in the effort to “compensate” at home for schools’ inadequate attention to their sons’ low writing achievement. Whitmire (2010) emphasized that lagging achievement affects middle-class boys as well: “At the end of high school, 23 percent of the white sons of college-educated parents—almost a quarter—scored ‘below basic’ in reading achievement, compared to only 7 percent of their female counterparts” (p. 35). However, he did acknowledge that a “far sharper” gender gap in reading scores is found between low-SES boys and girls than among their wealthier peers (p. 48).

Other writers in the popular press have suggested an array of possible factors contributing to boys’ lagging literacy achievement, including medical, neurological, and genetic causes (see, for example, Gurion & Stevens, 2004), environmental toxins (see Sax, 2009, for an extensive bibliography), and excessive immersion in electronic media to the exclusion of physical, outdoor activity in the natural world, dubbed by some writers “nature deficit attention disorder” (see, for example, Louv, 2010; Sax, 2009). Whitmire (2010) noted that the recent early emphasis on reading in pre-school presents many boys, whose verbal skills develop later than those of girls, with a frustrating challenge which can initiate a long-lasting resistance to schooling. Whitmire cites MRI evidence showing that in terms of development of language-processing areas of the

brains of young children, the brains of three-year-old girls resemble those of five-year-old boys). But neuroscientist Lie Eliot, associate professor of neuroscience at the Chicago Medical School of Rosalind Franklin University, counters that this emphasis on the importance of brain differences is exaggerated:

While subtle gender differences exist in sensory, motor, cognitive and emotional skills, sex typically accounts for only 1% to 5% of the total variance—meaning the range of such abilities is much larger within a group of girls or boys than between the sexes. And yet, we have educators who believe they should separate boys and girls because of differences in hearing or visual abilities, serotonin or oxytocin levels, corpus callosum or planum temporale sizes. Sex differences are sexy. Scientists often publish data showing profound gender similarities, but these studies rarely make it into public view. (as cited in Whitmire, 2010, p. 197)

These perspectives have been brought together most convincingly by Leonard Sax (2009), who cited a wide array of scholarly research in *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men*. Similar territory has been mined extensively (though with far less scholarly support) by Michael Gurian in a number of books whose titles—*The Wonder of Boys* (2006), *The Minds of Boys* (2007), *The Purpose of Boys* (2010)—give a sense of his approach, which tends to generalize and essentialize boys.<sup>14</sup> Another argument voiced frequently in the popular discourse attributes boys' literacy underachievement to schools' dangerously

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<sup>14</sup> See discussion of stereotyping and generalization, as well as single-sex education proposals, below.

“feminine” environment, which is characterized as inimical to boys’ engagement and learning.<sup>15</sup> Yet as Rosin (2010) noted in her much-discussed piece in *The Atlantic*, “What’s clear is that schools, like the economy, now value the self-control, focus and verbal aptitude that seem to come more easily to young girls” (p. 12).<sup>16</sup> Whitmire (2010), author of the popular-press book *Why Boys Fail*, commented in a *USA Today* interview that “Boys are failing because the world has gotten more verbal and they haven’t” (as cited in Marklein, 2010).

Given the discourse in the popular press concerning the literacy gender gap, it is not surprising that many solutions proposed in this discourse are founded on questionable assumptions and may be not only ineffective but in fact harmful to some students—both boys and girls—thereby actually working against the achievement of equity. Most prominently, a number of advocates have urged implementation of single-sex classroom or school programs in order to better address the perceived “needs of boys,” a phrase which appears frequently in the context of taken-for-granted generalizations about boys in this discourse. A major proponent of this approach is Michael Gurian, who writes

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<sup>15</sup> Articles in the popular media promoting this claim are far too numerous to mention; see comments by Dr. Tony Sewell (quoted in BBC, 2006) for a typical example. This theory has been rebutted by most scholarly researchers; see Alloway (2007), who points out that this discourse pits boys against girls and positions boys as “disadvantaged” in school. Alloway suggests that a political agenda underlies the sometimes virulent tone of the public discourse about boys’ literacy achievement, a discourse Alloway suggests serves as a delaying tactic to avoid addressing the needs of *all* students in a changing society.

<sup>16</sup> This contention is supported by scholars as well; see Weaver-Hightower (2003), who noted that “the workplace cultures of the ‘new capitalism’ increasingly value ‘feminine’ modes of interaction, such as working in interactive teams rather than as atomistic competitors” (p. 477).

widely on the subject and appears frequently on major broadcast outlets and in the popular press. Gurian (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) offers research based largely on his own consulting work with schools, promoting a menu of specific guidelines for schools wishing to implement single-sex programs. Similar research and resources are disseminated widely by organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Single Sex Public Education (NAASP). Such calls for single-sex education form an important part of the popular discourse on the gender achievement gap in literacy.

However, many of the assertions of single-sex education proponents have been refuted by more scholarly researchers. Recent articles appearing in the journal *Science* (Halpern et al., 2011, as cited in Lewin, 2009) and *The British Journal of Sociology of Education* (Harker, 2000) have assailed as flawed the research purporting to show the effectiveness of a single-sex approach to education,<sup>17</sup> and the American Civil Liberties Union recently won “a significant victory” in a case involving a sex-segregated program in Louisiana that was “based on faulty science” (Sherwin, 2011, para. 4). Whitmire (2010) noted that research by Teach for America “hasn’t shown that men are more effective” as teachers of boys, according to Wendy Kopp, TFA’s founder (p. 87). In the professional press, *Education Week* reported that California’s experiment with single-sex schools had ended in failure because “in practice, the academies inadvertently reinforced gender stereotypes, squandered opportunities to address issues of gender inequity, and exposed students to teasing from peers in coeducational classes” (Viadero, 2001, p. 9).

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<sup>17</sup> According to Richard Fabes (2011), one of the authors of the *Science* article, “The preponderance of scientific evidence indicates that single-sex education fails to produce academic benefits and inflates gender stereotyping.”

Viadero (2001) offered a dramatic example of the reinforcement of stereotypes in these “separate but equal” academies: “In one unit on settling the Western frontier, the boys’ lessons were enriched by an activity on survival skills. Girls, on the other hand, learned to quilt and sew” (p. 9). Calls in the professional discourse for increasing the number of male teachers have also been rebutted by research demonstrating the absence of a connection between teacher gender and male students’ achievement (Alloway, 2007; Martin, 2003; Martin & Marsh, 2005; Martino, Lingard, & Mills, 2004; see below for a review of the scholarly literature on this topic).

Clearly, the way the issue of boys’ literacy is framed will have enormous implications for how it is ultimately addressed in schools and school districts. Gains in boys’ literacy must not come at the cost of reinscribing gender binaries and hegemonic constructions of masculinity that have for so long disadvantaged girls and marginalized many boys as well. These themes have been explored in the scholarly literature on boys and literacy reviewed below.

### **Themes in the Scholarly Literature**

The scholarly journals offer a rich and varied exploration of possible causes of the literacy gap between male and female students. Some of the issues surfaced by researchers include social constructions of masculinity (Alloway, 2007; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Martin, 2003; Martino, 1999, 2000, 2003; Pollack, 1998; Rowan et al., 2002; Young & Brozo, 2001); misunderstanding of boys’ ways of engaging in literacy practices (Newkirk, 2003; Taylor, 2004); and the need to broaden our understanding, and our definition of literacies

(Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Cavazos-Kottke, 2005; Taylor, 2004). The issue of boys' motivation, identity formation, and self-perception has also received significant scholarly attention (Alloway, 2007; Bandura, 1995, 1997; Bozack, 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2000; Jackson, 2002; Jones & Myhill, 2007; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Martin, 2003; Martin & Marsh, 2005; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Pollack, 1998; Vallance, 2004). Scholars have pointed out that solutions proposed in the popular press often involve a damaging hidden curriculum that reinscribes socially constructed gender binaries and is based on a view of literacy as a zero-sum game, assigning “winners” and “losers,” reinforcing a binary gender order that disadvantages girls and many boys as well (Alloway, 2007; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Matthews, 1998; Pollack, 1998; Rowan et al., 2002). These topics are interrelated in complex ways, forming an intricate web of themes and concepts relevant to boys' literacy experiences. As the scholarly literature demonstrates, what we know does not precisely mirror what we think we know—and much remains unknown, requiring further study to fully understand.<sup>18</sup>

### **Multiple Masculinities**

Awareness of the central role of definition underlies recent calls for more comprehensive definitions of “masculinities” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Davies, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kehler, 2007; Kehler & Greig, 2003; Martino, 1999, 2000, 2003; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Rowan et al., 2002; Young, 2000). Numerous scholars have explored the social construction of masculinity (Alloway, 2007;

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<sup>18</sup> Weaver-Hightower (2003) offered an extensive and thoughtful review of what he has termed “the boy turn” in gender research in recent years.

Dutro, 2002; Martin, 2003; Young & Brozo, 2001). Rowan et al. (2002) argued that “Every individual boy accesses, performs, and transforms multiple versions of masculinity in various contexts or at various times” (p. 67). Davies (1997) offered a useful review of relevant deconstructionist theory, an approach which views gender as a construction, through language, of binary, hierarchical categories which come to be normalized and seen as natural, rather than as constructed.

While there are many ways of enacting masculinity, the dominant culture prescribes only one for young boys: heteronormative masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), a version of masculinity whose demands on boys may conflict with the needs of in-school literacy activities, as will be elaborated below. These elements of the “boy code” (Pollack, 1998) have been explored in depth in two important books about the social and emotional lives of boys (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Pollack, 1998). These two books, by practicing psychologists who study and work with boys, have entered the popular discourse but represent scholarly research as well and therefore straddle the two discourses.

Kindlon and Thompson (1999), in *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, offered a compelling picture of the psychological and emotional realities of boys’ lives in our culture. The authors noted that the role of biology in emotional differences between boys and girls is not at all clear; instead, they focused on deeply rooted cultural factors which can cause a lifetime of “emotional illiteracy” (p. 9) in boys and men, distorting their lives and relationships in harmful ways. This damage is often manifested in anger and violence, depression, alcohol and drug use, and suicide, as well as more

everyday aspects of boys' lives such as problematic relationships with parents and romantic partners, and a "culture of cruelty" which locks many boys into a defensive "fortress of solitude" (p. 142) as they attempt to maintain the required "manly" façade prescribed by the prevailing cultural definition of masculinity.

According to Kindlon and Thompson (1999), emotional ignorance and isolation are endemic among boys, due not to any inherent emotional incapacity, but to a culture that pervasively enforces male emotional illiteracy. This socially created emotional ignorance and empathy deficit, added to other stereotypical constructs of masculinity, creates a "culture of cruelty" (p. 72) in which boys are both victims and aggressors. Boys' lack of consistent male modeling of emotional openness, as well as an adequate vocabulary for articulating and understanding their feelings, leads to a belief that emotions have no role in the life of a "real man."<sup>19</sup> This "emotional miseducation" (p. 4) of boys leads to withdrawal or aggression in the face of perceived threat. Noting that in several societies aggression is unknown, Kindlon and Thompson emphasized that the search for biological explanations of issues in male behavior overlooks the overarching effects of how boys are raised in our culture. Adopting a "boys will be boys view" and accepting behavior that is hurtful or dangerous can impede boys' development of empathy and emotional responsibility.

Like Kindlon and Thompson's *Raising Cain*, psychologist William Pollack's *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (1998) is devoted to a consideration

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<sup>19</sup> As one of Martino's (2000) participants explained, to be a member of the powerful group of boys in his school, "you're hard, you're cold. . . . Powerful people aren't usually real kind, friendly, open people, if you know what I mean" (p. 230).



of the ways our particular culture affects boys and young men as they grow into manhood, giving little weight to brain-based and other biological determinants of male behavior, and in fact specifically refuting claims of biological determinism.<sup>20</sup> Instead, for Pollack, it is the culture's prescriptive dictates and definitions of masculinity, rather than hormones and brain structure, which account for most of the gender-specific psychological issues boys face. Even boys who seem to be doing fine, Pollack asserted, are imprisoned silently behind masks they have learned to deploy to hide their real feelings and conform to the mandates of a contradictory and obsolete "Boy Code," comprised of long-lived, stereotyped expectations of masculine behavior. Pollack's book describes several highly destructive myths about boys relevant to issues of literacy engagement in school: "boys will be boys," "boys should be boys," and "boys are toxic" (pp. 55-62).

The connection between the social construction of masculinity discussed by Pollack and by Kindlon and Thompson, and boys' literacy achievement and engagement, has been highlighted by a number of scholars. Alloway and Gilbert (1997) took note of how the hegemonic<sup>21</sup> construction of masculinity works against boys' engagement and achievement in school literacy practices, where the dictates of heteronormative

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<sup>20</sup> Weaver-Hightower (2008) noted that, while international achievement results might appear to support a biological explanation for boys' literacy scores, "one cannot overlook globalized masculinities that have in many ways standardized the socialization of males around the developed world" (p. 18).

<sup>21</sup> Rowan et al. (2002) speak of "hegemonic, subordinate, and complicit masculinities" (p. 60), defining hegemonic masculinity as "the most culturally powerful image of masculinity in a particular cultural and historical time-space, even if the majority of men may not be easily aligned with the image" (p. 60).

masculinity may conflict with the requirements of in-school literacy activities. In the school context, boys are asked to take on what may seem to be subservient rather than controlling roles and to engage in practices that are socially constructed as “feminine,” including self-examination, self-disclosure, and creative expression of feelings. Because this conflicts with the performance of heteronormative masculinity, boys may resist seeing themselves as “literate subjects” within school. In Martino’s (1995) study of boys in a Catholic high school in Australia, one boy offered a pointed illustration of this effect, telling the researcher, “English is more suited to girls because it’s not the way guys think. . . . Therefore, I don’t particularly like this subject. I hope you aren’t offended by this, but most guys who like English are faggots” (p. 354, as cited in Watson, Kehler, and Martino, 2010, p. 357). Participants in Martino’s (1999) study described what Martino has called a form of “protest masculinity” in which the “‘cool’ boys ‘act dumb’ in order to establish a hegemonic form of masculinity through which they can demonstrate their opposition to the values embodied in the aims of formal education” (p. 251). One boy commented that girls “are smart and they think about what’s going to happen to them when school finishes, they’re the ones who are going to have a better life,” while “a lot of guys don’t really see it the same way. They think they can just get through school like on the borderline or whatever, just get a job as a brickie or something” (as cited in Martino, 1999, p. 250). But as Rosen, Whitmire, and many scholars too have pointed out, this attitude is no longer working well for boys in terms of employment in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century economy.

Brozo (2005) noted that “there is plenty of evidence to suggest that many teenage boys are turning off to reading because of actual and likely recrimination from classmates who associate traditional book literacy with ‘schoolboys’ and ‘nerds’ and who regard it as ‘uncool’” (p. 18).<sup>22</sup> The central importance of the social construction of masculinity was forcefully articulated by Gilbert and Gilbert (2001):

Boys’ rejection of many school-based literacy practices, and their poor performance with literacy tasks at school, are closely linked with boys’ identification with masculinity and masculine performances. . . . Until literacy becomes a more highly prized commodity, and a more desirable asset for the masculine subject, it is unlikely to become a more successful practice for boys at school. (p. 9)

On the other hand, boys may be successfully literate in ways not recognized or valued in the school environment but which may be highly valued and useful in the technological environment of their future lives (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In contrast to school literacy activities, Alloway and Gilbert (1997) pointed out, electronic games may emphasize values and practices that are totally in keeping with (and reproduce) the dominant—often aggressively sexist—construction of masculinity. In addition to popular culture’s support of a hegemonic construction of masculinity, Martino (2003) noted that popular culture “reinforce[s] the already heavily patrolled gender borders” (p. 19) within

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<sup>22</sup> Weaver-Hightower (2008) observed that the construction of heteronormative masculinity serves as a powerful sorting mechanism, defining who may access patriarchal privilege, not just separating women from men but also men from other men” (p. 38). “As Dutro (2002) noted, “gender is a primary means by which power is organized in society” (p. 467).

which boys operate.<sup>23</sup> This heteronormative version of masculinity is also pervasive in school cultures; Kehler, in his 2007 study of high school boys, noted the ubiquitous script of homophobia and heterosexism that underlay the thinking and behavior of the boys in the study. One of the participants in Martino's (1999, 2000) study gave a chilling view of the effects on boys of this culture: "If [boys] show any sign of weakness or compassion, then other people jump to conclusions [about their sexual orientation] and bring them down. So really it's a survival of the fittest. It's not very good to be sensitive" [as cited in Martino, 2000, p. 222).

Commenting on the multiple masculinities present, though not acknowledged, in classrooms and schools, Rowan et al. (2002) caution that there is "no quick fix" (p. 9) for effectively dealing with this reality: "Any attempt to engage with the literacy needs or experiences of boys must attend to the multiplicity of the category 'boys' and to the diverse ways masculinity is experienced and negotiated within any school" (p. 9). There is no "one-size-fits-all" reform strategy, "no single literacy worksheet that can meet the needs of every classroom" and every boy (p. 9).

### **Masculinity as Performance: Patrolling the Boundaries, Maintaining the Gender Order**

The body of theory developed by Foucault (Rabinow, 1984) has been important to many scholars who explore masculinity as a regime of practices which are both

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<sup>23</sup> Martino and Piallotta-Chaiarolli (2003) noted the importance of Michel Foucault's work (1985) on self-regulation and normalizing practices to an understanding of the ways heteronormative masculinity affects boys, and pointed to sports in particular as one context for such policing in the lives of boys.

externally and internally policed to reinforce norms of dominant or hegemonic heteronormative masculinity, through what Foucault called “games of truth, practices of power” (as cited in Martino 2000, p. 214). Martino (1999, 2000) explored the ways that individual boys in a Catholic co-educational high school in Western Australia displayed this process, “learn[ing] to fashion particular forms of gendered subjectivity [which] are policed within regimes of compulsory heterosexuality,” carefully avoiding behaviors and speech which might draw the bullying or harassment of the “cool boys,” the “footballers” and the “party animals” who were the chief enforcers of this regime (Martino 2000, p. 213) and carried out the “boundary maintenance work” (1999, p. 239). Martino (2000) analyzed, in Foucauldian terms, how the participants in his study fashioned their gendered subjectivity, revealing the pervasive influence, throughout these boys’ lives, of the ubiquitous “regime of normalizing practices” employed by the powerful boys in the school to “police sex/gender boundaries” using homophobic strategies (pp. 219-220).

Such practices, Martino (2000) found, are fundamental to how “many boys learn to establish their masculinities at the level of performativity” (p. 221) and to “constitute themselves as males of particular types. . . fashioning a particular style of masculinity” (p. 216). Noting that schools are designed for “surveillance and moral supervision,” Martino (1999) pointed out that “students are not only monitored by school personnel, but learn to monitor themselves within a regime of normalizing practices involving the deployment of sexuality” (p. 256). Martino’s analysis of the “performative dimension of . . . masculinity” (p. 225) among his participants and their peers is further illustrated in the studies of Young and Peterson, discussed below. Mac and Ghail (2000) emphasized

this concept as well, noting that “the various forces of masculinity/femininity that are hegemonic in schools are crucially involved in policing the boundaries of heterosexuality. . . . [T]o be a ‘real boy’ is publicly to be in opposition to and distance oneself from the feminine and the ‘feminized’ versions of masculinity” (p. 172).

Young (2001) emphasized that “gender is something we do” (p. 14) rather than something we “are,” a useful framework for understanding boys’ literacy attitudes and behaviors. According to Young, gender is “not something one ‘accomplishes’ once at an early age; it has to be publicly displayed over and over again in accordance with the structures of social contexts, [eventually coming to] seem natural or essential” (p. 14) and sustaining and reproducing the “boys will be boys” belief system.<sup>24</sup> Thus gender roles must be continuously reenacted and displayed, as Peterson’s (2002) study illustrates.

Peterson’s (2002) study of eighth graders’ conversations about their own and classmates’ writing illustrates the ways that social constructions of gender, as well as the concept of gender as performance, are implicated in any discussion of boys’ writing. Peterson found that in their classroom writing group discussions, boys worked hard to align themselves with the prevailing hegemonic gender order as they talked about their

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<sup>24</sup> Gilbert and Gilbert (2001) have also explored the theme of gender as performance, noting that “The harm that boys do to themselves—and to others—is an integral part of learning to ‘do’ masculinity” (p. 7), a theme also echoed in Pollack (1998). Butler (1988) explored the theme of gender as performance in relation to feminist theory, identifying gender identity as “a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (p. 520) and arguing that these performances both reveal and constitute subjectivities. Dutro (2002) argued that “gender subjectivities do not exist apart from the ways that they are performed, or acted out, in the world” (p. 469).

own and other boys' writings.<sup>25</sup> Peterson (2002) pointed out that the available discourses in students' social contexts "provide the concepts, perspectives and values for constituting their sense of who they are in terms of race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation" (p. 352). Dominant discourses (e.g., of male/female duality) are "unconsciously reproduced across numerous social contexts" (p. 352), sustaining a sense that they are "natural" in their meanings.

Silencing of other ideologies, Peterson (2002) noted, helps maintain this pervasive sense of "naturalness," while "category maintenance [requires that students enact] taken-for-granted knowledge about gender in order to be recognized as socially competent females and males" (p. 352). Thus boys monitor their own and others' enactment of masculinity as they patrol the boundaries of heteronormative constructions of gender in the classroom context, in a process that reproduces the gender order and perpetuates "a seemingly natural social order" (p. 352). Peterson pointed to the difficulties faced by youngsters who resist performing heteronormative masculinity "and thereby enter uncertain worlds, with all the fear of rejection and the need for affirmation and support that accompany any risk-taking venture" (p. 353). In the classroom discussions Peterson observed, boys "supported the maintenance of a recognizable gender identity" by making comments that marginalized the one boy in the class who wrote about subjects involving non-heterosexual characters or ideas, such as a persuasive piece about gays in the military or a narrative about a gay farmer (p. 360).

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<sup>25</sup> Dutro (2002), in her study of literacy practices of African-American fifth-grade boys, reached similar conclusions.

As a participant observer in these discussions, Peterson (2002) questioned her own complicity through silence, which she felt “maintained an assumption of a universal heterosexuality” (p. 361). Peterson’s study serves as a powerful reminder of how many times during a school day students who are not performing heteronormative gender roles may experience shame or anger at comments by peers and teachers. Her study offers a window into how the social construction of masculinity affects boys’ attitudes and behaviors as writers within the social context of classrooms.<sup>26</sup>

In her 2006 review of research, Peterson noted the findings of numerous studies that “rigid gender expectations constrained both girls’ and boys’ writing choices,” but boys’ writing choices were constrained to a greater degree than those of girls “because it was socially acceptable for girls to take up masculine styles of writing, but socially dangerous for boys to take up feminine themes and topics” (p. 318). Similarly, Newkirk (2000), in an ethnographic study, observed that boys chose topics and themes intended to enhance their masculine status with peers, employing violence and parody to indicate their resistance to classroom strictures. However, Peterson (2006) noted that a number of recent studies have found that when students wrote in cooperative groups with, or for, members of the opposite sex, their writing tended to reflect less stereotyped versions of masculinity and femininity. Perhaps the less rigidly enforced masculinity in mixed-gender writing groups reflects a phenomenon observed by one of Martino’s (2000)

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<sup>26</sup> Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) argued that middle school is a “pivotal [time] in the construction of an adolescent’s gender identity” (p. 75) and are often a crucible of gender identity enforcement, where a “rigid adherence to gender roles becomes the norm, and peer cultures take on an active role in enforcing these [heteronormative] roles” (p. 76).



participants, that “females can get in touch with their emotions, and they’re not afraid to talk about them, while a lot of guys are” (as cited p. 228). As Martino (2000) observed, for the boys in his study, “the norms governing the public display of traditional forms of masculinity . . . emphasize the avoidance of communicating on an emotional level in peer group situations” (p. 228); perhaps the presence of girls in mixed-gender writing groups allayed some of this pressure on boys in the studies Peterson reviewed.

In an effort to align themselves with the accepted construction of masculinity according to a strict gender binary, boys may take great care to avoid activities constructed as “feminine,” including school literacy activities. This aspect of boys’ performance of hegemonic masculinity has enormous implications for boys’ attitudes toward classroom literacy activities. In Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli’s (2003) study, for example, a boy spoke of the derisive response from other boys when he read his poems aloud in class: “They’d start yelling, like ‘Why don’t you get out of the class.’ Some of them are laughing. . . .” He recalled that other boys came in for similar treatment when reading their stories aloud “if [they]’ve got cats in the story. . . if someone doesn’t want to fight. . . if they talk about friendship. . . .” (p. 247). Clearly, the pressure to conform to a heteronormative version of masculinity, as it relates to literacy activities in particular, is an everyday reality in many classrooms. (See also Martino, 1999, 2000.)

Taylor (2004) suggested that boys may also avoid any effort that could lead to failure, and instead work hard to distinguish themselves from anything that might seem female-gendered behavior (e.g., discussing emotions in narrative), citing Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) belief that boys prefer to remain within areas where they feel

competence and control, rather than risk failure and shame (see Smith & Wilhelm, 2004, for further elaboration of this point). This is in keeping with the findings of Pollack (1998) as well as Kindlon and Thompson (1999). Watson et al. (2010) pointed out that at-risk boys “may become resistant to labels of failure and look for other sources of power and privilege in their lives. The immediate gratification and status boys achieve by performing in excessively masculine ways are extremely appealing even if they lead to a life of underachievement beginning with academic failure” (p. 359).

Jackson (2002) argued that “laddish” behavior—a pattern characterized by disruptive behaviors, objectification of women, and resistance to authority—“acts as a self-worth protection strategy—protecting self-worth both from the implications of a lack of ability and from the implications of being seen to be feminine” (p. 37). Although the term “laddish” is British, teachers in the U.S. will have no difficulty recognizing this pattern of behaviors within their own classrooms; see also Gilbert and Gilbert (2001) for discussion of this pattern in Australian schools. A large body of research, both in the UK and elsewhere, has established a clear link between this pattern and academic underachievement among working class boys in particular (Jackson, 2002; Willis, 1977). Martino (1999, 2000) found a similar pattern in the middle-class boys he studied; as one of his participants pointed out, boys need to achieve a balance between appearing stupid and appearing to strive in school: “They can’t put too much emphasis on being brainy; it’s more like not being too thick or stupid” (as cited in Martino, 2000, p. 226). However, as Martino (1999) pointed out, those middle-class “cool boys,” as they were called in the school he studied, had access to forms of cultural capital that could mitigate the effects of

their rejection of academic achievement, and were “advantaged in ways which working-class boys are not” (p. 250).

Findings of research in the area of self-worth (Jackson, 2002) suggest that, because of the inextricable association between academic success and feelings of self-worth, many boys are motivated to avoid the appearance of failure through a carefully constructed performance of lack of effort and a refusal to take part in the “ability game” (p. 43). In fact, disruptive behavior in school can “deflect attention away from poor academic performance” and enhance the status of boys within the “laddish” subculture (Jackson, p. 47). Jackson drew a connection between the rejection of academic effort and the rejection of all things feminine: “A fear of failure at school leads to a contempt for, and dismissal of, schoolwork in much the same way that a fear of the feminine leads to a contempt for, and dismissal of, the ‘feminine’ (p. 45). The fear of being seen to fail in academic competition with girls only magnifies the barrier to academic effort, according to Jackson. Jackson noted that rather than teachers promoting classroom competition in order to increase boys’ engagement, as some reformers suggest, increasing competition is “likely to have the opposite effect to that intended,” whereas the opposite approach, using strategies designed to “reduce defensiveness and . . . to challenge hegemonic masculinities” (p. 48) is more likely to be effective with boys, and “may be beneficial for girls too” (p. 48).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gilbert & Gilbert (1998), however, cautioned that the reasons for boys’ misbehavior are complex, citing studies which reveal that many boys find their peers’ misbehavior “annoying or stupid” (p. 169).

## **Generalizations about Boys’ “Nature”**

While most popular-press discussions of single-sex education as a solution to the gender gap in literacy tend to rely on assumptions of inherent, “natural” or “essential” differences between boys and girls (or ignore the issue of causes of the literacy gender gap entirely), scholars, on the whole, are careful to avoid applying generalizations to “all boys.” Martino (2003) characterized this essentializing discourse as problematic in that it generalizes, and supports generalizations about, all boys, leading to a New Right discourse positing a need for single-sex education. (See complete discussion of scholarly responses to single-sex proposals in “Recommended Strategies” section below.) Watson, Kehler, and Martino (2010) noted that in this essentializing discourse, “Boys and girls are seen to have inherent or fixed characteristics that define who they are and determine their natural interests and behaviors” (p. 357). This discourse “has been picked up by the media and educational policymakers as a common-sense approach to boys’ underachievement” which “appeals to the tacit belief that ‘boys will be boys’ and lends itself to traditional definitions of what it means to be a boy, facilitating ‘quick-fix’ solutions” (pp. 357-358).

Kehler (2007) warned against the dangers of generalizing boys’ experiences in “policies and practices . . . to ‘help boys’ and respond to the ‘boy crisis’ [that] are more about restabilizing power and authority” (p. 261), policies and practices based on a tacit script of binaries, an “us/them, boy/girl, winner/loser discourse that essentializes boys and leaves the complexity of literacies and masculinities unquestioned” (p. 261). Such approaches, by constructing young men and boys as “a coherent and homogeneous

group,” only serve to “contribute to and perpetuate a naturalized discourse of masculinity” (pp. 274-275). Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) pointed out that, throughout much of the popular discourse on boys’ education, “boys are often categorized and homogenized as behaving, thinking and acting in similar or predetermined ways on the basis of their biological sex” and emphasized the importance of examining the many ways boys “negotiate and perform their masculinities” (p. xii).

Recent postmodern and poststructuralist approaches have questioned the grand narratives of fixed, innate difference and narrow gender constructs, arguing in favor of a more nuanced and diverse understanding of male identities. Jones and Myhill (2007) noted that the discourse of “difference” and binary gender opposition has been supplanted by “a discourse of diversity, which emphasizes multiple, contextually-shaped, and overlapping constructions of masculine and feminine identity” (p. 3). This more recent understanding of gender and identity holds promise for future efforts to address the gender gap in literacy achievement.

Up to this point, this literature review has focused on issues of masculinity, its construction and performance. At this point I expand the discussion to consider several other issues implicated in the literacy gender gap.

### **Equity: Toward the Goal of a Just Society**

The practices of writing and learning to write are connected not only with gender, but are also “intimately connected with issues of social identities, language, and justice” (Jones & Myhill, 2007, p. 4). Issues of class, in particular, are bound up with issues of

gender in literacy achievement gaps.<sup>28</sup> Alloway and Gilbert (1997), in their review of Australian research on boys and literacy, explored the intersection of class and ethnicity with gender in the literacy achievement gap, arguing that attention to boys' underachievement in literacy must not come at the expense of a consideration of the academic needs of ethnic minorities and disadvantaged girls. The connection between school literacy achievement and pathways to social success can be complex: Despite boys' underachievement in literacy, Alloway and Gilbert noted, men still predominate in positions of power, even in professions which demand literacy proficiency. Martino (2003) similarly pointed out that despite the very politicized discussion of boys' literacy, with boys now being constructed as "the new disadvantaged" (p. 11), boys' post-school opportunities are not harmed by their lower literacy scores.<sup>29</sup> He noted that the focus on literacy scores does not take into account boys' greater engagement with technology education and opportunities. Instead of a focus on gender alone, Martino argued that the intersecting effects of gender, class, sexuality, race, and disability need further exploration.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Appendix A and Vermont Department of Education, 2012, for a display and discussion of the intersection of SES (as measured by Free and Reduced Lunch eligibility) and gender in achievement scores.

<sup>29</sup> See also Wallace (2010). For a somewhat different perspective on boys' post-secondary levels of success in the current environment, see Rosin (2010, 2012). The distinction seems to be that while Rosin includes in her assessment the broad range of occupations boys may enter, scholars such as Martino and Alloway and Gilbert refer to positions of power, not the manufacturing and other blue-collar jobs that have traditionally offered boys secure routes into the middle class. Further, Rosin's work came after the economic debacle of 2008, which severely impacted the manufacturing economy.

