

LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF MALE STUDENTS  
IN AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

A Dissertation

By

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Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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## ABSTRACT

### LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF MALE STUDENTS IN AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case-study design was to explore the literacy experiences and perceptions of male students attending an alternative high school. A phenomenological approach was used to capture the essence of their literacy experiences. Ten male seniors in high school were each selected on the basis of purposeful sampling in which the student participants met specific criteria and were recommended for this study by their English teacher. Data sources included three in-depth interviews with each participant, as well as interviews with their Senior English teacher. Student records were also obtained from the school office, including the students' transcripts and attendance information to triangulate the data; member checks and peer review were employed to verify the results. A thematic analysis resulted in the identification of the four core themes: a) preference for variety, interest, and balanced rigor resulting in a disconnect between in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences, b) the importance of family and social relationships, c) a sense of competency, and d) recommendation for an environment that provides choice with a relevant purpose, independence, and personalized instructional support. The data analysis in this study revealed a mismatch between students' in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences. Several implications were discussed, including the need for a school wide focus on literacy tied in to on-going quality professional development.

## **DEDICATION**

In loving memory of my mother, the late Maria Antonieta Chapa who instilled in me a sense of understanding and compassion for others; to my father, Ernesto Chapa who taught me to value the dignity and sanctity of hard work. I wish to dedicate this study in their honor.

To my sisters Cris, Rose, Liz and their families; my brother Ernest, my nephew Nelson, and my nieces Amanda and Natalie, may this project inspire you to attain your goals in life.

To my extended family and close friends, thank you for your continued support. I have been truly blessed.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Background**

The number of school-age males reportedly falling behind in school in the United States has raised questions over the past several decades. Data on national tests and studies show boys have been falling behind girls in several areas, including literacy (Alloway, 2000; Center on Education Policy, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). The data on boys' lack of academic achievement raises several questions about the gender gaps in literacy and public education. Since the early 1900s, the boy crisis has been documented with boys scoring lower than girls on national assessments (Gates, 1961; Rivers & Barnett, 2006, Sadowski, 2010).

Although the underachievement of boys in schools is not a new issue, Whitmire (2010) questioned why, unlike the Australian government, the United States Department of Education has not investigated this serious concern in recent years. In 2009, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reported its long-term trend assessments in reading and math from the early 1970s through 2008 (Rampey et al., 2009). The report charted student progress since 1971 for reading and 1973 for math. The trend in male-female reading scores shows that most gender gaps remained static across all age groups studied (9, 13, and 17 year olds). The gender gap for 17-year-old students remained unchanged with an 11-point gender gap between the years 1971-2008. For 17 year olds, the 11-point gender gap is based on differences between unrounded average scores. The average reading score for females in 2008 was reportedly 291, and the average reading score for males was 280. Although both males and females saw

improvements in reading scores between 2004 and 2008, the scale scores remained unchanged from the reading assessment administered in 1971. In addition to low reading scores, Leonard Sax (2007), a family physician, psychologist and author, noted that there were a “smaller proportion” of males attending colleges in the United States, Canada, and Australia as compared to females (p. 8). Sax added that females outnumbered males in colleges and universities with college enrollment being comprised of 58% of females as compared to 42% of males.

Some researchers are blaming the school system for the underachievement of boys, calling for an overhaul of the traditional school curriculum (Brozo, 2005, 2006; Kelley & Gurian, 2006; Pollack, 1999); others specifically blame the feminization of schools (Mulvey, 2009; Novotney, 2011; Sax, 2005, 2007). Gender identity is a factor that researchers believe needs to be given greater consideration (Sanford, 2005; Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010). Watson et al. (2010) asserted, “We argue that it is more productive to challenge culturally and socially constructed understandings of masculinity through pedagogical reforms than to reinforce and cater to them through a boy friendly environment” (p. 359).

There are also those researchers concerned with equity, particularly social class and race (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008; Martino, 2003; Mead, 2006; Sadowski, 2010; Watson et al., 2010). Some states depicted greater gaps between different racial and ethnic groups than gender. According to Mead (2006), focusing on gender gaps only serves to “distract attention from ‘more serious educational problems –such as large racial and economic achievement gaps’” (p. 3-4). Mead added that boys, particularly Hispanics, blacks, and the economically disadvantaged, “are in real trouble” (p. 3).

The following story is but one familiar example of a male student who struggled with traditional forms of reading and writing instruction in school (Taylor, 2004). In the following story, a mother, an early childhood educator, shared her frustration with the English teacher's misunderstanding of her son Gabe:

Somewhere between first-grade and middle school, Gabe began to tell me that he wasn't a good reader and he didn't like reading, although he insisted that I read *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen (1988) because it was 'the best book ever written'....

One day when he was in high school, his sister came to me and said Gabe had asked her for help with his literature homework, and she wanted me to know that he couldn't read it.... He didn't understand the symbolism in the story and therefore failed the assignment. He is, as many boys are, very literal. (p. 291)

Taylor (2004) added that despite learning the complicated computer programming languages C++ and Java, as well as Unix system administration, Gabe insisted that he couldn't read. Eventually, Gabe dropped out of high school, "made a perfect score on the General Education Development Test (GED), and was hired by a major corporation to design software. He has been successfully employed at this job for five years, yet he still says he doesn't read" (p. 291). Unfortunately, there are numerous stories similar to this one, and other researchers have documented comparable examples as they identified concerns of male students becoming disengaged in school. For example, Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2004) described the resistance of male students labeled *at risk*. However, during the course of Smith and Wilhelm's study, these students discovered passion in other activities that gave them a sense of competence, as well as challenge. Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) study of 49 middle school and high school boys took place within a



three-month period, interviewing boys from four schools in three states in the eastern section of the United States. The three types of interviews included the boys' favorite activities, responses to short profiles on different kinds of literacy, and monthly literacy logs. Eleven major themes were identified; one of which was the importance of competence. The boys in the study "embraced activities in which they were competent or through which they felt they could improve on," and they rejected activities in which they believed themselves to be incompetent (pp. 456-457).

Newkirk's (2002) book *Misreading Masculinities* pointed out the lack of ethnographic data in boys' literacy experiences. Without proper understanding, educators and researchers are quick to blame various factors, but Newkirk cautioned about limiting this issue to a single cause: "The problem with a crisis mentality is that, in addition to reducing complex problems to a single cause, it overstates the uniqueness of the present moment" (p. 8).

Blair and Sanford (2004) conducted a two-year ethnographic study of elementary and middle school boys that depicted how resistant, younger male students transformed assigned work into something more meaningful and fun. The students created their own characters in a cartoon assignment as they changed the assigned tasks to make them purposeful and fun. Blair and Sanford discovered themes similar to those identified by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) who confirmed the following five components in the boys' literacy experiences as the boys discussed them during the study: interest, action, success, fun, and purposeful.

In a study involving high school students, O'Brien (1998, 2001) described how unmotivated students in the traditional school culture can become engaged in literacy

activities that take into account their multiple identities. In a four-year project known as The Literacy Lab in Lafayette, Indiana, O'Brien (1998) discovered that students were literate when their interests were taken into consideration, when teachers moved away from irrelevant skills-based tasks, and when the school culture made adjustments to meet the needs of individual students. O'Brien argued, "The optimistic, proactive facet of our stance is that if we assume a social constructivist position on at-riskness...we can address the problem by designing classroom and school contexts that are more nurturing to these students" (p. 34). The students in the Literacy Lab were provided interesting materials and learning activities that were relevant to their lives. Student success with reading and writing played a key role in their engagement and motivation.

Conversely, disengagement from school has negative consequences and can eventually lead to students dropping out (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). In 2008, while only 68% of male students graduated from high school, 75% of female students earned a high school diploma (Swanson, 2011). Only 58% of Hispanics graduated in the class of 2008, and 57% of African-Americans and 54% of Native Americans graduated. Despite recent reports of improved graduation rates from 72% in 2002 to 75% in 2008 (Balfanz, Fox, Bridgeland, & McNaught, 2009; Swanson, 2011), 1.2 million students were projected to not graduate from high school in 2011. According to Swanson (2011), "High school completion rates for minority males consistently fall near or below the 50% mark" (p. 23).

There are several reasons why students might become disengaged from school. Studies indicate that students can become bored with a curriculum that fails to provide rigor and relevance (e.g., Bridgeland et al., 2006; Jerald, 2006). Other cases suggest that

one of the factors that contribute to higher dropout rates is low expectations for struggling students (Jerald, 2006). Additional reasons for student disengagement include a lack of supportive adults and a sense of not belonging (Blum, 2005). It has also been pointed out (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007) that students in secondary schools move from the small community they knew in elementary school and enter large middle schools and high schools where they become disengaged from this crowded school environment and begin to experience academic failure.

For students who are disengaged from school for any of these and other varied reasons, alternative schools may meet the needs of these students. The National Center for Education Statistics (Hoffman, 2009) defined an alternative education school as

a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that (1) typically cannot be met in a regular school, (2) provides nontraditional education, (3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or (4) falls outside of regular, special education, or vocational education. (p. B-1)

Although alternative schools are not new in the United States, there are now various models of alternative schools designed to provide a range of educational experiences. This fragmentation has led to a lack of a “precise meaning” of the term ‘alternative education’ (Sliwka, 2008). Raywid (1994) clarified that alternative schools are created for unsuccessful students, “with those who by virtue of being ‘disadvantaged,’ ‘marginal,’ or ‘at risk’ cannot or will not succeed in a regular program.... A fine line divides at-risk or special needs students from the rest” (p. 26).

One of the challenges for alternative schools is identifying quality programs; in fact, only a few of the hundreds listed on the National Dropout Prevention

Center/Network website have been evaluated for their effectiveness (Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009). Kochhar-Bryant and Lacey (2005) reported that “a major problem with research and research synthesis on alternative schools is the lack of conceptual standardization and a standard definition” (p. 111). According to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N, n.d), “the most common model of alternative school operating today to serve youth in at-risk situations is designed to be part of a school district’s comprehensive dropout prevention program” (p. 2). Hoffman (2009) stated that in the 2006-07 school year, there were over 6,638 schools focused on some form of alternative education; this number does not include vocational schools. One year later, data for the 2007-08 school year reported a total of more than 500,000 students enrolled in over 10,000 alternative schools and programs operated by school districts alone (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010). This rapid growth of alternative settings has spurred increased attention to the alternative schools and their characteristics and effectiveness (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Although this information points to evidence that the need for alternative schools is on the rise, this can also lead to an over-reliance on alternative schools without addressing the real causes of the problem.

Educational theorists and researchers have long advocated for a school system that meets the current demands of our world (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2008; Karp, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Wells, 1996; Wise, 2008). Although some school districts have slowly moved away from tracking and ability grouping, the basic skills and transmission approach to teaching is commonly accepted. Olson (2009) compared schools to a sorting mechanism that tracks and monitors students, similar to the meat-packing industry, and designed to stamp students and ship them to their intended destination in the labor

market. Similarly, Ravitch (2010), former Assistant Secretary of Education under former President George H. W. Bush, warned against the growing push of running a school like a business:

Schools are not businesses; they are a public good. The goal of education is not to produce higher scores, but to educate children to become responsible people with well-developed minds and good character...the unrelenting focus on data that has become commonplace in recent years is distorting the nature and quality of education. (pp. 227-228)

When discussing methods of addressing the academic needs of our students, the term *literacy*, which comes from the Latin root *Litteratus* meaning *letter*, is often mentioned. The understanding of literacy has evolved to include broader “cultural and communicative practices among members of particular groups” (NCTE, 2008). Multiple literacies include visual, digital, textual, and technological modes of communicating ideas (American Association of School Librarians, 2009). According to Street (1993), the concept of multiple literacies refers to not only different languages or writing systems, but to “alternative uses of reading and writing within the same language and writing” (p. 6), which is known as *vernacular literacies*.

The New London Group (1996) stressed the need to expand the idea of literacy and literacy practices to better prepare students. The term *multiliteracies* addresses broader issues that go beyond language alone. Multiliteracies are dynamic because they “differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects” (p. 64). Another aspect of multiliteracies recognizes the ever-growing changes in technology, as well as “increasing local diversity and global connectedness” (p. 64).

These changes require educators to attend to the pedagogical practices as they prepare students to work and live in a changing environment.

New literacies refer to the different literacies which we use to communicate today. These new literacies are ever-changing as new technologies emerge and develop in our world. Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Commack (2004) asserted,

New literacies include the skills, strategies, and disposition that allow us to use the internet and other information communication technologies (ICTs) effectively to identify important questions, locate information, critically evaluate the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer those questions, and then communicate the answers to others. (p. 1572)

Gee (1989) believed that the term literacy was connected to one's identity and the idea of Discourse, the combination of "saying (writing) -doing-being-valuing-believing combinations" (p. 6). Gee described a Discourse as an "identity kit," which a person acquires as a member of a community. Gee defined literacy as "control of a secondary uses of language (i.e. uses of language in secondary discourses)" (p. 23). These secondary discourses are acquired outside the home environment, in places such as school, church, and other public places.

More recently, Gainer and Lapp (2010) have used the term "remix" to describe the mixing of traditional and new literacies. They emphasized the importance of integrating new literacies while keeping traditional print literacy in school. Another important point is that simply using technology is not enough. For example, many classrooms across the globe are purchasing pre-packaged software programs, which do nothing to support the principles of new literacies (Leu et al., 2004). Although

adolescents today use various forms of literacies in their daily lives, the primary focus in this particular study involves traditional forms of literacy, the reading and writing of written texts. These traditional forms of literacy correspond to the types of literacy found in the work of Freire and Macedo (1987) who argued that literacy can “momentarily be a transformative act that begins to assume an active and decisive participation” (p. 54). Similarly, Moje’s (2000b) study of gang members described students’ literacies and literacy practices connected to their relationships or social groups, such as family, friends, classmates, and others related to gender, race, class, and age. Moje (2000b) also pointed out that if “literacy is a tool for transforming thought and experience,” then researchers need to extend that same belief to the literacies of marginalized adolescents as tools rather than as resistance or deviance (p. 654).

The growing concerns of the gender gaps in literacy have researchers divided on the real causes of males’ underachievement. Some literacy researchers are calling for a broader definition of the term *literacy*; however, others are addressing the need for an overhaul of the public education system. With a growing trend toward increasing the number of alternative schools for marginalized students, educators are being challenged to improve our nation’s high schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The literacy practices of adolescent youth in traditional secondary school settings have been documented (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008; Sanford, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Snow et al., 2007; Wells, 1996). However, there is sparse literature on the literacy experiences of male students in alternative high school settings. Literacy researchers have attributed the adolescent crisis to the growing

technological changes, the increase of literacy demands across the globe, as well as the neglect of out-of-school literacy practices in the classrooms (Alvermann, 2001; Deshler & Hock, 2007; Moje et al., 2008). Young people participate in literacy for various reasons, including defining their identity, creating social networks, discovering relevant information to their lives, and coping with personal situations (Alvermann, 2001; Blair & Sanford, 2004; Millard, 1997; Moje et al., 2008; Sanford, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Males are more likely than females to drop out of school. Therefore, researchers and educators need a better understanding of boys' literacy experiences, particularly those who have enrolled in an alternative high school. This study can assist us in understanding why male students have left their high school to attend an alternative campus. In addition, the voices of male students can shed light on what their literacy experiences have been like since they are able to remember all their schooling years.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the literacy experiences of 10 male students attending an alternative high school. A phenomenological study is immersed in the lived experiences of the participants to gain a deeper understanding of their point-of-view. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1975), "The phenomenologist views human behavior--what people say and do--as a product of how people interpret their world" (p. 13). A multiple case-study design was used to investigate the reading and writing experiences of male students and will fit with other studies that have also attempted to gain insights into students' literacy practices.

This phenomenological inquiry focused on 12<sup>th</sup> grade boys who decided to leave their high school to attend a local alternative campus. These students' experiences can



best be understood from their own lived experiences. It is through our understanding of the students' perspectives that educators and others can address the underachievement issues facing many students, especially males.

### **Guiding Questions**

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do male students attending an alternative high school describe their literacy experiences?
2. How do male students attending an alternative high school perceive themselves as readers and writers?
3. What have male students attending an alternative high school learned or read that has been meaningful and significant to them?
4. How can schools better meet the needs of male students?

### **Significance of the Study**

Although there has been an increased interest in boys' literacies, much of the research has become polarized with debates over the causes, as well as the effect that the attention on boys could potentially have on girls. In addition, the concerns based on national test scores raise questions about boys and literacy. There is a call for more qualitative studies that lead us to a deeper understanding of boys' literacy experiences from their perspectives (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

This study intended to fill a gap in the research literature because, although a growing knowledge base has accumulated in the areas of boys' literacy engagement, there is a limited amount of phenomenological case studies of male students that include

boys' literacy experiences from their early childhood to their senior year, especially from those enrolled in an alternative high school.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were defined as follows:

1. Adolescent literacy— the reading and writing of youth between grades 6 and 12 (Moje et al., 2008).
2. Alternative education— a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the specific needs of students usually not met in a traditional public school (U. S. Department of Education, 2002).
3. Dropout— a student who is absent without an approved excuse and does not return to school by the fall of the following school year (National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.).
4. Literacy— the reading and writing of written text.
5. Literacy practices— the beliefs and purposes that shape how and why people use literacy (Moje, 2000b).
6. Phenomenological research methods— a qualitative study that seeks to capture the essence of a lived experience (Moustakas, 1994).
7. Reading motivation— an individual's goals and beliefs with regard to the topics and processes of reading.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

John Dewey (1897), who inspired much educational reform, once said, “I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 78). In the midst of continuous school reforms in our nation, the dropout rate continues to rise, particularly for low-income students, even as performance-based accountability increases (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Karp, 2003; Meier, 2004). Although the goal is for 100% of students to attain proficiency on state standardized tests by 2014, there are many students who experience difficulties, which make it unlikely that the goal will be met unless alternative pedagogical strategies are applied.

The focus of this study is to document the literacy experiences of 10 male students in an alternative high school who have been identified as *at risk* for dropping out of school. In this study, the researcher will focus on literacy in the traditional sense of reading and writing (Moje, 2000b) versus the concepts of New Literacies and multiple literacies as discussed by O’Brien (1998, 2001). This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section will review the literature on boys’ literacy abilities as researchers continue to debate the underlying causes of boys’ academic underachievement in school. The second will include a section addressing both the promising practices and challenges of adolescent literacy. The third section will focus on the drop-out problem in education with the fourth section reviewing alternative school models. Finally, a review of the research is presented on race and class, a topic that is relevant because a socioeconomic difference is considered a complex “predispositional factor” (O’Brien & Dillon, 1995, p. 34) or an “underlying risk factor” (Snow et al., 2007,

p. 65) in students labeled at risk. In addition, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2001) show that students whose families are at the bottom 20% of the socioeconomic scale are six times more likely to drop out of high school.

### **Boys' Literacy Abilities**

While the ongoing debate on the boys' literacy crisis is a global concern, some researchers blame the feminization of schools; others blame the essentialist mindset that seeks to find quick-fix solutions rather than develop an analytic framework to deal with the gender gap issues (Martino & Kehler, 2007). For decades, boys have consistently scored lower on assessments than girls. In fact, this "boy crisis goes back at least as far as the early 1900s" (Rivers & Barnett, 2006; Sadowski, 2010). The Center on Education Policy (2010) has recently reported the discrepancy between reading scores of boys and girls; boys score as much as 16% below girls in high school. In Texas, high school boys scored 8% lower than girls on the 2008 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). "The longer American students stay in the classroom, the more they slump...especially the boys" reported Richard Whitmire (2010), former editor of *USA Today*. Whitmire is concerned that the boys' reading underachievement will negatively affect their success in college. In fact, Sax (2007) noted that in 2006, there were 28% fewer males attending college than in 1949, "Right now, the student body at the average university in the United States is 58% female, 42% male (with similar numbers in Canada and Australia)" (p. 8).

Watson et al. (2010) remind us that not all boys are at risk. In fact, labeling boys as disadvantaged could have the adverse effect of causing female students to be neglected. If boys are failing as the media reports, the question then becomes "which

boys and which girls?” (p. 357). In addition, others claim that the boy crisis only serves to shift the attention away from important issues, including curriculum and assessment (Smith, 2010; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2004), as well as “large racial and economic gaps” (Mead, 2006, p. 4). Some experts contend that the gender gap reform advocates same-sex classes, more male teachers, and a boy-friendly curriculum that caters to boys. In a study of male students in a single-gender, Catholic high school, Thompson and Austin (2010) reported that researchers who promote single-sex schools claim that these schools have much potential and “can make a positive difference by standing in the gap and providing the type of education that helps to counter negative influences” (p. 442).

William Pollack (1999), author of *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, blamed the school system for failing to meet the needs of boys. “Our schools, in general, are not sufficiently hospitable environments for boys and are not doing what they could to address boys’ unique social, academic, and emotional needs” (p. 231). Sax (2007) attributed the problem to “gender blind changes in education over the past thirty years” (p. 39).

Some researchers have argued that different strategies should be used for boys based on gender differences (Kelley & Gurian, 2006; Sax, 2007). In an elementary school of 470 students based in Colorado, boy-friendly strategies were implemented after a school-wide study on brain research and learning styles. The researchers discovered that the boys who were struggling with literacy became successful within a year (Kelley & Gurian, 2006).

Other researchers have argued for a curriculum that challenges stereotypical views of masculinity rather than simply providing a boy-friendly environment (Alloway,

Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; Watson et al., 2010). If gendered identities are constructed instead of innate, schools have the opportunity to expand the range of strategies in a democratic learning environment. This would include critically examining popular culture as well as academic materials. Alloway et al. (2002) asserted,

With the importation of contemporary commercial youth culture into the classroom come both the opportunity and responsibility to engage its powerful discourses – about gender, race, class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability and so on – in ways that make those discourses objects of critical study. (p. 10)

According to Mead (2006), “The real story is not bad news about boys doing worse; it’s good news about girls doing better” (p. 3). Emma Smith (2010) agreed that it is the (state and national) assessment data that is driving these “moral panics” when in fact, “the achievement of all students continues to rise” (p. 46). She discussed the issue of the boy crisis in schools in the UK and America. The terms underachievement and low achievement are “conflated,” which do nothing to serve the real problems or needs of male students (p. 41). Another argument that Smith (2010) made is the evident gap between boys and girls, which she acknowledged has existed for decades. Smith suggested, instead, that there is a “differential attainment of boys in literacy-based assessments” (p. 45).

Cathy Atkinson (2009) conducted a study of high school boys and their literacy development after several discussions with the teachers and school staff about the boys’ lack of success in school. Atkinson worked as a school psychologist in an all-boys’ high school located north of England, and she noted that the “importance of affective factors has often been overlooked” in the research (p. 238). Not only was there a lack of a wide

range of materials, but there was also a mismatch between the school materials and the boys' socio-cultural needs.

In other studies, boys' perception of themselves as readers and writers had more to do with their gendered identity (Cavazos-Kottke, 2005; Fletcher, 2006). In a class of gifted ninth-grade students, boys resisted reading even when they scored high on their standardized language arts test. English teacher and researcher Cavazos-Kottke (2005) realized that while in middle school the boys' grades had dropped and they would not admit to being readers although "their backpacks were often overflowing with magazines, newspapers, and text-heavy printouts from the Internet" (p. 182). In middle school, these students had developed "a paradoxical aversion to reading" because they had associated reading with state tests.

To engage his students, Cavazos-Kottke decided to provide a variety of genres using a modified "S-SR" that included a personalized reading plan with learning goals, individual conferences, and a learning contract with titles based on the students' interests. Their writing assignments included an autobiographical essay on their prior literacy experiences. As the teacher became enlightened about his male students' literacy practices, he came "to better understand the value of choice as a powerful motivator in adolescent literacy development" (p. 183).

Likewise, Fletcher (2006) discussed a study in which 400 students were given nine different writing samples to identify the writer's gender for each essay. Boys wrote about violence, and girls wrote about relationships. Shelley Peterson, a professor at the University of Toronto, explained, "If boys did write about relationships, their peers used disparaging remarks to critique their stories" (Toye, 2000, cited in Fletcher, 2006, p. 22).

Fletcher (2006) points out, “If this study is accurate it suggests boys’ gender does influence the way boys perceive themselves as writers, and the perception isn’t a positive one” (p. 22).

Brozo (2005) cautioned against generalizing when reporting or making recommendations that target males’ interests and needs: “To propose broader gender specific recommendations for reading literacy improvement is to risk another form of sexual stereotyping” (p. 18). There is also a possibility for neglecting the individuality of each boy (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Interest and choice of reading materials is important to students; yet some experts agree that this key ingredient is missing in many classrooms (Brozo, 2010; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2004, 2008). Smith and Wilhelm (2004) discussed Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) research on self-efficacy. One of the eight characteristics of the ‘flow experiences’ is having a feeling of competence. In their study, Smith and Wilhelm interviewed 49 middle school and high school boys and found that these young men rejected literacy only when they felt incompetent. Unlike Martino’s (1995) findings in the U.K. and studies from other researchers, Smith and Wilhelm (2004) did not find that boys rejected “‘feminized’” literacy, but rather they rejected literacy that was “‘schoolish’” (p. 460):

Our data cause us to wonder why so many texts are used that are difficult for students in terms of the distance from their reading experience, lived experience, and from the potential for use through thinking, being, and acting. Our data cause us to wonder why the literature taught in school is not complemented more often by popular culture texts over which students feel more authority. (p. 460)



## **Adolescent Literacy Practices**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, several questions were being raised about the direction of adolescent literacy. The topics ranged from what counts as text and literature in high school classrooms, to the relationship between identity and literacy, and to how reading and writing would be taught (Bean & Harper, 2008; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2000a, 2002, 2008; Moje & Luke, 2009; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The International Reading Association (IRA) developed a position statement that called for a broader view of literacy that included the students' literacy practices outside of school, as well as literacy development across all the content areas (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). By 2006, adolescent literacy had become a hot topic and has continued to remain on the hot topics list for the past five years (Cassidy, Valadez, Garrett, & Barrera, 2010). Although adolescent literacy has secured much deserved attention, researchers now face many new questions and challenges ahead.

While much concern has been centered around the adolescent literacy crisis based on national and state assessments, some researchers have attributed the "crisis" to the growing technological changes, the increase of literacy demands across the globe, as well as to the neglect of out-of-school literacy practices in the classrooms (Alvermann, 2001; Deshler & Hock, 2007; Moje et al., 2008). In a study of adolescent's literacy practices in school and outside of school, Moje et al. (2008) examined the literacy practices of adolescents using a sociocultural lens to define the texts young people choose to read and why. They found that these students from one urban setting were actually reading and writing outside of school. The authors reported that although reading novels were linked

with academic achievement, literacy practices outside of school are just as important for both school achievement as well as for young people's personal development and should not be compromised. The authors share ideas about their findings in the following passage:

The literacy practices of youth documented in our study are significant and powerful in their lives. In other words, the value of youths' out-of-school practices should not be assessed only by the influence of the practices on school achievement. The qualitative data we present demonstrate that youth read and write for social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual purposes. Their reading and writing practices foster communication, relationships, and self-expression among peers and family members; support their economic and psychological health; and allow them to construct subjectivities and enact identities that offer them power in their everyday lives. These consequences of literate practice in the everyday world should not be diminished by the quest to improve the school achievement of all young people, even as educators pursue the important goal of closing the achievement gap. (p. 149)

Moje et al. (2008) also discovered that these students' motivations stemmed from their social connections as well as their identities. "Reading as situated in social networks, for example, also often means reading that allows for racial or gendered identities to be constructed or enacted.... Reading in affinity groups is most often gendered and raced" (p. 131)

Several reports commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York have been published in the past decade to support adolescent literacy. Recent reports are highlighted

and briefly described: In *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, Biancarosa and Snow (2006) provided guidance to schools with vital components which were recommended by a research panel. They outlined 15 elements necessary for effective literacy programs, including instructional and infrastructure improvements which can be used in combination. “We expect that a mixture of these elements will generate the biggest return” (p. 12). Under instructional improvements, some of the key elements include direct instruction, motivation and engagement, wide range of texts, and deeper writing. Some infrastructure improvements include more opportunities for literacy, ongoing professional development, and a focused, school-wide literacy program.

Another report also commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation, *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007) addressed the lack of writing proficiency at the secondary level, which is linked to the high drop-out rate (Moje & Tysvaer, 2010). The 11 recommendations based on a meta-analysis of approximately 200 writing studies include the writing process and strategies as well as writing models. More specifically, the research on writing models encouraged students to read, analyze, and emulate good writing.

Carnegie’s recent report, *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (Graham & Hebert, 2010) builds on *Writing Next* to improve reading through writing. The report included recommendations from the 2003 National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, which recognized the critical need for schools to double the amount of writing opportunities for students,

develop writing across the curriculum, and incorporate more writing during out-of-school time programs.

In 2010, Carnegie Corporation published six separate reports on various topics ranging from assessment to content area reading and out-of-school programs. *Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success* (CCAAL, 2010) included five corresponding reports. One of its specialized reports “Reading in the Disciplines: The Challenges of Adolescent Literacy” (Lee & Spratley, 2010) addressed concerns about secondary reading in the content areas. Lee and Spratley (2010) pointed out that one of the fundamental differences between elementary and secondary reading has to do with “the transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*” (p. 2). This “inoculation fallacy” refers to the belief that early literacy automatically transfers by the time adolescents reach secondary school (Deshler & Hock, 2007; Snow & Moje, 2010; Theroux, 2010). By the time adolescents enter high school, they may possess the basic reading skills, but the majority of the students need a higher level of literacy skills to comprehend subject area texts or “*disciplinary literacy*” (p. 2). Moje (2008) has also advocated for a strong *disciplinary literacy* program rather than an instructional program solely focused on strategy building because students need background knowledge to be successful in school.

