

“My reading-less days”: A descriptive qualitative exploration of reading attitudes, preferences,
and habits of fourth-grade students with aliterate characteristics

by

Marcus J. Hora

B.A., University of Northern Iowa, 2009
M.A.E., University of Northern Iowa, 2016

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum & Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

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Drawing on situated expectancy-value theory and identity theory, this research asked how elementary children describe awareness of their reader identity, to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors at school and at home. It also asked how elementary children perceive the value of reading at school and at home. To investigate these questions, the study employed a descriptive qualitative design with phenomenological methods. Participants were selected based on proficient standardized reading test scores and low self-reported attitudes toward academic and recreational reading. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and participant journaling.

Findings were derived using thematic analysis. These findings demonstrated that elementary children's reading behavior could be influenced by a variety of factors. Specifically, children navigated competing demands for time, space, and access to opportunities to read, they experienced emotional resistance to reading, and they required internal and external affirmations to engage in pro-reading behavior. These results contribute to the field of reading research by highlighting the importance of autonomy, relevance, and choice in the formation of a positive reader identity and more broadly in childhood literacy development.

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Approved by:
Major Professor
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my parents, Doug and Deanna, for encouraging my own love of reading from an early age, and for always believing in the things I wanted to do. To my sister, Caitlin, for her interest in my topic and support of the process. To my wife, Andrea, for her countless sacrifices that allowed me to both start and finish this journey, and for continuing to encourage me. And to my children, Elijah and Hannah—may you always keep growing, thriving, and believing all things are possible—I love you!

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In a fourth-grade classroom, the children have just begun their independent reading time. In one corner of the room, Olivia holds her book loosely in her lap, her attention drawn to the window and imagining what she will play at recess. When the teacher asks Olivia to tell her about her book, she admits she has not read much of it and doesn't really understand it. Across the room, Liam is happily turning the pages of his graphic novel; now he is whispering to his neighbors that he placed the next book in this series on hold at the library. Both of these children appear to be capable readers, but their sense of self and enjoyment of reading are wildly different.

Questions of when, how, and why children choose to engage with reading can sometimes be answered with numbers or standardized test scores, but there is also value in listening to children describe their reading lives in their own words. This study attempts to explore questions surrounding children with characteristics of an aliterate reader. An aliterate reader is most often defined (Mikulecky, 1978) as one who has been taught to read to proficiency and can in fact read well but chooses not to. An aliterate reader would not choose reading as a preferred activity, even though they could engage with it successfully.

In other words, they have mastered the mechanics of reading but not internalized it as personally relevant or rewarding (Alexander & Jarman, 2018). This could be framed as a lack of desire or personal connection to leisure reading (Boulhrir, 2017). This disconnect has implications for long-term cognitive development and critical thinking, as well as empathy and lifelong learning often associated with strong personal reading habits (Denham, 2024; Jensen, et al., 2016). Cultural forces are also at play, such as a plethora of digital media (Ranconi, et al., 2025) competing for children's time, feelings of boredom or lack of agency when reading at

home or school (Scholes, 2021), or beliefs that reading is done to please parents or teachers but not for personal enjoyment (Merga, 2017). A lack of personal reading habits can cause these children later problems in school, college, and in their future workplace (Lal, 2015). Thus, there is a need for research into aliterate behaviors in elementary children informed by insights based on the children's own words and interpretations of their lived experiences.

Overview of the Issues

The problem of aliteracy is tied to other issues in modern reading education, including illiteracy. It is also affected by many overlapping factors such as reader behavior, technological and cultural factors, and influences from parents, teachers, and students' peers. This section will provide context to many factors that bear upon modern reading trends both in the objective sense of academic achievement and in the subjective sense of motivation, engagement, and value.

Measuring Reading Achievement

Trends in K-12 reading achievement are often marked by large-scale, national assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; 2022). The NAEP, often called "the nation's report card," has been administered biannually since 1969 to students in fourth grade, eighth grade and, periodically, twelfth grade. Historical trends have shown that fourth graders score below the assessment's basic level of proficiency. When 2024 and 2022 results were compared, fourth graders' reading scores had dropped two points, and no state made gains in reading (NAGB, 2020). Ensuing headlines made much about the need for more instruction in phonics, oral reading fluency, and comprehension skills. Mention was also made of the need for students to read longer texts and more challenging texts (Hiebert, 2022).

While NAEP does not survey children's reading behaviors or attitudes, other national and international assessments have reported similarly concerning results. In 2024, the British

National Literacy Trust reported its largest ever drop in children reading for enjoyment. The Trust, which has been surveying school children in the United Kingdom since 2005, found that only one in three children read for fun on their own. Only one in five children read something for fun every day (Clark, et al., 2024). That same report showed that for children who did choose to read in their free time, they did so to learn something new, to learn the view of others, or to learn about other peoples and cultures (Clark, et al., 2024, p. 24). Children in the United States showed a similar trajectory. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020) Long-term Trend Reading Assessment, only 42% of fourth grade students reported reading for fun daily, a drop from 53% in 1984. Sixteen percent of fourth grade students said they rarely or never read for fun; only 9% said that in 1984. Seventh graders reported a similar drop in the daily reading habit, from 35% in 1984 to 17% today. Female students were more likely than male students to read for fun, although the total number of both males and females who report reading for fun has declined by 21 points since 1984 for females and 16 percent for males. Perhaps not surprisingly, students who did report reading for fun daily scored better on standardized reading tests.

This is an alarming change because reading for enjoyment has been positively linked to success in academics and better cognitive development (Guthrie, et al., 2004). As evidenced above, this trend has been on the decline for several decades. Educators and policy makers alike have examined probable reasons why U.S. students are simply not achieving at proficient levels. One landmark study from the early 1980s found that fourth grade readers from low-income households experienced “deceleration” in the growth of their reading skills, compared to peers of other income brackets (Chall & Jacobs, 2003). Through third grade, this cohort of students had previously shown no difference in reading achievement compared with peers. The decline was

particularly pronounced in these students' word meaning skills. One explanation was that "they were not prepared to meet the challenge of the greater number of abstract, technical, and literary words characteristic of the reading materials of grades 4 and beyond" (Chall & Jacobs, 2003). Although these children's oral vocabulary and reading comprehension skills were still on par with peers, by eleventh grade the same cohort of students scored only in the 25th percentile on standardized tests of reading (Snow, et al., 1991). These results demonstrate a need for a multi-prong focus on both academic and personal motivation whereby children are engaging in reading both at school and at home almost daily and for extended periods of time.

Measuring Reading Engagement

Extant research on engaged reading (Wigfield, 2004; Romero-Gonzalez, 2023) has found that without a personal interest in reading, students read less frequently. This in turn leads to less exposure to text, less practice at tackling complex vocabulary, and increasing odds that future reading may result in frustration. The issues of low motivation and low achievement are not separate issues, but part of a mutually reinforcing spiral of disengagement. Reading, particularly in schools, can often be seen as emphasizing skill work like decoding or as a means to accomplish a task, but other views on reading focus on the experience itself—centering feelings, experiences, and motivation as crucial to the emotional engagement that makes reading meaningful.

Rosenblatt (1978) developed reader response theory to describe the interaction between a reader and the text being read. Prior to this, most reading researchers believed that a text held the same meaning for all who read it. Rosenblatt challenged this assumption by framing the reading act as a transactional activity—readers combine their own knowledge and experiences with the author's words to create a nuanced meaning, and this meaning changes slightly depending on

who is doing the reading. Rosenblatt also considered why a person is reading—to obtain information (the efferent stance) or for enjoyment (the aesthetic stance). Other researchers have used Rosenblatt’s reader response theory to explore the ways children interact with texts. Fischer (2020) studied how to “nurture, challenge, and extend reader identity, agency, and response in childhood” (p. 9). She urged teachers to view motivations for reading through a child’s eyes—one may see a cozy reading corner as an invitation to rest, while another may use the same space for imaginative play (Fischer, 2020, p. 15).

Fischer (2020) encouraged adults working with children to be more open in their consideration of what counts as reading. She suggested that reading is more than just a cognitive process, and that children benefit from making their physical (classroom) space welcoming and conducive to reading. She also emphasized the role that a child’s imagination plays in their responses to reading (S. Fischer, personal communication, November 14, 2022).

School and Home Factors Influencing Aliteracy

Compared to previous studies focused on adults or teens, this study is centered on the same phenomenon in the context of relatively young readers just starting to gain individuality in preferences, habits, and identities. Readers in upper elementary are at a critical juncture for determining their life-long attitude toward reading. They have spent their early school years getting direct instruction in phonics, spelling, and other language skills. Some studies have shown that students are more likely to take elective English classes in high school if they had a positive attitude toward reading when they were in fourth grade (Durik, et al., 2006). Adults have modeled reading for them with read-alouds and library story time. Parents have spent time reading to them at home. But as students get older, these literacy experiences begin to change. Although students still receive reading instruction, it looks different. Reading becomes more

academic, and students are expected to apply their reading skills to classroom tasks. Parents become less likely to actively support home reading as children get older. All of these factors combined can lead to negative experiences around reading, even for proficient readers who previously found it enjoyable. This in turn can lead to negative self-identity as a reader that further decreases the likelihood of reading when given the choice. Research shows that people engage in tasks they have previously enjoyed, and that being rewarded for completing the tasks is motivating (Eccles, 1983; Manarin, 2019). As children age, they may also look to peers for social cues in both how to act in school and for how to spend their time outside of school, with boys in particular choosing non-reading activities to fill their free time. Gender may play a role in how reading is perceived (Burchard & Pilonieta, 2017).

Knowing more about children's reader identity and motivations for reading can help address the specific needs of an aliterate reader that may foster life-long love of reading. Similar efforts, such as the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, brought renewed attention to the kinds of literacy skills students should be proficient in by the end of their secondary school careers (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Statement of Significance

Given that the U.S. federal government spent \$15,621 per pupil in the 2018-2019 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), it stands to reason that teachers, parents, and others want students to sustain their literacy growth as they spend more of their instructional time reading to learn as well. Large meta-analyses of what is important in reading have been conducted, perhaps most notably by the National Reading Panel (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). It established five major

components (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). As such, many teacher training programs have focused on these areas in their literacy methods courses. Less attention has been given to the affective and emotional side of reading, and what role adults might play in this for developing readers. When research is conducted on the affective side of reading, it typically involves adolescent readers, their motivations and habits for reading, and how they construct their burgeoning young adult identities. Or, it may position subjects in a deficit model with labels like “struggling readers” (Aragon, 2025). Research is sparse on these same topics in elementary-age readers from a positive, strengths-based paradigm. Even young children are establishing a reading identity, responding to cues from parents and caregivers about their reading habits, and becoming more socially aware of what is acceptable in their peer groups.

Readers in upper elementary are at a critical juncture for determining their life-long attitude toward reading. They have spent their early school years getting direct instruction in phonics, spelling, and other language skills. Adults have modeled reading for them with read alouds and library story time. Parents have spent time reading to them at home. But as students get older, these literacy experiences begin to change. Although students still receive reading instruction, it looks different. Reading becomes more academic and students are expected to apply their reading skills to classroom tasks. Parents become less likely to actively support home reading as children get older. All of these factors combined can lead to negative experiences around reading, even for proficient readers who previously found it enjoyable. This in turn can lead to negative self-identity as a reader that further decreases the likelihood of reading when given the choice. Statement of the Research Problem

Existing research on similar topics of reading motivation and value (e.g. struggling readers, reading interventions, and early reading skills), uses a deficit model of reading, focused on what readers cannot do (Erickson, 2023; Hall, 2023). Schools have systems in place to serve students considered below grade level in reading (Porter, et al., 2024). However, a child who is proficiently skilled at reading for their grade level but simply isn't interested in reading has unique needs that are often unaddressed by the typical school curricula, instructional program, or teachers' ways of knowing (Kehoe & McGinty, 2024). A decline in reading engagement has broad implications for the future of academic achievement at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels with a direct impact on an educated and highly skilled workforce.

Extant research on aliteracy involves primarily middle and high school age students, or young adults (Hu, et al., 2024; Loh & Sun, 2022) showing a decline in voluntary reading engagement that has been occurring over the past several decades. Many students only read when required for coursework, and even then may seek out ways to avoid reading such as audiobooks or text-to-speech functions. This lack of direct engagement with reading can limit students' opportunities to develop a rich and extensive vocabulary, sharpen their critical thinking skills by building a broad knowledge base, and utilize deeper comprehension skills required for critical thinking as well as practicing textual analysis skills that can serve them in adulthood.

This problem becomes visible in schools and universities when educators observe that students can read the text but do not engage with course content as deeply or as critically as they are capable of doing. Many educators respond by teaching reading strategies, particularly ones designed to boost comprehension. However, the real problem may not be that students do not understand the text but rather that they made a conscious choice not to engage with it. Thus, different approaches are needed to address students' lack of motivation to read.

More globally, beyond a strictly academic context, lack of motivation to read may affect students by not exposing them to diverse ideas and perspectives. This is essential for developing an informed citizenry capable of critical thought, informed civic participation, and a desire to continue lifelong learning. For these reasons, it is necessary to understand the contributing factors to aliteracy within a contemporary educational context.

Research Questions

My research questions examine how elementary children value leisure reading and how children gain awareness of their reader identity—to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors—through sociocultural factors at school and at home.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do elementary children describe awareness of their reader identity, to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors at school and at home?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do elementary children perceive the value of reading at school and at home?

Understanding how students create and interact with literary spaces at school and at home is critical to understanding their development. We would benefit from knowing more about how elementary-aged students view themselves as readers, how they make choices in when and where to read, and how they are active constructors of their reading behaviors. Knowing more about these things can help inform related work on student autonomy and engagement, as students seek to form connections to their home and school environments.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how elementary-aged children understand and articulate their reader identities across home and school contexts. With a descriptive qualitative approach that uses phenomenological methods, this study will give in-depth insights into the

literacy habits, attitudes, and preferences of a selected small group of children. Specifically, the readers in this study will be fourth grade students approximately nine or ten years of age who attend a large suburban public school district in the Midwestern United States. With an emphasis on how elementary age students see themselves as readers, this study aims to provide insight to the lived meaning of reading in children's everyday lives. It will emphasize participants' own words and ways of sense-making around the phenomenon of childhood aliteracy. It is a phenomenological understanding of how children make sense of reading as human beings—socially, emotionally, personally. This may be of interest to teachers, parents, and researchers who know and are interested in the perspectives of children with aliterate characteristics.

As a qualitative rather than quantitative study, its main goal is to provide a rich contextualization of these students' lived experiences as readers. The study will share results of interviews with young readers, including their own motivations for reading (or avoiding reading), how they select books, whether they read voluntarily or for compliance, and what role they see adults play in helping them to form a positive reader identity. This study seeks to fill a gap in reading motivation research by providing examples of elementary age students' reading lives as they subjectively experience them. Insights will come from participant's journaling of their reading lives at school and home and from the use of semi-structured interview protocols with each participant.

Additionally, this study aims to provide parents and teachers with insight into how they can better support students who do not see reading as a preferred activity. Reading researchers may be interested in this research as it sheds light on the reading life of an alliterate reader, a child who can read but chooses not to. This is an under-explored area in existing literature, especially in the child population. Its focus is different from the predominant research on poor

readers or reading disability. For example, Smith and Jang's (2022) study on readers' motivation recommended "considering how class discourse shapes not only how readers think about themselves as readers, but also how readers even define reading" (p. 464).

Definition of Terms

The terms and their definitions below describe how they are commonly identified in existing literature, and how those terms are used throughout this study.

Affective: relating to moods, feelings, and attitudes (White, 2017).

Aliterate/aliteracy: describing a person who can read but chooses not to; the condition of being aliterate (A.E.I.P.P.R. & Thimmesch, 1984).

Identity: the distinguishing character or personality of an individual, often flexible and changing dependent on cultural, social, or personal attributes being examined (Darragh, 2016).

Motivation: the condition of being motivated by internal and external influences (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Theoretical Frameworks

This study utilized two theories that guided its design and its data analysis. These were identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and situated expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2024). These theories were chosen for their use in existing literature on similar topics of identity formation, attitudes, behaviors, and motivation. They were complementary to each other but allowed for unique interpretations of the data. Identity theory holds that people form their identity based on social and psychological cues (Stryker, 1980). People select a role for themselves based on its salience to the person's current situation. Roles that are reinforced get used more often while roles that are negatively reinforced may be used less often. Social interaction, external and internal labels, and affirmations all play a role in the formation of an

individual's self-concept. For the participants in this study, how they see themselves as a reader can be influenced by their prior experiences with reading, how they think others view them as a reader, and whether they see themselves as a reader. Children may use feedback from peers and adults in their lives to confirm whether being a reader is relevant to their self-concept (Burke & Stets, 2022). Children with less positive feedback around reading may be less solid in their self-concept. Consistent negative feedback may weaken their reader identity and reduce pro-reading behaviors (Capek & Loidolt, 2021).

Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT; Eccles & Wigfield, 2024) was used as a complement to identity theory. It provided a way to examine how the child interacts with reading on an individual, personal level. SEVT states that a person engages in things for which they have previously been rewarded or felt success in. These feelings are variable based on the context and environment. People ascribe value to a task based on their natural enjoyment of it, whether they believe it is useful and achievable, and whether the task is valuable enough to devote time that could be spent elsewhere (Eccles, et al., 1983). These tenets are often grouped together as expectancy beliefs and subjective task value. Because children's beliefs about their abilities change (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000), a capable reader may still exhibit a lack of interest in voluntary reading. Outside influences from peers and adults may positively influence an unmotivated reader but only if the reader is receptive to their feedback and encouragement. If not, it may further demotivate the individual who feels others are subsuming their competence and control (Gaspard et al., 2015).

Related Motivational Frameworks

Several researchers have used motivational frameworks to examine individuals' reading behaviors. Interviews with college students and their instructors (e.g. Anderson, et al., 2024;

Mokhtari, et al., 2009) revealed differing motivations for reading assigned course texts. Instructors saw the texts as having an inherent value, while students did not always feel internally motivated. Competing demands on their time and the availability of an alternative route to obtaining the text's content, such as instructor-provided notes, affected how likely students were to read (Manarin, 2019). Indeed, even preservice teachers who reported high reading motivation still needed choice in what they read and an introduction to the culture of being an adult reader (Davis-Duerr, 2013). A similar need to weigh the costs and benefits was found in high school students deciding whether to take an advanced placement course. Although many students were highly motivated to read, they did not always choose the more difficult course. The value that students placed on reading and whether they thought a more challenging reading course would help them in the future influenced their decision to enroll (Simmons, et al., 2022). This is in line with expectancy-value theory where students must see value in the task and already expect to be successful at it. People are more likely to read for pleasure if they have a positive self-image of themselves as a reader (Conradi Smith & Jang, 2022).

Similarly, other researchers have pointed to motivation as a major factor in students' reading achievement. Reedy and deCarvalho (2021) studied reading behavior in English school children. Using a motivation scale, they sorted children into either a positive or negative attitude group, then conducted interviews to learn more about how children in each group approached reading. The authors found that students held more positive attitudes about reading if they felt their choice and agency in selecting the reading materials was respected. The need to attend to individual preferences is borne out in other research as well. Mak (2021) found that when students read short stories and completed an appreciation questionnaire, they expressed differing reasons for liking the same story. Thus, a group of students may say they like the same book, but

their reasons for liking it may not always be apparent. This holds implications for providing reading recommendations for similar books. In older students struggling with reading comprehension, motivation to read may be increased once students are taught how to decode multisyllabic words and remediate their fluency and vocabulary knowledge (Strong, et al., 2025). One historical overview found that children who may be labeled as struggling readers in past decades experienced a drop off in their word reading and comprehension abilities between first grade and fourth grade, and that more recent data indicates current students in the same grade span who struggle are also experiencing a dip in their oral language proficiency (Terry, et al., 2023).

Epistemology and Ontology

Research typically falls either along positivist orientations, concerned with finding absolutes, and interpretivist orientations, concerned with understanding subjective reality (Mahoney and Goertz, 2006). The latter orientation recognizes that two individuals may experience the same thing but report it differently.

I adhered to an interpretivist epistemological position for this study. Broadly, qualitative research is concerned with the use of descriptive information to capture concepts, experiences, and emotions. It asks questions about why or how things occur, and makes use of interviews, focus groups, observations, and surveys (Grass, 2024). I understand that reality is socially constructed. An individual's experiences, beliefs, and ways of being affect what is "real" to them. Knowledge then is subjective, and to truly understand something means understanding how individuals interpret their socialized world (Fischer, 2025).

Therefore, knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants. This knowledge emerges through dialogue, reflection, and interpretation. This aligns with a

phenomenological approach because the aim is not generalizability of findings but rather getting at the essence and underlying structures of an experience as it is felt by the participants. The researcher is expected to engage reflexively with data and acknowledge their part in data interpretation while bracketing preconceptions. This approach was well-suited to my study's purpose because it elevated participant voices and acknowledged that each participant would have differing but equally valid ways of making sense of their reality. This is explained in more detail in the next section on methodology.

Methodology

This descriptive qualitative study sought to examine characteristics of aliteracy in children. The study's purpose was to understand how elementary children understand and articulate their reader identity in school and at home. My aim was to understand aliteracy in children as it can be seen from a small, same-age group of representative participants. The children's in-school and out-of-school reading behaviors were examined using a descriptive qualitative that is idiographic by exploring participants' responses individually; then results were interpreted collectively or across-case. Doing so allows researcher and participant to co-create meaning from the data (Jeong & Othman, 2016).

Participants

I examined a reading attitude survey and standardized testing scores to identify potential participants. Inclusion criteria were participants who reported a negative attitude toward reading for recreational purposes but who scored highly on standardized tests of reading. These types of participants were desirable because they possessed and could utilize a sufficient knowledge of academic reading skills. Once parent permission and child assent was obtained, I privately interviewed four students. A fifth student had dropped out. No other fourth-grade students at the

school site met inclusion criteria. Participants were two boys and two girls, which provided balance to the study, although gender was not a primary consideration in recruitment. Because I am a teacher in the students' school, participants in this study were from outside my homeroom and did not receive grades from me.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two sources of data were collected. These were semi-structured interviews and participant journals. Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately one half-hour each and sought to contextualize some of the participants' responses to the reading attitude survey that had been an inclusion criterion (low self-reported attitude toward reading). Each participant underwent two interviews where I followed pre-planned questions with opportunity for follow-up and clarification. Audio recordings and anecdotal notes were kept, aiding in later coding and analysis. Participants created a two-week journal of their home reading behaviors. I provided directions for formatting the journal and suggestions of what to log, but participants could make the final decisions on what they wished to journal and share with me. Data obtained from interviews and journals were analyzed for organization into themes by iterative and interpretative analysis of transcripts, which was consistent with the idiographic and hermeneutic principles of the qualitative approaches that use phenomenological methods (Smith, et al., 2009). I immersed myself in each participants' transcript (returning to its audio recording when necessary) to make my initial notes and coding. Codes would become categories that informed subthemes and the three main themes. I looked for key experiences, repetitive feelings, and how the participant responded.