<sup>30</sup> In the popular press, Whitmore (2010) noted the importance of class and race, remarking in a *USA Today* interview that in terms of the literacy achievement gap,

Some scholars have argued that instead of a generalizing focus on boys in the aggregate, the crucial question to pose is “which boys”—that is, which subgroups of boys— are actually underachieving in literacy, in order to direct policy attention toward the role of other significant factors such as class and ethnicity in accounting for the academic achievement gap. These scholars point out that, rather than focusing attention on all boys (and only boys), the needs of at-risk students of both sexes must be addressed in reforms designed to reduce the literacy achievement gaps. Alloway (2007) noted that, notwithstanding the findings of recent research, funding in Australia is still more available for projects directed at boys rather than at programs meant to serve at-risk students of both sexes. Given that both boys and girls from economically disadvantaged backgrounds score lower than both boys and girls from advantaged backgrounds (a score gap far larger than that based on gender alone; see Appendix A), Alloway argued that much recent empirical research supports the “Which boys?” approach (see also Hall & Coles, 1997; Martino, 2008). An understanding of the gender literacy gap must therefore look beyond generalizations based on gender alone, because academic achievement is “deeply embedded in a web of individual, socio-cultural, and historical understandings about what it means to learn at school, and what it means to be literate in twenty-first century, post-industrial, globalizing communities” (Alloway, p. 591). Alloway emphasized that “gender cannot, by itself, explain how students take up literacy practices at school” (p. 595). Rowan et al. (2002) have emphasized that “Boys’ education is

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“There’s no problem [in elite college admissions] among middle-class white males. Black and Latino boys have the flu, while middle-class boys have a mild cold” (Marklein, 2010).

fundamentally connected to girls' education" (p. 5) and that all students will benefit from efforts to create "*transformative* schooling practices" (p 5).

Weaver-Hightower (2005) affirmed the importance of the "Which boys?" approach (a response to the "What about the boys?" reaction to the 1990s focus on girls' needs, as he noted in his review article, 2003a), pointing out that this is a question that must be addressed, as socioeconomic status, sexuality, appearance, and disability all affect boys' achievement and success in school well beyond the general category of gender alone. Weaver-Hightower cautioned that "If researchers are not careful and nuanced in their examination of the issues, they may misrecognize disadvantages as affecting all boys, when really boys who are white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class, and traditionally masculine tend—on average—to do quite well" (p. 2; see also Martino, 2008; Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001). Watson et al. (2010) noted that "gender is by no means the only factor affecting literacy achievement, and . . . the way that gender intersects with other social and cultural factors such as SES must be further investigated" (p. 357).

Noting the potentially damaging consequences of an over-simplified understanding of the gender literacy gap, Alloway (2007) cautioned against the view of academic achievement as a zero-sum game in which, if boys are to win, something must be taken from girls. This zero-sum discourse employs a narrative of unequal empowerment (Stone, 2002), the sense that improved achievement by girls in math, for



example, has come at the expense of boys' achievement in literacy.<sup>31</sup> The discourse of "feminized schools" pits boys against girls and positions boys as "disadvantaged" in school, Alloway noted, suggesting that a political agenda underlies "the constant whipping up of panic" about boys' literacy achievement, which serves as a delaying tactic to avoid addressing the needs of all students in a changing society (p. 588; see also Martino, 2008b).

Lareau's (2011) study of the effects of class on children's school experiences strongly supports a focus on class as an important factor in boys' (as well as girls') literacy achievement. Class status is central to individuals' possession and use of particular types of cultural capital, and this has important implications for boys' attitudes toward, and achievement in, school literacy. Further, as Lareau demonstrated, class is also inextricably bound up with families' language use (e.g., the use of directives rather than extended questioning and reasoning in family interactions), with obvious implications for children's literacy development.

Alloway and Gilbert (1997) suggested that boys who are more socioeconomically privileged, with expectations of professional success after secondary school, view literacy as an important means to a desired end. In contrast, low-SES boys who lack these expectations see less potential reward for engaging in academic literacy practices; in fact, school literacy engagement may be perceived to hinder their enactment of the dominant

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<sup>31</sup> Long-term data belie this suggestion—in reality, boys' literacy scores in relation to girls' have been largely unchanged over decades (NAEP, 1995). According to a recent NAEP report, "the 18-point score gap in 2007 was not significantly different" from the gap a decade earlier, in 1998 (NAEP, 2008).

version of masculinity that will be their claim to future respect (Alloway & Gilbert).

Further support for the importance of class to an understanding of boys' literacy achievement comes from Martino (2003), who described a study of middle-class boys who rejected in-school literacy but were supported by their parents in their out-of-school literacy pursuits. Middle-class cultural capital was deployed effectively by these parents on behalf of their sons to connect the boys' out-of-school literacy practices with in-school literacy activities—a use of cultural capital less readily available to lower-SES boys.

Class differences have other implications for boys' school experiences: As lower SES boys disengage from school literacy, this furthers their over-representation in lower-tracked classes, a sorting process that maintains the reproduction of class difference in literacy achievement, sustaining structural inequality (Epple, Newlon, & Romano, 2002; MacLeod, 2009; Oakes, 1986).

### **Multiple Literacies**

In addition to the need to define more precisely “which boys” may be at risk for poor literacy achievement, further issues of definition are also central to an understanding of some boys' low literacy achievement as measured by state and national assessments. Awareness of the central role of definition underlies recent calls in the scholarly literature for more comprehensive definitions of “literacies” (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Blackburn, 2003; Dutro, 2002; Hall & Cole, 1997; Jones & Myhill, 2007; Martino, 2003; Schultz, 2006; Taylor, 2004). Schultz, in a 2006 review of qualitative research on writing, cited a rich array of recent studies of students' out-of-school and non-traditional writing practices. Schultz credits Dyson (1987) with posing a number of questions which have

expanded the understanding of literacy, including “What is writing or literacy? Where should we look for it? What are the boundaries? Is writing synonymous with the words on the page? . . . How are the purposes of writing in a particular cultural event connected to ideology or to societal discourses?” (p. 361).

The work of Moje (2002) offers one example among many of explorations of boys’ out-of-school writing. Moje explored in detail the out-of-school literacy practices of gang-connected youth, finding that the students she studied “used literacy practices as meaning-making, expressive, and communicative tools (p. 651). For these students, both male and female, graffiti writing and other alternative forms of writing served a fundamentally important purpose as “a way of conveying, constructing, and maintaining identity, thought, and power” (p. 651). Moje concluded that “if we can learn to work within the experience and texts of these young people, then we may be able to participate with them in the expansion of their literacy practices and in the rewriting of school experiences for typically marginalized adolescents” (p. 681).

Despite the well-documented personal importance of non-print text creation by boys, Alloway (2007) noted that achievement data are generally based on print texts, a fact which tends to skew and distort the interpretation of boys’ literacy proficiency. In contrast, many out-of-school and non-print literacy activities “do not clash with boys’ and men’s desire to take up positions as ‘masculine’ subjects” (p. 590). Thus the types of literacy most frequently assessed and reported fail to reflect increasingly important types of literacy at which boys in particular may excel, including information technology and

multi-media communication.<sup>32</sup> Rather than “pining for Paradise Lost” (Alloway, p. 586) in terms of print-based literacies, discussions of boys’ literacy must acknowledge that literacy demands have changed in recent years; further, an awareness of new forms of literacy must filter down from the level of policy decisions to the level of curriculum and pedagogy.

Martino (2003) similarly noted that literacy achievement data reflect a very narrowly defined form of print literacy,<sup>33</sup> arguing that this narrow definition of literacy has led to boys becoming constructed as an at-risk group. Instead, we need to broaden our definition of literacy, which will have implications for pedagogy and for schools. Alloway and Gilbert (1997) pointed out that boys may be successfully literate in modes not recognized or valued in the school environment, though these may be highly valued and useful in the technological environment of their future lives.

Jones and Myhill (2007) addressed the issue of definitions of literacy as well as assumptions about boys as “differently literate.” Their large-scale analysis of high school

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<sup>32</sup> Smith and Wilhelm (2002) addressed boys’ multiple literacies extensively. In their study of 49 high school boys from different geographic areas, classes, and ethnicities, they were surprised to find that, “Every single boy in our study enthusiastically engaged in a host of literacy practices outside school” including writing poetry, raps, and stories (as cited in Smith & Wilhelm, 2009, p. 364). See Hull (2003) for a discussion of new literacies, and Hull (2001) for an extensive review of research on literacy outside of school.

<sup>33</sup> Hillocks (2002), after an extensive study of state writing standards and assessments, concluded that “banality” was a hallmark of top-rated papers in some states (p. 190), and that thinking and reasoning were by no means universal criteria for assessment of writing. Schultz (2006) noted the “narrow and formulaic” nature of the writing such assessments often reward, which encourages the teaching of writing “merely as a skill” rather than as the more creative and individual exercise of meaningful thought (p. 359).

writers' work challenged the discourse of gender difference in writing competence and the "moral panic" (a phrase frequently used in scholarly discussion of popular discourse) typical of much current popular press discussion concerning boys' writing ability (p. 1; see also Watson et al., 2010; Rowan et al., 2002). Noting that the gender gap in writing achievement has "remained pretty stable since the early '70s and is currently at its lowest" in recent years (p. 1), they found that few studies have actually looked at samples of boys' and girls' writing, though the "differently literate" perspective (for which their study found only very limited evidence) takes for granted such a difference and further assumes that boys prefer nonfiction reading and non-narrative writing genres. Jones and Myhill (2007) noted that "scant empirical evidence exists to suggest this is true for writing; indeed, growing evidence indicates that it is not genre but topic that is a stronger factor in influencing boys' preferences" (p. 2). (Indeed, boys' evident enjoyment of fantasy narratives such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the Harry Potter series would seem an obvious counter to the assumption that boys reject narrative fiction. (See below for a discussion of Fletcher, 2006, and Thomas, 1998, on boys' enjoyment of writing narrative fiction on their chosen topics.)

Going beyond the question of boys' supposed genre preferences, Jones and Myhill (2007) emphasized that writing is fundamentally a social act rooted in its context,<sup>34</sup> a "socially-situated act of social practice, an act of connection and communication with others," and that classrooms are "socially-determined communities

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<sup>34</sup> Brodkey (1987) noted that "there is always a context" in which writing occurs, and this context is central to the study of writing (as cited in Schultz, 2006, p. 365).

of practice that shape both written texts and writing processes. . . . “ (p. 4).<sup>35</sup> Because this social element of classroom writing is so central, they argued that the achievement gap in writing is “more likely to be attributable to social and cultural factors, rather than cognitive or linguistic differences,” and that “the context and the community in which [students’ writing] occurs are powerful influences on writing development [which] shape how boys and girls variously respond to writing tasks” (p. 7). Jones and Myhill concluded that “the discourse of difference is unhelpful as a lens through which to consider boys’ and girls’ writing” (p. 8). The category of gender, while a factor in writing, needs to be problematized because of the limited range of gender “subject positions” available to both male and female students (p. 8) in classrooms and schools.<sup>36</sup> Instead of a focus on gender, Jones and Myhill argued, a broader view of literacies, both within and outside of school, will lead to a more nuanced understanding of boys’ literacy activities and engagement.

### **Motivation, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Perception**

In addition to issues of definition and the social construction of gender, the issues of boys’ motivation and self-perception, as well as the role of self-efficacy beliefs, have

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<sup>35</sup> Schultz (2006) has extensively reviewed several decades of research on literacy as a social practice among students and their peers and other communities, within and outside of school.

<sup>36</sup> Awareness of the central role of definition also underlies recent calls for more comprehensive definitions of “literacies” in books combining research with advice for practitioners, like *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys* (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), *Misreading Masculinity* (Newkirk, 2003), and *Boy Writers* (Fletcher, 2006), discussed below; this awareness has appeared in the popular press as well (e.g., “Boys Don’t Read, Except When They Do,” London, 2011).

also received significant scholarly attention (Alloway, 2007; Bandura, 1995; Bozack, 2011; Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Martin, 2003; Pajares, 2001, 2003; Pajares & Valiante, 2006; Peterson, 2006; Potter, McCormick, & Busching, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2009; Vallance, 2004). The connection between language use and identity construction has been explored in connection with the New Literacy Studies perspective, using the tool of discourse analysis (Gee, 2000). This body of literature is particularly germane to an understanding of factors involved in boys' literacy engagement and achievement. The work of Pollack (1998) and Kindlon and Thompson (1999) also contributes to an understanding of factors involved in boys' academic motivation in general.

Research on self-efficacy and its relation to achievement provides a rich body of relevant literature, beginning with Bandura's (1977) investigation of the construct. Bandura (1995) emphasized the central importance of this aspect of motivation: "Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than people's beliefs of personal efficacy" (p. 2). Bandura found several sources of efficacy beliefs relevant to academic motivation: the measuring of personal success not through competition with others but through meeting personal goals; experiences of mastery, of success through perseverance and effort to overcome obstacles; vicarious experiences through models with whom a student can identify; and verbal support indicating the potential for success with a task, combined with structured experiences (e.g., scaffolded writing tasks) which support success. Efficacy beliefs, according to Bandura, can serve to increase resilience and perseverance through difficulties, increase effort directed at tasks, and encourage the setting of higher personal goals.

Zimmerman (1995) reported on a large body of research on efficacy beliefs in educational development, including writing proficiency, noting that research across a broad range of ages and contexts confirms the importance of efficacy beliefs on motivation and achievement, goal-setting, and willingness to persevere in tasks.

Pajares and Valiante (2006), reviewing self-efficacy research spanning almost 30 years, asserted the crucial importance of teachers, parents, and others in fostering the self-efficacy beliefs of students, through providing challenging tasks and supporting students toward mastery of these tasks in order to help them develop “a robust sense of confidence” (p. 167; see also Hidi & Boscolo, 2006).

Pajares and Valieante’s (2006) review of research on the link between self-efficacy and writing motivation confirmed the connection between students’ confidence in their writing abilities and their writing achievement. Related research on motivation and perseverance has examined the concept dubbed “grit,” the perseverance to work toward long-term goals, which Duckworth et al. (2007) found to be an important trait predictive of success with tasks. This research suggests that, quite apart from IQ, the psychological disposition to grit “may be as essential as talent to high accomplishment” (p. 1100). Given that writing is a complex task demanding an array of cognitive and metacognitive processes as well as extended self-regulation (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006), this stamina to persevere is essential to writing—and academic—success.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 2000) and his colleagues did pioneering work on flow experiences, which Smith and Wilhelm (2002) discussed extensively in their book for practitioners, *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*.



Csiksentmihalyi emphasized the importance of marshaling intrinsic motivation in order to improve literacy engagement and learning. Csiksentmihalyi distinguished between extrinsic motivation, based on external rewards, and intrinsic motivation, evident when people are immersed in a task for its own sake, for the satisfaction of the activity itself. This “flow” state can be seen in a wide range of activities in which the enjoyment of the task itself provides the motivation. However, according to Csiksentmihalyi, such intrinsic motivation is often missing in the classroom. “Unfortunately,” Csiksentmihalyi noted, “at present. . . lamentably few students recognize the idea that learning can be enjoyable” (p. 116). But educators must mobilize this powerful source of motivation, because, unlike computers, “People will think logically only when they feel like it” (p. 118). Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) described the phenomenon of *autotelic* activity, which is rewarding “in and of itself. . . quite apart from its end product or any extrinsic good that might result from the activity” (p. 89). This phenomenon was “remarkably similar across play and work settings” (p. 89) and has also been studied in a number of other contexts including the arts. The phenomenon of flow occurs when a balance exists between perceived challenge and perceived capacity, when individuals experience a sense of control over their actions, leading to a loss of self-awareness and sense of the passage of time and to deep immersion in the task at hand. Such activities, even when intellectually demanding, may be deeply satisfying and offer a sense of “creative accomplishment” (Shernoff, Csikszentmihaly, et al., 2003, p. 159). Csiksenmihalyi’s work has been widely cited by later writers on issues of motivation.

More recently, Dweck's (2007, 2008, 2012) research on motivation has explored how intrinsic motivation, as well as a belief that intelligence is not fixed at birth, can impel students to higher achievement. In research replicated in many settings, from middle schools to colleges, Dweck and colleagues have demonstrated that students can be taught a "growth mindset," or incremental theory of intelligence, a belief that intelligence is malleable and increases with effort, and that this mindset results in increasing and ultimately higher effort and achievement than that of students who hold a "fixed mindset," or entity theory of intelligence, a belief that their intelligence is fixed and unchangeable. Students with a growth mindset seek challenging problems to solve, believing that their efforts will increase their intelligence, while students who hold a fixed mindset resist challenges lest their intelligence be called into question should they fail at the task. Students who have adopted a growth mindset are intrinsically motivated to accept challenges and increase their efforts when they begin to have difficulty with a task.

Other research supports the view that intrinsic motivation is especially important to student engagement: A study of high school students' academic and life goals (Potter, McCormick, & Busching, 2001) indicated that students were more motivated when their writing tasks seemed authentic to them, reflected their own life goals, and were responded to by a teacher perceived as caring and respectful of students—a combination of factors the students in the study perceived to be frequently lacking in the context of their in-school writing. Potter et al. found that a focus on immediate performance goals ("specific proximal goals," p. 46) as well as grades could be effective in motivating some

students, but such a focus could also serve to supplant the force of intrinsic motivation, whereas factors such as social and personal engagement, self-expression and self-exploration, and a sense of self-efficacy in personal writing mattered more for most students in the study. In discussing responses by the boys interviewed in the study, Potter et al. noted that “a central developmental task of adolescence is the construction of a workable identity. . . that authentically defines who one is” (p. 49), a task which requires autonomy that may conflict with classroom requirements seen as autocratic or requiring inauthentic self-expression.

Bozack (2011), in a mixed methods study of high school boys’ reading achievement and motivation, found a modest relationship between boys’ motivation and their achievement in literacy, specifically reading, noting that independence and choice in reading materials were crucial factors in motivation. Smith & Wilhelm (2009) summarized their own findings on motivation (which are echoed in many of the studies they reviewed) in five key recommendations: providing students with “a sense of competence and control, a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill, clear goals and feedback, a focus on the immediate experience, and the possibility of social relationships” (p. 366).

Vallance (2004) synthesized research to date on boys’ academic motivation and suggested important questions that should be pursued in this area. Vallance found that boys are motivated by performance approach goals—the achievement of a personal best—rather than by task mastery goals. (Here a gender difference seems to exist, with girls more motivated by mastery goals.) Classrooms emphasize task mastery goals

through pedagogical practices that allow individuals to work at their own pace and collaborate with others; but performance goals (which, according to Vallance, are more motivating to boys) involve peer comparisons, publicizing scores, ability groups, and strict time constraints. However, this performance goals approach can lead to “self-handicapping” behaviors, through which boys seek to protect themselves from the potentially damaging self-esteem effects of poor performance. Vallance also found that harsh evaluation destroys motivation toward mastery goals (e.g., when the emphasis is on the grade rather than on the learning challenge—see Csiksenmihalyi, 1990; Dweck, 2008, 2012), and both cooperation and competition can play useful roles in motivation. Nonetheless, Vallance argued, while using performance goals might reduce some boys’ willingness to engage with literacy activities, performance goals should be considered in a mix with achievement and mastery goals.

Martin (2003) summarized findings from Australian studies of boys’ motivation and achievement and conducted a quantitative study of the motivation of seventh and eighth grade students (both boys and girls). Martin’s interview findings include several points of interest: Boys in this study did believe that school was important to their future goals and life skills, as well as providing a place to meet new friends—the most highly valued aspect of school cited in the interviews. Negative aspects of school cited by participants in Martin’s study included boredom, repetitive demands, competing claims on time for other aspects of their lives, the challenge of difficult schoolwork, and poor teaching and relationships with teachers. Martin’s conclusions support the findings of other research in this area: Elements that served to boost boys’ motivation included a

belief in self and in the value of school, persistence and time management skills, a sense that their teachers enjoyed working with young people, and teachers' ability to balance authority with tolerance and humor and to offer choice and variety. Motivation was reduced by fear of failure, self-sabotage, anxiety, and a sense of lack of control.

Interestingly, while girls scored higher in anxiety, boys scored higher in failure avoidance and self-sabotage. Thus, Martin concluded, it is imperative that educators address the issue of students' negative thinking, focus on mastery rather than competition (here Martin's findings contradict those of Vallance (2005), above), and connect learning to students' lives, interests, and goals in the larger world. Pajares and Valiante (2006) reviewed recent research that upholds this view, finding that non-competitive approaches are most effective in supporting self-efficacy and motivation, and that offering students autonomy and choice in writing tasks enhances interest and investment.

In keeping with these findings, Pajares' (2003) review of research on motivation and writing achievement demonstrated that students' sense of confidence and self-efficacy has a significant impact on their writing motivation and achievement in school. Because writing is "as much an emotional as a cognitive activity" (Pajares, p. 154), it is not surprising that "affective components strongly influence all phases of the writing process" (p. 154). For many students, it is "inaccurate self-beliefs" about writing skill, rather than an actual lack of skill, that lead to "students shortchanging themselves academically" (pp. 153-154). Challenging students' inaccurate beliefs about their lack of writing skill can result in higher engagement and achievement. This finding supports Csikszentmihalyi's work establishing the importance of flow and intrinsic motivation and

Dweck's work on fixed and growth mindsets in student engagement with academic tasks. It also adds an important element to consider in connection with some boys' avoidance of tasks at which they fear they might fail (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Taylor, 2004).

Pollack (1998) offered a useful perspective on the frequent finding among researchers that boys' expressed confidence in their academic performance is out of keeping with teachers' assessments of their achievement, suggesting that many self-esteem measurement instruments simply cause boys to respond in keeping with the mandates of the Boy Code—essentially, “never let them see you sweat”—the dictate to maintain a show of confidence and bravado whatever the reality of one's feelings. Pollack's own counseling work with boys revealed that many boys hide their lack of confidence behind a mask of self-assurance and bravado; such “false positive” responses become more frequent as boys reach high school age.<sup>37</sup>

Newkirk (as cited in Whitmire, 2010) suggested that many boys' over-confidence is rooted in an unrealistic view of the world they will enter as adults: “Literacy is the currency of college work. . . .,” Newkirk pointed out, but “A lot of boys live by the end run. They think they can screw around in school but if they're aggressive and social, the world will take care of them. And for many years the world did take care of them, but

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<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Peterson (2006) reviewed a number of studies which found girls' self-confidence as writers exceeded that of boys, and that both teachers and students believed girls to be better writers than boys. Students' perceptions of gender disparities in writing ability strengthened between grades 2 and 8. See Younger & Warrington, 2005, on boys' “self-belief in their own ability” and “conviction that they would do well regardless of how little work they did” (p. 6).

that world is gone. There are a lot of boys out there living . . . with expectations that are unrealistic” (pp. 28-29).

Researchers confirm this impression: According to Pajares and Valiante (2006), “researchers have suggested that boys tend to be more self-congratulatory in their responses [to researchers’ questions regarding their writing abilities], whereas girls tend to be more modest” (p. 164); however, at least through the middle grades, boys report less confidence in their writing abilities than do girls. Pajares and Valiante offer this explanation: “When gauging their ability relative to the task, boys report higher levels of self-efficacy[;] when gauging their ability relative to one another, boys and girls agree that girls are better writers” (p. 165). In a series of studies conducted among students from grades four through eleven in 2001 and 2002 by Pajares & Valiante, such beliefs were strongest among students holding gender-stereotypical beliefs, suggesting that these conceptions of masculinity and femininity may adversely affect boys’ sense of self-efficacy in writing, as well as their writing achievement and perceived value of writing.

Issues of motivation, self-efficacy, and self-esteem are closely related to issues of identity formation. In a review of research on the influence of gender on writing development, Peterson (2006) noted that researchers have often viewed writing as a social practice through which “children learn the meanings of their culture, exploring and constructing their respective gender roles” (p. 311); given the centrality of culture in the social practices, it is important to recognize that writing both “shapes and is shaped by gender meanings” (p. 320). Schultz (2006) reviewed recent research on how students use writing to establish their identity and position in relation to others, sometimes in ways

that challenge the hegemonic order of gender definitions. (See, for example, Blackburn, 2002.)

Gee (2000), using discourse analysis tools to assemble “snapshots” of middle-class and working class teenage boys’ language, argued that social languages are used to construct and negotiate identities; boys “fashion themselves in language as different kinds of people” (p. 412). He noted that a very deep source of inequality in schools is “that poorer and minority children are often in classrooms where literacy is delivered as if it were some sort of general and stand-alone thing” (p. 413). Gee argued the fundamental importance of literacy education that provides “access to the ‘dominant discourses,’ the discourses that give one access to power, social goods, and relative freedom from oppression in our new capitalist, global, high-tech world” (p. 413).

Thus school-based reform proposals need to incorporate a wider, more socially relevant understanding of literacy if they are to serve the needs of the most disadvantaged boys. Gee (2000) concluded that, “What is at stake— as Paolo Freire knew so well—is the creation, in and out of schools, of social languages (literacies) through which all of us can read and write more equitable selves and worlds” (p. 419).

### **Scholarly Discussion of School-Based Reform Proposals**

Scholars have offered, and responded to, a range of proposals for reforms meant to address the literacy gender gap. Proposals for single-sex schools or classrooms have met with scholarly criticism (Martino & Kehler, 2007; Matthews, 1998). Teacher gender as a factor in boys’ literacy achievement has been refuted by scholars as well (Alloway 2007; Martin & Marsh, 2005; Martino, 2003; Martino & Kehler, 2007). Approaches



avored by scholars include critical literacy and an explicit focus in classrooms on the social construction of masculinity (Alloway, 2007; Davis, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 1999, 2000; Martino & Kehler, 2007). The importance of avoiding the “often ideologically driven suggestions of a bestseller” is a recurring theme (Weaver-Hightower, 2005, p. 4).

Many researchers have noted that essentializing attitudes, based on the assumption that difference is nature-based rather than cultural in origin, are a real problem in school reform proposals. Kehler and Greig (2005), for example, found Ontario’s “boy-friendly” educational reform proposals to be “simplistic quick-fix responses that fail to acknowledge the complexity of masculinity and literacy practices” (p. 366). Martino, Lingard, and Mills (2004) cautioned that schools that fail to address this sort of generalizing in their approaches to boys’ literacy risk “remasculinizing” their school culture, reinforcing traditional definitions of masculinity (p. 435). They concluded that a reform program founded on such essentializing assumptions in the Australian school they studied did not “come to grips with the underpinning causes of the problems which it is seeking to address”; instead, its “underpinning essentialist and biologically deterministic [assumptions] about gender and schooling . . . potentially exacerbate these problems” (p. 454).

**Teacher gender.** Teacher gender is a frequent subject of discussion in the popular discourse, generally grounded in the assumption that boys’ literacy achievement would be improved if more male teachers were involved in literacy instruction. Scholars have disputed this assumption for several reasons. Martin (2003) argued that calls for

more male role models to counter the “feminization” of schools are based on “populist beliefs” (p. 10) centering on biological explanations of difference. Smith & Wilhelm (2009), reviewing extensive research on teacher gender and boys’ literacy achievement, found that “the data supporting [the effect of teacher gender on boys’ achievement] are sporadic and unclear,” but that “Numerous large-scale and international studies have shown that the performance of boys for male teachers is not significantly different from their performance for female teachers” (p. 364). Similar concerns about the “feminization” of boys under the influence of female teachers date back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and provide “a continuing legacy of both fears over demasculinization by female teachers and efforts to instill a manufactured, traditional masculinity in boys” (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 181).

Martin and Marsh (2005) found that teacher gender had no effect on student motivation, and Australia’s Success for Boys program also counters the view that a dearth of male teachers is a cause of low achievement for boys (as cited in Alloway, 2007). Weaver-Hightower (2003a) noted that advocates of this approach “frequently make questionable assumptions about male teachers’ efficacy—for not all male teachers provide “‘positive’ role models” (p. 489).

Instead, Matthews (1998) argued, having all male teachers for boys reinforces stereotypes and reproduces the damaging construction of “masculine” as “not feminine,” reinscribing the gender binary that oppresses both girls and boys. In fact, in their 2009 study, Lingard et al. cited male teachers who “reported that they were expected to be

athletic, straight, Anglo-Celtic, and disciplinarians” (as cited in Watson et al., 2010, p. 359).

In a quantitative study exploring academic motivation and engagement in relation to teacher gender, involving 944 middle and high school boys and girls, Martin and Marsh (2005) found that the “gender-stereotypic model” (p. 320), which asserts that boys need more male teachers in order to be motivated academically, is not correct; in fact, teacher gender is not a factor in academic motivation.

Martino and Kehler (2007) noted that there has been no research to support the common anxiety about a paucity of male teachers (as well as the absence of other male role models) and the “feminization” of schools, pointing out that, ironically, the predominance of female teachers in elementary schools is rooted in the traditional devaluing of elementary teaching as “women’s work” based on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideology of the domestic sphere, where child care was assigned to women (see also Martino, 2008). They argued that current media-driven debates and policy initiatives attributing boys’ literacy underachievement to a feminization of schools, curricula, and pedagogy not only are unsupported by research but serve to detract attention from other significant factors such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

**Single-sex schools and classes.** Scholars have also contested proposals for single-sex classes and schools, arguing that such proposals tend to essentialize and stereotype boys, reinforcing and recuperating gender binaries. Scholars have argued that single-sex education also raises the issue of a hidden curriculum. Just as Anyon (1980) demonstrated how a hidden curriculum of pedagogical practices reproduced class

distinctions in schools serving working class, middle class, and elite populations of children, the concept of a hidden curriculum is important to consider in relation to proposals for single-sex educational approaches, which are promoted as a means to mitigate the effects of “feminized schools” that (according to this narrative) favor girls and disengage boys.

Greig (2003) made an observation voiced by numerous scholars, noting that single-sex settings often “reinforce traditional notions of gender and become sites for the reproduction of hetero-normative masculinity,” further marginalizing “boys who perform a subordinate masculinity and are oppressed and repressed by hegemonic masculinity” and who, in single-sex settings, “fail to see themselves represented within the school’s gendered culture” (p. 49).

In this vein, Matthews (1998) cautioned against a single-sex approach to meeting the needs of boys, noting that “methods of learning carry their own hidden curriculum” and can serve to reproduce gender binaries (p. 176). Single-sex approaches, according to Matthews, imply the existence of innate gender difference (rather than acknowledging the social construction of gender) and reinforce gender stereotypes. Single-sex schools, in Matthews’ view, “are structurally sexist” (p. 178) and are based on an assumption of biological determinism: “The separation of boys and girls into single-sex schools carries a powerful hidden message: that behavior is largely genetically determined and is fixed” (Matthews, 1998, p. 186).

Clearly, this hidden curriculum, in itself, can have enormous implications for boys’ attitudes toward literacy. Weaver-Hightower (2005) noted that, “England and

Australia, both veterans of the single-sex structure, have had perhaps more panic and tumult about boys than any other countries” (p. 3). He concluded that, “The research on single-sex education is mixed at best. . . . and for some students, single-gender schooling can be a horror. Those boys who are already at the bottom of the pecking order can have it even worse with only boys around” (p. 3). One boy in Martino’s (2000) study who had transferred from an all-boys school to the co-ed school in the study commented that the presence of girls made homophobic verbal bullying less socially acceptable, because girls “condemn that type of thing” (cited p. 222).

According to Matthews (1998), single-sex education is reductionist and discriminatory, ignores sexuality (students who are gay, hetero- and bi-sexual are all lumped together by biological sex), and increases intolerance through a process of “Othering” which leads to alienation and objectification, reinforcing sexist cultural conditioning and harming all kinds of relationships. It also leads to the splitting of the self, projecting despised traits onto the Other. For boys, in a binary gender order, the Other is female. This may have significant implications for boys’ attitudes toward forms of literacy constructed as “feminine.”<sup>38</sup> This theme was echoed by Mac an Ghaill (2000), who noted that various binaries in school cultures are “highly gendered”: for example, academics vs. athletics, arts vs. sciences. Martino, Mills, and Lingard (2005)

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<sup>38</sup> Dutro (2002) pointed out that, “A large part of what it means to be a boy is to be other than a girl,” (p. 470), which can include a range of successful literacy practices which are gendered “feminine” in many school settings. In Dutro’s study, boys “defined themselves in part through rejection of what they deemed feminine” (p. 470). As Connell (1995) remarked, “‘Masculinity’ does not exist except in contrast with ‘femininity’” (p. 68).

noted the tendency of teachers in single-sex classrooms to “adopt pedagogical practices that cater to taken-for-granted assumptions about how boys and girls learn as a group” and urged instead critical reflection on issues of “gender, privilege, and power” in order to address the problem of boys’ literacy achievement (as cited in Watson et al., 2010, p. 359). Grieg (2003), echoing a theme voiced throughout much of the scholarly literature, noted that “single-sex settings are dubious as they tend to reinforce rather than challenge the traditional gendered nature and processes of schooling. Single-sex settings remain a simplistic solution to a complex problem. . . .” (p. 50). Instead, “Boys need alternative visions of being boys” (p. 51). Thus single-sex educational approaches perpetuate a binary cycle reproducing structural conditions that lead to underachievement for boys who strive to sustain a performance of heteronormative masculinity.

