

EXAMINATION OF THE LITERACY ATTITUDES OF RURAL MALE ADOLESCENTS

by

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Abstract

Much recent scholarship about boys and literacy focuses on the “crisis” of male underachievement in schools, and a number of authors address why boys’ literacy rates are low (e.g., Newkirk, Wilhelm and Smith). In this paper, I use current scholarship and primary research to examine the literacy ideology of a specific group of adolescents who are underrepresented in the literature: those living in rural areas. Using interviews from eight high school boys as case studies, I examine how literacy manifests itself in male adolescents from the rural Midwest. This study follows a qualitative empirical methodology. I find that the boys’ ideology is shaped by societal and familial influences and is essentially a “serviceable” literacy ideology. A serviceable literacy is rooted in a male identity or “habitus,” which refers to the way individuals perceive, assess, and act in the world (Bourdieu, “Habitus”). The findings in this study suggest that rural young men have a habitus characterized by independence, expediency, competition, and individuality. Complicating this habitus of young rural men is a stigma that some of the boys are very aware of. This stigma asserts that rural inhabitants value literacy less than middle- and upper-class urban inhabitants. My findings clearly demonstrate that people who live in rural areas are certainly literate and value literacy, but school-sponsored literacy is very different than serviceable literacy, and classrooms are the arena for a struggle as educators attempt to expose students to unfamiliar forms of reading. Therefore, the results of this study present pedagogical challenges for rural English teachers who are responsible for literacy instruction. Lastly, I will present some solutions found in the literacy scholarship.

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Introduction

I am an English teacher, so why do I hear from some of the boys as they walk in the door to my classroom, “Do we have to read?” Isn’t reading in English class a given? Another question I hear frequently, especially as we begin a “classic” novel, is “Can we watch the movie?” There is little interest by a number of my rural high school boys in reading this type of literature. Few see the relevance of it and many see the difficulties. Boys announce to their friends that they have not read a book in years and that they have no intention of starting anytime soon. These testimonials are enough to discourage a city-born, literature-loving female English teacher. Hence, the roots of this study reach into my own experiences with rural adolescent males and my desire to forge meaningful relationships with them. I want to know what factors cause certain boys to walk away from reading. More specifically, what ideology is at work as Thomas Newkirk puts it in the foreword of *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys*: [what is the] “logic of their resistance?” My thesis attempts to answer this question: What ideology do boys from Midwestern agricultural rural areas hold about literacy? In defense of such a study, I argue that rural communities are multifaceted places whose populations are both distinct and comparable to urban populations. They can offer important insight into how region or geography shapes literacy choices. Indeed, Kim Donehower writes in *Rural Literacies*: “Rural communities offer a microcosm of the many social forces that constrain and encourage literacy choices. Despite their small size, rural towns have their own complex hierarchies of class, ethnicity, and status and are culturally and economically linked to the larger class, ethnic and social networks of American life” (74). Furthermore, Donehower says that her research suggests that “rural people can and do make conscious, informed choices among different alternatives of practicing and valuing reading and writing, acknowledging literacy’s important functions in navigating the complex economic

and social realities of rural life” (69). So studies like this one that investigate the literacy choices and literacy identification of people in rural areas are constructive in helping us understand and respect economically and socially diverse populations.

It is clear that the public perception of young people’s literacy is dismal. The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts issued a report, *Reading at Risk*, based on a study done in 2002 saying that “literary reading in America is not only declining among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young” (2). Furthermore, the concern for boys’ literacy is acute. A 2005 report by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) called “The Nation’s Report Card” recounted that not only had the average score in reading for all students dropped, but the gap between males and females in reading also widened compared to 1992: “In 2005, female twelfth-grade students scored 13 points higher on average in reading than male students.” The consequences are serious. The report asserts that electronic media, such as video games and internet reading, require less of the reader and do not delay gratification. Thus, America is becoming “culturally impoverished” by a lack of intellectual engagement that reading provides (*Reading at Risk* 3). Alarmingly, the report states that “[m]ore than reading is at stake” because readers are better participants than non-readers in their communities. “The decline in reading, therefore, parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life” (*Reading at Risk* 3).

My own experience in a rural school tells me that the picture of rural boys’ literacy is complex. These findings suggest that young people, and boys in particular, lack the fundamental literacy necessary to support and advance our society. Yet, rural boys and their families are involved in community efforts. They are very much a part of community life, but that life may revolve around auto repair, construction, machinery maintenance, and farm work. Some boys,

yes, really hate to read *some kinds of texts*: getting them to finish a novel is very difficult. Other boys will read when they have to and may even enjoy it a little bit. Still others read regularly without prompting. Is there a “stirring of language” in these boys that literacy theorist Mike Rose talks about? From my own teaching experiences, I can attest to those stirrings, even among those who dislike school-sponsored reading. One young man will not read books, but regularly reads hunting magazines—even the longer articles they contain. Another “non-reader” who most of the time faked his book reviews read with passion a Sherman Alexie novel. Another boy who considers himself a non-reader loves *A Child Called It*. Some boys avidly read the newspapers that I have delivered to my classroom. Finally, one young man rarely reads classroom assignments, but frequently reads thrillers from the bestseller lists. It would be short sighted to call these boys non-readers or illiterate because they dislike *school-sponsored literacy*. The researchers in studies such as *Reading At Risk* and *The Nation’s Report Card* may be defining literacy in such a way that distorts the real literacy held by rural boys. I suggest that a fuller understanding of rural boys’ literacy and re-examination of the assumptions upon which we base our assessments of literacy will give educators and others a clearer picture of the crisis of boys’ literacy.

So the impetus for this paper is my desire to sort out our “adolescent boy literacy problem.” I intend to explain the literacy ideology of the students who participated in this study. By looking at strands of family literacy patterns, individual literacy attitudes, and literacy actions, we can develop some understanding of dominant power relations, how these young men perform within those relationships, and reveal how ideology has shaped their identity. I will intersect these strands with research on male adolescent literacy. As I will make clear, I found

three focus areas in the research: a unique male identity, awareness of a stigma regarding literacy, and a pedagogical challenge for teachers of rural boys.

The term literacy, like ideology, is difficult to define. A common definition is that literacy is simply the possession of deciphering skills. However, in *Rural Literacies*, the authors Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell define rural literacy as the literate skills needed to sustain life in a rural area. Deborah Brandt in *Literacy in American Lives* defines literacy as an economic, political, intellectual and spiritual resource (5). Both definitions fit the results of this study. So even those who consider themselves non-readers are literate according to these definitions. The subjects show that they have the work ethic, moral values, and common sense to help sustain their rural communities. I believe that the subjects also see that literacy is a resource that they need to get what they want: a good job, for example. Some of the subjects may see literacy as a spiritual and intellectual resource. I posit that boys do, indeed, have an ideology about reading. What I have discovered is that for the most part, they do not feel illiterate or incompetent, but nothing is pressing on them to expand their literary literacy. They believe they can read and write well enough to find comfortable employment, not necessarily white-collar employment, but work that will provide a middle-class lifestyle. I call this ideology “serviceable.” Of course, from a select few subjects we cannot render a single ideology that can be generalized, and that is not the goal of this study. Through their stories, however, we can glean some insight into the literacy characteristics of this community of readers.

Review of Literature

My thesis is informed by several scholars whose work relates literacy to male gender and group stigmatization, the themes I found in my results. The following scholarly voices give perspective to my results because they examine the social and class issues related to literacy.