After repeating this for each participant, I began to look for cross-case patterns and gathered them into themes. Rather than bringing predetermined themes to this analysis, I

engaged with the participants' own words, coupled with my interpretation, to stay close to their lived experiences, as per commonly accepted practice in descriptive qualitative study (Robinson & Williams, 2024). I also read a summary of each participant's themes out loud to that participant at the conclusion of my analysis. My goal was not to engage participants in a precise recollection of what they had said. Rather, I wanted to see if I had captured the essence of their experience with reading at school and at home, and the value they placed on reading in various contexts. Each participant agreed that my summarization was a true reflection of their lived experience as they understood it.

My combination of relativist ontology and interpretive epistemology, guided me toward a coherent philosophical framework that grounded my examination of participants' meaning-making around their emerging reader identities.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study used purposeful sampling to locate fourth-grade students who performed at or above benchmark on their state's required reading screener, but who report themselves as being reluctant or apathetic to engage in reading voluntarily. Participants were delimited to students in the researchers' own school for ease of access and to facilitate the administration of reading attitude surveys, interviews, and collection of participants' two-week reading journals. To avoid any appearance of coercion, participants were not rostered to the researcher's homeroom nor received any grades from the researcher. A sample of four-to-six students meeting these criteria was desirable; five students were recruited, one dropped out before data collection, thus four participants were analyzed. Another delimitation was that the data collection occurred across one school semester. I obtained Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to include parent/guardian permission and child assent for participation in the study. The school

district also conducted its own IRB approval process and extended a formal permission notice from the superintendent before recruitment and data collection began.

Researcher Positionality

I self-identify as a U.S.-born White American, which comes with certain privileges that have manifested in my own reading journey. Between the two students in the opening vignette, I identified much more as Liam—always excited to read and always knowing what book I wanted to read next. I have not struggled to learn how to read nor find books that reflect my own lived experiences. I acknowledge that may not be the case for the students with whom I work. I use the term *reading* here in a way that means students choosing to engage in a period of sustained silent reading with their self-selected book. As a general education classroom teacher, I want to provide a rich literacy environment. I also maintain awareness that each child holds unique preferences and interests that they bring to school, and that these factor into their reading identities as well. Unless the classroom teacher actively seeks to identify and engage these types of aliterate readers this compliance-based mindset could have a negative impact on future academic performance. I purposely selected the sample size of four to six participants because it is in line with previous studies of a qualitative nature centered on a phenomenon—in this case, aliteracy in children (Bartholomew, et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2009).

Participants were selected because their parents indicated they attended school regularly (giving ease of access for interviews) and were likely to remain enrolled in this school for the duration of the study. As is common to a qualitative study, its findings are not generalizable to other schools, children, or contexts. Still, the information contained in this study represents the behaviors, attitudes, and opinions of reading held by its participants when at school and at home. It gives insight into the lived experiences of these children who are skilled readers but who do

not see reading as a preferred activity. Data were analyzed, in the form of children's words via interviews and written journaling, to aid understanding of their unique perspectives on literary practices at school and at home.

Semi-structured interviews were used in line with usual qualitative design using phenomenological methods, in order to gain insight into how participants perceived the phenomenon under study (Colvin & Croft, 2024). Participants provided both quality and quantity of data for analysis and interpretation. Their voice came through in two interviews, coupled with their journal responses. All participants wrote significant amounts of data in their journals for two full weeks, which is perhaps unusual for participants of elementary age. Their hearty participation made the data richer and the findings more meaningful.

As the opening vignette with Liam and Olivia suggests, many children who have been taught to read proficiently still struggle with seeing themselves as readers and valuing the act of reading, and this is the major impetus for this inquiry.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One introduces the study and the issues of aliteracy in relation to childhood reading development. It outlines the problem statement and the problem's significance, research questions, purpose of the study, key terms, researcher's positionality, and sets up the study's further organization.

Chapter Two provides a literature review on aliteracy, reading attitudes in children, and common motivational challenges. It also describes qualitative inquiry and the use of phenomenological methods, identity theory, and expectancy-value theory which give the researcher certain lenses through which to understand the lived experiences of children with aliterate tendencies.

Chapter Three explains the methodology of descriptive qualitative study design that uses phenomenological methods. It outlines the design of the study, how data were collected, and how they were analyzed to provide insights into the research problem. It also describes the researcher's role in such an investigation.

Chapter Four explains the researcher's findings through descriptive qualitative lens. This is based on each participant's interviews and journaling. Descriptions of each participant's insights into the phenomenon of childhood aliteracy are shared, and ensuing themes are described for each participant individually, and for participants as a group.

Chapter Five provides a theoretical analysis of the findings based on expectancy-value theory and identity theory. The researcher's analysis of the results, its themes, and insights into childhood aliteracy are offered. It explains implications and next steps for educators, parents, and other interested adults working to foster and maintain a positive reading identity in elementary school children. Future research recommendations are provided for the areas of reader identity and aliterate behaviors.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter provides a backdrop for the rest of the study. The research literature on aliteracy is wide and varied, covering both adults and children, academic and recreational lenses. Thus, this review of the literature begins in its first section by describing the significance of aliteracy both on its face as a phenomenon and as a potential problem in American education. Reader behaviors and teacher behaviors that may affect aliteracy in the classroom are described. The second section of this literature review situates the study in the specific contexts of the home and school environments that children must navigate during the initial formation of their reading

identity. The third section of this literature review focuses on the theoretical framework that guides this study, including identity theory and expectancy-value theory.

Significance of Aliteracy

Mikulecky (1978) was the first scholar to describe the phenomenon of a reader who can read but chooses not to do so. His research often focused on literacy, technology, and the workplace. Mikulecky conceptualized adult non-readers as a problem with many causes—rising technological demands in the workplace required a level of literacy not previously necessary. The ability to continue learning and retraining in the workplace also led to increased literacy demands, and poor parental reading models at home were likely to continue the cycle of non-reading (Mikulecky, 1990; Mikulecky, et al., 1996). The idea of literacy as a springboard to workplace achievement also gained traction—for example, a worker who knows how to combine technology and literacy skills with ease has a better chance of moving up in the ranks than one who never sharpens their skills beyond the high school level (Mikulecky, 2000).

In 1984, U.S. Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin popularized the term *aliteracy* as he tracked a perceived decline in literacy skills among American adults (George, 2021). Decker (1986) followed with a proposed definition of aliteracy as a condition in which people have “the ability to read but the unwillingness to do so” (p. 5). Some researchers and educators question the need to examine aliteracy as a phenomenon (Merga & Ledger, 2018). In their view, the goal of education is to equip children with a basic level of skills—and by definition, an aliterate child is one who can read proficiently. Parents and caregivers, too, often do not consider the role that choice and motivation play in their children’s reading beyond their early years (Merga & Ledger, 2018). The concern then becomes why adults should continue working to keep children reading for leisure. Some studies (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Jang, et al., 2015) have shown that even

proficient readers who do not continue to practice the reading habit can develop difficulty with comprehension and critical thinking in later schooling. This concern is in some ways a reflection of concerns over the past several decades about the role of U.S. public education as a public service, namely in preparing children to become workforce-ready adults (Shanahan, 2020).

In the 1970s and 1980s, some education policy makers began pushing a back-to-basics movement in U.S. schools—a renewed focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic with less time spent on other areas (Brodinsky, 1977). The pervasive feeling was that, since the 1950s, teachers were no longer equipping students with a solid literacy foundation and that adults were no longer reading voluntarily but only reading and writing for work-based sources such as technical manuals, communication memos, or to convey instructions to co-workers (Brodinsky, 1977). Mikulecky (1978) defined *aliteracy* as having the ability to read but choosing not to. This was in contrast to *illiteracy*, or not having the ability to read. The concern then became how to make reading a habit instead of just an ability as “the number of capable readers who regularly choose to read is decreasing” (Mikulecky, 1978, p. 7).

Previous Examinations of Aliteracy

The phenomenon of aliteracy has been studied in the literature with a variety of methodological and theoretical frameworks. Typically, it has been examined as an unwelcome phenomenon in need of correction—the catalyst for adopting new teaching techniques (Abimbola, et al., 2021), a bibliotherapy intervention (Oyewusi, et al., 2021), as a surrender to competing demands (Chong, 2016), an act of adolescent rebellion (Dredger, 2013), or as a byproduct of Covid-19 social isolation (Brown-Kuchera, 2024). Research conducted with children has viewed aliteracy as an issue for adults to fix once they understand the factors underlying a child’s motivation deficit (Merritt & Spreer, 2020). Typical recommendations emphasize how to keep

children motivated by access to preferred books, time to read, and finding a good series (Merga, 2017). This research is often done with children in the primary grades kindergarten to second grade, where getting young readers to enjoy the act of reading is done hand-in-hand with the act of teaching them to read (Mahiri & Maniates, 2013; Moses & Kelly, 2016). Other research has examined gendered preferences for certain genres, authors, or series (Scholes, et al., 2021). Global studies of functional literacy trends estimate that while adult illiteracy is improving (Richmond, 2008; Zua, 2021), the number of adults who identify as frequent leisure readers continues to decline (Meyer, 2023).

In the U.S., most adults are considered functionally literate (Sticht, 2022) but still may not read for leisure. A number of socio-cultural factors—from the desire for shorter, easier texts delivered on digital devices to the absence of parent or educator modeling—have been blamed for this. The following sections will examine more of these factors.

Psychological Theories of Identity

An understanding of factors surrounding aliteracy also requires an understanding of how people see themselves as readers—their readerly identity. Humans form their identities through a combination of self-concept, group memberships, and peer comparisons. Erikson's (1968) developmental theory states that identity formation unfolds in stages tied to a child's development. School-age children between seven and eleven years of age undergo a conflict of industry versus inferiority. The core of this conflict is a desire to feel competent. Children compare their abilities to peers. Support from teachers and parents can help children grow in their confidence, while lack of support risks children feeling inferior. This is the stage where a child's peer group becomes more important as a source of the child's self-esteem. Success in these tasks can lead to a sense of pride in their achievements, while persistent failures can make a

child feel inadequate. Similarly, social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979) explained the importance of belonging to a group in forming a positive self-concept. Holding values, goals, and attributes in common with the group can shape how people understand themselves. Bandura (1986) used social cognitive theory to show that one's perceived competence at a task strongly affects motivation. A higher self-efficacy can lead to higher achievement and more resilience against failure. This theory also explained how external rewards and punishments are not the only drivers in learning, but that internal thoughts also drive actions. Taken together, these theories can help us understand how children may be more likely to engage in voluntary reading if they are part of a group where that behavior is valued and if they have successfully read like this in the past.

Sociocultural Theories of Identity

Vygotsky (1978) stated that knowledge is constructed by social interaction and that socially shared practices are internalized. Children internalize attitudes toward reading from teachers, parents, and peers. If these experiences are in the form of isolated seatwork or test preparation, children may not internalize reading as socially meaningful. Wenger's (1998) communities of practice put learning at the center of a participatory experience that used shared norms, language, and tools. In a classroom setting, certain types of readers may be positioned as the in-group while others are seen as the out-group. Aliteracy may emerge if students do not see a pathway toward membership in the in-group or when membership is not desirable. Here again, school-based literacies that value specific types of reading, certain discourses around what counts as reading, or that unwittingly create hierarchies of perceived reader competencies may contribute to aliteracy. Similarly, the figured worlds theory (Holland, et al., 1998) also holds that human identities are shaped by culturally constructed and socially imposed worlds, although it

recognized that humans also have the agency to shape their identities. This may play out in the classroom when students see good readers as those who are fast, fluent, or who prefer traditional, teacher-approved texts. In this way, aliteracy may function as identity protection to preserve a racial, linguistic, or cultural identity.

Researchers conceptualize identity through both psychological and sociocultural lenses. A long-standing debate is over the role of motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic. Motivation and reading achievement can even be mutually reinforcing (Kortenbruck, et al., 2010). Intrinsic motivation has been linked to increased reading volume and scholastic achievement. Extrinsic motivation (e.g. to earn a good grade) has been linked to negative achievement as children progress through school, with effects more pronounced for readers who struggle early on (Kanonire, 2022). However, some studies have shown extrinsic motivation can lead to improved performance under certain conditions, such as when job or school demands create a purpose for the reading (Suarez-Fernandez & Boto-Garcia, 2022).

Aliteracy is hard to understand if separated from questions of recognition, literacy, and social expectations. The next section will explore how these expectations often affect children's reading behaviors.

Reading Behaviors Influencing Aliteracy

Some studies have shown that students with low reading scores still maintain a high level of motivation and that the opposite is also true (Burchard & Pilonieta, 2017). The topic of the book and the student's own interest in that topic heavily influence the decision to read it (Booth, 2018). Miller (2012) observed children's classroom reading behavior and gave labels to three types of reluctant readers: (1) dormant readers who have not yet found an inspiring book, (2) underground readers who feel their preferred book choices do not match what schools expect and

(3) developing readers with low test scores. The dormant reader most closely matches an illiterate reader. These types of readers may or may not have a negative attitude about reading, but they do not read for fun outside of class, even though they are capable and get good grades (Althuler & Chai, 2019). Some proficient readers can be turned off reading as they progress through school, particularly when the school adopts programs that place restrictions on which books can be read or assigns reading as a task (Patrick, 2019).

Research over the past few decades has consistently shown a reciprocal relationship between reading volume and reading achievement, perhaps most famously articulated in the Matthew Effect (Stanovich, 1986). This model holds that a child who experiences early success in reading will become exposed to more print. In turn, the child will grow faster in vocabulary, content knowledge, and fluency. Conversely, children who experience less success with early reading—or whose access is limited—will then experience less success with later reading skills. Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) demonstrated that print exposure predicted vocabulary growth and general knowledge after controlling for cognitive ability. Thus, time spent reading drives a child's cognitive development. This becomes a positive feedback loop where the rich get richer—and the poor get poorer. A child with adequate decoding but minimal time spent reading will not receive the same cognitive benefits as a peer of similar decoding skill who does read voluntarily. Allington (2012) found that reading volume was increased when participants had access to high-interest texts and were given sufficient time to read them. Children's attitudes toward reading may reflect the degree to which they feel autonomy and competence. The next section examines how children today navigate the confluence of technology and sociocultural factors in schools and homes today.

More recent research has pointed to the fact that readers want the reading experience to be more personalized, especially if the reading is being done to satisfy a school or job requirement. This personalization often looks like choice in what to read and a broadening of what is considered quality reading material to include comic books and digital media (Vogrinčič Čepič, et al., 2024).

Techno-cultural Factors Influencing Aliteracy

In modern times, children have many competing demands for the time and attention, and those demands can feel omnipresent in the form of technology, digital entertainment, and streaming media platforms (Ronconi, et al., 2025). These media offerings are easily accessible and can be instantly gratifying when compared to the mental effort required getting to know and invest oneself in the characters, setting, and plot of a book (Dontre, 2021). This draws children's attention away from traditional entertainment offerings such as books, toys, or puzzles.

With so many digital distractions, children are forced to filter out competing demands on their attention, sometimes called the attention economy (Karki, 2024). Further, these distractions may not affect all children the same way, but may unfairly hurt children from lower-income backgrounds who have fewer chances to do well on tasks that require sustained attention (Karki, 2024). Then, there is the fact that many multimedia offerings—especially social media platforms—are purposely engineered to be continuously gratifying and keep the user in a cycle of technology dependency (Bozzolla, et al., 2022). Not only can multimedia detract from time children may have previously spent reading books, but it can make the act of reading feel slow, cumbersome, and less rewarding by comparison (Hollingworth, et al., 2011). Similarly, emerging research hints that social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and others

condition children to prefer their entertainment in short bursts, further removing their preference for longer, text-based leisure activities (Kim, et al., 2022; Yan, et al., 2024).

Wolf (2018) found that reading books on digital devices caused readers to skim and fragmented their attention. This made it less likely that the readers would explore a text deeply and take time to fully comprehend the author's message. Ettinger & Cohen (2020) found that habitual multi-tasking while reading, whether digitally or not, also negatively affect a reader's ability to attend to the text and comprehend it fully. Although research in this area is ongoing, it is becoming clear that reader's preferences and behaviors are entangled by the affordances and constraints of digital media consumption.

Still, technology is not inherently good or bad; that is dependent on how it is utilized (Wolfers, 2024). Indeed, some students reported that digital entertainment gave them a better sense of social belonging and peer acceptance than they experienced from in-person interactions (Lenhart, 2015). Jenkins et al. (2007) found that participants became more collaborative given multimodal texts compared to traditional print. These considerations speak to how today's youth assign value to reading at school and at home. For children who may see digital, multimodal literacies as their preferred mode of information or entertainment, they may be put off by the perception that only traditional literacies are valued in schools. Research on aliteracy must then consider how today's youth interpret reading within broader hierarchies. The next section will address teacher and classroom factors that could cause aliterate tendencies in youth.

Teacher and Classroom Factors Influencing Aliteracy

As students move from learning how to read, they must begin reading to learn by applying their reading skills. When developing these skills in classroom contexts, they are presented with a new set of challenges. Students who do perhaps enjoyed reading for pleasure in

primary grades may find that their reading preferences do not fit more skill-based models of reading. These young readers may feel distanced from what is perceived as “real” reading in school, and this can lead to formation of negative reader identity and a decrease in motivation (Hall, 2010). As students age, they begin to notice the kinds of reading they prefer are less valued at school. This can sometimes cause once passionate readers to feel that they do not have a place in the classroom. In turn, this puts them at risk for further alienation from voluntary reading as they age and come into contact with increasingly complex texts. Having a solid identity as a reader makes them more likely to stick with a challenging text if they have a bank of successful reading experiences and are skillfully able to deploy reading comprehension and vocabulary strategies (Calloway, et al., 2022).

The teacher must maintain an active role in helping students to love reading, being just as mindful of this as they would a lesson on vocabulary or comprehension skills. Teachers cannot teach this love directly, but they can create conditions for students to develop this love for themselves. Kuhn and Stahl (2022) note that “instruction should foster and monitor positive reading dispositions that go beyond the simplistic ‘appreciation’ and ‘joy of reading’” (n.p.). But identifying specific teacher actions that foster a love of reading in the classroom has been less well-developed in the literature (Merga, 2015).

Tying students’ interests to in-class readings, performing read alouds, and allowing for silent reading can help. Teachers can also be proactive in helping students associate reading with success by having open dialogue about the challenges that all readers face no matter their skill level. Teachers should also be mindful of providing text choices that students see as relevant and accessible (Wood & Jocius, 2013). A teacher’s role is critical in making the classroom an accessible space for students to share their joys and struggles in reading. Beyond that, teachers

can also share the affective experiences of being completely engrossed in a story, a key component of a reader's identity that is often overlooked in schools in favor of more concrete skills (Mackey, 2022). Allowing oneself to be transported to the literary landscape can also aid readers in related skills such as making meaning from text, developing positive attitudes toward themselves and peers, and heightening their sense of agency (Fischer, 2020).

Rosenblatt (1978) defined two primary reasons for reading—aesthetically for enjoyment and efferently to accomplish a task. Both are important to fully literate lives, but the efferent stance often wins out in upper elementary grades as standardized tests become more common and take on more weight in a child's academic assessment (Robinson, 2020; Alexander & Jarman, 2018). This dichotomy places their future growth at risk because they engage only in compliance-based reading tasks. Mikulecky (1978) alluded to this phenomenon in his early research on the aliteracy crisis when he cautioned that schools must keep “a balance of emphasis from teaching basic skills” without neglecting “the positive reading habits and attitudes necessary for continued learning” (p. 12). For older students who are skilled readers, they still may not see reading as a useful tool for their future goals. So, just as we would for any other desired skill or trait, the teacher must provide explicit and direct instruction on the value of life-long reading habits.

As children spend much of their waking hours in school, the ways children experience reading in school is a potential factor in the formation of their reader identities. Just as parents are influential figures at home, the child's teacher has great influence at school (Alshamarri, 2024). This may take the form of conversations directly between teacher and student about reading habits or book preferences (Kristin & Ali, 2022). It may also take the form of how the teacher structures the classroom in ways that either support or neglect the formation of a positive

reader identity. For example, teachers who encourage social interaction among students and provide feedback on students' reading achievement often see students persist in a reading task longer than teachers who do not provide such an environment (Alqhatani, 2024).

Tying students' interests to in-class readings, performing read alouds, and allowing for silent reading can help, particularly with students from underserved groups (Toliver, 2020). Teachers can also be proactive in helping students associate reading with success by having open dialogue about the challenges that all readers face no matter their skill level. Teachers should also be mindful of providing text choices that students see as relevant and accessible (Wood & Jocius, 2013). A teacher's role is critical in making the classroom an accessible space for students to share their joys and struggles in reading. Beyond that, teachers can also share the affective experiences of being completely engrossed in a story, a key component of a reader's identity that is often overlooked in schools in favor of more concrete skills (Mackey, 2022). Allowing oneself to be transported to the literary landscape can also aid readers in related skills such as making meaning from text, developing positive attitudes toward themselves and peers, and heightening their sense of agency (Fischer, 2020).

Ryan and Deci (2000) stated that intrinsic motivation increases if a person feels autonomous, competent, and relationally healthy. In the classroom, this can be demonstrated by allowing students to choose their own texts to read. This choice is thought to increase the child's engagement, which in turn increases the likelihood they will engage fully with the text and continue the reading. Guthrie et al. (2004) showed that a pedagogical method called Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction improved text-based comprehension for students when strategy instruction and motivational supports were combined, along with authentic inquiry.

Parental and Home Factors Influencing Aliteracy

A parent is a child's first teacher, and within the context of this study, a parent can greatly influence a child's attitude toward reading. From a child's early age, parents model reading behaviors and develop literacy rituals that shape identities. Children's chances for academic success increase by spending more time with parents during their youngest years. The quality of parental interactions and the child's ability to stick with a given task are indicators of higher academic success in kindergarten (Orr, et al., 2023). There are also socioeconomic factors that can affect a home's literacy environment (Cekiso, 2022; Gray, et al., 2024). Hart and Risley (1995) demonstrated that disparities in early language exposure were tied to socioeconomic status, with implications extending into a child's later academics.