Another unintended consequence of single-sex approaches can be a “dumbing down” of curriculum, impeding rather than assisting boys in meeting the literacy demands of life beyond school, and neglecting research-based recommendations for developing students’ higher order cognitive skills (Martino & Kehler, 2007; Rowan et al., 2002). Martino and Kehler pointed out that while single-sex policies are not supported by research, a great deal of research does point to the importance of intellectual challenge, real-world relevance, and other elements that affect learning outcomes for all students. Essentialist approaches, which tend to ignore this research, can militate against offering the intellectual challenge and repertoire of skills needed in the real world beyond school (Martino & Kehler; Rowan et al.). Mathews (1998) further noted that proposed single-sex solutions ignore the importance of emotional intelligence and development of

the whole person as a part of cognitive development, and undervalue goals such as “improving relationships and maturity ” (p. 173). Opponents of single-sex education urge a deeper commitment to “what works, like smaller class sizes, more teacher training and greater attention to curriculum” (Sherwin, 2011, para. 4).

### **What Works: Critical Literacy Approaches and Other Suggested Pedagogies**

Single-sex proposals may be ineffective and in fact harmful, but literacy competence is crucial for informed citizenship and a more equitable and just society. One particular means for addressing the literacy gender gap has received attention from a number of scholars: the use of critical literacy (Alloway, 2007; Davies, 1997; Dutro, 2002; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Hall & Cole, 1997; Martino, 2003; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Rowan et al., 2002; Young, 2000, 2001), a pedagogical approach associated with raising critical awareness of relations of power in society and of the ways these relations are inscribed in texts (Freire, 1998).

Young (2001) defined critical literacy practices as building “an awareness that the language of texts and the reader’s responses to it are not neutral, but are shaped by social contexts and our experiences as people of particular races, ethnicities, genders and social classes” (p. 5). Increasing boys’ critical awareness of the social construction of masculinity can help them to understand that gender is something we do and learn to do, within social and institutional contexts. Young (2000) noted that “the word *critical* in *critical literacy* is derived from critical, social transformation theories that assume we live in a world of unequal power and resource distributions” (p. 312). Her explication of the functioning of critical theory is particularly helpful:

Critical theories reject the notions that there can ever be objective and neutral productions and interpretations of texts due, in part, to these unequal distributions of power and resources. Critical theory explains the production and interpretation of texts as mediated by hierarchical social institutions and relations of power. (p. 312)

Thus critical literacy activities can help make visible the otherwise invisible cultural messages conveyed in texts. Addressing boys' critical awareness of the social construction of masculinity is central to increasing their engagement with literacy, as constructions of gender and of literacy are interrelated and therefore must be examined together (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). Rowan et al. (2002) noted that gender norms are produced in literacy classrooms as well as in all other cultural contexts, and "the extent to which these norms are prescriptive or transformative is, finally, the most significant question of all" (p. 50). Making visible how structures work to "produce, circulate, and naturalize gendered norms"—the work of critical literacy approaches—involves revealing "how structures construct and secure their legitimacy" and "highlights how gender norms are constructed, naturalized and valorized particularly through language and discursive practices" (p. 47).

Toward this end, Alloway (2007) advocated a focus in classrooms on how "versions of masculinity, as lived and experienced . . . might be implicated in literacy learning at school" (p. 598). Martino (2003) also emphasized the importance of educators addressing with their students the social construction of gender, arguing that it is crucial for students to see and critique how their gendered selves are constructed, to



look at issues of power and agency in the classroom, and to critically interrogate the popular culture texts they bring into the classroom.<sup>39</sup>

Martino (2003) noted that popular culture “reinforce[s] the already heavily patrolled gender borders” (p. 19) within which boys operate and is therefore too significant not to receive critical attention by teachers and students. For instance, the ways hegemonic versions of masculinity are marketed, produced, and reproduced through electronic game culture, including their promotion of homophobia and misogyny, need to receive direct critical attention in classrooms. Toward this end, professional development for teachers is crucial “in order to create a culture that is committed to interrogating those discourses that naturalize masculinity and in so doing present it as an unalterable given”; this sort of professional development is important particularly in view of the powerful effect of popular discourses on teachers as well as on parents and education leaders (Martino, 2000, p. 232). Martino (1999) emphasized that, “Until matters related to homophobia and the role it plays in establishing hegemonic heterosexual masculinities are addressed on a whole school level, existing gender regimes will remain intact” (p. 260).

Davies (1997) also advocated the use of critical literacy pedagogies, noting that post-modern and post-structuralist theory seeks to reveal as artificial what is made invisible, internalized, and “natural” by language. Viewed from this theoretical

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<sup>39</sup> Martino (1999) cited a collection he co-authored for use in English classrooms, *Gendered Fictions* (Martino & Mellor, 1995) to help teachers introduce to students critical discourse concerning the construction of masculinities and the gender regimes which perpetuate them.

perspective, gender is constructed through language, rather than existing as an innate quality; and the gender order—a hierarchy of binaries, masculine and feminine—is maintained and normalized, made to seem “natural,” through language. This process is central to identity construction, as we (and our students) are shaped by discourse into a gender binary that is normalized and therefore invisible. Davies argued that “in working with boys and literacy, we need to make visible the constitutive force of discourse if we are to create fissures in the absoluteness of apparent naturalness of dominant masculinity” (“The End” section, para. 2). Critical literacy practices can break through this artifice of naturalness and “open up the possibilities of students and teachers becoming reflexively aware of the way in which speaking-as-usual constructs themselves and others” (“Critical Literacy” section, para. 1), offering students the capacity to constitute themselves in non-stereotypical ways. “In a critically and socially literate classroom,” Davies concluded, “language is no longer a dead tool for the maintenance of old certainties, but a life-giving set of possibilities for shaping and reshaping a complex, rich, fluid social world” (“Critical Literacy” section, final para.).<sup>40</sup>

The difficulties of critical literacy approaches are apparent in Young’s (2001) study, which applied discourse analysis to a home-schooling critical literacy lesson in which four young adolescent boys, made uncomfortable by the task of detecting gender construction in popular media, defied their instructor’s intentions by determined performances of heteronormative masculinity for one another’s approval. The transcript

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<sup>40</sup> Dutro (2002) also observed that boys have the potential to disrupt their own performance of hegemonic masculinity in a “safe space,” (p. 493), opening up the possibility of their responding to literacy activities in a freer, less gendered manner.

of the boys' responses is both humorous and disheartening, as they quickly move to "correct" their own and each other's initially critical responses to the images they are examining. On first comparing images of girls in *Girls' Life* with those in *Teen* or *YM*, the boys expressed their sense that "in reality most girls looked like the unmade-up ones in *Girls' Life* and probably felt really ugly when they looked at *YM* or *Teen*" (p. 8).

However, in response to images of girls in *YM*, *Teen*, and *Seventeen*,

As the boys were considering how the magazines [they were examining] portrayed gender in unrealistic and stereotypical ways, they were also confirming and displaying their heterosexuality to themselves, one another, and to me. . . .[making comments such as] "Major babe! Major babe!" [through which] each boy displayed his heterosexuality. . . . (pp. 8-9)

During the critical literacy activity, the boys were quite ready to describe the perfect girl as portrayed in the magazines but, Young reported, they were much less willing to explore the magazines' construction of masculinity: When asked if he could describe how the magazines portrayed the perfect boy, one of the boys indignantly responded, "I could not! I'm not doing that! I'm not a girl!" (p. 10). Young believed that the boys "may have felt that they [would appear to be] indicating an interest in boys as sexual objects" in responding to her questions about the portrayal of ideal masculinity.

Young concluded that "the boys were more concerned with their own masculine display than with answering her questions concerning the portrayal of masculinity" (p. 10). Her analysis of the entire activity was that "the boys' reactions to the photos [in the magazines] were meant to secure their position as real boys; they were attempting to

manage their actions and language in such a way as to clearly and unmistakably mark themselves as heterosexual males” (p. 10). Given that “the boys’ outward displays of heterosexuality were important to their growing identity as masculine” within a social context of “hegemonic [d]iscourses of masculinity” (p. 11), Young noted that “it is not surprising that the boys were more interested in displaying their heterosexual masculinity than participating in a critical discussion about how boys and girls were represented in teen magazines” (p. 11).<sup>41</sup>

Although the critical literacy perspective allowed Young (2000) to “see how the boys’ gendered identities . . . were constructed as they interacted with text, it also made more visible how the boys’ gendered identities influenced their construction of meanings” (p. 312). Young’s study (2000, 2001) in critical literacy activities with four young adolescent boys suggests the challenges of applying a critical literacy approach to helping boys become reflective and self-aware concerning the ways gender is socially constructed.

Martino and Kehler (2007) argued that what is needed is a set of approaches to address large sociocultural issues, so that “masculinity” can be reconstructed rather than

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<sup>41</sup> Martino (2000) found a similar attitude voiced by his high school participants, for whom “displaying masculinity. . . [was] linked to asserting publicly their heterosexuality by boasting about their sexual exploits with girls”—as one boy put it, like “roosters preening their feathers” (p. 225). He suggested that it is crucial for educators to call attention to the role of homophobia in the ways boys constitute and display themselves as masculine subjects. Dutro (2002), in her study of 5<sup>th</sup>-grade African-American boys, noted that the boys who held more social capital due to “performing the dominant hegemonic masculinity” were “able to make certain reading choices or respond to particular texts in ways that would have been far more socially risky for boys whose masculinity was not perceived to be hegemonic” (p. 471).

merely validated and reproduced in its most traditional and prescriptive form. They emphasized that “sufficient research-based evidence confirms that hegemonic masculinity is at the heart of many of the problems that boys are experiencing in schools” (p. 411) and that the skills and habits often devalued as “feminine” are precisely those which boys need to adopt in order to succeed in learning: reading, listening, attending to the teacher, and working more diligently. To ignore this underlying reality is to treat the outward symptoms (boys’ lower literacy achievement) rather than dealing with the fundamental issue of gender identity implicated in low achievement.

Weaver-Hightower (2005) recommended that educators, rather than adopting simplistic “tips for teachers” approaches to “fix” boys, engage in local action research in order to create approaches tailored to their particular classrooms, to “develop smart, non-stereotypical ways to help boys live in a world that demands masculinity to be reconceptualized as something more inclusive” (p. 4).<sup>42</sup> Weaver-Hightower recommended alternative approaches that “might seem to defy stereotypes of masculinity or traditional notions of schoolwork” (p. 4), including the implementation of dance, outdoor education, counseling focused on gender, and an “explicit attention to boys’ emotional vocabulary” (p. 4), an approach also recommended by Pirie (2002) and implied in the work of Kindlon and Thomopson (1999) and Pollack (1998). Above all, Weaver-Hightower warned against adopting “one-size-fits-all interventions” which fail to consider the specific needs of particular boys in the local context, wasting valuable time

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<sup>42</sup> This approach is illustrated in Whitmire’s (2010) discussion of school initiatives in Australia’s Success for Boys program.

and resources on “ideological gimmicks,” and above all “rolling back the gains of girls” (p. 4).

**Scholar-Practitioner Contributions to the Conversation about Boys and Literacy:  
Addressing the Boys in Our Classrooms Right Now**

Outside the scholarly conversation, practice-based recommendations for engaging boys in school literacy can be problematic, often grounded in a generalized, essentialist view of masculinity rather than acknowledging the role of cultural context and the social construction of gender in shaping boys’ literacy attitudes and engagement. This is a recurring problem in almost all non-scholarly writing proposing new approaches to boys’ literacy achievement: writers tend to generalize about boys in the aggregate and offer solutions which accommodate (rather than interrogate) a binary assignment of gender characteristics, thereby reinforcing hegemonic constructions of gender difference.<sup>43</sup> Yet teachers and other educational practitioners must deal with the outward manifestations of boys’ literacy disengagement, in addition to addressing the fundamental issues underlying the literacy gender gap.<sup>44</sup>

Toward the goal of addressing the realities of classrooms in which many boys are deeply invested in the culturally sanctioned heteronormative performance of masculinity,

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<sup>43</sup> One example, among many, of recommendations that uncritically reproduce the gender binary is Taylor’s (2004) suggestion of gender-separate book shelves in classrooms and boys-only book groups.

<sup>44</sup> In fact, Weaver-Hightower (2003b, 2008) has discussed at length the pressing need for a fruitful collaboration between the two separate discourses, the scholarly and the practitioner-oriented, in order to put into practitioners’ hands “nuanced, research-based” information and professional development to take the place of the more accessible and widely distributed “backlash blockbusters” (2008, p. 204).

a number of writers have offered useful classroom approaches to engaging boys in literacy activities. Many of the approaches offered by writers including Fletcher (2006) and Thomas (1997) in books and articles aimed at practitioners are useful for addressing the large numbers of disengaged boys (and girls as well) whom teachers see in their classrooms every day. Several other writers, like Pirie (2002), Newkirk (2003), and Smith and Wilhelm (2002), whose recommendations are grounded in scholarly perspectives, offer a blend of research and practical suggestions which acknowledge the impact of cultural influences on the ways boys enact masculinity in the literacy classroom while also addressing classroom realities as they are now.

Bozack (2011) remarked that, “It is possible that the belief of reading as a gendered activity is internalized during adolescence as a result of cultural experience” (p. 60). Bozack’s own research on adolescents’ reading experiences and attitudes found positive factors that improve literacy engagement—interest, identity, agency, a range of non-print materials—as well as a daunting, and too familiar, list of factors leading to reading aversion: perceived lack of control, teacher over-control, meaninglessness of text, task difficulty, and social isolation. In Bozack’s study, a mixed methods study of 330 students and 8 teachers at an all-boys Catholic high school, teachers’ efforts at actively encouraging students to view themselves as readers strengthened student attitudes toward in-school reading, while a mismatch between student needs and teacher practices furthered reading aversion. Australia’s Success for Boys program (discussed in Alloway, 2007; see also Weaver-Hightower, 2008; Whitmire, 2010) also advocates a broad array of

school practices, including community-based and technology-rich literacy activities, to bring more students into engagement with literacy.

Several other well-researched books and journal articles (some by scholars, others by secondary school educators) have blended insightful analysis of factors involved in boys' disengagement from school literacy with practical and research-supported approaches schools and teachers can implement to address these factors (Hall & Coles, 1997; Newkirk, 2003; Pirie, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). These are extremely accessible, making scholarly work readily available and immediately useful to education personnel at the level of implementation, from classroom teachers to curriculum directors and other school leaders. Although some of these books have been faulted for grouping all boys into one heteronormative category of masculinity, the authors acknowledge the cultural forces and social construction that reproduce one way of "doing boy," while offering suggestions for engaging many boys as they are now, in our classrooms today.

Smith and Wilhelm's *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men* (2002) made an important contribution to the literature, as it is grounded in scholarship but directed at practitioners. The book is based on original research as well as a thoughtful review of earlier research on the literacy lives of boys and young men. Smith and Wilhelm explored the ways that literacy is often an enjoyable social and collaborative activity for boys, and recommended that teachers connect reading to boys' "identity markers," their passions and interests outside of school, including the computer gaming experience. They noted that gender is the strongest predictor of writing



achievement, acknowledged the political heat surrounding the issue of boys' literacy underachievement, and asserted the power of reading to transform a life and fight stereotypes (including stereotypes about boys as a group). Importantly, Smith and Wilhelm questioned whether gender is "a useful category for teachers to think with" (p. xx) and noted that social class might be as important as gender in understanding boys' literacy. Pointing out that boys are often literate in ways not acknowledged or measured within the limits of school literacy (a concept Newkirk (2003) also explored), the authors conducted in-depth interviews with nearly 50 boys across a range of school types, geographical areas, socioeconomic levels, ethnicities, and academic achievement levels. They noted that while literacy is crucial for abstract thought, psychological development, and self-understanding, the narrow definitions of school literacy might be excluding other important literacy activities in which many boys engage outside of school.

Addressing many of the issues scholars have explored, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) insisted that proposals based in an anti-feminist backlash ideology reinforce the stereotyping of boys and miss the actual causes of boys' low literacy achievement which, they assert, are to be found in our culture's dominant construction of masculinity. But cultural constructions are neither universal nor permanent, they noted, and teachers can help disrupt dominant gender regimes by sharing with their students the constructedness of masculinity and working to change the "common sense" of habitus. Literacy instruction need not be socially conservative, supporting the status quo, but can instead disturb and disrupt socially constructed norms. In their review of recent research on boys and literacy, Smith & Wilhelm (2009) noted the complexity of the issues involved and

argued against a narrow focus on boys in curriculum and classroom planning, which often fails to address the diversity in boys' interests. Ultimately, they found that their own participants "were certainly much more different than they were alike" (p. 369).

Newkirk's *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture* (2003) drew on similar research, arguing that the trend to pathologize boys in the wake of the Columbine tragedy posits a view of boys as passive consumers who absorb and reenact an increasingly violent popular culture. This view leaves no room for boys' agency in their use of cultural materials and results in a misreading of boys' action/adventure writing and video game interests, with serious consequences for teachers' response to boys' writing. Newkirk, like Smith and Wilhelm, found the popular anti-feminist backlash discourse, as well as the debate concerning brain difference, unhelpful in considering ways to approach boys' literacy underachievement. Instead, according to Newkirk, a focus on motivation and psychological needs is more helpful. Newkirk hypothesized that boys' exaggerated sense of school capability (a finding replicated in many self-esteem studies but which is often not in keeping with actual school performance) may reflect a cynicism about the real-world importance of school-based literacy. Yet, Newkirk noted, in the post-industrial work world, skills not requiring high levels of literacy which once garnered success for male workers are no longer the skills most in demand. (See also Rosin 2010, 2012.)

Newkirk's (2003) suggestions for practical classroom applications reflect his belief in the need to remake the literacy curriculum to provide a free and pleasurable space for boys to inhabit, rather than the constricting space inscribed by the standards

movement.<sup>45</sup> Boys may resist low-level literacy tasks if they are seen as instruments of teacher control, and reading may appear “feminine” to boys because it is often solitary and inactive, with no visible product. Teachers must invite boys to experience the pure enjoyment of reading, which is the foundation of writing as well. Teachers’ unspoken class and gender biases can interfere with this process, limiting the types of stories that can find their way into the classroom. For example, teacher preferences for such genres as personal narrative and memoir may have less appeal to young boy writers; the dictate to “write what you know,” for instance, led one boy to object, “My imagination is bigger than my life” (p. 88).

Newkirk (2003) argued passionately for a broadened view of what constitutes literacy, to include much of what boys enjoy reading and writing (e.g., jokes, comic violence, action/adventure and parodies or extensions of media products like computer games and movies). In fact, Newkirk noted, stories centered on monsters, heroes, and violent action have a very long history in our culture, going back to the *Iliad* and *Beowulf*, and crude physical humor is a staple in the great works of Chaucer and Shakespeare.<sup>46</sup>

Hall and Coles (1997) raised many of the points later elaborated by Newkirk (2003) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002). Their survey of 8000 students from across the

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<sup>45</sup> In one truly horrifying anecdote, Newkirk (2003) described a kindergarten teacher using a rubric to get her young charges to draw “better” pictures, specifying exactly what elements, in what position, should appear in the picture.

<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that scholars including Weaver-Hightower (2005) have criticized writers like Newkirk for catering to “boys’ stereotypical predilections for grossness and naughtiness” (p. 3).

UK revealed that boys' favored reading genre was narrative, in contrast to prevailing assumptions that boys prefer nonfiction. Boys' nonfiction reading of periodicals often provided a bridge to narrative in the stories of sports figures or popular music celebrities. This finding is in keeping with Newkirk's assertion that boys enjoy both reading and writing narratives; what matters is topic, not genre.

Martino and Pallotta-Charolli (2003), in a study of 150 Australian boys and young men aged 11-24, found that narrow stereotypes concerning boys' reading interests failed to account for the boys in their study whose reading interests included, in the words of one 14-year-old boy, "love themes, relationships, suicide, drugs, alcohol, adolescence, peer pressure, abortion, depression, pregnancy and other issues that relate to us" (p. 243). Other boys in the study voiced an appreciation of the opportunities for self-expression and thought they found in their English classes: "You can express yourself in any way you like and there is really no wrong or right answer. . . . You start reading and thinking about issues" (p. 248). Clearly, the stereotypical view of boys not valuing school literacy practices offers at best an incomplete picture of boys and literacy.

Fletcher (2006, 2012), a writing coach and consultant, has offered many useful approaches to working with boy writers, though he acknowledged that his work addresses boys in the aggregate and does not take into account how some boys may be marginalized by an assumption of boys' similar tastes in reading and writing (Fletcher, personal communication, November 30, 2012). Fletcher has said that he feels "the voice in boys' writing—their humor, energy, passion—tends to disappear because it is not being encouraged in school" (as cited in Whitmire, 2010, p. 69). Fletcher attributed this

to many teachers' view of boy writers as "a problem to be managed. No wonder their voice gets dimmed and finally extinguished" (as cited in Whitmire, p. 69). In an approach similar to Fletcher's, Thomas (1997) discussed ways to work with the writing preferences of boys—again, employing a generalized conception of masculinity grounded in heteronormative constructions—offering teachers specific strategies to help boys develop stronger narratives with, for example, less insistent focus on action and more on reflection and character depth.<sup>47</sup>

Both Fletcher (2006) and Thomas (1997) grounded their suggestions in a "differently literate" perspective on boys as writers, offering useful strategies served up with broad generalizations about gender; for example, "We can best deal with girls and boys by identifying their respective discourse and genre strengths," "Boys like expert status in command and control situations," and "Men like power, instruments, and technical options" (Thomas, p. 24)—generalizations that may hold true for many boys, given the cultural pressure on boys to "do boy" (enact masculinity) in a particular way, but which may alienate and marginalize students who do not identify with the hegemonic masculinity Thomas and Fletcher have tacitly assumed to be the norm. Nonetheless, Thomas offered useful, specific strategies for teachers—for example, ways to work with narrative writers who seem stuck in an exaggerated use of the heroic model featuring "unambiguously heroic heroes impeded in performance only by physical injury" (p. 26).

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<sup>47</sup> Fletcher's list of boys' favored writing topics will be familiar to teachers and parents of many, but not all, boys: "aliens, monsters, horror stories, war, drugs, war-related hero stories, accidents, injuries, thugs, and mistakenly hurting something else. And we can't forget a particular favorite: robots fighting evil characters" (as cited in Whitmire, p. 70).

Taylor's (2004) strategies for engaging boys in literacy are similar to those offered by Smith and Wilhelm as well as many other writers: hands-on learning; problem-solving; discovery and analysis of information rather than of characters' motivations; and working with texts on a literal, explicit level rather than making inferences or decoding subtleties. Some of these recommendations, however, can lead to the "dumbing down" Martino and Kehler (2007) cautioned against, and some cross the line into limiting and harmful stereotyping.

In contrast, Wilson (2008) recommended motivating young writers through providing writing tasks that are authentic in terms of audience and purpose. Wilson noted that "authentic writing is quality writing" (p. 485) and offered suggestions including scheduling regular "write-talks" by guest speakers such as parents, coaches, athletes, musicians, and others who can talk to students about their own writing processes and about how writing is important in their own work, for authentic purposes and real audiences. Taylor (2004) recommended book talks and readings by guests like coaches and fathers, and book clubs led by male community members. These recommendations might well serve to engage some boys while not alienating or marginalizing any students. Bozack (2011) and Cavazos-Kottke (2005) emphasized the importance of choice and autonomy in boys' literacy engagement, echoing the findings of Newkirk (2002), Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2009), and many other writers on the subject of boys' literacy.

Rowan et al. (2002), however, suggest caution about the misapplication of such approaches, expressing concern about "the ease with which 'well-intentioned'

intervention projects can actually work to reinscribe traditional understandings about gender and to widen the gap between some boys and some literacies” (p. 57).

### **Conclusion: What the Literature Reveals**

Many unfounded assumptions and generalizations permeate the popular discourse concerning boys’ and young men’s literacy beliefs, attitudes, preferences, and identities, and these assumptions factor into the policy decisions crafted by educational leaders to address the gender gap in writing achievement. As a consequence, scholars have pointed out, policy responses can be ineffective or, at worst, harmful for many boys, and often ignore factors besides gender that are fundamental to literacy achievement—in particular, issues of class.

Literacy competence is crucial for informed citizenship in an equitable and just society, and the issue of the literacy gender gap must be addressed—but widespread misconceptions about masculinity and literacy must be avoided as we strive to improve literacy for all students. Scholars have emphasized that educators need to avoid solutions based on dominant social constructions of masculinity and limited definitions of literacy, which tend to reproduce the gender order, essentialize boys, marginalize boys who do not identify with the hegemonic version of masculinity, and ignore literacy activities in which many boys willingly (and successfully) engage. Increasing boys’ critical awareness of the social construction of masculinity through critical literacy practices and an expanded range of literacy activities can help in this effort, especially given that constructions of gender and of literacy are interrelated and therefore must be examined together (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997).

In addition to exploring with students the ways gender is socially constructed, both scholars and practitioners have argued that teachers also must address the needs of boys in their classrooms right now, boys whose identities have been conditioned by the dominant social construction of masculinity. It is important that educators work toward greater engagement and achievement in writing for boys as they are, however their gendered selves have come to be formed. Boys' self-identification as learners is critical. University of Alaska professor Judith Kleinfeld, founder of the Boys Project, argued that boys' lagging literacy achievement is at a critical stage:

Boys are in trouble in critical academic areas no matter what their income levels.

The nation needs to address the gender gap immediately before boys decide that school is an arena where the girls, but not boys, succeed, and the boys decide they "do not care" and withdraw from the competition. The situation is critical. At the moment, both boys and girls explain the gender gaps by saying boys are lazy and immature. The danger is that the boys will internalize this negative stereotype and it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. (as cited in Whitmire, 2010, p. 184)

Students' self-awareness as writers is also crucial in any effort to engage them in writing activities; toward this end, further understanding of the roles of motivation and personal agency in student achievement in writing can help educators to engage all students in meaningful writing tasks. Moreover, it is crucial that educators remain aware of boys' and young men's agency as self-creators of their writing personas, a countervailing force to the powerful influence of the social construction of gender on their writing attitudes and behaviors.



Scholars have also urged that educators be wary of proposed reforms based on the assumption of a universal heteronormative masculinity and universal male literacy underachievement. Not all boys are comfortable performing the roles prescribed for boys in our culture, nor do all boys lag in literacy engagement or achievement. Educators must also resist pressure to address “the boy crisis,” a discourse which draws attention away from the intersection of gender with class, and away from the needs of low-achieving girls as well. The narrative of “competing victims,” which assumes that literacy achievement is a zero-sum game, must also be challenged (Martino, 1999). A “political truce” is called for (Whitmire, 2010, p. 154).

In his extensive review of the literature on this subject, Weaver-Hightower (2003a) pointed out the importance of a more nuanced approach in this era of limited funding for educational initiatives: “To argue that the disadvantages in boys’ education pertain to the majority of White, upper-class, heterosexual boys is suspect at best. Advocates for boys’ programs must work harder to disaggregate what they mean by ‘boys’” (p. 485). Instead, “The question. . . is not ‘Should we help boys?’ but ‘What do the variety of boys in our classrooms really need, and how do we go about helping them in socially just and effective ways?’ Many of the answers in the popular media have been sorely lacking” (Weaver-Hightower, 2005, p. 3). Weaver-Hightower (2008) pointed out that the debate over boys’ education occupies a “tense, ambivalent cultural ground in the United States” (p. 188), but it also has “tremendous potential for progressive, socially just education” (p. 194), including the potential to help all boys improve their ability to communicate, to work cooperatively, and to become aware of themselves as gendered

beings whose version of masculinity is socially constructed and susceptible to personal agency.

### **The Need for Further Research: Addressing the Gaps in What We Know**

My review of the scholarly literature, as well as the popular discourse and the professional educator press, reveals a need for further research to address gaps in the literature, as well as to support, extend, or challenge themes in this body of work. Given that much of the current research and theory on this subject has been developed in Australia, Britain and Canada,<sup>48</sup> there is a need for further qualitative work exploring the extent to which social construction of gender, as well as other factors, may differ for boys and young men in the U.S. Cultural differences exist, and they matter, given that the social construction of masculinity is central to an understanding of how boys experience themselves as writers.

Further, there has been very little recent qualitative work exploring the writing experiences of high school boys in the U. S. to support or interrogate the findings of researchers such as Potter et al. (2001), Young (2000), Martino (2000, 2003) and Peterson (2002), and no study of boys' writing experiences from the perspective of young men who have persevered to college. Peterson's observational study of eighth grade students' classroom behavior in peer writing groups, with an eye to their performance of heteronormative masculinity, offers a provocative start on such a project. The findings of Potter and colleagues' (2001) study of 10 tenth-grade boys, exploring participants' life goals and writing motivation, could be further elaborated through a qualitative study of

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<sup>48</sup> Lesko (2000) and Weaver-Hightower (2009) have noted this lack.

young men in their first and later college years, to explore the ways their goals and motivation during their earlier school years went on to shape their college attainment and college writing. Young men in their first year of college, in a variety of higher education settings, are particularly well positioned to look back over their high school experiences in the light of their current college writing experiences. In addition, older college students could offer insights developed during their college years, sharing an “insider perspective” on earlier factors that fostered their success or hindered their writing confidence and competence. In particular, it would be useful to explore how connections from out-of-school to in-school literacy are experienced by these young men; this could shed light on ways to foster this connection for younger boys whose parents lack the cultural capital to make this connection for their sons.

## **CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Significance and Purpose of the Study**

My overarching research purpose—to determine, from the perspective of young men themselves, what writing experiences have either enhanced or impeded their engagement with writing, both in school and outside of school— led to my main research question: What can we learn from young men themselves about boys’ and young men’s lived experience and view of themselves as writers, both within and outside school contexts? Sub-questions focused on the influence of family, teachers, and peers in my participants’ development; issues of motivation and engagement; and young men’s sense of themselves as writers. Marshall and Rossman (2011) noted that, “Many qualitative studies are descriptive and exploratory: They build rich descriptions of complex circumstances that are unexplored in the literature” (p. 68).

It has been my intention in the present study to develop a nuanced picture of the writing experiences of young men who have persevered through their schooling to enter, and in some cases near completion of, a college program of studies. As mentioned at the conclusion of the previous chapter, this contributes to filling a gap in the research on boys’ and young men’s writing experiences, by offering a qualitative exploration of high school and earlier writing experiences as viewed from the perspective of young men in college, as they looked back to consider the experiences and influences that shaped them as writers. The present study also contributes to bridging the gap noted by Weaver-Hightower (2003b) and Rowan et al. (2002) between the scholarly and practitioner literatures about boys’ writing engagement and experiences.

### **Suitability of Qualitative Research Approach**

I interview because I am interested in other people's stories.

(Seidman, 2006, p. 7)

Seidman (2006) noted that, "Research, like almost everything else in life, has autobiographical roots" (p. 32). This is certainly true of my own interest in the topic of boys' writing experiences. As a former teacher of high school English and current instructor in an introductory writing course at a New England university, I have long been interested in how boys' and young men's academic and personal writing experiences relate to their motivation and, ultimately, their achievement in writing. Through this study I have sought to add to educators' understanding of boys' and young men's experience of writing during their school and early college years.

The current study began as a pilot study in 2011 which yielded several findings I further pursued in the present study. Those findings— my participants' love of satire, parody, and edgy humor of all kinds; the value they placed on their own creativity and freedom; and their deep engagement with writing outside the view of teachers and family—gave me a sense of the great possibilities for engaging boys and young men in writing.

Qualitative approaches offer the best means to surface this understanding and the feelings and beliefs associated with them, as Marshall and Rossman (2011) noted:

For a study focusing on individuals' lived experience, . . . human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to them is understood.