The Carnegie Corporation, in one of its six reports, *Adolescent Literacy Development in Out-of-School Time: A Practitioner’ Guide* (Moje & Tysvaer, 2010), included a guidebook on out-of-school time (OST) programs. The interest in OST programs developed as growth of OST programs evolved. Moje and Tysvaer (2010) reviewed over two dozen existing programs, and they categorized them into four types of

programs with unique characteristics. They discovered the need for “more intentional literacy development programming” (p. 26). One of the key findings in this study is the lack of literacy-focused programs for adolescents, particularly at the high-school level. Effective programs were those that offered interesting materials, a sense of purpose and choice, and personalized support. Instead of creating OST programs that look like traditional classrooms, the researchers suggested that classrooms should be more like OSTs in their engaging designs.

In response to the growing concerns of adolescent literacy, several recent efforts have included school-wide literacy projects. School teams can serve to enhance the literacy support that high school students need to be successful in reading diverse texts (Brozo & Fisher, 2010; Deshler, Schumaker, & Woodruff, 2004; Fisher, 2007; Gewertz, 2010). Gewertz (2010) described how the entire school staff of one large high school with 1,350 students in Alabama committed itself to “boosting literacy skills in all subjects, something few high schools do.” (p. 51).

One third of the ninth-graders entering this Alabama high school were reading below grade level, with some students reading four or five years below grade level. The school administrators brought in teacher consultants and authors Kelly Gallagher and Cris Tovani to lead professional development for all teachers. Kelly Gallagher, author of *Readicide: How Schools are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It* (2009), also coined the term “assumicide,” which refers to the assumption that students have the knowledge and skills to read content-area material. Teachers at the school began to change the materials and methods to enhance their instruction. Some of those changes included adding more hands-on activities in their teaching. The librarian also played a

key role and restructured the school library with popular culture books, putting aside her own biases that all students should be reading Hemingway. Surprisingly, the number of books checked out increased from 200 books a month to 1,600. The high school is now a national model for adolescent literacy.

In another example of how comprehensive professional development in content-area teaching led to student engagement and teacher empowerment, Brozo and Fisher (2010) presented five principles in transforming teachers during school-wide literacy efforts based on their work with high schools in southern California and eastern Tennessee. The five principles include the following: begin with a few new strategies, co-teach and model lessons after workshops, support teachers with forums, provide a variety of training formats, and begin with the most enthusiastic teachers who are open to adopting fresh ideas.

Brozo and Fisher (2010) began their school-wide project with teachers focused on establishing three initiatives, which included sustained silent reading, the use of a variety of materials, and “lesson impressions,” which is a strategy that involved the use of words and phrases to “form an impression of the topic to be studied. Using these words and phrases, students wrote brief essays or stories” (p. 74). After two days of workshops on instructional strategies, the staff developers spent time in the classroom with the teachers, modeling and offering support. In addition, teacher forums provided opportunities for teachers to discuss student needs, plan lessons, and schedule ongoing workshops. Professional development was provided in a variety of formats – small group, one-on-one mentoring, and large group. Once enthusiasm spread throughout the school staff, the students were “the beneficiaries” (p. 77).

Although reading performance has been connected to engagement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), the topic of motivation and engagement as it relates to adolescent literacy has not received the amount of attention it deserves (Cassidy et al, 2010; O'Brien & Dillon, 2008). Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) defined reading motivation as “the individual’s personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading” (p. 405). There are several factors that affect students’ motivation to read, including the choice of interesting reading material (Brozo, 2010; Fletcher, 2006; Lenters, 2006; Moje, 2006), instructional strategies, relevant learning, and group work (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Wigfield, 2004; Wilhelm, 2008). Guthrie (2004) noted that reading needs to increase in our schools:

Because engaged readers spend 500% more time reading than disengaged students, educators should attempt to increase engaged reading time by 200%-500%. This may require substantial reconfigurations of curriculum.... The crisis of our schools today is that too many children are disengaged from literacy. Their disaffection and retreat leads to mediocre reading comprehension, which prevents them from gaining subject matter and world knowledge. (pp. 1-2)

Self-efficacy is related to reading motivation. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is defined as one’s perceptions of his or her own ability to learn tasks or activities at specific levels. The importance of family influence plays a critical role in developing self-efficacy in young people. Parent involvement and expectations help shape the students’ growth and success (Schunk & Meece, 2005).

The question of rewards as a motivational factor remains a debated one. Researchers warn that extrinsic motivation based on incentives are short-lived and

disappear once the incentives are no longer offered (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Wigfield, 2004). Some reading programs are based on providing incentives to students to get them interested in reading; however, researchers suggest instilling intrinsic motivation in students is more effective. For many young people, grades can become a hindrance to reading for enjoyment. Lenters (2006) suggested that “giving space to ungraded, independent reading in secondary schools may help widen some adolescents’ conception of literacy” (p. 143).

### **The Drop-Out Problem in Public Education**

The high school drop-out rate in the United States is a serious crisis. It is estimated that about 1.23 million students drop out annually in our country – or a stunning 7,000 each day (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002; Wise, 2008). According to the San Antonio-based Intercultural Development Research Association (Johnson, 2007), almost 50% of dropouts in Texas are Hispanic. Nationwide, the rate increases to 58% (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008).

Although there are several factors for students leaving school, there is a correlation between reading habits and dropping out (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004). Alvermann (2004) linked reading difficulties to indifference toward school, which eventually leads to dropping out of school. In addition, the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as “the nation’s report card,” reveal that there are approximately eight million struggling readers between 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Although the reading scores improved by two points in 2007 compared to 2005, there are still wide achievement gaps affecting minority students,



particularly older students (NCES, 2007). The National Endowment for the Arts (2007) reported that a “little more than a third of high school seniors now read proficiently” (p. 13).

Today, more than ever in our country’s history, students need at least a high school diploma to sustain a quality life (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Several reports issued in the past few years indicate that high school dropouts earn almost \$10,000 less per year than those with a diploma (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). Cecilia Rouse (2005), professor of economics and public affairs at Princeton University, showed how the effect of dropouts reaches even further. Every single dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 during his or her lifetime. With an annual dropout rate of 1.3 million students nationwide, this results in a \$335 billion loss in total of lifetime earnings. If the dropout trend continues, the collective loss increases to \$3 trillion (Wise, 2009).

With a perpetual stream of educational reforms flooding our nation in the last 20 years, it is incomprehensible that our schools can be failing. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), public schools are not designed to meet the changing needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bob Wise (2008), President of the Alliance for Excellent Education, described today’s practices as antiquated and misaligned to the work world. Teachers are “still often trained to be isolated content lecturers” (p. 10). Likewise, many of American schools operate as what is commonly known as “20<sup>th</sup>-century factory models” (Kozol, 2005) where the curriculum is narrowed to skill and drill practices in crowded classrooms lasting less than an hour per day. Still, Wiggins and McTighe (2008) pointed out another problem in our high schools is the tendency to place emphasis on acquisition “at the expense of meaning and transfer” (p. 37). A report

released by John Hopkins University identified 2,000 high schools as “dropout factories,” or schools with high dropout rates. In many of these schools, the senior class is reduced by 60% or more from the time students enter high school as freshmen. In 2002, Texas alone had 185 of these failing high schools – 42 of them in Houston and 15 in San Antonio (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

In the report *The Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland et al., 2006), 467 high school dropouts were interviewed during focus group sessions in 2005. The participants represented 25 various geographic locations from large cities as well as small towns. The study reported the top five reasons why students dropped out of high school: 47% boring classes, 43% chronic absenteeism, 42% influenced by others who were not interested in school, 38% too much freedom and not enough rules, and 35% failing in school. Several studies have shown that disengagement from school is a process that eventually leads to dropping out.

There are several assumptions about why students might become disconnected from school (Blum, 2005; Snow, et al., 2007). Some studies indicated that students are bored with a curriculum that fails to provide rigor and relevance (Jerald, 2006; Tomlinson & Doubet, 2005). Similarly, Yazzie-Mintz’s (2006) *High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE)* reported that a great majority of the students are bored every day in class. In fact, only 2% of a total of 81,499 respondents reported that they have never been bored in high school. This report included 110 schools in 26 states across the United States. One common belief is that low expectations for struggling students is one of the factors that contribute to higher dropout rates (Jerald, 2006). Another reason for disengagement is the loss of connection or belonging, as well as the lack of supportive

adults (Blum, 2005; Wells, 1996; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). In addition, more students in secondary schools move from the small community they know in elementary school and enter crowded middle schools and high schools (Snow et al., 2007). While all of these reasons may certainly be factors affecting students today, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of adolescent literacy through the perceived experiences and voices of the students.

### **The Alternative School Model**

According to John Kellmayer (1995), alternative schools can be traced to John Dewey's progressive ideas. However, the first schools known as "alternative" schools were established in the 1960s (Raywid, 1999). The term "alternative education" was first used as an umbrella term for a variety of choice schools considered as innovative programs (Bauman, 1998) and has now been expanded to include several types of alternative programs. According to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N, n.d), "the most common model of alternative school operating today to serve youth in at-risk situations is designed to be part of a school district's comprehensive dropout prevention program" (p. 2). According to the Texas Association for Alternative Education (TAAE), there are five distinct programs: charter schools, Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP), General Educational Development (GED), Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP), and Schools of Choice. The Schools of Choice specifically provide "accelerated instruction" to students at risk of dropping out of school (TAAE, n.d.). This section focused primarily on alternative schools as dropout recovery programs, which may not always be considered to be schools of choice for court-adjudicated students.

Historically, alternative schools have been associated with the civil rights movement, and equality has played a role in the widespread development of alternative schools across the country (Bauman, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1999; Settles & Orwick, 2003). Raywid (1981) described the early public schools as “cold, dehumanizing, irrelevant institutions” (p. 551). By the late 1970s, some alternative schools were replaced with Magnet programs that served a political agenda to continue the unpopular directive of bussing students. During the 1980s, alternative schools became more conservative and remedial in nature while enrolling disruptive or failing students (Lange & Sletten, 2002). By the 1990s, the majority of alternative programs were designed to remove disruptive students (Bauman, 1998; Johnston & Wetherill, 1998). Bauman (1998) attested that alternative schools no longer carried the “romance of innovation it once did” (p. 259). Some alternative schools have now developed into special programs specifically targeted for at-risk youth, especially those at risk of dropping out.

While some researchers have documented the effectiveness of alternative school programs across the country, including improved attendance, attitude toward school, academic achievement, and behavior (e.g., Barr & Parrett, 1995; Raywid, 1994; Young & Clinchy, 1992), others have questioned the unclear definition of alternative education (e.g., Settles & Orwick, 2003) and limited data available about alternative education programs (e.g., Bauman, 1998; Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Johnston & Wetherill, 1998; Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002; Lange & Sletten, 2002).

According to Barr and Parrett (1995), Indiana University was the first institution to conduct descriptive research on alternative schools. However, the first documented

study on a national level was published in 2002 by the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES, 2002). During the 2006-2007 school year, there were over 6,638 schools focused on some form of alternative education (Hoffman, 2009), not including vocational schools. One year later, data for the 2007-2008 school year reported a total of over 500,000 students enrolled in over 10,000 alternative schools and programs operated by school districts alone (Carver et al., 2010).

Early studies in the 1980s and 1990s identified specific attributes of successful alternative high schools (Duggar & Duggar, 1998; Raywid, 1994, Wehlage, Rutter, & Turnbaugh, 1987). Small schools and a caring community were classified as strong factors for student retention and high school graduation. Wehlage et al. (1987) found that a caring community was one of the keys to students' success. "When schools change their policies and practices, they can change student perceptions about adults' caring and interest as well as about the legitimacy of the schools' authority" (p. 71). Model alternative schools generally have a small student population, caring teachers, flexible school schedule, and self-paced curriculum (Barr & Parrett, 1995; NDPC/N, n.d.). However, regardless of the various types of alternative schools, studies show that they all display a sense of community and a flexible schedule (Barr & Parrett, 2008; Raywid, 1999).

Most studies on alternative education have been state-specific studies (e.g., Gilson, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). For example, Raywid (1994) found eight characteristics of effective alternative high schools in Iowa. One of the strengths of these schools was the ability for teachers to choose to teach at an alternative school as opposed to being assigned by the school district. The small size of these schools also indicated

limited resources, such as access to a library, counselors, or science labs. Other characteristics included autonomy from district mandates and teacher input on the design of the school theme (Gilson, 2006; Raywid, 1994; Wehlage et al., 1987).

In a separate study, Foley and Pang (2006) documented information about the administrative structure, physical facilities, and student characteristics in the state of Illinois. Surveys were distributed to special education directors, principals, and superintendents of regional offices in the Illinois State Board of Education. Similar to other studies, the findings (Raywid, 1994) indicated a lack of available resources to provide educational experiences comparable to traditional public schools (e.g., libraries, science labs, computers). Another key finding was the significance of parental involvement; only one-third of these schools had opportunities for parents to participate. Finally, the researchers suggested that teachers need to be highly prepared to teach students with varied academic and social emotional characteristics. Teachers must be knowledgeable about school and community resources available to help students succeed.

One of the effective characteristics of alternative schools is the promotion of fast-track programs toward high school graduation (Barr & Parrett, 1995; Hopson, 2002). An accelerated or compacted curriculum allows students to complete graduation credits in half the time it would normally take to graduate. There is also the opportunity for a flexible schedule and individualized instruction. In addition, a small learning community allows the students to develop personal relationships with teachers and other students. A recent qualitative study (Bland, Church, Neill, & Terry, 2008) of dropout recovery centers in six different counties of central Kansas was conducted to discover why students drop out of school along with why students had been successful in this particular

alternative setting. Researchers in this study interviewed 24 former high school dropouts who had graduated from one of the Kansas centers. In addition, the researchers held focus group sessions with high school staff and teachers from the different departments. Some of the reasons given by both the teachers and students for dropping out included pregnancy, employment, substance abuse, peer pressure, and family problems. School factors included the lack of a caring and supportive environment. Both the students and teachers reported that the reason for students' success at these centers was a positive, caring environment. All groups recognized the sense of community and lack of competition at the centers. Small class size and personalized instruction were also important factors for success. A self-paced environment, a flexible schedule, and the use of technology accommodated individual learning styles. In addition, successful students set personal goals to graduate from high school. Future family and career goals motivated these students to complete their high school education. One key finding was that students noted the high school structure, staff, and environment as reasons for dropping out although the staff had not mentioned these reasons. It is important for schools to study the issues affecting the student population and to "examine their role in inadvertently pushing students out of school" (p. 36).

Despite the growing demand for alternative schools and programs, there are questions concerning the quality of these programs and their characteristics (Aron, 2006; Bauman, 1998; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009). Small school size is not enough to transform a school. The focus must remain on teacher quality and instruction (Hood, 2004; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). However, there is scant data available about the qualifications of teachers in alternative high

schools and how teachers are assigned (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Gilson (2006) strongly advocated for teachers choosing to teach at-risk students in an alternative school rather than being assigned to teach at-risk students in an alternative high school. It is equally important to match the students' needs and interests to the program. Davis, Brutsaert-Durant, and Lee (2002) cautioned that a critical feature often missing from a list of key characteristics is a "comprehensive and rigorous mechanism for admitting the 'right students' to the program" (p. 20) to match their educational and personal needs (Aron, 2006).

Throughout their existence, alternative schools have suffered from an image problem and have struggled to gain legitimacy with the public (Johnston & Wetherill, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994). Accountability systems which have increasingly required alternative schools to meet the same standards as traditional public high schools may provide credibility to these schools. However, alternative programs may lack the necessary resources, such as curriculum specialists and other necessary materials (Kraemer & Ruzzi, 2001).

Another concern is the limited number of alternative schools that exists (Wetherill & Johnston, 1998) compared to the growing demand, which has led the schools to develop waiting lists for their programs (Kleiner et al., 2002). Tyler and Lofstrum (2009) reported that the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network website contains a list of alternative program models; however, only a "few of those have been rigorously evaluated for their effectiveness" (p. 88). Furthermore, Kochhar-Bryant et al. (2005) maintained that "a major problem with research and research synthesis on alternative schools is the lack of conceptual standardization and a standard definition" (p. 111).



Wells (1996) asserted, “Real change is not the result of tinkering with policies and programs” (p. 176). Incorporating technology, silencing bells, and hiring extra teachers are “superficial actions unless they’re connected to an overall vision of what a school might be” (p. 176). Raywid (1999) reminds us that there is no magic bullet or single practice to transform “a failing student into a successful one” (p. 3). District administrators need to recognize that the increase of and focus on innovative magnet schools tend to leave district-wide alternative dropout recovery programs neglected. Dropout recovery campuses and programs need to recapture the creativity and effectiveness once envisioned. As alternative schools continue to evolve, ongoing studies are needed about the programs and the students they serve.

### **Race and Class**

While we are seeing a gap between girls and boys in reading, there are researchers who argue that the racial and socioeconomic gaps are much greater than the gender achievement gaps (Mead, 2006; Watson et al., 2010). Mead (2006) warned, “When racial and economic gaps combine with gender achievement gaps in reading, the result is disturbingly low achievement for poor, black, and Hispanic boys” (p. 9).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2001), students whose families are at the bottom 20% of the socioeconomic scales are six times more likely to drop out of high school. The old adage, “If you keep doing what you’ve been doing, you’ll keep getting what you’ve been getting,” can be applied to the public educational structures across the country. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) paved the way for equal education. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF, 2004) surveyed over 3,000 teachers in 2002 to describe the conditions in their low-

income schools. The report included the following problems: uncertified/unprepared teachers, high teacher turnover, teacher vacancies/substitutes, low parental involvement, inadequate physical facilities, infested and dirty buildings, inadequate instructional materials and equipment, and personal expenses for materials and supplies. In Jonathan Kozol's (2005) novel, *The Shame of the Nation*, he exposed the conditions of inner-city children in the United States. Kozol visited 60 public schools in 30 different districts in 11 states over a five-year period between 2000 and 2005. He found that the inner-city children are more racially isolated than before *Brown v. Board of Education*. Kozol also found discrepancies between inner-city schools in terms of quality, safety, curriculum, funding, and race relations.

Although President Lyndon B. Johnson, in the 1960s, sought to provide equal access and treatment for poor and minority students through programs such as Title I, researchers have continued to identify schools that are still segregated and isolated in terms of poor and minority students (e.g., Barr & Parrett, 2007; Kozol, 2005). Title I is one of the largest federal programs for high-poverty schools since 1965. However, the support for secondary schools has been insufficient. For instance, 31% of Title I funds are provided for students in grades 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup>, but the assistance drops dramatically to only 9% for students in grades 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> (Stullich, Eisner, & McCrary, 2007). Surprisingly, as Orfield (1999) pointed out, there has been little research on why Title I has not produced significant results. Even more startling is the fact that there has been no accountability for use of Title I funds. In a report published by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), Roza, Miller, and Hill (2005) stated, "While the \$13 billion dollar program unquestionably brings districts more funds, it is not clear how

these additional funds are being integrated with state and local funds to provide increased spending on the highest poverty schools (p. 1).”

Yet, the program has continued to grow. Some Title I funds, intended for students in schools with the highest poverty levels, have been mistakenly appropriated to schools in affluent districts (Roza et al., 2005). In addition, some reports indicated that only 10% of school districts saw an increase of Title I funds after 2004 because the Department of Education now requires states to reserve 4% for low-performing schools in need of improvement (THE Journal, 2006). More recently, Title I of the Graduation Promise Act (GPA) has authorized \$2.4 billion for the High School Improvement and Dropout Reduction Fund to support the states in their improvement of high schools (Dianda, 2008). Grants will be distributed to states based on poverty and graduation rates so that state leaders can implement successful programs guided by research and best practice.

Schools with low-income students struggle to find unbiased research and clear information. James S. Coleman, an American sociologist, published the “Equality of Educational Opportunity (EEO) Report” or the “Coleman Report” in 1966 in response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Coleman (1966) found that the schools in the 1960s were highly segregated. In addition, he reported that resources had little effect on student achievement. Coleman’s findings have had significant implications for schools since its publication. Although Coleman’s report has caused great controversy over the years, it has inspired much research on the effectiveness of schools. “It [EEO] has also served as the primary focus for decades of research on school and schooling effects that have followed EEO (Gamoran & Long, 2006). James Coleman’s study conducted in the 1960s

has been blamed for much of the misconceptions about educating poor students. Coleman collected data from 600,000 students, 60,000 teachers, and 4,000 schools and was one of the largest studies ever conducted in educational history. He found that schools had little or no effect on poor students; teachers could influence only about 10% of the effects of poverty (Coleman, 1966). Coleman (1968) defined different types of inequalities. While legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 attempted to disprove this fallacy by taking measures to bridge the gaps, other studies show that No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) could actually damage the low-performing schools that serve economically-disadvantaged populations (Viadero, 2007; Wood, 2004).

Under NCLB, Title I schools are required to offer free supplemental services if they fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), a state's measure of progress toward the goal of 100% of students achieving state academic standards in at least reading/language arts and math. Failing to meet AYP also means that schools will face sanctions (Karp, 2004). Currently, there are 47% of urban districts that have at least one school listed as in need of improvement, and ultimately 75% of our schools will be on that list whether because of one subgroup of students or all groups and all grades. Many of these districts have high numbers of minorities and low-income students (Center on Education Policy, 2007).

Much research has identified several high-poverty schools that are achieving success and beating the odds. The improvement of poor schools has been attributed by some researchers (e.g., Barr & Parrett, 2007; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2005) to the work of Ron Edmonds (1979) who identified correlates of effective schools

in the 1970s. Certain factors are referred to as “correlates” because there are unique characteristics and processes in schools that correlate to the academic success of students. The framework of research on high-performing, high-poverty schools identified eight strategies and practices: effective district and school leadership; partnership with parents and community; high expectations for poor and culturally diverse students; early interventions and targeting of low-performing students, particularly in reading; the alignment of the curriculum; a culture of assessment and data literacy; sustenance of instructional capacity; and the organization of time, space, and transitions (Barr & Parrett, 2007).

A serious concern for schools of low-income students includes retaining children in grade. The retention rate of poor children is expensive and more common for low-income students. In addition, retention has been known to have a negative impact on students. Allington and McGill-Granzen (2007) have argued that “retention is largely a de facto discriminatory policy against the poor” (p. 46). According to Mead (2006), while minority males are more likely to be retained than white students, “both boys and girls from low-income homes are much more likely to be held back” (p. 10). It is well documented that students who have been retained at least one year ultimately end up dropping out of school altogether (NCES, 2006; Roderick, 1994; Snow et al., 2007; Wood, 2004). In 2004, 21% of students who had been retained failed to complete their high school education, especially if they had been retained in the secondary grades 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> (NCES, 2005).

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) or “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) vowed to have every student performing at grade level

by the year 2014. Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder (2006) reported that the No Child Left Behind document provided no an explanation or definition of *grade level* or *proficiency* (p. 15). The authors of the report also explained why proficiency for all is considered to be an oxymoron that cannot be realistically reached. In 2011, only 66% of the schools met AYP for the federal rating standards (Texas Education Agency, 2011). Furthermore, as the 2014 deadline draws closer, the United States Department of Education estimates that as many as 82% of U.S. schools would be labeled as failing under AYP federal accountability rating standards unless the proficiency requirement is overridden for states. In the meantime, it is vital that schools rely on effective practices and strategies to improve student learning. In fact, most studies recognized the importance of high expectations for all students. Schools have become so focused on standardized tests that they tend to lose relevant, real-world learning in the classrooms (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

### **Summary**

The issue of boy's literacies has remained a global debate. While some researchers have not interpreted the gender gap as a critical issue, others have called for gender literacy reform. However, many experts have agreed that the term *literacy* needs to be broadened to include students' out-of-school literacies.

The increase of high school students attending alternative high schools is a phenomenon that can be uniquely understood from the students' perspectives. As teachers become more and more pressured with high-stakes testing, the approach to literacy becomes limited to mechanized instruction and skill-based approaches to teaching. As a result, many young people decide to drop out of school (Karp, 2003;

Meier, 2004). In addition, researchers have discovered that there is a correlation between reading habits and dropping out of school.

Although the assumption had been that focusing on early literacy would lead to success in the secondary grades, much research on adolescent readers and writers has been conducted during the past decade. Several studies have provided reasons for the disengagement of secondary students (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006), and other studies have drawn on students' perspectives of their educational experiences (Alvermann, 2003; Moje et al., 2008; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Snow et al., 2007).

While literacy histories may be complex, we know that resistance and disengagement may be a student's only way to display some power in the classroom. Phenomenological studies are effective in gaining deeper understanding of lived experiences, which will guide educators and others to reexamine current policies and practices.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This phenomenological study was conducted using a naturalistic approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with qualitative data collection methods and analysis.

Qualitative methods provide a more in-depth and rich description, which helps us understand the phenomena of interest from the participants' perspectives. This chapter begins with a description of the research design and rationale, followed by the role of the researcher, the participants and setting, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. Lastly, the trustworthiness of the analysis, potential contributions, and limitations of the study are addressed.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

Phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of the lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Therefore, a phenomenological approach best supported the exploration of literacy experiences of male students enrolled in an alternative high school. According to Merriam (1998), "Qualitative-research draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experiences and interpretations" (p. 15).

Phenomenology is grounded in four distinct processes that assist the researcher with self-reflection during data analysis: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). During the epoche phase, the researcher aimed to remove any assumptions or preconceived ideas about the participants' literacy experiences. The second step, phenomenological reduction, included two dimensions: bracketing and horizontalization. Van Manen (1990)



described the term “bracketing,” coined by 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Edward Husserl, as a suspension of our beliefs. Rather than ignore the knowledge gained through experience, the researcher acknowledged prior beliefs about male students’ literacy experiences but attempted to “bracket” that knowledge in order to be open to the participants’ understanding of their own literary experience.

Merriam (1998) identified two levels of coding: “identifying information about the data and interpretive constructs related to the data” (p. 164). The researcher began with the process of open-coding to identify key phrases and statements during the initial coding of the data. The researcher used *in-vivo* coding to “preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55) in analyzing the data. Saldana (2009) stressed that *in-vivo* coding, meaning “that which is alive” (p. 87), helps to capture a deeper understanding of adolescents’ culture and language. After the initial coding, the researcher reread the transcripts using structured coding (Saldana, 2009), which matched the four general research questions guiding this study. The data in the transcribed interviews were treated as equally important during the coding process, which is part of the horizontalization process. According to Moustakas (1994), “When we horizontalize, each phenomenon has equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence” (p. 95). After carefully reviewing the transcripts, irrelevant statements were selected and excluded from thematic statements. The “Horizons” (p. 97) or meanings of the phenomena were then clustered into themes.

The third phase, imaginative variation, focuses on all the possibilities connected with the essences and meanings of an experience. Moustakas (1994) clarified, “The thrust is away from facts and measurable entities and toward meanings and essences” (p. 98).

During this phase, the researcher reflected on many various possible meanings for the experiences described by the participants. The final phase, synthesis of meanings and essences, recognizes the importance of unifying the experiences into a whole. Moustakas (1994) explained that “the essences of any experience are never totally exhausted” (p. 100). At this stage, the researcher identified the common experiences of the participants to capture the essences of their literacy experiences.

In qualitative case studies, each case (a single event or person) is a bounded system which allows us to understand it as an object as opposed to a process (Smith, 1979; Stake, 1995). Merriam (1998) commented that the within-case and cross-case analyses allow the researcher to analyze the data from each participant and then across all cases to identify “categories, themes, or typologies that conceptualize the data from all the cases, or it can result in building substantive theory offering an integrated framework covering multiple cases” (p. 195).

This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of 10 male students at an alternative high school. The intent was to listen closely while processing the participants’ learning experiences; significant issues were developed and identified during the study. The students played a major role in the collection and analysis of the data, and their voice was a key element in this qualitative study. Eisenhart (2006) emphasized the importance of clearly showing how the data were organized and interpreted so as to compel the use of specific concepts, imagery, or narratives and to support the findings. This means that the methods in the research are extensions of what human subjects typically do (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The research questions guiding this study included the following:

1. How do male students attending an alternative high school describe their literacy experiences?
2. How do male students attending an alternative high school perceive themselves as readers and writers?
3. What have male students in an alternative high school learned or read that has been meaningful or significant to them?
4. How can schools better meet the needs of male students?

### **Role of the Researcher**

In *Researching Lived Experience*, Van Manen (1990) asked, “What is the significance of theorizing and research and scholarly thought if they absolutely fail to connect with the bodily practices of everyday life (p. 148)?” As I reflect on this question, I am reminded to apply and connect educational theories and research to my teaching. As educators, we gain insight into our students’ experiences when we listen and reflect. Otherwise, theories become abstract thoughts, irrelevant ideas, and useless practices. We must connect our knowledge to our practical experiences as educators. Reflection brings us back to our reality as we focus on our new understandings, not only of our students but as our role as educators.

My role as a participant observer enabled me to have access to students on a daily basis as I am currently one of three English/ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers at the high school. During the time of the interviews, I had been teaching at the alternative high school for three years. Before I describe my role as a researcher, I will provide some biographical information about my background in education and my interest in working with adolescents.

I entered the field of education while serving as a part-time Catholic youth minister. My experience in working with high school students led me to change my undergraduate major from management to secondary education. At that time, I was employed in the personnel office of a local bank. Upon graduating from college, I taught English Language Arts at a middle school for three years, but I left the classroom to accept a full-time position in diocesan youth and young adult ministry with the intention of returning to the classroom in the future. I returned to education eight years ago as a social studies and Language Arts teacher at a middle school, where I also served as a part-time assistant principal. For the past three years, I have taught secondary English and a reading elective course at the alternative high school. I currently have a total of 11 years of teaching experience at the secondary level.

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as a human instrument (Patton, 2001) to “understand the world as it unfolds, and to be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge” (p. 51). The researcher as instrument requires that the researcher carefully reflect on potential sources of prejudgments and error. Patton (2001) and Van Manen (1990) encourage the researcher to acknowledge existing biases and how they might affect the study during data collection and analysis. As a teacher at the alternative high school, I am familiar with the setting, the curriculum, and the students. According to Merriam (1998), the participant’s perspective as an insider is referred to as “emic” (p. 6). As a researcher, the key is to gain a deeper understanding of the students’ literacy experiences from their perspectives.