Explaining literacy requires consideration of class issues that surround it. *Literacy in American Lives* is Deborah Brandt's examination of literacy learning, literacy development, and literacy opportunity. One of the primary tools she uses to discuss the economic influences surrounding literacy is the concept of "sponsors." These are people or agencies that are the means through which literacy is attained. They "enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy" (19). Brandt says the concept of sponsors helps explain a range of human relationships and ideological pressures (e.g., teacher-student or middle class-working class). Literacy provides security, well-being, and dignity. Her concern is that literacy has become both property and a resource; it is a component of our economic system instead of an element that reflects democratic principles, in particular equality across all socioeconomic, race, and gender groups. She asserts that because literacy is about profit, competition grows up around it, and while it leads to higher literacy rates, at some point "when the economy secures enough of a certain kind of literacy to move on, it does" (189). Indeed, we want No Child Left Behind to achieve high (tested) literacy rates; we want our kids to "own" literacy so they can secure employment somewhere. While Brandt qualifies her argument by stating that literacy as property is not the only source of our social and economic problems, we must be aware of its calculating influence on literacy. Because literacy in a capitalistic society is a valued commodity, competition surrounds its acquisition and dissemination.

While sponsors are often positive influences, we must be aware of their motives. Kim Donehower in *Rural Literacies* says that literacy sponsors seek validation of their own worldviews and may stigmatize the literacy of sponsored individuals. She writes, "Literacy sponsors offer...a certain set of methods for practicing literacy and particular reasons why literacy should be done. Sponsors...demand from their students' compliance with the values...of

the sponsor” (50). She gives the example of east-coast missionaries who came to Appalachia in the early 20th century to help educate and refine the lives of that population. English teachers are also a good example of sponsors as they often expect students to “naturally” come to love reading. The power relationship between missionaries and the Appalachian population, like the relationship between teachers and students, is unequal. The missionaries and teachers control and disseminate culture and therefore have the advantage.

As a result of such sponsored relationships, rural people are often identified by urban elite as “other.” In *Rural Literacies*, the chapter entitled “Rhetorics and Realities” by Kim Donehower discusses how rural identities are shaped by the broader public culture. She establishes that rural literacies suffer from the stigmas that rural people are illiterate and consider reading of less value than those who live in urban areas (37). These stigmas emerge from the context of rural literacies which differ from urban literacies in three ways: use of leisure time, access to literacy materials, and economic demands of particular kinds of literacy, and these differences result in “different ways of valuing and practicing literacy” (28). The stigma impacts both literacy development and the relationship to literacy sponsors. Donehower points to Appalachia’s history in the 20th century to show how stigmas develop; she then argues that this stigmatization and stereotyping apply in similar ways to the rest of Great Plains (40). Firstly, the process of stigmatization happens by identifying a region as “other,” and secondly by identifying the region as a problem (41). In this view is the idea that a “natural” otherness exists because of isolating mountains (Appalachia) or vast emptiness (Great Plains). Accordingly, if a problem exists, a solution must be found. The solutions, Donehower cites, include modernization, preservation, or relocation. To modernize means bringing technology and distance education, to preserve means creating a “public memory” by documenting and having dialogue about the

history of the place, and to relocate means to establish huge nature preserves or to consolidate schools (43-45). Class issues are tied up in rural stigmas as well. The author explains that a hierarchical effort emerged as immigration increased at the turn of the century, and an effort to maintain social, political and economic control led to a boundary between “high” and “low” culture (47). These class distinctions, in part, mean that students from rural areas experience stigmatization in their relationship to academic literacies since it is through academics that students broaden cultural understandings (75). She poses this question that is central to my study: how can literacy teachers be better sponsors to students with rural literacies?

Stigmas are found also in relationships of gender (Newkirk), race (Ogbu), and socioeconomic class (Rose). In gender conflicts, underachieving males are seen as “other” and problematic. In *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture*, Thomas Newkirk examines boys’ literacy underachievement. He found that boys’ behavior earns negative labels: that the male identity does not like “book books,” and that boys don’t think they need literacy like the girls do because they feel competent anyway. Newkirk asserts that teachers must accept the ideas boys have that are manifest in their reading and writing. Newkirk helps us see that boys’ ways of viewing the world are not as scary as we suppose, and that we should accept them. He says teachers need to get back to the “ethnography of childhood” and understand where a boy is coming from before expecting the student to enter the teacher’s world (12). Furthermore, Newkirk asserts also that boys are not passive slaves to the culture, that they can “accept, reject or mock” (23). Newkirk also offers some explanation for why boys may dislike English class. He says that boys get little out of the regular classroom that affirms their male identity which includes “aggressiveness, competitiveness, physical strength, gregariousness, and outgoing personality” (44). Newkirk continues, “Work is authentic and valuable. Traits developed on the

athletic field and in male friendships are the ones that make the difference” (44). Part of examining male adolescent literacy requires consideration of the way boys look not only at literacy, but also at masculinity as well. English professor and author Peter Schwenger cautions that “for a man to think about masculinity is to become less masculine oneself... The real man thinks about practical matters rather than abstract ones and certainly does not brood upon himself or the nature of his sexuality” (Storey 123). Newkirk and Schwenger are not essentializing boys, rather they are pointing out that identity and self-esteem are tied to what matters most, and boys see school work as related more to feminine identity than masculine and thus place less value on it. Therefore, by setting lower standards in school work, boys feel very confident that they can achieve success in it. We can conclude, then, that boys’ notion of identity and masculinity are socially constructed and are manifest in their literacy.

Besides gender, race is also the root of stigmatization. In *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb*, John U. Ogbu explores the problem of black students’ underachievement compared to white students’ despite living in similar affluence. The value of his work in this study lies in his observation of behaviors that result from being stigmatized. His study focused on a suburban, affluent school in Shaker Heights, Ohio beginning in 1997. He found that though black students knew that more effort would result in better grades, they chose not to perform for fear of looking like they adopted “white” culture. He found several other results. Most black students were content to be average (21). There existed a “norm of minimum effort where students knew they were putting in little effort into their schoolwork, but believed that when the chips were down, they could work harder and succeed” (24). Work outside of school took time away from studying (29). The media does not portray successful black youths, and many see nonacademic routes to success (30). Their collective identity is oppositional (174).

Like Ogbu, Mike Rose in *Lives on the Boundary* addresses race, but also class. He examines American schools, children, and how they function. Rose asserts that boundaries between classes and races exist, limiting access to higher education and its benefits. Students of low socioeconomic standing are made to feel that they are the “other.” Rose goes on to illustrate how the educational system fails to meet the needs of all by recounting his own circumstances that led him to the dead-end vocational education track. His home life, which he called the “abyss of paradise,” was marked by layers of violence, death, and despair (13). Where school ought to have been an escape route, its labels constricted students’ abilities to be successful. The poignant cry from a student, “I just wanna be average,” revealed the hopelessness within this system. Unexpectedly, Rose was lucky enough to be pulled out from this track, and he later stumbled upon “saviors” (or sponsors) who supported his learning and helped him enter the conversation of the humanities. Rose makes an important point about critical literacies, which are those that rely on framing and analyzing arguments as well as synthesizing and applying different points of view. He says that Americans expect this kind of advanced literacy from all students despite giving economic and political priority to support education. He asserts that most students who enter college are “competently literate” (188). He means that they can summarize a news story, write a personal response to a story or regurgitate lecture material. Rose also points out that the culture in which a person is raised ingrains certain beliefs about the world that can be very rigid, and this rigidity can limit the ability to engage in critical literacies. Finally, Rose has identified characteristics common to working class lives, including “the isolation of neighborhoods, information poverty...the intellectual curiosity and literate enticements that remain hidden from the schools, [and] the feelings of scholastic inadequacy” (9).

Boys who are non-readers of school-sponsored materials are stigmatized, too. Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* look at the literacy performances of boys outside of school. The premise of the book is that boys are at risk of failing in school because they do not see immediate benefits from reading novels, the kind of reading expected in English classes. Smith and Wilhelm argue that boys' literacy is complex and is not reflected in many classroom expectations and national tests. The authors argue against these stereotypes of boys: first, all boys are zoned out on media and violence; second, boys are incapable of sustained attention that reading requires; third, they are controlled by a "boy code" of masculinity—what it is to be a man. According to Thomas Newkirk, two significant findings in this study are that "literacies grow out of relationships" and "flow" (a state in which people lose a sense of anything other than the immediate experience) represents a key to real learning. Finally, the authors suggest that the literacies exhibited by boys outside of the English classroom should be tapped and used to "show them the power of reading and literacy."