Because thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptions are involved, the

researcher needs to understand the deeper perspective that can be captured through face-to-face interactions and observation in the natural settings. (p. 91)

The importance of qualitative approaches to the study of writing has also been emphasized in a recent review of qualitative research on writing: Schultz (2006) noted that recent research interest in questions focusing on the social nature of writing are best addressed through qualitative approaches, which “allow researchers to document and analyze the writing processes of individuals and groups” (p. 358) as well as the social contexts which mediate those processes. Although, increasingly, funding has gravitated toward outcomes-based experimental research, Schultz (2006) emphasized the contributions of qualitative research in furthering understanding of students’ writing processes and attitudes: “Many of the most significant advances in the writing field have come from qualitative studies,” Schultz noted (p. 358), which employ a range of methods from ethnographic to phenomenological, but which all share a focus on “insiders’ perspectives” using “nuanced, descriptive language” and a focus on the social contexts in which writing occurs (p. 359). The rich description that is characteristic of qualitative research is “often more accessible to educators, including teachers and administrators” (Schultz, p. 361), than the language of quantitative studies, and is thus more likely to result in changes in practice.

Through listening to the voices of first-year and senior-year college men during in-depth interviews, I sought to develop a sense of how these students were experiencing college writing, as well as these young men’s earlier experiences with writing and writing instruction. I sought to draw out from my participants the “tacit knowledge and

subjective understandings and interpretations” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 91) that can lead to a more nuanced understanding on the part of practitioners and policy leaders who hope to address the needs of all students, including boys, within their writing programs. My research can ultimately contribute to the aim of increasing the engagement of boys and young men in writing, through pointing the way toward practices and approaches that can more effectively invite boys to experience the pleasure and power of their own writing.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

My study is grounded in several basic theoretical perspectives, including the following:

- Constructivism —meaning-making within an individual’s mind—and social constructionism—the process of collective social formulation and reproduction of meaning (Patton, 2002)
- A view of “the self as a social creation” (Rogers, 2007, p. 102)
- Critical gender theory, which views prevailing gender constructions and the gender order as socially constructed and maintained rather than “natural” (Davies, 1997; Glesne, 2011; Young, 2001)
- The concept of gender as performance, including the patrolling of boundaries to contain and inhibit transgression into non-sanctioned gender performances (Kehler, 2007; Martino, 2003; Peterson, 2002; Young, 2001)

- Theoretical discussions of multiple masculinities beyond the socially sanctioned heteronormative version (e.g., marginal and resistant masculinities).<sup>49</sup>

I view these concepts through a social justice lens, with a concern for moving toward equity for all students, not just those of one gender identity. These concepts and perspectives form the foundation for my study.

Delamont (2002) has noted that “the deployment of theoretical or analytical concepts is what separates social science from journalism” (p. 20), and it is appropriate that this study be guided by foundational concepts from gender theory such as those mentioned above. According to Krathwohl (2005), researchers may feel that being bound by theory can impede the process of developing new theory inductively from one’s data; however, Krathwohl suggested, a productive balance can be found through basing one’s work in theory but being open to emerging insights that add to or contradict existing theory. As Bowen (2006) remarked, sensitizing concepts provide “interpretive devices” (p. 14) and offer useful starting points for the qualitative researcher, but such concepts may be supplanted by other concepts emerging from the data. Thus, employing a grounded theory perspective (Patton, 2002), I was alert to emerging themes beyond these

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<sup>49</sup> Connell (1995) has formulated and developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity, grounded in Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony), in works spanning several decades beginning in the 1970s (Demetriou, 2001; see also Davidson, 2008). Demetriou built on this theoretical base, arguing that “the form of masculinity that is capable of reproducing patriarchy is in a constant process of negotiation, translation, hybridization, and reconfiguration” (p. 355). It is this process of negotiation and hybridization that offers critical theorists a point of entry into a re-vision of the social construction of masculinity that so deeply affects how boys interact with school literacy.



theoretical categories, in order to generate new understandings of the experiences of young men and boys as writers.

Of central importance to my perspective is a critical theory approach, which according to Butin (2010) is founded on the assumption that “reality is a function of dominant and implicit ideologies that determine how reality functions” and that “truth is linked to power” (p. 59). This perspective is useful in considering the competing discourses concerning the literacy gender gap, in particular the anti-feminist backlash (“war against boys”) discourse noted in my review of the popular discourse, above.

### **Overall Research Approach: Phenomenology, a Grounded Approach**

My study is based in the tradition of phenomenology, an inquiry paradigm which takes as its foundational question, “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of persons?” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The phenomenological approach centers on “experience from the perspective of the individual” and is founded on a belief in the central importance of “personal knowledge and subjectivity” (Lester, 1999, p. 1). This exploration of personal knowledge and subjective experience provided the analytical perspective as well as the methodology and ultimate goal of my study (Glesne, 2011): to uncover nuances of the lived experiences of young men with writing, including their attitudes and practices regarding writing both within and outside of school contexts. I was interested in exploring the experience of writing for young men (and the boys they recently were) from their own perspectives, their personal knowledge and subjectivity (Lester, 1999, p. 1). The goal of phenomenology, and my goal in this study, is to understand “the inner

world of experience of the subject” (Groenewald, 1999, p. 20). The contextualization of young men’s and boys’ writing, and the voices of these young writers themselves, will add to the body of knowledge and understanding supporting policy and practices to address the gender achievement gap in writing.

Interpretivist research is founded in the belief that reality exists in the meaning people make of it (Glesne, 2011). It is this meaning I sought to explore in the present study. According to Seidman (2006), “A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience” (p. 10). Thus the meaning of writing experiences for boys and young men is intricately bound up with their ways of “carrying out” writing in their lives, both in school and outside of school contexts. My interest was in uncovering how their writing experiences were perceived by the boys and young men I studied. It is their voices my study sought to capture.

Research paradigms and approaches are deployed in ways that are not necessarily distinct from one another (Glesne, 2011). A useful metaphor for understanding the ways that qualitative methodologies relate and overlap is the image of trees growing up in a forest, their branches beginning to intertwine with one another (Gerstl-Pepin, personal communication, September 19, 2012).<sup>50</sup> Coffey and Atkinson (1996) have noted that, “What links all the approaches is a central concern with transforming and interpreting

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<sup>50</sup> The intertwined nature of these approaches is evidenced in the citing of Beverley’s (2003) exploration of *testimonio* and narrative authority as both an example of phenomenology (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and an example of narrative methods in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

qualitative data—in a rigorous and scholarly way—in order to capture the complexities of the social worlds we seek to understand” ( p. 3). They argued that an insistence on viewing paradigms as distinct approaches can limit the researcher’s ability to approach the data with “creativity and genuine variety” of interpretations (p. 13)

In light of this understanding, my dissertation includes narrative elements, in the form of stories offered by my participants in the course of our conversations (Chase, 1995; Quiroz, 2001). Using qualitative methods enabled me to capture the insights from participants’ stories—those “complex narratives of personal experience [which] are masked by quantitative methods” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 92). I have set participants’ narratives within a focus on patterns of experience across the data, as well as disruptions to those patterns.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

My sampling strategy was both purposeful and, to some extent, opportunistic (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002), dictated by issues of access and by the constraints of my dissertation project in terms of time and possible interview subjects. In seeking a range of student ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, goals, and experiences, I interviewed first-year and older male students enrolled in writing courses in a private military university; a private college specializing in majors such as video game design and graphics; the flagship university in a New England state; a program housed within that university serving students at several local higher education institutions who sought a more structured and supported entry into their college studies in the university and nearby colleges; and a small private college specializing in environmental and outdoor studies in

another New England state. The sample was purposeful in the sense that students currently immersed in college writing classes might be likely to be both thoughtful and articulate about their writing experiences, and opportunistic in the sense that these students were available and willing participants within the limitations of time and geography of my dissertation research.

I developed my list of interviewees through several steps in a process facilitated by initial contacts in the institutions' English departments and writing centers, with one exception: a chance meeting with a former student of mine who was able to provide me with the perspective of his experience as a student from a background of deep poverty now entering his senior year in college.

Because the role of gatekeepers was a significant consideration in assembling my participant group (Groenewald, 2004; Seidman, 2006), after initial contacts with appropriate administrators at each institution, I contacted writing center directors (this had proved a fruitful starting point in my 2011 pilot study) in order to obtain the names of possible contacts among faculty teaching writing courses for first-year students at their institutions. With these instructors' permission, I then visited writing classes, described my study to students, asked them to complete a brief questionnaire, distributed an IRB-approved information and consent sheet (see Appendix B), and requested volunteers to participate.

This process led to a pool of 23 interviewees who were diverse in several ways, including socioeconomic status, family backgrounds, geographic backgrounds, ethnicity, goals, and ages, as the Demographic Table below (Table 1) demonstrates. (See

“Limitations and Delimitations” discussion, below.) I sought maximum variation within the pool of possible participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006) and was alert for information-rich cases (Patton) to add to my group of participants, including extreme or deviant cases (e.g., older students, students with unusual backgrounds) and confirming or disconfirming cases to develop confidence in my conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 2014; Smagorinsky, 2008). I also sought new participants as the study evolved, employing a snowball approach as a means to locate additional participants who might offer a further range of experiences and perspectives (Krathwohl, 2005; Marshall & Rossman; Patton). As the study progressed, new leads directed me to other potential participants with different backgrounds and experiences to include in the study.

I continued expanding my pool of participants as long as I found new data emerging, seeking to include as wide a range as possible of student backgrounds, goals, experiences, and purposes for writing in order to achieve “saturation of information” and “sufficiency” of numbers to reflect the available range of possible participants (Seidman, 2006, p. 55).

Table 1

*Demographic Table of Participants*

All participants were currently attending New England colleges and universities at the time of our interview. All names are pseudonyms.

Pseudonym	College year at time of interview	Home region if known	Type of institution	Major or likely major if known
Cory	First year	New England	State university	Business
Justin	First year	New England	State university	Business/engineering
Ben	First year	New England	State university	Engineering
Rory	First year	New England	State university	Engineering
Kai	First year	China	State university	
Paolo*	First year	large West Coast city	State university	Engineering, possibly switching to English
Sinclair	senior	Midwestern suburb	State university	English and philosophy, minor in political science
Ethan	senior	New England	State university	English and education
Will	senior	Large East Coast city	State university	English with interest in rhetoric and debate
Jason	senior		State university	English
Garrett	senior		State university	English
Jake	First year, but after 8 years of military service	New England suburb	Private military university	Nuclear engineering
Julio*	First year	Southwest city	Private military university	Math

Zach	First year	New England	Small private college	Digital forensics
Isaac	First year	New England town	Small private college	Film making
Paradise	First year	New England	Small private college	Video game writing
Nick	First year	New England	Small private college	Digital forensics
Jeff	First year	Suburb of large New England city	Small private college	Business and entrepreneurship
Anil	First year	New England	State university	Not yet determined
Daniel	First year	New England town	state university	Not yet determined, likely a science field
Dustin*	senior	New England small town	small university	Conservation Law
James	First year	Midwest suburb	State university	Environmental Studies
Thomas	First year	New England village	State University	Environmental Science

\*indicates first-generation college students

*Note.* In addition to the student participants, I also spoke with two adults important in Dustin's life, with his permission: Ron, his teacher advisor during his junior and senior years in high school, and Dave, a student assistance outreach counselor who works with first-generation potential college students through the federally funded TRIO program.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Any data are incomplete or partial versions of reality.

(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 15)

[W]e produce versions of the social world through our data collection and our processes of analysis.

(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 15)

## **Interviews**

Seidman (2006) noted that, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). My goal throughout my interviews was to develop a sense of the lived experience of writing and the meaning of this experience from the point of view of my participants. My data was collected primarily through qualitative interviews based on a semi-structured interview guide (Patton, 2002) which addressed key concepts highlighted in my literature review, in order to examine these concepts in light of my participants’ responses (see Appendix C for interview protocol). I developed this guide further based on responses to the initial questionnaire prospective participants completed in the classes I visited as I “made my pitch” and sought participants for my study (see Appendix D for classroom questionnaire). This general guide was provisional, however. As Glesne (2011) pointed out, “In the process of listening to your respondents, you learn what questions to ask” (p. 104), and many interviews offered me new ideas for questions to ask of later participants.

The general topic areas in my interview guide proved useful in helping me bring conversations back to key areas I hoped to learn more about, but I also remained open to leads my interviewees offered, which I followed up with further prompts to elicit deeper reflection and elaboration from participants (Patton, 2002). In particular, I asked participants to share stories, episodes, and recollections of particular moments in their writing experiences (Seidman, 2006).

Marshall and Rossman (2011) noted that “the richness of an interview is heavily



dependent on . . . follow-up questions” (p. 145). In fact, I found that it was during the side trips in each interview that I began to hear some of the ideas that later became important to my growing understanding of the writing experiences of boys and young men; thus I followed my participants’ leads as I listened attentively for new areas to pursue. While I employed a “topical or guided interview” approach (Marshall & Rossman, p. 144), I sought to elicit the *emic* perspective, that of my participants, rather than foregrounding the *etic*, or researcher’s, perspective (Marshall & Rossman; Schultz, 2006).

Seidman (2006) pointed out the importance of an understanding of context in exploring the meaning of participants’ experience. In light of Seidman’s remarks, I asked participants to share with me early experiences at home as well as at school, to allow me to better understand what they later said about their more recent writing experiences. Interviews ranged from one hour to slightly over two hours in length, depending on participants’ available time and interest in continuing the conversation. The total time spent in these interviews was over 35 hours.

I carefully considered the settings for my interviews, trying to locate on each campus a space comparable to the setting that had worked well in my pilot study, a cozy fireplace area in the university’s student center. That setting proved to have certain advantages of both public and private spaces: My interviewees and I were surrounded by other students, studying or napping in comfortable chairs or working quietly in small groups. There was no power dynamic of the type that would be implied in meeting in a professor’s office. I believe this sort of “neutral territory” setting, which I was able to

duplicate in almost every site,<sup>51</sup> allowed for very comfortable, open conversations with participants.

Seidman (2006) offered a helpful discussion of the interview relationship, suggesting that the interviewer avoid seeing the interviewee as “an object or a type” and instead strive for a relationship of mutuality, more like “we” than “I and Thou” (p. 95). I also implemented included Seidman’s suggestion that the researcher remain aware of the possible distance between the “public voice” and the “inner voice” of participants during the interviews (p. 79), and ask for clarification of meaning, for example of ambiguous word choices (e.g., “What do you mean by ‘nice’?”). Seidman suggested an approach of “exploring with” participants rather than “probing” for deeper meanings (p. 83). Similarly, Glesne (2011) recommended what she called a “naïve” stance (p. 121), suggesting that the researcher set aside assumptions that participants’ meanings are self-evident or transparent, instead seeking further explanation in order to fully understand. Glesne cautioned that the researcher’s prior knowledge of the subject can lead to unfounded assumptions concerning participants’ experiences or meaning and therefore prevent the researcher from asking participants to “tell me more” (p. 122). In sum, Glesne recommended that the researcher take “the mindset of a learner, not an expert” (p. 122). I found all these suggestions helpful throughout the months of interviews.

## **Documents**

I invited my participants to share pieces of their writing from both in-school and

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<sup>51</sup> Several interviews took place in a public space in a dorm (in the structured-support program at one university), in a borrowed professor’s office, and in a high school library quiet study room.

out-of-school contexts. Roughly 30% of my participants did so. I carefully analyzed these pieces, looking for evidence of themes and ideas that had emerged in the interviews and ones suggested by my theoretical framework, as well as evidence that might counter the interview data or might suggest new themes to further illuminate the writing experiences (including topic, genre, and style preferences) of my participants.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The search for a perfect data analysis method is fruitless.

(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 2)

Too many people are so in love with their data that they cannot bear to disturb their pristine beauty by interfering with them in any way.

(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 2)

What is conventionally referred to as analysis is a pervasive activity throughout the life of a research project. Analysis is not simply one of the later stages of the research, to be followed by an equally separate phase of ‘writing up the results.’

(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 11)

Groenewald (2004) noted that phenomenological researchers are generally wary of the term “analysis,” as it implies a breaking down of data into parts, thereby potentially losing the sense of the whole phenomenon. Instead, the phenomenological focus is on “interpretation” of the data in an attempt to capture a holistic sense, the *gestalt*, of the phenomenon studied (Groenewald, 2004). As in all qualitative research, however, an attempt to identify key themes within the large body of diverse data is central to the researcher’s work (Lester, 1999). These themes can then lead to further interrogation of the data to uncover subthemes as well as new themes, eventually allowing the researcher to develop a “structural synthesis” and perhaps new theory, based

on the assumption that there is “an essence to an experience that is shared with others who have also had that experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, pp. 148, 201).

Glesne (2011) noted that analysis is an on-going process, not a separate stage of the project: the researcher must listen analytically, thinking about new directions and questions suggested by participants’ comments (p. 122). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) also emphasized the iterative nature of analysis in qualitative studies, noting that analysis “should not be seen as a distinct stage of research” but instead as “a reflexive activity that should inform data collection, writing, further data collection, and so forth.” In this view, “Analysis is not. . . the last phase of the research process, but instead a part of the ‘cyclical’ nature of the research process” (p. 6). It should be varied and continuous, “reflexive,” “systematic but not rigid,” inductive and data-led,” as well as “playful” and “artful” (Coffey & Atkinson, p. 10).

Thus the field notes and memos I wrote following each interview, as well as my reflections and follow-up questions during the interviews, were in fact the start of the process of analysis. I examined my data for themes revealed in my literature review (e.g., patrolling boundaries, performing masculinity, alternate literacies), while remaining open to the emergence of new themes in the data. I found that in the process of reviewing and my data, I experienced what Alberty described as the “delighted discovery of the provocativeness of the record-keeping process” (as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 590).

Themes and patterns that had seemed peripheral early in my study revealed themselves as actually central to the experiences I was seeking to understand. For me, as

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) noted is true of many qualitative researchers, analysis actually initiated “the primary work of interpretation” (p. 6).

Initial coding themes were based on my conceptual framework as well as on data from my 2011 pilot study; these codes were then revised during data collection. Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggested beginning with “theory-generated codes” (p. 209); thus the themes suggested by my literature review offered an important element, in addition to the codes my pilot study data suggested. I also continued my review of literature as new themes emerged in the data and maintained notes of patterns, contradictions, key factors in participants’ experiences, and other nuances as they emerged (Glesne, 2011), letting my ongoing analysis shape the developing study. Throughout the process I created *in vivo* codes in addition to codes derived from my theoretical framework and my literature review (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). These became “tools to think with” (Coffey & Atkinson, p. 32) throughout my on-going analytical process.

Bowen (2006) spoke of using a “constant comparative method, marked by an iterative process, to identify the latent pattern in multiple participants’ perspective,” continuously comparing codes to all other codes in order to identify points of similarity and difference, as well as emerging patterns (p. 17). I revised, combined, and otherwise altered themes and codes as the data suggested. I followed this process throughout the data collection to the point of saturation (Bowen; Patton, 2002).<sup>52</sup> I audio-recorded,

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<sup>52</sup> Patton (2002), in his discussion of emergent design in qualitative research, noted that “sample size adequacy” (p. 246) is a matter of judgment, though “sampling to the point of redundancy is an ideal” (p. 246)—one which may be limited by time and resources. Returning to the field for further interviews as the data warranted, I continued

typed up, and reviewed interview transcripts throughout the data collection process, keeping analytical notes throughout the process to link emerging data to other data and to themes identified previously, as well as to identify newly emerging themes. In particular, I watched for data and themes which either supported or called into question the concepts prevalent in the various discourses discussed in the literature review above. Negative instances and conflicting data were noted and examined for the light they might shed on my research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I followed Marshall and Rossman's advice to avoid being overly attached to initial coding themes and instead remain open to "the unusual and the serendipitous" (p. 208). I decided against using computer software such as HyperResearch in this process, believing that to retain a sense of the meaningful context of particular comments, I would be better served not by segmenting bits of data but by a process of constant reviewing of transcripts, thinking about the ways that particular themes emerged from the context of other remarks in the conversation.

### **Reflexivity: Subjective "I"**

Delamont (2002) noted that reflexivity is essential to the qualitative researcher, for "research is a series of interactions, and good research is highly tuned to the interrelationship of an investigator with the respondents" (p. 8); therefore "the permeation of all aspects of the research process with reflexivity is essential" (p. 9). However, Delamont cautioned, while "each researcher is her own best data-collection instrument" (p. 9), researchers must be aware of the subjectivity of their interpretations. Rather than

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the process of analysis and further data collection until a point of saturation was reached (Seidman, 2006).

attempting to eliminate “investigator effects,” the researcher should “concentrate on *understanding* those effects” (p. 8). Glesne (2011) noted that the researcher’s subjectivity provides the perspectives and insights on which to build understanding: “Noting and reflecting upon your emotional reactions and the way in which they connect to who you are, your history and experiences, is important [and shapes] all that you do as a researcher, from the selection of topic clear through to the emphases you make in your own writing” (p. 156).

Toma (2000) explored the importance of the subjective qualitative interviewer’s close involvement with study participants, noting that “personal values necessarily influence any investigation” and that the “relationship between researchers and subjects is inherently subjective” (p. 178). Toma argued that this closeness between researcher and participant leads to “good data” and that “the process of research is a transaction between two people” (p. 178). In this view, “The researcher is not a detached observer but is a participant with the subject in the search for meaning” (p. 178). I found this perspective compelling throughout the interview process. According to Toma, “In a subjective relationship, researchers and subjects collaborate to determine meaning, generate findings, and reach conclusions” (p. 177). I see this collaboration as an important aspect of my study.

In the following discussion, I will explore my subjective position in order to better understand and bracket (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) the perspective I brought to the current study, as well as to indicate how I created conditions for rich collaborative

relationships with my participants during our conversations such as those Toma (2000) described.

### **Researcher's Positionality and Strengths**

Several aspects of my positionality tended to foster productive interview interactions. First, a number of factors helped to create a candid, relaxed quality of conversation with participants. Foremost was my long experience and comfort with high school students, who are just a bit younger than my participants and with whom I had had many years of enjoyable and warm relationships. Further, my experience and knowledge base as an English teacher enabled me to follow up participants' comments about particular books and authors, as well as pedagogical techniques and classroom experiences (both positive and negative ones); this encouraged interviewees to continue at some length in particular areas of discussion, as they saw that I was familiar with and very interested in the topics they raised. "Chance favors the prepared mind," as Pasteur remarked (as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 553), and I think my conversations benefited from my knowledge of students and of many aspects of the English curriculum they might have experienced.

Other factors that were conducive to extended, open conversation also served me well in the study. As a former high school English teacher and current student myself, I was not intimidating in the way that my participants' professors might seem. Gender and age might also have been important in these interactions. Seidman (2006) noted that "There is evidence that interviewer and participants of different genders get different interviewing results than do those of the same gender" (p. 102). I think that my age and



gender may have been positive factors contributing to the relaxed, candid tone of the conversations in my interviews, to some extent: I am roughly the age of my participants' mothers, and therefore might seem "safe," and I am also female, which could have caused the young men I spoke with to be predisposed to relate to me (on the basis of deep-rooted cultural gender stereotypes) as empathetic and caring. This conjecture about the influence of my gender, offered to me by a professor in the University's Department of Family and Human Development (personal communication, December 2011), resonated with my own sense of how my interviewees perceived me. For example, several mentioned to me that they were shy or did not "interact much with other people," yet they had agreed to be interviewed by me and actually followed through, meeting with me for an hour or more and telling me details of their lives and experiences.

I believe a further strength I benefited from was that the students I interviewed knew I was also a student, working on an academic project for my program; this not only established an area of commonality, but also positioned my participants as being able to offer me help, an empowering position for them to be able to assume. One interviewee specifically told me that he had decided to participate because he "wanted to help out"; he reiterated this in his final words to me: "Glad to help. Enjoy your time." This young man spoke with me for well over an hour, despite his hesitation to take on the unfamiliar role of being interviewed.

### **Researcher Bias**

Because the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research, researcher bias is important to explore and "bracket" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 13); the researcher must be

“visible in the ‘frame’ of the research as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer” (Lester, 1999, p. 1). Therefore, although empathy and rapport are crucial to qualitative interviewing, it is also important that the researcher become aware of and account for attitudes and biases that may be relevant to interpretation of data (Patton, 2002). I sought to maintain this delicate balance throughout my study by member-checking my interpretations as my analysis proceeded. Furthermore, I was mindful that opposing perspectives and individual variations were as important as any commonalities my data might reveal (Groenewald, 2004); therefore, I was wary of a too-vigorous search for patterns across participants and data.

I believe my biases were actually related to my strengths as a researcher in the context of this study. I was definitely predisposed to enjoy and feel relaxed with my interviewees, and it is possible this could have led to some degree of “teacher-pleasing” behavior on their part. To avoid this, I sought to encourage truly thoughtful, candid responses and reflection through careful questioning and follow-up, rather than appearing to seek comments my participants might believe I expected. I used open-ended prompts like “Tell me about a writing experience you recall” or “Tell me a story about a piece of writing. . . .” and follow-ups like “What was that like for you?” rather than more leading questions about types of experiences (Seidman, 2006). I sought concrete details and narratives of experiences to help me truly understand the experiences participants were sharing. I was open to surprises, seeking to maintain a sense of “naïveté, innocence, and absence of prejudgments” (Seidman, 2006, p. 33). Several of my preconceptions (for instance, about the likely writing preferences of the engineering or business students I

interviewed) were soundly refuted by my interviewees' comments, leading me to believe that whatever my bias in that regard, it was either well hidden or quickly dismissed by evidence from the data pouring in. I continued to strive for the stance of "empathic neutrality" Patton (2002, p. 569) recommends, and remained open to the surprise of the unexpected in the data.

### **Validity, Reliability, Credibility, and Trustworthiness**

The concepts surrounding validity in qualitative research are quite distinct from those used in quantitative research studies. Bowen (2006) noted that "The trustworthiness standard in naturalistic research is in contrast to the conventional, positivistic criteria of internal and external validity reliability, and objectivity" (p. 15). Glesne (2011) similarly noted that validity is a "debated topic in qualitative research scholarship. Most [qualitative scholars] agree that we cannot create criteria to ensure that something is 'true' or 'accurate' if we believe concepts are socially constructed" (p. 49). Alternate terms for validity including "trustworthiness," "credibility," "transferability," "dependability," and "confirmability" have been suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 23).

The qualitative researcher seeks participants' individual perceptions of their experiences, not a universal "meaning." In his discussion of validity and reliability, Seidman (2006) raised the important question, "Whose meaning is it?" (p. 22): "Many qualitative researchers disagree with the epistemological assumptions underlying the notion of validity. They argue for a new vocabulary and rhetoric with which to discuss validity and reliability. . . ." (p. 23).

Seidman further problematized the issue of trustworthiness in qualitative interview data with a series of provocative questions:

How do we know that what the participant is telling us is true? And if it is true for this participant, is it true for anyone else? And if another person were doing the interview, would we get a different meaning? Or if we were to do the interview at a different time of year, would the participant reconstruct his or her experience differently? Or if we had picked different participants to interview, would we get an entirely dissimilar and perhaps contradictory sense of the issue at hand? (p. 23)

Seidman noted various means through which the interviewer gains confidence in the participant's responses as authentic reflections of that participant's particular experience: For example, through consistency within the interview, the sense of candor in the participant's expression and formulation of the experience, and perhaps consistency with data from the literature and from other participants (though this would not necessarily occur). Seidman acknowledged, however, that the question "Whose meaning is it?" (p. 22) is not a simple one, for in-depth interviews necessarily are a dialogic process: Though we may strive toward "minimizing the effect the interviewer and the interviewing situation have on how the participants reconstruct their experience" (p. 22), the interviewer is inevitably central to the interviewing experience of the participant, and again in the ways data is analyzed and interpreted.

Evaluative validity, according to Thomson (2011), involves the researcher's own interpretations of the data. To help further this sort of validity, I carefully bracketed my own subjective perspective as much as possible (see above), but with the understanding

that qualitative research is, by its very nature, a subjective interpretive effort (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Thomson, 2011). Through measures such as member-checking (Seidman, 2006) as well as quoting participants' own words from both their interviews and their writings to illustrate and support my interpretations, I have made transparent the process involved in my interpretations.

In order to allow readers to evaluate the trustworthiness of my findings, I offer detailed descriptions of my participants as well as quote substantially from the data I received in interviews and in the writing pieces I collected, in order to allow readers to evaluate my interpretations. Seidman (2006) suggested that the researcher "go to such depth in the interviews that surface considerations of representativeness and generalizability are replaced by a compelling evocation of an individual's experience" (p. 51). I have sought to provide this depth through thick descriptions of participants (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Glesne, 2011, pp. 17, 49) as well as direct quotations from interview transcripts.

On the issue of credibility, Duneier (1999) spoke of the ways he sought confirmation of his observations and inferences, making sure there was "a warrant for believing what [he'd] been told," although his research method was largely to "follow [his] nose" during his research process (p. 345). He noted that "when the same events were told to me over and over again in the context of different lives" (p. 345), the stories gained credibility for him. The same was true of my study: When certain themes appeared repeatedly in the descriptions of writing experiences, as well as the writing products, of interviewees from a range of ages and backgrounds, I found the themes

especially convincing. In some cases, I was able to triangulate between students' comments and the writings they sent me; for example, in several instances the writings sent to me by students who mentioned a love of parody, risk-taking, or creativity revealed these qualities very clearly.

When similar themes emerged from a wide range of young men, this would tend to support the claim of reliability of my findings; alternatively, in some cases I found a range of diverging themes (e.g., on the subject of gender and its impact on my participants' writing experiences) which gave me new insights into the ways boys and young men experience writing and identify themselves as writers.

### **Delimitations of the Study and Limitations of Findings**

My study has several limitations based on the population from which I drew my participants. Participants were not a "representative" sample in the sense of a quantitative study's randomized sampling methods; college students are "survivors" (Kratwohl 2005, p. 86) who have persevered through at least 12 years of schooling and therefore do not represent an entire population of boys and their school experiences. Further, because my participants constituted a self-selected group of volunteers from the already limited pool of students enrolled in writing classes in several New England higher education institutions, these students were likely to have a greater interest in the topic of their writing experiences than students who did not volunteer to be interviewed, or students outside of my available pool of possible interviewees.

Kratwohl (2005) noted that people who volunteer for a study are a self-selected group who might differ from the general population in several ways; for example, they

might be better educated, have a higher need for social approval, and be more sociable. However, this expectation was not borne out in my group of participants, which included several young men who told me they were very shy, rather than sociable—yet they had chosen to participate in my study.

Although the self-selected nature of my group, as well as the geographic limitation of the study, limits the transferability of my findings, my participants came from a wide range of geographic and family backgrounds, ranged in age from 18 to 30, and came from a spectrum of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. The fact that participants were students currently enrolled in writing classes who volunteered to talk with me about their writing experiences served to offer me insights and clarity not obtainable through more general population samples. Those students who chose to participate were truly interested in sharing their experiences, and therefore my findings have a good degree of trustworthiness as a basis for further exploration into the writing experiences of boys and young men.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Delamont (2002; see also Patton, 2002) discussed several ethical issues relevant to fieldwork in educational settings, including the need for pseudonyms for participants and their locations and the need for member-checking of quotations. I carefully followed these procedures. The research conducted by Duneier (1999) offers a compelling model for ethically sound practices to better understand the experiences of participants. I admired Duneier's care and thoroughness in having his participants read and comment on his descriptions of their experiences and behaviors. I followed Duneier's approach in my

study, seeking participant feedback through member-checking (Patton, 2002) of transcribed interviews, and again during my analysis and interpretation of themes, in order to ensure that my interpretations and representation of participants' meanings were accurate.

Glesne (2011) underscored the importance of considering issues of power, risk and benefit, and researcher accountability in order to avoid an exploitative, "colonial" stance (p. 167). In light of this, I also remained mindful of possible issues involving white privilege (Duneier, 1999) with those of my participants who were from non-dominant ethnic groups, as well as my position of perceived power as an older person and a teacher, and the possibility of a sense on the part of my participants of exploitation and appropriation of their words and ideas (Duneier, 1999). Seidman (2006) pointed out the danger of qualitative interviewing as potentially a "process that turns others into subjects so that their words can be appropriated for the benefit of the researcher" (p. 13), noting that, "The interviewing relationship is fraught with issues of power—who controls the direction of the interview, who controls the results, who benefits" (p. 99). Glesne (2011) also noted that attempting an objective stance vis à vis participants raises an ethical issue, in that it can constitute, or be construed as, objectification of participants. Seidman (2006) argued that, "The First Commandment of interviewing [is] 'Be equitable'" (p. 40) and suggested steps to assure reciprocity and equity, urging a consideration by the researcher of the "more basic question of research for whom, by whom, and to what end" (p. 13). Seidman suggested that use of the word "participants" rather than "subjects" or



“interviewees” (p. 14) reflects an active stance on the part of those being interviewed, a sense of their involvement in creating meaning during the interview.