My training as a youth minister, teacher, and principal could potentially affect my views and judgment. As a former youth minister, I conducted retreats, conferences, and

leadership training for young people and parish youth ministers. I established relationships with adolescents as a youth minister in a Catholic church setting. Youth ministry coordinators are trained in the vision of ministry, which is to foster the total personal and spiritual growth of young people. My experience as a youth minister prompted me to want to assist students and offer advice concerning the life issues they brought up during the interviews. However, I held back as I listened intently to capture the essence of their literacy experiences.

As a former part-time assistant principal of a middle school, my role included disciplining the students. I discussed behavioral issues with students and counseled them about consequences. I also implemented a school-wide mentoring program during my internship. Although the students that I interviewed at the alternative high school did not know of my previous administrative background, I was still not sure to what extent the students would trust me and share their experiences with me as a teacher and a researcher. Fortunately, they allowed me to enter their world as they openly shared their experiences.

As an English teacher, I have been trained in the components of the reader's and writer's workshop approach, which is built on a constructivist classroom environment that allows opportunities for choice in reading and writing authentic texts. My teaching background could have affected my personal reaction to students' stories about their literacy practices. During the study, my focus on the students' experiences allowed me to "bracket" my assumptions to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

## **Participants**

The selection of 10 participants was criterion-based (cf. Patton, 1990). The participants were male students in their senior year in high school who had decided to enroll in an alternative high school. A purposeful selection of participants with similar characteristics served to provide information for this study. According to the specified criteria by the dissertation committee, the senior English teacher was asked to recommend male students who met the selection criteria for the study. Other selection criteria recommended by the dissertation committee and approved by the institutional review board (IRB committee) included the following criteria: male gender, teacher recommendation, grade-level status as juniors or seniors, no referral to a disciplinary campus for behavioral issues, no history of grade retention, and no students from the researcher's classes. Then, each student was asked personally about participating in this research study. After the purpose and time requirements were explained, an appointment was scheduled either during the researcher's conference period or at the students' convenience. Most of the students were in a physics class during the researcher's conference period, so their physics teacher was consulted ahead of time about the interview process. The physics teacher was fully supportive of this study and allowed his students to participate in the interviews during his class period.

The 10 students and the English teacher received a consent form describing the purpose of the study and their role as participants, followed by a brief description of what participating in this study entailed. Confidentiality was explained to each student during the interviews, and any questions from participants or their parents/guardians were addressed. Participation in the study was voluntary and was kept strictly confidential;

participants were able to withdraw at any time without penalty. Students were also asked to choose a pseudonym to avoid any potentially adverse reaction to their participation. Prior consent was obtained from each student and parent/guardian to audiotape the interviews. In addition, the parents had the opportunity to contact the researcher if they had any questions about the study before they signed the consent form. All information has been kept in a locked, fire-proof cabinet for safety and security reasons. Consent forms are included in Appendices A, B, C, and D.

A pilot study was conducted to establish the process and field test the procedures. The pilot study consisted of interviewing five students, two females and three males, in order to establish that the proposed questions were unique, open-ended, and relevant to the students. One of the pilot interviewees was the foster brother of a research participant, but none of the male students who participated in the pilot interviews were involved in the actual research study. The pilot interviews were transcribed, and the digital recordings were saved in digital voice folders using Windows Media Player. As a result of the pilot study, the need to make the first interview more casual in order to become better acquainted with the participants without compromising the formality of the interviewing relationship was identified (Patton, 2001; Seidman, 2006). The semi-structured interview approach also allowed follow-up questions to student responses while using the interview questions as a guide. It was important to provide an appropriate balance for the participants to allow them to feel comfortable sharing details about their literacy experiences during the interview process. Seidman (2006) also cautioned against establishing a full “We” relationship with the participant in which “the interviewer would

become an equal participant, and the resulting discourse would be a conversation, not an interview” (p. 96).

### **Setting**

The study was conducted at Alternative High School (pseudonym) located in a large urban school district in South Texas. The school was reopened as a high school in the fall of 2006 and currently serves as the alternative high school, the teen mothers’ school, and the staff development and parent involvement centers. The district spent nearly \$500,000 for upgrades to the facility, which was formerly an elementary school. The alternative school is advertised to the public as a school of choice, and there is currently a waiting list of students wishing to enroll at this school. The curriculum is compacted, which allows students to receive a year’s credit in a core subject in one semester of 18 weeks. Electives can be completed within a nine-week period.

The attendance area of the alternative high school includes a large, low-to-middle income, Hispanic community of Mexican-origin. According to the 2009-2010 Campus Profile of the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), 78% of the students were economically disadvantaged, and only 2% were classified as being Limited English Proficient (LEP). The total student population was comprised of approximately 221 students from 8<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade; 85% were Hispanic, 5% were African American, and 10% were white. The mobility rate was 89% (Texas Education Agency, 2010).

### **Procedures for Data Collection**

According to Seidman (2006), in-depth interviews are designed to reconstruct the participant’s past experiences and to explore their meaning. A three-phase interview process allows the researcher to gain insight into the lived experiences of the participants.



The interviews were conducted during a four-month period at the alternative high school. Most of the student interviews took place in one of the meeting rooms near the entrance area of the school. When the meeting room was unavailable, the interviews were conducted in the researcher's classroom during her 50-minute planning period. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes; a member check was conducted during the third follow-up meeting to clarify the participants' responses. The researcher and students examined the transcripts to provide the students with the opportunity to make any changes, corrections, and deletions. This also permitted the researcher to ask further questions to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences. Member checks further increase the validity of the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Some of the participants were completing their classes before the end of the semester in January and were only available for interviews in the morning. The researcher took personal time off from school to meet with these students at their convenience. After each interview, the researcher listened to the audio-tape recordings and transcribed the interview verbatim. Within a six-month period, approximately three days per month were taken from teaching duties to interview some of the participants and transcribe the interviews.

One of the challenges during the study was obtaining the students' latest schedule changes from the school office. The researcher had to routinely check with the students about their completion status due to the self-paced nature of the alternative campus. Two of the twelve participants who had initially been interviewed had completed their coursework early in November and were unavailable to complete the study.

Multiple sources of data were collected to provide a basis for triangulation as analyses were conducted and the cases were transcribed. For example, data was obtained primarily from audio-taped, semi-structured interviews with student participants, as well as interviews with their English teacher. Student documents and a researcher's journal were used to assist the researcher with data analysis. Student records obtained from the school office included the students' transcripts and attendance information. See Table 3.1 for the interview timeline with the male participants during the study. Table 3.2 provides the interview dates held with each of the participants' English teacher. All of the participants were recommended for this study by their English teacher.

Table 3.1

*Interview Timeframe with Male Participants*

Male Participants	1 <sup>st</sup> Interview	Follow-up	Member check
Allen	October 21	November 2	November 18
DJ	October 26	November 4	December 7
Blue	October 28	November 4	December 17
Bob	October 29	December 7	February 14
Ike	November 18	December 9	December 14
Tom	November 19	December 14	January 20
Joe	December 7	December 14	January 13
Ted	December 8	December 15	February 21
Andres	December 16	January 13	February 28
Justin	January 27	February 2	February 9

Table 3.2

*Interview Timeframe with English Teacher*

	Date	Students Discussed
Interview 1	Oct. 27	Allen DJ Blue
Interview 2	Nov. 18	Bob Ike Tom
Interview 3	Jan 20	Joe Andres Ted
Interview 4	Feb 27	Justin

**Student interviews.** During four months of the academic school year, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. This semi-structured format facilitated the opportunity to acquire further information through additional questioning. According to Patton (2001), the purpose of interviewing is “to allow us to enter into the other person’s experience” (p. 196), which can shed light and understanding about the people behind the numbers and put faces on those statistics we often read about. The researcher relied on a digital voice recorder and a researcher’s journal during the interview. For the interviews, each participant either chose or was given a pseudonym for identification, and student record information was aligned with data from interviews. The information was recorded on a table and was incorporated into the results of the study.

The initial interview was held at the beginning of the study to gather information about the participant's expectations, questions, beliefs, and experiences. The interviews began with general informal conversation to discover information about the students and allow flexibility in encouraging them to freely share their experiences (Patton, 2001). Then the researcher proceeded with specific, open-ended questions regarding the students' attitudes toward reading, computers, writing, and school. The interview questions served as a guide and were adapted for this study (Merriam, 1998; Moje & Tysvaer, 2010). The set of sample questions for the participants are included in Appendix E, and the questions used for their teacher are included in Appendix F.

**English teacher interviews.** Separate interviews were held with the students' English teacher, providing a context for the students' experiences and performance in the classroom setting. Specific information about the students' literacy experience from the teacher's perspective served to validate other sources of information from student interviews, attendance records, and academic transcripts.

**Student records.** Student records (e.g., attendance records, standardized test scores, and transcripts) were obtained to gain further information about the students' literacy experiences. Attendance records provided information about the students' history of absences, and the academic records were collected to confirm student and English teacher interviews and to provide further reflection pertaining to the students' literacy experiences.

### **Procedures for Data Analysis**

**Student interviews.** The procedures for analyzing this phenomenological study entailed transcribing verbatim audio-taped interviews using the constant-comparative

method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher began with an open-coding system to reduce the data into focused themes to identify the phenomena under study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Structured coding (Saldana, 2009) was then used to match the four research questions guiding this study, utilizing *in-vivo* coding to preserve the participants' voices and language (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2009).

Although phenomenologists do not normally use a highly structured coding system with categories, a coding structure was an asset in providing a deeper meaning of the students' literacy experiences (Charmaz, 2006). As a beginning qualitative researcher, a structured coding system facilitated the development of core themes associated with each of the four research questions. After reading and rereading the transcribed interviews, the researcher highlighted key words and quotes that either stood out or were repeated across the study. The individual transcripts were analyzed using the constant-comparative method to develop categories. Throughout the process of comparing and categorizing data, information was labeled and coded within emerging themes that described the students' experiences and perspectives.

Data analysis began early on during the collection of data and continued for several months after the interviews. After gathering data from the "within-case" analysis, a cross-case analysis was conducted to search for patterns in the form of themes that cut across the students' individual experiences (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2001). Several charts were then created to organize the data into meaningful information. The first chart included the participants' responses to each of the interview questions. The second table included *in-vivo* coding responses, categories, and emerging themes. Various charts served to organize the data in a structured manner as the researcher began to interpret the

meanings of the students' responses. A sample chart is included in Appendix G. Sample common categories are listed in Table 3.3.

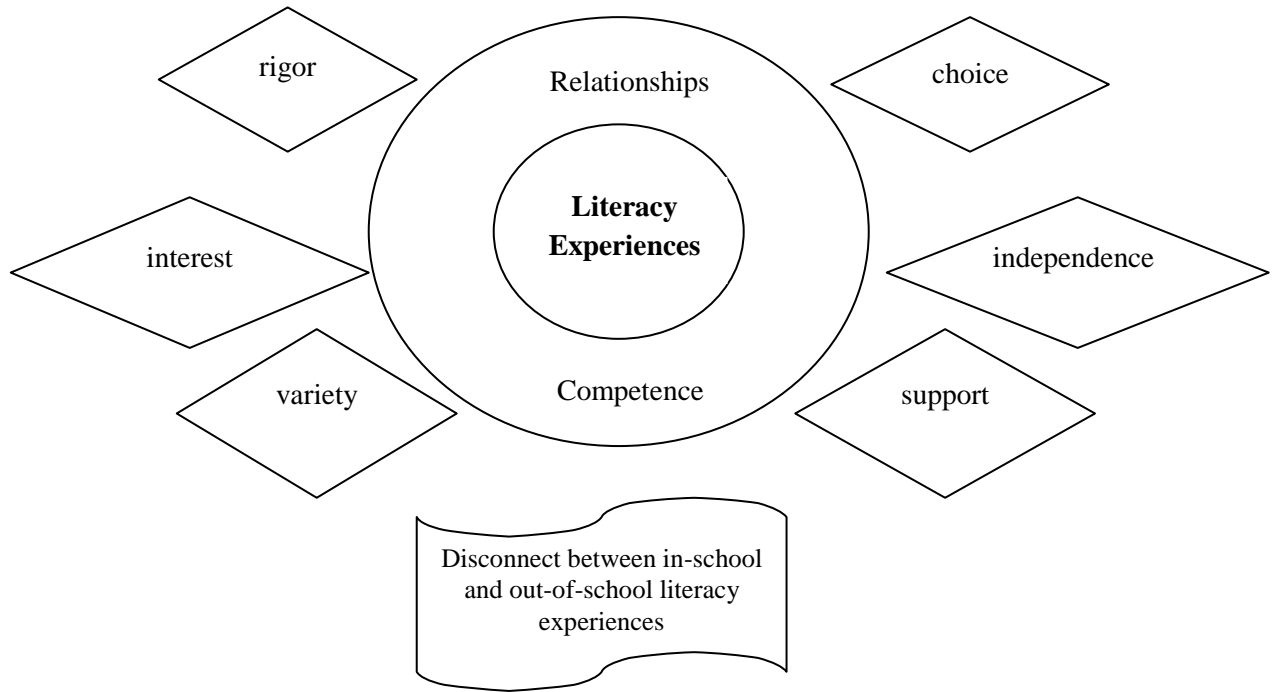
Table 3.3

*Sample Common Categories*

Preference for variety, interest, and rigor	Family and social relationships	Sense of competence	Recommendation for choice, independence, and support
Skills-based instruction	Learning to read	Positive identity as readers	Limited choices
Transmission; lecture	Recommendation of books	Identity as writers	Desire for independent learning
Decline in high school reading	Teacher rapport	Identity as learners	Small classes
Limited library use	Social networking	Self-motivation	Personalized support
Use of online curriculum	Family influence	Student reading test scores	Teacher rapport
Computerized reading program	Friends' reading	Reading comprehension; vocabulary	Meaningful learning
Favorite authors, books, and genres			Learning styles

After meeting with a peer debriefer, emerging themes were kept on a wall chart for reference and reflection during analysis. A result of the analysis is shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Analysis of Themes



**English teacher interviews.** The participants' English teacher was interviewed about students' literacy experiences in the classroom. Audio-taped interviews with the English teacher were conducted in her classroom after school hours. Ten interviews, scheduled in four separate sessions, were digitally audio-recorded and manually transcribed. During the interviews with the English teacher, the researcher attempted to capture the students' overall literacy experiences in the classroom setting. Member checks were held with the teacher after each interview session to confirm understanding of the teacher's responses. The semi-structured interview questions for the teacher are included in Appendix F.

**Student records.** Several sources of data were used in the analysis of the students' literacy experiences and engagement. Besides in-depth interviews, other sources analyzed included the students' academic records. The researcher analyzed attendance records, course transcripts, and standardized test scores. The transcripts provided information on students' personal background and history of school attendance. In addition, student course grades were compared with other sources, such as state test scores and student information from student and teacher interviews. These documents provided the researcher a comprehensive perspective of the data.

### **Trustworthiness of Analyses**

Trustworthiness has been compared to validity and reliability in quantitative methodology. In qualitative research studies, trustworthiness refers to the means of evaluating the credibility of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important to point out that other limitations of qualitative case studies could involve the issues of reliability and validity. Thus, without adequate training and self-reflection, the researcher as the primary instrument could present preconceived ideas about the phenomena under study.

Merriam (1998) provided suggestions to establish trustworthiness of the data analyses based on her research experience, and the researcher carefully adhered to "basic strategies to enhance internal validity" (p. 204). For example, in addition to transcribed interviews and student documents, member checks, a researcher's journal, and peer debriefing served to establish credibility. Trustworthiness increased when multiple methods of data collection and analysis were employed by the researcher. According to Denzin (1989), it is through triangulation of the data that "researchers can overcome intrinsic bias" (p. 307) and enhance internal validity. Member checks provided



continuous clarification and verification of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Feedback from and discussion with the teacher and student participants about the researcher's interpretations and conclusions also increased the trustworthiness of the study.

A researcher's journal was kept to record ongoing reflections and ideas throughout the study. The researcher's journal allowed the researcher to stay focused and keep track of thoughts and feelings related to the study during the process of analysis. Analytical memos during the research process assisted the researcher in reflecting on the emerging themes. The ongoing analysis of multiple sources of information, including student interviews, teacher interviews, and student documents served to triangulate the data. See samples of analytical memos below:

**Analytical Memo on November 21, 2010**

After the first three interviews, the researcher noted some key ideas:

- Students read a variety of materials and shared experiences about books they had enjoyed reading
- were influenced by family members
- had a positive identity as readers based on different reasons
- desired small class size, self-paced, and personalized instruction

### **Analytical Memo on Sample of Emerging Themes – March 23, 2011**

- Engagement versus discouragement; personal interests
- Low expectations versus high expectations, mechanized instruction
- Choice versus lack of choice; wide range versus limited topics
- Value of boys' reading and writing: relevant, purposeful, individualized, control, opportunities, learning styles
- Discovery and exploring: library visits, "flow" experiences
- Social, identity, affinity, networks, disconnect, action, success

**Peer debrief.** According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), Peer debriefing "...is a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). The peer debriefing process enhanced the credibility of the qualitative data analysis in this study.

The peer reviewer was a doctoral student in curriculum and instruction and was employed by the school district as a secondary literacy coach. The peer reviewer examined a sample of the transcripts with the researcher and offered insights and suggestions. As the reviewer read the transcripts aloud, the researcher listened to the students' words in a reflective mode. The peer reviewer's critical eye allowed the researcher to gain a deeper perspective of some of the literacy experiences, which the researcher could have taken for granted. The peer reviewer also suggested keeping a wall chart during data analysis to process the categories and themes, which contributed significantly to the identification of themes during the data analysis.

### **Potential Contributions of the Study**

Previous research has documented many reasons why students become disengaged in the learning process and decide to drop out of school. “Nationwide, nearly one in three U.S. high school students drop out each year – averaging 7,000 every school day or one every 26 seconds” (Swanson, 2008). This study describes students’ literacy experiences as they chose to leave their home campus and eventually graduate from an alternative high school. A thick description enhances the transferability of data through various sources, including transcribed interviews, a researcher’s journal, and student academic records (Charmaz, 2006; Merriam, 1998).

Although we have dropout statistics readily available, we have little insight into the lived experiences of these students. This study attempted to fill a gap in our understanding of the literacy experiences from the male students’ perspectives. In addition, this study intended to give male students a voice so that educators might gain a deeper insight to the students’ own perceptions of their reading and writing experiences.

This study was conducted at one alternative high school and gathered information from 10 male students through interviews and student documents. Although generalizations cannot be made to a broader population based on these factors, the information provides educators and others with a deeper understanding about male students’ literacy practices.

### **Summary**

A phenomenological approach was used to capture the essence of the literacy experiences of male students enrolled in an alternative high school. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the literacy experiences of 10 male students attending an

alternative high school. A phenomenological study was selected to allow the researcher to be immersed in the lived experiences of the participants and gain a deeper understanding of their point of view. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) stated that “the phenomenologist views human behavior--what people say and do--as a product of how people interpret their world” (p. 13). Both within-case and cross-case analyses were used to investigate the reading and writing experiences of male students and contribute to the results of other studies that have also attempted to gain insights into students’ literacy practices.

This phenomenological inquiry focused on 12th-grade males who enrolled at a local alternative campus for different reasons. The researcher’s assumption was that the students’ experiences could best be understood from their own lived experiences. It is through the understanding of the students’ perspectives that educators and others can address the underachievement issues facing many students, especially boys. Data sources included three, in-depth interviews of each participant, teacher interviews, and student documents to triangulate the data. A researcher’s journal supplemented the data with analytical memos pertaining to thoughts and ideas during the study. Member checks, peer debriefing, and an audit trail were employed to enhance the credibility of data analysis. In the next chapter, the participants are introduced, the findings are presented, the research questions are reviewed, and the approach used to identify the themes across all 10 students is discussed in detail.

## **Chapter 4**

### **THE FINDINGS**

#### **Background**

This chapter presents the results and data analysis that supports the phenomenological perspectives of the literacy experiences of male students attending an alternative high school. As stated in the first chapter, the purpose of conducting this study was to share the insights of male students describing their in-school and out-of-school experiences in reading and writing by using the following research questions:

1. How do male students attending an alternative high school describe their literacy experiences?
2. How do male students attending an alternative high school perceive themselves as readers and writers?
3. What have male students in an alternative high school learned or read that has been meaningful or significant to them?
4. How can schools better meet the needs of male students?

This study sought to give the male participants a voice by allowing their unique stories to be heard. Therefore, the researcher hopes the results will provide valuable insights into the experiences of these students resulting in a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study. To accomplish these objectives, the researcher made the decision to answer research questions primarily in the participants' own voices. The results could provide educators with additional information as they strive to conduct further research that will assist male students to be successful in both reading and writing.

After within-case and cross-case analyses, the researcher analyzed the data for patterns in the form of themes and categories. The most commonly identified themes

elicited from the interviews were (a) a preference for variety, interest, and balanced rigor that resulted in a disconnect between students' in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences; (b) the importance of family and social relationships; (c) a sense of competence; and (d) recommendation for an environment that provides choice with a relevant purpose, independence, and personalized instructional support. In addition to the interview transcripts, other data used for this study include teacher interviews, student documents, and the researcher's journal.

Participant profiles (see Table 4.1) are included to introduce the participants and provide a brief background to contextualize each of their experiences. The profile included the following: age, race, parent or guardian, academic status as noted on student documents, primary reason for attending alternative high school, and student's plans after high school. Student data sources included attendance and academic records, as well as interviews with the participants' English teacher.

Table 4.1

*Participant Profiles*

Participant	Age	Race	Guardian	Academic Status	Reason	Plans after high school
Allen	17	Caucasian	Foster parents	Passing	Early graduate	Welding program
DJ	17	African-American	Grand-parents	Failing algebra	Fell behind at early college high school	Music production; join Marines
Blue	17	Caucasian	Mom and stepdad	Failing	Recover attendance and grades	U. S. Marine Corps
Bob	18	Caucasian	Mother	42 absences	Mom had surgery	No information
Ike	18	Hispanic	Mother and two brothers	Failing	Recover grades	Enlist in the Navy
Tom	17	Hispanic	Parents	Failing physics	Recover grades	Sales jobs
Joe	18	Hispanic	Mom, girlfriend, and baby	Failing history	Recover grades	Law enforcement
Ted	17	Caucasian	Parents	Excessive absences	Treatment	Undecided
Andres	18	Hispanic	Friends	Failing	Overload at early college high school	Enlist in the military; chiropractor
Justin	18	Hispanic	Friends	Failing	Unfocused	Cosmetology

## **Participant Profiles**

### **Ms. Rodriguez – English Teacher** *(All names are pseudonyms)*

Ms. Rodriguez has been one of three English teachers at the alternative high school for the past two years. She had worked as a paraprofessional for six years and as an English and ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher for the past 25 years. Ms. Rodriguez received both her undergraduate and graduate degrees at a local university.

In response to the question about the professional development opportunities teachers needed to better assist students at the alternative high school, she replied:

I think that we should be writing across the content areas. It should not be the ELA's (English Language Art's) responsibility; it should be everybody's responsibility, whether it's math, science, or social studies. And not to write short answers or phrases but actually have them write complete sentences with a subject and predicate, and for them to write more: read, think, and write.

Ms. Rodriguez believed that we can we better assist our male students by building a positive rapport with each student and by not giving up on our students:

I think with the male students, it's been my experience that you have to bond with them first, and if you bond with them, everything else comes sort of naturally for them. So, they need a lot of motivation and pep talk: "Hey, you can do it," that sort of thing. "Hey, you can do it; let's do this thing." "Si se puede!" ("Yes, it can be done!") You just have to motivate these kids. They don't feel secure. They're two or three years behind, and their self-esteem is low. And that's what basically has to be done. The majority of my students have been successful. Now, there are some that just don't get it yet.

### **Allen**

Allen was the first participant that I interviewed. He was a 17-year-old, Caucasian male. He first heard about the alternative high school from his stepbrother and decided to enroll at the beginning of the school year. Allen had been in the foster care system and moved around the country as a child. He could be described as mild-mannered and extremely polite. Although he seemed a bit shy at first, there was a calmness and



introspectiveness about him. When Allen transferred to the alternative school in the fall, he was passing all his classes at his former high school. His academic records listed him on the Recommended Achievement Plan, which required four extra credits than the minimum graduation plan.

Allen had much to say about his reading and writing experiences. Ms. Rodriguez, his English teacher, reported that Allen was above average in reading comprehension and writing. She described his writing as very deep; he elaborated extensively in his writing samples. She also stated that he needed more time to complete his assignments. In response to the question about the support she needed to assist Allen, Ms. Rodriguez responded, “Maybe challenging him more; perhaps assigning more analytical reading passages because I think he has the capability of thinking critically. I think he’s capable of being very successful.”

Allen stated that he had learned about the alternative high school from his step-brother who had been enrolled at the end of last year, adding, “Before that, I didn’t even know that this alternative school existed, and then we’d see people [enrolling at the alternative high school] and think, ‘Oh, they went to a different school; they’re gonna go to accelerated.’”

In response to the question about whether or not the alternative school had met his expectations, Allen replied,

Yes and no. Yes, because I expected that it would be a little quicker to graduate early. And no, in that I didn’t expect there to be as many people that there are because I was told they usually tried to keep the amount of people under 300, and it really looks like there’s more than that.

Allen’s reason for attending an alternative campus was to graduate early:

I want to graduate early. I took some classes here this summer, and they said I could graduate by January. So I thought that was a good idea, so I could get a head start on life.

After graduation, Allen planned to enroll in the welding program at a local community college.

## **DJ**

DJ was a 17-year-old, African-American male who had transferred to the alternative campus from a college preparatory high school where he was falling behind in mathematics. The oldest of three boys, he lived with his grandparents, his legal guardians. He was soft-spoken and respectful.

According to his transcripts, DJ had failed physics and Algebra 2 along with the math and science state tests. However, he received commended scores in both his English Language Arts and Social Studies state tests. DJ was on the Distinguished Achievement Plan, which required four extra credits than the minimum plan and student achievement of four advanced measures. These measures include college entrance exams and dual credit college courses.

DJ's English teacher, Ms. Rodriguez, described him as above average and a critical thinker. She reported that at times he tended to become a "little lethargic" with some of his assignments toward the end of the semester, but he managed to complete the course within four to six weeks. According to DJ's school application, he worked a total of 35 hours per week at a local fast-food chain restaurant. His reason for attending an alternative high school was "to make up a class [algebra] and to graduate early. I'm making it up right now. It's one of my classes."

Student documents indicated that DJ had left the college preparatory high school to move with his father to a major city in Texas. However, he returned and applied at the alternative high school after the college prep high school did not re-enroll him. His plans after graduation included enlisting in the U.S. Navy and then working in music production. DJ played the piano and percussion instruments and had a home-based studio where he worked with the production and composition of music.

### **Blue**

Blue was a 17-year-old, Caucasian male who lived with his mother and her boyfriend, his legal guardians. His demeanor was serious and reflective during our interview sessions. His plan after high school was to attend boot camp in San Diego, California. Blue's mother was in the Navy, and he was interested in joining the U. S. Marine Corps.

Blue's academic records show that he had failed five of seven courses during his junior year in high school before enrolling at the alternative high school. Ironically, Blue had a commended score in his social studies state test although United States History was one of the classes he failed. He also had a high score in his science state test but had failed his science class. His attendance records listed 14 absences for that year. Blue was on the Minimum High School Program for graduation, which required a total of 22 credits. He had successfully completed all of his state tests by the spring.

According to Ms. Rodriguez, Blue had difficulty completing his research project in her class. Ms. Rodriguez explained that he had chosen to research a famous general in the military, but, "his attitude has totally, totally changed; he's the one who chose it, and now he's telling me, "Well, what other way can I do [the research]?" In response to the

question about his academic writing, Blue admitted that he struggled with writing, “I just feel like I’m not good at it.”

Blue was attending an alternative school because he had fallen behind:

Last year I screwed up pretty bad, and this year whenever I went in to get my schedule, my counselor told me about this place and said that I’d be able to catch up on everything and graduate faster because she knows that I just want to get out of school.

### **Bob**

Bob was an 18-year-old, Caucasian male. He lived with his mother who had recently undergone surgery; he had approximately 50 absences because he had stayed home to care for his mother when she returned home from the hospital. According to student documents, Bob was identified as economically disadvantaged and eligible to receive free school meals because his mom was disabled.

Bob’s transcripts showed he had only failed economics during his junior year, and his attendance records indicated a total of 42 absences. Bob had received a commended score in his social studies state test, and he came close to being commended on his English Language Arts test as well. His academic record listed him on the Minimum Plan of 22 credit hours to graduate from high school.

Bob was reserved and quiet but quite articulate about recounting his reading experiences. His English teacher, Ms. Rodriguez, described him as a “good kid” but added that his main problem was his attendance: “I was always calling home; I could never get a hold of the mother. I always asked him, ‘How are you gonna keep a job if you keep on missing school?’”

Bob described the details of his mother’s surgery and shared how he had been denied credit because of his absences even when he had kept up with his schoolwork:

I had excessive absences at my home school. My mom had a fuse on her spine and lower back; I just had about 50 absences, and they were going to deny me credit unless I moved schools.

### **Ike**

Ike was a 17-year-old, Hispanic male who lived with his mother and two younger brothers. Ike's student documents indicated that he was eligible to receive free school meals. During the first nine weeks of his senior year in high school, Ike had failed three of seven courses – Communication Applications (Speech), English IV, and Algebra II. His withdrawal grades for the second nine weeks showed that he was failing government and English IV. However, Ike had successfully completed all of his required state tests. Transcripts indicated that he was on the Minimum High School Plan for graduation, which required a total of 22 credits. His attendance report listed approximately 17 absences during the first semester of his senior year.

At the time of his first interview, Ike had only been enrolled at the alternative high school for three weeks. According to Ms. Rodriguez, Ike was already completing English IV. Ms. Rodriguez described him as self-motivated, savvy, and a “go-getter.” She also commented that his reading and writing skills were very good. Ike's reason for attending an alternative high school was to graduate early and then to enlist in the U.S. Marines:

I heard about it [alternative campus] in my sophomore year. Several kids were talking about it, and they were saying how easy it was, and you can graduate faster, so I thought about it this year so that I could hurry up and start my career - just decided to come here.