Methodology

I followed a qualitative empirical methodology, examining students' attitudes about reading through conversations using guiding questions and making comparisons with the work of theorists. Since I sought to elicit literacy stories, most questions came from Deborah Brandt's interview questions found in the interview script in *Literacy in American Lives* (see Appendix A). I modified the script by adding questions regarding geography and community values in order to elicit responses pertaining to the rural nature of their literacy. For this project, I am defining literacy as it manifests itself in reading. I did not look at writing literacy because my primary concerns in the classroom deal more with boys' aversion to reading assignments than writing assignments.

My interviews took place in a rural county in south central Kansas, the majority in the homes of my subjects. I conducted interviews with eight boys in grades 10, 11, and 12. Each interview lasted about one hour. My subjects are students in a small, rural school of approximately 100 students in grades 7-12. This school consolidated in 1961 and enrolls students from towns and rural areas up to 20 miles away; parts of the school district boundaries shoot into five different counties. The subjects include children of farmers and ranchers, of blue-collar workers as well as those of the professional class. These students include those from the working class and the middle class.

The participants were not chosen at random. I wanted to interview boys who identified themselves as oppositional to reading as well as some who considered themselves readers. I have identified readers as those who more readily fit the school-based notion of a reader of novels and books for pleasure. A non-reader, then, is someone who dislikes that particular kind of reading. The participants' grades in English range from Cs to As. I looked for boys in grades 10 through 12, assuming that the subjects' experiences and maturity levels would be comparable. I was dependent on the boys' willingness to meet with me during summer break. I tried to heed the caution of Wilhelm and Smith that I need to look at these boys as individuals, even as I attempted to evaluate group characteristics. Much of the scholarship emphasizes the importance of looking at boys as individuals, an important step to avoid stereotyping.

It may be helpful to readers to understand the context in which my subjects live their lives and the economic context that influences their future. According to the 2000 U.S. census (2006-08 data for this county were not available), the median family income is \$41,386, which is slightly above a nearby major metropolitan city where the median income is just under \$40,000. Regarding employment, 32.1 percent of people over 16 are employed in management,

professional and related occupations; 19.3 percent in production transportation and material moving occupations; 18.5 percent in sales and office occupations; 16.9 percent in service occupations; 11.1 percent in construction, extraction and maintenance occupations; and only 2.2 percent in farming, fishing and forestry occupations. Literacy skills are needed by a significant portion of the population in the county besides being necessary for higher-paying jobs available outside the county.

The towns in the school district could probably be considered “dying towns” economically, since new business ventures are few. However, these communities have powerful histories, families who have lived in them for generations, and a sense of “this is where I belong,” particularly for those members of agricultural families. Families from other towns or cities who are escaping high living costs or unsafe schools and neighborhoods make up a small percent of residents.

Results

The case study excerpts are presented in the following section. Since the conflict between school-sponsored literacy and the boys’ literacy is a primary focus of this study, I chose to organize this material accordingly. Thus, the responses are organized into three components: home literacy events, school literacy events, and literacy attitudes. The first five interviews are with boys who would classify themselves as non-readers, whereas the final three interviews are with boys who would classify themselves as readers. The distinction lies in their preference for spending leisure time reading novels or books, as well as their openness to the kind of reading required in English classes. Finally, each heading reflects my understanding of the participant’s reading philosophy.

Rite of Passage: Randy

Randy's working class family knows how valuable literacy is, despite not being "big readers." So all of the children in the family have passed through a period of reading *The Red Badge of Courage* to advance their literacy, if not become real readers. This particular book contains enough action to keep a boy interested and once the oldest brother read and enjoyed it, the parents persisted in their efforts to get the other boys to read it, too.

Literacy Events: Home

Randy's parents read a little, such as the newspaper; and the home has many magazines around such as *Sports Illustrated* and *Motocross*, but it is the older brothers who typically read them. The reader in the family is Randy's oldest brother who Randy has seen reading "a whole lot in his room." Randy claims that his brother read "a bunch of different series, like *Box-Car* books." They didn't appeal to him that much. Randy claims that the person who had the most influence on his reading has been his dad. Randy read the *Red Badge of Courage* in the truck while traveling with his dad to the oil fields over the summer. "He was always the one who helped with homework and studies and stuff; [it] aggravated me at the time; I wanted to do it on my own. Now I'm glad. In elementary school I read with him and he made me read aloud."

Randy does read on his own. Last year he read the *Harry Potter* series and was able to remember them because "they were an interesting story and I just want to see what happened in the end. I saw a couple of movies that got me hooked a little bit." He recently read *The Red Badge of Courage*. It seems to be a family book that each sibling takes his turn tackling. "[I] finished in one day (3 hours); it's a pretty good book. I felt all right about it. I skim *Sports Illustrated's* short stories. I read a little and it's interesting, so I read more. Like the one article about that football coach who got shot, and like what players are doing now in the off-season and

what plays they'll do next season. Not stats." He uses technology in a limited way. He and his family occasionally read information on the internet and the oldest brother sometimes uses email. Randy says it is not used for "personal reading nor finding stuff out." He says that the *Simpsons* and *Family Guy* are shows he watches; that *South Park* is stupid, but sometimes it really makes him laugh. He says these shows make him think.

Literacy Events: School

Randy's early memories of learning to read show a tepid interest in reading. He recalls reading out of the red or blue books in first grade which included short stories. "Wasn't that great, didn't enjoy reading. Rather do something else." He says he never taught himself to read and only has read with friends or his brothers for technology or instructions. One would read aloud while others perform the work. He handles reading assignments in school by either waiting until the last minute or reading all of the assignment on the first day. So he will get charged about reading if it catches his interest right away. His favorite classes have been science classes since they are "hands-on stuff" [like labs] with limited reading that is not a problem for him.

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Randy believes that he is literate since he knows how to read. Randy "doesn't have an opinion of good readers. I don't notice it. Smart people are readers. They are good people." Randy classifies reading as important despite not doing it that often. Though he does not care to read much, Randy has some mature insight into literacy. Its absence, he admits, would have a "pretty big impact on life... [reading] affects how you think about things."

Getting Into It: Dean

Digging a hole and burrowing in it after reading the book *Holes* shows how much literacy can influence Dean. He has passionate bursts of interest in reading. He delightedly recalls “the giant book—the mouse one” from his childhood and his phase of reading car magazines when he bought his first car. His literacy attitude is shaped by this expectation (or hope) of a thrill he may get from a text.

Literacy Events: Home

Dean could not share many stories about grandparents. He did not know their schooling or even occupations. In his family, there were fewer close connections between generations where literacy might be shared. Dean’s parents both graduated from high school and finished college at a major university. Therefore, family expectations are to graduate from high school and get some post-secondary training for literacy.

Dean believes that his mother is the parent who read to him; when he was little, he looked at the pictures and she read. He was the listener. Dean does not consider his father to be a reader: “Dad never reads.” As far as the entire family, Dean describes it as “no one normally read...the family just said go run and play.” As a young child, Dean recalls positive memories of reading with his family. Before formal schooling, “Mom read all the time. We had a bookshelf in there [he points to the bedroom]. [It had] all kinds of books. We had little world books ([a set] with all the same spine); we had literally every one ever made and picture books with easy stuff in it. We sat down and read all those...then this giant book—my favorite book ever: the mouse one.” Dean goes on to tell me the great story in that book. Other reading materials around the house included *Boys’ Life* which Dean read some of if the front cover was interesting or if he felt like reading the comics in the back. He reported that an article on building igloos led to a family project that

unfortunately did not work. Another example is his digging a hole following his reading the book *Holes*. “I think about digging holes, I can see the picture. I dug a hole in the garden; I could fit in it. I just hid and sat in it. I was older not a young kid: 12 or 13.”