Seidman (2006) and Marshall and Rossman (2011) also pointed out a specific ethical issue in transcription: including every “um” and “like, y’know” can prove embarrassing to the participant and add nothing to a reader’s understanding of the participant’s words. I encountered exactly this issue in one of my pilot project interviews, and I found the guidance of Seidman and Marshall and Rossman very relevant. Seidman further noted that decisions about how to punctuate participants’ sentences during transcription constitute “the beginning points of the process of analyzing and interpreting the material. . . and must be done thoughtfully” (p. 116).

As Patton (2002) noted, this type of research requires a “significant commitment to represent the participants in their own terms” (Lofland, 1971, as cited in Patton, p. 28), a commitment that I upheld throughout my study. I found this to be a truly rewarding aspect of the work of analyzing and reporting my participants’ responses. So many of them expressed themselves in powerful language that reflected their personalities as well as their ideas, and copious quoting has proved a very meaningful way for me to capture and convey the experiences they shared with me. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) remarked that the goal of the researcher should be to “treat data in different ways in order to produce rich and variegated analyses” (p. 15), and I have sought to do this through a variety of means.

The embedded narratives that emerged during my interviews offered a source of rich narrative data. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) emphasized the importance of “attention

to the voices of storytellers and other social actors” in order to attend to the range of perspectives on the world being explored, making a “commitment to a dialogic methodology” through “representation of actors’ own narrated lives” (p. 79). I have included a number of my participants’ narratives in my findings. Further, as Coffey and Atkinson noted, narratives can generate much larger ideas, for “the analytic purchase gained from close attention to accounts and narratives provides a valuable resource for theorizing” (p. 146).

I have produced several transcribed poetic texts (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 2011) conveying the voices of participants in my dissertation study in order to highlight key concepts which surfaced in the data. I also have offered detailed descriptions of many of my participants’ backgrounds and current concerns in order to convey their unique perspectives as individuals for my readers. Seidman (2006) suggested creating profiles of each participant in order to keep their individuality in mind. I found that approach quite powerful in Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) book *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, which included detailed profiles of the study’s participants, and I have provided similar depth of individual description for many of my participants.

### **Empathy and Reciprocity**

I was guided in my study by an awareness of the great importance in qualitative research of empathy, which Patton (2002) has described as “being able to take and understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences, and worldview of others” (p. 52). Throughout the research process, I endeavored to convey to my interviewees, through my

responses and follow-up questioning, my understanding of the feelings, information, and experiences they shared with me.

I sought to create a sense of a reciprocal exchange during my dissertation interviews by offering my time to participants to give feedback on current writing projects if that might be helpful to them. During my study, several participants expressed appreciation of my feedback on writings they shared with me. (I also provided home-made cookies at the end of each interview, which Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest as well.) Most important of all, Seidman (2006) noted that the interviewer's attentive, empathetic listening has value for participants:

It takes the participants seriously, values what they say, and honors the details of their lives. The reciprocity I can offer in an interview is that which flows from my interest in participants' experiences, my attending to what they say, and my honoring their words when I present their experience to a larger public. (p. 109)

According to Seidman, this relates to the issue of equity as well: "Being equitable in interviewing research means. . . valuing the words of the participant because their words are deeply connected to that participant's sense of worth. . . . Striving for equity is not only an ethical imperative; it is also a methodological one" (p. 110). Glesne (2011) further elaborated the concept that the interview process itself can offer a certain reciprocity, noting that when researchers ask participants to explore and elaborate their feelings with questions like "How did you feel about that? Would you tell me more about that?" this can give participants the opportunity to reflect and grow from the interview

experience itself (p. 123). This too was borne out in my study, as several participants later e-mailed me with further thoughts and realizations our conversation had engendered.

### **Conclusion: Reflections on Methodology and Analysis Process**

My participants' individual realities have proved compelling to me as I have sought to create a nuanced picture of young men's writing experiences. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) have noted that for many researchers, "the interpretation of data [is bound up with] the imaginative reconstruction of social worlds and often emphasize[s] the unique rather than regularities of incidence or pattern" (p. 7). I will now move on to a detailed discussion of my findings as they relate to previous research or suggest new grounds for theory and research. In this process, I will strive to reconstruct the social worlds of my participants, emphasizing what is unique in each young man's experience as well as the patterns across several individuals revealed in their words.

Analysis and drafting tend to go hand in hand. Writing itself often leads to deepened awareness. I am reminded of E. M. Forster's question, "How can I know what I think till I see what I say?" The process of writing to understand is characteristic of my own past writing experiences, and this held true as I wrote up the findings of the present study. My analysis began to develop as I talked with participants, took further shape during the process of transcribing and coding, and continued to evolve as I wrote up my findings. As I prepare new versions of my findings to share with other audiences and consider the implications of those findings, I look forward to further exploration of what it is I may come to know about young men and writing.

## **CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS: FROM LOCAL DATA TO GROUNDED THEORY**

Theorizing is integral to analysis; they are not separate stages in the research process.

(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 139)

We can all make interpretations. Whether we always grace such ideas with the grandiose label of theory, the important thing is to have ideas and to use them to explore and interpret the social world around us.

(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 157)

Through our many hours of conversation, my participants offered me an “embarrassment of riches” in their responses to my research questions concerning young men’s writing experiences and the factors that enhance and impede those experiences. Findings concerning the direct impact of gender stereotypes on my participants’ experiences revealed that a minority, around 25%, expressed an awareness of such an impact. I will offer data from those who did and those who did not express this awareness, with some attention to possible reasons my findings do not reflect previous scholars’ studies of young men’s awareness of such stereotypes and their possible effects. In other findings, assumptions that have been widely repeated in the public discourse were challenged by my data: for example, beliefs that boys do not willingly write poetry or engage in writing about personal feelings. Boys’ out-of-school writing, well documented in the literature (Moje, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2009) was widely supported in my data.

Elements important to young men’s writing engagement were also significant themes in my data: the importance of personally involved, challenging teachers and other caring adults; the role of supportive classroom communities and peers; the central role of

creativity and autonomy in young men's writing motivation; and the role of epiphanies, turning points, and goals in young men's movement from high school to college.

Finally, my data revealed the importance to high school and college-age boys and young men of an element previously described in the literature only in relation to younger boys (Fletcher, 2006; Newkirk, 2003; Thomson, 1997): the pleasure of writing parodic, transgressive texts. Young men's sense of identity, passion, and originality were also salient themes which emerged from my data. All these findings will be explored in detail in this chapter.

My group of 23 participants, though drawn only from among young men who had persevered to attend college in two New England states, came from a variety of family and geographic backgrounds, writing experiences, ethnicities, goals and preferences. As I have noted, very few generalizations held true for all. Instead, taken-for-granted assumptions that are widely disseminated in the popular discourse were repeatedly refuted, and some themes prevalent in the scholarly literature (especially literature from studies in the U. K. and Australia) were far less evident in my own data, suggesting a need for further and more nuanced exploration of these areas.

Among the young men I interviewed were many "black swans" who disconfirmed generalizations widespread in the public discourse about boys and writing, as mentioned above. Likewise, the influence of gender on writing experience was expressed by only a minority of my participants, perhaps due to cultural differences between participants in this U. S. study and studies of boys in Australia and the U. K., where the influence of gender has been far more prevalent in scholars' findings (e.g., Martino, 2000).

Ultimately, I find myself pondering again the question posed by Smith and Wilhelm (2002, p. xx), whether gender is after all a useful lens for thinking about boys and young men as writers.

I will elaborate on these areas in detail, offering the voices of my participants themselves as they reveal their attitudes, preferences, and experiences with writing.

### **Gender Stereotypes and Young Men's Writing Experiences**

My data revealed a range of awareness of gender stereotypes in school experiences, as well as a range of responses to those stereotypes that were perceived by participants. I will discuss these and suggest possible reasons for the variation below.

#### **Young Men's Awareness of Gender Stereotypes Around Writing**

It was pretty much a girlie thing to do—  
“oh, you’re writing in a book, is that a diary?”—  
like girls keep diaries  
Ethan

If someone wanted me to write about like unicorns,  
if the topic’s unicorns, you’re going to write about unicorns,  
because obviously you want the good grade, y’know,  
and I don’t know, you might have fun writing about it,  
you might make the unicorn something manly, y’know, like a race car driver. . . .  
I mean, it’s your story, you can write it however you want to.  
Julio

There was a funny guy persona around,  
like basic ignorance of things when you’re like  
“What’s that?”  
and you just sort of play that role  
and you don’t really even try to apply yourself that much because  
you can get away with the persona of just sort of *gliding* . . .  
Sinclair

A great deal of research over the past several decades, discussed at length in Chapter II above, has explored issues of social construction of masculinity, the ways that

boys police their own and their peers' performance of heteronormative masculinity, and the many ways these limiting constructions may impact boys' writing attitudes and achievement (Butler, 1988; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Martino, 1999, 2000, 2003; Peterson, 2002; Young, 2000, 2001).

However, only a minority of participants in my study told me that they had experienced a sense during their earlier school years that writing was gendered as a "feminine" activity. It is very possible that my questions about gender attitudes and expectations concerning writing during their school years did not resonate with many of my participants because they were all young men who were attending college and therefore had been perhaps less touched by, or better able to resist, gender constructions relating to writing and school engagement in general than young men who do not engage with their schooling enough to persevere to college. Many of my participants also came from school cultures where writing was universally supported and deemed centrally important, so that they experienced it as a given that everyone would write, and that everyone could write well. Others had like-minded peers who supported them in their writing. I will offer a selection of their comments at the end of this section to convey a more nuanced sense of their experience.

First, though, I will discuss the observations of several participants who were very aware of the gendered nature of writing during their school experience. Those who did express this awareness had a great deal to say concerning what they had observed and how this affected them as writers.



Those participants who had experienced writing as a gendered activity were quite explicit about this awareness. Ethan, a senior English major and future high school English teacher, when I asked him whether he thought that boys might withdraw from writing because it is not seen as a socially acceptable thing to do among their peer group, told me, “I totally agree with that statement. It was pretty much a girlie thing to do—‘oh, you’re writing in a book, is that a diary?’—like girls keep diaries. It’s gendered at a younger age, I would say. . . yep, middle school even into high school; if you were to ever write down poetry, then it wouldn’t be very cool.” But this was not the end of the story: Ethan told me of a remarkable and inspiring English teacher at his high school, a man who had been a varsity athlete at a large university and was physically imposing, 6’7” and 350 pounds, so “nobody messed with him”; this teacher was a poet, gave poetry readings, performed slam poetry, and dressed up on Costume Day as a Greek poet, going through the halls reciting poetry. This “very manly dude,” Ethan told me, “sparked my interest in reading poetry” –and no doubt did a great service to the entire high school community in shattering some gender stereotypes about men and poetry.

Sinclair too had been aware of the gender stereotype about boys and writing during his high school years. Sinclair, an English, philosophy, and political science major, responded thoughtfully to my question about whether he had ever felt the effects of cultural conditioning that mandates that boys keep a stoic face, never revealing emotions: “I think it goes beyond the emotions into the general intellectual capacity,” he said; “At some point, especially in high school, there was a funny guy persona around, like basic ignorance of things when you’re like ‘What’s that?’ [said in a comic, highly

exaggerated voice] and you just sort of play that role and you don't really even try to apply yourself that much because you can get away with the persona of just sort of *gliding*. . . ." He told me that while the boys in his class were enacting this comic persona, the girls would immediately get to work on the assignment: "All the girls would be like *shredding* and writing awesome papers." (I later learned that "shredding" is bass players' jargon for playing an amazing riff; Sinclair is in fact a bass player and had proudly showed me his calloused fingertips.) Clearly, Sinclair admired the girls' willingness to throw themselves into an assigned writing task with energy and flair.

Thomas had taken a Sociology and Psychology course in high school that included a gender studies component, and he was therefore especially attuned to this issue when I raised it in our conversation. Thomas told me that he had been very aware of the "STEM is for boys" stereotype and recognized it as such. He also was aware of the generalization that "poetry was for girls, that was a thing" but added, "I really liked it." He laughingly called himself a "closet poet."

Gender may have been a factor in Thomas's decision not to take his high school's AP English course in his senior year, although it was something he might have wanted to try, and the course was being taught by his favorite creative writing teacher. But another teacher had warned him that it was "really analytical," and he felt that he himself was not analytical but instead tended to have the attitude "Put it out there and let me reflect on it." Having decided against taking the AP course, when he would walk by the AP classroom, he noticed that it was "all girls and like maybe one guy." Instead he took a course in which the teacher "would show up . . . like 10 minutes late and talk to kids for 10

minutes, and you could get him off topic really easily”—clearly not a challenging English experience for Thomas. I wondered whether the teacher who warned him away from taking AP English might have been influenced by the stereotype that girls are better at English. Thomas told me that he has one very close male friend, a “soul-mate” who shares his love of writing, but in general he finds that more girls “resonate” with him; he feels “that could be like the writing thing, ‘cause writing is very, very emotional.”

Nick told me of a sexist teacher who was only interested in girls’ comments in his class. Nick described the effect this had on the boys in the class: “All the guys in the class knew it and they, a lot of them, reached the point of just not talking in class, because if you voiced your opinion, he’d look at you and go ‘Yeah’ and then carry on or walk over to the other side of the room.” This teacher’s obvious lack of interest in his male students’ comments, Nick told me, “made my opinion seem a lot less interesting to myself, even.” Nick also noticed a difference in how boys and girls were taught writing in his high school classes: “I feel like definitely as a female you’re given a lot more emphasis on description in your writing, but as a male I feel like I haven’t been told before in my life that ‘This needs more flair, this needs more to draw the reader in.’ I feel like I’ve been told ‘No, you need to research this more’ . . . but then when I get feedback on my papers, they’ll look at it and they’ll tell me ‘I started to lose interest about here’ but I was never really taught normally how do I pull people back?” Nick felt cheated by never having been taught how to put a human face on his writing; in his perception, his teachers had imparted that skill only to their female students, though they perceived its lack in Nick’s writing.

For other young men, gender stereotypes about writing were either not apparent or were not insurmountable barriers to their own writing engagement. Paradise's story illustrates the latter situation.

Paradise told me that he was aware of the "stigma against like boys and creative writing" but was required to take two arts electives (he attended a charter school, as nearly all the schools in his post-disaster rebuilt city were charters) and decided to take an acting class "cause it was easy." He found theater games a lot of fun, and his teacher encouraged him to take a creative writing class as well. In the creative writing class, his teacher was a published poet and novelist who was committed to helping his students develop into strong writers. Paradise looked around the room, noted that, "There were three guys in this room and 12 girls," and wondered, "Do I belong here?" When he expressed his hesitation about being a boy taking creative writing to his father that evening, his dad asked him, "Do you want to write?" and when Paradise answered that he did, his father continued, "Then why do you care?" Ultimately, Paradise was named Poet Laureate of his seventh grade class.

Paradise came from a family of story-tellers and told me he was "raised on a steady diet of fiction." When his dad would ask, "Do you want to go outside and play sports?" he would reply, "No, I want to read." He "wanted narrative, and [his mom and dad] were totally cool about that." He told me that he has ADHD and had no interest in standing still in a baseball outfield, though baseball was "huge" in his Southern town; he "would sign up for Chinese water torture before I'd go and play baseball." Clearly,

Paradise had managed to resist and transcend gender stereotypes, with the support of his family.

For Dustin, coming from a background of poverty and family pain, the connection of gender with schooling was more complicated. Scholarly research into the particular gender issues implicated in the experiences of young men from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as research into masculinities, seems to apply to Dustin's experience. Taylor (2004) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002), as well as Pollack (1998) and Kindlon and Thompson (1999), explored the tendency of some boys to avoid risking failure and shame by avoiding areas where their competence and sense of control might be threatened. Watson et al. (2010) pointed out that at-risk boys may seek success and masculine status in areas of their lives apart from school, acting out an extreme masculinity that dooms them to school failure. Jackson's (2002) study of "laddish" behavior—disruptive behaviors, resistance to authority, objectification of women—also illuminates the behavior of "Dustin's" peer group in high school (a group he no longer feels much connection to during his visits home from college, he told me). Jackson found a connection between rejection of academic effort and rejection of all things feminine, a finding that helps illuminate the difficulties Dustin and his peers had with many female teachers during his high school years.

Alloway and Gilbert (1997) offered an insight that may also illuminate aspects of Dustin's story: While boys who are more socioeconomically privileged, with expectations of professional success after secondary school, view literacy as an important means to a desired end, boys from low-SES backgrounds who lack these expectations see

less potential reward for engaging in academic literacy practices, and in fact may feel that engaging in such practices hinders their enactment of the dominant version of masculinity that will be their claim to future respect (Watson et al., 2010). This is in keeping with the resistant and obstructive behaviors of Dustin and his peer group in high school classrooms.<sup>53</sup> Performing dominant, heteronormative masculinity was an evident concern for these boys, who were often grouped in classrooms of low-achieving students, predominantly boys, in a de facto version of tracking which still existed in Dustin's school. (See MacLeod, 2009, Oakes, 1986, and Epple et al., 2002, on sorting processes which reproduce class differences in literacy achievement, sustaining structural inequality.) A fear of failure in activities in which these boys felt they were competing with girls may have also provided a disincentive to put effort into classroom literacy activities. Pajares and Vallenti (2006) found that students who held gender-stereotypical beliefs were most likely to feel that girls are better writers, finding that such beliefs adversely affect boys' sense of self efficacy, writing achievement, and belief in the value of writing. This would tend to discourage boys from engaging in school writing, an activity in which they felt they were at a disadvantage in competing with girls.

Dustin told me that in high school he had definitely felt that writing ability was the province of girls only, though he no longer feels this way. At the time of our conversation, Dustin was a senior at a New England college, majoring in Conservation

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<sup>53</sup> Pollack (1998) discussed the "hidden yearning for relationship" (p. 18) that boys experience; Kindlon and Thompson (1999) also explored the importance of peers to adolescent boys. Stakelum (2010) examined these relationships in the context of a case study of eight "lost boys" in a San Diego high school.

Law. He had persevered to enter and continue through college against serious odds: He told me that his ninth-grade year was spent living in a camper with his mother and younger sister, through the cold New England winter, after his father had left the family. He experienced violent abuse in his earlier years, and he had attended six different elementary schools in several states as his father moved the family from place to place.

Dustin, who struggled with writing himself, definitely felt during his high school years that writing ability was related to gender, and to some extent he still felt this when we spoke, as he entered his senior year in college: “I feel like women are a lot higher at writing for some reason, [though] I don’t really understand it and can’t really comprehend it.” He was not sure why he thought this, mentioning that “when you think of an English teacher you think of a woman, and that’s what I—before, not now.” He went on to say that now, “I think that anybody can be anything” and that it is sexist to believe otherwise. I could see that Dustin was really grappling with this question. He told me that he feels it is “a lot easier” for women to write, but that there are some women and girls who “can’t write at all,” and many guys, including his roommate, who are really good writers. He explained that his attitudes have changed during his college experience: “Back in high school, yes, I did think that a lot, but now, I mean there’s Shakespeare . . . there’s a lot of male poets out there.” He mentioned to me a drama class he had taken as a required art credit during which he had read *King Lear*. Dustin’s college experience had clearly contributed to his change in attitude about men as writers.

Although Dustin was from a low-SES background and notes that his high school peers definitely held negative gender-based attitudes concerning school engagement, he

was able to persevere despite these negative peer influences due to the presence and support of a number of caring adults in his school experience, as discussed below. His story illustrates the conjunction of class and gender that can result in very low writing achievement. (See Appendix A for Vermont statistics on the intersection of class and gender in assessments of writing proficiency.)

In contrast to the experiences mentioned by Sinclair, Ethan, Nate, Paradise, and Dustin, many others among my participants did not feel any sense of gender expectations or pressure related to writing engagement or achievement.

Isaac attended high school in a district that prided itself on its strong writing program. He noticed no gender issues; instead, “They tried to get everyone to write a lot, so everybody at the school [was] doing it.” He commented, “I’ve seen as many poems from males as I have from females posted in [the] school journal. . . . there’s like an equal distribution.” James explained that in his writing class, “We would have poetry and everyone would have to write a poem, and. . . some were good and some were bad, but I never noticed a distinction . . . in the quality of writing” between girls and boys in the class. His English classes “were rigorous enough where everybody in the classes had to be able to write pretty well, and it didn’t really matter whether it was a guy or girl writing it, because. . . . we just never, there was really never a difference that I saw.”

Other participants mentioned some awareness of the stereotypes surrounding gender and writing in high school but felt these had not had an unduly discouraging effect on them. For instance, when I asked Zach about whether he perceived writing as gendered in any way during his school years, he replied simply, “Honestly, not really.”



He felt that his own interests in computers, gaming, and the military might not have equal appeal for women, and he noted that poetry might have been seen as a strength of girls in particular in his high school years: “I know like there’s plenty of well-known male poets in history but in terms of my peers. . . . maybe there are tons of guys who write poems and just don’t publish or something, but I see girls maybe in class or something just casually writing a poem or writing something.” When it comes to writing about feelings, though, Zach did not feel at any gender disadvantage; he told me, “I tend to be more private, but when I get an opportunity to express any feelings I have in me, I’ll put it down. . . . I’ll express my mind if I feel I can.”

Most other participants similarly felt no sense of gender differences in writing ability. Anil said quite firmly, “I don’t believe too much in different intelligences and different genders psychologically; males and females have the same intelligence.” Jeff answered my question after a long pause. He told me that “I basically grew up with two girls, my mom and my sister, and for that reason my life has been very girl-power oriented. . . . I guess I never really felt like boys are better than girls in any way. . . . I do know the stereotype that women are more likely to write poetry, but I have a good friend, Theo, who writes amazing poetry, and he does it in his free time.” This was a frequent theme among my participants: among all the young men I interviewed, a majority had either written poetry themselves or knew a male friend who did, and did it well.

Julio is a confident, cheerful first-year student at a private military university, the first generation in his Mexican-American family, raised in a southern border state, to attend college. (During his first winter in New England, his father, a highly successful

Mexican-American entrepreneur, dubbed Julio “the frozen Mexican.”) Julio had an especially definitive take on the lack of importance in his experience of the issue of gender and writing. A one-time high school football player, Julio was not at all concerned about any gender assumptions around writing during his high school years. He told me that he did not feel there was an approved version of masculinity at his school: “There were some guys that I knew that just didn’t do any sports, just ‘cause they weren’t good at ‘em, y’know. It didn’t make them any less of a guy, just they weren’t good at sports.” His tone implied strongly that this was no big deal. Instead they participated in other activities, like band or mechanics shop; he remarked that, in fact, “We even had two girls on our football team, and they could kick the crap out of half the team.” This comment was accompanied by appreciative laughter and the comment that “We had no problem with them.” Having a truck was a much more important mark of status in Julio’s high school, and “there were just about the same amount of girls that had trucks” as boys.

Julio felt that writing is in no way a gendered activity, and that good writing is a matter of individual talent and interests. He pointed out to me that there are as many great male writers as female, from Shel Silverstein to Shakespeare.

Even seemingly gendered topics would not necessarily create a problem for him: When I asked about gender expectations concerning writing in his school years, Julio commented that, “If someone wanted me to write about like unicorns, if the topic’s unicorns you’re going to write about unicorns, because obviously you want the good grade, y’know, and I don’t know, you might have fun writing about it, you might make

the unicorn something manly, y’know, like a race car driver. . . . I mean, it’s your story, you can write it however you want to.”

It may well be the case that for many of these young men, as for Julio, their confidence in themselves, as well as supportive and gender-inclusive school cultures, served to inoculate them against the damaging effects of stereotypical constructions of masculinity. Yet such effects can be invisible to us as we swim in our own cultural sea; as Marshall McLuhan observed (in a much-cited and variously quoted remark), whoever discovered water, it was unlikely to have been a fish. For many of my participants, the invisibility of gender stereotypes in their school experiences may have been reflected in their responses

### **Yes, Some Boys Do Write Poetry**

Widespread in the public discourse about boys and writing is the assumption, often quite explicit, that boys in general do not like to write poetry. The forces ranged against boys who might attempt poetry are of course legion, as Peterson (2002), Young (2001), and many others have documented. But again, my participants included a number of “black swans” who disconfirmed the taken-for-granted assumption that boys do not care much for poetry.

Paolo spoke to me about reading aloud a poem he had written in his seventh-grade class. What follows is my poetic transcription of our conversation about the outcome of that event:

“What kind of upset me was when

Some people thought it was stupid.

But all right, I pretended to brush it off.”

“Do you still have the poem?”

“No. I threw it away.

I felt like since nobody got it,

That it must not mean anything.”

“What was the subject of the poem?”

“Rebirth.”

Paolo’s 12-year-old classmates were clearly not prepared to understand a poem of this level of abstraction, but Paulo told me that his teacher also said she did not understand it. The lack of teacher support, coupled with peer incomprehension, had dissuaded Paolo from further efforts at poetry.

With a supportive and caring teacher, the outcome of experiments with poetry can be entirely different. Paradise told me of his discovery of the sestina form through a high school teacher’s assignment. Because he respected this teacher, he gave it his best. He described to me the intricacies of the form and noted that it requires the poet to be “very precise in what you’re trying to say.” Now, he told me, the sestina is his “go-to form” when he wants to write a poem.

Paradise told me of feeling deep resistance when assigned to write a sonnet, a few years earlier, by a middle school teacher, but “it’s Mr. Flint, and I love Mr. Flint,” so he did it, although he “didn’t see the point of doing something so archaic.” He wrote about a house that had been desolated by a storm and now stood abandoned. He wrote the poem after his city had been overwhelmed by a natural disaster, and he realizes the

connection now: “I started writing about storms after the storm.” He likes the concept of storms: “Out of nowhere Nature’s like ‘Hey, f—you, here’s a storm,’ and it’s just so chaotic and powerful, and then everything goes back to normal.” Throughout the rest of middle school and high school, Paradise contributed to his school’s literary magazine and eventually rose to the position of editor.

Thomas told me that he was aware of the stereotype that “poetry was for girls.” But, he went on, “I really liked it, so I was like kinda a ‘closet poet.’” Like many of my other participants, he mentioned having enjoyed Shel Silverstein as a child, in fact reading a Shel Silverstein book “cover to cover one day”; it was “pretty awesome.” He told me he frequently finds himself visiting the Poetry Foundation website at odd moments, “when I have like research papers and other things I don’t want to write.”

Ethan, a senior English major now taking his first fiction-writing and poetry classes, was just beginning to write poetry when we spoke. He told me he is “getting growing pains,” but finds it “fun to just let yourself go onto the page.” He keeps a journal of poetry jottings with him, which he pulled out to show me as we talked. When we spoke, Ethan had recently written a poem for a class assignment while guiding an Outing Club backpacking trip. During the hike, he noticed the particular way light was playing on a stream falling over rocks: “Time and time again [the stream] would flow down this moss, and it would stop there a second, and the light would catch it, and it would shine and then drop, and [again it] would fall and shine, and it would drop, and I wrote a poem about that, and I actually really enjoyed writing that poem.”

### **More Assumptions Challenged: Boys and Personal Writing**

One stereotype especially widespread in the public discourse about boys and writing is that “boys don’t like to write about feelings.” Perhaps this is the case for many students in a school context (although Martino and Pallotta-Charolli, in their 2003 study of Australian boys and young men, cited many boys’ appreciation of the opportunities for self-expression they found in their English classes); but outside of school this is very clearly not the case for boys in general. One of the most frequent themes in my data was the finding that, for many boys and young men, personal writing about feelings, far from being loathed and resisted, is in fact absolutely essential—though this writing often takes place in private, outside of school.

Personal writing to explore feelings has been compellingly important to several of my participants. Isaac told me of the satisfaction he experienced in writing short stories that allowed him to explore his feelings indirectly: “There was like gratification in sort of getting a story out of my head. . . . I was also dealing with some internal problems at the time, so that was kind of an outlet to get things out. I guess it was satisfying to have like some of my issues with the world, teenage angst and stuff, out of my head and eventually [put into] something concrete. . . . subjects that preoccupy me and like not directly talking about those subjects in the short story, but. . . . I probably should be doing that more. Writing about things that bother me. . . .” Anil told me, “I do like to write what I feel so that I can get a better understanding of my feelings;. . . ‘cause otherwise , if you don’t know what you’re feeling, you could go and do something you really don’t want to do. . . .”

Nick told me that his most satisfying piece of writing had been the eulogy he wrote for his beloved grandfather. This was so important to him that at the time, although the funeral director advised against allowing a child of 11 to speak at the funeral, Nick stubbornly insisted on sharing his feelings about his grandfather. In school, he told me, he never really had opportunities for personal writing until his current college English class; after we spoke, he sent me a powerful personal essay he had written for this class, about his mother's long illness and the impact of this experience throughout his childhood. However, there had been one opportunity for personal writing, in a non-traditional genre, within his school years: In a film-making course in high school Nick had created a story-board version of a film featuring an interview with himself, which he found "really fascinating." He took on the role of the Other and the Self, he said, in terms he had learned in a Concepts of the Self English course this year in college. "That's really the closest thing to personal [writing I had done], even though it was just talking to myself." Now he especially enjoys the fragments of personal free-writing in response to prompts which one professor uses to begin each class: as Nick commented, "I don't know if it works for everyone else, but it definitely gives me a diving board or jumping off point for y'know 'I never really put this into words before.'" He told me he appreciates the professor's ongoing journal assignment, though the professor had yet to collect the journals: they provide "a chance to really [write about] something that's in your head and not someone else's." Clearly, "just talking to [him]self" has opened a rich vein Nick is now eager to mine. He told me that the two papers he had already written for this class were the first ones he had enjoyed writing in a long time.

Paolo's immersion in personal writing extended over many years. Paolo grew up in a tough neighborhood in a West Coast city, a first-generation college student who had somehow ended up in a New England university. He had turned to personal writing years earlier from a need for self-understanding. Paolo spoke of his habit, spanning many years, of recording his thoughts on Post-It notes which he had returned to at intervals in order to better understand what he had been thinking and experiencing. Sometimes he still does not understand, he told me, but "I wait for the day when I do understand it." He intends to "assemble them all together and make something of it" one day. Before leaving home for college, he put all his notes in a leather portfolio for safekeeping. His words, rendered in the following poetic transcription, convey the deep importance to him of these writings:

I wait for the day when I do understand it. . . .

I would have been satisfied with anything.

It could have been cardboard.

But the reason I decided to go with the leather was that  
people tend to find things that are covered in leather  
more valuable. . .

I feel like if I would've left them in anything else, it would've  
ended up in the trash.

I feel it has kept it safe.

If I would've been there. . . but I'm not there.

It's more of a safeguard.



Paolo told me that sometimes he would awaken in the middle of the night and start writing down his thoughts. Clearly these bits of writing had enormous value for this young man. A first-year student, Paolo had declared an engineering major as an “escape mechanism” from his thoughts. He continued, “I thought if I do this I would be able to escape myself. . . . because sometimes my thoughts consume me.” But “it didn’t work, so I feel like I just have to go back to what I have to do.” At the time we spoke, he was planning to change his major to English, to confront and attempt to understand his thoughts through writing.

Anil told me that journaling had saved him during a very dark period in his life. He told me the exact date he began keeping a journal: “April 25 of this year.” This was a significant moment in his life: he was engaged in therapy trying to overcome substance abuse, depression, and finally an overdose brought on by “a hopeless need to get high” to escape from his sense that “I couldn’t do anything to help myself.” Anil mentioned that he valued journaling because it tells him “more about my life and myself”; he told me that journaling increases his self-understanding, giving him insights into his own thoughts and motivations. He does not feel depressed now, and he feels that writing, among other new and healthful habits, was “part of that.”