### **Tom**

Tom was a 17-year-old, Hispanic male who lived with his parents. He arrived at the alternative campus in November and completed his coursework at the end of January.

According to student documents, Tom was eligible to receive reduced meals. His transcript showed that he had failed pre-calculus during the first nine weeks of his senior year. Tom had stated that he enrolled at the alternative high school because he was failing physics. Tom was commended on his social studies state test and had completed all state test requirements. He was on the Recommended Achievement Plan, which required a total of 26 credits.

During the first interview, Tom seemed distracted; therefore, I wasn't sure if I would follow up after the first interview. However, I thought I needed to give him a second chance because it was the week before Thanksgiving and his class was going to the gymnasium for a basketball game that day. Fortunately, he showed much more interest and openness during the last two interview sessions.

Ms. Rodriguez praised Tom, "He did a wonderful job with his poem." He also had scored 100% on the *Beowulf* quiz. While he did well academically, Ms. Rodriguez mentioned that Tom needed "to be redirected to take off his cap." Tom was an avid basketball player. Whenever I needed to schedule an interview with him, I knew that I could always find him in the gym.

### **Joe**

Joe was a 17-year-old, Hispanic male who had enrolled at the alternative school the year before. He lived at home with his mother, his girlfriend, and his newborn baby girl. On his student application form to the alternative campus, Joe indicated that he received reduced or free lunch. He was mature and serious about completing high school.

Joe's transcripts showed that he was passing his courses and received high scores on his state tests, including a commended score in social studies; he came close to

commended in Reading. His graduation plan, however, was to meet the Minimum High School Program requirements of 22 credits.

Ms. Rodriguez commented that Joe was “a good student overall, finished all of his assignments,” and scored “very very high” on his English Language Arts standardized state test. However, she noticed that he “needed to be motivated at the very end” because he was struggling to complete his assignments.

Joe displayed a career interest in law enforcement. He planned to obtain a criminal justice degree, but he had not decided where he wanted to attend college. Joe stated that he was failing history, which was one of his favorite subjects:

I came here because I was actually doing pretty good; I was actually failing one class [World History], and I just couldn't seem to bring my grade up. I tried, and I couldn't get a grasp on it and bring it up.

In his student application, Joe explained why he believed he should be accepted to the alternative high school:

I have a newborn child that I now have to take care of, along with trying to support her while going to school. I will overcome this by getting my education and finishing school as soon as I can.

### **Ted**

Ted can be described as a bright, talkative, 17-year-old, Caucasian male. He had been enrolled in an honors science class at his former high school. He lived with his parents and had only been enrolled at the alternative high school for two weeks at the time of his first interview. According to student records, Ted was failing pre-calculus and a career marketing elective course when he transferred to the alternative campus. Attendance records showed that he had accumulated 25 absences by the time he transferred in November and another 20 absences at the alternative high school between

November and March. His academic transcript listed that he received highly commended scores on his math, science, and social studies state tests. He had also come close to commended on his Reading test. His graduation plan was Recommended Achievement Plan , which required a total of 26 credits instead of the 22 minimum credit requirements.

Ted's excessive absences contributed to his prolonged stay at the alternative high school. His attendance was also a factor in a gap during the three-phased interview during this study. His first interview was in early December, and his final interview was not until February. Therefore, I was not sure if he would complete his final interview. His absences after the Christmas break were due to a skateboarding accident during the holidays; he had surgery on his wrist.

Ted's English teacher, Ms. Rodriguez, reported that he tended to rush through his work. She did not have much to report as he had many absences. However, Ted's statement about reasons for leaving his high school displayed his attitude toward school:

I had teachers at [former high school] just because I was absent a lot, yet I would still turn in the work; they didn't like that. I had higher grades than kids who were going every day. And I had teachers who would get on my case every day, and I would say, "What does it matter if I miss it?" I would do make-up hours. I just wasn't there whenever they would lecture, and they would get mad about that, and they would say I wasn't there for the learning experience, and I would say, "How does that make any sense if I am learning it?" I would make higher grades on the test than the kids who were there every day, and I couldn't really tell them about my medicine because if I do, I get pulled off that medicine, and I need that medicine to focus.

Ted was undecided about his future plans after high school:

I want to graduate recommended; I want to switch back to my home school and go to a university. I kinda wanted to be a pharmacist, but I started to realize for those you have to be strong in math and science. Those are not really my strongest points. It's not necessarily the job that I think I would have a hard time with; it's the schooling required to get to that job. You have to take a lot of calculus and stuff. I don't know.



## **Andres**

Andres was an 18-year-old, Hispanic male. He lived with a friend and his friend's family because his parents had been incarcerated. Student records listed Andres as homeless and economically disadvantaged. He had attended a local college preparatory high school for three years until he fell behind. Andres was failing a dual credit college U.S. History course and government when he transferred to the alternative high school. According to transcripts, he had completed all his required state tests and was on the Distinguished Achievement Plan of 26 credits, but he had dropped his pre-calculus class.

His English teacher, Ms. Rodriguez, knew that he read a lot "because he said that was his way of escaping." However, Andres struggled at the very end of her course with the research paper. She was concerned about Andres's lack of motivation and confrontational attitude at times. Andres shared that he had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) when he was younger, and he admitted to having mood swings.

In response to the question about the reason for enrolling at an alternative high school, Andres provided the following reflection:

When I was in college prep, I was taking basically the same courses I'm taking over here. What they wanted me to do over there was finish like all the courses; 12<sup>th</sup>-grade and 11<sup>th</sup>-grade at the same time and finish them both before the year was over. They wanted me to do so much work, and I couldn't keep up with it. So I was like passing one class and failing in other classes. I thought, "I can't do it over here. I gotta get out of here."

Andres's plan after high school was to attend college and join the military as an officer. He indicated that he would be interested in studying to become a chiropractor.

## **Justin**

Justin, a Hispanic male, was a few weeks away from his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday at the time of the first interview. He lived with a friend. As a kid, Justin was raised by his father who is now incarcerated; he was the 4th of 11 children. According to school records, Justin was considered homeless and economically disadvantaged.

Attendance records showed that he had changed elementary schools eight times between Pre-K and fifth grade, attending six different schools. Justin's current attendance records at the alternative high school indicated that he had a total of 23 absences in the five months that he had been enrolled there; however, not all of those days were full days. When he transferred to the alternative campus, transcripts indicated that the only class he was passing at his home school was physics. Documents also showed that Justin had passed all his state tests and was on the Recommended Achievement Plan, which required 26 credits for high school graduation.

Justin's demeanor was always extremely polite and easy-going. He volunteered at a hair salon and had plans to work as a cosmetologist when he graduated from high school. During the time of the interviews, Justin worked at a local fast food restaurant and was looking forward to his promotion as crew manager on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Justin's English teacher, Ms. Rodriguez, stated that he had completed English IV very quickly, adding "he (Justin) didn't need any support at all; he was on auto-pilot and very independent." Justin completed the class so quickly that Ms. Rodriguez was unable to provide detailed responses to the interview questions. During the interview, Justin mentioned that he had decided to attend the alternative high school when he realized that he was falling behind. He stated, "It's a lot of time management problems and failing

grades. I really wasn't focused in school." However, Justin demonstrated his creativity and talent in creating "sprites" [characters] for video games.

### **Literacy Experiences of Male Students in an Alternative High School**

After carefully reviewing the data and reflecting on each participant's unique experiences for the within-case analysis, I conducted a cross-case analysis to search for patterns in the form of themes that cut across the students' individual experiences (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2001). Common themes were confirmed and exemplified with quotes from the conversations with each student and their English teacher.

The seven initial, collapsed categories derived from the interview transcripts and student documents at the beginning of data analysis included the following: positive identity as readers and writers, individualized instruction, variety of reading materials, relationships, independence, reading zone, and functional purposes for reading and writing. These categories were further refined resulting in the following four core themes: (a) a preference for variety, interest, and balanced rigor resulting in a disconnect between in-school and out of school literacy experiences; (b) the importance of family and social relationships; (c) a sense of competence; and (d) recommendation for an environment that provides choice with a relevant purpose, independence, and personalized instructional support.

### **Preference for Variety, Interest, and Balanced Rigor Resulting in a Disconnect Between In-School and Out-of-School Literacy Experiences**

The preference for variety, interest, and balanced rigor resulted in a disconnect between the students' in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences as the young men shared their literacy experiences from elementary school to high school. None of the

students had recently checked out any books in high school. Seven of the 10 students mentioned that they only checked out books when assigned for a grade.

Two of the 10 students were avid readers at home. For example, Allen talked about reading a variety of genres, including fantasy, science fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Andres enjoyed mystery, action, and horror novels. Nine students indicated that they had read more books in elementary school although they had been exposed to prepackaged, computerized reading programs to motivate them to read. Kelly Gallagher (2009) pointed out that students need a wide and balanced diet of high-interest texts as well as required academic texts because, although students can read the words, they do not have the prior background knowledge to comprehend the texts. Every student in this study mentioned book titles and genres they preferred to read.

While the participants in this study believed that self-paced instruction was important, some of them concurred that the online curriculum used at the school was not challenging. Four students (Blue, Bob, Ike, and Andres) disliked the use of the online course at the alternative campus. For instance, Bob stated that some of the questions were ridiculous, and Andres disliked the worksheets that accompanied the online course.

### **Allen**

Allen shared his interest in reading a variety of books and materials, and he believed that reading was important because he learned a lot. Allen also noted that he had not had time to read that week because of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) Test.

Allen described his interest in science fiction and fantasy in terms of personal enjoyment. He purchased books at a local Goodwill store because they provided a variety of materials:

R: What kinds of books do you like to read?

A: All kinds; I get into the science fiction and the fantasy.

R: How often do you check out books from the library?

A: Actually I haven't been to the library to check out books; I kinda just go to Goodwill and check out their books. I buy them; they have a variety.

Allen described reading an enjoyable book, which displayed an example of the experience that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) wrote about in his book, *Flow*. However, Allen also showed what happened when not given a choice of books to read when the school was trying to encourage students to read more.

In response to the question about how he would describe the experience of reading something enjoyable, Allen replied,

It can be therapeutic. It's like, if you're reading, you can get a mental image kinda like watching a movie, but only you're using the words that are written. And if you get into it and it's really enjoyable, you hardly realize the pages are flying, as opposed to if you're reading, what was a boring book I had to read? I think it was in eighth-grade because they were trying to get the students to really read, and we had a homeroom. In homeroom, we basically just read from the book. We also had to read *My Side of the Mountain*. It was alright, but it wasn't my cup of tea. It just didn't click; like the pages dragged.

The preference for variety, interest, and rigor was highlighted when Allen stated that he had missed out on some good reading in high school:

That would have been good, maybe focus on different forms of literature like some of the older stuff that kids don't really read or stop to appreciate like they used to. I missed out on some of the good reading in high school. In ninth grade, what were you supposed to read? I read *Night* about six times between 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 10<sup>th</sup> grade; I read it like six times because it was a requirement. I could probably act that book out if I had to.

Allen continued:

In that predicament, it really wasn't the school's fault; I used to move around a lot. It just happened to be my situation. It was a good book; don't get me wrong. But most of the last three or two times I read it, I spent time helping the teacher explain it to everybody else.

Besides fantasy, science fiction, and nonfiction books, Allen also expressed his deep interest in poetry and history:

I love poetry. I usually read like Robert Frost and Edgar Allan Poe. I was actually a pretty big fan of Edgar's. Have you ever read "The Pit and the Pendulum?" It was one of my favorites because it dealt a lot with history. I love history, and there's so much to learn from it. You take other people's mistakes, and you do your best not to repeat them. And that particular story was the Spanish Inquisition, and I always found that interesting. I don't know why it interested me, to be honest; it just clicked.

Allen explained the importance of exposing students to a variety of genres:

R: Do you think that students miss out if they're just given a choice?

A: If they're given a choice, they're going to go after the books they know instead of exploring other genres. I didn't like historical books until, I forget what grade it was, but it was a required reading. It happened to be a journal; it wasn't Anne Frank; it was some other girl, but it was based on that. There was a work program, and they'd say, "How can you know your favorite job if you've never seen it?" It's the same thing with reading.

The use of computers in school included research on Google's search engine and worksheets for an online curriculum that failed to provide rigor:

R: How often do you use the computers?

A: Every day I use APEX (online curriculum). At home, I use MySpace; it allows me to keep in contact with my family. YouTube, I like listening to music. But, for the most part, I use computer for school-based things.

R: Are there any other favorite websites?

A: Maybe A to Z lyrics because I like to look up the lyrics I'm listening to, but other than that, I just go on Google and do research.

The preference for increased rigor at the high school level was evident when Allen described reading more at the elementary level compared to secondary; he believed that there should more required reading in high school:

In elementary, there was more reading because they had AR [Accelerated Reader]. In high school they have one or two assigned readings, and that's it. And sometimes it's an actual book you have to go and checkout, and sometimes it's one or two books. I personally believe that there should be a lot more [reading] because it's an essential skill.

Although Allen believed that the school library had a good selection of books, he recommended expanding the school library to include a variety of books:

R: What do you think of our school library?

A: Well, considering the size of our school, it has a pretty good selection. They have a lot of books that [former school name removed] library didn't have. They have a lot more Stephen King whereas they [former high school] might have had *Christine*, and that's about it.

R: What would you recommend for our school library?

A: Well, they don't really have a lot of space, so we can't cram it full of books; maybe expand it and make it a little bit bigger, and then they'd be able to have more books.

## **DJ**

DJ recalled Scholastic book fairs and book catalogs in elementary school.

However, in high school, he struggled with finding books that were appealing to him. "I guess it's just because you usually have to read awhile before a book gets interesting or gets into the plot, and usually if it doesn't interest me, I'll just stop reading it." His favorite books were realistic fiction, particularly war stories with strong symbolism and character development. One of his favorite books was the *Catcher in the Rye* because he liked how the main character progressed throughout the story. He connected to this

particular book because of the way he had progressed in his own life and changed the people around him in positive ways as a role model.

DJ indicated that he had not checked out books from the library very often. He added that he also had not read any books at home and that there was not enough reading in high school compared to elementary school. However, DJ believed that he was a good reader because he read lots of different materials and had an extensive vocabulary:

R: What materials would you prefer to read?

DJ: I think books, depending on the genre.

R: How would you describe the experience of reading when you're reading something enjoyable?

DJ: It's phenomenal; it's pretty captivating when you're really engaged in the story when an author does a pretty good job of articulating the words to where you can almost put yourself in the story and view it through your own eyes.

### **Blue**

Blue revealed that he did not read books too often, but he mentioned two books that he found interesting; one was nonfiction, and the other book was science fiction. He described *The Trench* by Steve Allen as a gruesome book and as a type of reading not typically sanctioned in schools. He began the interview with hesitation, but his demeanor changed when he spoke of his ruling passions, music and local concerts. Blue had stayed away from the library because he did not feel comfortable there. After a while, Blue opened up about his literacy experiences:

B: I really only read when I have to. That's pretty much in school; like I'll text, and that's really the only time I read. It's not interesting for me.

R: Have you ever found an interesting book?



B: A couple of them like *A Child Called It* [Pelzer]. I'm not really sure; it was interesting to me. And also, Steve Allen's *The Trench*; I've read that. It was like a science fiction, but it was kind of gruesome.

Blue mentioned that he had not been required to check out books from this library since his freshman year, which had been three years ago. He recalled that his teacher played the audio cassette of reading selections in his language arts class, an example of the lack of variety, interest, and rigor:

R: How often do you check out books from the library?

B: Never, really. The only time I really do is if the teacher says we have to for the class. Not this year; I think my freshman year was the actual time that I did it.

R: How many books did you read your freshman year?

B: Maybe one self-selected book.

R: And for the class?

B: About two or three; it's more like the teacher had the cassette.

Blue's disengagement with the textbook stemmed from a lack of rigor in reading, which led to the skim and scan method of looking up information with no real learning taking place:

R: How about for your other classes, such as science and science books?

B: Well, if we have to do an assignment out of the book, I don't really read the chapter. I just go and read the question and skim my way through it to get it over with faster.

In some classes, APEX was not optional. Blue described the online curriculum as repetitious, lacking the necessary interest, variety, and rigor:

R: Tell me about APEX. What was it like for you? What did you like or didn't like about APEX?

B: When I first started it, I liked it just because it was going on my own pace and I was able to do it on my own. I didn't have to wait for other people to finish in

order for me to go on. But then as I kept using it, it was just basically the same thing over and over every day; it gets boring.

A new sub-theme of alienation emerged for Blue as he described his isolation stemming from a feeling of discomfort in the library. Blue associated the library with church – “like I don’t belong.”

R: Have you checked our library?

B: No, I usually stay away from libraries.

R: What have your experiences at the library been like?

B: It’s really boring because you just have to sit there most of the time. You don’t do much, the same way when I go to church. Like I’m not really religious or anything, so I just feel uncomfortable like I don’t belong in there.

R: But in the library, is it because it’s too quiet?

B: That bothers me, too. You gotta be quiet and everything; you can’t be moving around.

Despite his discomfort in a quiet library, Blue was able to identify with zoning out and focusing when reading something enjoyable:

R: How would you describe the experience of reading when you’re reading something enjoyable?

B: I kinda zone out, and I just focus on it; sometimes I visualize what they’re talking about.

Blue’s primary reason for his computer use was tied directly to his interest in local music concerts.

R: How often do you use the computer?

B: Every day at school.

R: If you use the internet, tell me something about some of your favorite websites?

B: Mainly for looking up concerts; see when the next concert is coming around here. That's pretty much the only reason I use it.

**Bob**

Bob's reading of books declined in high school. He only checked out books when he had an assigned report to complete for a class because he didn't have enough time to read. Bob shared that he had 100 books in storage, all of which he had read in middle school. He had read all the *Harry Potter* [Rowling] and *Star Wars* books. However, Bob was now reading random news, magazines, and other information online.

R: Tell me something about your reading habits.

B: I usually don't read books too often, but I read a lot on the internet.

R: What kinds of things do you like to read on the internet?

B: Just news, random stuff, nothing in particular.

R: How often do you check out books in the library?

B: Usually only when I have to, like to write a report or something; when I was young I read a lot like throughout middle school, and I would check out books almost every week, but once I got to high school, I just kinda stopped reading - didn't have time for it.

Bob indicated that he was interested in nonfiction, but he also enjoyed the sense of humor in a science fiction comedy that he had read.

R: What kinds of books do you like to read?

B: Usually like factual. That'd be like nonfiction, right?

R: Yeah, that would be nonfiction. So you prefer nonfiction books. Is there any book that comes to you mind when you think of a good book?

B: They made a movie about it. *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* [Adams]. I liked that one; the sense of humor in the book was pretty good.

R: What materials would you prefer to read if you had a choice?

B: Probably internet or magazines; just anything, I don't know. I usually just pick them up and start reading.

R: How about topics?

B: Cars, I don't know. I just usually start reading when I pick them up.

Bob mentioned books that he had enjoyed when he was younger:

R: How would you describe the experience of reading when you're reading something enjoyable?

B: I don't know; I just get into it and don't want to put it down.

R: Have you had books like that where you get into it?

B: Not lately. When I was younger, I got into books a lot.

R: What kinds of books when you were younger?

B: I read a lot of the *Star Wars* books and *Harry Potter* [Rowling].

R: Was it in middle school or elementary?

B: Middle school; well, *Harry Potter* was in elementary.

Bob's writing occurred only when assigned rather than for pleasure. He also stated that he had never been assigned to write poetry in school:

R: What helps you want to write something?

B: If it's assigned to me, I guess.

R: What keeps you from wanting to write something?

B: I don't know; I usually find something more entertaining to do. I don't really get into writing too much.

R: How about poetry?

B: I don't think I ever wrote poetry.

Bob described the lack of rigor in the online coursework, APEX. However, he would recommend it to other students because it's not much different from his class assignments:

R: Have you taken any APEX courses?

B: Yeah, it was okay. Some of the questions were ridiculous. They'd go from really easy, like you wouldn't even have to read any of the sections, to extremely hard; you have to like look up every single detail of the paragraph to get the question. It wasn't very consistent, but it was okay, I guess.

R: Would you recommend it to other students?

B: Yeah, I don't know. I got through with it, and I learned about the same if I would have taken it as a normal class, I think.

The lack of variety, interest, and rigor was especially evident in high school.

Bob's reading declined in high school; he was only assigned to read one required book his senior year. *Beowulf*, an epic poem, is one of the required readings in English IV:

R: And how many books did you read in high school?

B: Probably no more than five and those were just usually the required books.

R: In high school this year, how many books did you read?

B: Just one, just *Beowulf*; it wasn't choice reading or anything.

Bob used the computer for social networking, downloading videos, and sites of interest. He also used the computer at school for APEX online courses.

R: How often do you use a computer?

B: Almost every day, I'd say or almost every day.

R: Tell me about your favorite websites?

B: YouTube, Stumble [Stumble Upon], Facebook. Just like the pretty average internet sites, I guess; it wastes time, so it's good.

## **Ike**

Ike enjoyed reading scary stories and mystery books; he preferred short stories to reading novels. He was also interested in reading the biography of Vladimir Lenin, a Marxist leader. At home, Ike wrote stories to entertain his younger brothers but had not written short stories in school:

R: Could you tell me something about your reading habits?

I: I read every now and then. I like to read either a decent scary story or mystery book, just stuff like that.

R: Do you get a chance to read?

I: Yes, I have a couple of chances every week or something; I have not checked out books here.

R: How about your home reading habits?

I: I maybe read one or two things at home twice a week or something like that.

R: What kinds of things do you like to read?

I: Scary stories and mystery books and autobiographies.

R: Is there a particular autobiography that comes to your mind?

I: It would be of Vladimir Lenin; he's a person I always read about.

Ike recommended moving and expanding the school library, which he described as having a variety of books:

The library here should be a little bit bigger, maybe closer in the middle of the school. I like the assortment of books that they have. I didn't know where it was for the first couple of days; I had to go ask the counselor.

Ike used the computer for social networking, videos, and online courses on APEX. Although he did not believe that APEX provided balanced rigor, he recommended it for other schools:

R: What materials would you prefer to read?

I: Internet or books.

R: If you use the internet, what are some of your favorite websites?

I: I guess Facebook and YouTube; that's about all.

R: Have you ever been in any APEX courses?

I: Yes, I'm in Spanish II and government, I believe.

R: What has it been like for you?

I: They're pretty simple. Everything is just common or basic knowledge; I would recommend it.

The lack of rigor is illustrated in some of his written assignments, especially in copying definitions for a test.

R: Tell me something about your writing at school? What kind of writing do you do here at school?

I: I write research papers or just write down definitions.

R: Does it help you learn or remember anything?

I: Not as much unless I need it for a test or something, but other than that, that's the grade – just to write down definitions.

### **Tom**

Tom was interested in reading a variety of genres, including nonfiction, realistic fiction, and comic books. He enjoyed reading historical topics, such as the Holocaust. He mentioned the book *Bottled Up* by Jaye Murray, which helped him to cope with family issues. In general, Tom described his reading in terms of information and personal enjoyment:

R: Can you tell me something about your reading habits?

T: The only time I read is during school.

R: What kind of books do you like to read?

T: Something probably history-like, like a book on the Holocaust. Something I can picture on my head like a movie.

R: Do you like magazines or other types of materials?

T: I've liked comic books since I was fifteen.

R: What got you interested in comic books?

T: Probably watching TV.

Tom was also interested in reading the local news online, in addition to reading fiction books. He did not recall reading before the third grade:

R: How about your home reading habits?

T: Newspaper, and [local news website name removed] every day for the news.

R: Do you prefer fiction or nonfiction?

T: Fiction books are more interesting.

R: Can you think of a good memory of a teacher teaching you how to read in elementary?

T: The only memory I have is in third grade; we were like going over letters, and that's about the time when I had to write. That's when also they told me to start getting some books and all that. That's really when I started reading; I hadn't read before.

R: How would you describe the experience of reading when you're reading something enjoyable?

T: Like I'm watching a movie – just kick back.

Tom explained that he read much more in elementary school than in secondary; the reading materials in elementary seemed more appealing than those in secondary:

T: I probably read like seven novels in middle school; in high school, probably like five. I read a lot in elementary; a lot more because they were more interesting with the pictures. The fact that the words and the vocabulary were not as hard as it



is today, and then we had our daily trips to the library. And the books grabbed your attention more than they do now.

Tom was required to take AR tests for his senior English class. Although he had not checked out any books from the school library, he recommended expanding it:

R: Have you been to our library here?

T: I just go to take tests [AR]. It's small. There are a lot of books, but I just go to take tests because that's what I have to do for Ms. [English teacher name removed], but I haven't gotten a book there.

R: Where would you move it [library] to if you had a choice?

T: I'd just keep it there. It's small. They need to expand it; they can combine both classes next door.

R: If you were a teacher, how would you grade reading? Would you do more AR [tests] or literature circles?

T: Circles [literature circles] because the tests are computerized. It's not a person. It doesn't know if you're cheating or not. A teacher can ask certain questions to see if they're cheating or not.

### **Joe**

Joe identified himself as a slow reader but came close to a commended score on his English state test. He attributed his comprehension of texts to his strong vocabulary. Joe had not read books for personal enjoyment since he was in middle school. He stated that the teachers should make the students read a little more. Joe preferred to read magazines and newspapers for personal enjoyment and information:

R: Tell me something about your reading habits.

J: I read at school every now and then when I have to. I'm kinda a slow reader, so I don't read too much. I enjoy reading magazines quite a bit. Not really any certain kind; just anything that interests me. I take a look at it and just go from there. I'll flip through the pages.

R: What topics are you interested in?

J: Probably not really any certain topics. I like anything that has to do with automotive or just stuff like that.

R: How often do you check out books from the library?

J: Every now and then. Like I said, I'm kinda a slow reader, so I can't get through lengthy books; or if I do it'll take me awhile.

R: Tell me something about your home reading habits.

J: Home reading like I said magazines or on the computer. I like to keep up; just know what's going on most of the time. I like to be informed.

Joe discussed his elementary reading experience using Accelerated Reader (AR), but he stated that his reading declined in middle school because it was no longer required.

The incentives to read had been discontinued:

When I was younger, I used to read quite a bit, but I guess, I don't know, but I slowly just gradually stopped reading as much. Like in elementary school, I was reading. I was just reading and reading and reading. Once I got past the sixth or seventh grade, it just slowed down. I think it was because they just didn't make us read as much. If I would have been encouraged to read more and more, I think maybe I would have kept reading, and right now I probably would have been reading a little more than I do. A big part for me was the testing on the computer. Since we got a grade for testing like the AR test we used to do when we were younger, I used to ace those. Since we had to do that and get a grade for it, I was always reading. And now they don't make you do that.

Joe enjoyed reading nonfiction materials; he was especially interested in animals as a child:

R: What kinds of books did you like to read?

J: I like more of the true stuff.

R: Non-fiction.

J: Fantasy wasn't really in my interest. I just preferred reading about animals when I was younger or just stuff like that.

Joe was interested in history, particularly reading about the Holocaust experience in Elie Wiesel's book, *Night*. Ironically, his high school transcript showed that he had been failing his World History class at his former high school:

R: Any good book you've read recently?

J: Well, I had just recently read the book on the Holocaust called *Night*. And one of my favorite subjects is the Holocaust. That subject just interests me because it is just telling you what happened; there's so much information on it. Every time I read a little more about it, I just learn more and more about it. You can look up so much about it, and facts are there to prove everything that happened.

R: How would you describe the experience of reading when you're reading something enjoyable?

J: I guess you can say it kinda just puts you in your own happy place.

**Ted**

Ted displayed an interest in reading online news stories on his Android II phone, but he resisted reading books unless they were required for a grade. He mentioned the difficulty of reading Old English Texts in his English IV class without instructional support:

R: In high school, have you done much reading compared to middle school and elementary?

T: Honestly, I'll read newspapers if I see an interesting story; I'll read a lot online. Usually, Yahoo is my home page. Honestly, as far as books go, I don't read them. I'll read them if it's required. I'm not one of those students who goes, "Aw, we have to read." I'm not one of those students, but if they give me a story, I'll read it, but I won't go out of my way to read; it's not my hobby.

R: Have you had a lot of required reading this year?

T: In my English class, not a lot, but the stories are long. They're like in Old English, a little hard to get a grasp. I can see how those stories would confuse a lot of people. A lot of the contexts just don't make a lot of sense.

R: Would you prefer to have choice of reading materials?

T: Me, honestly, no. I really don't care as long as it's a story that I can get done, but I can tell you a lot of students probably would rather have choices. If I had to pick a story, for instance, *Beowulf* or *Harry Potter* [Rowling], *Harry Potter* is going to make a lot more sense. It's in English, not in Old English. As long as it is something I can understand, I don't really care.

The lack of rigor is illustrated through the use of prepackaged, computerized programs. Ted admitted that he had not checked out any books for enjoyment since middle school, and he had only checked out the required books for his classes. He also mentioned having a college reading level in sixth-grade based on the Star reading test. In elementary school, Ted participated in Accelerated Reader (AR) for points and prizes:

R: How often have you checked out books from the library?

T: I check out books that I need to read for classes like for grades. Other than that, I don't check out books for leisure like just to read for fun. I haven't done that like since the seventh grade probably, or sixth grade.

R: Did you read a lot in sixth and seventh grade in middle school?

T: Yeah, I would think so. I've had a college reading level since like the sixth grade; the Star test said I've been reading like at 13th-grade level since the 6th grade.

R: Did you read a lot in elementary?

T: Yeah, like *Cirque De Freak*, and like *The Series of Unfortunate Events*, and *Goosebumps*. I used to get all kinds of AR points, and I'd go to Pizza Hut, and you give them your things and they give you a personal pizza and button with stickers.

R: Did that work for you?

T: Yeah, it wouldn't work anymore now. Now, I would just be like, "Why"? That was like the big thing; everybody wanted to do that. It works for elementary kids. It [reading] seems to be more encouraged in middle school, like I don't really seem to have to read as much in high school as long as it's stories in class. Other than that, I don't really have to read too much outside of school.

Ted preferred browsing the internet for a variety of topics:

R: What materials would you prefer to read?