Dean’s literacy actions also include a great deal of reading about cars because of having to buy his own. He reads car magazines all the way through because he says they are not “all that long.” He describes his interaction this way, “I understand what they [the writers] are saying and after awhile you don’t have to read it; you know it. He said his magazine reading started in junior high school; his car “spree” started this [junior] year when he was looking for a car. “I read everything to get what I wanted.” He expands, “You got old *Motor Trend*, *Car and Driver*, *Hot Rods* in your [teacher’s] room, from work and gurty (a reference to an antique cars magazine).” He found that the antique magazine contained an article about a car like his Camaro, so he read it. “The main article was four pages, then other stuff, types of cars, car shows, I like to see the history where it was and where it is now.” He goes on to give an example. Dean seems to have retained well the material in those magazines.

Dean’s read-to-know philosophy appears in other interests besides cars. He reads instruction manuals for new technology. He is also a golf player and read a book about Tiger Woods. “Tiger Woods goes through how to play the game, step-by-step, how to hold the club... A lesson [is presented] then a little thing about Tiger...how he got started. I liked it when I read [it] the first time, then it just collect[s] dust. I remember most of it [Wood’s tips], then I changed it up so it fit me.”

Literacy Events: School

Technology played a role in Dean's developing literacy. He recalls using computer games in the second grade that were meant to improve reading skills. Dean describes a computer game with cats in which the words went by and they had to be identified. He also remembers computer games in the third grade, "a whole bunch of games." He only realized it was fun, not that he was learning to read. He does not admit to being self-taught, but he could sound out words and made it through spelling tests easily. He learned that he preferred silent reading since it is a faster method than someone reading to him. He remembers his library experience in a way that reveals how reading can easily bore, especially if one is aware of formulaic writing. "[It was] always cold in the library; go in the back first, up the stairs, where the big kids books were. *Hank the Cow Dog* books were there and we made our own books. It was all right. It started out pretty good [the book series], but then it got boring. I saw the pattern, it was repetitious." Dean is aware of how he reads. He skims to get the main point unless he has to slow down to get a good grade on a reading assignment. Later in elementary school and in junior high school, he realized he had to slow down at times. Nevertheless, he still skims school assignments generally. In elementary school, Dean experienced standard reading instruction consisting of reading short passages and answering questions on worksheets.

Literacy Attitudes

Dean talks more about *Holes*. He describes it as his "all time favorite" book. [It was] the only book I just couldn't put down." He even took "crap" off others about getting into it so much, but Dean was drawn to the story of kids his own age who just dig holes as if digging holes builds character. He likes the plot and the setting, which shifts from present day back to the 19th

century. He likes that the kids get rich in the end. Dean went on to point out that the more you read a book, the more you get out of it. “I could tell you every tale about that book.”

As Dean’s class got older, reading became more of a gendered activity. He most associates his female English teacher with reading, then goes on to count possibly a female friend of his at school. “Most of the guys didn’t really want to read and still [are that way]. [A couple of girls] have always been reading. [There was] harder stuff as we got older. It is not a guy thing to do. Read the sports part and get that done, then the classifieds.” Dean ponders, “It used to be that everybody read, no one whined, but as we got older, [it] seemed like we had better things to do. I don’t know.” I asked if any guy readers in the school were not considered sissies. “Maybe some that read at home, but everyone in our class only reads for fun. They do not like to read books. Magazines are a different story: fur trapping and game...the hunters read that... [and] *Motocross*. I don’t laugh at others reading; it’s their choice. I’ve never got a hard time. Most of the time when I read everyone else is reading, too. I don’t have a positive or negative opinion [about readers].”

I Know I Ought To, but I Don’t Want To: Allen

Allen values nonconformity. Perhaps that is why he does not yield easily to schoolwork. Allen believes he is best at thinking on his own, “trying to solve a problem, in any area. If there is a problem, I try to figure it out, why it is happening. To people too, all kinds of stuff, how things work and what’s wrong with this person.” He knows (because he has been told) that reading skills are important, and he believes this is true and that he will need those skills. But he considers reading a chore, and he does not identify himself as a reader.

Literacy Events: Home

Allen's mother tries to encourage him to read and knows how important it will be for his future. His father and he do not really talk about it, nor does Dad even know that Allen fails to read much. Having a role model has kept Allen from abandoning reading. Allen's early memories of reading center on his sister. "[She] read a lot and influenced me." No other family member in his mind is the "reader." However, Allen did indeed read in part because of her influence. His "real first book he ever read was 100 pages long." He was eight or nine years old. He says he just liked that particular one, "others after that – [I] couldn't get into it." As a child, he does not remember reading newspaper articles, just little books "maybe 10 to 20 pages long." He does not recall being read to. Aside from his reading of Dr. Seuss books, Allen did read the *Captain Underpants* books on his own. He does not remember reading materials for adults around, although there may have been a few, "but I never got around to trying to read them." Although he most associates his sister with reading, Allen is aware that his father reads now and calls what he reads (psychological books and life stories) "weird books I never understood...big thick books 300 pages. He would tell me about them, they were in his room."

Literacy Events: School

I asked Allen about silent reading versus oral reading: "When I read aloud I can understand it, but when others read I can't pay attention, even a teacher, I'd have to try to read along, but could not remember it." He prefers silent reading. The problem with oral reading is that he gets sleepy listening to stories. "I've always been that way." Allen tells the anecdote of his sixth-grade teacher reading the popular book *Holes* to the class. "Everybody said it's a great book...I was sleeping." In school he felt like no one taught him to read, he just read. He has never really challenged himself to read more or harder material. He knows that he likes comedy

books, “nothing much else, the funniest would keep me involved.” He is not interested in stories like the *Harry Potter* series, but will watch the films.

His own literacy actions reveal how he copes with reading tasks. By junior high school, Allen had learned the skimming strategy to finish reading homework. It was especially useful so he could get the work done at school because home was stressful and there was no time to read. He is bored with books in his high school library, even the wilderness books which are popular with a lot of the guys. Allen says it doesn’t matter what kind of book it is, if he can’t follow along or it does not keep his attention, he “just gives up.”

He discussed his school’s curriculum and his future. He can’t think of any classes he wished the school offered. He knows that Agricultural Sciences is dominant in the curriculum offerings, and that there are fewer creative classes. He enjoyed carpentry because he liked making things out of wood, but he gave it up for other classes that would help his educational goals. He opted to take college courses for dual credit. After high school graduation, he hopes to attend a state university and become a surgeon who specializes. He “feels good about the science.” I ask him about the type of reading required for those classes and he says, “Anatomy books and science books...those books [are] kind of cool because it gives you facts about the human body; [I] take to that kind of reading.”

Literacy Attitude

Allan’s literacy attitude is negative. Allen believes that avoiding the reading that has been assigned in English classes will hurt him. Members of his family have told him as much. “I’ll need to read and study a lot when I’m trying to be a doctor and not reading a lot all those years is probably going to come back and kick me, I guess. It [hard reading] works the brain; so anything that does that is good exercise.” But Allen also defends his poor reading habits, saying, “I read

fine; I don't stutter when I read. I comprehend if I pay attention. But I can read and not get it, like an ADD problem." He agrees that he should probably read more, but thinks it [his lack of reading] will not hurt him that badly. His opinion of those who are good readers is that they are "smart, literate people. They are more stuck up, more than I am. They think in smart ways, [but] they are not better, I guess. Their methods would be different [than mine]...go by the book, not outside the box, I don't go; I try to go a different way." He does not believe that people where he lives are as creative or open as those in urban areas.

I'm Too Busy: George

George's thinking is this: "I can read. I'll read when I have to for work. But I don't have the time or interest to read for pleasure." A recent high school graduate, George believes that he can do anything well if he puts his mind to it. "If I really want to I could, just the fact of wanting to do it; having ambition for it. With some things, I am ambitious...*some* things: getting up in the morning to go work or go fishing. If it is important I will: something I have to do or want to do."