Bandura (1997) found that children adopt behaviors exhibited by their parents. Baker and Scher (2002) tied this specifically to a parent's beliefs about reading and their child's motivation to read. Other sociological factors also affect academics. For example, a parent's level of education has been shown to directly and indirectly affect the size of toddlers' spoken vocabularies (Singh, et al., 2023). So, too, can specific family literacy practices such as the use of digital reading platforms (Tatar & Gerde, 2023). A child's perception of reading value may reflect the alignment, or misalignment, between home and school literacy practices. Still, not all outcomes are inevitable. Cubillos (2023) found that parents' leisure reading motivation and frequency were positively associated with children's reading motivation and that the parents' reading behavior was more influential to the child's motivation than other factors such as socioeconomic status. When considering behavioral, techno-cultural, and instructional domains, aliteracy is a multi-faceted phenomenon.

A child's identity is not static or permanent, but it is the product of a variety of factors that form self-concept and feelings of competence and value. Rather than presuming aliteracy is a deficit in motivation or a related factor, this study will examine how children understand and articulate their readerly identities at school and at home. The following section will outline the theoretical models used to guide the study.

Theoretical Framework

This section of the literature review will outline the theoretical framework that underpins the study and guides the study's design and analysis of results. It contains two sub-sections—identity theory, a means of thinking about one's role in life; and situated expectancy-value theory, an exploration of intrinsic value, utility value, attainment value, and cost in a given activity.

Identity Theory

Identity theory has previously been used in sociology and psychology (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Stryker (1968; 1980) developed the idea of social roles as a formational part of one's identity. His work was predicated on earlier findings on symbolic interaction, which held that reflection and appraisal were keys to the formation of one's self-concept (Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1902). Stryker also developed the idea of a hierarchy of roles that a person can prioritize based on commitment and salience—the likelihood a certain role will be needed in a situation. Burke & Stets (2022) drew on this work to emphasize how individuals seek to confirm their identities through interactions with other people. As a theory, it “explicates how individuals organize identity meanings, enact them in social situations, and respond to identity-relevant feedback” (Davis, J. L., et al., 2019, p. 255). In basic terms, a person's commitment to an identity is strengthened by social confirmation and acceptance. Social interactions that are not confirming

may cause distress. In the classroom, social labels can greatly influence a child's self-concept and how they respond to their environment. These labels are heavily dependent on context and how the child views themselves in the world. A label as an "advanced" reader can be as welcome or unwelcome as a "struggling" reader label depending on the child's current self-concept (McCall and Simmons, 1978).

Although not directly informed by identity theory, similar work by Gee (2000) and Sfard and Prusak (2005) conceive of identity as enacted through social participation and constructed through personal stories. They reaffirm the importance of eliciting children's own descriptions to understand how they are constructing their identity. Identity theory's core tenets are salience, role identities, and commitment (Stryker, 1980; Morris, 2013). I will briefly define each tenet and speak to its relevance in the current study. Salience means the likelihood that a given identity will be invoked in a certain situation. In the context of this study, a person with a highly salient reading identity would interpret situations through the lens of being a reader and choosing positive reading behaviors. Role identities are the meanings a person internalizes about a particular social role. These get incorporated into one's self concept. In the context of this study, it is whether one would see himself or herself as a reading kind of person. The third tenet of identity theory is commitment. This is the degree to which one's identity is tied to external factors, usually social ones. For this study, it can be seen as whether many people view you as a reader and the psychological significance you attach to that part of your identity.

The concept of "being a reader" can be thought of as a role identity. Children who internalize this as a salient identity are more likely to enact supportive behaviors—choosing books, making time to read, talking about what they read. For illiterate readers, this salience may be less solidified. Their engagement with reading may be heavily context dependent or based on

external factors like complying with authority. Burke and Stets (2022) explained how individuals verify their identity. They compare feedback from teachers, parents, and peers against their own internal identity standards. If students receive the message that others don't view them as a strong reader, their reader identity may weaken. Over time, this decrease in salience can reduce voluntary reading behavior.

Identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) was chosen for this study because it can help explain how children's identities are formed and displayed across settings. As the ever-changing sum of one's life experiences up to that point, one's reader identity is necessarily subjective. This aligns with phenomenological inquiry into how children experience the act of reading and how they evolve a sense of their literate selves. Identity theory also allows for the possibility that their identities are different across different contexts, such as at school and at home, with friends or alone, or for different text types and purposes (Capek & Loidolt, 2021). Identity theory also allows for the examination of how identities are formed and evolved from social and cultural influences (McCaslin, 2009). Some students may internally feel themselves capable of accomplishing a task but will look for confirmation of their abilities from teacher or peers (Venegas, 2024). This theory alone describes several significant components that could cause aliterate behavior, but it is important to consider other factors within the context of this study's research questions and methods. To do so, a second theory provided an additional lens for analysis and interpretation of results.

Situated Expectancy-Value Theory

The preceding subsection described how identity theory can be used to address ways in which internal and external factors shape one's sense of self. But it is not wholly sufficient to address all the dimensions of a child's relationship to reading. Thus, situated expectancy-value

theory (SEVT) was used as a complementary framework. This theory states that people prefer to engage in tasks where they can expect success (Atkinson, 1957; Eccles et al., 1983). Originally called expectancy-value theory, it was reframed (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; 2024) as situated expectancy-value theory to acknowledge the role of context and environment in a person's decision-making and motivation. In terms of a young child who is still learning about their preferences as a reader, it is important to know what factors might influence them to see reading more favorably. Eccles et al. (1983) described four values people often ascribe to daily activities. The four values are *intrinsic* (your natural enjoyment of the task), *attainment* (believing you can master the task), *utility* (how useful the task is to you), and *cost* (the trade-off while achieving the task). Gaspard et al. (2015) explored the students' feelings of success as a motivating factor in wanting to read more. Those findings showed that the opposite also occurs—avoiding reading if one feels inadequate at it. As a child reflects on their reading preferences, patterns can emerge that provide insight on how reading is seen as enjoyable and rewarding. Often, a reader's identity is comprised of five components—attitude, self-efficacy, habits, book choice and process (Scoggin & Schneewind, 2021). These components come both from within and without and interact with each other to influence one's attitude toward reading as a recreational activity.

Situated expectancy-value theory (SEVT; Eccles & Wigfield, 2022) is based on two constructs—expectancy beliefs and subjective task value. Together, they explain a person's achievement-related choices as being informed by competence, importance, interest, utility, and cost. Wigfield and Eccles (2000) showed that children's beliefs about their own competence declined in certain academic domains over time even if objective performance was unchanged. For an aliterate child reader, they may possess adequate reading skill but still self-report a decline in interest or relevance around voluntary reading. Similar to findings in identity theory,

these beliefs can be context dependent. A child may value reading at home if it allows them to accomplish a desirable goal (e.g. completing a preferred activity) but devalue reading at school if no comparable goal exists, or if school-based reading is felt to be socially controlled by adults. Thus, we cannot generalize a child's feelings about reading across settings.

Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy supports this distinction between a generalized self-concept of what one can achieve, and efficacy beliefs that are domain specific. Hidi and Renninger (2006) developed a four-phase model to explain how people develop interests. This model showed that situational interest can evolve into more permanent interest under the right conditions. Intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy were found to be positively tied to the amount and breadth of a child's reading and that reading engagement is linked to beliefs about its value (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Of relevance to the current study, aliteracy can be seen as a manifestation of low subjective task value, diminished expectancy value, or high perceived cost. In simple terms, if children view voluntary reading as any combination of boring, irrelevant, or unimportant, or requiring too much effort, their engagement will likely decline.

Identity and motivation can be mutually reinforcing. The ways in which a child understands themselves as a reader connects to the value they place on reading in their lives. Both identity theory and expectancy-value theory align well with the qualitative inquiry of this study that helps bring voice and meaning to children's lived experiences.

Conclusion

Students who exhibit signs of aliteracy are influenced by social norms against reading and personal beliefs about the lack of perceived value in books. Addressing this requires an understanding of children's reading motivations, book selection habits, and changing attitudes. Much research has been done on elementary students and book choice, reading motivation and

attitudes, particularly with readers who struggle. Researchers using the expectancy-value framework have previously looked at how elementary students value reading, how they perceive reading as a task, and whether they expect to be good at it. But little research has been done on students who can read proficiently but choose not to. This study connected that work to the concept of a specific type of elementary reader—the aliterate one. Beers (1996) alternately describes these types of aliterate young readers as literate nonreaders, reluctant readers, and nonreaders. They read what they must but no more. Voluntary reading is not merely a behavioral outcome, but an enactment of identity within a value system shaped by social interactions.

Existing literature has typically focused on the attitudes and motivations of struggling readers. This study differs in its emphasis on students who are not struggling, at least not in ways schools typically define it—the participants in this study were students who had demonstrated proficiency in grade-level reading tasks but who expressed poor reading attitudes. The current study added to the literature by exploring these proficient readers’ attitudes toward reading and what factors might motivate or demotivate them to choose reading as a preferred activity. This study aimed to add to the existing knowledge base on what motivates children to read at the upper elementary level, as they move from learning to read to now applying their skills independently. It was designed to address a specific population gap in the research—what motivates upper elementary readers who can read proficiently but who no longer choose to read for fun. Reading for fun is often called recreational reading or voluntary reading and is contrasted with academic reading. Little research on this topic has been conducted via direct conversation with child participants (Scholes, 2021; Jabbar & Warraich, 2023). The current study provided complement to the existing research base around students’ motivation for recreational reading (Winberg, 2022). Various internal factors including intrinsic motivation,

choices, and attitudes will be examined. The role of external factors—such as social peer influences—will also be considered as they relate to formation of a reading identity.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This was a descriptive qualitative study using phenomenological methods to explore aliterate reading behaviors among upper elementary students. It utilized semi-structured interviews and participant journaling to ascertain the ways students think about their own relationship to reading and what counts as being literate in their current lived experiences.

Research Questions

Two major questions guided this study:

- 1) How do elementary children describe awareness of their reader identity—to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors—at school and at home?
- 2) How do elementary children perceive the value of reading at school and at home?

Table 1

Research Constructs

Research Question	Theory	Constructs
1) How do elementary children describe awareness of their reader identity—to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors—at school and at home?	Identity Theory (Stryker, 1980)	• Reader Identity • Identity salience • Reading motivation • Reading engagement • Reader self-concept
2) How do elementary children perceive the value of reading at school and at home?	Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2024)	• Expectancy for success • Intrinsic value • Utility value • Attainment value • Cost • Reading motivation

		• Reading engagement
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This qualitative study described the aliterate reading behaviors among selected fourth-grade students in a suburban Midwestern elementary school. Most of the current research on aliteracy examines a reader’s attitude, a term which is often used interchangeably with motivation or engagement, depending on a study’s context (Xiao, 2023; Wang & Jin, 2020; Hall, 2010). Much is known about reading motivation and how students are positively motivated (e.g. matching books to interests, being able to read with friends) or negatively dissuaded (e.g. reading to please adults) when reading for voluntary reasons (Toste, et al., 2020; van der Sande, van Steensel, Fikrat-Wevers, and Arends, 2023). In a meta-analysis of reading interventions, elementary students’ reading motivation and reading comprehension was increased most by interventions that were designed to target the students’ individual interests (van der Sande, et al., 2023). My research filled a population gap in what is known about the child participants’ own views of reading expectations at school and at home, how children navigate their literate lives alongside other facets of their identities, and how children make sense of their developing reader identities.

Through my design, I brought a narrow, close-up focus to the issue of aliteracy. I approached this study of childhood aliteracy from a different angle than most of the extant literature, in which the phenomenon of aliteracy has been examined via adult populations (Griffin and Mindrila, 2024; Chong, 2016), or as a close cousin to illiteracy (George, 2021; Kim, 2019; Ramsay, 2002). Instead, I examined whether the child described their reading preferences, attitudes, or behaviors in ways that could be seen as aliterate, and how they described the value they place on reading at home and at school.

School and home provide the bulk of students' lived experiences in middle childhood (Nash, et al., 2024). Many studies have been conducted on school-based literacy focused on both instruction and curriculum (Chong, 2016; Dredger, 2013). However, only a handful of researchers have paid attention to elementary students' literate experiences in their home environment, and much of this has been focused on topics such as parental interactions, with less attention paid to what the child is doing independently in the environment (Lynch, 2021; Kersten, 2020).

Another factor is that children today very often access reading material through multimodal means such as electronic library platforms and electronic reading devices, and the children often do not see this as any different than reading from paper books (Taylor & Leung, 2020). Although many studies on digital literacy related to academic achievement have been published in the past decade, less is known about the differences between digital reading at school and at home for recreational purposes. Studies on the intersection of technology and home literacy have found that children do better if their technology use is coupled with parent-mediated reading experiences (Altun, 2019). Digital technology was not a major focus of this study, but it was occasionally mentioned by participants in interviews or journaling. I included one journal prompt for participants to think about their use of digital reading.

As children grow older, they seek more autonomy over where, when, and how they read. This factors into their developing identities as readers. A major influence in young readers' identities is whether they feel empowered to make their spaces and places comfortable for themselves, and this is often exhibited in how children engage in their own literate behaviors and respond to peers' literate behaviors (Fischer, 2020). The purpose of this study is to explore how students understand and articulate their reader identities across home and school contexts. The

next section will explain how this study is designed to do so using interviews to gather participants' own words and journals to track their reading habits at school and at home.

Research Design

A descriptive qualitative design was used for this study. This was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain insight into the students' lived experiences. Qualitative research is often attached to interpretivist and constructivist paradigms—the goal is to deeply understand a thing rather than confirm a preconception or assumption (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Interpretivism uses an individual's unique perspective to attach meaning to an event or experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Constructivism views knowledge as constructed as people work to make sense of their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Few studies focus on the lived experiences of young readers as the students themselves and describe themselves. Indeed, qualitative design is often a good fit for research which wants to examine a participant's perception of something (Gundogmus, 2024).

A descriptive qualitative design allows for both lived experiences and subjective perspectives to be captured (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Broadly speaking, methodologies in the qualitative tradition come out of interpretivist and constructivist ways of conducting research, ways that allow the researcher to deeply examine a subject. This is the opposite of quantitative methods that seek to quantify what is occurring, or a positivist paradigm that tries to predict an outcome (Tomaszewski, Zaretsky, and Gonzales, 2020). A descriptive qualitative research methodology allows us to understand different ways of knowing all the complexities and richness of a phenomenon (Tisdell, et al., 2025). The focus is on how participants experience the phenomenon being researched, with data often collected through interviews or first-person

accounts. The researcher brackets his assumptions so that the essence of the experiences can be analyzed without biases.

In this study, I kept analytic memos and engaged in multiple rounds of coding at the individual participant level, and later at the group level in order to put similar emergent themes “into buckets” and relate them to “theoretically relevant abstract features, possible relationships, and research questions” (Locke, et al., 2022, p. 264). I also returned to participants’ own voices in my analytic memos and coding to ensure my subsequent interpretations did not stray from the participants’ own contributions.

This study described what happened during aliterate reading behavior, such as what choices children make when they avoid reading. As a descriptive qualitative study, it used semi-structured interviews and participant journaling to gain insight into each participants’ lived experiences. A two-week window for participant journaling was chosen in order to collect enough data to be useful without unduly burdening the child participants. Participants explained how they viewed themselves as readers, to include their thoughts and feelings about recreational reading at school and home. This helped answer the research questions connected to identity theory and situated expectancy-value theory by prompting participants to discuss how they see themselves as readers, and how that identity is reflected in their attitudes and behaviors toward reading. It also gave insight into how participants perceived their reading ability and how they valued reading as a pastime. These things cannot be captured fully by external observation or quantitative measures designed to sort, order, or rank outcomes. Rather, this study recognized that participants were individuals whose attitudes and behaviors toward reading are not inherently right or wrong, and this study embraces the subjectivity of each participant’s personal beliefs about themselves as readers and the act of reading.

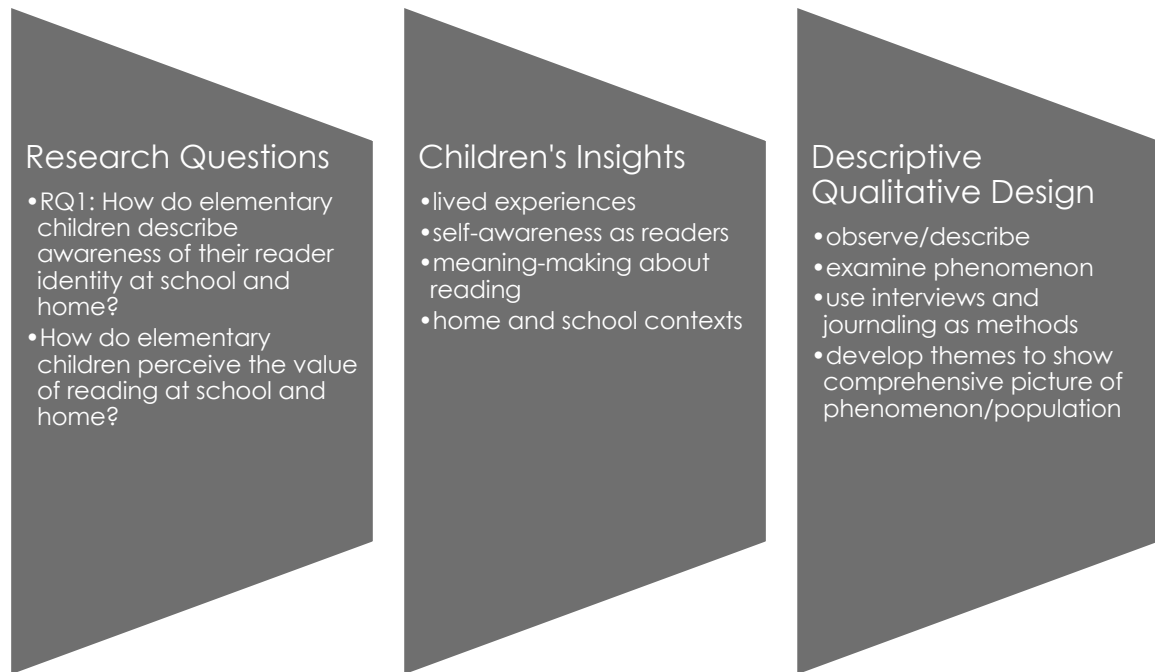
Researcher's Role

As a researcher making use of descriptive qualitative methodology, I was mindful of my dual roles as interpreter and participant. I began by bracketing my own biases about the topic, keeping in mind that my own positive experiences with reading may not hold true for my participants. I interpreted through analytic memos, iterative coding, and thematic development. Memos provided space for reflection immediately after each semi-structured interview. I documented insights, further questions, and possible meanings in the participant's responses. Doing so allowed me to focus on the participant's lived experience as they communicated it to me, while acknowledging that a researcher is someone who is an integral part of the research and cannot be wholly separated from it (Patton & Broward, 2023).

Smith and Osborn (2003) explained that the researcher is a person-in-context. That is, the researcher is subjected to preconceptions by participants along with the researcher's own understanding of the phenomenon. To limit the chances of introducing my own bias and distorting participants' meaning-making, I considered each participant's experience as-is and viewed my role as telling *what* participants experienced and *how* they experienced it (Alase, 2017). The coding process allowed me to identify units that carried meaning, such as replies with strong emotional language or dichotomic descriptions (i.e. reading is good; reading is bad). Emergent themes from individual cases, and eventually patterns across cases, allowed me to gather themes into superordinate and subordinate themes while staying true to the participants' lived experiences with aliteracy as originally communicated .

Figure 1

Connecting Research Questions to Methodology



Methodological Framework

Descriptive Qualitative Design

A descriptive qualitative research design (Tisdell, et al., 2025) will be employed for this qualitative study. The study's two research questions aimed to gather insights into children's lived experiences as the children themselves know and understand them. A qualitative design was well suited to this examination of how participants perceive, interpret, and assign meaning, to both their identity and motivational beliefs.

Tools such as interviews and participant journals offer up units of meaning that can be grouped in themes. When coupled with analytic memos, emerging themes can be interpreted in ways that stay true to the essence of the participants' lived experiences. This gives both structure and texture to the study's findings.

I selected descriptive qualitative study for my design because I am interested both in what participants are experiencing with aliteracy and at the same time how they are making sense of those experiences. Qualitative research recognizes that reality is subjective and that not all influences are visible on the surface. Descriptive qualitative research requires the researcher not only to observe but also to be an active participant in discovering emergent categories and then themes (Pringle, et al., 2011). Because of this, best practice in such a design is to provide a transparent, rigorous process for data analysis. Idiography allows for looking deeply into individual cases and also to look amongst them (Eatough & Smith, 2017). This preserves the identity of the participants as individuals, rather than generalizing their experiences. It attends to not only the words participants say, but what they might mean in the context of the given phenomenon, in this case childhood aliteracy. It gives equal weight to divergent and convergent experiences rather than just looking for commonalities.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the role of the researcher as the main instrument who guides and interprets the contours of a study. Descriptive qualitative research design gives a structure necessary for examining rich, contextual detail that is both rigorous and coherent (Miller, et al., 2018). This is well-suited to the study's aims of studying reader identity and value perceptions that are often attached to personal and social contexts.

Researcher Bracketing

As a researcher, I acknowledge my role in the research setting as a classroom teacher in the school where the study is to be conducted. My positionality as a teacher of reading is that reading is both a cognitively demanding skill and a deeply personal one. I believe that the goal of reading is always to make meaning, but in that meaning, a reader should also find value—by feeling included, supported, and empowered as independent readers and thinkers. I also approach

this work as a practitioner-researcher who is an in-service teacher. I have spent significant time both teaching children to read and providing structures to help them love reading. I acknowledge the often-significant challenge faced by fourth grade students navigating this transition between “learning to read” and “reading to learn” (Allington & Johnston, 2002). My philosophy of reading instruction is that reading should be meaningful, relevant, and connected to students’ identities and purposes. This echoes Rosenblatt’s (1978) aesthetic and efferent ways readers experience texts and the reading act itself. As someone who enjoys reading for many purposes, both academic and recreational, and a variety of text types, I will intentionally bracket my own beliefs and attitudes about reading for the purposes of this study. Through memoing, I will reflect on my beliefs about reading and how I think children acquire reading identities. I will also memo as I code and interpret data to decrease the likelihood that I extract something from the data because I want it to be true. I also designed the semi-structured interview questions to be open-ended and not lead participants toward a preferred answer.