T: Honestly, probably the internet because that's just such a broad area of reading; like it can be so many topics. It's not just poetry; you're probably gonna come across sad stuff and like stuff about love. And internet, it can just be all kinds of stuff.

R: How would you describe the experience of reading when you're reading something enjoyable?

T: I guess it's mentally stimulating. It usually feels like something I do every time. Don't get me wrong, I do learn. Sometimes my vocabulary does get bigger reading books. Sometimes, I'll learn a word and say, "Hey!" I can use that in conversations or something as long as it's not one of those too far words. I'm not gonna try to use one of those in conversations just to use it.

Ted used the internet on a daily basis; he also was interested in video games:

R: How often do you use a computer?

T: Actually, I would say every day but only because I get on the internet on my phone a lot; pretty much what I can do on a computer, I can pretty much do on my phone.

R: Tell me about your favorite websites.

T: Bungi.net. It just lets me check my scores and statistics from my Xbox live account. Google is probably one of my favorite sites just because it's so vast; you can use it for everything. Any time you have a question, you can just Google, and it will bring you up an answer pretty quick.

### **Andres**

Andres stated that he never read books or checked them out from a library unless they were recommended. However, he mentioned that he would usually buy a book at a local bookstore, adding that he spent time at a local bookstore with a friend who is an avid reader. He enjoyed reading mysteries, scary stories, and war stories. One of his favorite books was *The Phoenix* [Connor]. When it comes to writing, Andres shared that he can write deeply and meaningfully when in the mood for writing:

A: I don't read that often, but when I do, it's something that has to do with mystery or scary that's to my liking. It has to be a lot of fighting, too, but it's very rare that I read a book.

R: So how often do you check out books in the library?

A: Never unless it's recommended; usually I buy a book at Barnes and Noble, mostly Half-Price books. I live over there and hang out with my friend sometimes. She's a really big book worm.

Andres did not check out books from the library if they were not required. In senior English, he read short stories:

R: How about here at this library? Do you ever find anything?

A: No, it's too small; I don't really look there. I just see the variety of books and like, "Ah, whatever, I'm not gonna read. Teachers don't require me to read a book," so I don't read one.

R: Have you been required to read at all your senior year?

A: No, well just short stories in the book [textbook]. They were pretty good.

Andres described how the Accelerated Reader (AR) requirement of answering questions in middle school ruined the reading experience:

R: What else have you read recently besides *The Phoenix* [Connor] and *Beowulf*?

A: *The Outsiders* [Hinton], and that was a good book.

R: Did you find that you read more in middle school or high school?

A: I read a lot more in middle school; I was required to read. We had to have a lot of AR points, and you had to make above a 70.

R: What did you think about AR?

A: I didn't like it very much. The way it was when I was there [college prep high school] was to read a book, enjoy it, and not take a test over it. It's like watching a movie. I don't like watching a movie if we have to review over questions. To answer questions just ruins it. I don't even want to watch a movie if I have to answer questions.

Andres used his PSP (PlayStation Portable) for social networking, downloading music, and researching on Google. He noted reading random articles pertaining to science:

R: How often do you use a computer?

A: I don't have a computer, so I get on my PSP, or I usually go to the mall or my friend's house; they have Wi-Fi. I can go online, and I usually go to Facebook or MySpace and music websites and download free music.

R: If you use internet, tell me about your favorite websites.

A: Facebook, I go on that a lot. I talk to my friends, and My Space to see what's going on, and my music downloads; oh, and Google a lot. I read a lot of interesting stuff, not books, but like articles. At least that counts as a habit of reading. I usually go on the internet and read random articles that interest me like scientific stuff like the body, brain stuff, like fish...like I was reading about the Angler fish, butterflies, elephantitis and just random stuff.

Andres expressed frustration with the online courses on APEX. He complained about the worksheets and the lack of rigor:

R: Have you taken any APEX courses?

A: I'm taking right now a U.S. history; I was taking pre-calculus, but I dropped that. And I'm taking Spanish II and government.

R: Tell me what do you think about APEX?

A: I like it, but I don't like it. It's just like I rather have paper than work on the computer. The way APEX is you have to do your worksheets and take the quizzes, read the articles in there, and then take the quizzes. I don't understand why I have to do the worksheets. I just don't like doing that.

### **Justin**

Justin identified himself as a fast reader who enjoyed reading poetry online or at local bookstores; he did not visit our school library unless assigned. He enjoyed video games and created "sprites" or characters online. Justin had kept a journal since middle school to keep a collection of his thoughts. He described his reading in terms of interest, including learning about animals:

J: Well, I usually read things I'm interested or things I don't know about the world or something. I consider myself a fast reader, but I don't really have any particular reading habits.

R: Is there a certain type of book or information?

J: Usually about animals because a recent one I read was about a bug that actually doesn't kill a prey.

Justin did not associate the school library with his personal interests. Instead, he browsed through a local bookstore or online to read poetry:

R: How often do you check out books in the library?

J: Not very often unless the teacher assigns it or it's class-related. Otherwise, I just go to bookstores and scan through what they have there.

R: Do you know why that is?

J: I don't really think that the library has things that I would be interested in. I really don't like searching the entire library. There are a lot of books about poems in the library, I know that.

R: Where do you read poems?

J: Usually like Barnes and Noble [bookstore] or online.

Justin usually read or scanned informational and global magazines at home:

R: How about your home reading habits?

J: At home I really don't have books other than magazines. I usually do read through those to know what's going on around the world. I have a few [magazines] that I buy, and I scan through them sometimes. Occasionally, I read newspapers but not so much.

Justin did not have any memories of being taught to read, but he commented on being expected to know how to read when he left elementary school:

I really don't have any memories of teachers teaching me how to read; none that I can remember. I suppose once you're out of elementary they expect you to know how.

Justin remembered the reading circles and many titles of books in first-grade and throughout elementary school:



R: How far back do you remember reading a book?

J: I think I would probably say it was first grade. We had like this big reading circle, and everybody would all bring blankets and pillows and read on the floor.

R: Do you remember anything in elementary that you really liked such as a certain book, author, or genre?

J: Mainly the kids' books like the fish where she shares her little scales, *The Rainbow Fish* [Pfister], and the caterpillar that eats everything and turns into a butterfly. I don't remember what that book is called [*The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Carle].

Justin read more in elementary than in secondary. In high school, he was expected to comprehend his reading assignments even if the selection was written in Old English:

R: Do you think you read more in elementary, middle school, or high school?

J: I would probably say in elementary I read a lot; then high school; then middle school. In high school, they would issue us books and expect us to read and know what we're reading.

R: What kinds of books?

J: *Beowulf*, *Greek Tales*, and all that stuff.

Justin discussed his experience with AR in elementary which earned him a dollar for every book he read. He recommended AR because of the incentives provided to students who read:

R: What made you want to read in elementary?

J: I think it was the AR Program always taking tests. I remember in elementary for each book you read they would give you a dollar. It was like a program from the bank. By the end of the week, you would have seven dollars or something, depending on how much you read. I think I had nine dollars; I'm not sure. There were four people there to help us.

R: Would you recommend having the AR program in middle school and high school?

J: Yeah, I think that would help out because it just gets you more into reading, and it also gives you a grade. It's not like you're reading books for nothing, and

you're probably gonna get more people interested in reading if they want good grades. And it can help out in classes because, if you told them to choose a book and take an AR quiz on it, it would be helpful. It does start getting people interested because once they read a book they're gonna want to know more.

R: What materials would you prefer to read?

J: Magazines, poetry, and like things on the internet online.

R: Do you have favorite websites?

J: Not really; just if there's something I'm looking for, I use Google.

Justin struggled as he described the experience of reading something enjoyable:

R: How would you describe the experience of reading something enjoyable?

J: Good because I find out something I never knew before.

R: What's the experience like?

J: Being caught up in a book is just really thrilling because you really don't want it to end, especially books that make a lot of sense and are well-written and stuff.

In response to the question about the genre he would write if he were to publish a book, Justin explained his interest in memoirs, "I like documentaries over like other things because it's interesting the way people live and what they go through." Justin used the computer daily for a variety of activities, including word processing, research, and video games:

R: How often do you use a computer?

J: A lot. I use them like every day because I always do a lot of things on the computer: look up resources that I need, type a lot of things, and play games on the computer at home.

Justin related how his interest in online video games helps him with reading:

R: Do you think these video games distract you from reading?

J: Not really. Actually I think they help me because usually when I want to find out something about *Naruto* [part of Manga series], I look online or I read

something, or it's always just constant reading because the games never really tell you everything you can know. Like *Naruto*, it's a show, it's a book, and it's a game. So things the games don't tell you and the books don't tell you, they'll have online, or the show will tell you. It's constantly going back and forth to get the full story...It's just like one long story.

All the participants described the experience of reading something enjoyable but noted that they had not checked out any books in high school. Seven of the 10 students mentioned that they only checked out books when assigned for a grade. In response to the question about the materials they preferred to read, the students' use of multiliteracies was apparent. Students shared about reading magazines, news, and other topics of interest on the internet. Andres was an avid reader of books at home, and he talked about reading a variety of genres, including fantasy, science fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Nine of the 10 students indicated that they read more in elementary school, and they had been exposed to prepackaged, computerized reading programs to motivate them to read.

The need for rigor was highlighted when students expressed the need for more reading at the high school level. Four of the 10 students (Blue, Bob, Ike, and Andres) disliked the use of the online course at the alternative campus. For instance, Bob stated that some of the questions were ridiculous, and Andres disliked the worksheets that accompanied the online course. While the participants in this study believed that self-paced instruction was important, some of them concurred that the online curriculum used at the school was not challenging.

### **The Importance of Family and Social Relationships**

As students described their literacy experiences, the influence of family and friends played a key role in their reading and writing. In response to the question about a memory of a teacher teaching them how to read, four students (Allen, DJ, Blue, and Bob)

remembered a parent or grandparent who had taught them to read. Two students recalled their third-grade teacher. Joe mentioned that a combination of family members and teachers helped him with reading. Two students had difficulty remembering any specific person teaching them to read. In response to the question about their writing outside of school, most of the students mentioned communicating with family and friends through e-mail, text messaging, and social networking. Ike, however, indicated that he enjoyed writing stories to entertain his younger brothers at home.

Most of the students were also able to describe the reading habits of some of their friends. Six of the participants indicated that some of their friends read books or magazines. Three of the 10 students responded that their friends did not read; Bob was unable to describe the reading habits of any of his friends.

### **Allen**

Allen's family and social relationships shaped his literacy experiences. Outside of school, Allen used the computer primarily for social networking to keep in touch with his family and for downloading lyrics. In response to the question about a memory of a teacher teaching him to read, Allen shared early memories of his grandfather teaching him to read:

Wow! I think it all started with actually my grandpa with flashcards trying to teach me. I learned steadily, and then from there when I got into kindergarten, it just seems that they were doing the same things. We took home words; we learned words and then finally, "Alright, you learned these words. Now we're going to teach you how to put those words into correct sentences."

When Allen responded to the question regarding his home reading habits, his mother's influence on his reading was evident:

A: At home, usually I read a lot. I spend a lot of time reading R.A. Salvatore. Lately, I've been reading a lot more by him. He writes more the fantasy category usually with Wizards of the Coast [Publishing].

I first heard about *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair in my U.S. history class. I always meant to get around to reading it, and finally, my mom says, "Here, I think you'd appreciate this book," and it happened to be *The Jungle*.

R: What made you want to read that book?

A: I've always liked history because the book opened people's eyes, and it led to the passing of the pure food acts.

Allen believed that helping his older brother to read helped him to become a better reader. He explained,

Actually, my older brother has never really had good eyesight, so he kinda struggled with reading. Because of that, I always tried to help him out as much as I could, so as I was helping him, I was helping myself. I don't know what happened for a lack of documentation; he and I are in the same grade. Well, actually now I'm a year in front of him because I skipped a grade, but he and I were supposed to be juniors this year because one of his eyes is underdeveloped. In trying to help him read, I made myself a better reader.

Allen's writing outside of school was used for functional and social purposes. He communicated with others through letters and e-mails:

R: How about your writing outside of school?

A: Well, I used to keep a journal to remember certain things and events and kind of alleviate some of my anger. I write letters to people; I use e-mail. I think it's important to write because how can I explain this? If you didn't write, then there'd be nothing to read. English would be pointless because no one reads. It would be a vicious circle.

R: What helps you want to write something?

A: To keep in touch with people. To remember some things because, like I said, my memory is bad. I keep a "to do" list; it's important to do that to stay organized.

In response to the question about the reading habits of some of his friends, Allen mentioned reading magazines for personal enjoyment:

A: I have three brothers. One of them actually loves to read; the other two read when they have to. And that's pretty much the same with all my friends. None of them read for enjoyment, except magazines. They might browse through that, but all the time you hear them, "Ah, I don't wanna read; reading's gay, dude. I can't believe you spent all your time hanging out in your room just reading."

R: What kinds of magazines do they like to read?

A: Usually you see them with - I want to say *Entertainment*; any kind of magazine that deals with the music industry, or cars; various magazines that just catch their interest.

**DJ**

DJ used computers on a daily basis, primarily at home for social networking, music, and online news.

R: Tell me about some of your favorite websites.

DJ: Social networking sites, poetry, and music sites.

R: Do you ever read newspapers or online news?

DJ: Yes, usually online like CNN [Cable News Network] or the bigger news.

The theme of importance of family played a major role in DJ's early memories of learning to read.

R: Tell me about a teacher teaching you how to read.

DJ: Yeah, I'd say at home; I remember my dad working with me on some of the stories that I was having trouble with pronouncing the words and getting through it.

DJ did not believe that his friends did much reading because it just didn't interest them or they didn't have the self-motivation to read. He had suggestions to help motivate his friends. "I suppose telling them, 'Hey, this is a good book; you should read this,' or just spreading the word about good books."

## **Blue**

The importance of family was described as he recalled his mom teaching him to read as a child. Blue shared some of his childhood books and early experiences in elementary school:

R: Tell me about a teacher teaching you how to read.

B: I don't remember a teacher teaching me to read. I remember my mom teaching me, though. We'd sit down and read simple books like *Green Eggs and Ham* [Dr. Seuss]; I remember that. And then there's *Brown Bear* [Martin], just simple books like that.

R: *Green Eggs and Ham* was Dr. Seuss. Did you go to the library?

B: I don't think she ever really took me there, but for school I would go. I remember at the elementary school, I was reading at the high school level; like they wanted me to read *Moby Dick* [Melville] whenever I was in elementary school. It didn't interest me, so I just pretended like I read it.

In response to the question about his preferred materials, Blue pointed out a book that his mom's boyfriend had given him, indicating family influence. The book about a soldier fighting in Vietnam could have been connected to his interest in the Marine Corps. Blue also believed that his friends read more than he did:

R: What materials would you prefer to read if you had a choice?

B: There's a book that my mom's boyfriend gave me, and it's like a guy's diary from Vietnam. That's pretty interesting; it was like an actual diary with actual dates on there. It skipped days on there because things got heavy.

R: Tell me about the reading habits of some of your friends?

B: A couple of my friends read a lot. I think all my friends read more than I do.

## **Bob**

Family members played an important role in Bob's early childhood. Bob's grandfather, who was an English teacher, worked with him during the summer:

R: How about a good memory of a teacher teaching you how to read?

B: Not really teachers; I learned from my grandpa. He was an English teacher. I remember having to sit every summer and do a packet this big of like work from like when I was probably in second grade through fifth grade or fourth grade. I learned a lot from it, but I didn't really enjoy it because it was during the summer.

### **Ike**

The importance of family is displayed in Ike's use of writing to entertain his younger brothers with short stories. Although Ike enjoyed writing stories, he stated that he had not been assigned any creative story writing in school:

I: I like to write stories sometimes to keep my brothers occupied, like something childish; something war-like, stuff like that.

R: Oh, now, do you do any story writing at school?

I: No.

### **Tom**

Tom identified with his friends and their lack of reading habits. He then mentioned a book title that he had connected to and read in one day, which he stated had helped him cope with family problems:

R: Tell me about the reading habits of some of your friends.

T: They don't really read; same as me; just in school.

R: Tell me about a good book you've read recently.

T: *Bottled Up* [Murray]; it was at [home school library name removed]. A friend told me it was going to be a good book, and as soon as I read like a few pages, I read the book that day. I could relate to the problems. Like there was a kid who had a little brother, and like he just had a lot of problems at this house. And then he just has a lot of problems with drinking and all that. And even though it was a fiction book, it was like a nonfiction book because it was like a real story, and I was connected to it.



The influence of family affected his reading and learning. However, he did not elaborate on his personal problems:

R: How do you consider yourself as a learner?

T: I guess a fast learner. I was really fast [reader] until my seventh-grade year, but after eighth grade, I just stopped and started slacking due to like stuff at the house.

### **Joe**

Joe's girlfriend was an avid reader; he compared his reading to hers:

R: Tell me about the reading habits of some of your friends.

J: I know some of my friends probably don't like to read, but like my girlfriend loves to read. She's good at it; she reads big books. She can read one [book] in a day; I can't even finish a smaller book in a day.

### **Ted**

Ted hoped to graduate with his home school in June and make his mother proud:

Well, I want to return to graduate with my home school, I think. My mom will see that and make her proud and just graduate recommended [degree plan]. Just get the four by four [credits] or whatever.

Ted knew exactly how many of his friends actually read for enjoyment. He also knew the exact titles that his friends read. It was evident that he had discussed at least some of the books with his friends. He and his friends read gaming magazines for personal enjoyment:

R: How about the reading habits of some of your friends?

T: Honestly, I only have like maybe 10 friends who read for fun. A lot of my friends don't like to read either.

R: Do you know what your 10 friends read?

T: Those books like *Crank* and *Glass*.

R: By Ellen Burns?

T: Yeah, I have some friends who read like *A Million Tiny Little Pieces* [Frey], that book that Oprah came out with, and then she found out that it was a fake story, and then she got really mad.

R: How about magazines?

T: Yeah, they read magazines. I read like gaming magazines.

### **Andres**

Andres's friend influenced him to read a book, which he enjoyed though he found it easy:

R: Tell me about the reading habits of some of your friends?

A: Nancy lives a couple of blocks away from me. She reads like a big book of 500-600 pages in a day. I'm like, "Whoa!" It takes me like two weeks. She's a big book worm.

R: She's a good influence on you?

A: No, well I influence her; she influences me. I was like, we made a deal one day. You know what? You never play video games. I'll read a book, and then you play a video game with me. I read the book and gave it back to her, and she didn't play a video game with me.

R: What book was it?

A: I think it was *Crank* [Burns]. I thought it was a good book, but it was really basic that anyone could read it. It was good, but the sentence structure had words in it; it was just like a kid's book. It was explained thoroughly for anyone who read it could understand because the words were kinda big and the sentences were spaced out a little bit. I thought, "Man, I'm reading this book pretty fast."

Andres was also influenced to write by his friend:

R: What helps you want to write something?

A: Meeting new people like the girl I met. I haven't been able to write for a long time until I met her, and I was like, "Whoa!"

R: She's inspired you to write?

A: Yeah, she's inspired me to write. She's so amazing. She'll be my girlfriend pretty soon.

Andres's memory of his third-grade teacher teaching him to read depicted the joy in books:

It was my third-grade teacher [name removed]. She was really awesome. She taught me how to read a lot better. We went over a lot of books and took little quizzes and stuff. She made it fun. If we like got the answers right, on Friday we'd get cookies and stuff.

### **Justin**

Justin's friends hung out in the school library of his former high school. Justin shared that he did not discuss books with them although his friends discussed their books with each other.

J: I know a lot of my friends hang out in the library and like to read. I always see them in the library.

R: Which library?

J: Usually the one at [home school name removed]. A lot of them do check out books and read.

R: Do you know what kinds of books they check out?

J: Not so much.

R: Do you ever discuss them?

J: Not me; my friends with other friends.

### **A Sense of Competence**

Another recurring theme was the sense of competence as readers and writers. All 10 students believed that they were good readers, and most of them also expressed that they were good writers with the exception of Allen and Blue. For some students, their competency was based on reading test scores; for others, it was based on their vocabulary and reading comprehension.

## **Allen**

Allen identified himself as a good reader but not as a competent writer, especially in writing poetry:

R: Do you consider yourself a good reader?

A: I'd like to think so because I read like a wide range. Nowadays, they classify books by difficulty; they do 12<sup>th</sup>-grade reading level and da-da-da. Apparently, I took the Star Reading Test, and it said I have a post-grad reading level.

R: What about your writing in school?

A: I've done essays. I've had to write a poem; by my standards it wasn't very good, but we're usually harder on ourselves.

R: Is there anything that keeps you from writing something?

A: Sometimes, those little things that get to you. I'm really not that good in writing, so what's the point?

R: You don't feel like you're a good writer?

A: Not as good as I should be. I'm really good at reading, but for some reason, I don't think my writing is very good.

## **DJ**

DJ's sense of competence in reading was based on his interest in a variety of materials and an extensive vocabulary:

R: Are you a good reader?

DJ: Yeah, I'm a pretty good reader because I've read lots of different materials. I have a pretty extensive vocabulary, so some of the higher level stories are easy for me to figure out and understand.

R: Do you enjoy reading?

DJ: Yes, I enjoy reading if it's a good book.

R: What has helped you become a good reader and writer?

DJ: I think just having a good foundation from elementary to middle school to high school, emphasizing reading and writing.

DJ's interest in writing was also tied to his sense of competence. He described his writing in terms of practical purposes:

R: What about your writing?

DJ: I believe I'm a strong writer; I actually love writing.

R: Is there something that you like to write about?

DJ: Personal experiences and research. I like research when it's something pertaining to my current situation or if I'm looking into something or depending on the situation.

R: Is there anything that keeps you from wanting to write something?

DJ: I don't think so. Even if I don't feel like writing, I try to still apply myself and write.

## **Blue**

Blue displayed a sense of competence as a reader that was based on standardized test scores and computerized reading tests:

R: Are you a good reader?

B: I think so; I don't really struggle that much. I try to figure out the words, and I think I have a pretty good vocabulary. According to my TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) scores, I'm good at that.

B: I remember at the elementary school, I was reading at the high school level. Like they wanted me to read *Moby Dick* [Melville] whenever I was in elementary school.

R: Did you get to read it?

B: No, it didn't interest me, so I just pretended like I read it.

R: So, there was pressure to read *Moby Dick*?

B: It's a pretty thick book, too. There's this other guy, and he read it in one night.

Blue's struggle with writing might help to explain why he was resistant to writing at school. His negative experiences with writing are evident as he shared his aversion toward writing:

R: What would you say about your writing in school?

B: I always have a real hard time getting started, but once I'm going it's easier. For me to get started takes me a long time.

R: What strategies do you use? Do you write whatever comes to your mind?

B: I don't really use any strategies for it.

R: Tell me about your writing outside of school? What helps you really want to write something?

B: Usually if I get to pick the topic, but even then it's still a struggle.

R: What keeps you from wanting to write something?

B: I just feel like I'm not good at it.

R: What could help students with writing? What do you feel would help you?

B: I think that if you struggle with reading, then you're going to want to try to avoid writing because you're not going to be able to understand it; like you don't know how to spell and all the punctuation and everything. Then if your teacher gives you back your paper with all those red marks on there, then it's going to make you feel even lower.

### **Bob**

Bob's sense of competence was strong both as a reader and as a writer. In response to the question about how he would describe himself as a learner, he mentioned that he could teach himself better than by listening to lectures:

R: Are you a good reader?

B: Yeah; I've always been able to read really big books. It's just usually not something I enjoy; I don't know.

R: What do you think about writing?

B: Oh, I don't mind writing. I don't like to sit there and write all day, but if I have to write something, I usually do a pretty good job. I definitely don't want to be an author or anything; I'm pretty good in English.

R: How would you describe yourself as a learner?

B: I'm not very good at sitting there listening to lectures. I could teach myself, but it's hard for other people to teach me, I guess.

### **Ike**

Ike's sense of competence as a reader was based on his reading several books and understanding most of what he read: "I read a lot of books, and I can understand most of them." Ike shared that he could read approximately 20 chapters daily.

R: How would you describe the experience of reading something enjoyable? What is that experience like?

I: Um, I don't know how to answer that, except to say I enjoy it. I can read about 20 chapters of a book each day.

In response to the question about the online courses on APEX, Ike replied that the questions were pretty simple. "Everything is just common or basic knowledge."

### **Tom**

Tom's sense of competence in reading was based on his fluency; he believed his comprehension level was better than average. Tom indicated that personal problems at home interfered with his learning at school:

R: Are you a good reader?

T: Yeah, a little better than the average. Well, from noticing like from when students read from the book, they read super slow and like couldn't pronounce many words. I could just read it.

R: How about comprehension?

R: I'm gonna say average.

R: How do you consider yourself as a learner?

T: Um, I guess a fast learner. I was really fast until my seventh-grade year, but after eighth grade, I just stopped and started slacking due to like stuff at the house.

Tom was attending an alternative high school because he had failed physics.

R: Why are you attending an alternative high school?

T: Cause [Because] I couldn't pass physics in my other school. That class shouldn't even be required. We shouldn't even have to take that class. There shouldn't be a course; it's too hard. Not everyone wants to learn about physics.

### **Joe**

Joe's sense of competence as a reader is based on his comprehension although he considered himself a slow reader:

R: Are you a good reader?

J: I read slow[ly], but I think I am [a good reader] as far as vocabulary and everything like that. I understand it pretty well.

For Joe, finding time to write was difficult because he was seeking employment. However, he expressed his interest in writing and researching topics of interest. Joe did not indicate any problems with his writing.

R: How about your writing in school?

J: I like it cause [because] I get to research my own information, or just if I'm writing an essay, I get to write about what interests me or my experience, things of that nature. Something that I can relate to, or just write down my own experiences.

R: How about outside of school? Is there any need for writing at home or at work? Do you work?

J: No, I'm trying to look for a job, so it's kinda hard. I've been looking for a while.

Joe enrolled at the alternative high school because he was failing history, one of his favorite subjects. Joe did not want to fall behind in school:

R: Why are you attending an alternative high school?



J: I was actually failing one class, and I just couldn't seem to bring my grade up. I tried, and I couldn't get a grasp on it and bring it up.

R: What class was that?

J: It was World History. Up until now history had never been my forte; I never had a hang of it. I was failing that class, and I couldn't bring it up, and I wasn't failing by a lot, was failing like in the 60s area, and I didn't want to fall behind. And they had told me, since I had been failing it all year, they told me about this [alternative school]. And on top of that, a baby on the way, I didn't want to fall behind.

### **Ted**

Ted's sense of competence was based on fluency, vocabulary, and his SAT

(Scholastic Achievement Test) scores:

Yeah, I'm a good reader. Like whenever it comes to reading in front of class, I can usually pronounce all the words. I'm not like trying to sound out words or anything. I have a pretty good vocabulary. I scored about a 1500 on the SAT.

Ted explained his difficulty with focusing while reading a book. There was a lack of motivation and value in reading:

I can read. I'm more of an active person. I guess because I do have ADD. (Attention Deficit Disorder); I'll be reading and stuff, and I'll just get distracted real easily. The motive and incentive has to be there. Honestly, it has to be a really good book. Otherwise, I'll get distracted every five minutes. It's hard to find an incentive when I'm reading something when it's not needed for school, and I get nothing by reading it. Like my life doesn't change if I read a book for fun. I might learn a couple of new words, but that's about it.

Ted's assessment of his writing in school is based on the state test scores and criteria. His reason for writing would be to communicate with others, but there was no intrinsic motivation for writing:

R: Tell me about your writing at school.

T: I usually score like a three or four on my writing. It's good; it's understandable. I know how to implement quotes for text evidence and supporting details.

R: How about your writing outside of school?

T: No writing outside of school.

R: How about texting?

T: Yeah.

R: What helps you want to write something?

T: Probably wanting to communicate.

R: What keeps you wanting to write something?

T: Honestly, just reward. I don't see a reward. There's not much gain from it; the same with reading. It's only a mental stimulation for me. I see a lot of other stuff that I can be doing and having a lot more fun.

### **Andres**

Andres mentioned that he preferred video games and the outdoor adventures to reading books at home. Andres's sense of competence in reading was based on his comprehension and vocabulary:

R: Tell me something about your home reading habits.

A: Don't read at home at all. I'm more of a video game person. I'll do more outside activities or something like that than read. I have really good books at the house, but to sit down and take the time, it's like I can do that later; I have better things to do. Then when it comes down to later, I'm like, just forget about it.

R: What other activities are you talking about?

A: Like I work out, play games, go outside on my bike, or go for a walk. I'm more of an outdoor person; I like adventure.

R: Do you consider yourself a good reader?

A: I consider myself a very good reader. I can understand big books. I came from [college prep name removed], and all we did was vocabulary words.

Andres described his writing in terms of interest rather than purpose. His motivation to write depended on his mood:

R: How about your writing in school?

A: My writing, it's really good. I feel I can write deep and meaningful stuff, but lately I haven't been able to. I just haven't been like in my motivational mood. Well, I'm talking about weeks ago. But recently, I've just met this girl, so I've been motivated to draw and stuff. I feel super happy lately.

R: What do you like to write about?

A: I could write about romance. Romantic dude – that's what I am.

R: Romance novels or stories?

A: Just romance, not novel; I'm not that good, yet. I like to write short stories; taking walks on the beach. I'm not much of a candle person; I'm more of an outside person.

R: Anything else you like to write about?

A: I like to write about fighting and action, a little bit of detective.

R: You go from romance to fighting and action.

A: Oh, yeah, and scary stuff.

R: How about poetry?

A: I write a little bit of poetry. I like more romance poetry. I can't really write about fighting poetry. I can write fighting stuff and depressing stuff, but I have to be in that kind of mood.

### **Justin**

Justin's sense of competence was based on his reading comprehension and interest in the topic:

R: So you said you're a fast reader. Are you a good reader?

J: I believe so; I think it depends on what I read. Like if I'm not interested in it, I'll just be reading slow or not be paying attention. But reading-wise, I think I understand a lot of what books portray and what they're trying to get through the audience.

Although Justin did not indicate difficulty with writing, he expressed dislike for writing prompts.

R: What keeps you from wanting to write?