Literacy Events: Home

His mother is the person he most associates with reading. She was primarily responsible for his learning to read, and models pleasure reading for him. Yet, George never adopted pleasure reading as a leisure pursuit. George's mother has homeschooled all of her children. His early childhood memories of seeing others read are few; he mostly remembers being read to. He does not recall favorite books from his childhood. His grandfather read to them when he visited, and he recalls gathering around the reader along with all his siblings on the living room couch. There were no bedtime stories read to each child individually. George's two older siblings read to him when he was younger, but he rarely reads to his younger siblings because "they don't want it." George prefers reading silently; others' reading gets boring so he falls asleep. As a

result of being homeschooled, he was taught to read earlier than others in his age group since he heard older kids being taught their reading lessons at the table. “[I was] picking up books early...heard older kids taught there so I picked up on that, then picked up grammar—like how to pronounce words or say them right.”

Now his reading consists of magazines and newspaper classifieds. He reads about fishing, hunting, and sports. He says there are plenty of books around the house if you want to read them. “Plenty of them...just find the time.” The books consist of fiction books, chapter books, religious books, cookbooks, etc. “You can find it if you want to, [but] I never do...busy. I used to have the time, but watched TV instead. It’s easier to watch a movie [that you can] watch in an hour, but [it takes] three days to read a book. He does remember the *Magic Treehouse* adventure books and enjoying them when he was younger. He does have to read at work at the co-op occasionally. He will need to read an instruction manual and skim to look for what you need to repair; [it’s] “easy reading.” Therefore, George’s literacy actions are rooted in necessity. He anticipates getting a job that requires a lot of reading to keep up to date, but the reading will be market information and not books. He likes to keep up to date and to read others’ analyses. He plans to attend a state university and major in Ag business or Ag economics. He wants a job that will not take up all his time so he can still hunt and fish. More specifically, he is thinking about agriculture and banking. “Keeping the books. [It’s] cool to watch the markets; [and I] like being around people. Don’t like being by myself. People, I like.”

Literacy Events: School

The kind of reading done in public school, George said, was “the same or easier...just faster. [At school there was] a set time it had to be done, not when you felt like it. I adjusted to that OK. “In junior high he was able to finish most of the reading at school or on the long bus

ride home. In high school, he relied on web sites that summarize literary texts. There have been times when he's gotten lost in a book: when he read *Damage*, about football. He likes sports books "to a certain extent...something exciting, adventure I guess."

Literacy Attitudes

His opinion of readers is that he is glad they have time to read. He speculates about whether they enjoy it more than he does or that they see something he doesn't. Still, he does not wish he were like a reader because it "take[s] up more time." George states that he "prefer[s] to do something other than read; it's a waste."

The Activity of Last Resort: Rick

Rick's story centers on his love for fishing and hunting. He has attended hunting shows, gone pheasant hunting, and taken guided trips a few times. He states that he was successful getting many pheasants. He wishes his school offered "outdoor" classes like hunting. Despite the influence of family and community expectations, he generally considers reading to be an activity of last resort. He does not believe he is literate because he does not *like* to read. Yet, he will read and write occasionally and find fulfillment and pleasure in it. Thus, while Rick may appear to "hate reading," he *can* read, and some stories are engaging for him. Rick's attitude is that he sees, generally, no need to read, so why bother, especially when English-class reading will only put him to sleep.

Literacy Events: Home

Rick identifies Mom as "the reader" who reads both books and magazines. He sees his father read only for business. Rick seems impressed by his father's calculations of cattle feed rations. Rick reveals that reading materials around his home include dictionaries, encyclopedias,

books, magazines, and newspapers. Rick knows that his mother read Dr. Seuss books to him as well as some other “little books.” However, even when his mother read to him, Rick found it boring. He fell asleep at bedtime reading. Now he plays video games before bed. He thinks she wants him to read, “but I don’t.” He does reveal, however, that he reads hunting magazines. “They’re alright, keeps my interest, not boring.” Rick says he will read long articles if “it’s something I like doing.” He admits that if he doesn’t like the reading he will fall asleep. He says he likes reading about what he likes doing especially when the text gives information that is factual. He has found a couple of internet sites he finds useful.

Literacy Events: School

Rick’s early experiences in school in kindergarten and first and second grades were boring to him. He remembers the teachers reading to him, but he was not engaged. For high school class reading, he has utilized internet sites to support his reading of classroom assignments. Between that and reading book jackets, he has coped with English assignments. He does not like any books from the school. Even the survival stories are boring to him because they have no “hunting or killing stuff” in them. He says he has more of a problem reading non-fiction than fiction. Whenever he can, he wants to watch the movie adaptation of a book rather than read it. Rick remembers testing both in the classroom and state testing. He feels classroom tests were easy if he read the book for class, and he does not believe that the state tests were very hard. He appears to feel confident in his reading test-taking skills. He often sleeps in class, but shows genuine interest at times, and later, another hour when he has a study hall, he will come in for help on assignments. Last school year he wrote a poem that he was extremely proud of. Rick seems to be motivated by grades and parental expectations. Rick is friendly, often smiling, but

can be very resistant about doing class assignments. He certainly does not want to take work home; that is his time for hunting.

Literacy Attitudes

Rick considers a literate person is someone who likes to read, and since he does not, he does not consider himself literate despite clear evidence to the contrary. He does not believe there will be any consequences for his lack of reading. Nevertheless, he admits that mechanics school will require it. Generally, he is not motivated by others to read. He says it doesn't bother him that others say he should read. He considers his peers who read for pleasure just "smart." He does not appear to feel bad that he does not read.

The Role Model: Mike

Mike is a quiet young man who fits the stereotypical "reader." Some of his family is well-educated: his grandfather was a superintendent of schools and his mother is a teacher. Other members of his family are working class or semi-professional. He would rather read than do just about anything else. His role as the model reader in his home for his younger siblings is the notable characteristic I found in my interview with Mike. Mike's identity is rooted in his own discovery of the joy of reading for pleasure. It is something of a game to think ahead and through what the authors of texts are offering. He finds a sense of self-esteem in "being a reader" since his class largely would not consider themselves readers. He also seems to enjoy his role as a literacy role model for his younger siblings; it offers him a sense of pride.

Literacy Events: Home

Mike remembers reading playing a role in his family life when he was a child. He recalls being read to at bedtime and "Christmas time for sure!" He says that anybody and everybody

(grandparents and aunts) read all the Christmas stories to him. Favorite books including Curious George and those by Dr. Seuss he quickly identified as “the best.” Dr. Seuss’ *Green Eggs and Ham* and *Go! Dog! Go!* stand out in particular. As an older child, Mike’s mother read the *The Chronicles of Narnia* to him and his sister: one chapter every night. Mike remembers his mother and grandparents participating in the act of reading both to him (short stories) and to themselves (novels, newspapers and magazines). His grandparents’ coffee table stood out as a place where books and magazines lived. He does remember his grandfather reading the newspaper daily from front page to back page.

Mike’s recent personal reading includes *Band of Brothers* and *Citizen Soldier*. Reading about war, especially WWII, is his passion. He reads during long car trips of an hour or more. On vacation recently, he read three books in four days. His reading interests span from military history (Michael Duran’s *Black Hawk Down*) to fantasy (the last *Harry Potter* book). One aspect of Mike’s literacy life that is noteworthy is the influence he has had on younger siblings. He became a reader before his sister, but she saw him reading and sometimes talked with him about it, and eventually she found her own reading interests. He also reads aloud to his youngest siblings who seek him out for this.