Setting

The school district is located in a Midwestern U.S. state in a suburban area that serves approximately 6,000 students in grades kindergarten through twelfth. This school site serves 402 of those students in PK-4th grades. It is 71% White, 15% Black, 6% Hispanic, 6% Multiracial, and 1% or less of other races and ethnicities such as Native American, Asian, or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Students are 53% male, 47% Female, and none identify as non-binary. Students receiving special education services are 16% of the student body, while 9% are English Learners. School meals at free or reduced prices are given to 41% of students at this school. The state department of education classifies this school as highly performing, with its standardized test scores eight points above the state average. Sixty-two percent of students were

proficient on the most recent statewide assessment of language arts, with students in the 72nd percentile for growth. Seventy percent of students were proficient in a state test of mathematics, with students in the 70th percentile for growth. The student population contains a diversity of social, economic, and cultural factors typical for the area. Participant selection was based on student-reported feelings toward reading and standardized reading test data.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected based on their performance on the Formative Assessment System for Teachers Adaptive Reading test (FAST aReading; Renaissance Learning, 2025). This is a state-approved assessment measure given to all elementary students in this district three times per year. Fourth-grade students who scored at a proficient level on this assessment were considered for inclusion to the study. Additionally, this school site administered the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS; McKenna & Kear, 1990) to its students. Students who self-reported feeling low interest in recreational reading, the term used by ERAS to contrast with academic reading, were considered for the study if they also scored proficiently on FAST. The ideal participant pool was between four to six fourth grade students who were proficient on FAST who also held poor attitudes toward recreational reading on ERAS.

Participants in this study were all fourth-grade students, placing them around nine or 10 years of age. Participants were selected because they scored proficiently on the state-required reading assessment, but the participants themselves declared low interest in reading on an attitude survey. The study was conducted in the Fall, 2025 semester for data collection. Four participants gave interviews and kept reading journals for two weeks. A fifth participant met criteria of proficient test scores and low reading attitude and so was invited to participate, but they dropped out before interviews or journaling. In line with the school's demographics, three

participants were White; one was Hispanic and an English Language Learner (ELL). Two identified as male and two identified as female.

Standardized Reading Data

The Formative Assessment System for Teachers (FAST aReading; Renaissance Learning, 2025) test is given to elementary students in the fall, winter, and spring. Data for this study were drawn from the previous Spring's assessment window. This is because the district may have been unable to format and provide Fall data at the time this study was set to commence. Using Spring data over Fall data also helped to combat any dips in proficiency due to students not receiving reading instruction over the summer break.

The FAST aReading assessment is given to students in a whole class setting with their regular classroom teacher. Students whose 504 Plan or Individualized Education Plan call for alternate testing arrangements would take it accordingly, most often in a small group or separate setting. The publisher of FAST aReading (Renaissance Learning, 2025) describes the test as designed for use in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade to be used as a screening measure two or three times per year (Renaissance Learning, 2025). For students in kindergarten through fifth grade, the test measures concepts of print, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension. Older students would be tested on orthography and morphology in addition to vocabulary and comprehension. At each grade level, the test is adaptive based on each student's unique performance. This allows the test to give each student a unique set of between 30 and 60 questions regardless of whether a child is considered below-, on-, or above-grade level. At the end, students are assigned a score between 350-750, and teachers can use each child's score to compare with normed proficiency benchmarks listed by grade level and time of year.

Student-reported Reading Attitude Data

In addition to a standardized measure in the FAST aReading test, this study also used student-reported data as an inclusion criterion. This data came in the form of the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990). This survey was designed to address a need for classroom teachers to explore the link between attitude and achievement using a publicly available instrument “to estimate attitude levels efficiently and reliably” (McKenna & Kear, 1990, p. 626). It was tested with a national sample of over 18,000 elementary students. Ten questions measure the child’s attitude toward recreational reading, such as “How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?” or “How do you feel about getting a book for a present?” Ten more questions measure academic reading attitudes, such as “How do you feel when a teacher asks you questions about what you read?” or “How do you feel about reading workbook pages and worksheets?” Typically administered to an entire class at once, each child circles one of the Garfield cartoon characters shown below each question. The teacher tallies the child’s responses based on which Garfield face was circled: up to four points per question for happiest Garfield, three points for slightly smiling, two points for mildly upset, and one point for circling very upset Garfield.

The emotional descriptions used here of each Garfield face are taken directly from McKenna and Kear’s (1990) own advice to teachers of how to interpret the findings. Children have the faces described to them prior to taking the survey but are not aware of the point values when circling the faces.

This instrument was selected because it was a student self-reported score that was tied directly to each potential participant’s attitudes and feelings about their own experiences with reading, which have a likelihood to inform the research questions around how students see

themselves as readers and what value recreational reading has in their lives as a preferential activity. It also provides some insight into if and how a student's feelings about reading may differ if the reading is academic (i.e. to learn a fact or get a good grade) versus recreational (i.e. for entertainment). Note that the terms "academic reading" and "recreational reading" come directly from the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS; McKenna & Kear, 1990). This survey also provides a complement to the FAST aReading standardized measure in that the ERAS scores can be converted from a raw score to percentile ranks based on the nationally normed sample, using a table provided by the survey's authors.

The Formative Assessment System for Teachers (FAST; Renaissance Learning, 2025) and Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS; McKenna & Kear, 1990) were used in this study as inclusion criteria for the purposes of determining which students could be invited as participants. The participants' FAST and ERAS results were not reported in this dissertation's findings, nor will they be used in any subsequent publications.

Data Sources and Collection

The data sources for this study included participant semi-structured interviews and participant journaling, along with my analytic memos. I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Kansas State University and approval from the school district's superintendent prior to beginning any step of data collection or recruitment. The following sections describe each source in turn and how sources fit with the goals of this study.

Participant Selection

Four participants were interviewed and their reading journals examined to obtain data that was coded using descriptive qualitative study. All participants were fourth grade students at the same elementary school where I am a teacher, although students were not in my homeroom,

nor did I assign grades to them before, during, or after the study. Participants were between nine and ten years of age. They were selected based on proficient standardized reading test scores for the most recent testing window of Spring, 2025. In addition to being recent, use of spring data avoided potential dips in performance due to lack of instruction over summer break. Students with proficient standardized scores were then cross-referenced with their self-reported scores on the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS; McKenna & Kear, 1990) in the area of recreational reading. The school district's superintendent had granted permission for me to access this data for this purpose.

I located five students who were proficient in standardized testing but low in self-reported attitudes about recreational reading. I contacted parents/guardians of all five potential participants and explained the study's purpose, methods, and scope. All gave verbal permission, at which time I told them I would send home a written permission for them to sign that would allow me to recruit their child for the study. I receive parental permission for five children, but only four returned the permission document with parent and child signatures by my intended start date. After calling the fifth child's parent, it was determined the child did not wish to participate. This led to the inclusion of four participants.

After parental consent and child assent was obtained, I shared details with each child individually about what they would be asked to do—participate in two interviews and keep a reading log for two weeks. The children were told that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. I told the children that the information they provided during interviews would be used in a public setting such as a dissertation defense (which I described to them as a big class presentation) and possible publication. I assured that their real names would not be used and that they could use a pretend name called a pseudonym in its place. Each child created their own

pseudonym; those pseudonyms are used throughout this dissertation. Participants chose their own pseudonym at the start of the interviews and journaling. Although I addressed the child by their real name in the interview, the pseudonym is how I referred to them in my work (e.g. all rounds of coding, analytic memoing, data analysis and file naming conventions) in order to provide a further layer of privacy to the children.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are “an interaction between two people on a particular occasion” with the roles of interviewer and interviewee (Mashuri, et al., 2022, p. 23). It is the most commonly recommended data collection tool for descriptive qualitative study (Alase, 2017). The structure helps keep the interview moving forward while at the same time not being too strict. This allows for flexibility to ask follow-up questions in response to something the interviewee has said. This is different from an unstructured interview in that a semi-structured interview is pre-designed to keep the interviewer on track in service of their research questions. Kvale (1996) suggests using semi-structured interviews as a tool to build up knowledge, and that is another reason questions must be prepared in advance. Advance preparation also allows the researcher time to consider and address moral or ethical dilemmas that may arise in the interview (Rabionet, 2011).

The choice of semi-structured interviews as a tool was also guided by my ontological and epistemological orientations toward relativism and interpretivism (McLachlan & Garcia, 2015) for this study; namely, that these methods allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own words. This allowed me to engage in hermeneutic interpretation (Smith, et al., 2009) to interpret how participants perceive their reader identity and the value of everyday reading

activities. Doing this permitted me to make sense of the participants' lived experiences at home and at school and the meaning they constructed around reading behaviors.

These interviews were conducted one-on-one between the researcher and the participant. Because all participants were minors, the interviews were held at a time and place convenient for the child and parents which ended up being the school library during the participants' regular school day. Each interview contained 14 planned questions, with time allotted for follow up prompts as needed. I knew that participants of this age may be unable to answer multiple questions in detail in one sitting, so I divided the questions roughly in half. I noted my stopping point after the first interview and continued there in the second interview. Based on variability in each participant's length of answers and my follow-up questions, the stopping points were not the same for each participant, but all participants answered the same 14 core questions by the end of their two interviews.

For practical reasons of gaining access to participants, all interviews were conducted during the participants' lunch and recess period when the participant and I were both free (I am also a fourth grade teacher in the school with the same lunch period). Because students did not wish to miss two consecutive days for my interviews, I spread each participant's interviews several days apart.

The structure of each interview included a few questions for warm-up, such as "What do you like to read, if anything?" and some closing questions such as "What would you tell someone your age who does not like to read?" In between, the majority of questions probed reading habits and the influence of peer groups and parents, such as "Does anyone at home encourage your reading?" and "If you don't like to read, what do you do instead?"

These were collected in the Fall, 2025 semester. Interviews were audio recorded only; no video recording took place. I also kept anecdotal notes of observations during the interview, particularly for how children describe themselves as readers (reader identity) and how they talk about their feelings toward reading compared to other activities. The anecdotal notes were also helpful in capturing facial expressions or hesitation because no video was captured that I could refer back to later.

The 14 core interview questions for each participant were:

Warm-up questions

1. Tell me about your favorite activities at home? What do you most enjoy doing when you have free time?
2. What do you like to read, if anything? How do you choose what to read?
3. When someone says “reading,” what do you think of? What do you think counts as “reading?”

Home reading habits questions

4. How often do you read at home? What kinds of things do you usually read?
5. How do you feel when you read for fun? How do you feel when you read for school?
6. Are there specific times or places at home when you like to read? How long do you read at one time? Describe what that is like.
7. If you don’t like reading, what do you do instead? Why are those things enjoyable to you?
8. Do you ever read digitally, like on a phone, tablet, or computer? What do you read digitally? Is the feeling different from reading paper books?

Social and family influence questions

9. Does anyone at home encourage your reading? How do they encourage you?
10. Are there times when your family reads together or talks about books? What is that like?
11. Do friends or classmates ever talk about reading or share what they like to read? How does that make you feel?

Closing questions

12. If you could change anything about reading at home, what would it be? Would that make it more fun or interesting?
13. What would you tell someone your age who doesn't like to read?
14. Is there anything else you want to share about how you feel when you read, or how you decide to read or not read?

Participant Journaling

Participants were given a journal template on their school computer that was shared only with myself. They wrote about when, where, how, and why they read for two weeks. I provided some prompts but encouraged participants to write as much or as little as they wished, telling them to focus more on writing meaningfully rather than to fill up the space on the page. Still, most participants filled in something for every prompt every day. This was unexpected and provided much more meaningful data that nearly equaled the importance of interview data when it came to analysis and interpretation.

The prompts given were:

- What did you read today?
- How long did you read today?

- Where did you do most of your reading?
- How did you feel about today's reading?
- What influenced you to read or not to read?
- Did you use any digital devices during reading today?
- Did any family members get involved in your reading?

Analytic Memoing

Analytic memos are useful in qualitative research to help the researcher make sense of various sets of data as codes are applied and themes are. I recorded an analytic memo at least once each week using the same school-issued device that housed other data from this study. I engaged in analytic memoing in the evening after each participant's interview to capture my own sense-making of how participants responded. I added to the corresponding analytic memo after listening to and transcribing each interview in order to capture additional meaning-making either from myself or the participant. Based on Saldaña (2021), I used quotation marks around any participants' direct words in every memo. This helped me to distinguish their contributions from my own thinking. The memoing process helped me document my thoughts and reflections during data analysis. This helped me maintain transparency and to trace how my interpretation developed over time. This also helped me maintain my reflexivity and check biases. Memoing also aided in my construction of clearer themes better rooted in the data. I could trace my initial codes to my emergent themes, participants' personal themes, the group themes, and then to my own meaning-making under the theoretical framework.

Analytic Process

The study's purpose was to explore how students understand and articulate their reader identity at school and home. As a qualitative study examining the phenomenon of aliteracy, I

selected a descriptive qualitative approach (Tisdell, et al., 2025) It allows the researcher to play a role in the meaning-making process. This was important because all participants were children, and contextualization would be key to understanding how children describe and interpret their reading identity and the value they perceive toward reading.

Participants interpreted their own experiences by sharing narrative answers to semi-structured interview questions and describing their reading behaviors in a participant journal. I examined each participant's case by idiography, or giving detailed analysis of the individual's experiences. Initial codes led to emergent themes for each individual, not compared to others. This allowed me to know each participant as an individual and learn more about how they viewed themselves as readers or aliterate readers.

My analytic process was non-linear, which is typical for descriptive qualitative work. I moved fluidly between the individual transcripts, their journaling, my own coding and memos, and my emerging themes. The emerging themes were eventually solidified once I was sure I had a rich and thick understanding of each participants' conveyed experiences. Later, as I looked across participants, participants' individual themes would form a core set of three themes that aided in the rest of my analysis. The next section will provide detail in how I used multiple data sources to engage in my analysis and interpretation.

Data Analysis

I transcribed the semi-structured interviews and reviewed the participant journaling. I engaged in multiple rounds of coding and analytic memoing. I was attentive to prominent words or phrases or statements worth further exploration. I highlighted places that could be of future interest in subsequent coding rounds. This is known as descriptive commentary (Nizza & Smith, 2021). For this process, I examined and re-read each piece of data at least twice and often more

to ensure I had a thorough understanding of the participant's complete experience and interpretation of the phenomenon. In consecutive rounds of coding, I moved toward focused and concise descriptions of the participants' experiences.

For my second round of coding, I focused on linguistic commentary, looking at participants' language use, tone, and emphasis. I examined specific word choices participants used to describe experiences. My third round of coding was conceptual, where I focused on interpretation and participants' meaning. This round did not focus on verbatim excerpts (Smith et al., 2009) but instead looked at deeper levels of meaning. I followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendation that a unit of data should be relevant to the study, stimulating to the reader, and able to retain meaning on its own without supporting information. I moved from codes to categories, then refined the categories into subthemes and themes; here, a theme is the largest unit. A theme provides a way to talk about a meaningful pattern identified in the data (Tisdell, et al., 2025).

Table 2

Codebook Excerpt

Codes	Definitions	Examples from Data
Real reading	Behaviors that are meaningful to the child or validated by others	Reading means multiple paragraphs Ask friends what books are interesting Read many pages
Anti-reading	Being turned off of reading by internal or external factors	Bored Reading-less days Calling friends Homework Make me read Teacher-directed Sad Annoying Silent K-2 books

Desirable attributes	Characteristics that make reading more attractive	To learn Chapter books Selecting books Finish quickly Graphic novels Holds your attention If it looks good Books with details
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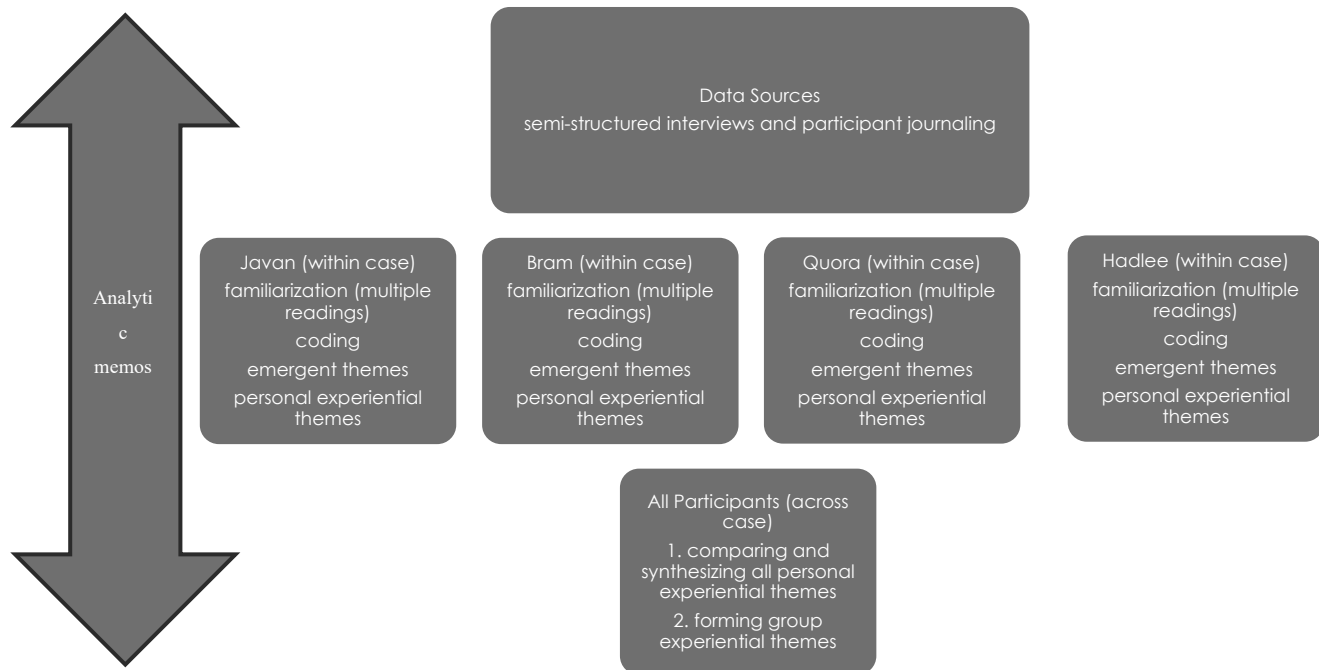
This started my identification significant codes, placed into categories that would eventually be winnowed to subthemes and themes. I completed all three rounds for each participant before moving onto another participant. I also remained attuned to my own emotional responses when reviewing the data, which I checked and reflected on after each round in my analytic memos. I looked for connections or patterns, grouping these based on their similarities (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

This was an iterative process whereby I compared old codes to new codes, reviewed previous rounds of coding to ensure all salient details had been captured. Codes were collected based on similarity into categories. I then refined the wording of the categories, and eventual themes, to be satisfied that relevant data had been included and that my own interpretation had not overshadowed the original words of the participants. This was critical in my desire to remain faithful to my study's stated purpose of exploring how students understood and articulated their reader identities.

During this process, I continued to move between the data, my memos, and my themes, which led to some reorganization of the themes. Themes were reorganized, condensed, split, and reworked until they held meaningful insight into the data and its patterns. Special attention was given to ensuring that the generated themes could be supported by the codes extracted from participant data itself such as interview transcripts and participant journaling.

Figure 2

Development of Themes



When I was sure my work was grounded in the data and an accurate reflection of participants' meaning, I built a thematic structure and began my interpretation (Smith, 2017). Throughout, I was still checking my own biases and referring to the data. This was important to be sure I was honoring the participants' voices. Whenever and as often as possible, I supported my interpretations with direct quotes from participants. This rich, thick, description is useful in descriptive qualitative work (Tisdell, et al., 2025). This reaffirmed the use of qualitative research design and analysis as a capturing of participants' lived experiences (Miller et al., 2018).

The data for this qualitative study were drawn from participant interviews and participant journaling. The study's purpose was to explore how elementary-aged children understand and articulate reader identities at school and at home. I used descriptive qualitative design as my analytic approach, with identity theory and situated expectancy-value theory to guide my

interpretation in complement. The use of descriptive qualitative design was suited to making case-to-case comparisons amongst participants purposively recruited for their fit to the research topic (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). This allowed for more detailed descriptions of how children see themselves as readers and how they value reading using their own words. It was also better suited to the small sample size of this study (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Noon, 2018).

I followed Smith et al.'s (2009) recommended steps for qualitative analysis of a phenomenon by (1) reading and re-reading one participant's journals and interview transcripts to become familiar with their narrative; (2) using reflexive journaling and analytic memos to capture what the participant is saying or describing; (3) synthesizing these notes into emergent themes; (4) organizing emergent themes into clusters or superordinate themes; (5) repeating this process for each participant; (6) looking for shared themes or insights in a cross-case analysis. I borrowed from Saldaña (2021) to use limited first cycle coding so that I could better identify salient places in the transcripts and participant journals that could inform my initial, emergent themes. These codes were provisional to ensure I was engaging with the data. They also helped ground me in participants' actual words as I wrote my analytic memos to document my reasoning behind my creation of each participant's coding and initial categories. These would later help form themes that showed patterns in the data.

Each participant's data were examined individually in an idiographic and iterative process. I kept analytic memos to document changes in interpretations, to aid in reflexive observations, and to show connections between participants' data. I transcribed the interviews using the audio recordings along with notes taken during the interview. I read each transcript initially without marking any commentary. This was purposeful so that I could familiarize myself with the transcript's contents and so that I could check for accuracy before proceeding. I

next read each transcript a second time. My impressions in this round were added to my analytic memos. In my third reading of each transcript, I analyzed each line carefully to see what words or phrases stood out. I highlighted and made notes in the margins, which similar protocols refer to as descriptive commentary (Nizza & Smith, 2021).

Categories were drawn from the semi-structured interviews and reading journals of each participant. This was done in an iterative fashion focusing on one participant at a time. Then, a comparison of categories led to the development of themes. I took time to see where individual themes converged or diverged among participants. This provided a cross-case understanding of participants' lived experiences with aliteracy. Three themes were created and will be outlined below. In keeping with my emphasis on participant voice, quotes from participants were included to properly contextualize each theme. This allowed for a deep and expansive view of the participants' lived experiences around aliteracy.

Most important to my process was for me to ensure that I maintained a spotlight on participants' own words throughout my interpretive process. As this was an inductive approach, I was careful to view my data by how participants themselves made sense of their experiences. I attended to four best-practice indicators of a qualitative study—constructing a narrative, developing a vigorous experiential account, closely analyzing participants' words, and attending to convergence and divergence (Nizza, et al., 2021). With only four participants of the same age and from the same school, it was critical for me to avoid “flattening” the participants' experiences; that is, inadvertently making participants seem more homogenous than perhaps they really were, and losing each participant's uniqueness. After this process, I applied the theoretical frameworks of identity theory and situated expectancy-value theory that would help me interpret more deeply.