Zach was a recent convert to the pleasure of personal writing. Currently enrolled in an ROTC program on a university campus near his small college, Zach told me he had always preferred “cut and dried” writing but now finds he is open to enjoying new types of writing, under the influence of his current college English professor, whose class is very relaxed, “more of a like just a group hanging out, just talking about things.” He told

me, “Generally I do like things very technical and just like ‘This is what you do, this is how you’re gonna do it, execute.’” Recently, though, he enjoyed writing a paper for his English professor in which he was allowed to go beyond guidelines and express himself: “That was the first time I had like free rein, in like how I could write it, and I could use . . . everything that came to mind basically . . . I was able to put myself into that paper, and actually like express my thoughts and opinions and everything; y’know it was just satisfying to get that out.”

### **Writing Outside of School: The Writing that Teachers and Parents Do Not See**

Boys’ out-of-school writing in a variety of forms has been well documented in the scholarly literature, as detailed by Schultz (2006) in a review of qualitative literature on writing. The frequency of these activities, and their importance to young writers, is supported in my data. My participants told me of a very rich array of out-of-school writings, which they spoke of with pride and satisfaction, challenging the stereotype in the popular discourse that boys do not like to write and will do so only under duress. Daniel and Will told me of writing song lyrics. Will had also kept extensive travel journals on family trips to Paris and Thailand and still deeply enjoys filling books with writing: “I’ve always dug really cool books—books that were bound and you could write—I always thought that was really sweet. Whatever kind of book it is, I guess. . . . I have four complete ones. I like the idea of filling a whole entire book with writing, y’know, like writing all the time.” He felt an enormous sense of loss when a travel journal he had kept on a post-high school trip to Europe with friends disappeared.

Many of the young men I spoke with mentioned, with great pleasure, writing they had done outside of school. Jason in seventh and eighth grades wrote what he called “really terrible poetry and song lyrics.” Isaac tried to write a novel—twice. Anil also mentioned having tried to write a novel. Cory told me he had tried as a child to write a book with a friend, though it had not worked out. Sinclair, Ethan, and others mentioned out-of-school writing throughout their childhoods, remembering with evident enjoyment particular stories they had written: Ethan recalls with great pleasure a story he wrote as “a really little kid” with a precociously sophisticated theme, about a knight who killed a dragon but “didn’t realize the dragon had a little dragon baby and then the knight got cursed because he broke apart the family.” Ethan noted with a chuckle that “it was a really macabre story for a first grader to write. . . . Everybody’s writing about puppies and sunshine, and I wasn’t. But that was a lot of fun to write. . . . That was great.” Sinclair’s Thanksgiving story about Pilgrims and Indians, pounded out on the family’s old computer in the basement, earned him much appreciation from his family.

Nick, during his senior year in high school, had crowd-funded a “little mini-movie-making thing” with some friends involving an armored car heist; he had even lined up an old armored car he could use and had created a story-board for the project, though it is now on hold. He likes the idea of “playing tricks on the person watching . . . like y’know just screw with their heads.”

Martino (2003) and Alloway and Gilbert (1997) have emphasized the importance of the multiple literacies many boys engage in outside of school; Nate’s movie project undertaken with friends illustrates one such non-print literacy activity, taken up outside

school, with friends, purely for personal satisfaction. Jones and Myhill (2007) emphasized that writing is fundamentally a social act, “an act of connection and communication with others” (p. 4). For both Cory and Nick, the social aspect of writing occurred entirely outside of school, in projects undertaken with friends. For many other participants, this social exchange took place as they shared pieces of writing with peers (see discussion below of the importance of like-minded peers). For Nick as for many of my participants, a great deal of writing for pleasure is going on beyond the view of parents and teachers.

### **Young Men and Writing Engagement**

A range of factors promoting writing engagement were apparent in my data. I will discuss several of these below: the importance of caring adults and like-minded peers; the power of autonomy, creativity, and flow; the role of perseverance, motivation, and grit; the epiphanies that helped young men envision a goal; and the role of confidence as inoculation against damaging gender stereotypes. Pollack’s (1998) discussion of the importance of mentoring programs is relevant to Dustin’s experience, detailed below.

### **The Importance of Caring Adults Outside the Classroom**

For one of my participants in particular, a young man from a background of deep poverty who had not forged positive relationships with classroom teachers and who entirely lacked family support that might have helped him persevere to continue his education, it was his connections with other adults outside the classroom that proved to be of central importance to his ultimately entering college, and in fact persevering to his

senior year, when we spoke. The involvement of two particular men in Dustin's life was crucial: Ron, his teacher advisor (not his classroom teacher) who first met Dustin during his junior year in high school, and David, a student assistance outreach counselor who worked with the federally funded TRIO program to identify and support first-generation students with the potential to attend college.

Dustin had experienced violent abuse from his father, but his relationships with these caring and supportive men outside his family served to countervail the anger and pain of his family life and ultimately support him in his goal of entering college. Throughout his high school years, Dustin had frequently had troubled relationships with his classroom teachers, his disruptive behaviors at times escalating to levels at which his teacher advisor, Ron, intervened; but over two years and a summer, Dustin developed a strong relationship with Ron based on mutual respect as they worked side by side at Ron's home stacking wood and working in Ron's furniture-making shop. Dustin learned woodworking skills from Ron, a skilled cabinet-maker. Dustin's strong work ethic earned him Ron's respect and made Dustin a truly valuable helper, beyond Ron's desire to support his advisee. The bond of mutual regard and respect that developed between the two through these experiences was described to me at length by both Dustin and Ron when we spoke.

The student assistance counselor, David, had met with Dustin from time to time throughout Dustin's high school years, but it was not until six months after Dustin's high school graduation that this relationship became pivotal in Dustin's life, as I will describe

in a later section, when a sudden epiphany concerning his future sent Dustin back to David for advice on how to apply to and enter college immediately.

### **The Importance of Like-Minded Peers**

In addition to the support of caring adults beyond the classroom that enabled some of my participants to persevere through frustration and serious obstacles, another factor that appeared throughout my data was the importance of like-minded peers who encouraged and supported these young men's writing efforts. This is an area which has not been extensively explored in the scholarly discourse, though Pollack (1998) discussed boys' need for affiliation with peers and others, noting that "affective ties. . . formed with close male friends" help boys develop "a resilience that helps to sustain them" (p. 18). Pollack noted that these bonds may be formed with girls as well, as Paolo's story will illustrate.

Thomas told me of one very close male friend who also was engaged in writing, a singer-songwriter who became a major source of support for Thomas's own writing efforts. The two met in a difficult class they both "struggled through," and they became close friends. Thomas and his friend were both "in that very contemplative high school [stage when] everything is so important." In the creative writing course they both took, they shared their writing with each other, with a freedom and self-revelation that was "a huge, huge factor" for Thomas: In sharing his work with this friend, he told me, he was saying publicly, "Hey, this is what I'm feeling today." He still sends his writing to this friend, who is "a brother now," though they live in different states.

Paradise, after a painful emotional setback, found new friends among a “super-nerds” group who shared his love of fantasy and gaming; ultimately this, combined with his love of stories, led him to a college major in video game writing. Among his peers in the Fantasy Club was one friend who is “a great surrealist/essay writer” with whom he “used to joke that when he wants to take over the world with an army of robots, . . . I would be the first to volunteer to have my hand replaced with a cannon so I could be in the army.” This group of peers, with whom Paradise shared a love of writing and fantasy, sustained him during a difficult time. He commented that “I like to think of things in terms of stories. . . . When I’m not sure what to do, [I think], ‘This is a story. What happens next?’”

Sinclair, a senior majoring in English, philosophy, and political science at the time we spoke, told me that he has a community of friends who share his interest in writing. When they encounter one another on campus, their frequent greeting is “Written anything lately?” He finds this a “subtle motivation to keep writing.” He told me that his friends “just sort of enjoy the ability to create things, and the freedom.”

Unlike for Paradise and Thomas, it was a young woman friend who provided the crucial relationship that supported Paolo’s reading, writing, and self-reflection. A soft-spoken first-year student when we spoke, Paolo came from what he described as an “at-risk high school” in a large West Coast urban area. He told of being handed a Thomas Mann novel by an older cousin when he was 12 years old; the cousin never read the book, which he had chosen for a book report because of its visually arresting cover art, but Paolo devoured the book and still lists it among his favorites, which also include *Crime*

*and Punishment* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When I commented on the darkness of his reading preferences, Paolo replied, “Anything that’s dark tends to be more honest and true.” He continued, “I’m not into those kind of *Twilight* books or Harry Potter—I don’t like fantasy. . . it’s not very interesting to me.” I found myself thinking that Paolo’s reality had probably provided him with darkness enough to make fantasy fiction seem completely irrelevant.

In high school, it was a young woman friend who first handed him *Crime and Punishment* and encouraged his writing efforts; when other friends could not “understand what I was going for,” she was supportive and engaged. He repeated several times during our conversation that he feels guilty when he does not work hard, because this friend struggled and took her work very seriously, while he was “more laid back and just waited for things to happen. . . just flying by in a class, getting As.”

Jeff often sends his writing to friends back home to read and give him feedback, and he returns the favor, realizing that he is learning as he is giving feedback to others. His older sister, now a student at Smith College, gave him snarky, funny feedback throughout his high school years that he appreciated and learned from. Jeff emphasized the central role of peers in his transition from a “painfully slow” Remedial English class in ninth grade to AP English his senior year: After meeting a new group of friends in his extra-curricular Speech and Debate Club (a suggestion from his sister which he had initially resisted), Jeff found that his competitive spirit kicked in, and he wanted to show these new friends he was “on a par” with them. All these friends were “super-intelligent,” and he said to himself, “I can catch up.” Year by year he moved through the



levels of English classes, from remedial to college prep to honors and finally to AP. “I really wanted to match my good friends with the highest course I could,” he told me. “I’m very competitive.” Besides, he said, he didn’t want to “let my sister get all the academic credit in the house.”

### **The Role of Creativity, Autonomy, and Flow in Young Men’s Writing Motivation**

You can be anyone.  
You can really say anything you want.  
You can do whatever you want. . .  
In the end, you’re in control.  
Will

Daniel Pink has brought a wide-ranging discussion of motivation into the public discourse in several best-selling books (e.g., *Drive*, 2009; *A Whole New Mind*, 2006) as well as in publications ranging from *The New York Times* to *Harvard Business Review*. Pink brings together research into motivation by a number of scientists from several fields, from positive psychology to behavioral economics. Many of the findings Pink cites were illustrated in the words of my participants as they talked with me about their own sources of motivation and engagement

Pink (2009) coined the term “Type I” to indicate intrinsically motivated people, who, he asserts, “usually achieve more than their reward-seeking counterparts” (p. 75). These intrinsically motivated people are “working hard and persisting through difficulties because of their internal desire to control their lives, learn about their world, and accomplish something that endures” (p. 75).

Precisely this internal drive to control his own learning is what motivates Anil: for him, intrinsic motivation is central to his desire to learn. He told me that grades are no

longer a motivation; he feels they are “psychologically destructive” and tend to put the emphasis on “the extrinsic portion of our education rather than enjoying the learning.” Anil told me that he knows from his own experience that “grades just make you not want to learn in high school. I never focused on learning. The pressure was always on, y’know, do whatever you want to get the grade, so I cheated on tests or whatever to get the grade.” This supports Pink’s (2009) argument that extrinsic motivators “can clobber creativity” (p. 67). Anil’s motivation is now entirely intrinsic; he was very interested when I told him that a good deal of research supports his belief that only intrinsic motivation fosters sustained learning. Anil’s comments accord perfectly with the finding of Potter et al. (2001) that “performance or ego goals (achieving in order to impress others, sometimes in a competitive sense) . . . tend to elicit superficial strategies designed primarily to win approval” and a focus on “discovering short cuts to satisfying external demands” (p. 46), rather than the intrinsic motivation Anil described to me which now leads him to seek knowledge in order to further his own goals.

In addition to the importance of intrinsic motivation, Pink suggested that managers’ lack of awareness of motivational factors creates passivity. This also applies to some of my participants’ resistance to completing writing tasks they felt were pointless and rote. The powerful connections among autonomy, performance, and attitude that Pink described apply quite clearly to my participants’ responses to many prescribed writing tasks they had experienced in school (e.g., the hated five-paragraph essay or the analysis of literary texts). Jeff offered an example of this attitude: he told me that he enjoyed analytical writing in his AP class when it was “wide open” with “no restrictions

[as long as] you had an argument and you had proof”; for him, this meant “freedom, I had freedom.” In contrast, he found assignments with a pre-shaped argument—for example, to discuss why a character is dynamic—to be boring because the argument was already set up; he already knew what he was proving, so there was no real challenge. In earlier courses he said, “It was basically intro, three bodies, conclusion. Hated that! I hated it!” The prescribed five-paragraph essay “felt so constricted.” His favorite competitive event in speech tournaments was Original Oratory, which allowed him to “basically write whatever I wanted as long as it had some sort of point.” He enjoyed being “a little more loose” than most of his competitors and did not finish in the top ranks, “but I had fun doing it.”

Jeff’s experience supports Pink’s (2009) comment that “in our offices and our classrooms we have way too much compliance and way too little engagement” (p. 112). Correcting this imbalance is fundamental to what Pink calls “Motivation 3.0” (p. 111). Pink offered a review of self-determination theory, which posits “three innate psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness. When those needs are satisfied, we’re motivated, productive, and happy” (2009, p. 72).

Indeed, autonomy and control were frequent themes in my participants’ accounts of their writing experiences. Justin was aware of a particular turning point in his school years when he no longer sought the advice of family members (many of whom were writers), feeling somewhere during middle school that “it’s really up to you. . . .it was more useful to use your own ideas and your own thinking.” When I asked him whether he thought this was the first stirrings of a desire for autonomy, he replied, “Yeah, I think

it was—it was the beginning of real independence, where you’re kind of starting to separate a bit from your parents. . . and you kind of just want to do it for yourself. . . not necessarily in a negative way, just [a] coming of age process. . . .”

The freedom to engage in tasks that felt personally authentic and creative was also central in my participants’ discussions of their writing experiences. Gee’s (2000) discussion of the ways boys create and portray themselves through language as particular kinds of people suggests why so many of my participants insisted on the crucial importance to them of having the freedom to express themselves in the way they felt most represented them as individuals. This is in keeping with the findings of Potter et al. (2001) that students were more motivated when their writing tasks seemed authentic to them, reflecting their own life goals and interests. Wilson (2008) and Potter et al. also found that authenticity in their writing was central to boys’ engagement.

Closely allied to authenticity was the sense of personal creativity. The possibility of personal creativity was mentioned again and again by my participants as the crucial factor that made a writing experience enjoyable. Several went into detail about particular experiences of in-school writing that were memorable and deeply pleasurable for this reason. Creativity was possible even in analytical assignments, according to several participants, including Will, whose words are reproduced as a poetic transcription above. Rory, a first-year engineering student, told me, “I’m just really creative, so . . . whenever inspiration strikes, that’s when you act.” He told me that as a child, he was “always being very creative for pictures and stuff, but it seems like in the last years that’s kind of

transformed a little bit, or redirected towards writing. I'm able to express the pictures in my head through words."

For Ethan, a prospective English teacher, the importance of creativity was reflected in the writing advice he would offer to young boys: "I would let them have a sense of play when it comes to writing, because that's what I didn't have. It was always a very formal thing. . . there was no fun involved whatsoever." He further advised young boys to "start writing now; later on in life, girls will think it's really cool." Ethan's comment suggests the importance of creativity and a sense of freedom as a way to overcome constricting gender expectations concerning writing.

Many participants also mentioned the importance of authenticity and remaining true to their own voices in writing. This often emerged powerfully when I asked participants my final question at the end of an hour or two of conversation: "If you could go back and give advice about writing to yourself at a younger age, or to another young boy, what would you want to say?" I intended this question as a means to encourage my participants reflect on what they know now about writing that has been important to them but did not know at a younger age.

Paradise responded to this question with a firm injunction against sacrificing one's true voice as a writer: "Don't be afraid to share because you think people will judge you or criticize you. Because if they do, they don't understand. . . . And I've found a lot of people will understand, they'll try and connect to you. And in opening yourself up, you become, you open doors. Like trying to hide things is never helpful." Clearly, revealing his identity through his authentic voice was a crucial value for Paradise in his writing.

Justin's insight about voice and identity came to me in an e-mail message he sent me following our interview: "I just thought about how one's identity plays into their writing and style, which could have some interesting connections to secondary school writing." An engineering and business major, Justin intended to take courses in the humanities in order to keep developing his writing voice.

Many participants mentioned that they liked research writing only when they could bring a personal or creative element into it. James, for instance, mentioned that he dislikes "just research" but enjoys combining research with storytelling or narrative in some way. He was looking forward to a research project in his current English class because creativity would be an integral aspect of it: "I think I'll have fun with it," he told me.

This writing preference, voiced by James and a number of other participants, accords with Hall and Coles' finding (1997) that narrative was boys' favored reading genre, in contrast to the prevailing assumption that boys prefer nonfiction. Because of the very close link between reading and writing, it is not surprising, in light of this finding, that many boys would enjoy combining creative and narrative elements with other genres such as research writing.

Creativity offered a saving grace for Nick. After being hit hard by the demands of high school writing and finding himself "completely dissuaded . . . from it," Nick had "one great English teacher that I stuck with for two years" who "revitalized my love for writing because he let us do more with narrative and with voice. . . . I much prefer a

narrative writing style or I guess a more personal writing style.” He writes stories in his head, he told me, and especially enjoys creating an element of twist, a surprise.

Sinclair was very explicit about the creative pleasure to be had from writing. He told me that the interest came from “just playing with ideas in words” which carried with it “the joy of constructing something. . . . the satisfaction of creating something. . . . sort of like about experimenting, putting things on the page and seeing what happens.”

Sinclair enjoys writing science fiction and dystopian stories, though the story he sent me was a realistic piece, with compelling voice and characters, set in the most mundane of settings: a home improvement chain store. The narrator’s voice is powerful: the story opens with a reported dialogue that immediately conveys his cynicism and frustration with his life at work. As the scene opens, he is dressed for work in his “aluminum safety holster, which matched my apron and the Kevlar on the gloves which were all orange, the color of headaches”:

The day Dortimer got fired I knew something was up because all I did was ask him to chuck some cardboard boxes in the Cardboard Compactor and he was immediately all like: why don’t you chuck yourself in the Cardboard Compactor, and I told him because it wasn’t my job to be chucking things in the Cardboard Compactor, let alone forbidden objects such as human bodies, and that I was supposed to be out on the floor selling tractors and lawn mowers. . . . But James wasn’t really a bad guy, in fact he was kind of a nice guy if you caught him within three minutes of his last cigarette when his nerves seems to be covered in a sort of life-is-nice-and-easy nicotine tar. . . .

Rory, a first-year engineering major, emphasized the high value he places on originality in his work. He told me that “the majority of kids look at [an assignment] the same way, so I like to incorporate creative writing because it kind of differentiates yourself. . . so you stand out.” He was especially struck by a Donald Murray quotation that had just been discussed in his English class earlier on the afternoon we spoke, about “opening your subconscious to writing and waiting for the writing to come to you, then grabbing it.” He told me that he became aware that this was a good description of his learning process.

Garret shared with me a story he had recently written for his campus alternative paper’s Halloween edition, about ghosts who hung out playing poker in the Student Center but were annoyed by the living students in their midst. Garret was obviously getting a great deal of extracurricular fun out of writing with full creative license. He was able to apply his creativity to academic writing as well; he told me of a paper he had recently written tracing connections between the first three *Star Wars* movies and the politics of the Nixon and Reagan eras.

Ben, a first-year engineering major, was one of the first of my participants to disabuse me of an unconscious stereotype about creativity in writing that I had held about students majoring in technical fields. He told me that he prefers writing when “a lot is left for my own creativity.” This sentiment was echoed by a number of other participants who specifically said that they enjoyed research writing when the assignment allowed room for creativity. Daniel told me that he began exploring creative writing in fourth or fifth grade, “and it was just like my first attempts at trying to do something that



was. . . putting just words on the page, writing anything. . . different, creative imaginary. But by middle school, “things got pretty formal pretty fast.” He commented that he now enjoys both creative writing and research, and frequently during our conversation he mentioned being taught structures that he felt ultimately freed him to be creative once the basics of an assignment had been put on the page: “I just do the structure first, it helps to implement the creative styles . . . once I have initially created the first set-up [in] the textbook kind of way.” Throughout our conversation, Daniel returned to the idea that structure can be liberating; persevering through the “textbook style” requirements can allow a writer to “start using that inner creativeness that we all have.” Daniel plays piano by ear and is a songwriter; clearly creative expression is important in his life, and his writing preferences illustrate this.

Will asserted strongly the creative potential in any piece of writing, whatever the assignment: “You can be anyone. You can really say anything you want. You can do whatever you want. . . in the end, you’re in control.” Regarding the commonly made distinction between creative and other writing, Will asserted, “You can be creative when you’re writing anything.” Paradise too spoke of finding writing easy “if it’s something I’m passionate about, if it’s in a creative format that allow me freedom of expression’— a frequent theme among my participants.

Isaac, like many of the young men I spoke with, soundly refuted the stereotype that boys do not enjoy creative writing and tend to be more analytical; on the contrary, he much prefers creative writing to “anything that involves formal analysis.” Isaac told me that freedom on a first draft is important—he wants “free rein” in his writing, a desire

reflected in his advice to his younger self: “Don’t be so tight about it.” He mentioned that he generally has a “really strong filter on . . . the words that come out while I’m writing” which “can really . . . cripple my process,” and he advised younger writers to “practice writing without that filter.” He wished that teachers would not “make every piece of writing have a purpose or a grade.” Clearly, pleasure in pure creativity is what Isaac needs to stimulate his writing engagement and overcome some of the impediments that trouble him.

Zach said he was enjoying a paper he was working on for his current English class, because this was “the first time I had like free rein like how I could write it, and I could use experience, everything that came to mind, basically. . . . I was able to put myself into that paper and actually like express my thoughts and opinions. . . . it was just satisfying to get that out.” He told me that he did not enjoy the frequent high school assignments to write about themes in literature, but he really appreciates the freedom to shape the paper he is currently working on as he chooses: “I thought that whole mentality was really cool.” He remembers a high school English teacher who challenged his draft of his college essay, saying “This doesn’t sound like you. . . . You need to be yourself.” Zach looked at the essay, realized she was right, and began working to put his own voice into his writing. Zach’s writing advice to his younger self or another young boy—“Be yourself”—conveys the value he places on authenticity in his writing.

Nick believes he would thrive on the Swedish approach of having students study topics of interest independently, then present their findings publicly. He feels that his educational experience has not prepared him for real-world challenges: “Once you’re in

Real World [said as if this were a computer-simulated virtual world], good luck testing what may be your limits.” The autonomy to pursue his own interests in a manner of his own creation seems to Nick the ideal educational experience.

Autonomy and creativity are closely allied to the experience of flow. Many participants spoke to me of writing experiences that would be characterized by Csikszentmihalyi (2000, 1999) as flow experiences.

Nick, often an indifferent student, told me of a day when his high school class entered their classroom to find the teacher missing but a picture projected on the board, with a little note instructing students to “make a story of this picture.” Most of the students “disappeared,” but he and a few others took up the challenge. The remaining students wrote mysteries, poems, anything they chose; Nate found the situation intriguing: “Here’s a prompt, do what you will.” The story he wrote “kind of started out as a mystery. . . and then ended up being a conflict” between a character and his neighbor, “and it almost turned into a *Great Gatsby* style” of narrative. He told me “that’s one of the few writing assignments that I’ve sat down and when the bell rang, I thought it had only been five minutes.” Unlike the “laborious . . . time-consuming papers that you’re writing and writing. . . that was one of the few that I just lost myself in.” Nick’s description of this experience precisely matches the terms Shernoff et al., (2003) have used to describe the flow experience, as “a state of deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically enjoyable.” According to Shernoff et al., “Individuals in this state perceive their performance to be pleasurable and successful, and the activity is perceived as worth doing for its own sake, even if no further goal is reached” (p. 160).

## **Perseverance, Motivation, and Grit**

Duckworth's (2007) research on motivation and perseverance led her to develop useful theory concerning a construct she dubbed "grit," which she found to be an important trait predictive of success with a wide variety of tasks. Quite apart from IQ, according to Duckworth's findings, this psychological disposition "may be as essential as talent to high accomplishment" (p. 1100). This theory is germane to my participants' experiences with writing: Given the complexity and challenge of many writing tasks, "grit"—the stamina and determination to persevere—is a quality evident in the stories of many of the young men in my study.

Nick responded to my question about what had kept him persevering to college with "Well, at the moment I don't even really know if I'd consider what I'm doing 'persevering'." He told me of a recent conversation with his career advisor during his first college semester which helped him formulate his current goal of working in digital forensics. This professor, who had had a career in this field and therefore spoke from personal experience, told of a life of "city-hopping" across continents—India, China, "all over the place"—and although Nick "find[s] it hard to sleep in cities," this life appealed to him. He is fascinated by not only logic ("Logic is my friend," he told me) but also by anticipating other people's moves, as in a chess game: "When you see your opponent play a move, you're thinking of what move comes after that, what move they're going to do after that, what move you're going to do after that, and thinking so many steps ahead." Nick told me that he was a very anti-social person as a middle school student, "was awful at talking to [people]," and studied interactions both in the real world and online until he

reached a point of feeling “pretty happy with how I can talk someone down now.” Nick is strategic in his interactions: he makes a point of gaming out the consequences of his interactions with others, mindful of the status issues and exchange of favors involved in many social interactions. The connection between his love of logic and his approach to social interactions is clear. Digital forensics seems a perfect career goal that merges these interests. Although Nick did not feel that perseverance actually characterized his attitude, his focus on a career goal indicated that although he was an indifferent student, he is still persevering academically.

For Anil, as for Nick, a long-range goal keeps him working within an academic context. Anil told me that for him, “Perseverance comes from . . . the intrinsic pleasure that you get from helping others.” He wants “to be an example for people,” to make a contribution to society. After a troubled high school experience, his recently discovered sense of purpose has given him a new academic commitment.

Jeff persevered through the challenges of a rigorous AP English class in part because, as he told me, “I didn’t want to let down my mom, believe it or not.” “She’s always been very supportive of everything I’ve ever done. That’s why I wanted to give her those good grades.” He told me he wanted to get his papers on the refrigerator too, where his sister’s had often appeared. When I asked what advice he would have liked to be able to give to his younger self, he said, “Take AP classes; they’ll kick your butt [but] it’s worth the ride, it’s worth the ups and downs. You get a little bit motion sick, [but] it smooths out.” Jeff told me that his competitive spirit, his desire to keep up with his

peers, was also an important factor in his perseverance as he moved from Remedial English in ninth grade to the AP English course he took in his senior year.

Isaac perseveres despite great writing difficulties because of the support of teachers. Telling me of his struggles to capture abstract thoughts in words, he said that at one point he “did write something that made sense” and in fact earned an A from his professor, but only after he “spent a good three or four hours walking and in the study rooms in the library trying to . . . . I ended up generating like two letter-size pages of thoughts,” then went to his professor for help; the professor offered a few concrete questions and suggestions, “sort of a guide to go by; that helped a bit.” This was enough to keep Isaac persevering to complete the assignment. He told me he still struggles with motivation; though he is “mostly over the psychological stuff” he had been struggling with during high school, “there’s still a lot of residue.” Now and then, though, he feels “a burning desire to do something,” and he is able to write again. For Isaac, writing has gone from being “nightmarish” to occasionally being enjoyable, with the support of his current English professor and a high school teacher who had helped him with his struggle to capture his thoughts in words.

Very frequently, the school writing projects my participants described as their most frustrating were also the ones they found the most rewarding, once they had persevered and completed the task. Jones and Myhill (2007; see also Newkirk, 2003; Potter et al., 2001) found that it was not genre but topic that motivated students to persevere and ultimately rewarded them with satisfaction in their writing efforts. This was definitely the case for many of my participants, who frequently told me that they

enjoyed research writing, for example, only when it involved creativity and personally meaningful topics they had been allowed to choose and shape for themselves. These students tended to describe their projects with a great deal of satisfaction and pride. In fact, the correlation between “most frustrating” and “most satisfying” pieces was a nearly universal response on the questionnaires I collected from dozens of students in the classes I visited.

This accords with what Pink (2009) called “Goldilocks tasks,” tasks which offer the perfect balance between perceived challenge and perceived capacity to meet the challenge. This balance between challenge and capacity was the subject of Csikszentmihalyi’s first book on autotelic experiences, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (2000), which discussed the need for balance between challenge and capacity in order for flow to occur. Shernoff et al. (2003) spoke of the “symbiotic relationship between challenges and skills needed to meet those challenges” (p. 160), noting the importance of the fit between the two elements: “The flow experience is believed to occur when one’s skills are neither overmatched nor underutilized to meet a given challenge” (p. 160). Pajares and Valiante (2006) found a direct connection between students’ confidence in their writing abilities and their level of writing achievement.

These concepts accord with Dweck’s (2008) research indicating that students’ motivation to persevere with challenging tasks may depend on their having a “growth mindset,” a belief that with effort, their neural connections increase, intelligence expands, and ultimately they will be able to master challenging tasks. My participants mentioned lengthy projects, spanning many (often frustrating) months, in which they pursued topics

with family connections (e.g., James's research on the Colorado Gold Rush, in which his family had taken part, and which he described to me with evident pride and satisfaction; and Justin's extensive senior project on the challenges faced by the newspaper industry, in which his family was deeply involved). Other personally compelling themes (e.g., Zach's research on the origin and development of military computer networks) were highly motivating for some participants. These students persevered because their topics were inherently interesting to them, and their teachers supported their efforts through the months of work on their projects. The result was pride and satisfaction with the outcome of their writing efforts.

### **When it is Not Flowing: Procrastination, Lack of Motivation, and Getting Unstuck**

Nick described himself as a "pretty awful student" who had become "great at keeping my head above water." He told me that he is very resistant to, and resentful of, assignments that feel like "busy work," and really does not care to go "above and beyond," but an extra credit assignment that instructed students to "'Go perform your own experiment,' that would be something that involves and interests me, and gives me the basic artistic freedom to go do whatever it is I want." Nick made it clear several times throughout our conversation that he is selective about which class assignments to complete, an important way he maintains his autonomy as a student.

Nick described his continuing lack of motivation as a habit from middle school, when he missed so many assignments that "it started to catch up to me, and I was already in this hole, and . . . that whole notion of looking up and I was like 'That's pretty far up, I think I'm gonna stay down here for a while.'" He told me he has "been desensitized by



the ‘I’m stuck in a hole’ [metaphor] ‘cause in simple terms, I really don’t care.’ Grades were not (and are not now) a motivation; Nick feels they reflect only “how much I’ve turned in” rather than how much he knows; he could “relay to you everything that I’ve done in my classes and probably write it on a white-board and make some complex overview, summarizing the entire unit, but I don’t want to.” He likes to “tread water right at the surface” and lacks that “same feeling of urgency that someone will [usually have] with a paper lingering over them, even if it’s overdue.” Grades are not a factor for Nick at all, in fact: “I’m perfectly happy as long as you’re not gonna kick me out,” he said. He often sleeps through classes or skips them entirely, but “when I go to the class, I still feel like I’m up to date.” At the midpoint of the semester when we spoke, Nick’s lack of motivation had not (yet) become a problem, as he perceived it.

Smith and Wilhelm (2009) summarized their review of research on motivation with five principles that were also salient in my data: “a sense of competence and control, a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill, clear goals and feedback, a focus on the immediate experience, and the possibility of social relationships” (p. 366). This last factor is reflected in Nick’s comment concerning the enjoyment and motivation he felt when working on a research project within the context of a classroom of similarly engaged students (see below). Pajares and Valiante (2006), in their review of research on self-efficacy and motivation, also discussed the central importance of challenging tasks and support by teachers and parents toward achieving mastery, to help students develop “a robust sense of confidence” (p. 167). (Confidence and self-efficacy will be discussed

more fully below.) These factors were clearly evident in my participants' accounts of their work (discussed above) on challenging but ultimately satisfying writing projects.

Several participants told me of their individual methods for persevering in the short term with frustrating assignments. For Paradise, who has ADHD, listening to somber, sad music keeps him persevering. He told me, "It kinda helps me contain myself, so . . . I just sit down for 20 minutes and I just work, and then for five minutes I allow myself to check Facebook." For Zach, it is the opposite: epic orchestral music gets him pumped and ready to tackle a writing task. Zach obviously knows something about persevering through frustration: he named *Beowulf* and Plato's Allegory of the Cave among his favorite readings in high school, though he found other assigned readings almost unendurable (e.g., *The Scarlet Letter*).