Literacy Events: School

Mike explains that he “more or less just picked up reading,” and that he liked to listen to others read. He does not remember being taught to read, exactly. He remembered pretending to read picture books as a child, making up words as he “read.” He does remember the one unplanned reading experience that led him to call himself a reader: he picked up *The Indian in the Cupboard* in elementary school. He is willing to read what is assigned at school, even if it seems boring. A favorite book that was assigned in school is *The Giver* and he delightedly

summarized this science fiction story that he had read five years earlier. A more recent example of a challenging class-assigned book is his reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. As with Shelley's novel, when Mike read *Moby Dick* he struggled with the vocabulary, but still gathered the gist, and remembers the Spouter's Inn with clarity. He also found standardized tests "long and hard," but persevered and often scored well. His highest score among the ACT individualized tests was reading. He admitted that his friends may rely on him when they are in college together for his reading abilities. He seemed proud that he would possibly be an academic "go to" guy. This is a surprising statement because he also says that he thinks the class does not think he is a reader because they do not notice it as much as they notice the girls reading. He noted that there are only two other students (girls) in his class who are readers. During the same period as this interview occurred, Mike was taking college composition at an area junior college. He described the activities as being the same as those experienced in high school English class except that he was being exposed to new ideas. Over the past five years, as a result of exposure in school, he now reads the newspaper daily. He sheepishly admits that the best parts are comic strips and Sudoku puzzles.

Literacy Attitudes

His attitude towards literacy is generally positive. With exuberance he can tell you about *Go! Dog! Go!* and can proudly rattle off the name of his favorite first chapter-book. He can also meticulously expound on the three most recent books he has read. An exception to his positive attitude towards reading is his experience in religion classes. He stressed this. The boredom came from repetition of concepts; he had heard about it all before. For him, his personal reading is often an escape from responsibilities. Mike also enjoys reading for his own pleasure. He considers it a way to escape: "no one ever bugs me when I'm doing it." Mike describes the

reading experience, particularly with military history texts, is one that allows him to put himself in the position of the characters and strategize over the conflicts in which they are in.

The Rebellious Reader: Sam

I consider Sam a rebellious reader. He was not reluctant to read, he just wanted to choose his own reading. Like Mike's literacy, Sam's literacy is formed by the pleasure he has discovered in the act of reading. Furthermore, his own literacy sponsors have played a powerful role in shaping his enjoyment of reading: both his mother and sister read often, and Sam's close relationship with them caused him to imitate that practice. Sam's working-class, military family exhibits literate practices including library use and the presence of reading role models. Sam is quiet and quick-witted and considers himself a reader.

Literacy Events: Home

Sam's mother displayed an interest in his education; she attended most parent-teacher conferences and felt it was important for Sam to keep his grades up. As a young boy, he was a member of the Boy Scouts because his mother made him join, but he said he would rather be out playing than be in meetings. He dropped out before being held accountable for reading and knowing material from the handbook.

Sam's early memories of literacy were positive and filled with role models. Even before he went to preschool, both his sister and grandmother often read to him. He said he did not mind being read to, but to this day, he will fall asleep if someone reads aloud to him. Sam recalls his mother "always" reading and he also witnessed his maternal grandparents reading. He knows that his dad does not particularly like to read, but he recalls his father reading the sports section of the newspaper. Sam reported that his mother reads mystery books as well as "boring" ones. Reading material in Sam's home was abundant when he was a child: newspapers, mother's

books, “little kid” books, and “the Bible, obviously.” Sam attempted to read his mother’s books, but found that he was not interested. He also attempted to imitate his sister’s reading. The school library and public library were a resource for him and his family. He recalls going to a city library (about 20-30 minutes away) every week or two with his mother before he began junior high school and got busy with sports. Sam discussed his activities in the library. He goes to the young adult section as well as the stand with new books. He does not use the librarians as sources of information or recommendations. He believes that they are knowledgeable, but books they recommend do not seem fun. Sam is most receptive to recommendations by peers because he says they “think like I do.” He makes an exception for his older sister.

He listed his current reading interests to include sports fiction, adventure stories, science fiction, medieval fiction, and non-fiction about athletes in *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN* periodicals. He explained that he is drawn to some of these texts through his interest in sports, especially football, and wanting to know about the best of the best. He recalls reading for hunter safety class and reading football plays every night in high school. Sam discussed other current reading to include a college orientation handbook. He admitted it was somewhat boring, but skimmed it because he felt the need to know the information.

Literacy Events: School

Sam reported that to a certain degree he taught himself to read in school, so formal literacy lessons were not memorable for him. Interestingly, he did not even like reading until the third grade. One teacher played a role in hooking him on reading. Another teacher introduced to him with a simple recommendation what would become his favorite book, *The Giver*. He recalls this teacher having a class library and often being given choices about books, a practice he likely appreciated. Sam perceived himself to be a decent reader early on, and described himself as

being “in the middle” between an advanced student who read junior high-level books in third and fourth grades, and other peers who were becoming apathetic readers. Sam reported that peers had no influence on his reading development. In junior high school and high school, with “boring” books, Sam would not read even to get a better grade. Yet, he would read ahead in assigned novels if he was interested in the book, finishing it in just a few days.

Literacy Attitudes

Sam says reading is important because life would be more boring without it and he would watch more TV. He says his friends watch *South Park*, but he does not, not for hours like they do, though it is his favorite show. He just describes reading as fun. Compared to other activities he would rather read than watch TV; but he’d like to do “physical stuff” like playing games (football) or weightlifting more than he would like to read. However, he would rather read than work. He says, “I’m lazy.” He admits, though, that reading is an activity he can get so engaged in he will lose track of time. He said that the night prior to our interview, he read from ten p.m. until midnight without realizing such a long time had elapsed.

Sam discussed “getting into” a story. He used *The Giver* as an example of a book that contained action from the start. Books that “take too long” by including “pointless details” are problematic for him. He elaborates that pages and pages about little things that happen “bore up the story.” He did concede that a thoughtful, reflective beginning to a story could be OK. Sam describes what goes on in his head when he reads. He gets a picture of the characters and it [the story] plays out in his head. He thinks ahead and analyzes the story.

Seeing the Big Picture: Isaac

Like Mike and Sam, Isaac is a reader, meaning he finds pleasure and mental challenge in the act of reading. He sees himself as very intelligent and expects (or would like to see) others

around him to exercise their brains, too. He is disillusioned that they do not do so. He is aware of cultural influences on literacy and how lack of literacy may negatively affect the viability of the rural area he lives in. He identifies himself as white and is strongly connected to the Czech farming community. His own parents are working class. Isaac is verbose, serious and confident. He recently won a national Future Business Leaders of America competition and as a sophomore scored 35 on his ACT.

Literacy Events: Home

He has been told stories that when he was two or three years old, he picked up the newspaper and read the headlines, shocking everyone. He reports that his mom read to him all the time, including bedtime; “little story books, nothing special.” He was involved in a reading group at age four in which “some woman read to us and we had cookies.” He remembers it as a good experience. He cites a Catholic magazine, and a couple of newspapers as other material he will pick up when they are around. He says that his older sister is the big reader of novels in his family, although they all read newspapers, magazines and occasionally, books. Isaac recently read *Crime and Punishment* (calling it a horror story of sorts), *1984*, and *Grapes of Wrath*. Most books that he reads are borrowed from the high school library.

He has a lengthy analysis of humor in American popular culture. He said he likes to read jokes in the paper or *Reader's Digest*. He says many stories are witty, but none are “laugh out loud” stories. He says *South Park* is clever and *Family Guy* has some artistic merit and clever humor. He cites *Seinfeld* and *The Office* as “extremely clever and extremely artistic and brilliant.” However, he thinks most shows have the kind of jokes that he could make up himself.

Literacy Events: School

Early in school, he reports that he was “far ahead” of everyone in kindergarten because he read at the third grade level. He recalls that by fourth grade materials were finally getting more challenging. Isaac says that he understood the material better than the class because he had strong test scores, and knew the answers to questions about a story. He says he “got the concept” whereas others would not. He explains that others then put him in a “geekish position”; that “they were a little jealous” because they struggled in that area, but it was easy for him. He feels that he taught himself, that he did not have to be helped, though he never moved ahead of the class in reading activities. Instead, his extended learning consisted of computer games that taught typing and math. Isaac prefers silent reading better than reading aloud because he can move faster, but if he has to memorize or understand material more thoroughly, he says it aloud. Therefore, Isaac is not really a listener. He appears to get frustrated with peers who do not read aloud fluently. He states that he does no reading with peers other than class work.