The following figure provides an example of how I moved from coding to categories to themes for one participant, Bram.

Figure 3

Idiographic Coding Example with Theme Development

Pseudonym	Descriptive coding	Linguistic coding	Conceptual coding	Categories	Themes
Bram	Mom; Dad; siblings	Family plays a big role	Reading is socially mediated	Social influences	Relational act; emotional resistance
	sad/sadness; encourage;	He feels sad when made to do something he does not want to do He internalizes emotions; needs outside encouragement to read again	Reading is an emotional act	Emotional push/pull	Emotional regulation
	involved	He is very active; He is involved in basketball; He likes to be involved in decision making	He feels multiple demands on his home time; Frustrated when others don't seek his input	Emotional push/pull	Emotional regulation; navigating preferences
	pick	He prefers to pick his own books; He knows what he likes to read; He knows when/length he wants to read	Frustrated when others don't seek his input	Me vs them	Emotional regulation; preferences, time, location; non-preferred activity
	friends/peers	He mentions being volun-	Demands; Friendship conflict	blame	Emotional resistance;

		told to read at school; He does not see this as a positive; he sticks out for being “good reader”			external resistance
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Theoretical Frameworks

This study embraced the lived experience of aliteracy in children in ways that can be uncovered through qualitative phenomenological inquiry. It was important to engage in data coding, patterning, and wrestling with themes prior to imposing theoretical frameworks (Noon, 2018). Once that was done, I applied my chosen theoretical frameworks informing how identity and value beliefs may co-construct children’s reading behaviors and attitudes. Frameworks also helped explain similarities or differences in how various children saw themselves and what they valued about reading. The study is guided by two separate but complementary theoretical frameworks—identity theory and situated expectancy value theory. Each theory will be described separately and then positioned together to show how they are appropriate to both the study design and the research questions.

Identity Theory

Some researchers have applied identity theory as a lens through which they examine the lived experiences of elementary students and their reading behaviors. Hall (2010) found that young readers often avoided being labeled as good readers or poor readers, because labels attach new and different expectations for how children are seen as readers. Thus, being labeled a good reader can have negative consequences for students (i.e. heightened expectations for achievement or amount of reading required), something that adults often fail to consider. Motivation for

reading at school is often linked to obtaining information or solving a problem, and this is usually motivated in turn by the desire to please the teacher or get a good grade. However, this is only one aspect of what motivates students to read at school. Motivation may also come from an intrinsic desire to gain experiences or add to one's identity through reading. Peers may also influence an individual's choice both in what to read and how often to read. Identities are constant but so too are they constantly evolving, made malleable by internal and external forces. Identity theory considers the micro identity of an individual, the mesoidentity of an individual's social group, and the macro identities of one's social and cultural spheres (Burke & Stets, 2022).

Much of this is invisible, as it manifests as social structures that control much of what individuals do and think in a society. Indeed, sociologists concerned with the rules of society find that individual interactions and decisions are bounded by pre-established patterns and relationships (Laffan, 2021). These micro- and meso-identities are always in flux with one another. These identities also come into play when individuals consider the costs, benefits, difficulty level, and probable enjoyment of engaging in a given activity. They are also influenced by a child's repeated interactions with peers and adults, which shape the child's views of a thing and their attitude toward it. Indeed, a more nuanced view of identity theory as it relates to reading behavior may be less about whether reading is good or bad, hard or easy—rather, a child may simply feel that letting others know “I am a reader” is less important than other descriptors the child wishes to maintain about himself or herself. In this way, identity theory can be a critical framework for a researcher to interpret how external factors are absorbed by a child, how this affects their inward perceptions of reading, and in turn how it impacts their choices to read or avoid reading. It directly connects to the first research question on how children see themselves as readers.

Situated Expectancy-Value Theory

Just as identity theory highlights one's sense of self based on micro-factors and macro-factors, so does expectancy-value theory highlight motivation in both internal and external ways. In that way, the two theories do overlap, but using both as theoretical frameworks will provide more robust insights into the phenomenon of aliteracy.

Being motivated by something based on the thing's perceived value to ourselves has been formalized for years in psychological theories (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Eccles and Wigfield, 2023). Expectancy-value theory outlines the intersectionality of an individual's beliefs, goals, and values that provide motivation to engage with a task or achieve a goal.

Of relevance to this study, students who did not experience success with reading as younger children may carry that feeling into middle childhood and perhaps longer. Not reading can limit an individual's future in terms of economic earnings and social standing (Lal, 2015). It's also possible that students experience success with another activity that replaces pleasure reading for them. A key consideration in aliteracy research is the "so what" factor (Buis, 2020).

Some scholarly arguments have been made that being taught to read is sufficient and that continued pro-reading behavior is the individual's choice (e.g. Gallagher, 2009). This calls attention to relevance for parents, teachers, and the students themselves who negotiate literate expectations at school and at home while forming their own opinions of what counts as real reading. We must consider the complementary goals of both learning to read and reading to learn—or for fun, as reading for fun has been shown to expand vocabulary and builds empathy, along with self-awareness and identity formation (Scholes, 2021).

Hall (2010) states that some proficient readers may keep this part of their identity hidden from others because even positive labels, such as being a good reader, come with an increase in

expectations—for example, a teacher may call on a perceived higher reader more often in class or assign them more difficult homework. Still other students may wish to engage in types of reading not historically valued at school, such as reading graphic novels, comics, or magazines (Cook, 2017). Reading online is now commonplace among today's youth, and most youth make no distinction between where or how they access a text (Buckingham, 2020). Digital literacy is another facet that has been well-studied in the literature but whose acceptance as a valid literacy genre may not be well-established among practitioners or communicated to students (Cook, 2017).

All of these factors may turn out to play a role in a child's determination to read. There may be a low expectation when the child feels they are not good at reading. This can happen even when external sources such as teachers or test scores say the opposite. There may be a low value placed on reading when the child feels it is not fun or useful. For one or both reasons, a child may choose to stop reading and become aliterate. It directly connects to my second research question on how children assign value to reading.

A child who says they do not choose to read because they are a slow reader and reading is boring has articulated themes about self-concept, distancing, utility, and perceived cost. Thus, both identity theory and expectancy-value theory provide ways to think about aliteracy in children. They provide two different but complementary lenses to examine how children see themselves and why they choose whether to engage in an act based on its perceived value. A combined theoretical framework can give the study a fuller and more robust understanding of the phenomenon being studied under the stated research purposes of how children value reading and how they perceive themselves as readers.

Epistemological and Ontological Influences on Methodology

The current study is descriptive qualitative, using phenomenological methods. Phenomenology as a philosophical tradition is concerned with examining people's everyday lived experiences (Husserl & Moran, 2012) and ways individuals make meaning inside their socio-cultural contexts (Husserl & Heidegger, 1927). For this study, my interest in knowing more about children's everyday interactions with literacy via peers, teachers, and family members could not be captured solely by observation. Childhood aliteracy is the phenomenon under examination. I needed a way to examine a child's experience during those interactions and how they influenced each child's perception of themselves as readers.

Descriptive qualitative study was selected as the best fit under my ontological and epistemological orientations in this study. This approach is useful in examining how participants described their interpretation of the phenomenon, and then allowed me to look for patterns, themes and further meaning (Smith et al., 2021). I was an active participant along with the child trying to make sense of their (subjective) reality. A descriptive qualitative design also gave me a way to maintain reflexivity via analytical memoing during data collection and analysis. Qualitative research's use of idiography, or examining individuals in their unique contexts, was also a good fit because I wanted to avoid overgeneralization of my participants' experiences. With four participants who were relatively homogenous (same school, same age), I wanted to preserve unique facets of each participant's experience to better understand the components of their subjective realities. These individual narratives helped me find nuance that would strengthen my formation of broader themes when I moved to cross-case analysis. Next, I detail more about my ontology and epistemology and how they influenced my study design.

As researcher, I adopted an interpretivist paradigm for this study. I was not trying to objectively measure things like reading behavior. Instead, I wanted to understand how children conceptualize and articulate the things that make up their reader identities. Interpretivism is appropriate to this study's purpose, exploring how students understand and articulate their reader identity at school and home. A person's identity is necessarily subjective because it is formed through personal experiences, social interactions, and introspection (Grass, 2024). Understanding the phenomenon of aliteracy requires examination of the meaning each participant gives to their reading behaviors, preferences, and attitudes. It also allows for variability in how participants value reading that may change between home and school contexts or in different social situations.

I selected relativism for my ontological stance. This was a good fit for my study because it assumes phenomena exist in the real world, but they are not understood or experienced the same way by all participants. For example, reading engagement can be seen as a social phenomena that occurs with the classroom environment, home-based literacy practices, or even cultural expectations about the value of reading. The ways individuals interpret and make sense of these experiences are unique to each individual, however. Relativism allowed me to situate my interpretations within authentic literacy environments while I studied how participants interpreted their experiences.

Trustworthiness, Rigor, and Validity

In all research but particularly where children are involved, it is important to ensure that participants' ideas are being represented accurately in the analysis and discussion. Annotations and edits were conducted as needed to ensure my notes matched what the child intended to convey of their experiences. A coding system and a codebook were developed.

For this study, I utilized two sources of data: participant journaling and participant interviews. I also wanted to ensure that I was providing the correct contextualization of the data. To do so, I began with a comprehensive review of extant literature, searching for current trends in the field, established methodologies, and noted previously recommended topics for future research as I organized my own study parameters. Next, I examined each data set I collected through the lens of two distinct but complementary theories for the context of my research questions: identity theory and expectancy-value theory. Both are well-established in peer-reviewed literature and used in the social sciences. I also supported my interpretations with quotes from the participants themselves. This served to ground my interpretation in each piece of datum itself and minimized my own biases.

For a study to be valid, it must clearly articulate its methods and present findings that are truthful, helpful, useful, and important (Smith, et al., 2009; Grass, 2024). This study employed rigorous data collection and analysis techniques. Participants' words were recorded verbatim, put through multiple rounds of systematic coding, with my decisions recorded by memoing. I formulated several rounds of theme creation guided by my study's purpose and the research questions. The use of descriptive qualitative study paid careful attention to participants' own words because the goal was to uncover their unique lived experiences. As researcher, I was reflexive in my role, sticking closely to what participants said in interviews and recorded in journals, without attaching my own meaning to their data during coding and development of themes. When I began my interpretation, my work was likewise grounded in exactly what participants said and did. I included thick description and participant quotations. I constantly compared my interpretations against the original data to ensure coherence, plausibility, and textual support for my analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are necessary and important to any study involving children. This study involved students for whom the researcher is an authority figure as a classroom teacher. I worked to counteract these limitations by only recruiting students who were not in my homeroom which eliminated any conflict of interest around the students' grading or evaluation.

I began rigorously collecting and analyzing data, being transparent about my positionality in my analytic memos, and being mindful of any ethical concerns that may have arisen during the research process. Concerns for privacy of student data were addressed in my initial application for study approval with the school district.

Parental consent and student assent were obtained, along with approval from the researcher's university institutional research board and the school district's compliance officer. Students were informed of the risks of participating, with the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Data were stored on a password-protected computer in a protected file. Participant-selected pseudonyms were used in data collection (except when speaking in interviews), data storage, and final reporting. Student data used as inclusion criteria—standardized reading scores and attitude survey scores—were not reported in dissertation findings. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and incorporated into coding, data analysis, and file naming in order to give privacy to the children's data.

Summary

This chapter explained the use of descriptive qualitative research using phenomenological methods, specifically semi-structured interviews and participant journaling. The study explored the multifaceted issue of aliteracy among fourth grade students and their lived experiences with reading at school and at home. The codes established from the interviewing and journaling data

gave rise to categories, then themes, that helped inform the research questions around reader identity and perceived value of reading.

Chapter 4 - Findings

This descriptive qualitative study was designed to explore how students understand and articulate their reader identity at school and home. Two research questions were posed:

RQ1: How do elementary children describe awareness of their reader identity, to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors at school and at home?

RQ2: How do elementary children perceive the value of reading at school and at home?

The descriptive qualitative study approach (Tisdell et al., 2025) was used to make sense of the data and to make sense of the participants' own sense-making. In my idiographic approach, priority was given to examining each participant's account in individual detail. I emphasized each participant's own words because this was essential to addressing the population gap in the existing literature. I did this while also acknowledging my own role in the sense-making process. Then, I provided patterns of convergence and divergence through my development of themes. Each participant was treated as a case. Their meaning-making was explored in depth by within-case analysis. This preserved their unique preferences, resistances, and affirmations. Cross-case themes were formed after within-case analyses.

Javan

Javan is a nine-year-old male. He attends the same elementary school as the other participants and is the only participant who is not in the same homeroom. He lives with his mom, who is a single parent. Javan has a large extended family including many cousins around his age who also attend his school and live nearby. He is classified as an English Language Learner student for which he receives pull-out services daily. Javan's mom works in late afternoons and

evenings, so he spends much of his free time at home making his own choices on what to do and when. He wore a matching hoodie and sweatpants outfit to both interviews and was proud to show off his collection of high-top sneakers that he owned in various colors. Javan was an animated speaker whose ideas came rapidly in short bursts. In the first interview, Javan said he was excited to talk with me about what he likes to do, but he made clear that reading was not one of his preferred activities. He said that he only read at home if he had nothing else to do, so most of his reading was done at school.

“Reading isn’t super useful to me,” Javan admitted (Interview 1, December 1, 2025). “I can’t find books I really get into that much.” This aligned with his earlier statement that reading was last on his list of entertainment options. This supported his coding of reading as non-preferred activity and emotional resistance to reading. He resisted reading in favor of other, more preferred activities. Javan showed strong preference for activities on the iPad. “I use the iPad a lot at home,” (Interview 2, December 9, 2025). “I really like to take pictures with it.” With prompting, he shared that he does occasionally read digital book on the iPad at home. “It is different than a [paper] library book,” (Interview 2, December 9, 2025). “The iPad gives more detail than on the paper, like a little bit more of the story.”

Javan said he liked stories that had lots of detail, and he found more of these types of books on the iPad than in the school library, though he could not give specific examples of books with his preferred level of detail. Later in the second interview, he stated that he likes to use the iPad’s accessibility features to pronounce or define words he does not know. These responses showed clear preference for digital reading over printed material. The responses supported a personal theme of clear preferences in reading habits. Javan reported reading between three minutes and 12 minutes at a time in his reading log. Unlike other participants, Javan did not

articulate a resistance to reading. In fact, he said “reading makes me happy” (Interview 1, December 1, 2025). He recalled feeling happiest at a book fair where he could choose lots of books to buy and then pick one to read first. He could not explain why reading made him feel happy. Indeed, he stated that he did not know how he would recommend a book to a friend or encourage someone else to enjoy a book the way he did (Interview 2, December, 9, 2025). This led to what Javan described as his “reading-less days” (Interview 2, December 9, 2025). These were days where he recalled reading nothing at all, which appeared 17 times in his reading log. He explained that his mother talked about what she was reading but did not ask about what he was reading, nor did Javan feel his mother took an active role in encouraging his reading. “Mostly mom just tells me what she’s reading. But no one really encourages me doing it” (Interview 2, December 9, 2025). Javan reported reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007) for the entirety of his reading log. These statements support coding of affirmation in reading—the context for Javan is that he rarely described receiving external affirmations to read, whereas all other participants named several affirmations happening daily or weekly.

Bram

Bram is a 10-year-old male who attends the same elementary school as all participants. He is in the same fourth grade class as participants Quora and Hadlee. He is the eldest of four children in a family with two boys and two girls. He enjoys basketball and plays for a club team on the weekends. He also enjoys arcade games and spending time on his grandfather’s acreage. Bram asked to re-arrange the scheduled time for his first interview, saying it was not a good time and I should come back tomorrow. He subsequently agreed to begin the interview the next day. In his two interviews, Bram was polite, cheerful, and seemed to enjoy answering questions. He often paused before answering to carefully consider the question. He diligently kept his reading

log over two weeks, filling in nearly every prompt every day. Early on, he made clear that he has a wide variety of books at home with clear preferences for what, when, and how he reads.

“I have lots of books. I read three times a week, maybe 15 minutes” (Bram, Interview 1, December 2, 2025). “My mom likes it when it’s 20 [minutes read].” Bram spent the most time reading at home of all participants. He explained his preferences for time and location. “If I’m feeling it and it goes more [minutes read], that’s awesome.” (Interview 1, December 2). Follow-up questioning prompted him to consider a time he felt in the mood to read. “Fifty minutes was my highest. I think to myself ‘come to your spot,’ and it might be in bed or in my mom’s chair” (Interview 2, December 11, 2025). Bram also articulated preferred genres. “I do a lot of *I Survived* (Tarshis, 2010) and always by myself.” He noted reading by himself or “just me alone” five times in his reading log. He also reported reading in class or the school library five times. A prompt to describe his ideal reading experience showed more strong preferences. “In my bed at night,” Bram stated in Interview 2 (December 11, 2025). “I like to lay under the covers and stare at the ceiling and sometimes I read there.”

Bram frequently described being resistant to reading, both by pushing against external forces and pushing against his own negative emotions. “At school, my group always picks me to be reader. It’s because they know I can do it,” (Interview 2, December 11, 2025). This would lead him to negative emotions about reading. “I just feel like when people make me read, I’m going to do it less and less.” In his first interview, Bram described being bored by the thought of reading, even when classmates and teachers framed his reading ability positively. “My teacher forces me to read because she says I’m good at it,” (Interview 2, December 11, 2025). “It makes me sad.” When prompted, Bram clarified that this sadness were caused by someone else (e.g. his

teacher) making him do something he was not in the mood to do (e.g. read aloud to the class). These statements support coding of emotional resistance and resistance to external factors.

Bram also linked his resistance to a personal theme of reading as a non-preferred activity. His preferred activity was to play basketball either at home or with his club team practices. “If it’s snowing, I can’t really play basketball. So I’ll just chill inside and play with my brother and sisters.” (Interview 1, December 2, 2025). “I have these big arcade game machines downstairs I always play when I get home.” Bram drew firm boundaries around when reading was acceptable, at a time and place of his choosing. Only then would he describe reading in favorable terms.

“I’m excited if I’ve been waiting to read my book all day,” (Bram, Interview 1, December 2, 2025). Bram kept a book at home and a different book at school. He did not mix them unless a book was being returned to the library. “You can just get books on *Epic!* And leave home books for when you have a long time to finish them (Interview 1, December 2, 2025). In his reading log, he recorded reading a book on the history of global warfare. He said he found it at his grandpa’s house, and grandpa let him take it home. Bram appreciated its mix of text and hand-drawn illustrations. “I like books that have lots of details. I like books that teach you stuff that you want to know,” (Interview 2, December 11, 2025). When prompted for any favorite book titles or genres, Bram responded, “[non-fiction] is a bit more immersive, I don’t know. A good book inspires you to just live on and read.”

Bram reported receiving numerous affirmations to read from his family. He reported that all of his siblings read at home because it was a routine established by his parents as a “job” to be done daily when arriving home from school. “My mom has this chair she reads in, so if I sit there she’s like ‘how long did you read?’ (Interview 1, December 2, 2025). “My dad reads to me each night, like long chapter books he finds.” Bram reported that his dad selects books that dad

enjoyed as a child. Although Bram does not always relate to these books, he always listens “to the first chapter of my dad’s books to see if it’s good.” He values this time with his dad as a bedtime routine. “People just like reading with me, I guess,” (Interview 1, December 2, 2025). “I always like to read by myself, just me alone. Mom and dad encourage me reading but especially mom. Each night she’ll say ‘get your 15 [minutes read],’” (Interview 1, December 2, 2025). These statements support coding from Bram that reading is an emotional regulator, a relational act with his family, and that despite his strong preference for solo reading, it can also be a connection ritual for him.

Quora

Quora is a 10-year-old female who attends the same elementary school and is in the same homeroom as Bram and Hadlee. Her pastimes include music and dance, which she does competitively through a local studio. She also enjoys taking ideas she learns in art class at school and replicating them at home. She sees friends as very important to her and stays connected to them mostly through texting when not at school. Quora’s answers to most interview questions were brief, prompting several follow-up questions for clarification or additional context. Though brief, her answers were sure and definite.

Her answers gave a clear picture of what reading meant to her. “Reading means two full paragraphs. You can’t really be reading if you do less than that. You need to be thinking about something when you read,” (Interview 1, December 4, 2025). Her definition of reading gives insight into how she views her relationship to books. “I used to read when we got those little books to take home each night, but I stopped since then,” (Interview 1, December 4, 2025). The school provides decodable books to all students in grades kindergarten through second to read each night with a family member. “Now I read just one time each week. It’s 15 minutes and it’s

[on my] couch or bed,” (Interview 2, December 18, 2025). These statements support coding that led to subthemes of preference, time, and location boundaries.

Similarly, Quora showed strong demarcation around the personal and external factors that influenced her decision to read. “There comes times when it’s silent and it’s just like I can finally relax. But if there’s people, it’s like ‘no, I am not going to do this’” (Interview 2, December 18). She gave a detailed description of her internal thoughts when reading:

It’s always something. I’m always thinking. Sometimes my teacher tells us to read for 20 minutes a night and I’m like ‘oh yeah, I gotta do that.’ I’m always thinking when I’m reading. It’s so distracting. Like if you’re telling me to read, it’s kind of annoying because if I don’t really want to read, I don’t love reading (Quora, Interview 2, December 18, 2025).

This emotional description of home reading is contrasted with Quora’s description of how she reads at school. “I read decently on my computer researching mountains,” (Interview 1, December 4, 2025). “It’s like always good for me to be thinking about things and that’s what I can do when I’m reading.” These statements support the theme of resistance to reading and its subtheme of reading as a non-preferred activity. Quora showed a strong distinction between her feelings about reading at school and at home.

These feelings continued through her interview responses about her reading routines. “I read before bed,” (Interview 1, December 4, 2025). “You put on your cool down calm down music all you want. Reading makes me calm, stable.” Quora reported reading two books during her two weeks keeping a reading log. In line with her interview statements, she typically read at home for short bursts of 10 to 15 minutes, although she reported reading several nights a week at home rather than the one time per week only that she claimed. Quora also described a routine for reading time at school, if the teacher provided class time for self-selected independent reading.