J: The only thing I think is something I don't think is important or I'm tired because when I'm tired, I really can't do anything.

R: How did you do on prompts?

J: Oh, prompts. I don't like writing prompts, but it's just a simple format I follow, so it's real easy. Um, most of the prompts that I follow, I take it one step at a time to get it over with. I don't really like writing prompts that are just given to me.

In response to the question about reasons for enrolling at an alternative high school, Justin attributed his failing grades to problems with time management and his inability to remain focused at school:

R: Why are you attending an alternative high school?

J: It's a lot of time management problems and failing grades.

R: Can you say why you were failing?

J: I really wasn't focused in school.

R: Was there a reason for that or is it just throughout your school years?

J: Mainly throughout my school year, but this year has been difficult because it's my senior year, and a lot of things are going on with my life and stuff.

All 10 students expressed a positive sense of competence in reading, and most of them believed that they were good writers. Three students (Allen, Blue, and Ted) had advanced reading levels according to Star Reading tests. Blue believed he was a good reader based on his state reading test and college reading level in elementary. Despite his negative experience with reading in elementary school, he remained confident in his reading ability. Most of the participants had enrolled in an alternative high school

because they were falling behind, with the exception of Allen. Allen conveyed his desire to graduate early and enroll at a local community college. For these students, enrolling in an alternative high school enabled them to recover their grades and graduate on time.

The differences in the students' sense of competence is complex but could be affected by their prior experiences both in-school and out-of-school. For example, DJ and Andres had been enrolled in a college preparatory high school and left to attend the alternative high school after they fell behind with their grades. Allen was not failing any courses, but he enrolled at the alternative campus to graduate early. These students were successful in school at one time and expected more rigor in high school. Andres complained that the online course was boring, while Allen and DJ indicated that there should be a wide range of reading in high school.

### **Recommendation for an Environment that Provides Choice with a Relevant Purpose, Independence, and Personalized Support**

The students' recommendation for an environment that provides choice with a relevant purpose, independence, and personalized support was a recurring theme for all 10 participants. Newkirk (2009) clarified the differences between constrained and unconstrained choices. Choice is not a "free-for-all" design, but rather a learning environment facilitated and guided by the teacher. A respectful environment is one where the teacher knows the students and meets their learning needs and learning styles. Some of the students (Blue, Ted, and Andres) did not believe that their teachers had implemented a plan that took their learning styles and needs into consideration. Five of the students (Ike, Tom, Ted, Andres, and Justin) also mentioned the importance of teacher rapport with students. Although teacher rapport overlaps with the theme of

relationships, the positive relationship with teachers is also tied to a classroom environment that provides the support that students need to be successful in school.

All 10 students recommended having small classes and personalized instructional support. In addition, all 10 students recommended the need to work at their own pace, which provided them with the opportunity to work independently as they completed their high school education.

### **Allen**

Allen described the ideal classroom as one where students could receive personalized instructional support:

The ideal classroom would not be jam-packed. There'd be enough room where the teacher wasn't spread too thin. If Mary had problems doing quadratic equations, the teacher could take time and show her, or if Johnny really doesn't get imaginary numbers. It would be where kids could actually thrive and don't struggle, and it's interesting. I think that's why a lot of people skip and drop out, "It's so boring. Why? Why bother? I fail if I go; I fail if I don't go." Not everybody comes out and says that, but I've heard that.

APEX, an online curriculum, allows students to work independently at their pace. Although online learning is not for everybody, many of the students recommended APEX as a quick-paced option for those who seek early graduation regardless of its lack of rigor:

R: What was APEX like for you?

A: I thought it was simpler because it allowed me to work quicker and allowed me to finish classes a lot faster.

R: Would you recommend other schools to have APEX and be self-paced?

A: Yes, ma'am. I mean, you won't be there as long as you have to be.

Allen also recommended that the novel *Night* be kept as part of the English curriculum because of the lessons learned through the author's historical experience:

There are some stories that just have to be read because of the lesson learned in it. Like *Night*, I don't think they should ever take that out of the curriculum; I mean that's important.

See Appendix I for an excerpt of Allen's coded interview transcript.

**DJ**

DJ suggested that the school library needed to include a variety of genres, "I would say just to have more different types of genres of books; I'd say just a variety."

In addition, DJ believed that teachers should expose students to different genres:

DJ: I think it would be pretty good to be forced to read different genres because I like a certain type of genre, and if I never get exposed to different types of genres, then who knows, I may like this one better than that one.

R: Have you been in a situation where you had to read something you didn't initially want to read, but you ended up liking it?

DJ: It's happened to me a couple of times before in my previous English classes. It didn't seem that it would interest me at all, and I ended up enjoying it.

R: Can you think of any titles at all?

DJ: [Pause] It was Jefferson; it was in Mississippi. He was on the death penalty because he was at the wrong place at the wrong time. A teacher works with him and teaches him to read and write before he dies.

[\*Note: *A Lesson before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines]

DJ's preference for rigor was displayed in his interest in *Beowulf*; it would not have been his personal choice of reading material:

R: Have you read anything here at the alternative school that has been significant or interesting?

DJ: *Beowulf* is really interesting. It's kinda challenging with the grammar being more Old English type. It was a pretty interesting story.

R: Would that have been a book that you would have chosen to read for personal enjoyment?

DJ: Probably not.

DJ recommended having several teachers in a classroom to provide personalized instruction:

R: What would the ideal classrooms be like?

DJ: I would say that the ideal classroom would include maybe multiple teachers to have more of a one-on-one approach; be more personal than just instruct the entire class. It would be beneficial for the teacher and student because there's less stress on both.

R: As far as class work, do you prefer independent, small group, or whole group?

DJ: I find individual work is, I guess, sometimes harder for some people, depending on the individual. And when it comes to group work, it's kinda 50-50 because if someone is not pulling their weight someone has to take responsibility for that; usually I prefer individual work.

The online course, APEX, was an option in some classes but not in others. DJ enjoyed the independence of working at his own pace.

R: Are you taking any courses on APEX?

DJ: I was taking it, but I finished it. I liked it because I'm usually pretty self-motivated, so I could usually work at a pretty fast-paced, and I like to work at my own pace. If I didn't feel as motivated one day, I could do a little less; and if I felt motivated one day, I could do a lot more, so I liked it.

In response to the question about how schools could better prepare students for their futures, DJ replied:

I would say kinda helping them get a concept of what they want to do later in life and kinda gear their education towards that because a lot of kids graduate from high school and still don't know what they want to do as far as jobs, or it would help if high school exposed them more to that.

An excerpt of DJ's coded interview transcript is included in Appendix J.

### **Blue**

The recommendation for choice with a relevant purpose, independence, and personalized instructional support was evident as Blue shared his struggles with writing, especially when responding to prompts. Blue did not discuss the use of any strategies or



writing conferences with the teacher. His struggle with writing might help to explain why he was resistant to writing at school. Teachers contribute to this avoidance by emphasizing standardized prompts.

R: What would you say about your writing in school?

B: I always have a real hard time getting started, but once I'm going, it's easier. For me to get started takes me a long time.

R: What strategies do you use? Do you write whatever comes to your mind?

B: I don't really use any strategies for it.

R: Tell me about your writing outside of school? What helps you really want to write something?

B: Usually if I get to pick the topic, but even then it's still a struggle.

R: What keeps you from wanting to write something?

B: I just feel like I'm not good at it.

R: What could help students with writing? What do you feel would help you?

B: I think that if you struggle with reading, then you're going to want to try to avoid writing because you're not going to be able to understand it; like you don't know how to spell and all the punctuation and everything. Then if your teacher gives you back your paper with all those red marks on there, then it's going to make you feel even lower.

The ideal classroom for Blue and the other participants was a small learning environment with the flexibility to work at their own pace. Blue preferred the occasional assistance of a teacher rather than the usual lecture approach:

R: What would the ideal classroom be like?

B: I like the ones here; there are not too many people. It's not real loud; you could listen to your iPod and things like that. I like it better if the teacher gives you the work, and then you try to figure it out on your own; and if you can't, then call her over instead of having her explain the entire thing.

Although Blue preferred working independently, he found the online curriculum (APEX) repetitious:

R: Tell me about APEX. What was it like for you? What did you like or didn't like about APEX?

B: When I first started it, I liked it just because it was going on my own pace, and I was able to do it on my own. I didn't have to wait for other people to finish in order for me to go on. But then as I kept using it, it was just basically the same thing over and over every day; it gets boring.

For an excerpt of Blue's coded interview transcript, see Appendix K.

### **Bob**

Bob enjoyed the personalized instructional support and small classes at the alternative campus. Bob recommended more one-on-one instruction because the classes in the regular high schools were overcrowded.

R: What would be the ideal classroom?

B: They're pretty good here. They're small classes, and I like that.

B: I like working independently, but I know a lot of people like working in groups, too...at [home school name removed], they had all of sit-down, listen to the teacher, then do the work, and then leave.

R: Did you ever do any small group work at all?

B: Not really; mostly individual packet work.

For an excerpt of Bob's coded interview transcript, see Appendix L.

### **Ike**

For Ike, the ideal classroom signified the importance of a positive learning environment with teacher rapport and a sense of independence:

R: What would the ideal classroom be like for you?

I: I guess everything is just comfortable; the teacher has a good attitude, kids have a good attitude; something like that.

In response to the question about the changes he would make in the educational system, Ike replied that he would “make everything self-paced.”

See Appendix M for an excerpt of Ike’s coded interview transcript.

### **Tom**

Positive teacher rapport and a small learning environment were important to Tom. He preferred to work independently; students at the alternative campus are self-paced. Online classes did not allow choice but did help students earn credits quicker:

R: What changes would you make in education in general?

T: How the teacher explains; if I like and have a good vibe about them. I like it when they have a good personality, but there are some teachers that just get to me. Like it makes you an enemy if you’re strict. You have to talk to that person.

R: What would the ideal classroom be like?

T: Any classrooms with the radio on. Not too loud, and I like a class with no more than 10 in the classroom.

R: How about small group instruction? Or do you like independent?

T: Independent. A lot of my classes are on computer, also. Right now I only have one class, and it’s on computer.

Tom recommended giving male students the choice of reading popular culture genres as a way to increase their reading in school.

R: What keeps you from reading?

T: Tasks at home, trying to find a job, my school work, just trying to graduate.

R: How can teachers get male students to read?

T: If they let us choose a book we can read in our English classes. Say, English IV, it doesn’t really matter, then a lot of guys would read books and all that. A lot of books don’t get our attention as much as the females. More books about what we see on TV, a lot of movies and all that. If we had books like that, we would read.

An excerpt of Tom’s coded interview transcript is included in Appendix N.

**Joe**

Joe recommended that teachers offer students a choice of reading materials, including picture books:

R: Is there anything else about what reading and writing should be done in high school? How can we help these boys to graduate?

J: Just kinda focus on what interests them and give them more of an option to write about what they want to write about. In elementary, all those books are so interesting, and once they get to middle school and high school, it's boring. A lot of people will say, "Why not read picture books in high school?"

In addition to online news and magazines, Joe enjoyed reading the actual newspaper to stay informed:

R: What materials would you prefer to read if you had a choice?

J: Probably newspaper all the time. You know, see the front page or just what's on the headlines.

R: How about the internet?

J: CNN [Cable Network News].

Joe emphasized the importance of choosing topics to write and research. He struggled with prewriting ideas, indicating a need for instructional support:

R: How about your writing in school? How do you feel about your writing?

J: I like it because I get to research my own information. If I'm writing an essay, I get to write about what interests me, or just write down my own experiences. As far as our grades, I think they should make us read a little more. I think it would do us all a favor, and just if we do care, we'll read. As far as TAKS writing, I'd rather just choose what I'm gonna write about because sometimes I'll read the prompt, and I won't know what I'm gonna write about for a good while. I have to sit there and think of ideas because I won't have a clue what I'm gonna write.

The ideal classroom for Joe would be a small, quiet classroom to help him focus and receive personalized instruction as needed:

Small class; I don't like a real big class. I don't mind a little noise in there, but kinda quiet. It just makes it more comfortable. I feel a little uncomfortable if there

are so many people. Or if I needed help, then there's a lot of people and the teacher might not get around in time. Quiet, it helps a lot if it's quieter; keep your concentration if you don't have a lot of people over here disrupting you or others from what you're doing.

Joe enjoyed working on his own pace; it offered him a sense of independence and structure:

R: I know you've taken APEX online courses. What was it like for you?

J: I liked it personally; I just liked relying on the computer. I could go on my own pace, and that helped out a lot. I could read the material right in front of me every time I needed to. It just helped me with everything being right there in front of me knowing what I had to do every day and where I left off.

An excerpt of Joe's coded interview transcript is included in Appendix O.

### **Ted**

Ted expressed frustration over having to listen to teachers lecture, and he acknowledged that he was just not in the right environment. He also recognized that his former high school was overpopulated and that teachers were not able to provide the personalized instruction he needed. Ted justified his frustration by validating himself as a student who can do his work:

I would go to school, and at a normal school, like lecture is a big part of it. You really need to focus on speakers and stuff. At this school [alternative high school], it's more like they give you the information like on paper, like more visual stuff. At normal schools, it's more like audio it seems like. They think they're helping you more, but in a way they kinda don't. They talk a lot. Honestly, I don't see myself as a dumb student. I can do a lot of my work. I've never been to summer school. I've never failed a grade; I've never been to [disciplinary alternative campus]. I know I can do the work. But I'm just not in the right environment. At [home school], the teachers there are a trip. They don't really seem to care, but then again [home school] is so overpopulated, it's hard for them to care about every single student. Not necessarily care about every student, but it's hard for them to focus on every student. Especially when I'm not there, I'm getting even less attention because then they just start looking at me as, "Oh, it's the kid that just skips all the time."

In response to the question about the online courses on APEX, Ted stated that he could focus while working independently at his own pace:

I had the APEX program for my government class, and I still learned all the stuff; I really liked it. I really think APEX is a great program; you really do learn it all. I learned all about the executive branch, the judicial branch. I feel like I learned it a lot better than I would have with my teacher explaining it. They have these little tips and tricks that they think helps students out, but honestly I'm not the kind of student that that helps. I'm not a very listening kind of student because it's hard for me to focus, but like with APEX you could go at your own pace. If you want to sit there all night and go through all of it like I did, I stayed up for like six hours. I just kept going and going; I got it all done.

Ted continued, explaining his incentive to focus at the alternative campus:

And with this school, it's a little different. At [school name removed], with ADD, you can focus if the desire is there. At [school name removed], there is no desire to focus because I'm going to have to go to that class regardless. But like with this school, I know that if I just learn it and read it and learn it and read it, then I can get out of that class; I can earn my credit. There is my incentive to focus, and it actually helps me. If you have an incentive to do something, it's a lot easier. If there's not much willing to learn over there, it's because for one, they don't really treat me that good, and I'm going to be there every single day even if I did all the packets over there.

Ted's description of an ideal classroom highlighted the importance of providing personalized instructional support and a positive rapport with the teacher:

R: What would the ideal classroom be like for you?

T: Honestly, kinda the way things are at [alternative campus]. Like they just give you the work, and you can do it. And if you need help, then they'll help you. They're not always up on your business about stuff. They're not always just trying to get on your case; like they don't look for a reason to fight with you. A lot of the teachers here are trying to work. Like some of the students here don't really see that. I can see because I've seen the difference between the teachers [at home school] and the teachers here, and they really want to help you. They're just trying to get you through their little system on your way.

In response to the question about recommendations he had for our present educational system, Ted stated that he would change the attendance policy:

T: I guess like the attendance; I would make it a little more relaxed. I don't really see why it matters how much you show up to school as long as you learn the content and all that. I don't see why there's so much stress on attendance. I see why attendance usually does reflect your grades stuff because, if you're there, your best chances that you're gonna know what their teaching, but I don't know. I can get my work done and not be at school. It really does depend on the student. I guess for most students being at school would probably help them to learn because they're probably not going to do it at their house.

See Appendix P for an excerpt of Ted's coded interview transcript.

### **Andres**

Andres's description of an ideal classroom would include a knowledgeable, yet friendly teacher who respects the students' learning styles and needs:

R: So what would be the ideal classroom for you?

A: A good teacher who knows what they're teaching about, who can make it challenging, but not too challenging. Friendly teachers that you can talk to and stuff; they would ask us, "How do you learn better?" They would give us surveys; we had at least three or four surveys a year [at college prep high school].

In response to the question about high stakes testing, Andres replied:

A: I would say get rid of the TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] Test; I don't even believe in it. If teachers are doing their jobs correctly, there should be no reason for the TAKS test. For me, it's not hard. I just don't like it because I work hard in my classes to know what I'm learning, so when it comes to TAKS test, it's challenging, but it's not too difficult. Teachers have to take out like so much time out of their whole year to do revising or TAKS preparation. They could be studying on a different subject to get more in-depth. In algebra, go all the way through; I don't see the necessity for it.

Andres found thrill and connection in his favorite book, *The Phoenix* by John

Connor. He inquired about downloading free e-books:

R: You told me about a book that you've read recently. Do you want to clarify how it was meaningful or significant to you?

A: When I read it, it was in depth so much. There was this one phrase I can remember, and it just gives me a chill. It was so empowering. It was about her dreaming and someone driving an 18-wheeler down the freeway and wrecked into her. She got out and was okay, but the person wasn't, and it was like at that

moment she thought she was dying. She woke up with cool chills and a hot sweat. I woke up like that one time, and I thought, “I can relate to that!”

R: What was the name of that book?

A: *The Phoenix* [Connor]; It was just crazy. It had so much drama in there. There was so much detective [mystery]; I need to buy that book.

R: Do you find a lot of books like that because you seem to enjoy those kinds of books?

A: I need to go to the Half-Price Bookstore; I’m supposed to get paid Saturday. I want to find a book I can read on computer. Usually I go on the computer to try to find something to read, like a book. I can never find anything. I try to type it on the computer. Is there a website you can actually read books for free? Every time I check a website to read for free, you have to pay for it.

R: I believe it is Gutenberg.org, but I’m going to double check. There are several, and some of these [books] are classics, too.

Andres shared about the flow experience of being engaged in a good book:

Like I’m not even aware of anything around me; it’s like I’m not looking at the book anymore. It’s like I’m actually in the story; like I’m just in the moment.

For an excerpt of Andres’s coded interview transcript, see Appendix Q.

### **Justin**

Justin shared how his teacher’s instructional support helped him to understand the symbolism and other elements even when he had not been interested in reading a book initially. Instructional support contributed to a more positive reading experience:

R: Tell me about a book that you have read recently.

J: Recently I read *Beowulf* with my teacher [at home school].

R: Tell me what did you think about it?

J: As much as I wasn’t really interested at first, like I caught a lot of what the teacher was saying and how he described the book, what it meant as a whole, what it portrayed, the under-linings and all the details you wouldn’t catch just be reading the book, like the good versus evil and pretty much that and everything else like how the dragon symbolized greed.



R: Did you like the book?

J: Yeah, I liked it; it was a really good book.

Justin recommended the online courses (APEX), which he found to be somewhat challenging:

R: Describe APEX [online curriculum].

J: It's helpful for the most part. They give me pamphlets, like a little module to finish, and it goes along with what's online. Online helps me know what's going on the module, so APEX is really helpful.

R: Would you recommend it to other students?

J: Yes, I would recommend it to other students. I think it's the most helpful online course I've experienced. It's kind of challenging, but if you focus, you can get through it.

Justin described his writing in school in terms of purpose, such as required essays and poetry:

My writing in school consists of pretty much anything that needs to be done like essays or poems. Usually like if I'm not doing that, I'm always like writing on my journal or something.

Justin had mentioned that he kept a personal journal. He discussed how it helped him but then also shared how it got him into trouble in middle school:

R: Tell me a little bit about your journal.

J: My journal is just a collection of my thoughts. Like anything that I think that I don't want to forget. I write it down so I won't forget. What I think about places, what I remember, just whatever I think is important.

R: How long have you been keeping your journal?

J: I've had several since like middle school...but it got me in trouble before; just things I wrote down- nothing like super bad.

R: Your own thoughts?

J: No, it wasn't like my own thoughts. It was just stuff that was happening at home, and it got me in trouble one time.

Justin shared his dislike for writing prompts in school, which were used to assess students for standardized tests:

R: What keeps you from wanting to write?

J: The only thing I think is something I don't think is important, or I'm tired because when I'm tired, I really can't do anything.

R: How did you do on prompts?

J: Oh, prompts. I don't like writing prompts, but it's just a simple format I follow, so it's real easy. Most of the prompts that I follow, I take one step at a time to get it over with. I don't really like writing prompts that are just given to me.

R: Do you find that teachers give you prompts or do they give you a choice?

J: Teachers usually give us a choice unless it's a TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) practice and they give us a certain prompt to see how we're doing.

In response to the question about providing self-paced instruction in other public high schools, Justin replied:

I'd say it would be really helpful because students can get done here really quick[ly], and a lot of problems that I faced throughout high school was repetition. It was doing everything over and over again, but if you had something like this, they wouldn't have to be putting up with like four years of school. They could do it in three or two, or however long it does take them.

Justin's description of an ideal classroom setting included interaction between the teacher and students, as well as interaction among the students:

R: So what would the ideal classroom be like?

J: Where the teachers interact with students; mainly somewhere that isn't empty because empty classrooms aren't that great. Just like five to six students because sometimes kids need other kids to help them, as opposed to just teachers because kids know what kids are going through.

R: How do you feel about the educational system here in our public schools in Texas?

J: I have various opinions on it. Like I think one of the problems is that they're trying to extend school too much.

R: What would be some positives that you can think of?

J: That they [teachers] work with students.

Justin did not identify himself as a library person, but he recommended having small groups work together in the library for research purposes. Justin provided detailed plans, such as giving students a time limit and allowing only one group at a time in the small library:

R: What would you recommend for our library or librarian?

J: I don't even know what I'd recommend; I'm not much of a library person.

R: How could we get more males into the library?

J: Probably like class group work that involves actually being in the library and finding out things that they can come up as a group because putting one student in the library isn't going to be as effective as multiple students and letting them work as a group because it'll give them like the pleasure of being with friends in the library and doing work at the same time.

R: Do you think our library is small?

J: Well, like sending a group at a time; giving them like a time limit so they won't be wasting too much time in there, but they'll have enough time to do what they need to do.

R: Do you think the library is hidden?

J: Yeah, it might be because they should have signs to the library in the main hallway because I didn't know where it was the first time.

See Appendix R for an excerpt of Justin's coded interview transcript.

All the participants recommended having small class sizes to provide personalized instructional support. In addition, all students conveyed the need to work at their own

pace, and seven of the students believed that the online curriculum at the alternative school helped them to complete a course at a faster pace. The other three students (Blue, Bob, and Andres) expressed frustration with the online curriculum's repetition, low-level questions, and worksheets.

Another interesting finding was the need for increasing the use of the library at the alternative high school. Six of the 10 students recognized the importance of the high school library for their reading and writing experiences. A cross-case analysis is provided following the sample coded interview transcripts of each participant.

### **Overview of Results**

Within-case and cross-case analysis resulted in an examination of individual participant responses as well as an overview of the entire groups' responses to the interview questions (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2001). As the participants described their literacy experiences, the majority of the students expressed that their reading in school was limited. Most of the participants shared that they had not checked out books unless assigned for a grade. Nine of the 10 participants in this study shared their use of a prepackaged, computerized program in elementary school, which for some students also carried over to middle and high school. Justin, for example, remembered being paid a dollar for every book he read for one week when he was in elementary school. Other students recalled the points and prizes associated with the program. However, their responses indicated that incentivized reading does not necessarily encourage students to read or promote the love of reading books and other materials.

There is a decline of secondary reading in school, and all the students in this study mentioned that reading had not been assigned in both the regular and the alternative high

schools. In addition, none of the participants had checked out books from the school library during high school. It is ironic that, in a time when college and career readiness has become a priority, our schools are operating under what Finn (1999) referred to as “domesticating education and functional literacy” (p. ix). This is a traditional approach focused on basic knowledge and skills and a transmission mode of teaching. All of the participants noted that they had read a lot more in elementary and that their in-school reading had decreased in high school.

Three of the students expressed frustration with listening to class lectures, and all of the participants shared limited reading and writing experiences in terms of materials and approaches to learning that failed to provide variety, interest, and balanced rigor. Although the online curriculum at the alternative high school was not considered to be challenging for many students, seven of the students recommended it for others because they believed the online courses were easy enough to complete at a faster pace. DJ and Joe, however, indicated that they were personally successful with the online courses because they were self-motivated; they both stressed that the online program was not for everyone. The lack of variety, interest, and balanced rigor was evident in students’ in-school literacy experiences.

As students described their literacy experiences, their family and friends played a key role in their reading and writing. Family and social relationships influenced each of the students in several different ways. For instance, some of the students were taught to read by family members, and others helped siblings with reading and writing. Parents and friends also played a role in recommending books for the participants to read. Many of the students mentioned that their writing was used primarily to communicate or keep in

touch with their family members and friends via social networking (e.g., email, text messaging, and Facebook).

When students were asked if they believed they were good readers and writers, most of the participants believed that they were proficient readers and writers. A sense of competence in reading was a recurring theme for all 10 participants, but only eight of the 10 students identified themselves as competent writers. Competence in reading; however, was based on different factors. For some of the participants, their competence in reading was based on their ability to comprehend texts while for others competence was based on the authority of a computerized or standardized test score, such as Accelerated Reader, Star Reading, or state assessments. Their competence in writing was also based on various factors.

Although the participants expressed concerns that their academic reading had declined in high school, every one of the students had mentioned the experience of reading for pleasure outside of school. In response to the question about their reading interests, many students shared titles of books they had enjoyed, the names of authors, or specific genres and topics. Three of the participants (Allen, Tom, and Joe) indicated that they had enjoyed reading the novel *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Allen discussed the significance of the lessons learned in history, and Joe mentioned how the Holocaust “opens up your eyes” to the world around us. Andres grew animated while describing one of his favorite books, *Phoenix* by John Connor. In response to the question about the significance of the book, Andres pointed out that the mystery novel gave him chills as he connected with the experience of the main character.

DJ enjoyed the character development and symbolism in several books, including *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *Slam* by Walter Dean Myers, and *The Things They Carried* by Paulo Coelho. Allen shared a variety of book titles and genres that he had read both at home and at school; however, most of the fantasy fiction and science fiction books were read for enjoyment at home. Allen also conveyed his love of poetry and history. Although most of the students were not asked to name specific book titles that were significant, some students expressed their interest in particular books that held special meaning or personal significance. See Appendix H for a list of some of the books that the students mentioned as significant.

In response to the question about describing the ideal classroom, all 10 students recommended smaller classes, the independence of self-paced instruction, and personalized instructional support, which the alternative school provided for students; these preferences indicate the need for meeting students' individual needs and learning styles. Also, the need for choice with a relevant purpose was evident when students struggled with completing reading and writings tasks. For other students, such as Allen, choice with a relevant purpose would have allowed him other options than reading the same book for the sixth time. For DJ and Ike, writing assignments related to their outside interests could have motivated them to write in school. DJ was involved in writing music; Ike enjoyed writing entertaining stories for his younger brothers. Five students (Blue, Tom, Joe, Andres, and Justin) explicitly mentioned the need for choice in their school assignments. According to the participants' English teacher, several of the students experienced a lack of motivation in completing their final research paper in English at the end of the semester.

Unlike the findings in other studies on boys' literacy practices (e.g., Brozo, 2006; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), the recommendation for independence stands apart. One of the reasons for this difference could be that the 10 young men in this study had left their home schools to graduate in a self-paced alternative campus. In addition, all of the participants were seniors in high school and approximately 17-18 years of age. This factor could have influenced their need to work independently on school assignments.

It was interesting to note that four students (Allen, DJ, Tom, and Andres) recommended increasing assigned reading in high school as well as expanding the school library at the alternative high school. Bob had also mentioned that he had been assigned only one book to read during his senior year in high school. Joe recommended more library visits in high school, and Justin suggested assigning inquiry groups to study in the library. These students, while they are all in an alternative high school, they are absolutely unique in their literary tastes and literacy achievements.

### **Researcher's Reflections**

The literacy of males is a major concern facing our schools today. With more than half a million students dropping out each year, educators struggle to find solutions not only to keep these students in school but to help them be successful and engaged in learning. These young men graciously volunteered to participate in this study, especially after being told that it would help other students like themselves. They were then eager to share their literacy experiences and speak out for other students who have not had the opportunity to be heard. Each participant had much to say about his experience with



reading and writing, and I have gained a deeper understanding of their literacy experiences.

Although I did not have a sense that any of the participants withheld information pertaining to their literacy experiences, I question whether my status as a Hispanic, female teacher and researcher caused them to hold back on their responses to any of the questions during the interviews. Other questions lingered regarding their gendered identity construction: why did some students indicate that they did not read or had not visited the library? Was reading in direct conflict with their masculinity or how they were conditioned as males? These questions are important to examine as we seek to understand boys' literacy experiences from their perspectives. Moje (1998) pointed out in her study of adolescent girls that, as we listen to our students' voices, we must keep in mind that students develop "assumptions that are derived from academic and social discourses that surround us...which often support unequal power relations" (p. 222).

As I reflect on the findings of this study, it is evident that all 10 students valued reading and writing, but their academic assignments did not match their interests and had little relevance to their lives. It was also clear to me from the interviews that the support from teachers and their relationships served as a protective factor in the students' successes. These students had become resilient in overcoming the many obstacles they had faced in completing high school. However, there is a sense that the students had almost become conditioned to schooling in terms of their acceptance of the expectations set for them by their teachers. These young men all complied with school administrators and teachers as the authority, whether it was copying definitions for a grade, reading a

book for the sixth time, or being pushed out of school for absences that were beyond the student's control.

Another interesting finding is that none of these students harbored negative feelings toward schools in general or any of their teachers. They accepted responsibility for their underachievement, and they were tolerant of the conditions they had experienced without question or blame. Allen explained that as a foster kid he had moved around a lot when he was younger, and Justin shared that he had not been focused in high school. Other students mentioned falling behind in school and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to recover their grades and attendance. As I listened to each student, I realized there had been times when I, as a teacher, had misunderstood the reasons why a student seemed disengaged in my classroom. Students arrive in our classrooms every day with their identities, interests, goals, and a wealth of knowledge and experience that sometimes can be easily overlooked or misinterpreted. As a teacher, I not only view my role differently because of these students and this study, but I also have come to value my role and my opportunities as a teacher much more.