Literacy Attitudes

Isaac makes a commentary about the kind of reading assigned in high school. He says that the assignments need to be harder. He explains that younger readers read just stories, “nothing abstract,” whereas older readers should be assigned “poetry, technical [reading], or stories that offer an examination” of some issue. He cites *The Giver* as the “most basic entertainment.” Isaac can point to one classmate who he considers a “good reader” because she reads a variety of books. He states that most people read “what is coming off the bestseller list” and criticizes it (*Twilight* or books by Judy Picoult) as being “easy to read” and “not very challenging.”

Isaac explains that his purposes for reading include enjoyment, to be introduced to new ideas, and for a good grade or a job. Again, Isaac digresses, saying that he wants to experience new ideas because “it’s something you can’t get in [here]...different cultures.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the literacy ideology of rural boys and contribute my observations to the scholarly conversation about literacy. I intended to discover something about rural boys’ literacy that might help me meet the literacy needs of this group of students. My study resulted in three findings: (1) The literacy of rural boys reveals that within their habitus is a distinct masculine identity with respect to reading; (2) Rural boys are aware of a literacy stigma associated with living in a rural area; and (3) A pedagogical challenge exists for teachers of rural boys to address not only various skill levels but also cultural and socio-economic variations in students’ backgrounds. In this study, all the participants are competent readers; no one is truly a non-reader or one who cannot read. Yet, the frequency and types of texts they read varies. Three read books for pleasure regularly, and two others have had some positive experiences with books. All of them read magazines or newspapers at least occasionally. I have identified three of the boys as “readers” according to conventional middle-class or even aristocratic notions that readers enjoy independently reading fiction books for pleasure. Thus, “non-readers” are those who dislike spending much time reading, especially longer works of fiction. Furthermore, an important distinction is the willingness to read school-sponsored literature. Non-readers will find ways to avoid it, whereas readers will either attempt or embrace the assigned reading.

Evidence for the complexity of rural boys’ attitudes comes from their perceptions of others who read. Dean reported that his male friends gave him a hard time about reading *Holes*.

This suggests that rural boys experience peer pressure influencing them not to read. Yet, Randy and Rick responded that they did not think much about others who read. Their belief is that it is fine for others to read even though they do not care to read themselves. I can offer one explanation for this kind of variation. It has to do with who these boys are identifying as readers. Two of the boys named girls in their classes who they considered readers, whereas Dean's peers are male "buddies." The answer is, in part, a gender issue. Girls are expected to be readers, but "real boys" are not. So how do we account for boys like Mike and Isaac who are drawn to reading as a pleasurable activity? It seems that identity is the key. The three readers in this study do stand apart somewhat from the non-readers. My impression is that while readers are accepted by their peers, some of their behaviors, such as reading, are perceived by those peers to be atypical.

A Distinct Masculine Identity

A clarification of Pierre Bourdieu's term "habitus" is necessary at this point. In *Toward a Civil Discourse*, Sharon Crowley explains that postmodern thought generally assumes that people act in a context of some sort. The English words "habit," "inhabit," and "habitation" all derive from the Latin term "habitus," which refers to a stable situation. These variations show how the notion of habitus permeates all parts of our lives. She continues her explanation by pointing out that habitus has a material manifestation because our culture is expressed in our bodily actions and creations. The habitus can also exist for long periods of time making them seem "natural" (62). Bourdieu explains that habitus is "very similar to what was traditionally called character, but...is something *non natural*, a set of *acquired* characteristics which are the product of social conditions." ("Habitus" 29). The concept of the habitus allows for examining much more of a participant than just the conscious notions of identity. Habitus is a way of

considering identity that looks at the way individuals perceive and assess the world as well as the reasons why he/she behaves in certain ways. The literacy of rural boys reveals that within their habitus is a distinct masculine identity. This habitus is one in which traits such as independence, expediency, competition, and individuality are valued.

Dean, Allen, Rick and George are not influenced to be avid readers though they have role models that are readers. Notably, these role models are female, but the male members of these subjects' families are not ardent readers. I think this has an impact on how the boys see reading in terms of masculinity because reading definitely becomes associated with female activities. According to Newkirk, in the eyes of young men, "real boys" do not like to read, and adult masculinity does not seem to include much reading. Dean speaks most directly to the issue of gender and reveals that the literacy of these subjects has a chronological element and also has genre and subject-matter attributes. He explains that once his class entered junior high school, reading became something more for the girls than for the guys. Guys viewed reading magazines about masculine endeavors, like hunting, sports, and cars, as acceptable. Those types of texts reinforced their notions of masculinity.

Isaac, Sam, and Mike are three participants whose responses make generalizations complicated. Some of the boys in my study do not seem to care that reading is seen as "a girl thing." They appear to believe that what they are reading is consistent with their masculine identity. Isaac reads classic, challenging literature that other boys his age generally do not have the desire to read on their own. Sam reads about sports. Mike reads about military history. It is important to note that these are not "girl books," and thus are acceptable reading materials for boys. Their choice of reading materials is sufficiently difficult to satisfy their need for a

challenge and is consistent with more conventional “male” topics. Therefore, I hypothesize these three find a sense of identity and individuality through their literacy.

The implications of this distinct masculine habitus manifest themselves in a couple of ways. First, the genres or literacy media that many rural boys are comfortable with are limited primarily to magazines, newspapers, movies, and television and topics such as war or sports. As Newkirk points out, anything that is about the real world is preferable to the “pretend” world (i.e. school), and book reading is associated with school. Second, these “non-readers” influence readers, both boys and girls. Boys who are readers are suspect. Randy stated that they are “okay—if that’s what they want to do.” Dean related that his multiple readings of a favorite book led to the guys giving him a hard time. Not surprisingly, the subjects talk about girls’ reading as something very typical. So reading books for pleasure is not part of the habitus of some rural boys.

Certain influences play a role in inculcating this male habitus. Deborah Brandt’s concept of sponsors offers a useful way to understand relationships and ideological influences in rural males. A number of literacy sponsors emerged from my interviews and are common to most, in some cases all, subjects. A variety of family sponsors exist from parents to siblings to extended family. Books, movies and television from popular culture are also sponsors of literacy. Private and public schools, junior colleges, and universities emerged as sponsors as well. Included are teachers, libraries, standardized testing services, school-related activities, the internet and technology.

For several of the subjects, mothers and sisters stood out as especially important sponsors. These role models would impart gender values, and literacy would “naturally” be associated with femininity. Like Newkirk, I found that the literacy of my subjects is a gendered

activity. Their first associations with reading were more frequently feminine than masculine, so they made gendered connotations with literacy and learning. However, the influence of these family-based sponsors does not appear to be powerful enough to affect the subjects' teen reading habits. In nearly all cases, the person the subjects considered the family reader was female (the exception is Randy). However, only in Sam's case would I consider that he reads primarily because his role model reads. In Isaac's case, he has his own motivation for reading for information, and does not appear to be particularly influenced by his sister's regular reading habit. However, this is still a gendered finding because it reflects male habitus characteristics of independence and individuality.

Popular culture is another important sponsor. The shows the boys watch such as *South Park* and *Family Guy* reinforce the satiric humor Newkirk argues that boys are drawn to. Certain books (*Holes*, *The Giver*) and magazines are sponsors that bestow independence and self-sufficiency. These books are coming-of-age stories that illustrate such values, and the magazines are often the subjects' preferred type of literature reinforcing independent choices in literacy. I found that the subjects in many cases don't want to be told what to read. They choose what they will or won't read in the classroom, despite parental influence, teacher influence, or grades. Again, we see here a gendered literacy emphasizing the values of individuality and independence.