“I’m always calling my friends when I’m at home. So at school I will go up to them saying ‘What kind of books do you think I like?’” (Interview 2, December 18, 2025). “I would go ‘Hey, you know where like the sports books or fantasy or mystery books are?’ And we would read through some,” (Interview 2, December 18, 2025). This suggests a subtheme of reading as a relational act. It also supports a subtheme of reading as an emotional regulator for Quora. It appears she does not read the same book consistently at school across a week, and relies on friends’ recommendations to supply her with new books that hold her interest during the class’s independent reading time. She recalled one particular book that she did read completely. “It was an outer space book but not a real one. It was like a fake one where each chapter was a different adventure,” (Interview 2, December 18, 2025). “It came with lots of chapters and I was very involved with it.”

Hadlee

Hadlee is a 10-year-old female who attends the same elementary school and is in the same homeroom as Bram and Quora. Hadlee recently joined the wrestling club that meets several nights a week and every weekend for practices and tournaments. She never wrestled before this year but enjoys the challenge of trying something new. She also enjoys being outside and stated that winter was her favorite season because there are many fun things to do in the snow. Hadlee is known for her elaborate friendship bracelets and would often work on putting one together while we talked in addition to eating her lunch. She asked several clarifying questions during both of her interviews and appeared to be thoughtful in her responses before she shared.

Like Quora, she began by recalling the school’s decodable books offered in earlier grades. “I used to read every night when I brought those little books home,” (Interview 1,

December 5, 2025). “Ever since, I haven’t been reading as much except during school.” She reported having no trouble accessing books to read, despite the lack of decodables from school. “My mom is always buying me books. She buys me these full text sets. Like, she thinks I’m going to like them more if I have so many,” (Interview 1, December 5, 2025). “I have many, many books in my room and more in the living room. She described her preferred locations for reading. “If it’s snowing outside and my family is around, I will read,” (Interview 1, December 5, 2025). “I like to read in my living room or by my front door on the bench. The weirdest place I would read is on my trampoline, which is in the summertime of course.” These responses were consistent with her reading log entries. She read consistently across the two weeks and often in the same location. This indicates a personal theme of time and location preferences when reading. It also shows ease of access to books. Hadlee reported that her favorite books for a long time have been books on how to draw things. With her recent interest in wrestling, she has begun reading books on that topic, too, though she stated it is difficult to find books specially about girls’ wrestling.

These themes were mediated by opposing themes of resistance and distraction. “I get distracted by reading a lot,” (Interview 1, December 5, 2025). Further questioning clarified this statement to mean she is distracted *while* reading and it is often due to her location. “I get tired from reading the same book. If I am in the living room, I am usually looking to see what my brother is doing or what is going on outside.” She referenced her love of the outdoors and how she enjoys reading by the window to watch the snow fall, but that this can also be distracting to her focus on reading at home. “My brother might also be playing Roblox, so I will follow with him to do that.” This supports coding of alternate preferred activities. It also illustrates Hadlee’s feeling of competing time demands. “I just joined wrestling so I wasn’t sure about it. It actually

takes a lot [of time]. I don't read a lot because of that" (Interview 2, December 19, 2025). This was reflected in her reading log. She often recorded reading length of 30 minutes several times a week at home. She also tended to stick with the same book, reading it at school and at home. "I would say it's just getting back to the consistency again. Because as a younger kid in this school, I would read those little books," (Interview 2, December 19, 2025). Hadlee also described several reading habits based on convenience. During times when she is not reading the same book every day, she will grab a book nearby to fill time. "I saw one of my brother's books," (Interview 2, December 19, 2025). "I just found it while I was waiting for my dad to leave, so I read it for a while."

Hadlee described similar moments (Interview 2, December 19, 2025) of reading for convenience when driving to wrestling practice ("It was just sitting in the center console") and another time while waiting for her dad to leave ("It was just in my backpack so I decided to read it"). These short bursts of reading were in contrast to the longer, sustained reading Hadlee recorded during her two-week reading log. Hadlee stated that her mom has been encouraging her in third grade, and now fourth grade, to read longer chapter books. Hadlee stated her mom also wants her to read an entire book without abandoning it.

This attempted structure was not always welcome ("No one can make me read," Hadlee, Interview 2, December 19, 2025) but it is clear Hadlee looked to her parents for guidance on how to develop the reading habit. Hadlee relied on her mom for reminders to read at home. "My mom says you have to get in the consistence of reading like 30 or 15 minutes. You can even read an hour, if that's possible, which I would do up in my room. You can calm down before you go to bed," (Interview 1, December 5, 2025). "My mom does the kinds of things she always does to encourage me to be reading." She elaborated that her mom would check in with her on any

homework requirements, be sure she knows how long until a competing time demand such as wrestling, and follow up before bed to see if she has read for the allotted time, usually 20 minutes per night. “My dad also tells me to read but just like “Hey, did you read?” but then he also asks me what am I reading today,” (Interview 2, December 19, 2025).

Hadlee said that reading at home offers fewer distractions than at school because her friends “don’t text super long messages” so that she can “mostly just focus on my books” (Interview 2, December 19, 2025). Hadlee contrasted her claims about being distracted when reading at school with statements that showed a fondness for reading. “I wish I had time to read more. I really like the book I’m reading now.” This indicates a personal theme of the importance of being absorbed in the reading act, and how one’s feelings about reading often change. “You need to read through a couple pages,” Hadlee said about her method to finding a new book (Interview 2, December 19, 2025). “The *Speechless* series (Steinke, 2025) got me involved again, and I told a friend about *Dork Diaries* (Russell, 2009).

Hadlee enjoyed moments when she felt in control of her reading choices. She also enjoyed moments when she could share book recommendations with friends “I give my friends book ideas that are actually interesting to read” (Interview 2, December 19, 2025). Hadlee’s use of the phrase “actually interesting” to describe her book recommendations for friends is noteworthy. It indicates that she finds other books to be not interesting, most likely books that are presented in school or given to her by adults. It could also indicate that she feels books are not interesting unless they are recommended peer-to-peer rather than based on adult guidance.

The preceding section described each participants’ lived experiences with aliteracy using their coding. It used participant quotations from the two semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant along with examples from participants’ reading journals to provide detail

around reading habits. In line with descriptive qualitative study design, my findings provided surface-level interpretation of how each participant made sense of their reader identity and perception of reading value. This interpretation relied on participants' words in order to derive meaning idiographically, that is without comparing participants against each other.

The following section will take the next step in descriptive qualitative study, detailing the results of the study across cases. Subthemes derived from participants' individual data were grouped to form broader themes that applied to the participants as a whole. These researcher-generated themes formed the bulk of the analysis. Participant data was again included where helpful for contextualization.

The themes will be shared in the following order: (4.1) navigating time, space, and access; (4.2) resistance to reading; (4.3) affirmation in reading. The table below displays the themes and their constituent subthemes.

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
4.1 Navigating time, space, and access	4.1.a Preference boundaries
	4.1.b Time and location boundaries
4.2 Resistance to reading	4.2.a Emotional resistance and disengagement
	4.2.b Reading as an external imposition
	4.2.c Reading as a non-preferred activity
4.3 Affirmation in reading	4.3.a Reading as an emotional regulator
	4.3.b Reading as a relational act
	4.3.c Becoming absorbed in meaningful texts

4.1 Navigating Time, Space, and Access

The first theme is related to how participants made sense of their reading based on the time, space, and access to text. These were self-imposed requirements by the participants that made them feel that they could fully engage in activities that counted as reading. Each participant had strong and clear preferences for the types of books they wanted to read.

4.1.a Preference Boundaries

Chapter books were frequently mentioned as a requirement for “real” reading. Participants said reading done in class often does not count as “real” reading because the teacher might only ask them to read a paragraph; “real” reading must be “a couple of paragraphs” or “even a whole page is better.” Chapter books are widely available in the school library and for that reason were seen as sanctioned by adults. For that reason, electronic books, comics, and magazines were perceived as not “real” reading, even by participants whose teachers allowed them to read on electronic book platforms. Physical books were preferred, with engaging cover art the primary method of book selection, along with reading the synopsis on the back or inside flap. Participants also reported the need to read an entire book (e.g. not abandoning the book early). The ideal length of a book was one that would take one month to read. Bram explained his reasoning as “taking a month to read one book is good because it shows you are really into the story, but you can’t get bored with it.” In follow-up questioning, Hadlee shared that “[a month] is about how long it takes my friends to read, and I am able to do it more than I did last year.” This shows a growing self-awareness of peers’ reading behaviors, which are beginning to influence the participant’s own behavior.

Participants also expressed clear awareness of their reading preferences. Action and mystery books were most sought. Bram explained that these genres are preferred because

“you’re involved with it” and “it holds your attention.” Books by the same author were not mentioned explicitly as a preference, but books in a series with common characters (ostensibly by the same author) were. In follow-up questioning, some participants noted this gave them an easier entry point to subsequent books, and less time devoted to understanding the world building and character development. Quora said “I try to pick books carefully because I really want to stay with it. If I find a series I like, I’m more likely to read them [future books in that series].” Hadlee echoed similar thoughts about carefully selecting books, saying “I like books that show consistency.” Follow-up questioning defined “consistency” as having a writing style where she could be familiar with tropes, characters, and the typical plot arc for that genre.

4.1.b Time and Location Boundaries

The act of reading was situated in particular times and places within participants’ routines. They often read in places that were comfortable, like a couch, and sectioned off from others, like a bedroom. Reading alone was preferred, and playing popular music was often connected to the reading routine. Here, choice in time and place were valued, with participants reading at least 10 minutes at one time and as long as 50 minutes if conditions were right. The lower time boundaries of at least 10 to 15 minutes of reading daily were set by parents, though the feeling of being overtly timed by adults was described negatively.

Positive attitudes toward recreational reading were more often expressed at home; at school, negative comments about adult-directed reading (e.g teacher-directed) were most common. Convenient access to books was also important to get participants reading. They often described having separate books to read at home and at school. Javan stated that he kept separate books at home and at school. “My mom talks about what she’s reading,” and those are books that are passed between mother and son at home. Javan said at school he “only read[s] library books

that look happy and make me feel good,” alluding again to familiar cover illustrations and characters.

All participants reported having a system for managing books they were reading. School books were kept in a backpack or in a desk. Home books were kept near the bed or couch where home reading occurred. Occasionally, participants reported reading in unexpected places because they found a book and had no other preferred activity available at that moment.

Hadlee said “I started one time reading on the way to dance practice because I saw an old favorite book sitting in the center console of my dad’s car.” Similarly, Quora had read “while waiting for my dad to get going because I found a book sitting on a bench by the front door.” This shows that participants preferred reading at a time and place of their choosing. Much of their recreational reading is opportunistic, based on convenience or lack of a more desirable alternative. Reading to please an adult, either in type of book or length of time, was less preferred and could lead to reading resistance. This is explored in the next sub-section.

4.2 Resistance to Reading

As expected in participants with aliterate profiles, discussing reading habits often included emotional resistance and disengagement. Reading was often seen as an externally imposed requirement from teachers and parents, and rarely a preferred activity during recreational time.

4.2.a Emotional Resistance and Disengagement

Participants stated the importance of choosing when, where, and how long they read. If conditions were not met, participants described reading as “sad,” “annoying,” and “boring.” Quora described books as therapeutic after a stressful day at school. “When I get home after a bad day, I go in my room and put on my ‘cool down, calm down’ music.” Only after a cool down

period would she decide whether to read a book while listening to music or continue only listening to music. During Hadlee's interview, she always asked for clarification on whether the interviewer's questions was based on child-directed or adult-directed reading. Hadlee stated that adult-directed reading made her feel "really not happy and adults better not be telling me what to do." She further stated "I really don't love to read. I just find it annoying. I'd rather sit and be silent if [adults] are telling me to keep reading." This emotional resistance to reading was often triggered by a feeling of external expectations beyond the participants' control, which is explained more in the next subsection.

4.2.b Reading As An External Imposition

The participants' school setting offers short books for students in grades kindergarten through second to take home each night. Hadlee and Quora both felt they read more at those grade levels because of the nightly readers. "I stopped reading after second grade because we didn't have [program name] anymore," said Quora. "I just stopped because it didn't feel like anyone was making me." Hadlee experienced a similar drop off after second grade. She stated it was around this time her parents began buying her books for home to fill the gap left when the school's nightly readers stopped. "I have lots of books. I just get tired and bored with them." Hadlee said this was most likely because her parents tried to buy her books they thought she would like, but they did not meet her criteria for preferred books. It also made her feel like her parents were subtly pressuring her to read more. Hadlee then described external factors that turned her attitude negatively. "I don't like when people expect me to read. Like my parents or even teachers. They always make it feel like homework." Although her parents set no parameters on what to read or for how long, this was common for other participants. Bram stated that his mom regularly set minimum time limits for reading and asked about what he read during that

time. He also felt parents framed the reading as homework or an obligation to their teacher.

“Like if I don’t read, my teacher will think I’m not a good reader, is what my mom thinks,” said Bram. Participants often framed the time spent reading as an external imposition to appease adults, not an activity the participants themselves felt motivated to engage in. Competition from more preferred activities is explored next.

4.2.c Reading As A Non-Preferred Activity

In upper elementary school, extra-curricular activities compete for after-school time once occupied by recreational reading. Hadlee noted that she recently joined a girls’ wrestling league, and that this took place several nights each week along with occasional weekends. In line with earlier descriptions of after-school routines, time slots historically devoted to reading in early childhood began to lose out to newer hobbies or social events. If a reading time slot was missed, it was not made up later in the day. Javan noted that he often read when he first got home from school. He estimated this was usually five to ten minutes of reading time—but as soon as a friend knocked on the door, he went to play and did not return to reading, even if his mom asked him to. “She’s not really encouraging me,” Javan said, “and there’s a bunch [of] other stuff I always want to do.” Quora said that she would often read while her parents cooked a meal, but this time was frequently replaced by other more preferred activities such as beginning a text thread with a friend, playing Roblox, playing at a friend’s house, or drawing.

Changes in schedule, such as going with parents to a monthly bingo night or going out to eat earlier than the typical mealtime also cut into time slots normally reserved for reading, and those missed reading times were not made up. Although participants reported doing things online, such as texting, none of the participants in this study reported heavy electronics use at home. Bram reported “If my teacher has me reading a lot at school, like for a report day, then I’d

rather play basketball when I get home.” Quora also reported a trade-off on school-heavy reading days. “When I read in class or library, it’s not very comfortable,” she said. “So when I get home, I’m pretty much done and have other things I need to do.” She also reported finding a more preferred activity easy to do. “Like if I kind of want to read but not really, I’ll just ask my brother what he’s doing. Or sometimes he will just come in my room, and we’ll start something.”

Some participants reported that longer than usual use of electronic books during a single school day, such as research for a science paper, made them less likely to engage in voluntary recreational reading at home that night. Javan said, “In fourth grade you’re always finding facts...[and] that’s a lot of reading. It makes it harder to read my own books when I get home.” None of the participants reported having a home device that was mostly used for reading; indeed, all participants stated a preference for physical paperback or hardback books. Javan reported using his mom’s device for reading, although he did not do it often and hinted that his use of the device had more to do with the novelty. “I just like to click things on [the device].” Follow-up revealed that he mostly played in a literacy-related application on the device but did not engage in sustained reading.

4.3 Affirmation in Reading

All participants except one reported having at least one parent who checked in on their reading throughout the week, though the type and frequency of these check-ins varied. The subthemes of emotion, relationship, and meaning are explored in this section.

4.3.a Reading as an Emotional Regulator

Participants reported that reading was part of their nightly routine if it helped them emotionally regulate. Quora reported being more likely to read if she had an especially stressful day at school. Then, she would go to her room, close the door, and put on her “cool down, calm

down” music and read in bed with the covers over her head. She reported doing this several times a week when she felt the need to emotionally regulate. Bram reported wanting to return to a book if it had a familiar structure. “I like books with lots of details,” he said. “I like having something I can really focus on when I really think about it.”

4.3.b Reading as a Relational Act

Like many students their age, participants in this study were beginning to prioritize relationships with peers over those with adults. All participants reported having a strong friend group with which they enjoyed socializing both in and out of school. Most participants also reported looking to this group for book recommendations and ideas of how to be a reader. “I like books that will teach me something,” Bram said. “My friends and I will talk about what we are learning.” This learning was often in relationship to popular games or shared interests. Bram stated that he and his friend group checked out library books on NBA teams because their fourth-grade basketball season had just begun. In the same way, Hadlee and Quora shared that they would read books on Taylor Swift. They also read the new graphic novel versions of *The Babysitters’ Club* because they “might want to do that when we get older” and “it has lots of examples of how to work together with your friends.” Their friendship groups were not identical but overlapped with many common peers and interests.

A shared sense of identity also allowed Hadlee the chance to take the lead on starting a trend. Hadlee said, “I told [friend] about the *Dork Diaries* series because I got one from the library, and she liked it.” This was affirming for Hadlee because the friend then recommended that book to another friend. “I really liked that we could all read the same book,” she said, “and I think we will keep reading them because we think they are fun.” Javan reported that he often gets information about common interests such as video game characters from his friends, and that

those friends often get their information from books. “I don’t always read those books,” Javan said, “but I like hearing my friends talk about them.”

4.3.c Becoming Absorbed in Meaningful Texts

Participants reported reading several titles typical for their age, such as the *Harry Potter* series. Another common preference was for graphic novels such as the *Diary of A Wimpy Kid* series. Hadlee also said she could go long stretches of time without reading anything at home “until something gets me involved again.” She continued, “The *Speechless* series got me involved again because it reminded me of the *Drama* series that I read the whole thing.” When a friend recommended a book she found interesting, Hadlee would stick with it until she finished it, then return to another stretch of not reading. Javan’s experience diverged from other participants. He reported that his mom would often share book ideas with him, but she did not check to see if he was reading, for how long, or whether he ever finished a book. Javan typically read for ten minutes each day. He stated that he read for ten minutes because this was typically how long it took for a neighborhood friend to discover that he was home.

Because Javan’s mom worked in the afternoons and evenings, he relied on adult neighbors for supervision. It is unlikely that an adult neighbor checking in on Javan’s safety would also enquire about his reading minutes; thus he would stop reading and not return to it after he went outside to play with friends. This led him to rarely finish any book, and he often abandoned books after a few days. Javan’s journal recorded him reading just one book, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007) during the two weeks of journaling, though there were many days he recorded no minutes spent reading at all.

The preceding chapter discussed the findings of the study. Findings were drawn from participants’ interviews and journaling. Codes were gathered into categories that were refined in

to themes. The themes were how participants navigated time, space, and access to reading opportunities, how they resisted reading, and how they became affirmed by reading. The next chapter will discuss the findings in the context of the research questions, the theories that guided the study, and the constructs that were explored. It includes implications for parents, teachers, and researchers, along with suggestions for future research on the phenomenon of childhood aliteracy.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This descriptive qualitative study explored fourth grade students' reading habits, attitudes, and preference through semi-structured interviews and participant journaling of reading habits across two weeks. The study aimed to explore the lived experiences with the phenomenon of aliteracy in home and school contexts.

Two research questions guided the study:

(RQ1) How do elementary children describe awareness of their reader identity to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors at school and at home?

(RQ2) How do elementary children perceive the value of reading at school and at home?

Participants were capable readers as identified by their standardized reading scores but self-reported low interest in both recreational and academic reading. Findings were derived from a descriptive qualitative approach. The major focus was on how participants made meaning of their experiences with aliteracy as revealed in their two interviews and journaling of home and school reading habits. It is worth noting that all participants journaled to a much greater degree than was expected. It may be said that participants did not like to read every day, but they did like to write. Aliteracy was studied as a lived experience and not as a deficit. Each participants' interview transcript and reading log were coded idiographically in several rounds, with each

individual coded alone before moving to the next participant. This process led to the development of codes and categories for each participant. After refinement, these were examined across cases for convergence and divergence. Then, broader themes were formed: (1) navigating time, space, and access; (2) resistance to reading; and (3) affirmation in reading. Each theme contained several subthemes, all of which were detailed in the previous chapter.

The present chapter will provide discussion of the three themes across cases, with descriptive qualitative analysis informed by relevant literature and theoretical lenses of identity theory and situated expectancy-value theory. Implications for theory, practice, and future research are discussed.

Table 4*Overview of Study*

Themes	Research Questions	Participants
Navigating time, space, and access	How do elementary children describe awareness of their reader identity, to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors at school and home?	Bram Javan Hadlee Quora
Resistance to reading	How do elementary children perceive the value of reading at school and home?	
Affirmation in reading		

Overview of Common Experiential Patterns

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that research on a phenomenon, which in this study was childhood aliteracy, works best with homogenous populations. Participants with similar shared experiences enable deeper analysis of how that group experiences the chosen phenomenon. All of the participants in this study were of the same approximate age and grade level, attended the same school, and all but one had the same teacher. In addition, all participants had experiences in which they engaged with both academic reading at school and some degree of recreational reading at home. They had access to books, clear opinions on which types of books interested them, and a circle of peers or adults who encouraged their pro-reading behavior. In this way, they were not wholly anti-reading, despite their self-reported reading attitudes. They did not avoid reading at all costs. Rather, they all held characteristics of Mikulecky's (1978) definition of an aliterate reader as someone who makes choices not to read. These aliterate characteristics looked different in each participant, and some were more pronounced than others. As evidenced by their reading attitudes, they viewed reading through numerous, evolving lenses that were highly dependent on time, location, book choice, competing demands for time or attention, and the presence or absence of other preferred activities. This was evidenced by behaviors such as

not reading for extended periods of time, and needing a good deal of internal and external motivation to read. The three themes will be summarized below, as follows: (1) navigating time, space, and access; (2) resistance to reading; and (3) affirmation in reading. These themes will then be tied to answering the two research questions and to the theoretical foundations of the study.

Theme 1: Navigating Time, Space, and Access

Considerations of when to read, where to read, and how reading materials are selected are critical to children's developing sense of autonomy. Participants in this study were able to articulate clear definitions and boundaries for these preferences. The academic reading environment at school was often constrained by subject matter requirements or teacher-directed tasks. At home, more leeway was typically described, but exhaustion from academic demands often decreased the likelihood that participants would choose to read for prolonged recreation. This connects to RQ1, illustrating how structural and environmental factors mediate a child's agency as a reader. Time and space were experienced as constraints. School time was described as rushed in order to get a set number of tasks completed. Reading was a tool to accomplish these tasks, but reading was not experienced as something that could be enjoyable. As such, each child's relationship to reading was enabled or limited by access, time, and space. A reader's identity is negotiated within the environment and is not fixed. Thus, conditions were set that contributed to feelings of resistance or affirmation.