One of the research questions pertained to the students' learning or reading that was particularly meaningful or significant to them. One question I would like to have asked each participant was for them to describe more fully the books and other material they read in school that had personal significance to them. Although this was one of the general research questions, I could have spent more time on their response to specific book titles and the books' significance to the participants. As a teacher and researcher, I believe that I would have gleaned new insights about their reading of particular books. It

is interesting to note that both Allen and Andres shared the personal significance of specific books at length. They were both avid readers of a variety of genres.

It is also worth noting that these students were young adults and were focused on graduating from high school. Their maturity could be one of the factors why these participants recommended working independently in a self-paced environment, as opposed to younger boys in similar studies who preferred working in small groups (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In addition, I was struck by how these findings confirm that marginalized students are in need of alternatives when it comes to education; most importantly, students need a community that values their learning as they reach their full potential.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented findings that emerged from the data analysis of the actual words of high school males who shared their literacy experiences. The participant profiles served to introduce each participant at the beginning of this chapter. Although each student was unique, there were some common patterns, and some of the results based on the students' experiences overlapped.

The following recurring themes were identified: (a) preference for variety, interest, and balanced rigor resulting in a disconnect between in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences; (b) importance of family and social relationships; (c) a sense of competence; and (d) recommendation for an environment that provides choice with a relevant purpose, independence, and personalized instructional support. In the next chapter, I will discuss each theme as it relates to the literature, as well as the implications for educators. In addition, recommendations for further studies will be provided.

## **Chapter 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the study, a summary of the qualitative findings, the researcher's final reflections, and implications for future studies. The emergent themes discussed in Chapter Four will also be examined. The summary and discussion at the end of the chapter will center on the research questions that formulated this study. The primary questions used in this qualitative exploration were as follows:

1. How do male students attending an alternative high school describe their literacy experiences?
2. How do male students attending an alternative high school perceive themselves as readers and writers?
3. What have male students attending an alternative high school learned or read that has been meaningful and significant to them?
4. How can schools better meet the needs of male students attending an alternative high school?

The purpose of this study was to explore and gain insights on the literacy experiences and perceptions through the eyes of male students attending an alternative high school. The method of inquiry was a qualitative research design. Four emergent themes were discovered throughout this study: (a) preference for variety, interest, and balanced rigor resulting in a disconnect between in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences; (b) the importance of family and social relationships; (c) a sense of

competence; and (d) recommendation for an environment that provides choice with a relevant purpose, independence, and personalized instructional support.

### **Discussion of Emergent Themes**

The semi-structured interviews of 10 high school male students indicated the following: There was a disconnect between students' in-school practices and their out-of-school literacy experiences. In-school literacy experiences were narrow, and there was a decline in secondary reading. The participants mentioned that required reading was limited in high school; self-selected reading in school seemed to be nonexistent as students described their literacy experiences. While students were assigned skills-based activities at school, they were reading online articles, news stories, magazines, and books of interest for personal enjoyment and for information at home. Outside of school, the participants were writing for a variety of purposes, including communicating with others, entertaining siblings, and writing poetry. Nine of the participants in this study shared their use of a prepackaged, computerized program in elementary, which for some students also carried over to middle school and high school. Also, all of the students had experienced an online curriculum that included basic questions and worksheets. The lack of rigor and choice imposed a limit on student interest in learning.

Family and social relationships influenced students in several different ways. Some of the students were taught to read by family members, while others helped siblings with reading and writing. Parents and friends played a role in recommending books for the participants to read. Many of the students mentioned that their writing was used primarily to communicate or keep in touch with their family members and friends.

All 10 participants identified themselves as competent readers, but only eight of the 10 students perceived themselves to be competent writers. Every one of the students had experienced the *flow* of reading something enjoyable when given the opportunities and the time (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

All of the participants in this study recommended a self-paced environment and personalized instructional support, highlighting the importance of meeting the individual needs and learning styles of the students. According to the participants' English teacher, most of the students struggled with writing their research papers at the end of the semester. If the students had been provided with constrained choices, perhaps these students would have been motivated to read and write about information and questions relevant to their lives.

### **Preference for Variety, Interest, and Balanced Rigor Resulting in a Disconnect Between In-School and Out-of-School Literacy Experiences**

The male participants in this study have unique interests, and their out-of-school literacy is based on those interests. However, there is a mismatch between their out-of-school and in-school literacy practices. A positive finding was that these male students read a variety of genres for different purposes outside of school. Unfortunately, these students indicated that there was no time to read in secondary school. Students' in-school materials were limited to one or two assigned books, especially in high school. Many of the students spoke about reading magazines, news, poetry, and other random online articles outside of school. The students in this study who read books for personal enjoyment preferred different genres and topics, such as fantasy, science fiction, mystery, thrillers, action, war stories, nonfiction, and comic books.

The importance of reading and writing a variety of texts was highlighted in this study. The students' use of varied purposes for reading and writing was apparent in the interview data. Students talked about social networking, e-mail, journals, letter writing, and poetry. Students deserve opportunities to read and write a variety of texts, as well as to participate in respectful environments characterized by high expectations, trust, and care (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycek, 1999; Sturtevant et al., 2006).

While all 10 students reported that they had read much more during elementary school, nine of the participants in this study shared their use of prepackaged and online computerized programs at both the elementary as well as the secondary level. School districts across the country are purchasing computerized programs to use as interventions for struggling readers. However, we must keep in mind that teachers can intervene while a prepackaged program cannot (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Researchers warn that extrinsic motivation based on incentives are short-lived and disappear once the incentives are no longer offered (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Wigfield, 2004). This might explain why most students did not read school texts unless it was assigned for a grade. Justin remembered being paid a dollar for every book he read for one week when he was in elementary school. Other students recalled the points and prizes associated with the program. According to Krashen (2004), to his knowledge, there are no studies that have "attempted to test the hypothesis that testing children on their reading has a positive effect" (p.121). Likewise, McQuillan (1997) reviewed studies on reading programs and found no evidence in their effectiveness toward the improvement of reading interest or motivation. In fact, McLoyd (1979) found that rewards potentially inhibit reading.

Incentivized reading does not necessarily encourage readers to read and to develop a love of books (Bintz, 1993; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; McQuillan, 1997; Smith, 1988; Worthy, 1998). Allington (2006) reported that prepackaged reading programs can be an expensive option and offer little instructional support. The monitoring systems are outdated and provide primarily low-level recall questions for students to answer after reading a book from a limited selection. This lack of rigor is ironic since adolescents need to be motivated to read.

All 10 students had experienced a decline of in-school reading in both regular and alternative high schools; in fact, none of the students in this study had recently checked out any books from the school library. Eight of the 10 participants stated that they had not checked out books because it was not assigned for a grade. Yet even while these students had neither visited the school library nor checked out books, half of the students believed the library should be expanded to include a variety of books. Five of the participants also agreed that there should be more reading in high school. Joe reflected, “I think they [teachers] should make us read a little more; I think it would do us all a favor.”

Both Allen and DJ recommended more exposure to a variety of genres; they shared a situation in which they discovered an appreciation for particular books when their teacher introduced them to new genres. Allen recalled, “I didn’t like historical books until, I forget what grade it was, but it was a required reading.... How can you know your favorite job if you’ve never seen it? It’s the same thing with reading.”

The ability levels of the 10 young men could have been influenced by their previous literacy experiences in-school and out-of-school. Students who had previously experienced success in school seemed to be more comfortable with increasing rigor,



while those students with negative experiences in school were not as open to rigorous coursework. Four of the students (Allen, DJ, Joe, and Andres) generally believed that teachers should hold higher expectations, especially at the high school level. Three of the students indicated that they were bored in school while having to listen to their teachers' lectures, and all of them shared about limited reading and writing experiences in terms of materials and approaches to learning that failed to provide variety, interest, and balanced rigor. For instance, Ike shared about having to write definitions for a grade, and Blue spoke about skimming and scanning his textbook "to get it over with faster." Blue also had recalled his English teacher playing cassettes of the readings in class. Joe added that he would "ace" AR tests that he was required to take in elementary.

In addition, although the online curriculum was not challenging for many students, some of the participants recommended it because it was an easy and quick option for course completion. Blue and Andres were particularly frustrated and bored with the repetition and worksheets of the online program. Bob described some of the questions as "ridiculous," while Allen, Ike, Tom, Joe, and Ted recommended working on the basic online program to finish the course quicker. Justin was the only participant who mentioned that the online curriculum was "kind of challenging."

Providing variety of materials alone to meet the students' interests does not necessarily translate into automatic student engagement of all students. Sturtevant et al. (2006) emphasized that although the need for adolescents to connect with various print and non-print texts exists, the "concept of engagement" is key to this principle, and the teacher plays an important role in "facilitating involvement in the subject matter through those texts" (p. 55). Another key idea is that as students navigate through various texts

they must also learn to become critical thinkers. Their world of instant communication and access to unlimited information can lead to a lack of reflection on their reading.

Teachers today need more support in accessing a variety of resources. An ideal classroom library would be well-stocked with various magazines, books, encyclopedias, picture books, textbooks, computers with book-marked web sites, and more (Sturtevant et al., 2006). The challenge for educators is to bridge the gap between students' in-school and out-of- school literacy practices.

### **The Importance of Family and Social Relationships**

Family and social relationships played a significant role in the students' literate lives. Five of the 10 students recalled being taught to read and write by a parent or grandparent. Two of the participants remembered their third grade teacher teaching them to read. One student (Joe) shared that a combination of both family members and teachers taught him to read. Allen shared that in the process of helping his older brother learn to read he himself became a better reader. Ike told of the stories he wrote to entertain his younger brothers at home, and Joe shared how his mother had encouraged him to stay in school and graduate.

The family plays a crucial role in helping young people develop a love of reading. Family support helps to foster the literacy development in many ways. In a study of 65 sixth-grade students and 86 ninth-grade students, Strommen and Mates (2004) found that the majority of the students indicated that their family and friends had influenced them to read books and visit the library. "When parents establish a routine of reading to their young children they foster an early interest in books that can be maintained if a variety of books is made available as children mature and their interests change" (pp. 198-199).

The theme of family and social relationships fits well with the research of Smith and Wilhelm (2002) who discovered that the boys in their study were influenced by family and friends in different ways, including the recommendation of books, relationships with their teachers, and group work, as well as the characters that they encountered in their reading. Similarly, four of the 10 participants in this study mentioned the importance of having someone recommend a book to them. Six students also expressed the importance of having positive relationships with their teachers. Social relationships are inter-related with the curriculum as literacies grow out of relationships (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Wolk, 2003), which can also lead to student achievement (Santa, 2006).

John Dewey (1927/1954) reminded us that democracy should be “the idea of community life itself” (p. 148). A democratic classroom allows students to experience a community of learners, in which they are allowed to discuss their thoughts about different issues. Wolk (2003) emphasized that “the underlying principles of a democratic classroom – choice, discourse, social responsibility, community, critical inquiry, authentic, and teaching a relevant and creative curriculum – help promote caring relationships between teachers and students” (p. 14).

Additionally, social networking outside of school was evident in the participants’ use of social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace. Seven of the students kept in touch with family and friends through the use of online networking sites.

### **A Sense of Competence**

All 10 participants believed that they were competent readers. However, the students based their perceptions on different factors. Some of the students based it on test

scores, while others based their reading competence on their own functional abilities, such as vocabulary, comprehension, and wide range of reading materials. It is not surprising that students place authority on standardized test scores and the Star Reading Test when perhaps they have been conditioned to do so by their teachers. However, teachers must use multiple sources of assessments and provide constant feedback to students. According to American psycholinguist Frank Smith (2006), students need an environment with expectations for learning if teachers are going to instill a sense of competence for students. “Motivation doesn’t ensure learning” just as “desire and effort don’t necessarily produce learning” (p. 206). Smith (2006) added, the “expectation that learning will not take place is itself learned” (p. 208).

When it came to writing, however, only eight of the 10 students felt they were competent writers. DJ preferred writing over reading, and he wrote song lyrics for his music production. Justin enjoyed reading and writing poetry, as well as keeping a personal journal. Ike wrote stories to entertain his younger brothers at home. Andres wrote letters to his mother who was incarcerated, but he never sent them. Allen and Blue did not feel as competent in writing. Allen mentioned that he had kept a journal to alleviate anger at one time, but he struggled with writing poetry; Blue resisted writing in general because he felt he was not competent in writing.

In some studies, boys’ perception of themselves as readers and writers has to do with their gendered identity (Cavazos-Kottke, 2005; Fletcher, 2006). English teacher Cavazos-Kottke (2005) pointed out that his male students would not admit to being readers although “their backpacks were often overflowing with magazines, newspapers, and text-heavy printouts from the Internet” (p. 182). In middle school, these students had

developed “a paradoxical aversion to reading” because they had associated reading with state tests. To engage his students, the teacher provided a variety of genres based on the students’ interests. As the teacher learned about his male students’ literacy practices, he gained a better understanding of the “value of choice as a powerful motivator in adolescent literacy development” (p. 183). Likewise, Fletcher (2006) discussed a study in which 400 students were given writing samples to identify the writer’s gender for each essay. Most boys wrote stories about violence while girls generally wrote about relationships. However, when boys wrote about relationships, their peers criticized their writing. Fletcher (2006) noted, “If this study is accurate it suggests boys’ gender does influence the way boys perceive themselves as writers, and the perception isn’t a positive one” (p. 22). In this study, Justin pointed out, “I’m not a library person,” and Ted clarified, “Honestly, I don’t read books.” In addition, Tom displayed his gendered identity when he explained that males were not as interested in reading as females. Tom recommended giving male students the choice of reading popular culture as a way of increasing their reading in school.

The differences in the ability levels of these participants are complex because it is evident that so many factors contributed to their sense of competence. For example, Tom identified himself as a fast learner until he began experiencing personal problems at home. He indicated that he was an average student, “I don’t really shoot for the moon when it comes to education.” Tom’s state scores and grades displayed that he was a capable student. Another student, Blue, was failing many of his classes when he enrolled at the alternative high school. He indicated that he was reading at a college level in elementary school, but in high school he hardly read any books and stayed away from

libraries. Blue also shared that he struggled with writing in school, especially with writing prompts. When we limit our assessment of males' achievement to school tasks, teachers tend to underestimate boys' capabilities (Smith & Wilhelm, 2004).

### **Recommendation for an Environment that Provides Choice with a Relevant Purpose, Independence, and Personalized Instructional Support**

In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey (1938/1997) promoted the need for choice and purpose in education. However, Newkirk (2009) clarified the differences between constrained and unconstrained choices. He stated that choice is not a *free-for-all* design but rather a learning environment that is facilitated by the guidance of the teacher. "There is also a direct role for the teacher in presenting information, teaching key concepts, structuring informal and formal writing opportunities" (p. 146).

A respectful environment is one where the teacher knows the students and meets their learning needs and learning styles. Some of the students (Blue, Ted, and Andres) did not believe that teachers had put their learning styles and needs into action. Teachers are called to recognize the importance of using texts to engage adolescents with questions and ideas that are meaningful to them and that tap into their multiple identities (Moje et al., 2008; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Tatum, 2008). According to Tatum (2008), "The texts students will remember or find meaningful are texts that move them to feel differently about themselves, that affect their views of themselves, or that move them to some action in their current time and space" (p. 84). Thus, it is vital to connect texts to students' lives and not the other way around.

Kelly Gallagher (2009) pointed out that students need a wide and balanced diet of high interest texts as well as required academic texts because, although students can read

the words, they don't have the prior background knowledge to comprehend the texts. Every student in this study mentioned book titles and genres they preferred to read. Three of the 10 students mentioned the novel *Night* by Elie Wiesel as interesting or significant. Allen stated that *Night* should be kept in the curriculum because of the lessons taught in our history.

Moje and Hinchman (2004) advocated using culturally responsive practices for all students, not only to "connect to new ideas or engage students" but to deepen their experiences and understandings (p. 326). The needs of minority students are often overlooked, and we need to address the "mismatches in classroom discourses" (p. 325). Although each of the 10 participants preferred specific topics and genres, Allen, DJ, Ike, Tom, and Andres shared how specific book titles were meaningful to them. For instance, Allen expressed how "The Pit and the Pendulum" by Edgar Allan Poe was one of his favorite stories "because it dealt a lot with history. I love history, and there's so much to learn from it. You take other people's mistakes, and you do your best not to repeat them."

DJ enjoyed how the main character in the *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger progressed; he connected to the book because of the way he had progressed in his own life and changed the people around him in positive ways as a role model. Ike had recently read *The Looking Glass Wars* by Frank Beddor and liked how it was different from the original *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. "There's a lot more fighting and action in it." Tom read Jaye Murray's *Bottled Up* in one day because he identified with the problems of the main character, "Even though it was a fiction book, it was like a nonfiction book because it was like a real story, and I was connected to it."

Andres passionately relived a scene from his favorite book, *The Phoenix* by John Connor:

When I read it, it was in depth so much. There was this one phrase I can remember, and it just gives me a chill. It was so empowering.... It had so much drama in there. There was so much detective [mystery]; I need to buy that book.

Andres had also inquired about downloading free e-books on his PSP. When the researcher gave him information on downloading free e-books, Andres had already downloaded an e-book by the second interview.

While most of the findings matched other studies on boys' literacy practices (Brozo, 2006; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), the recommendation for independent study stands apart. However, it is important to keep in mind that these 10 young men had chosen to leave their home school for different reasons and were on an independent path to graduate in a self-paced alternative campus. Also, all of the participants were seniors in high school and approximately 17-18 years of age. This factor could have impacted their preferred mode of independent school assignments.

All 10 participants expressed their desire for a small classroom environment with individualized support. In a time of budget cuts, this recommendation becomes a challenge. High schools are overcrowded, and more students are seeking smaller environments. There is a waiting list at the alternative high school as students learn about the small class sizes and self-paced environment at the alternative campus. In *Principled Practices for Adolescents: A Framework for Instruction and Policy*, Sturtevant et al. (2006) highlighted the need for adolescents to “participate in respectful environments characterized by high expectations, trust, and care” (p. 30). Students easily lose interest when school becomes repetitious and boring.



While the participants in this study believed that self-paced instruction was important, some of them concurred that the online curriculum used at the school was not challenging. The wide range of ability levels was evident in all ten participants. Four of the 10 students (Blue, Bob, Ike, and Andres) disliked the use of the online course at the alternative campus. For instance, Bob stated that some of the questions were ridiculous, and Andres disliked the worksheets that accompanied the online course.

Kelly Gallagher (2006) challenged teachers to think about teaching writing versus assigning writing. One of his “top ten writing wrongs in secondary schools” (p. 9) includes the problem with assigning writing as opposed to teaching writing. Students need instructional support even at the high school level, and they are shortchanged when they are expected to enter our classrooms with the necessary skills.

When asked about writing, Blue and Joe had difficulty with writing primarily because they had little or no teacher support to get them started. Joe shared, “I’ll read the prompt, and I won’t know what I’m gonna write about for a good while.” Blue explained, “For me to get started takes me a long time...then, if your teacher gives you back your paper with all those red marks on there, then it’s going to make you feel even lower.” Allen saw no point in writing because he did not identify himself as a good writer. Students need teachers to provide models, practice, and writing strategies. Additionally, high school students are in need of appropriate interventions if they are to be successful in school. Moje (2006) reminded us that “high schools need to develop interventions in secondary teaching practices that can support teachers in scaffolding students’ reading of the demanding texts of the content areas” (p. 13).

### **Implications and Recommendation for Educators**

The results of this study indicate that students' literacies between home and school are disconnected. One of the implications of this study is the need for schools to broaden their literacy focus and enhance literacy instruction that engages the students. Schools need to value different kinds of reading and writing for different purposes. Coordinated efforts at the campus level can serve to enhance the literacy support for all students. School-wide literacy efforts provide effective results when implemented carefully (Brozo & Fisher, 2010; Gewertz, 2010). The five principles provided by Brozo and Fisher (2010) begin with a few strategies, offer model lessons, support teachers with forums, provide a variety of training formats, and begin with the teachers who are most willing to adopt new ideas.

Schools must ensure that teachers have access to a variety of high interest materials as well as required texts. Successful literacy plans provide students with time to read and write self-selected texts during school. Teachers also have the opportunity to collaborate and have ownership in the design, as well as evaluate those plans. In addition, the librarian plays a key role in restructuring the school library with popular culture books and a variety of other reading materials.

Although an effective school-wide literacy focus is tied to high quality professional development, teachers need much more than subject-area knowledge. They must also appreciate the development of young people and have the openness to learn new ideas to meet the needs of their students. The importance of teacher support is a key factor in the students' success. Ms. Rodriguez, the senior English teacher, continued to

believe in her students, and she recognized that some students just needed extra time to catch up:

You just have to motivate these kids. They don't feel secure. They're two or three years behind, and their self-esteem is low. And that's what basically has to be done. The majority of my students have been successful. Now, there are some that just don't get it yet.

Providing culturally responsive teaching is one of the keys to student engagement (Moje & Hinchman, 2004; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2008). The purpose of culturally responsive texts is to build connections with students through their multiple identities (gender, ethnicity, age). Teachers can provide meaningful lessons when using texts and questions that matter to students. Tatum (2008) addressed the importance of providing significant learning experiences for students: "Responsive teaching and curricula focus on powerful and authentic texts for adolescents that help them bridge in-school and out-of-school discontinuities that exist for many students" (p. 15). However, it is critical that teachers respect students' out-of-school literacies and not stereotype students in any way (Brozo, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Sturtevant et al., 2009; Watson et al, 2010).

Inquiry units could also engage students in authentic reading and writing experiences (Dewey, 1910/1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). An inquiry framework begins with a problem and essential questions while providing a variety of reading texts, choice, and balanced rigor. Students develop a sense of competence and work in small groups on relevant topics (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2006). Smith and Wilhelm (2006) also advocate using the *Understanding by Design (UbD)* planning guide by Grant Wiggins and Jay

McTighe (1998). The *UbD* guide is referred to as backwards planning which was developed to deepen the students' understanding.

Teacher certification programs must prepare preservice teachers to work with adolescents and their multiple literacies. Preservice students need highly qualified, cooperating teachers who are familiar with a wide variety of print and online reading, as well as the tools to assist secondary students in becoming proficient writers of various forms of texts.

Another key implication involves the need for qualified reading specialists at the secondary level. Reading specialists can provide valuable work not only with struggling students but also serve as a resource for content-area teachers who need support locating alternate texts and teaching reading strategies and skills. If we had knowledgeable reading specialists at the secondary schools, school districts would not feel compelled to purchase scripted, or prepackaged, computer-based programs.

Despite growing reports that interactive technology is improving student learning, some researchers claim that technology does nothing for reading complex texts. For example, Bauerlein (2011) argued that “complex texts pull young minds in one direction, digital diversions in another” (p. 30). There is a call for occasional unplugged and unwired reading in classrooms. In addition, some researchers simply point out that interventions are needed at the high school level to help students be successful (Gallagher, 2009; Moje, 2006, Newkirk, 2009).

Alarming reports on students' poor literacy skills have spurred new initiatives and reforms, which have only led to further issues. For instance, the accountability measures have placed added strain on schools, which serve to trigger alienation between school

staff and students. Many high school students are being left behind and pushed out of their schools because of attendance issues and failing grades or state test scores (Jerald, 2003; Orfield, 2006). School administrators and teachers need to reexamine how local policies and practices should be changed to better serve the needs of individual students.

This study displayed the importance of alternative schools; however, we must also ensure that alternative school settings do not become what Snow et al. (2007) described as a “bandage to a gaping wound” (p. 135). The growing number of alternative settings can lead to an over-reliance of these schools without addressing the real causes of the problems. Teachers and staff at the regular high schools must seek ways to implement interventions for marginalized students and carefully identify students who would benefit from a self-paced alternative environment to recover credits for graduation.

Matching the needs of the students to the right alternative program is vital for success. Court-adjudicated youth need more structure than students who choose to attend a dropout recovery program. Not all alternative programs offer the structure and pacing that some students need to be successful. A “school of choice” with court-adjudicated students for truancy is no longer a school of choice and may only serve to hinder efforts to focus on students striving to graduate on time, such as the 10 participants in this study.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study advances research on the literacy practices of male students by investigating their experiences. The findings of this study fill a gap in the research literature because, although a growing knowledge base has accumulated in the areas of boys’ literacy engagement, there is a limited amount of phenomenological case studies of male students that include boys’ literacy experiences from their early childhood to their

senior year, especially those enrolled in an alternative high school. Although the research base has provided much insight in the area of adolescent literacy, further studies can serve to enhance the quality of literacy instruction that engages students to not only complete their high school education but to be prepared for college and the workplace.

- One of the findings in this study highlighted the need for increased rigor in alternative schools settings. It would be worthwhile to conduct both qualitative and quantitative studies to further investigate the rigor in alternative campuses as they strive to provide accelerated instruction and a flexible schedule. This information would help to develop effective professional development opportunities for teachers and staff members at alternative schools.
- This study shed some light on the limited materials that students are exposed to in secondary schools. It would be worthwhile to conduct a descriptive study to examine the use of materials, as well as how teachers are being supported to utilize a variety of texts. This would assist in developing effective professional development and ongoing support.
- With the current practice of assigning some displaced teachers to alternative campuses, further studies can be conducted with teachers at alternative school settings to evaluate the process of assigning teachers to the appropriate special campus.
- Longitudinal studies with high school males need to be conducted to bridge the gap between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices. Journal entries and inquiry-based units can be used to identify processes for student engagement and academic growth.

- It would be interesting to replicate this study with females to discover if these findings are gender specific. This would add to the growing body of knowledge in the area of adolescent literacy practices.
- This study could be replicated with a large population of male students in regular high schools. Further research can help to generalize to a broader population sample to expand and deepen our understanding of males' literacy practices.

### **Researcher's Final Reflections**

Max Van Manen (1990) reminds us that “we gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves” (p. 62). I chose this topic of study primarily because of my interest in students who have been identified as “marginalized” and “at risk” of dropping out of high school. Although there are numerous factors affecting these students, each student has a unique story. One of the misconceptions about students attending an alternative campus is that they do not care about school.

After teaching in an alternative high school for the past three years, I have noted that many students have been subjected to a dated and rigid curriculum that has little meaning or relevance in their lives. Unfortunately, in some cases, my interviews with these 10 students reinforced my concerns. Perhaps Thomas Newkirk (2009) said it best when he described a cluttered curriculum, “The school curriculum becomes a wonder of physics where material can continually be added, with nothing removed” (p. 132). Mechanized approaches to teaching will continue to have a damaging effect on our students when competition for high state test scores drives schools to raise test scores. The school culture in our country has been in survival mode with over a million students

dropping out each year. Schools have the responsibility to become proactive rather than reactive in their efforts to improve.

As educators, we begin by taking some of the responsibility. We need to constantly find ways to engage our students, males and females, and build their critical thinking skills. Young and Brozo (2001) share their different views on the means of critical literacy, the ability to read and critique texts. My view is aligned with Josephine Young's notion of how "critical literacy can take place simultaneously as one learns to read.... All kinds of readers can be critical when they are given opportunities to become aware of and challenge the unfair practices in the world" (p. 323). We have the opportunity to transform our classrooms every day. Henry Giroux (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985) reminds us that teachers are called to be "transformative intellectuals and not mere skilled technicians" (p.142).

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was conducted at one alternative high school to gather information from 10 male students and their English teacher through interviews and student documents. Generalizations cannot be made to a broader population based on these factors. However, the information provides educators and others with a deeper understanding about male students' literacy practices.

Other limitations of qualitative case studies could involve the issues of reliability and validity. In general, without adequate training and self-reflection, the researcher as the primary instrument could present biases and prejudgments about the data.



## **Summary and Conclusions**

This phenomenological inquiry has taken me to new places that were unforeseen when I began to explore this topic. I approached this journey as both a researcher and a learner. This study sought to describe and explore the literacy experiences of male students attending an alternative high school. It is my hope that this study accomplished its intent to listen to our students as we strive to improve their literacy experiences and to deepen their appreciation for reading and writing, for it is so much more than mere skills.

Attending to our students' diverse needs will help us to better serve both male and female students. Furthermore, it is important that we do not stereotype genders, which can lead to regulating reading, as that would jeopardize our efforts to engage all learners. Similar to Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) study, the young men I interviewed had not experienced a feminized school culture. Although a few of the boys used gendered constructions in their language when referring to their literacy practices, the feminization of school was not the case. The findings of this study provide educators and school administrators with an understanding of males' literacy experiences in an alternative high school, which can guide efforts to improve current policies and practices.

Alarming reports on students' poor literacy skills have spurred new initiatives and reforms, which have only led to further concerns. Many students are being pushed out of their schools because of attendance issues and failing grades or state test scores. School administrators and teachers need to reexamine how local policies and practices should be changed to better serve the needs of individual students. In addition, school districts must encourage and support school-wide literacy efforts that engage students in the evolving changes of literacy in our world. The complexity of student literacy practices is much like

a puzzle, and we must carefully examine the whole picture to put it together. Ultimately, my stance as an educator challenges me to uncover productive ways to handle this issue in a responsible and professional manner.

I am deeply grateful to these students and their English teacher for sharing their time and their stories during the interviews. Their voices will continue to be heard and will be echoed as I share their experiences with others. This research study has the potential to contribute to the understanding of student literacy experiences in our schools and effect changes in instructional practices and policies.

Moore et al. (1999) remind us that our students “deserve enhanced opportunities to grow into healthy, strong, and independent readers and writers” (p. 19). We must take the necessary steps to ensure that our students navigate through life with positive experiences in reading and writing. Furthermore, we can deter the dropout rate from escalating and increase our graduation rates. It may well be as Smith and Wilhelm (2004) stated, “Some boys reject literacy not because of the gendered way society constructs it but rather because of the way students encounter literate activity in school – and that is in our power to change” (p. 460). Educators have both the opportunity and responsibility to connect and engage students’ lives to reading and writing a variety of texts, and we begin by giving students a voice.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Parental Consent Form**

#### *Literacy Experiences of Male Students in an Alternative High School: A Phenomenological Perspective*

Your son has been invited to participate in a research project exploring the reading and writing experiences of adolescent boys at (name removed) High School. If you grant permission for your son to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent. Your son has been selected to be a participant because of his attendance at (name removed) High School.