Julio told me that he had entered his current English class a couple of weeks into the semester and was warned by the professor that students who entered late frequently fell behind and did poorly. Julio found that this motivated him to do well rather than discouraging him; he told himself, "I'm not gonna be one of those students that slack off and fall behind." This came from "kind of self-drive just because he said that and I [didn't] want to be one of those students." He was motivated by a sense of pride to do well: When his first quiz results in his college math class were disappointing, he said to himself, "I know I can do better. . . . My bar is higher than this. . . . I got a C and I was like 'at least get a B!'" Julio told me of his method for persevering through frustration: "[I] back out and then just try and take it one step at a time," he told me. The "severe procrastination" that characterized his work habits in high school is no longer a

possibility now that he is in college: as he explained, “You really don’t wanna dig yourself in a hole here!” When he feels stuck on a writing task, he makes a few notes about what to do in the next paragraph, then takes a break outdoors to clear his head.

In a similar vein, Zach told me of a Winston Churchill quotation he had heard from a drill sergeant in Basic Training which has helped him avoid procrastination: “When you’re going through hell, keep going.” Garret liked to cultivate the appropriate atmosphere for getting the writing done: he told me that he puts on the television for white noise, sets himself up with food, beer, and a cigarette close at hand, and begins to write. “It’s all about having the right mood,” he explained. Referring to his habit of procrastination followed by intense effort as a deadline loomed, he commented, “It takes pressure to make a diamond.”

Perseverance for Dustin, coming from a background of deep poverty, arose from a somewhat different source, his own personal qualities: his pride in his ability to do physical work, and a determination to drive onward toward his goals, whether to make and save money to help support his family by working two or even three jobs, or, later, to enter and complete college in order to become a game warden. This was described to me by two important adults in his life, his teacher advisor, Ron, and a college outreach counselor, David, who had both forged close relationships with Dustin during his high school years, and with whom Dustin gave me permission to speak.

Ron told me more about Dustin’s very difficult family background of violence and abuse, which had left him “really rough around the edges” with “a lot of anger in him” when Ron first met him. One of the issues Ron saw was Dustin’s pride and need

for respect: “If you didn’t respect him, it was a double dose—he didn’t respect himself either.” Ron poured time and love into Dustin, who became “like a son” to Ron. Over a breakfast at a local diner during the December after his high school graduation, when Dustin had just begun thinking of applying to college, the two discussed how Dustin could finance college through grants and loans. Dustin worried about how his mother would support herself if he went to college—he had been supporting his mother and sister by working two steady jobs in addition to doing odd jobs for Ron and others. Once in college, Ron said, Dustin became a “dedicated student” who “focused on the whole process” of working toward his ultimate goal. This was borne out in the portfolio Dustin showed me during our interview—hundreds of pages of carefully organized material presenting his fishery research at a local pond—which he had produced during the previous year in college. Dustin also told me with evident pride that he had excelled in his statistics classes and now served as a tutor in statistics for other students.

Dave told me that Dustin, “despite not having achieved traditional success in school, [was] very disciplined and determined,” commuting to a construction job in a small city over an hour away, then returning for an evening job at a video store. Dave had the sense that Dustin’s determination and discipline had finally “come around to support him academically” in college. Dave told me that Dustin had “an incredible sense of empathy unusual for boys [and was] a really caring guy, very genuine.” Dave remembers Dustin as “one of the most remarkable students I ever worked with.” Dustin “always had a sense of who he was.” Dustin perseveres “because that’s who he is—that’s his core—that’s who he is as a person.”

As the stories above indicate, much of the theory concerning motivation and perseverance developed by Duckworth et al. (2007), Dweck (2008, 2012, and Csikszentmihalyi (1990), and research reported and elaborated on by Pink, is borne out in the experiences of my participants in the current study.

### **Epiphanies, Turning Points, and the Importance of Goals in Sustaining Engagement**

It was a trap I fell into—  
I was smart, gifted, never had to try. . .  
I didn't want to grow up  
Jake

Everything seemed really easy the first year of high school  
And I slacked off. Then the second year  
Hit like a bus.  
Nick

A clear theme emerging from Dustin's story, and from the experiences of a number of other participants as well, is the importance of goals in young men's persistence to college.

For Dustin, the desire to attend college took on sudden clarity six months after his high school graduation, one cold December day on the construction site where he had worked following his high school graduation. Dustin looked around him at the middle-aged men who had worked construction for years and realized that every one of them had bodies that bore the effects of years of hard physical labor: "Bad knees, bad back. . . [they had] just torn up their body." At that moment, Dustin realized that he "would rather do something I love and [not] tear up my body than do something I'm making a lot of money at and I don't like." He loved the outdoors and knew he would need to go to

college in order to pursue a goal of becoming a game warden, a goal he had first imagined his freshman year in high school.

At this point Dustin sought out the advice and support of David, the student assistance counselor who had met with him a number of times during his high school years and had taken him to visit one college in particular that offered courses in his area of interest. But, according to David, that December Dustin himself drove to visit the college he now attends, ascertained that it had a major in his chosen field, Conservation Law, and went through the application process immediately. David was able to help address the financial hurdles Dustin faced by means of a federal scholarship that would follow Dustin through his four years of college. Dustin never looked back. He is now a senior and on track to graduate four years after entering college. Dustin remarked that this change in his life was a 360-degree turn for him; he had been a deeply disengaged, and in fact angry, student during his high school years. Now he is focused on his career goal as a game warden, is excelling at his college studies, and is proud of his many close relationships with professors at his college.

For Jake too, it was the development of a goal, after years of floundering and false starts, that caused earlier failures to eventually turn around into college success. Jake was a first-year student at a private military university when we spoke, but he was almost ten years older than traditional first-year students. He had managed to get by in high school on brains and ability, but by the end of high school his grades were slipping. Jake described a pattern familiar to many frustrated parents and teachers: a “trap I fell into in high school: I was smart, gifted, never had to try . . . got in trouble for not doing

homework, got by doing the minimum, never learned to apply myself.” He entered the state university immediately following high school at his parents’ behest, but his brains and talent did not bring the accustomed success once he entered college. He himself was “not driving it”—he was “not on board.” He skipped classes, slept through a final exam, and was on academic probation by the end of the year. He transferred to a community college, with exactly the same results. He told me, “Obviously I didn’t learn my lesson. . . . I was not ready for college.”

Finally, after he had dropped out of community college and had been living in his parents’ basement for a year, working days at a warehouse, Jake’s parents made it clear that the situation was getting old and would have to change. Jake realized he was “running out of options”; he was approaching age 21 and was about to lose coverage under his father’s health insurance (this was several years before the Affordable Care Act extended parents’ insurance coverage to children up to age 26). A strong military tradition in his family and a lack of other options led him to visit the Navy recruitment office in hopes that he would find his way to “a nice technical job to reward me for being the smart guy that I am.” This panned out: He scored in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile on the ASVAB, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, and was told by the recruiter that he had qualified for “anything we have.” Jake entered training to become a nuclear technician, a field he is currently pursuing in his studies at the private military university he now attends under the GI Bill.

After six years of training on nuclear submarines under military discipline, he now finds himself impatient with the immaturity and poor work ethic of many of his

classmates; his attitude toward academic work is now “Do the job! You don’t have to like it—you signed up for it.” He commented that in his first year out of high school, he “didn’t want to grow up.” Now he realizes that “Life has bills. To pay the bills you need a job. To get a job, you need credentials.” His goal, to become a nuclear engineer in the private sector, gives Jake a reason to meet all academic expectations without complaint and to the best of his ability. Maturity and experience in the military were clearly central to his formulating and pursuing this goal.

Jake’s earlier show of bravado and over-confidence is perfectly in keeping with the findings of Pollack (1998), Newkirk (as cited in Whitmire, 2010) and Younger and Warrington (2005) that boys often convey a sense that they will succeed regardless of their efforts, though this may be a mask to hide uncertainty, in keeping with the Boy Code’s mandates. In fact, when I asked Jake whether this might have been the case for him, he responded in a stage whisper, “Shhh! Don’t tell!”

Zach, a college freshman at a small liberal arts college and currently enrolled in an ROTC program at a nearby university, had a similar experience after returning to high school following a summer Basic Training program after his junior year. In Basic Training, there was no room for immaturity—“everyone was so in line” —but in a high school assembly the following fall, he was disturbed by the immature behavior of students talking over a teacher during an assembly; “it felt so wrong to me,” he said. “Everyone’s still got a little immaturity and unrul[iness], and it was so, it was hard to deal with.” Zach is now enrolled as a Digital Forensics major and feels very motivated by his career goal. Ken Page’s observation (as cited on page one, above) about the danger of



following the frequent advice to “give them the gift of time” is called into question by stories like Zach’s and Jakes’ discussed earlier. Nonetheless, as Whitmire (2010) has discussed at length, there is no assurance that an individual boy’s immaturity will be outgrown in time to avoid derailing his opportunities for future education and career paths.

Several other participants spoke of their goals and how they arose. Paradise, who chose as his pseudonym his tag as a video gamer, developed his goal after a period of chaos in his life. Now a game writing major, this young man came from a family of storytellers: “Everyone in our family just likes to tell stories,” he said, “including me. When we all get together, everybody has a story to tell, and from a young age I fell in love with just like telling stories.” Paradise told me that he was “an awkward kid” who was “picked on” through his childhood; one particularly bruising story involved a snake put into his lunchbox on Bring Your Pet to School Day. Paradise joked with me that this was actually quite fortunate: as a writer, he appreciates his good luck in having had a miserable childhood.

When a major natural disaster hit his city, the family relocated to a nearby state, and his life changed. In his new school, Paradise discovered an enjoyment of writing when his teacher praised a story he had written and asked him to read it to the class. His classmates reacted enthusiastically, and that afternoon the teacher told Paradise’s mother about the success of his story. Paradise recounted this experience with pleasure and pride.

His father nurtured Paradise's love of story: every evening after work, their father would give him and his little brother a choice between reading a book together or playing an old video game, *The Legend of Zelda*, "and I'd go to bed just like with these stories in my head. . . .It was like I experienced escapism really early in life, and that kinda helped me . . . stay through school. If I didn't have that, I think I would have dropped out of school, to be quite honest." When the natural disaster hit and his family lived with another family in temporary housing, his mother brought home the first Harry Potter book. He burned through the first book, asked "Where's the second one?" and started reading voraciously, going through the entire Harry Potter series, then all J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy quest epics (both books and movies) with his father as well. Both the books and the video game, with its quest theme, sustained him in the chaos after the natural disaster.

Paradise realizes now that both the books and the game provided a metaphorical schema for "what makes a strong person." His goals began to develop in high school, where Paradise connected with a group of video gamers who became his social group. Two days before college applications were due, a close friend (now his roommate) urged him to apply to the same school he himself had applied to, where "they have video game stuff and they have a good writing program." Paradise applied, was accepted, and now majors in video game writing. He wants to "help as many people as possible" through the video games he will write.

Ethan, a senior English major and prospective high school English teacher at the time we spoke, also recalled an important turning point during high school. He told me

of a sleepless night when he had picked up a volume of Robert Frost's poetry to read until he fell asleep, but instead of getting sleepy, he "read and read and read, and it didn't put me to sleep, it invigorated me." The next day he talked about the experience with his English teacher, who told him, "You like this too much not to think about studying it." Ethan realized, "That sounds great, actually. I would really love to do that."

The development of a meaningful goal was part of a major life change for Anil—in fact, a life-saving change. Anil is a young man who has lived through some difficult times, including substance abuse, depression, and a near-brush with suicide. Anil came through these experiences with a sense that he would like to someday change the world through his writing. He hopes to "write novels based on opinions that I have of things that should be changed in our society. . . . I mean, I'm not gonna change everything, [I'm only] one little person, but whatever you can do is what you can do."

Nick, a digital forensics major, also wants to do something purposeful, something that connects with people's needs: "I'm a firm believer that work shouldn't be play," he told me; he wants "to leave [college] stable enough to be happy," with a meaningful career that is separate from his hobbies of video gaming and game-creating. Nick had considered majoring in business, then game design, then art and film-making, before settling on digital forensics. "I find the combination of computers and problem-solving fascinating," he told me. Nick told me that he is a "control freak" and added, "I definitely like being kind of the arbiter of making sure nothing goes terribly wrong." He takes the attitude that "something could go wrong at any point, so let's make sure when it does it's less severe." This is an attitude perhaps related to his experience, since early

childhood, of his mother suffering from a dangerous long-term illness that has had an enormous impact on his experience throughout his life. His desire for control meshed with his wish for a stable career in keeping with his skills and interests; digital forensics became that career goal. Nick is a very self-aware first-year student, very thoughtful about how he is conducting his life. Despite his self-described lack of motivation as a student, his sense of his goal has kept him on track to achieve a career he thinks will be satisfying and rewarding.

Garret's love of writing first developed in middle school during a moment he clearly recalls. A senior English major when we spoke, Garret was a writer for a campus alternative paper at his university. He remembered two distinct moments when his interest in writing was sparked: In eighth grade he read his first screenplay and realized that great movies, including epics like *The Lord of the Rings*, "all started out [with writing] on a piece of paper." A second important experience was being assigned a multi-genre research project in high school which could include film reviews; he felt great excitement at the prospect, realizing "Wow! I can write like that!" He suddenly "had the chance to write things I never in a million years thought I could write." Garret later sent me a review he had written for his current film course in which he compared *Blue Velvet* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; clearly, his interests in film and writing, dating back to that early epiphany about writing, continued to intersect.

### **Confidence as Inoculation: Resisting Cultural Messages to Disengage**

My participants were all young men who had persevered to college, and many of them expressed confidence from various sources that seemed essential to their academic

perseverance. Bandura (1977) emphasized the central importance of self-efficacy beliefs in relation to school achievement. Such beliefs, Bandura found, could originate through meeting personal goals, experiencing mastery, overcoming obstacles through perseverance and effort, observing models with whom the student can identify, and structured (scaffolded) experiences that support success with tasks. Efficacy beliefs in turn support greater effort and ultimately higher achievement. Bandura's work has been supported by later research, including Martin's (2003) finding that belief in self boosted boys' motivation and achievement (see also Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Pajares, 2003; Pajares & Valiante, 2006; Zimmerman, 1995). The importance of confidence and self-efficacy beliefs is illustrated in the stories of many of my participants, including Jeff, Paradise, James, Zach, Thomas, Isaac, and Dustin.

For Jeff, the AP English course he took senior year, after working his way up from a remedial class in ninth grade, was a huge challenge: Jeff told me the class "stomped my confidence for a little bit, kicked it around, beat it up, twisted it around inside out, yep." Although the class was "pretty brutal," he liked the teacher and survived to tell the tale. An important bit of feedback from a respected teacher gave him confidence despite the setbacks: "Reading your essay . . . made me think about this." Jeff found it "super-encouraging" that his teacher said Jeff had "made him think." He managed to meet his own expectations, and his confidence returned. For Jeff, grades could be a two-edged sword: when he received a low grade on a paper in his AP class, "I'd like flip it over 'cause I didn't want other people to see it. . . . because I just didn't want them to think I was lesser." He appreciated his teacher's attitude that every piece of

work is unfinished and could always be revised and graded again. This sustained his confidence, and he persevered.

For Paradise, confidence came from a different source: the discovery of athletic as well as writing talent. After an awkward childhood and the upheaval of a natural disaster, Paradise had relocated with his family to a new city. Here he attended a school with a diverse population for the first time, and here his life changed again. He had “always thought I was uncoordinated and I was like clumsy, ‘cause people made fun of me for that. . . and I had a hard time making friends.” But in this new setting, on the first day of fourth grade, he was sitting eating his lunch alone when two older kids urged him to come play football with him. He had no real knowledge of how to play, but they urged him to join the game. To his amazement, he intercepted a pass intended for a much taller boy, then “just froze.” Remembering the moment now with obvious relish, Paradise told me that he ran home and yelled to his mother, “Mom, I can do things!” This discovery of his athletic ability was life-changing, he recalled: “I was like able to go out and make friends, and, I don’t know, I became a much happier individual.”

This was the same year that Paradise discovered he enjoyed writing poetry, when his teacher assigned his class of fourth graders to write a sonnet. Paradise wrote about “being on a train and leaving my friends behind.” He wrote from his own pain; he was “heartbroken” when his family was forced to relocate, “and thought I would try to put as much of that into this [sonnet] . . . as I could, and it was a sonnet by a fourth grader; it was by no means earth-shaking, but. . . my teacher read it and she said, ‘Wow, you’re really good at this’” and asked his permission to share it with other teachers. Later, his

mom “got it framed and put it like on the wall.” Paradise had been thrown into a new setting where he had to remake his life in every way, and there he found new areas of enjoyment and confidence—football and poetry.

Confidence, for some of my participants, came directly from their experience in a high school environment where writing achievement for all students was expected and encouraged. James typifies the middle-class boys Whitmire (2010) spoke of, many of whom fare far better than do boys from a lower socioeconomic background and less supportive school environment. James attended a large high school with an excellent English department, elected to take a course his senior year in the area he felt weakest in: writing. Two teachers in an American Studies program his junior year had guided students, step by step, through a challenging research project which James ultimately found fun and rewarding, though it was a long and frustrating process spanning several months. By the end, everyone in the class felt “pretty proud of their work.” The following year, surrounded by committed writers in his senior year writing class, James and his classmates all accepted the necessity of sharing their work aloud. Despite any reluctance to share his writing now, in his college English class where he is unfamiliar with most students, he willingly shares his work, knowing that this is the way to improve his writing: “Regardless of whether or not I feel comfortable sharing my work, I’m going to anyway, because. . . that’s the only way my writing’s going to get better.” The confidence engendered by an excellent high school experience has stood him in good stead in his college writing efforts.

For Thomas, a moment of new confidence also directly involved a writing experience, which occurred when a friend in his creative writing class, “an amazing poet,” read Thomas’s poem aloud, anonymously, for him, while “Thomas” sat quietly listening to his classmates’ comments. For him, this was “kind of confidence-building because it was like all these people are. . . . [discussing and interpreting my poem], and I was like, ‘Wow, I’m getting people to do this. . . .this is me!’” Thomas grew up in a very small town of around 2000 people and now attends a state university in a small city, where the confidence engendered in high school has spurred him to seek out new people and experiences and to explore ideas with new friends. Reading his poems aloud in his creative writing class helped generate this confidence in his own voice and passions.

Isaac is a young man who has struggled with confidence issues. He told me that he often lacks faith in his ideas, but some things do help: for instance, receiving affirming feedback about his ideas as well as good grades at times when he had no belief in his own work reassured him that perhaps “other people see something in my writing that I myself am not seeing.” Often when he feels he is “just rambling. . . .to complete an assignment,” this sort of positive feedback from teachers and professors helps him believe in the value of his thoughts.

For Dustin, unlike for many of my other participants, confidence came not from academic success but from close relationships with adults and from the admiration they showed for his strong work ethic. He told me with pride of the many times he had done heavy physical work for various adults, including moving wood for his teacher advisor, moving a piano for a school secretary (who then took him out to breakfast, as he recalled



with pleasure), and various jobs now for a number of his college professors. His teacher advisor Ron, as well as his TRIO outreach counselor David, commented to me about Dustin's remarkable work ethic. This was clearly a source of pride and confidence that helped propel Dustin from a childhood of poverty and deprivation into a successful college experience, moving toward a career in a field he loves.

### **Young Men's Writing Selves: Passion, Identity, and Transgressive Humor**

Writing is easy  
when it's a completely unbridled expression  
of me.

Garret

It really makes me want to go like  
change the world,  
but I look around and I go,  
"Oh, I gotta go to dinner before it closes."

Thomas

### **Passion**

Passion was a central theme in my conversation with Thomas. Thomas is deeply motivated to explore his passions—a word that recurred frequently during our conversation. At the time of our interview, "Thomas," a first-year student from a very small town in northern New England, was a student at a state university where he was majoring in Environmental Science. A thoughtful, self-aware young man, "Thomas" wrote to me several months after our conversation to offer thoughts about connections he was seeing between recent events and the book *1984*. The following excerpt gives a sense of his thought process:

Something that's stuck out to me that may be of use to you are the recent events in the news and how they correlate to books I've read. For example, the Colorado thing that happened where the students protested the selective teaching of history that makes America look more favorable. This definitely invokes feelings of *1984*. Another *1984* moment happened for me in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. We were talking about 9/11 and how not too many people knew that the US funded the Taliban before the attack, but how after the attack they were immediately made the enemy. This harkens back to the enemy switching in *1984*.

Thomas is a passionate collector of books, from sources ranging from the "Free to a Good Home" shelf in his university library to garage sales and flea market finds. He visits the Poetry Foundation website frequently, often when he has "research papers and other things I don't want to write." He discovered Sappho's poems, among many others, on this site.

Thomas told me of a current writing project which had renewed the passion he felt he had lost due to the time pressures of college work. In college, he finds himself stimulated by an idea, then suddenly interrupted by the schedule of college life: He will be reading something that moves him, like *Endgame: the Problem of Civilization*, that makes him feel a need for action, when suddenly the demands of his college schedule force an interruption: "It's like so disheartening! And it really makes me want to go like change the world, but I look around and I go, 'Oh, I gotta go to dinner before it closes.'"

The assignment that recently re-ignited his passion was to prepare a literature review on a topic of his choice. Thomas found that with this assignment, he could retrieve the passion and curiosity he had felt in high school, when fewer demands on his time and attention had intruded on the time available to explore topics that captured his interest. With the current assignment, he told me, “I can write and write and write and write,” continuing to work until 1:00 a.m. reading scholarly articles to add to his annotated bibliography. These articles had opened “a whole new realm” to him, and his passion for learning was suddenly back. vHe often moves from one reference to another, taking detours to look up concepts he doesn’t understand, thinking “This is wicked cool!” He told me, “I like knowledge—that’s what gets me going.” He had recently posted an addition to his dorm’s Board of Lost Causes bulletin board: “Writing for me is something you feel.”

Thomas’s advice to his younger self, or to a young boy starting to write, reflects his passion for learning: “The trail doesn’t stop here . . . you can go here, here, here.” “Write what you’re interested [in]—you start writing, and then you want to say something, but you don’t know how to say it, so you look it up, and then you learn what that is, and you learn more about what you write, and that’s like really fulfilling.” He continued, “Definitely read. And. . . try lots of things. Like look around. Explore a little. . . . Don’t waste time and energy on things that aren’t important to you, because they’re important to somebody else.”

Daniel too spoke of the importance of passion, both in the truly passionate teachers who had inspired him as a young student and in the passions he himself pursues.

This theme was apparent in his response to the final question I asked of each participant, a question that often led to responses that got to the heart of each individual's feelings about his writing experiences and the wisdom he had accrued from his perspective as a college student: "If you could somehow give advice to yourself as a younger student, or to another young writer, what would you say?" Daniel responded to this question by urging his younger self, and all young students, to "focus on what . . . you find passionate, [but] know that it's gonna be somewhat of a struggle. . . but stick with what you find passionate." The forms and structures might be "tedious and boring" to learn, but ultimately these will free the young writer to "really thrive." According to Daniel, focusing on that motivating passion is what gets a young writer through the hard work of ultimately crafting a creative and satisfying piece of writing.

### **The Pleasures of Writing: Parody, Transgression, Risk-Taking, and Originality**

[I'm] hairier than  
your average Wookie  
but in an endearing way.  
Garret

Scholars and practitioners have noted the pleasure elementary school boys take in producing transgressive texts of all kinds, exploring themes from the humorous and ribald to the fantastic and violent (Fletcher, 2006; Newkirk, 2003; Thomas, 1997). Newkirk noted that over many centuries, such texts have in fact found places among the classics of literature, from *Beowulf* to *The Canterbury Tales*, from the *Iliad* to Shakespeare. As my participants revealed, this enjoyment of transgressive writing has enormous appeal for older boys and young men as well.

Garret, a senior English major at the time of our conversation, wrote for an alternative campus paper which, he said, “tries to say what everyone’s thinking but. . . in a way that’s so clever [they] could never think of it themselves.” He sent me numerous pieces written for that publication which clearly demonstrated the originality and enjoyment of satire that many of my participants mentioned. Garret told me that writing is easy for him when it is a “completely unbridled expression of me.” He recalled that in ninth grade there were “no papers worth writing,” and “I couldn’t do it.” Now, he said, “I really like words.” He feels excited when he has the freedom to express himself in a way that may be “inappropriate” but perfectly captures his view of reality: In a piece for the alternative paper, he identified himself as “hairier than your average Wookie, but in an endearing way”; the widely read alternative campus paper itself was identified, with elaborate false modesty, as a publication that is completely “marginalized.”

Sinclair, a senior English/philosophy/political science major, was very explicit about the pleasure to be had from writing: “When I write fiction, the interest just sort of comes from just playing with ideas in words on my own, and just getting, sort of learning how to appreciate that, and then when I’m writing something more academic, it sort of comes with the joy of constructing something; when I make an argument and I can follow it through, it feels pretty good, so it’s sort of the satisfaction of creating something.”

Rory, a first-year engineering major, told me of his enjoyment of parody and sent me a paper he had recently written titled “The Eyes in the Trees: The Power of Parody” which illustrated this enjoyment in abundance. In the paper, Rory discussed the use of parody in both a Renaissance statue and a series of 2008 *Saturday Night Live* skits

lamprooning various presidential candidates. His paper showed a vigorous engagement with his chosen topic. Several lines will illustrate the power Rory attributes to this form of humor: “Parody does not discriminate against time. It all depends on how the wielder chooses to use the weapon. Humor equals subconscious persuasion, altering a person’s perceptions of the world without them even realizing it.”

Several participants indicated the great pleasure they found in tricks, pranks, and other transgressive expressions of humor. Nick said, “I definitely have a pretty stubborn habit of always wanting the last laugh in everything.” His questionnaire mentioned his enjoyment of pulling off “tricks and surprises.” Zach told me that his humor “has a lot of attitude in it and a lot of sarcasm,” and at times his peers comment that this might sound “kind of insulting” to a reader; but, although he understands this feedback, he feels that “if that was out, it would kind of totally defeat the purpose of my intention in the paper.” This sense of a transgressive humor being central to their identity was hinted at by a number of my participants. For instance, Paradise described himself as “impish” and “mischievous,” someone who enjoys pranks and “being pranked too.” He described to me, with great relish, a number of the pranks going on in his dorm at the time we spoke.

When four of the first seven young men I interviewed during my pilot study (Disenhaus, 2011) mentioned Kurt Vonnegut as the writer who inspired their interest in writing, I began to sense that something was up. Sinclair, a senior English, philosophy, and political science major, mentioned his discovery of the work of Vonnegut as central to his epiphany about the possibilities of writing: at some point in high school, a friend gave him a Vonnegut book and, as he told me, he “laughed out loud—I didn’t know you

could laugh out loud from reading. I didn't know books were funny." Vonnegut seemed to him "sort of like that funny risky risqué uncle who nudges you and winks and tells you these funny little stories that sort of let you know that literature is like a vessel for interesting things." He was shocked to realize that "people can get away with writing this thing? And people read it?" This was the moment Sinclair "started appreciating the possibilities" of reading and writing.

Ethan, also a senior English major and a prospective English teacher, told me of the great pleasure he had found in creating a Kurt Vonnegut exhibit for a Museum Project in high school, featuring Vonnegut "sitting on top of a giant pack of cigarettes." After years of not liking his English classes, Ethan had encountered Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* and realized, "Okay, writing's kinda cool. I'd like to be able to try that." He "wanted to be able to replicate that or try to create my own stuff."

Jeff, a relaxed, cheerful young man with a ready laugh, told me, "I really like authors like Kurt Vonnegut because it takes effort to appreciate how powerful it is." He, like a number of other participants, enjoyed Vonnegut's "dry sense of humor." Jeff is, according to many friends, he told me, a "good storyteller" and likes to laugh at himself. In Vonnegut, he sensed a kindred voice. Jeff's college essay was, he felt, "hilarious" as he recounted many incidents when he had simply not become angry when others might explode in frustration. His sense of humor is a leavening element in Jeff's character, and Vonnegut's dry humor resonated with his own sense of his identity. For Jeff, as for many of my other participants, the discovery of a voice whose ironic humor and wit matched their own was an important incentive to pursue their own writing, in their own voices.

### **Other Individual Factors Affecting Young Men as Writers: Learning Disabilities, Physical Problems, and Psychological Issues**

Several of my participants told me of specific writing issues that had played a major role throughout their writing experiences over many years, ranging from physical pain and handwriting challenges to writing anxiety and difficulty thinking in words. Awareness of such issues can give educators a valuable key to assisting students who appear to resist writing.

Because Paradise has had to deal with a stutter throughout his life, he told me, he likes writing better than speaking; as he pointed out, “My brain doesn’t stutter, my mouth does.” (During our two-hour conversation, I was never aware of this stutter; Paradise told me that he has learned to pace his speaking and plan his words so that he can formulate a smooth utterance.) He also suffers from a painful physical disability involving his hand which made his handwriting “really bad.” During lengthy writing assignments, he would “feel feverish” and desperate to complete the writing, not caring about editing, spelling—just wanting to finish and to stop writing. He would need to run his hand under cold water for hours after a lengthy writing session. Using a computer for writing—which he began to do only when he was finally diagnosed with dysgraphia at age 17—made an enormous difference. He told me that if he had had to handwrite his college application essay, “I would not be here right now. I would not have gotten a scholarship, I would not have been able to come here.” He noted the irony of being “a writer who can’t write.” Paradise also has ADHD and has developed a variety of ingenious organizational systems



to help him keep his materials and ideas organized and stay on top of commitments and schedules.

Isaac, who is majoring in film-making, told me that, ironically, he's "not the best at analyzing films." This is because he thinks in pictures, not words. For him, wrapping language around his thoughts is a difficult and painstaking process: "I don't think in words, I think in pictures and really abstract ideas. . . . It takes me quite a while to put words to certain ideas. . . . That's one of the reasons I try to avoid complex topics, because when I think about complex topics, I don't think about them in words, I think almost exclusively in visuals." Noting the truism that a picture is worth a thousand words, he continued, "I usually see what . . . all those words represent at once. I don't see all of the words at once, but what they mean." Because of this, he said, "I tend to have more confidence in what I'm going to say than what I'm saying." At another point in our conversation, he told me "I might be as bold as to say that nothing gives me confidence"—nothing external tends to help, not even when a teacher offers an advance list of items to be ready to write about on an exam; this does not help because "I know the material that I'm going to be writing about, but not in the words that I can communicate in—translating that thought into words." Isaac is well aware of what he needs in order to convert his mental pictures into words: He joked that what really helps him is "a healthy dose of sleep deprivation," but a quiet environment and sufficient time are crucial. Going over his thoughts aloud with a supportive teacher when he was "in a panic" was also helpful as he struggled to put his thinking into the form of an essay.

Isaac has at times worked with MindMaps (a sophisticated graphic tool for organizing thoughts in complex relationships to one another), though when this approach was insisted upon by an elementary school teacher, he resisted: As he told me, “I don’t like having things forced upon me.” Currently, however, he finds this approach helpful, because “some ideas are just not meant to be presented in a linear fashion.” He has “started liking MindMaps and more graphical ways of organizing information” and thinks that, for some of his projects, “I would’ve been better off if I could have presented them as MindMaps and not an essay.”

Isaac has also, like Paradise, suffered from physical issues that have made writing difficult for him. The pain he feels in his wrist when writing springs from the muscles in his back being “too tight,” so that “whenever I tried to grip a pencil or do an excessive amount of typing, my wrist starts to ache a lot. So that kind of discourages me from writing long passages, sometimes even writing at all.” He told me that, after a long and frustrating diagnostic process, a new form of physical therapy helped, but he has not continued the exercises on his own due to “the lack of instant gratification” and the time the exercises require. His pain has “become sort of a problem again,” partly due to stress, because “the muscle thing is a stress issue.”

Isaac has worked at times with voice recognition software, but he found the latter extremely frustrating, although sometimes “really fun to fool around with: I mean it’s cool saying ‘full stop, scratch that,’ it’s really cool and sometimes things did work pretty fluidly, but every once in a while it would have this like spasm of not, it . . . just didn’t want to recognize anything that you said. . . .” He speculated that if he had the time, he

might try to follow a friend's lead and reprogram the software to better meet his own needs.