Theme 2: Resistance to Reading

Children often experience little control over events in their daily lives, being reliant upon and beholden to decisions adults make on their behalf. As children progress toward middle childhood, they may position themselves in ways that are intentionally resistant to adult

expectations. This connects directly with RQ1's focus on attitudes and behaviors. It also connects with RQ2's focus on how readers perceive value in reading. Thus, resistance to reading is an interpretative, sense-making act by the child. Where the resistance is driven by emotion, its function may be to avoid shame, boredom, or failure. It may also help children to regulate their emotions. Although all participants were proficient readers for their age and grade level, it is possible that resistance could be driven by conditions like reading anxiety or a desire to make their own emotional determinations (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Occasionally, this resistance was a response to school testing or classroom demands, along with feelings that adults were surveilling their reading habits. Participants experienced different power structures around reading at school versus at home. Academic reading was frequently described as compliance-based, but recreational reading was negotiable. In some ways, reading lost its value when friends, sports, or games could fill similar psychological needs. Participants did not interpret them as distractions from reading, but rather as equivalent ways of feeling competent, engaged, and socially connected. Thus, resistance to reading is a form of communication. This challenges the deficit view of reluctant readers and frames them instead as readers in need of affirming conditions.

Theme 3: Affirmation in Reading

For these participants, reading did not hold abstract importance in their lives. Instead, reading was something that required them to feel usefulness, something that they could relate to or emotionally resonate with. If these conditions were met, reading had value. This directly informed RQ2 on the value of reading at school and at home. Most participants interpreted reading as an escape from negative demands or external pressures. It helped them with emotional processing. This value was not inherent in the act of reading itself, but was frequently co-constructed with teachers, parents, and friends or siblings. Value was high when reading aligned

with participants' emotional needs, identity, or relationships. For some, value reached its peak when they became engrossed in a book. Then, they suspended all resistance and lived in the flow of the narrative—but once the book was complete, participants waited weeks or months to commit to a book in that way again.

This discussion showed that participants held many ideas about the role of reading in their lives and a variety of influences that would cause them to read or to avoid reading. The next sections will provide explication of both research questions.

Responding to Research Question 1

The first research question of this study was “How do elementary children describe awareness of their reader identity, to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors at school and at home?” This question explored participants' sense-making with their identities. Using descriptive qualitative study revealed feelings of resistance to reading, inconsistent access to text, and a desire for personal connection when reading. This section will link each of the themes to answering the first research question on reader identity.

Theme 1: Navigating Time, Space, and Access

Participants described how their opportunities to read were impacted by location, time, and the text available. They held clear preferences for genres and topics of their self-selected texts. They had designated locations to read at home, usually based on comfort such as a bed or couch and sometimes based on privacy, such as reading in their room or under the covers. Space preferences were also tied to relationships, such as wanting to be with family members while reading. This aligns with other research on how readers are affected by various influences when deciding to engage in reading, such as their attitude toward reading, their current book choice, and their previous reading habits (Scoggin & Schneewind, 2021). Not one participant mentioned

consideration of their own reading ability as a factor in their preferences of what, when, or how to read. This indicates that participants likely had a positive self-concept of themselves as readers, and that their attitudes or beliefs about reading at any given moment were highly dependent on the context of the reading experience (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Theme 2: Resistance to Reading

Participants easily mentioned a wide range of emotions with reading. These emotions were often distinct at school or at home. School-based reading cause feelings of begrudgingly complying with teachers or peers. This was true even when participants were encouraged by peers based on the perception that the participant was a strong, capable reader. Some interactions caused sadness in a participant who did not wish to read publicly, but who also did not want to argue with peers. This aligns with prior research on how children perform their roles in public, taking cues from social pressures (McCaslin, 2009). This made reading an obligation rather than a voluntary activity, a feeling that often carried over to home. Participants did not have reading assignments in terms of worksheets or reports, but they did engage in reading for a set time period as homework. These external expectations to read reinforced the idea that reading was an obligation, done to avoid appearing socially non-compliant. When given choice, all participants chose to read for the shortest time allowed by their parents, or to avoid reading altogether until questioned. This suggests voluntary reading did not occupy central place in participants' list of leisure activities. Ryan and Deci (2000) found that motivation fluctuates based on one's feelings of autonomy and competence toward a task. Here, most participants positioned themselves as academic readers who read to appear studious or to help peers with a project. This adds to our understanding of participants' identities being shaped by emotional and motivational factors.

Theme 3: Affirmation in Reading

Participants consistently described reading as one choice among many, and not always their first choice. This shows the interplay in the child's mind between reading ability and limits to voluntary engagement. Participants were more likely to read when they recalled a teacher's expectation or when they were questioned by a parent. Beyond strict compliance, participants often framed these reminders in a positive, affirming light. Many wanted to read near the family, in a comfortable spot such as their bedroom or by a window. These settings often helped participants become absorbed by an interesting story. Guthrie et al. (2004) found that when engagement increases, so does the likelihood a child will stick with a reading task. Occasionally, this reading became immersive and enjoyable rather than task oriented. This joy was shared with peers by recommending books or reading the same book and talking about what they enjoyed. An enjoyable series was also preferred, again pointing to social affirmation as a motivating factor in voluntary reading choices. Participants' words showed that even resistance to reading can be turned into engagement when the child feels their experience is meaningful. Texts that resonate with the child's interests or emotional needs can help solidify positive reader identity. This echoes Fischer's (2020) findings that being completely engrossed in literature aids in positive attitude development and increased agency.

Together, these group themes suggest that fourth graders are still forming identities; they are dynamic, even contradictory, at times. Reader identity in these participants was not fixed but was still developing as they navigated their preferences, experiences, and environments.

Responding to Research Question 2

The second research question of this study was "How do elementary children perceive the value of reading at school and at home?" The themes in this study revealed that context,

emotions, and opportunities for meaningful engagement all influenced the ways a child valued reading. This section will describe how the three themes answered this question on reading's value.

Theme 1: Navigating Time, Space, and Access

To most participants, reading existed as one option among many. School-based reading was required in order to behave like a student, but home-based reading was much more likely to be pushed aside by competing demands for sports, family activities, or simply an activity that was a more-preferred type of recreation. Other research has shown capable readers do not always engage in reading outside the school day (Altchuler & Chai, 2019) and that reading is often placed alongside other options as one of many entertainment options for today's youth (Ronconi, et al., 2025). Reading was not an activity that held primacy above other activities, as evidenced by the fact that an interrupted reading period was rarely made up later by the participants in the current study. This suggest reading was less likely to be seen as valuable when the child was not in a school-based context. This aligns with past research showing feeling the pressure of external demands, such as accomplishing a job-based or school-based goal, leads to heightened motivation than if the pressure is simply to satisfy a personal goal (Suarez-Fernandez & Boto-Garcia, 2022).

Theme 2: Resistance to Reading

Similarly, participants resisted voluntary reading because it held little personal meaning to them. Other activities were valued more, perhaps because things like wrestling, basketball, and other games could not be done at school while reading could. Instructions from parents to read a certain number of minutes were met with compliance. No participant reported arguing with a parent about wanting to read, or lying to a parent about having completed their reading

minutes. Existing research into reading value suggests that children have limited capacity to prioritize demands on their attention (Karki, 2024). Competing demands may also have been more reinforcing for participants, especially if the demand was seen as more stimulating or enticing as is often the case with digital media (Bozzolla, et al., 2022), or if the competing demand required less cognitive load than reading would (Kim et al., 2022).

Theme 3: Affirmation in Reading

Resistance was contrasted with affirmation if participants saw value. This was most likely when the text was self-selected, aligned with the child's interests, met an emotional need, or was part of a social experience. Prior research has demonstrated the importance of helping children connect educational content to their own lives (Toliver, 2020) and that adults often help to guide children in selecting books that will match their interest in goals, thus increases the likelihood the child will engage in pro-reading behaviors (Alshamarri, 2024; Alqhatani, 2024). This showed that fourth graders attach meaning to experiences that resonate with their lives, and are quick to seek out new activities when an experience does not resonate. Similar findings showed that children benefit from adults helping make those connections, so that the children do not dismiss new experiences too quickly without fully understanding their potential relevance (Wood & Jocius, 2013).

Each participants' perceived value in reading was influenced by how they experienced reading and the context they placed it in. Reading had value when it was required for school, even if participants masked negative attitudes. Feelings of personal value toward reading increased when the act of reading met the child's social, emotional, and engagement needs.

Cross-case Interpretative Summary

Taken together, results from both research questions emphasize the need for school and home processes that help children feel connected to reading. Javan, Bram, Quora, and Hadlee experienced similar academic and recreational reading structures in their lives being of the same age and same school, but they exhibited both convergent and divergent ways of making meaning as aliterate readers. Where their lived experiences converged, it is important to interpret them without erasing differences that made them unique individuals. Participants all had a purpose for reading, but these purposes often required a combination of self-determination and external affirmation to sustain. Socialization with friends and holding common interests were often driving motivators to engage in voluntary reading at school and at home.

Similarly, friends and, to a lesser extent, parents were motivating forces to sustain voluntary reading. When reading was not sustained, either by abandoning a book or waiting long periods of time to read again, it was typically due to a lack of internal motivation. Where the narrative was divergent, it indicated that the participants' reader identities were not fixed, and were not wholly positive or wholly negative. Instead, it is fluid and highly situational. Identity in this study can be seen as the intersection of preferences, environments, and textual engagement. The findings are interconnected, suggesting that when children have opportunities to read that are authentic, engaging, self-directed, and match their preferences, it will positively support the child's relationship toward voluntary reading.

Aliterate, Reluctant, and Illiterate Readers

The phenomenon of aliteracy provided a useful conceptual lens for this study. An aliterate reader possesses proficient reading skills, ones that are required to be successful in school and to read for pleasure if they so choose (Mikulecky, 1978). Contrast this with an

illiterate reader who is far below proficiency and possesses no or very rudimentary skills. The distinction between aliteracy and illiteracy can seem clear, but the distinction between aliteracy and a reader who is reluctant can be less obvious (Beers, 1996). Reluctant reading is often described as temporary resistance or low motivation toward reading. Reluctant readers may or may not be proficient; aliterate readers are. Reluctant readers often make their resistance obvious, leading to increased adult support. Aliterate readers may not necessarily show external signs of disengagement that would cause adults to intervene. Their standardized reading scores were proficient. Although their reading attitude surveys showed hallmarks of aliterate attitudes, not many schools screen for attitudes toward reading as a part of their regular assessment battery (Robinson, 2020). In short, the reluctant reader may resist due to situational or motivation factors; the aliterate reader demonstrates a sustained lack of voluntary engagement with reading.

Returning to the idea of negative attitudes toward reading, my findings showed that every participant held clear opinions on what, when, and how they would read. They also held convictions about things that would stop them from reading, sometimes it was an internal choice and sometimes it was caused by outside pressures. This echoes Mikulecky's (1978) own work with aliterate adults who still read when the situation required it, such as to follow directions at work. All participants in the present study engaged in some form of reading outside of the school day. Their individual amounts of time spent reading varied, but no participant reported reading zero minutes outside school. Most participants read because an authority figure like a teacher told them to, and they would read at home because they knew the teacher would ask about their reading the next school day. Participants also read if they had a parent checking in to be sure they were doing it. Some, like Javan, read more sparingly than others and reported fewer instances of parents or teachers asking them to read. Rather than confirming the strictest

definition of aliteracy, each child's sense-making revealed layers of complexity in their reading identity and value perceptions.

Theoretical Contributions

This descriptive qualitative study using phenomenological methods study extends identity theory and situated-expectancy value theory by foregrounding participant voices and their affective experiences. It demonstrates the utility of phenomenological methods in literacy research, particularly with children where double hermeneutic interpretation can enrich the analysis.

Interpretations Through the Lens of Identity Theory

Identity theory holds that one's identity is multifaceted, performative, and situated in the context of a given moment. Erikson (1968) viewed identity as a developmental achievement, something that is worked at throughout one's whole life. Of relevance to this study is how identities are positioned at school and at home during reading. School-based reading is public and often evaluated by others. It is conducted with norm-referenced passages aligned to a certain grade level or skill. The use of time, space, and access allowed participants to gatekeep their reader identities. Time spent reading academic texts at school often decreased the odds of voluntary reading at home. Similarly, boundary setting allowed participants to protect themselves against any imposed identities by teachers or parents and to a lesser extent, their peers. Identity is sustained when it is affirmed by the self or others. When a reader's identity is affirmed by others as meaningful, it provides continuity between home and school. It is also reinforced by peers when reading becomes a conduit for social expression and belonging. It can also be reinforced by positive feelings from an engaging text, where the reader feels alignment between text and self.

Reading is valued when it supports the coherence of one's identity. Maintaining agency over one's reading life is essential both for enjoyment of text and for comprehending it (Frankel, Ward, & Fields, 2019). Tensions between school and home reading arose when different facets of one's identity competed. This was often expressed through differing criteria of what good readers do. Identity theory supports expanding legitimate reader identities in classrooms and emphasizing personal recognition and choice in reading tasks when feasible. Measuring reading success with one-dimensional measurements is less desirable if the goal is to encourage positive identity formation.

When children are navigating their preferred time of day, genre of text, or location to read, they are solidifying their concept of who they are as a reader. These preferences should not be dismissed as trivial whims but as identity-defining attributes. Children in middle childhood seek a sense of burgeoning autonomy, control, and competence at making their own choices. Distress responses may be triggered when children try to align their growing sense of self-control with experiences around them driven by peers or adults. These could take the form of disruptions like noise, lack of time, or imposed scheduling conflicts, which may be invisible or seem unimportant to adults. If enough stress triggers occur when the child is reading, a positive reader identity will never be enacted.

In theoretical terms, macro-level constraints interfere with micro-level identity formation processes (Gee, 2000). The reader's identity becomes situationally suppressed. On a similar level, children whose behavior seems reading resistant may be putting up a protective response. Institutional demands of school assessment or parental expectations may disrupt the child's feeling of control over their identity. In simple terms, the child is not struggling with reading; they are struggling with an identity label they feel is being imposed—compliant student versus

autonomous reader. Other factors may cause the same effect. A text, genre, or format could be a mismatch with the child's internal identity that again triggers a stress response. This is particularly true for children who use reading as a tool for emotional regulation. To them, reading is a means of emotional regulation and personal coherence. Verifying their reader identity through preferential and positive reading activities will lead to a more positive affect and reduced stress. It allows them to feel that their sense of self is consistent across contexts.

Similarly, some participants articulated a desire to become fully engrossed in a book. This deep absorption in the act of reading shows high congruence between the child's identity and the reading experience. The feeling of "losing oneself" in a book demonstrates an absence of any identity conflicts—reading here is intrinsically sustaining because identity verification is uninterrupted.

This discussion has shown an iterative movement between resistance and restraint, and affirmation and agency. Children's identities shift on situational context, access to preferred structures, and feelings of emotional safety. Thus, reading engagement can be seen as an identity process, not just a skill or motivation concern. The value of iterative phenomenological analysis is that it can surface identity dynamics not visible through behavioral measures. This need to navigate context, resistance, and affirmation is also critical for middle childhood when relational values (reading common texts, feeling understood, and belonging to a peer group) are increasingly affirmed by social feedback.

Gee (2000) conceives identity as enacted in social practice. Aliteracy can be viewed as a misalignment between how children want themselves to be seen and how reading positions them. This is similar to how Hall (2010) described the "good" reader as one who is compliant; the "good" reader is motivated by scholastic achievement and a desire to please adults. Children who

cannot or will not subscribe to this purpose may actively reject participation in the narrow confines of school-based literacy. Gee (2001) explains that literacy practices cannot be separated from identity and social positioning. Identity theory illuminates how participants in this study made sense of their identity construction, verification, and regulation.

Navigating Time, Space, and Access: Identity Theory

Identity theory (Stryker, 1968, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000) explains that a person's identity is formed by their social roles and interactions with others in various contexts. Individuals form ideas about themselves by participating in social situations and receiving feedback on how those interactions unfold. In the context of this study, participants' experiences at navigating time, space, and access to reading opportunities are the processes through which they are forming their emerging reader identities. All participants reported reading at school in their classroom. The physical classroom space in an elementary school is ordered and controlled by the teacher. Reading activities are tied to a performance outcome—to complete an assignment, to answer a question, to locate information, to complete a group project. Very few classroom interactions were done for recreational purposes or under independent, self-directed tasks. Bram recorded five instances of reading as an assignment in the classroom with a school-owned text and only one instance of reading a self-selected text for enjoyment in the library during his two week journaling window. This could give students the impression that reading is goal-oriented and tied to achieving something. The student might then internalize the mistaken assumption that “real” reading is only done to appease someone else or achieve a goal.

Similarly, the texts used in the classroom are frequently teacher selected. Curriculum and standards often dictate what types of texts are necessary in order for students to learn the intended content. Quora explained that her teacher required information research on mountains,

which Quora spent considerable class time during one week doing, which she described as “reading a decent amount.” Because of this, Quora felt her reading obligations were met and subsequently did not do any reading at home for those days (Interview 2, December 18). There were few times participants mentioned self-selecting texts in the classroom or reading for enjoyment during school. Indeed, these times were often tied to special events such as Quora choosing from the book fair (Interview 2, December 18) and Hadlee’s parent purchasing new books for her home collection (Interview 1, December 5). This limiting of preferred texts can also reinforce the idea that reading is only done to meet a goal or achievement set by the teacher. This removes the locus of control from the student and increases the likelihood that the student will see reading as a mismatch between their personal interests and what counts as reading.

In order for students to identify as readers, they need a school-based environment that allows them to engage with texts they find meaningful and relevant to their lived experiences. Time made flexible to read, particularly with peers, is important. So is a supportive space where peers and the teacher honor each student’s choice in what and how to read, in addition to providing access to a variety of authentic and engaging texts.

Resistance to Reading: Identity Theory

In identity theory, individuals hold various roles inside. Their salience is determined by how applicable a certain role is to a given context. Identities are reinforced when a child receives positive feedback from the environment on how well they performed an expected role. When expectations and performance are mismatched, a child may be less likely to engage that role in the future. Thus, participants in this study experienced resistance to reading when their reader role conflicted with their self-perceptions. These often took the form of frustration, boredom, or

sadness toward having to read. This is likely due to repeated, negative experiences around reading over time.

A child can interpret their negative emotions as signals that being a reader is misaligned with their sense of self. Similar to participants' experiences in navigating time, space, and access, these negative emotions appeared when participants read something uninteresting, or when they felt reading was becoming evaluate or performance oriented. Participants then disengaged from reading. Identity theory could also explain that this disengagement can come from the feeling that being a reader is an external imposition. An adult sees the child as a capable reader, but the reader does not hold or wish to hold that view for themselves. Quora described herself as someone not in love with reading (Interview 2, December 18). She described external expectations to read as "annoying" and "I'm not going to do this." These emotional responses may be because the child does not want to perform tasks they associate with reading, or it can be part of a larger move toward seeking more independence for themselves as they go through middle childhood and approach the teenage years.

Javan recorded 17 times in his two week journal as his "readingless" days. His amount of reading ranged from three to 12 minutes on days when he did read. Although other participants recorded reading at home on most days, they used specific language to push back against pro-reading expectations. Bram recorded three times that reading made him feel bored. He also described meeting adult expectations as being "forced to read," which caused the additional emotion of "sadness" (Interview 2, December 11).

Occasionally, participants reported becoming totally absorbed in a reading experience. Identity theory explains that this occurs when the participant's view of themselves is reinforced. They enjoy the reading experience because they are experiencing reading as an act that is

entertaining and enjoyable, or they see the text they are reading as authentic to their lived experience. Perhaps as a focus aid, Hadlee would pair her longer reading times with music. Her journal showed “listened to music” for half of her recorded days. Even brief instances of immersion suggest that the child’s reader identity is not fixed, but situational. The pro-reading parts of their identity increase in salience when the reading act is personally interesting and engaging, which is unique to each individual.

Affirmations in Reading: Identity Theory

Identity theory tells us that individuals enact a role and receive confirmation through social acclamation or internal competence. Each time this occurs, that identity becomes more salient and more integrated into the individual’s self concept. For this study, having their reader role validated allowed participants to position themselves more positively toward reading. This helps explain how even participants who resisted reading in some contexts can still find times when reading is useful and relevant.

Reading could be personally validating when participants used it as an emotional regulator, to relax or otherwise manage their emotional state. Here, reading moves from an academic context to an internal, emotional context. It also helps reading become embedded in the participants’ everyday practices. The key is for the individual to have repeated positive experiences with reading over time, in order for it to become fully integrated into their identity. Then, reading is not just something they do, but it is a contributing factor to their state of well-being. Javan had the lowest frequency of reading, read for the fewest minutes per day and for the least number of days out of all participants. Still, his unprompted description of reading was that “reading makes me happy” (Interview 1, December 1). Quora echoes this feeling, saying reading made her calm and stable (Interview 2, December 18). Hadlee frequently resisted reading, but

when she did, she used it as an emotional regulator. “If it’s possible, read up in your room to calm down before you go to bed” (Hadlee, Interview 1, December 5).

There are a number of ways to increase one’s positive beliefs toward reading. Identity theory could indicate that reading together with parents, peers, and siblings can all reinforce positive relationships and strengthen the social context of reading as an enjoyable pastime. If participants see others reading for fun, they will begin to value it that way, too. Bram held books at home that he did not ever take to school. He explained that he liked having books in a private space that he could talk about with parents, who read to him each night at bedtime (Interview 1, December 2). Hadlee’s dad showed both a responsibility to monitor her reading and a commitment to genuinely ask about what she was reading and how she liked her books (Interview 2, December 19). Similar to how reading can be emotionally regulating, using reading as a relational act can strengthen the social context and sense of well-being. Parents, teachers, and peers strengthen a child’s relationship to reading because that part of their role gets supported. It also allows opportunities for the child to support others’ roles in the same way. This links the social community together and elevates reading as a valuable social activity.

Social comfortability also comes when one is absorbed in the text. Identity theory states that this type of engagement shifts reading from an external task to one that aligns with a child’s natural curiosity and interests. This also reinforces a child’s role, rewarding them with positive feelings or competence or even intellectual engagement. This is key for children who otherwise express resistance to reading. Bram had several recommendations for friends who were stuck on which book to read next. He suggested reading the summary or the first chapter, asking about the friend’s interests, or searching on the computer to find a book (Bram, Interview 1, December 2). Hadlee also suggested reading several pages to “get a feel” for the author’s work. She stated that

although she did not like to read, she sometimes felt sad when reading was interrupted if she was in a particularly good spot in her book (Hadlee, Interview 2, December 19).