#### **What will the student be asked to do?**

If you agree for your son to participate in this study, he will be interviewed three times for approximately 30-45 minutes at (name removed) High School. All interviews will be held at his convenience. In addition, his English teacher will be interviewed for information about his reading and writing interests and challenges. It is believed that this study will help teachers and others understand the experiences and interests of adolescent boys. I will use a voice recorder at each session; and I will use a journal to record information. All information collected during this research study will be kept completely confidential.

#### **What are the risks involved in this study?**

There are no known risks in this study.

#### **What are the possible benefits of this study?**

The possible benefit of participation is the opportunity to help teachers and others gain a better understanding of the literacy experiences of adolescent boys in an alternative high school.

#### **Does he have to participate?**

No, his participation is voluntary. You may grant permission for your son to participate in this study, and he may withdraw at any time without your current status with (name removed) High School being affected.

#### **Who will know about your son's participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential, and students will choose a fictitious name to maintain confidentiality. Also, the records will be kept in a locked file cabinet.

If you choose to participate in this study, your son will be audio recorded. All audio recordings will be stored securely and only Ms. Toni Chapa, teacher at (name removed) will have access to the recordings. All recordings will be kept for a period of three years and then erased.

**Whom do I contact about my son's rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. For research-related problems or questions regarding your son's rights as a participant, you may contact the university research office at (361) 825-2497.

Please be sure that you have read the above information, asked questions, and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records.

By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent(s) Legal Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix B**

### **English Teacher Consent Form**

#### *Literacy Experiences of Male Students in an Alternative High School: A Phenomenological Perspective*

Dear Teacher:

You have been invited to participate in a research project exploring the reading and writing experiences of approximately eight adolescent boys at (name removed) High School. If you agree to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent. You have been selected to be a participant because of your role as an English teacher of the student participants.

#### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed about the student participants in your English class. Each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. All interviews will be held at your convenience at (name removed) High School. It is believed that this study will help teachers and others understand the experiences and interests of adolescent boys. I will use a voice recorder at each session, and I will use a journal to record information. All information collected during this research study will be kept completely confidential.

#### **What are the risks involved in this study?**

There are no known risks in this study.

#### **What are the possible benefits of this study?**

The possible benefit of participation is the opportunity to help teachers and others gain a better understanding of the literacy experiences of adolescent boys in an alternative high school.

#### **Do you have to participate?**

No, your participation is voluntary. You may agree to participate in this study, and you may withdraw at any time without your current status with (name removed) High School being affected.

#### **Who will know about your participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential; and you will be able to choose a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Also, the records will be kept in a locked file cabinet.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. All audio recordings will be stored securely and only Ms. Toni Chapa, teacher at (name removed) will have access to the recordings. All recordings will be kept for a period of three years and then erased.

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a participant, you may contact the university research office at (361) 825-2497.

Please be sure that you have read the above information, asked questions, and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records.

By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C**

### **Student Consent Form 18 Years of Age or Older**

#### *Literacy Experiences of Male Students in an Alternative High School: A Phenomenological Perspective*

Dear Student:

You have been invited to participate in a research project exploring the reading and writing experiences of adolescent boys at (name removed) High School. If you agree to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent. You have been selected to be a participant because of your attendance record at (name removed) High School.

#### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed three times during the 18 week semester. Each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. All interviews will be held at your convenience at (name removed) High School. It is believed that this study will help teachers and others understand the experiences and interests of adolescent boys. I will use a voice recorder at each session; and I will use a journal to record information. All information collected during this research study will be kept completely confidential.

#### **What are the risks involved in this study?**

There are no known risks in this study.

#### **What are the possible benefits of this study?**

The possible benefit of participation is the opportunity to help teachers and others gain a better understanding of the literacy experiences of adolescent boys in an alternative high school.

#### **Do you have to participate?**

No, your participation is voluntary. You may agree to participate in this study, and you may withdraw at any time without your current status with (name removed) High School being affected.

#### **Who will know about your participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential; and you will be able to choose a fictitious name to maintain confidentiality. Also, the records will be kept in a locked file cabinet.



If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. All audio recordings will be stored securely and only Ms. Toni Chapa, teacher at (name removed) will have access to the recordings. All recordings will be kept for a period of three years and then erased.

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a participant, you may contact the university research office at (361) 825-2497.

Please be sure that you have read the above information, asked questions, and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records.

By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Student Assent Form Under Age 18

#### *Literacy Experiences of Male Students in an Alternative High School: A Phenomenological Perspective*

I agree to participate in this study about the reading and writing experiences of boys attending (name of alternative high school removed).

The consent form signed by my parents/legal guardian has been submitted to you stating that I could participate in this study. I understand that all the information collected will be kept confidential.

I agree to be interviewed three times during the study. I understand that each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes at (alternative high school name removed). Also, my English teacher will be interviewed regarding my reading/writing interests and challenges.

My participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I can inform the person in charge of this study if I wish to withdraw.

I voluntarily consent to take part in the above described research.

Student's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix E**

### **Interview Questions for Students**

#### **Reading**

1. Thank you for meeting with me today.
2. Tell me something about your reading habits.
3. How often do you check out books from the library?
4. Tell me something about your home reading habits.
5. Are you a good reader? Why do you think so?
6. Tell me about the reading habits of some of your friends.
7. Tell me about a good memory you have of a teacher teaching you how to read.
8. Tell me about a book you have read recently.
9. What material(s) would you prefer to read? Show student a variety of reading materials (newspaper, magazines, poetry, email, internet, books of different genre...)
10. How would you describe the experience of reading when you're reading something enjoyable?

#### **Computers**

11. How often do you use a computer?
12. If you use the internet, tell me about your favorite websites.
13. (If student is taking an APEX course online) Describe what the online APEX course is like for you.
14. (For students enrolled in a computerized reading program). Describe what the reading program was like for you.

#### **Writing**

15. Tell me about your writing in school?
16. Tell me about your writing outside of school?
17. What helps you really want to write something?
18. What keeps you from wanting to write something?

#### **School**

19. Why are you attending an alternative high school?
20. What would the ideal classroom be like for you?
21. What would you say to someone who said that students here at the alternative high school didn't care about school?

## **Appendix F**

### **Interview Questions for English Teacher**

1. How would you describe the student's reading habits?
2. How would you describe the student's writing abilities?
3. What literacy task does the student seem to enjoy?
4. What literacy tasks are most difficult for the student?
5. What kind of support do you think the student needs to be successful?
6. What support do you need to assist the student?

## Appendix G

### Sample Common Categories

<b>In-School Experiences</b> <b>Narrow</b> Skills-based – AR/Star Transmission approach Lectures Limited texts/materials No choice Decline in high school Incentivized reading Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Skills-focused</li> <li>- No strategies or modeling</li> <li>- No choice (prompts)</li> </ul>	<b>Social – Relationships</b>  Importance of Family  Friends  Classroom Climate – Teacher/Student relationship	<b>Out-of-school</b>  Personal interests  Favorite websites  Video games	<b>School Culture</b> - <b>Environment</b>  Attendance  Support Rapport with teacher  Self-paced instruction – independence
<b>Positive identity as</b> <b>readers (writers)</b>	<b>Sense of Competency</b>	Fast learner Self-motivated Independent	Slow reader Good vocabulary
<b>Significant reading or</b> <b>learning</b>	<b>Genres</b>  Fantasy Science Fiction Historical Fiction Nonfiction	<b>Materials</b>  Online reading (variety)  Magazines	<b>Titles</b> <i>*Night</i> – E. Wiesel <i>*The Things they Carried</i> – P. Coelho <i>The Legacy of the Drow</i> <i>The Phoenix</i> <i>Catcher in the Rye</i>

	Poetry		<i>A Child Called It</i> <i>The Trench</i> <i>A Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy</i> <i>Bottled Up</i> <i>Vladimi Lenin</i>
Schools Need unified vision-literacy focus  Broader literacy focus	Small classes – more one-on-one; individualized  Overpopulated schools/classrooms	Self-paced schooling	Support Learning styles Professional development Positive relationships with students

## Appendix H

### Significant Books and Reading Materials of Interest to the Students

Male Participants	Book Titles	Genres	Significance
Allen	<i>Legacy of the Drow</i> by R.A. Salvatore; <i>Wizards of the Coast</i>	Fantasy fiction	Family influence
	<i>Night</i> by Elie Wiesel	Autobiographical memoir	Lessons learned in history
	“The Pit and the Pendulum” by Edgar Allan Poe		Dealt with history
	Stephen King novels Other topics	Science fiction history, poetry	Interest
DJ	<i>The Things They Carried</i> by Paulo Coelho	Realistic fiction	War story - Vietnam
	<i>Catcher in the Rye</i> by J.D. Salinger	Fiction	Symbolism and character development
	<i>A Lesson Before Dying</i> by Ernest J. Gaines	Realistic fiction	Interest
	“Beowulf”	Epic Poem	Challenge; interest
Blue	<i>A Child Called ‘It’</i> by Dave Pelzer	Autobiography	Personal connection
	Vietnam War story (unknown title)	Nonfiction	Family influence
Bob	<i>A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy</i> by Douglas Adams	Science fiction comedy	Humor

Ike	<i>The Looking Glass Wars</i> by Frank Beddor	Fantasy fiction	Action and fighting
	Vadimir Lenin Biography	Biography	Interest in Lenin's biography
Tom	<i>Bottled Up</i> by Jaye Murray	Realistic fiction	Connection in dealing with family problems
	<i>Night</i> by Elie Wiesel	Autobiographical memoir	History
Joe	<i>Night</i>	Autobiographical memoir	Interest in history - opens up your eyes
Andres	<i>The Phoenix</i> by John Connor	Mystery	Interest in mystery; thrill and connection
Justin	Various nonfiction books and articles about animals	Nonfiction – science	Interest in animals
		Poetry	Interest in poetry

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## Appendix I

### Sample of Allen's Thematic Analysis

Excerpt from Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
R: What kinds of books do you like to read?	Reading for enjoyment	Interest Variety
A: All kinds; <u>I get into the science fiction and the fantasy.</u>		
R: How often do you check out books from the library?		
A: Actually <u>I haven't been to the library to check out books;</u> I kinda just go to Goodwill and check out their books. I buy them; <u>they have a variety.</u>	Limited library visits Variety of books	Limited reading Variety and interest
R: How would you describe the experience of reading when you're reading something enjoyable?		
A: It can be <u>therapeutic</u> . It's like, if you're reading, you can get a mental image kinda like watching a movie, but only you're using the words that are written. And <u>if you get into it, and it's really enjoyable, you hardly realize the pages are flying,</u> as opposed to if you're reading, what was a boring book I had to read? I think it was in 8 <sup>th</sup> grade because <u>they were trying to get the students to really read,</u> and we had a homeroom. In homeroom, we basically just read from the book. We also <u>had to read <i>My Side of the Mountain</i>.</u> It was alright, but <u>it wasn't my cup of tea. It just didn't click; like the pages dragged.</u>	"Flow" reading experience  Environment (ENV): No self-selected book	Reading Interest  No choice of reading material; no interest
<u>Reading started with actually my grandpa with flashcards trying to teach me.</u>	Grandpa teaching me;	Importance of family
Helped out [with reading] older brother with poor eyesight <u>I missed out on some of the good reading in high school. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, what were you supposed to read? I read <i>Night</i> about six times</u> between 8 <sup>th</sup> grade and 10 <sup>th</sup> grade; I read it like six times because <u>it was a requirement.</u> I could probably act that book out if I had to.	Helping brother  Content-repetitious	  Lack of rigor
R: How often do you use the computers?		
A: Every day <u>I use APEX.</u> At home, I use <u>My Space,</u> it allows me to keep in <u>contact with my family;</u> <u>You Tube,</u> I like listening to <u>music.</u> But, for the most part, I use <u>computer for school-based things.</u>	Social network, music, online curriculum at school	Social – Family APEX- lack of rigor
I'd like to think I'm a good reader; 12 <sup>th</sup> grade reading level in Star Test Can write essays nor poetry Don't think my writing is very good Ideal class would not be jam-packed; Teacher could take time and show student...	Positive id. as a reader Negative Id in writing Class size	Sense of competence Personalized support

## Appendix J

### Sample of DJ's Thematic Analysis

Excerpt from Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
It would pretty <u>good to be forced to read different genres</u> because like me, I like a certain type of genre... ( <i>A Lesson Before Dying</i> by Ernest J. Gaines; <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> by J. D. Salinger, and <i>The Things They Carried</i> by Paolo Coelho).	Exposure to different genres	Variety Interest
In <u>elementary, we had Scholastic book fairs</u> I don't think there's enough (reading in <u>secondary</u> ) because I've barely had to read just one book or short story – <u>recommend a variety</u> ; Our school library can have <u>more different types of genres of books</u>	Limited reading in secondary -- expectations	Lack of rigor Variety
<u>I love writing</u> , especially personal experiences <u>I like research</u> – pertaining to my current situation...	Interests- writing A lot of writing outside of school	Interests - writing
<u>poetry; music sites</u> ; I usually do a lot of writing outside of school with production and writing song pieces		
<u>Social networking</u> sites	Network	Social
I remember <u>my dad working with me</u> on some of the stories that I was having trouble with <u>pronouncing the words</u>	Dad working on stories	Family
Yeah, I'm a <u>pretty good reader</u> because I've read lots of <u>different materials</u> ; I have a pretty <u>extensive vocabulary</u> ; I'm usually pretty <u>self-motivated</u> ; I believe I'm a <u>strong writer</u> ; <u>Proactive learner</u> ; I like to take <u>self-initiative</u>	Positive id as a reader and writer based on reading lots of different materials	Sense of competency As a reader and as a writer
Usually read occasionally – whenever I get a chance	Slow start in reading Self-paced – APEX	(Environment) Independence
I enjoyed APEX because... <u>I like to work on my own pace</u> ; usually I prefer individual work		
I don't think there's enough (reading in secondary) because I've barely <u>had to read just one book or short story</u>	Decline in high school reading Personal; Individual needs	Lack of rigor Personalized support
[Teachers] Be <u>more personal</u> than just instruct the entire class		

## Appendix K

### Sample of Blue's Thematic Analysis

Excerpt from Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
I read only when I have to – <u>not interesting for me</u>	Reading	Lack of interest
I usually <u>stay away from libraries</u> – it's really <u>boring</u> because you <u>just have to sit there</u> most of the time – <u>you don't do much</u>	Library visits – boring uncomfortable Limited reading	Alienation - subtheme
<u>No books checked out this year</u> – the last time was my <u>freshman year</u>	Low expectations Lack of choice	Limited choice Need for rigor
Read <u>one self-selected book</u> and two or three for class – the <u>teacher had the cassette</u> .	Decline in secondary reading Favorite books	lack of variety and choice Interest
<i>A Child Called It</i> (Dave Pelzer)		
<i>The Trench</i> (Steve Allen)		
When I first started <u>APEX</u> , I liked going on my own pace, but as I kept using it, it was the <u>same thing over and over every day</u> .	APEX online curriculum – self-paced, repetitious	Lack of rigor; independence Need for support
Hard time starting <u>writing</u> assignments; I <u>don't really use any strategies</u> ; I <u>struggle with writing</u> – <u>avoid writing</u>	Limited Writing instruction and support	Struggle; need for support
Teacher gives you paper with <u>red marks</u> , it's going to make you <u>feel even lower</u> . I like when teacher gives you the work and you <u>figure it out on your own</u> – call her over instead of her explaining the entire thing.	Teacher grading – student's self-esteem Teacher instruction – lecture (transmission model)	Environment that supports competence & independence
We were supposed to read one full book and do assignments – I didn't want to do that, so he just put me <u>doing basically TAKS work</u> .	Limited options	Lack of rigor and purpose
<u>Teachers don't really put your learning styles into action</u> – if the whole class doesn't get it, then <u>you're stuck in that one spot</u> (in regular high schools)	Learning styles ignored	Need for support
Took Star and AR test for senior English.	Star/AR	Lack of rigor
Teachers say the <u>more you write the better off you are</u> ; <u>they just want you to write more</u> .	Writing Instruction needed	Need instructional support

## Appendix L

### Sample of Bob's Thematic Analysis

Excerpt from Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
Usually <u>don't read books too often</u> – read a lot on the internet ( <u>just news – random stuff</u> )	Online reading	Interest; purpose
Read <i>Harry Potter</i> in elementary; Read <i>Star Wars</i> in middle school		
<u>Read a lot throughout middle school – checked-out books almost every week, but once in high school – kinda stopped reading – no time for it</u>	Decline in secondary reading; stopped due to time constraints	Environment – needs to support interest, variety, purpose
Prefer <u>nonfiction books</u> - Read <i>Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy</i> ; <u>Prefer internet &amp; magazines</u> as well; video games	Reading preferences	Interest as motivating tool
<u>AR incentives</u> in elementary & middle school	Incentives	Environment
APEX was okay – <u>some of the questions were ridiculous, inconsistent but would recommend b/c learned about the same.</u>	Online curriculum (pre-packaged programs)	Lack of rigor and variety
I don't like to sit and write all day – usually <u>do a pretty good job</u> ; don't get into writing too much	Writing	Competence Independence
Like working <u>independently</u>	Self-paced	Environment – support competence and independence
Wish for more individual attention	Class size	Environment – support interest and choice
I like <u>short stories</u>		
Just didn't have enough time to read	Limited time for Reading	
Just read one book this year; Beowulf was required		
I'm not good at sitting there listening to <u>lectures; I could teach myself</u> ; At home school, it was sit down, <u>listen to teacher</u> , then leave; Mostly individual packet work	Lectures	Lack of rigor, variety and interest
A lot of <u>group work in elementary and middle school</u>	Elem/middle school group work	Environment to support student
Excessive absences after mom had surgery	Attendance	

## Appendix M

### Sample of Ike's Thematic Analysis

Excerpt from Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
I read every now and then – <u>scary story</u> or <u>mystery book</u> <u>have not checked out books here</u> – haven't had a chance like scary stories, mystery books, and <u>biographies (Vladimir Lenin)</u> no memory of learning to read but remembers Dr. Seuss books prefer to read internet or books <u>APEX is pretty simple</u> – just common or <u>basic knowledge</u> Writes <u>research</u> or <u>definitions for class</u> Don't write when I don't have any idea	Genre – scary/mystery No library visits No early memories Childhood books  Preferences  APEX – basic knowledge Definitions No writing strategies	Interest as motivating tool  Environment – to promote choice Interests as a child   Lack of rigor  Lack of rigor, variety, Interest, choice
Ideal classroom – everything is just comfortable; <u>teacher and kids have a good attitude</u> ; Prefer <u>small groups</u>	Comfortable classroom; small groups	Social support
Star & <u>AR tests</u> whenever we're done with a novel – it's quick Make everything <u>self-paced</u> ; Provide APEX I like <u>history</u> <u>Library here should be a little big bigger</u> – in the middle of school; I didn't know where it was the 1 <sup>st</sup> couple of days I like the <u>assortment of books in our library</u>	Star/AR  Self-paced Expand library – good selection	support competence Lack of Rigor support independence Interest as motivating tool support competence; Variety and Interest

## Appendix N

### Sample of Tom's Thematic Analysis

Excerpt of Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
Only time I read is <u>during school</u> – probably history like a book on the <u>Holocaust</u>	Reading in school for information	Purpose, interest as motivating tool
Prefers <u>comic books, daily online news, and fiction books</u>	Reading preferences	Variety of reading materials
Memory in 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade – taught me to write and read books ( <i>Barenstein Bears</i> ; <i>Henry Mudge</i> )	Early memories - titles	
Schoolwork and <u>focusing on stuff at home</u> (tasks, job seeking) <u>keeps me from reading</u>	Lack of time to read	Interest
If teachers let us <u>choose a book, a lot of guys would read books</u> . A lot of books <u>don't get our attention as much as the females</u> .	Student choice Gendered identity	Choice Interest
Read <i>Night</i> and <i>The Stonehenge Mystery</i> in middle school – literature circles	High interest Meaningful; self-help	Purpose and Interest as motivating tool
Read <i>Bottled Up</i> (by Jaye Murray) and <i>Tangerine</i> (by Edward Bloor)	reading	Support, choice, interest, variety
<u>Prefer lit circles freshman year in high school</u>	Middle/high school literature circles	
Read novels in middle school; five novels in high school; <u>I read a lot more in elementary</u> – more interesting with pictures; easy vocabulary; books grabbed your attention	Read a lot more in elementary; Picture books in elementary	Support, variety
Library here is <u>too small</u> ; need to expand it	Library size	
I just go to <u>take (AR) tests</u> for English 4; <u>Prefer lit circles</u> because tests are computerized	AR tests	Lack of rigor
<u>Changes in the teacher</u> . How teacher <u>explains</u> – <u>good personality</u> ; some teachers just get to me.	Teacher attitude And rapport	Environment that supports student learning/competence

## Appendix O

### Sample of Joe's Thematic Analyses

Excerpt of Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
Read at school every now and then	Read for	Purpose; interest
Good reader – vocabulary is more advanced than most	information	Competence
Enjoy reading <u>automotive magazines</u>	Positive id as reader	Interests
When younger, I read quite a bit, but I <u>slowly just gradually stopped reading</u> as much	vocabulary	Need for variety of materials
In elementary, I was reading and reading and reading; once I got <u>past 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, it just slowed down – they just didn't make us read as much</u> ; We got a grade for <u>AR test</u> ; I used to ace those.	Out-of school	
I prefer <u>nonfiction</u> – animals when I was younger	Reading slowed down in 6 <sup>th</sup> or 7 <sup>th</sup> grade (ms)	Lack of rigor
Enjoy something that informs you	Mechanized –lack of rigor	
The book on the <u>Holocaust, <i>Night</i>, is one of my favorite subjects; interests me because it is just telling you what happened; there's so much information</u>	Reading interest	Interest - nonfiction
Use computers every other day, from time to time	Favorite subject – Holocaust	
Liked APEX personally – <u>liked relying on the computer – go on my own pace</u> – helped out a lot, knowing what I had to do every day, where I left off – <u>fairly easy</u> , depending on the subject	APEX online curriculum– own pace	independence
I get to <u>research my own information</u> ;	Lack of rigor	Lack of rigor
Something I can relate to; write down my own experiences	Writing choice – own experiences	Interest
Short on time to write – limited on time	Prewriting strategies	
Have to picture it in my head – <u>think about what I'm going to write before I actually start writing</u>	Small class size	Need for Instructional support
Ideal class – <u>small class</u> more comfortable, but kinda quiet – keep your <u>concentration</u> – if you don't have a lot of people disrupting you or others	Individualized attention	Independence

## Appendix P

### Sample of Ted's Thematic Analyses

Excerpt of Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
Read <u>newspapers</u> if I see an <u>interesting story</u>	Reading for information	Interest
<u>Read a lot online</u>	Reading online	Need for support
<u>I don't read books</u> - I'll read if it's <u>required</u> ; not my hobby	Required reading	
Not a lot of reading in Senior English class, but stories are long – in <u>Old English</u> – a little hard to <u>grasp</u> . A lot of contexts <u>don't make a lot of sense</u> . Only <u>check out books I need for classes for grades</u> – not for leisure; <u>haven't done that since 7<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade</u>	Read for grades only	Lack of interest
Star Test – I've been reading at 13 <sup>th</sup> grade level since 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	Star Test – level	Lack of rigor And purpose
If I can go out and skateboard, I get a physical like feeling from it – feel like I'm being <u>productive like it's fun</u> . If I read a book, it does get my mind going and sometimes interest, but it doesn't do as much for me. <u>Don't see reading as something fun and productive</u> . I do have ADD; get distracted real easily – the <u>motive and incentive</u> has to be there. It has to be a really good book.	Need to feel productive – physical activity	Interest – need for motivation and incentive Variety; interest
I used to get <u>AR points</u> – go to Pizza Hut. It wouldn't work anymore now. I prefer reading on <u>internet</u> because that's such a <u>broad area of reading</u> – <u>so many topics</u> ; not just poetry, all kinds	AR incentives	Lack of rigor Social
Use computer every day – <u>Google is so vast</u> , you can use it for everything. <u>APEX</u> is a good way to learn.	Online reading	Independent
Writing to <u>communicate</u> .	Online curriculum	
I don't see a <u>reward for writing</u> . There's not much gain from it. The same with reading – only mental stimulation <u>Self-paced work</u> - they give you work and you can do it. if you need help, then they'll help you. <u>Teachers here are not on your case</u> . I've seen the difference between teachers at regular school and teachers here.	Writing to communicate	Purpose
<u>Reading seems to be more encouraged in middle school</u> – I don't really have to read as much in high school. At a normal school, <u>lectures are a big part of it</u> – need to focus on speakers. They think they're helping you more, but in a way they kinda don't. <u>They talk a lot</u> . I just wasn't in the <u>right environment</u> ...but it is so overpopulated, it's hard	Self-paced T/S relationship	Environment; Teacher rapport
	Decline in secondary reading	Lack of interest, variety, and rigor
	Environment – lectures and class size	Personalized support; relationships



## Appendix Q

### Sample of Andres's Thematic Analyses

Excerpt of Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
Don't read that often; <u>Prefer mystery or scary; a lot of fighting. People recommend them to me – guaranteed to read an awesome book. Never check out book unless recommended; usually buy a book – mostly Half-Price books – I live there; Our library is too small.</u>	Reading – amt Genre Limited visits to library	Interest Environment- choice
<u>Teachers don't require me to read, so I don't;</u> just short stories in textbook. They were pretty good (Beowulf was ten pages)	Teacher expectations	Lack of rigor
Also read <i>The Outsiders</i> (S.E. Hinton) – good book <u>I read a lot more in middle school; I was required to read for AR points – make above a 70.</u>	Reading requirement in secondary AR incentives	Interest Lack of interest
<u>I didn't like AR very much; I read for the fun of it. If required, I just want to read and get it over with.</u> <u>A lot of reading in elementary after 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> grade – building your vocabulary. My 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher was really awesome – taught me how to read a lot better; went over a lot of books, took little quizzes, had cookies on Friday if we got the answers right. She made it fun.</u>	More reading in elementary	Environment - support
Don't have computer – get on my PSP <u>I like APEX, but I don't like it. I'd rather have paper than work on computer – have to do worksheets and take quizzes; don't understand why the worksheets.</u> Like to <u>write about romance, fighting, and a little bit of detective – and scary stuff; I write a little bit of poetry</u>	APEX online curriculum Writing preferences	Environment – lack of rigor Interests; variety
<u>It's just too easy (alternative hs); students are not really good at hard, hard work like that.</u> Ideal classroom – a <u>good teacher who knows what they're teaching about; who can make it challenging, but not too challenging. Friendly teacher – one you can talk to.</u>	Teacher – relationship	Instructional support and teacher rapport
They would ask us how do you learn better? Have us learn more in younger grades I would say <u>get rid of TAKS test.</u> If teachers are doing their jobs correctly, there should be no reason for TAKS. For me, it's not hard. I just don't like it cause I work hard in my classes to know what I'm learning... <u>Teachers have to take out so much time out of the year for TAKs preparation.</u> They could be studying a different subject to get more in-depth.	TAKS prep	Lack of rigor and purpose

## Appendix R

### Sample of Justin's Thematic Analyses

Excerpt from Interview Transcript	Categories	Themes
I usually read things I'm interested in or that I don't know about the world	Reading for information – animals	Interest
Usually read <u>about animals I don't know about</u>		
<u>Don't check out books unless assigned</u> . Otherwise, I just go to bookstores and scan	Bookstore	
I don't really think our library has things I would be interested in – <u>don't like searching the entire library</u>	Good reader id	Competence as reader
I believe so (a good reader); I think it depends on what I read. <u>If not interested, I'll just be reading slow or not be paying attention...I understand a lot of what books portray.</u>		
Recently I read Beowulf with my teacher (in former school). <u>Wasn't interested at first</u> – caught a lot of what the <u>teacher was saying and how he described the book</u> – what it meant as a whole – what it portrays, and all the details you wouldn't catch just by reading the book.	Recent reading – Senior English Beowulf	Instructional support
I would probably say <u>I read more in elementary</u> ; I read a lot.		
In high school: they would issue us books and expect us to read and know what we're reading. <u>Here at alternative, I haven't really read anything</u> . I already read Beowulf.	Teacher expectations	Lack of support and balanced rigor
<u>Prefer to read magazines, poetry, and online</u> . I use Google; <u>Use computers every day; do a lot of things</u> : look up resources, type a lot, play games on the computer at home. Video games help me because usually when I want to find out something about <i>Naruto</i> , I look online or I read something, or <u>it's always just constant reading because the games never really tell you everything...</u>	Reading preferences	Variety of interests
APEX: it's helpful for the most part – <u>gives me pamphlets like little module to finish</u> .	Computers and other interests Video games	Interests
I'm always writing on my journal. <u>I don't like writing prompts</u> , but it's just a simple format I follow, so it's real easy. I take it one step at a time to get it over with	Online curriculum	Independence
Teachers usually give <u>choice unless it's TAKS practice</u> . Enrolled at alternative: a lot of time management problems and failing grades – wasn't focused in school; A lot of problems that I faced throughout high school was repetition	Writing prompts	Lack of choice and rigor
	Repetition in high school	Independence; lack of rigor

## Appendix S



May 18, 2010

Ms. Toni Chapa  
Corpus Christi, TX

Dear Ms. Chapa,

I am pleased to inform you that your research project entitled "Reading Engagement of Adolescent Boys at an Alternative High School: A Phenomenological Perspective" (IRB# 58-10) has been granted approval through a full review by the Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are authorized to begin the project as outlined in your application. We wish you the best on the project.

IRB approval is granted for one year. Should the project continue beyond May 18, 2011, you must reapply for IRB full review and approval. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erin L. Sherman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Erin L. Sherman  
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