Finally, Isaac has at times suffered from psychological barriers to writing. He told me that during what he called the most horrible year of his life, a period of "psychological disarray," one particular teacher was "very personal," encouraged "deep thoughts," and at one point assigned him the only detention he had ever had, as a way to keep him after school so she could help him produce the writing he needed to do. The fact that this teacher had built a "really tight-knit class" also helped him through this terrible time. Isaac told me that he is deeply grateful for the support of this skilled and caring teacher, the best he has ever had.

Dustin, unique among my participants, identified his greatest writing issue as his handwriting—and in fact, although he had been my student five years before our chance encounter and subsequent interview, his handwriting came immediately to my mind when we met, as though I had read one of his papers just the night before. When I asked Dustin what advice he would give to his younger self, he responded in a way notably different from any other participant: "I would go back to elementary school and I would first of all try to stay in the same elementary school [he had changed schools six times during his elementary years]. . . and y'know those exercises where you have the dotted lines? You have the big lines and then the dotted lines and you'd do a lower-case 'D' and then upper-case 'D'? I'd go back and take my time on that and learn that, and then take my time on . . . developing my spelling . . . ." He explained that unless he writes very slowly, he will include random capital letters within words. Now, writing all his work on

a computer, he “can type a lot . . . I can sit there in one sitting and just knock out a ten-page paper. . . .I can just get that done and crank that out easily.” Dustin still struggles with issues of grammar and mechanics, but for most of his written work in college, his computer’s word processing tools have freed him to produce the writing his program requires.

### **The Importance of Supportive Teachers and Classroom Communities**

Some findings of my study, for instance the central importance of caring and respected teachers in the school lives of boys and young men, have been well documented in the literature (Pollack, 1998; Potter et al., 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In fact, the importance of particular teachers was mentioned by nearly every one of my participants. Teachers from as early as middle school were remembered with gratitude and appreciation in connection with a wide range of writing activities, from mastering structures that helped Daniel learn to write an essay or Paradise to write a sonnet or sestina, to imaginative activities like those that set Nick and Zach free to imagine and create. Further, as many studies have found, teacher gender had no bearing on my participants’ stories of favorite teachers who had had an impact on them and were spoken of with fondness and respect (Alloway, 2007; Martin, 2003; Martin & Marsh, 2005; Matthews, 1998; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2009). In addition to caring teachers, many participants alluded to the importance to them of supportive classroom communities (e.g., Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2006, 2009; Potter et al., 2001). The importance of caring teachers and supportive classroom communities was such a

constant finding that I will elaborate on it a bit here in order to convey my participants' experiences in their own voices.

Shernoff et al. (2003) noted that much research indicates the crucial role played by students' sense of "involvement and participation. . . , commitment and belongingness" in furthering their likelihood of successful school completion (p. 159). In my own data, the importance of a supportive classroom community came up again and again in participants' comments about their experiences with writing. Daniel told me that a class in which "everyone together is trying to work to make it a better place. . . is really powerful and strong" and creates "a universal comfortability" because "there's gonna be some problems and distress and unexpected things, but in the end we're all trying to help each other. And [there's] a sense that . . . if one person falls, another person's there to lift them up, and if you fall then they're there for you." For Julio, it was tremendously motivating to have his English professor lead the whole class in a discussion of how to strengthen individuals' thesis statements: "It's the whole group and a group effort to help bring your thesis to a stronger point," he told me. Jeff described his wonderful AP English class senior year, where the classroom became a site for conversation about books and ideas, a collaborative community where "we just talked a lot" and ideas were stimulated, shared, and built upon; for Peter, "that was just brilliant."

Nick mentioned several times that he has been disappointed to find that very little of the work of writing in college happens in the classroom. In high school, he found that being surrounded by classmates all at work on the same task—for instance seeking sources for a research paper topic—made him able to focus and get the work done;

college has been a “slap in the face” in this regard: “Casually looking for stuff on your own time . . . doesn’t give you the same feeling of being in a classroom, [where] everyone’s looking for topics” and competing with one another to locate good material for their topic, then shouting out their finds, which Nick said gave him a “jumping-off point” and “got the juices flowing, . . . [got] the floodgates open.” Lacking this very social classroom experience now, as he begins a research project, he finds he is more likely to procrastinate. He appreciates a class in which the teacher has taken the time to build a sense of trust and community, not through the typical ice-breakers that result only in learning names, but by means of solving a problem of some kind together. Nick’s comments are in keeping with the findings of Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2006, 2009) and others (e.g., Potter et al., 2001) on the centrality of the social aspects of the writing experience.

Almost every participant spoke of at least one particular teacher who had been a major influence on his engagement in writing and in school in general. Nick spoke of a teacher who had become a friend, whose classroom became an after-school gathering place for a group of students: “It was nice to have somebody that you knew knew more than you but you were okay with that. . . . There’s a lot of teachers nowadays that I feel like— especially my Government teacher who wrote the textbook he was using for class—where they’re so rejecting to any other idea that [it] completely dissuades anyone from chiming in, and then you get the classes of totally silent people.”

Daniel spoke of wanting to explicitly thank particular teachers, to show his appreciation for their passion and their efforts. He added that sometimes “just doing

well. . . for the teacher can make not only yourself feel good but makes you feel good that they feel that they did something for the students and that they taught us something and made an effort and changed things.” Clearly, such teachers were an important part of the motivation that my participants felt for writing—and the motivation that had led them to volunteer to participate in my study.

My participants had no difficulty distinguishing passionate and caring teachers from those who were just serving time and were not engaged with their students or their subject. Julio contrasted his current English professor, who “obviously cares about us as students” and makes himself constantly available to help or answer questions, with another professor he had had last semester who explicitly told the class that their evaluations of her did not matter, because she could not be fired by the university: “Some of these professor have. . . tenure already, y’know, obviously they don’t care” because they are in no danger of being fired. This perception was echoed by a number of other participants as well. Anil commented, in similar terms, that he likes teachers who “aren’t in it just for the money, they’re in it for the joy of helping a student.” These young men clearly distinguished between the excellent, caring teachers who had mentored and supported them and those who appeared to be disengaged, uninterested, just punching a time clock and drawing a paycheck.

### **Conclusions: The Complex Web of Factors in Boys’ and Young Men’s**

#### **Writing Experiences**

As I experimented with various ways of presenting my findings—and began to see the multiple and complex ways each topic related to and interconnected with others—

I realized that the whole subject of young men's writing experiences has so many moving parts that if I tried to do a MindMap of it, my diagram would look like an octopus with 100 tentacles that all connect to one another in a nearly infinite number of ways. I am certain that my readers can readily imagine many different ways these topics could be discussed in relation to one another; for example, should passion be discussed as part of creativity, or, as I have chosen to do, as a part of young men's identity as writers? To offer one more example, there are obvious connections between creativity and flow, but also between creativity and transgressive humor in terms of young men's writing selves.

I ended this discussion of my findings with young men's comments on an aspect of writing that has struck me as being of great importance in my own writing classrooms over many years: the social nature of the writing activity, which can be a pleasurable transaction between and among people in a community context. For me, this resonates with my memories of writing classes I have taught over the years, the words of the young men I have spoken with over many months for this project, and the interactions I see among the students in my writing classroom right now. For both young men and young women, this aspect of the writing act has abiding importance for those of us who hope to engage all students in the pleasures and challenges of writing. This social aspect of the writing act is one all educators can foster. And we can also foster conditions and attitudes to encourage the personally meaningful and rewarding literacies our students engage in outside the view of parents, teachers, and even peers—all boys, all girls, all literacies.



**CHAPTER V:**  
**CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PEDAGOGY,**  
**AND THE NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Understanding proceeds through a constant movement between data and ideas.  
(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 153)

Analysis is never complete. There are always more ideas and more lines of inquiry open to us than we can ever hope to exhaust.  
(Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 146)

Authentic research begins with yourself, when you ask questions and look for answers. In looking, you pose more questions. . . It's not easy, but it's sometimes fun. And always you are present, the guiding curiosity and controlling intelligence, trying to find something out.  
(Toby Fulwiler (2002, p. 61)

I think best with a pencil in my hand.  
(Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1978, p. 9)

This project began for me a number of years ago, when my son was on the cusp between elementary school and middle school. That year, as I attended the high school graduation ceremony at the school where I had taught for years, I noticed that among the rows of gowned graduates, the gold sashes indicating honors students were draped around the necks of 20 girls—and only 3 boys. I felt a sudden fear: Would my son find here a peer group of academically engaged young boys? If he did not, what would that mean for his experience of schooling in the coming years? And how had this happened?

As a high school English teacher, I had always taught the full range of courses, from those designed for struggling readers and writers to the most advance level literature and writing classes. Course selection occurred through a process of advising, teacher recommendations, and individual student choices, but the result often looked like

tracking. Struggling readers and writers were grouped together in classes that were largely populated by boys. My AP literature class was largely populated by girls. My advanced writing class, however, had an even mix of genders, with an atmosphere that was busy, productive, and lots of fun. I observed, I reflected, I adjusted—and I began reading about boys.

As I embarked on my doctoral program, these experiences gave rise to my research focus throughout the following years: I wanted to understand the cultural forces at play in my classroom and school. My dissertation research allowed me to pursue the questions that had been in my mind for years: What do boys and young men experience as writing students? What do they think of themselves as writers? How do parents, teachers, peers, and the culture of boyhood expectations affect boys' and young men's attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of writing? These became the research questions that guided the present study.

I began this study with a consideration of the broad context of my questions: the continuing problem of boys' low literacy achievement, as measured by assessments at the state, national, and international levels. It quickly became evident that, while the reality of the gender achievement gap, especially in writing, was not in dispute, nearly everything else was: its causes, its consequences, its proposed solutions. Competing discourses—popular, professional, and scholarly—viewed the issue in widely differing, often mutually exclusive, ways; and the professional discourse, read by education leaders and policy-makers, seemed far more attuned to popular pronouncements than to scholarly research. Stakeholders like parents were, of course, far more aware of, and responsive to,

the public discourse, which tended to be vehement, extreme, and often unsupported by evidence. These facts gave rise to my own study's focus, as indicated in the research questions reviewed above. I wanted to gain a nuanced understanding of the writing experiences of boys and young men, including influences of family, school, and peers, in order to better understand the conditions that have led to the low proficiency levels revealed in writing assessments. I chose to speak with young men in college, both first-year and senior-year students, to gain their perspective looking backward over their earlier school years in light of their current college experiences.

Over the many months of collecting, transcribing, coding, and studying my data, I have felt the presence of the faces, voices, and personalities of the young men who have shared their experiences with me and deepened my understanding of young men as writers. From the very first interviews in my pilot project, as a novice qualitative researcher, I learned from these young men that serendipity and surprise were likely to be hallmarks of this process, and that I needed to stay open and enjoy where the ride took me. My very last interview, which filled in an important and worrisome gap in my understanding of the experiences of low-SES boys and young men, came about through a serendipitous encounter, on the day following the last day of the semester I had set myself as the deadline for completing my interviews, with a former student of mine during a chance visit to the high school where I had taught and where he had been a student five years earlier. This student's background of deep poverty and school disengagement, lack of cultural capital and middle-class habitus (Bourdieu, 1988), made it seem nearly miraculous to me that at the time of our chance meeting, four and a half

years after his high school graduation, he was now entering his senior year in college.

This interview, for me, was the capstone of my research.

I knew my data would not be representative, in the sense of quantitative studies drawing on representative samples of large populations, coming as it did from 23 young men who had persevered through high school to enter college in two New England states. My participants varied widely in family and geographic background, in prior and current educational experiences, and in age, ranging from 18-year-olds to a 30-year-old student returning to school after military service, from first-year students to college seniors; but all were “survivors,” whose experiences and backgrounds had in some way, through some conjunction of forces and effects, led them to reach this educational milestone.

But although this group of young men did not in any sense represent all young men, I hoped my conversations with them would prove highly evocative of ideas and possibilities that might illuminate the writing experiences of many other boys and young men who may or may not have persevered to college. I sought to uncover the nuances of these experiences that only qualitative research can approach.

This proved to be the case. Qualitative researchers, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) remarked, tend not to view “our local research settings as being ‘representative’ or ‘typical’ of known populations of social worlds” (p. 163). However, they continued, our local data can lead us to theoretical ideas about these social worlds and their processes. I now turn to the process of generalizing from my data, interpreting their meaning, and suggesting new possibilities, new grounded theory that arises from my participants’ lived experience of their writing lives.

As I reviewed the literature, it became apparent that while there had been provocative qualitative studies of young men in the U.K., Australia, and Canada, and of younger students in the U.S., there was a dearth of U.S. studies using qualitative methods to explore the experiences of young college men as they recalled their earlier years of schooling. My study contributes to filling in that missing piece.

Many of my findings confirm and extend the findings of other studies in other settings. My data confirmed the importance of a number of factors described in the literature: caring teachers and supportive classroom communities, the crucial role played by autonomy and creativity in writing engagement, and the role of self-efficacy beliefs in motivation and perseverance.

Other findings either extended or added a new dimension to previous research involving younger students or those in other countries and cultures. The importance of transgressive humor, choice, personal voice, and identity come through clearly in the words of my participants in this study. The crucial importance of like-minded peers was also a repeated theme which extends our sense of how not only caring adults but also peers can affect young men as writers and students. The existence of multiple forms of literacy in writing activities outside the context of school was widespread in my data, as it is in the scholarly literature on boys and writing.

But some of my findings offer an important challenge to widely held, and widely disseminated, beliefs about boys and writing—beliefs which can have destructive effects when implemented in pedagogy and policy. Contrary to the unsupported truisms that drive much policy and practice, boys are not a homogeneous group, all experiencing

masculinity in one heteronormative form. Although many do enact and perform that one socially sanctioned version of masculinity, many other boys and young men find themselves imprisoned within its dictates. My findings reveal the fallacy of such generalizations as “boys don’t like to write about personal feelings,” “boys don’t like poetry,” “boys prefer nonfiction,” “boys prefer structure over creativity.” My participants included many “black swans” who repeatedly disconfirmed these misguided stereotypes.

Further, as I listened to my participants, then pored over the transcripts of our conversations, I felt again the rightness of Smith and Wilhelm’s (2009) suggestion that gender might not be a useful lens through which to view the questions surrounding boys, schooling, and writing in particular. My participants varied greatly as individuals, and many of their experiences and preferences might equally apply to young women. The “tips for teachers” approaches which suggest everything from boys-only bookshelves to boys-only classrooms and schools are potentially damaging in reproducing the binary gender order at the root of much of the problem of boys’ under-achievement in writing; and policy that does not account for the “Which boys?” question will tend to miss the needs of many low-achieving boys and girls as well, while directing resources to boys who really are doing very well, despite the imagined “war against boys.”

As my findings revealed, the effects of gender constructions and stereotypes on my participants were neither uniform nor even universally apparent. Many of my participants from excellent high school backgrounds were not aware of gender stereotypes concerning them as writers (though of course Marshal McLuhan’s

observation that fish are not likely to be aware of water is relevant). Yet those who did speak of their experiences with gender stereotypes in their school contexts revealed a clear understanding of the effects these stereotypes had on them and their peers: teachers who assumed boys would not match girls in the range of writing skills, teachers who blatantly dismissed and devalued boys' participation in their classroom, and peers committed to performing a resistant masculinity that made literacy achievement problematic at best. Visible or not, the workings of social constructions of gender are still affecting the boys (and the girls) in our classrooms.

Critical literacy approaches can help. Approaches which make the invisible workings of culture visible to students can help all young men become aware of the gender constructions that may affect their attitudes and their ways of "doing boy." Further research is needed into practices that have proved, or may prove, successful in achieving this goal. There is great potential for teachers and schools to support all students in a creative, fulfilling process of shaping their own writing selves, free of the constraint of limiting cultural strictures, dissolving those boundaries that boys learn over many years to constantly self-police. Research into the writing experiences of low-SES boys in particular can add to our understanding of how to address the conditions that contribute to their low writing achievement.

Flawed conceptions of the writing experiences of boys and young men can only lead to flawed solutions to the achievement gap in literacy. The tendency to generalize characteristics of boys in the aggregate can do great harm to boys as individuals, serving to reproduce damaging social constructions of masculinity. Generalizations create

blindness: If we view achievement gaps, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender, or other factors, as representing “natural” capacities of students—as Laurence Summers, then president of Harvard University, famously did in a 2005 comment attributing women’s under-representation on science faculties to “innate” differences between men and women (Hemel, 2005)— we will miss the heartening lesson offered by the closing of the math achievement gap between boys and girls indicated by recent state and national test results (Cavanagh, 2008; Robelen, 2010). A more nuanced understanding of the literacy experiences of boys and young men can help educators and policy-makers as we strive to improve writing achievement for all boys—and for all girls as well.

The gender gap in writing is real, and the implications of low writing proficiency for many boys’ future paths to college and career are significant. We cannot hold fast to familiar models as we attempt to address these realities. As Rowan et al. (2002) argued, “Schools and literacy classrooms have produced and reproduced narrow and limiting understandings about what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl. This has had real—and *really* dangerous—consequences for our kids, our societies, ourselves” (p. 6). Further, they argue,

We cannot afford to focus exclusively on the needs of boys *or* girls. We cannot afford to get caught up in arguments which claim that all girls’ problems have been fixed or others which insist women are now actually privileged over men. But nor can we afford to cling stubbornly to the belief that all boys experience the rewards of patriarchy in the same way. (p. 26)



Equity demands that we address, in particular, the poor writing achievement of boys of low socioeconomic status. My study explored the gaps between what we know, what we think we know, and what we have yet to learn regarding boys and writing, through qualitative research into the writing experiences of young men now in college, in order to surface new insights to inform education policy and practice, to invite all students to experience the pleasure and power of writing as a crucial means to explore their thoughts, their learning, and themselves.

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## Appendix A

### Vermont Department of Education 2012 NECAP Score Report:

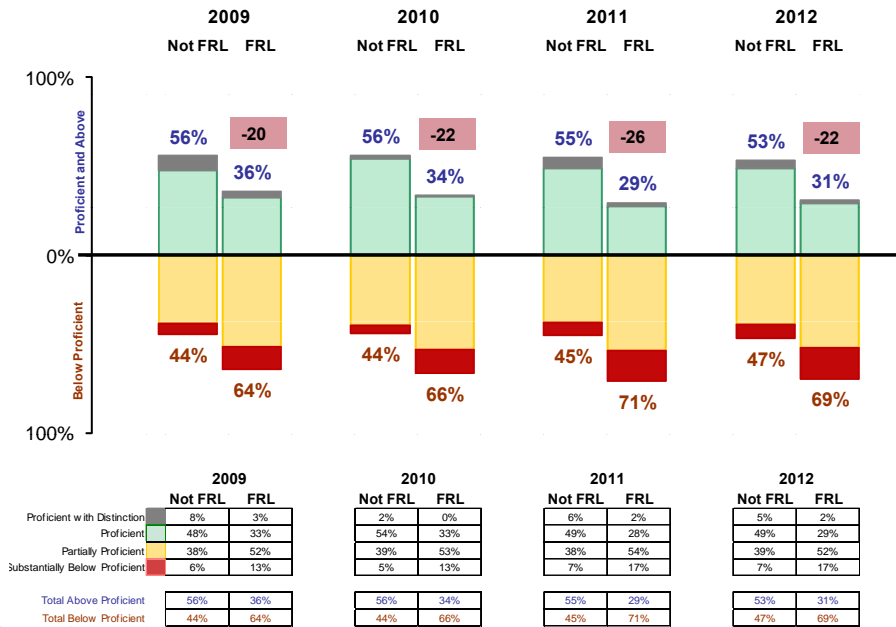
#### SES and Writing Achievement;

#### SES + Gender and Writing Achievement

### 2012 NECAP Writing Results for Grade 11:

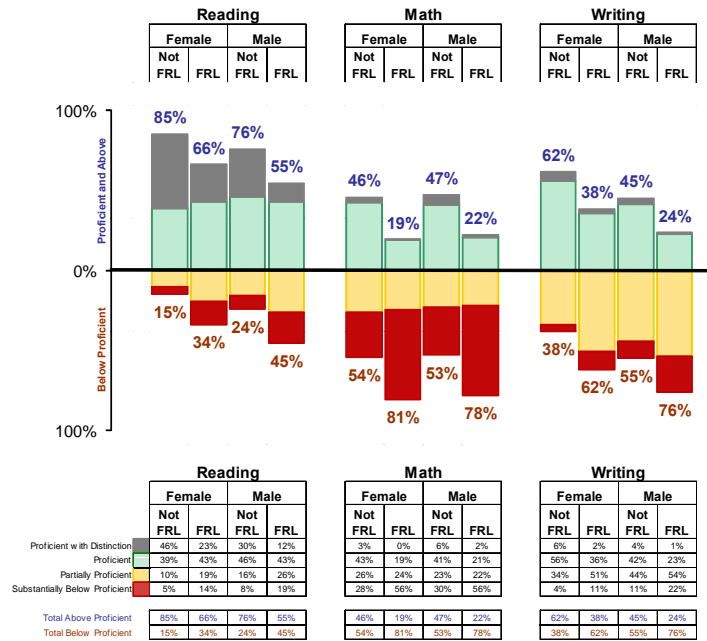
#### Socio-Economic Status Comparisons

*Are there differences in achievement related to family income? Are the gaps closing?*



## 2012 NECAP Results for Grade 11: Comparison by Socio-Economic Status and Gender

*Are there differences in achievement of male and female students related to family income?*



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Appendix B  
IRB Informed Consent/Information Sheet for Participants

**Research Information and Informed Consent**

**“Boys, Writing, and the Literacy Gender Gap:  
What We Know, What We Think We Know”**

**Nancy Disenhaus, College of Education and Social Service, University of Vermont**

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn about boys’ and young men’s experience as writers, both in and out of school. This research is being done as part of my dissertation project as a doctoral student at the University of Vermont. You are being asked to participate because your ideas and feelings about your writing experiences may help me to better understand how boys and young men develop their attitudes about writing and come to see themselves as writers.

Completion of the in-class survey indicates your permission for me to use the information as part of my research. Only a subset of students who agree to provide contact information will be contacted for future interviews.

Participation in the interview portion of this study will involve one interview, in a location on your campus, which will probably last for about an hour. You will be asked to provide your e-mail address in order to schedule our interview. You may be asked to arrange for a second meeting in order to clarify for me or extend what you have shared in our interview. You will also be asked to share any pieces of your own writing that you choose, including any pieces for either academic or non-school purposes. This is not a requirement of your participation in the study and is completely up to you. (If you would like feedback on any writing you’ve shared, I would be glad to do this.)

**How the study sites and participants were selected:**

Participants in this study will be men in first-year writing classes who can share their writing experiences both within and outside of school settings, from their earlier years through their current college setting. Participants will include students from several institutions of higher education in Vermont.

**Confidentiality of participants and sites:**

In any written reports, the names of study sites and their locations, as well as names of individual participants, will be changed. Only members of the research team (which consists of me, Nancy Disenhaus, and my dissertation committee) will know that you personally are participating in this study. Your information will be identified using a pseudonym (fake name); if you would like, you may choose the name by which you’ll be identified.

**Request to record observations and words (written notes + voice recording):**



Notes will be taken during the interview. If you agree, the interview session will be recorded to ensure an accurate transcript of your comments. All research information will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home office for security. After the study and written reports have been completed, the recordings will be destroyed.

The results of this study will be published as a dissertation (stored at the University of Vermont) and as one or more journal articles which may be read by teachers, professors, educational leaders, and other interested persons concerned with helping boys and young men succeed as writers.

**Possible benefits as well as risks to the participant:**

The potential benefits to you of doing this study involve the opportunity to examine and better understand your own writing experiences and the ways those experiences affect your present attitudes and feelings about writing, both within your academic program and for your personal purposes. You may find that this introspection increases your own awareness and insights concerning yourself as a writer. In addition, your participation in this study will help me and others to better understand how to help boys and young men have positive experiences with writing that will serve them well.

There is a very slight risk that the interview process might make you uncomfortable as you recall some of your experiences. At all times during the interview, please know that you are free to decide what to discuss and to change the conversation's direction as needed. In addition, you are free to end the interview or withdraw your participation at any time.

Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers to any questions or topics that arise during our interview. The goal is to understand your actual feelings and experiences about writing; if I ask you to explain a comment you've made, it will be to help me to better understand what has been said. You are the expert about your writing experiences, past and present. Whatever you share will be helpful and valid.

**Contact Information:**

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact the investigator in charge of this study, Nancy Disenhaus, at the following phone number: (802) 229-4320. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you should contact Nancy Stalnaker, Director of the Research Protections Office, at the University of Vermont at (802) 656-5040.

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

### Interview Protocol

“Boys, Writing, and the Literacy Gender Gap: What We Know, What We Think We Know”: October 2014 interviews

These will be general topics of conversation I will raise during my interviews with students; I will likely revise some of them when talking with the students, and other questions might suggest themselves during the interviews or as a result of responses to the classroom questionnaire.

Start by asking about the individual’s questionnaire responses!

- What makes writing easy (or easier) for you?
- What makes writing more difficult?
- Can you tell me about particular times you found writing something easy? Difficult? Satisfying? Frustrating?
  - What do you usually do if a piece of writing is difficult or frustrating for you?
- What are some of the most satisfying writing experiences you had in high school, middle school, or even in elementary school?
- What were the most satisfying pieces you wrote during your earlier school years, either within or outside of school?
  - What made these experiences and pieces of writing satisfying or enjoyable?
- What college writing experiences have been most satisfying or most challenging for you, and why?
  - Have instructors, tutors, or friends/classmates been helpful with your college writing assignments?
  - In what ways can instructors’ writing assignments be helpful, or be difficult, for you?

- How have friends and classmates been important, in either positive or negative ways, to your experience of writing? Has that been different in earlier school years than now?
- Was gender ever a factor in your interactions with peers concerning writing, either within or outside of school? Did you perceive writing as being a particular strength or interest of students of one particular gender as you were growing up? Have you ever felt that your gender influenced how you felt as a writer or as a student being asked to write in a class?
- Did you perceive writing as being a particular strength or interest of students of one particular gender as you were growing up? Were there any attitudes about writing related to gender that you recall from any in-school or outside of school settings?
  - Have you ever felt or heard from others that certain types of writing were more suited to, came more easily to, or were approved of or valued by either boys or girls?
- What teaching methods did your English teachers or other classroom teachers use to help you develop as a writer before you got to college?
  - Which methods actually helped you and have proved useful to you now?
- What approaches by college instructors, whether in English or other classes, have helped you write well?
  - Which teachers other than English teachers have helped you improve as a writer?
- What's your sense of what really helps you improve as a writer?
- Did various types of writing seem to you to come more easily to some students than others? Can you tell me about that?
- Did family attitudes or responses have any effect on your writing, either in the past or at present?
- What conditions make you feel confident about a writing task?

- When you feel confident, do you generally find you do produce your best work, or not?
- Have you ever felt you were over-confident about a writing task or other assignment?
- What was the outcome, and how did this affect your later attitudes toward that type of task?
- Can you tell me about a time when you succeeded at a writing task? How did that affect your work on later writing or other academic tasks?
- When you feel anxiety about a writing task you're working on, how does this affect your motivation or persistence with that task?
- What factors do you think have affected your perseverance with writing or other academic tasks?
- How do the teaching approaches of teachers in your earlier school years compare with the writing instruction approaches you've experienced in your college classes?
- Did you feel somewhat prepared, not at all prepared, or very prepared for the writing assignments you are now encountering in your college classes?
- How do you feel the writing expectations in your college courses so far compare with those in your high school courses?
- What about the level and type of writing support or assistance available now, as compared to earlier in your school years?
- Have you taken advantage of support available, whether at your campus Writing or Learning Center, from your professor during office hours, or elsewhere? Why or why not?
- Do your professors in other courses assign writing?
  - What courses, and what types of writing assignments?
  - What expectations do they seem to have?

- How detailed are their written assignments, in terms of giving you a sense of guidelines and expectations for the assigned writing?
- Are you offered models or sample papers to indicate what it looks like when a student does that particular assignment well, or an exemplary level of performance on written assignments?
- If so, have these helped you understand and do better on the assignment?
- How can an instructor best respond to your writing in order to help you do better or improve a piece of writing you are working on?
  - What types of response or feedback, in any form, have you had from various instructors, both in English classes and in other classes, to pieces of writing?
  - How does this compare to how your high school teachers responded to writing?
- In your English or other classes, do you generally get a chance to revise early drafts, with feedback from instructors?
  - If so, how does this work for you?
- How does being graded on a piece of writing affect your writing attitudes and ultimate success?
- Have you ever experienced peer writing groups—meeting face to face with classmates to get help with and response to a draft you’re working on?
  - If so, how has this worked for you?
- Have instructors had you respond online to classmates’ drafts?
  - If so, how do you feel this has worked for you?
- How have any digital technologies affected how you write (anything from simply using your computer and Microsoft Word or another word processing program to write and revise, to Google Docs for sharing writing, to search engines, to multimedia software like PhotoStory, or any other tech approaches like voice recognition software)?

- Can you tell me about a particular instance?
- What effect do you feel your learning in writing classes has had, or may have, on your learning or writing in other courses?
- Do your professors in classes outside of writing classes use “writing to learn” activities (e.g. journals, in-class quick-writes, two-column notes, written Q&A exchanges with other students about a topic under study, etc.) that ask you to process ideas informally in writing to help your understanding of course content?
  - Was this type of approach used in your high school classes to help students learn or process new information or concepts? If so, how has this worked for you?
  - Do you now use writing in any way to help yourself learn new material on your own?
- How would you describe your attitude when you look over a syllabus and find writing assignments listed?
  - Does this vary by course and type of writing? Are there some types of writing assignments you welcome and others you dread?
- What have I not asked you that you could tell me about your writing experiences or attitudes?
- If you could go back and give some advice to your younger self, or to any younger boy, about writing in school, what would it be?
  - What experiences have you had that would lead you to give this advice?
- If you could give one piece of advice to a writing teacher to help boys and young men enjoy and succeed with writing, what would that be?

## Appendix D Classroom Questionnaire

### Questionnaire: Introduce Yourself as a Writer

I am asking you to complete this survey in order to help me to better understand the nature of your writing experiences and to select interview participants for a study of boys' and young men's writing experiences. The interviews I conduct will explore these writing experiences in much more detail. You must be 18 years of age or older in order to participate in this study (including completing this questionnaire). The questionnaire data may be used in written products of my study, with no personally identifying information, and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Although my study concerns the writing experiences of boys and young men in particular, I am very interested in learning more about girls' and young women's writing experiences as well. Your responses to this questionnaire will be very useful to me as I think about ways that male and female writing experiences may differ.

If you are willing to be a possible interview participant, please include your name and e-mail contact information so that I can be in touch to arrange our interview. I will be interviewing only a limited number of participants from each site, due to limitations of time. More detailed information about the interview process is found on the Research Information and Consent handout you've been given.

Thanks so much for your willingness to participate in my study, by means of this questionnaire and/or in the interview process.

Name and e-mail contact information (optional, but necessary if you are willing to be an interview participant):

Name:

e-mail:

How do you feel about writing right now? How do you see yourself as a writer?

Do you feel there are personal, individual factors that have affected you as a writer/writing student? What factors come to mind?

What piece of your past writing did you find most satisfying? Most frustrating? Why?

Is there a type of writing you most enjoy? Most dread?

What do you recall about your previous writing instruction during earlier school years? What was most/least helpful to you?

Did/do you enjoy out-of-school writing of any kind, such as song-writing, journals, blogs, social media posts, or other types of writing? (Please give me a detail or two concerning this.)

How were/are peers a factor (or not) in your experiences of writing, either in school or outside of school? Were/are you aware of your peers' attitudes or habits concerning writing? If so, how did you become aware of their attitudes or habits?

Do you feel your family had an influence on you as a writer or as a student of writing? (Please explain.)

Do you have particular worries or concerns about writing assignments in a course other than this (your present) writing class?



What are your personal goals and hopes for this (your present) writing course and for yourself as a writer in your college courses?

What do you see as your strengths as a student? How do you feel these strengths contribute to your experience with writing? Are there areas in which you'd like to improve as a student in general, or as a writer in particular?

What do you like to read? Do you find time to read what you like? Do you feel your reading has had any effect on your writing attitudes or experiences?

Because gender is central to the topic I'm researching, please indicate your gender:

Thanks so much for helping me with my study, and I do hope that many of you will be willing to speak with me about your thoughts and experiences concerning writing. I'm hoping many future students will benefit from what I learn, and your insights will be an important part of that.

**Nancy Disenhaus**  
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