Deep engagement challenges earlier experiences that reading was boring or irrelevant. Seeing reading as emotional regulating, relationship strengthening, and deeply engaging suggests that a reader can feel validated. This does not mean aliterate characteristics are eliminated. Yet even occasional bursts of prolonged reading can lay the groundwork for feelings of emotional, social, and personal attachment to a text. Then, the role of a reader will become more salient within the child's sense of self. In the next section, Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2024) will be used to examine how participants made decisions about reading based on their perceived effort, cost, usefulness, and predicted outcomes.

Interpretations Through the Lens of Situated Expectancy-Value Theory

Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2024) holds that human beings seek situations which are meaningful and valuable to them and are less likely to do things that are less meaningful or valuable. Because these terms are subjective and vary between individuals, four task values are often ascribed: intrinsic value, attainment value, utility value, and cost. As with identity theory, these constructs are situated in the context of a given task and can change frequently. As it relates to this study, children's beliefs about their competence shape their reader identity. They consider past experiences, internal and external feedback, and peer-to-self comparisons. The ways in which children describe their preferences, attitudes, and behaviors reflect both how competent they expect to be at a given reading task and whether they expect to be successful at achieving the required task. As children navigate the time, space, and access required to read, they weigh the intrinsic value reading has to them against the opportunity cost

that time could be spent on other activities. In some ways, time, space, and access become signals of value.

If reading time is rushed, it can signal increased cost in decreased enjoyment. When reading time is protected, its intrinsic value increases. Expectations based on the physical and social spaces also matter—school reading is evaluated as required labor; cost is lessened since other activities are not an option, but intrinsic value may also be impacted. Home reading may see intrinsic value heightened by choice in where to read or for how long, but utility or cost may be negatively impacted by social pressures. Resistance can be seen as a logical response to the perceived cost outweighing the value. Reluctant readers, then, may be making a protective choice to distance themselves from unwanted costs—anxiety, boredom, judgment, or loss of time.

Situated Expectancy-Value Theory can also help explain how reading can become valuable to children. First, it assumes that an individual's choices are shaped by their expectation for success, or how well they will perform on a task, also influence by past experiences. It also assumes that individual's subjectively attach value to each task they undertake, which considers the task's importance, usefulness, enjoyment, and cost. Second, an individual's beliefs are situated in the context. A context is framed by its intrinsic value, attainment value, utility value, and cost. Intrinsic value can be measured in enjoyment and interest; attainment value can be seen as the proper alignment with self-concept; utility value can be perceived usefulness of reading, and cost is what must be traded to deeply engage in reading. In short, children must believe that their reading experiences will be enjoyable, emotionally affirming, and relationally meaningful. In human nature, value is tied to context and is unique to each person. Thus, children do not hold a single "value for reading" in mind—value fluctuates with context, task, or audience. School-based reading may be seen as a vehicle for attainment and utility in the form of better test scores

or higher grades. Home-based reading may offer more intrinsic value, with social opportunity cost offset by greater feeling of autonomy. Home-based reading may offer a reprieve from school-based reading that tends to be evaluative, emphasizes skill or speed, and is externally controlled by a teacher. Heightened intrinsic value was also seen when participants described becoming fully absorbed in a book. Thus, even readers who are skilled at the basics such as decoding may develop aliterate habits under instructional practices that emphasize compliance.

Children frequently acknowledge reading is important but still avoid it. This occurs when utility value alone is insufficient to motivate reading engagement. Intrinsic value and attainment value are weak and perceived costs are high. Cost is particularly important to elementary children. In popular parlance, it is the fear of missing out. Rigid practices like over-testing or book leveling can contribute to this feeling, while choice and relevance can offset negative costs by increasing intrinsic value and utility. In this way, aliteracy could be viewed as a child's attempt to achieve motivational equilibrium—when the child expects a low chance of success or fulfillment, and if perceived costs are steep, the choice to disengage from reading may be seen as a logical one. Cost may also come in the form of emotions (anxiety/shame, boredom/monotony), cognition (effort outweighs the payoff), and opportunity (missing preferred activities). This reframes the conversation around aliteracy as a decision, not a deficit; a problem of misaligned context or cost-avoidance rather than an individual failure.

Through examination of findings and an alignment with both theoretical frameworks, aliteracy functioned as a coherent motivational stance. Motivation is not binary (present/absent) but evaluative and context dependent. Participants often viewed themselves as capable readers who chose not to read. From a phenomenological perspective, participants' narratives showed appraisals of voluntary reading as not worth the perceived cost-benefit judgment. Similarly,

participants did not suffer from low confidence in their reading abilities. Their beliefs were context specific, shaped by prior experience and social feedback. They preferred times, places, and texts that were self-selected. When intrinsic value was low (e.g. school-based reading times), participants described reading as boring or repetitive. Intrinsic value—enjoyment and interest—is a strong predictor of sustained reading.

Situated Expectancy Value Theory (SEVT; Eccles & Wigfield, 2024) conceives of utility value as often insufficient to sustain engagement if other values are weak and costs are high. Participants in this study echoed this in their meaning-making statements, stating that reading was important but pushing back against any external pressures. Competing demands for time and attention were the most salient factor affecting the participants' aliterate tendencies. SEVT explains how cost can negatively affect task value. Participants described reading as emotionally taxing and cognitively effortful. Aliteracy then was a function of cost avoidance. Descriptive qualitative study sees considerations of effort and affect as central to participants' sense-making work. It was a central goal of this study to center children's ways of making meaning about their literacy choices, rather than imposing adult assumptions about their motivations, choices, and perceptions.

Navigating Time, Space, and Access: Situated Expectancy-Value Theory

Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) states that people are more likely to do something if they have experienced prior success with it, see it as enjoyable or valuable, or attach some other personally motivating factor to it (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). These motivating factors do not exist in isolation. Rather, they are mediated by social and situational context. Viewing the theme of time, space, and access through an SEVT lens shows how a students' reading environment influences their motivation and engagement with reading.

One important component of SEVT is the task value. This is directly tied to interest. A child will experience an increase in reading engagement when texts match their personal interests. This is because the child begins to perceive the act of reading differently—as something enjoyable and worth their time and effort. The opposite is also true—when texts are less enjoyable, engagement with reading decreases.

Task engagement is also mediated by the conditions under which reading occurs. Participants in this study most often engaged with reading in the classroom. The academic routines in a classroom setting are structured and monitored. It can also make reading feel like a punishment (Bram, Interview 2, December 11). A well-structured classroom can help children building reading skills, which is the dominant aim of the classroom setting. But it is a less-than-ideal context to foster independent reading engagement. For students who already feel distracted by reading, the hustle and bustle of a classroom setting can reinforce that reading is difficult to sustain long enough to enjoy it (Hadlee, Interview 1, December 5).

Time, space, and access point to the situational nature of reading motivation as connected to expectancy-value theory. Participants' engagement was closely tied to the context in which they were reading and the value they ascribed to it.

Resistance to Reading: Situated Expectancy-Value Theory

SEVT provides a way to examine the theme of reading resistance by focusing on participants' beliefs and competence and their perceived value of the reading task. Participants' words describing boredom and frustration may mask other beliefs such as anticipated difficulty with the reading, or fears of task failure. Lowering expectations by lowering the amount of reading could be one way a child protects themselves from the potential for a negative experience. This could also reflect how the child views the cost of reading. Because reading is

cognitively complex, the child may articulate frustration at having to expend effort. They may also desire to expend effort on another more preferred activity. Time spent reading is another cost where the child cannot spend that time on a more preferred activity. Hadlee listed reading as just one option from a range of options she might choose at home, which also included drawing, wrestling, or playing with her brother (Interview 2, December 19). Quora's journal showed that she only read physical books on nights she did not have dance practice. On dance nights, she would read social media while in the car going to and from practice but would not read any longer. Any child can express similar negative, reading-resistant behavior toward a reading task that is effortful or emotionally taxing.

Task value also influences a child's feeling of engagement. Under identity theory, the child weighs how they will enjoy the task, if it will be important to them, and if it will help them achieve a future goal. These things are less likely if reading is performed due to teacher or parent request. This also reduces the child's feelings of autonomy, which in turn decreases the likelihood of the child ascribing value to reading in the future. Adults may interpret this as resistance, yet the child is thinking that the reading expectation is not personally meaningful or relevant beyond doing well on a school project or satisfying nightly reading requirements. Bram preferred reading digital books because he perceived a greater literal value—he did not need to purchase books from a digital library, and he could save his purchased books for home reading, the environment he preferred for prolonged reading tasks (Interview 1, December 2).

Affirmations in Reading: Situated Expectancy-Value Theory

Similar to how identity theory explains brief periods of reading absorption, situated expectancy-value theory can give insight into why children with mostly reading resistant behaviors can occasionally become engaged for prolonged periods in certain books. This is

explained by the interest value. Interest sustains engagement, even in a harder academic task. If a text matches the child's interest, the child's perceived value toward reading that text goes up, and so does their engagement. Hadlee stated that she wanted to become more consistent in her nightly reading, like she had in early elementary; but her current reading habits were opportunistic—picking books left in the car or by the door rather than sticking with the same book (Interview 2, December 19). Increases in interest value significantly enhance a child's likelihood of engaging with reading for prolonged periods. Thus, reading engagement is not only dependent on reading ability but also hinges on the level of motivation found in certain contexts.

Implications for Practice

My conversations with each participant, along with insights gained from their reading journal, proved invaluable in obtaining a sense of their unique reader identities as they navigated reading at school and at home. Several implications drawn from this data, along with my own analysis, could serve educators and other adults interested in the reading lives of children with aliterate characteristics. For K-12 professionals, be aware that children may lead very different reading lives at school and at home. Fourth graders are just beginning to navigate a life outside the home, responding more to peer influence than they did previously. Educators should provide opportunities for social connection in the classroom that will foster sense of belonging, recognition of shared interests, and opportunities for children to experience reading in low- or no-stakes ways. When possible, also consider the pacing of the curriculum to allow children opportunities to engage more deeply with literature and to discuss their connections with peers. This would also increase their emotional safety that factors into their healthy reading identities. Extended reading of texts in English Language Arts and other content areas is essential for

students to gain facility with the multiple meanings of words as they progress through middle and high school (Hiebert, 2022).

Teachers can provide direct support to a child's reader identity by encouraging students to discuss enjoyable books, to share reading with peers, to encourage reflection not only on a text but on the child's emotional response to it, and to let the child set personal reading goals that are both fun and academic. Some reading assignments can be tied to other subject areas, such as science, social studies, music, art, and health. Upper elementary students enjoy being able to choose their own material and being given time to read independently during the school day. They also gravitate toward non-traditional formats such as graphic novels, digital texts, and can prefer informational texts over fiction. Similarly, teachers can help students find texts related to their hobbies or interests and position reading as a tool to help them accomplish real-world goals or solve problems meaningful to the child's life.

Attend to the affective side of reading, and provide future teachers with an understanding of how children develop an interest in reading, attach a sense of value to reading for pleasure, develop positive mindsets around reading success or difficulty, and interact with texts (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Burns, Duke, & Cartwright, 2023). Teachers and parents can model reading behavior by reading books or digital texts, and narrating what they are doing. They can discuss what they are reading with children and how they choose books that match their own interests and purposes. Parents can also share ways they use reading and writing in the workplace. In turn, parents should ask the child about what they have read lately, encourage them to share favorite books or characters, and make reading at home a comfortable part of the child's nightly routine rather than an expectation based on compliance with adult expectations.

For families, place value on relational reading practices. Read together, share what you are reading, and elicit children's ideas about what they like and do not like to read. Seek opportunities to make reading a social act such as joining a summer reading activity at the local library. Allow children to select reading material for the family, even if you do not see it as "real" reading. This validates the child's interests and may make them more likely to accept your ideas for future books. For higher education faculty and teacher educators, help teacher candidates recognize the affective components of the reading experience, how they can select high quality children's literature that will lead to enjoyment, and how to structure their teaching in engaging ways (e.g. dialogic reading).

For administrators and policymakers, be aware that standardized measurement often leads to a narrow view of the purpose and value of reading, and this is passed on to teachers and to students and families. Educational leaders have wide influence on how schools structure their literacy instruction and student access to reading resources. Because schools do not routinely screen for reading attitudes, and aliterate readers are proficient on standardized tests, children with aliterate behaviors can be difficult to locate. Rather than attempting to pinpoint individual students with aliterate characteristics, school leaders can invest more broadly in things that will draw children into reading—providing adequate funding for building-based libraries and for teachers to update their own classroom collections, providing a highly qualified librarian in each building, curating contemporary, diverse texts, and forming partnerships with public libraries for programming that allows children to socialize in reading-centric ways such as specialized book clubs (anime, Minecraft, Pokemon, etc.) and community outreach ideas, such as a shared library card for school and town libraries.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Reflexivity

This study used purposeful sampling to locate fourth-grade students who performed at or above benchmark on their state's required reading screener, but who reported themselves as being reluctant or apathetic to engage in reading for pleasure. Participants were delimited to students in the researchers' own school for ease of access and to facilitate the administration of reading attitude survey, interviews, and collection of reading journals. Participants were not recruited if they performed below proficient benchmarks on the state reading assessment, or if they self-reported high positive attitudes toward reading.

For additional protection, participants were not rostered to the researcher's homeroom; neither did they receive any grades from the researcher. Participants chose their own pseudonym used in data analysis and reporting. A sample of five students meeting these criteria was desirable but one parent declined consent, leading to the inclusion of four participants. Another delimitation is that the data collection occurred across a two-week period in a single semester in order to track changes in reading attitude, motivation, or behavior. The researcher obtained IRB approval including parent/guardian permission and child assent for data collection. The school district also conducted its own approval process and granted permission for the study to be conducted during school hours and on school grounds.

As with all qualitative analyses, the findings and interpretations are only valid as they regard the participants in this study. They should not be generalized to other children or schools. Although the sample size of four participants was manageable for this dissertation and within bounds of similar works, a larger sample size may capture more or different themes that help explain the phenomenon. The hermeneutics of this qualitative study required me to interpret the participants' sense-making of their lived experiences. I was a teacher in the participants' school,

and this may have influenced how participants responded to questions about their reading behavior. Because all participants were children, interview questions were framed to capture each child's current reality, with the reading journal covering a two-week period. A study with a longer time range may have captured different categories and subthemes which would have informed different overall themes.

Directions for Future Research

Future research may consider participants' lived experiences with reading over a longer timeframe. Descriptive qualitative study may be useful with a more diverse student body or school site, a higher number of participants, or ones at different ages or grade levels. The current study could be replicated or expanded by a comparison of how teachers or parents make sense of children's aliterate characteristics at school and home.

Although participants rarely reported reading with digital devices or electronic media, future studies could incorporate those modalities and expand the definition of "reading" to include social media, video gaming, online chats and other types of non-traditional reading. More broadly, researchers might examine how children select their books, how they report enjoyment of those books, and what influences them to finish or abandon a book.

Also, many interview excerpts referenced participants' love of activity—basketball, wrestling, dance, or playing outside with friends. Reading a book is decidedly less active. The role of the oft-sedentary nature of reading is worth exploring in future research as it relates to aliterate tendencies in capable child readers.

Identity theory and situated expectancy value theory were well-matched in explicating the findings of this study, but they are by no means the only relevant theoretical frameworks. In future research, I would like to examine the phenomenon of aliteracy through different lenses.

Research work in aliteracy must continue to distinguish between reading ability and reading motivation. The theory of critical literacy (Wood & Jocius, 2013) would extend my current framework by emphasizing the interplay of power, ideology, and what counts as literacy. School practices often privilege majority languages and ways of making meaning. Research in this vein could explore aliteracy as resistance to culturally incongruent texts or a response to literacy practices that value reproduction over authentic critiques. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory would also be helpful in explaining aliteracy as embedded in our cultural, institutional, and historical contexts. It can explain aliteracy as a disengagement from dominant school-based literacy, not a disengagement from the love of reading itself. This theory aligns with the current study's emphasis on how motivation is situated in the ways reading is modeled and legitimized by more powerful others.

Summary

This discussion of aliterate reading identities in children examined how participants navigated their identity, to include preferences, attitudes, and behaviors, at school and at home (RQ1). It also examined how participants perceived the value of reading at school and at home (RQ2). Three themes that were common to all participants were examined: navigating time, space, and access; resistance to reading; and affirmation in reading. Participants' choices were described in ways that prioritized their agency, intelligence, and individual home-school contexts, rather than viewing their behaviors as deficits. Connections were made across participants as well. The study's findings were integrated with identity theory and situated expectancy-value theory. These theories jointly aided in explicating how participants' choices were grounded in their understood realities of time, space, relational contexts, and institutional

demands. The complementary frameworks help us to understand reading as an identity-regulated practice and a situated motivational choice.

The participants' words through which they conveyed their sense-making and understanding of their lived experiences with literacy can help inform broader conversations about the way today's youth engage in literate or aliterate behaviors at school and at home. These participants were proficient readers with low motivation to read. The data collected through semi-structured interviews and reading journals led to the three themes that described the ways Javan, Bram, Quora, and Hadlee continually formed and negotiated their reader identities: by navigating time, space, and access to texts; by resisting reading; and by seeking affirmation when reading. These were moderated by genre preferences, choices in when and how long to read, emotional relationships to reading, and social relationships to reading. These themes were framed not as deficit or disengagement, but instead as meaningful, sense-making responses to their environment.

Participant voices grounded the analysis and discussion with the use of each child's words, which were interpreted through the lenses of identity theory and situated expectancy-value theory. As descriptive qualitative study, this study brought a nuanced, child-centered focus to the research questions of how elementary children describe awareness of their reader identity and how children perceive value in the act of reading.

It underscores the role we all play in creating literacy environments that honor children's lived experiences, agency, and humanity (Gee, 1989). In the words of the poet William Butler Yeats (1972), we can only taste, see, and feel the truth—we cannot simply reason our way into it.

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Appendix A - IRB Approval



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: Eileen Wertzberger
Curriculum and Instruction

Proposal Number IRB-12591

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 06/24/2025

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Course: EDCI 999 Research in Curriculum & Instruction
Project: a dissertation entitled "A phenomenological exploration of reading attitudes, preferences, and habits of elementary students with aliterate characteristics ""

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 06/24/2025

EXPIRATION DATE: 06/23/2028

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 06/25/2025 11:54 AM ET

Appendix B - Journal Template

Today's date	What did you read today? Books, comics, websites, social media?	How long did you spend reading today? Estimate the total number of minutes.	Where did you do most of your reading? In the kitchen, on the couch, etc.	How did you feel about today's reading? Happy, bored, distracted, etc.	What influenced you to read or not read today? A friend recommended a book, you were busy with sports practice, etc.	Did you use any digital devices during reading today? Phone, tablet, e-reader	Did any family members get involved in your reading today? Reading together, talking about what you read
Monday Dec. 8							
Tuesday Dec. 9							
Wednesday Dec. 10							
Thursday Dec. 11							
Friday Dec. 12							
Monday Dec. 15							
Tuesday Dec. 16							
Wednesday Dec. 17							
Thursday Dec. 18							
Friday Dec. 19							

Appendix C - Parental Informed Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE:

A phenomenological exploration of reading attitudes, preferences, and habits of elementary students with aliterate characteristics

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:

PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:

June 1, 2026

LENGTH OF STUDY:

1 year

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Eileen Wertzberger

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

Marcus Hora

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

Eileen Wertzberger
785-532-6158
ejm7777@k-state.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-2224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-2224

PROJECT SPONSOR:

none

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

This study will explore how students read for recreation at school and at home. By focusing on participants' lived experiences, this study will try to understand the complex factors that influence children's reading preferences and behaviors. Our research will provide insights into the social, cultural, and personal dynamics that shape children's attitudes toward reading.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

This study will use reading attitude surveys, standardized testing data, and journaling and in-person interviews to explore how students feel about reading and how they read for fun at school and at home. Participants will participate in a one-on-one interview with the co-investigator of about 30 minutes in length. A follow-up interview may be requested. In the interview(s), participants will be asked some pre-planned questions about their reading experiences and preferences. Follow-up questions may be asked to clarify or expand on participant answers. Also, participants will be asked to write in a reading journal that is shared with the co-investigator, documenting reading-related activities and reflecting on their literacy experiences over a two-week period.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

Minimal risk or discomfort is anticipated while participating in this study. You can stop participating in this study at any time without penalty and skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

Possible benefits include learning more about yourself as a student and a reader. The researcher's findings about you (your child's) reading habits and behaviors can be provided to you after the study's conclusion.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Information collected will be kept anonymous and not tied to specific participants. Pseudonyms (no real names) will be used in the final reporting. All interview transcripts and journal entries will be anonymized. Data will be securely stored on a protected computer accessible only to the co-investigator.

The information or biospecimens collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:

PARENT/GUARDIAN APPROVAL
SIGNATURE:

DATE:

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

PARTICIPANT NAME:

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE:
(PROJECT STAFF)

DATE:

DATE:

Appendix D - Child Informed Assent Script

This script will be read by the co-investigator to each potential child participant after the co-investigator has obtained consent from the child's parent/guardian to invite the child to join the study. Children's signatures will be collected on the same form as their parent/guardian's approval signature.

Hello,

My name is Mr. Hora. I am working on a research project at Kansas State University. "Research" means I am trying to find out more about something. I am researching why kids like to read or don't like to read. I have already told your parents about this, and they agreed that you could participate—but the choice is still yours. I will tell you more about my research before you decide if you want to participate or not.

What is this research about?

I would like to talk to you about what you like to read, when and where you like to read, and what you think about reading. I would also like to know if you like to read only sometimes, or if you don't like to read at all.

What will you do for the research?

It's important to know that there is no right or wrong answer in any part of this research. I want to know your opinion about reading. I will give you a survey about your attitude toward reading, look at your reading test scores, and have you write about your reading in a journal for two weeks. I will also ask you some questions about reading one-on-one for about a half hour. I will ask you some questions one-on-one for half an hour. I will write down your answers in the interview and also record your voice (no camera or video) to help me remember what you say.

Who will know about this research?

Only myself, your parents, and my teacher, Dr. Wertzberger, will know what you do or say in this research. If I share your ideas with others in a report or presentation, I will not use your real name or tell them what school you go to.

Will this research help or hurt you at school?

You might feel good learning more about yourself as a student and reader. But you will not get a reward for participating, and it will not help or hurt your grades in school. There may be some questions you do not want to answer, and you can tell me if you want to skip them. You can also tell me if you want to stop participating completely at any time, and I will not use any of your information in my final report.