Extracurricular activities sponsored by the school system promote literacy either in the type of activity (quiz bowl) or by grade requirements for participation (football). Such activities impart a sense of responsibility. One role that peer sponsors play is to hinder literacy by labeling it a "girl thing" as in the case with Dean. Peer sponsors are thus imparting gender values as well. Certainly, teachers are powerful sponsors of literacy in elementary and middle school; they have

a larger influence over reading preferences and habits than high school teachers. Allen's literacy in science was influenced by a female junior high teacher, and *The Giver* was recommended to Sam by a teacher. So gender values of independence, expediency, competition, and individuality are all part of the habitus of rural males that is created by literacy sponsors. As this study shows, masculine notions of literacy permeate boys' rural literacy.

Defining the literacy of rural boys is complicated. Indeed, generally the definitions of literacy can be slippery. In his book *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*, David Barton explains that we discuss literacy in terms of metaphors, and both lay persons and academicians create metaphors in an attempt to describe literate activity. Thus, the assumption that literacy is a skill is a metaphor. Barton also explains that since literacy is being studied in a number of academic fields, a variety of definitions have emerged to fit the questions generated in each field. I propose that the literacy ideology of the young men in this study can be labeled "serviceable" and is rooted in a masculine habitus. The boys' reading is in the service of their relationships with peers, with teachers, and with parents. Furthermore, this term implies a sense of confidence in one's natural competence, pragmatism, utilitarianism and self-interest.

One aspect of "serviceable literacy" is that these subjects are confident that their skills are accomplished enough to do whatever they may wish in the future to do. Newkirk's research reports a similar kind of confidence. Smith and Wilhelm similarly showed that boys desire a sense of competence about literacy. Another aspect of serviceable literacy is that it is a very pragmatic literacy. The boys feel that they read well enough to pursue any job they are interested in. Allen knows pragmatically that his failure to practice more challenging reading throughout school may affect his future success in college, although he has confidence that once he gets there, he will be able to handle the reading expectations. Serviceable literacy is also utilitarian. In

other words, for rural boys, reading should be used for a clear purpose. For example, George sees how reading about the markets on the job is utilitarian. A final aspect of serviceable literacy is that it is interest-based. Their literacy actions show stubbornness about what they read and what literate activities they engage in. For example, early in school Sam valued choosing his own reading materials.

The serviceable label applies to both the subjects who are readers and the subjects who are not readers. Again, I am defining readers here as boys who regularly read novels and books on their own and are willing to read school-sponsored texts, and non-readers as boys who rarely, if ever, read novels and books and very much oppose reading school-sponsored texts. The two groups just use reading for different purposes. Readers are those who read books without being forced to by a teacher or parent because they enjoy the activity. Take readers Isaac and Mike for instance. Isaac wants to expand his learning and Mike wants to escape. These two subjects show how literacy serves to shape their own masculine identities. Isaac seeks an academic identity and Mike likes being known as one of the readers in his class. For other subjects who are non-readers, the reading is serviceable if they are able to read the hunting or sports magazine they desire. For non-readers, reading serves certain purposes in their lives, but does little to challenge existing notions or expand a critical understanding of politics, economics or socio-cultural issues as Donehower, Hogg and Schell or Brandt suggest in their definitions of literacy.

Stigmatization

Donehower asserts that rural identities are shaped by the broader public culture. She establishes that rural literacies suffer from the stigmas that rural people are illiterate and consider reading of less value than those who live in urban areas (37). The findings in this study suggest that rural boys are aware of the stigma associated with living in a rural area. Dean talks about his

friends going to schools with more rigorous academic standards and larger class sizes. Although he says he doesn't want to work as hard as they appear to, there is a sense that he feels inferior. Isaac explained that he wished he could attend a larger school where there were more people who shared his attitudes and values. Allen, also, feels like he wants out of a "simple" community. The consequences of this stigma include embarrassment and frustration.

Some of the participants such as Isaac, especially, but also Mike, overachieve in academic life defying the stigma. Others are not aware of or ignore the stigma and appear to be content with their literacy performance. The stigma does not seem to affect their overall confidence in their own literacy because they value a "serviceable" literacy. Expanded notions of literacy reveal that rural boys are literate. By considering Donehower's and Brandt's definitions of literacy it becomes possible to see what kind of literacy exists in rural boys. Donehower emphasizes literacy for a rural community's sustainability, and Brandt focuses on economic consequences of literacy. Under these definitions, rural boys are certainly literate. The kinds of materials they read, newspapers and magazines, allow them to participate in the economic life of the community. They can work on a farm or as a mechanic and function well.

In order to counter the effects of the stigma, Donehower points out the importance of understanding how rural literacies differ from urban literacies. They differ in the use of leisure time, access to literacy materials, and economic demands of particular kinds of literacy. These differences result in "different ways of valuing and practicing literacy" (28). For example, the participants in this study spend leisure time watching TV or playing video games, and are often with family rather than friends because of distance and transportation limitations. Urban boys can more easily access malls, movies or arcades as well as friends. Urban boys have easier access to literacy materials. Rural boys have limited access to large libraries and bookstores that

are more likely to carry materials of interest such as a wider array of magazines. Finally, the kinds of jobs available to rural boys have different literacy demands than those of urban boys. Most of the subjects in this study worked for farmers or at the co-op, the types of jobs urban boys typically do not have.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital can also shed light on the class component of rural stigmatization. Cultural capital, which comes from one's social background, is the "knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications" (*Language* 14). Furthermore, it is the educational system that is the "guardian of the legitimate culture" (*Language* 62). The educational system, then, influences students' level of capital. Those with low capital tend to be excluded or exclude themselves from the system and thus are less successful in the "educational market" (*Language* 62). They are "least able to accept and adapt the language of the school" (*Language* 62). Some of the subjects in this study suspect or know that they do not possess high levels of cultural capital. Isaac in some way recognizes this, which may explain his efforts to read classic literature. Other subjects do not recognize or seem to care that they lack literary knowledge or the ability to effectively critique society, literature or art. Rather, they have knowledge and skills that are appropriate for rural culture such as fixing cars, playing sports, and farming. So the point here is that rural boys are stigmatized for their lack of the kind of literacy sanctioned by academia.

The stigma, of course, is based on a stereotype. Clearly, rural families do indeed value reading, and certain sponsors were directly responsible for this. Sam's mother helped him use the public library, Randy's parents encouraged reading a classic novel, and almost all of the subjects' homes included newspapers and magazines. Some of the subjects' non-school sponsored reading patterns as young adults eschew the stereotype of the non-reader. Randy reads

as he travels with his dad to work. Isaac read *Crime and Punishment* of his own accord.

Similarly, Mike reads even on vacations. Furthermore, none of the subjects of this study are technically illiterate. They certainly all read for a variety of purposes. Even Rick reads hunting magazines. ACT reading scores for Mike and Isaac were high, suggesting advanced proficiency in reading.

Yet, both Rose and Ogbu have identified the tendency for underachievers to just want to be average because they feel stigmatized. Their observation is that some students have experienced such academic and social disregard that they give up attempting to excel and simply strive to avoid failure. Unlike the boys Rose and Ogbu write about, the participants in this study have not experienced humiliation in the classroom. They are valued enough by their parents and teachers to be assured basic literacy. Yet, there is still a sense that some of the boys in this study are content to be average and perhaps this is reflected in my conclusion that serviceable literacy involves a feeling of competence, but not an urge to excel. In their circumstances, average means non-elite and non-urban. For some, attempting to excel academically and become part of the elite class may lead to failure; others just do not see benefit in working very hard in school. For example, one uses “Spark Notes” to get through challenging texts; another procrastinates before doing a reading assignment. Dean and Sam both speak about being lazy. John Ogbu’s work reveals similar notions that contribute to stigmatization as those I found. In five areas, their behavior parallels black students who do not want to be identified as white. First, the subjects in this study exhibit the masculine value of confidence that when they really need to read and understand something, they can do it. Second, one participant, Dean, articulated that excelling in English class was for girls, not boys. So boys, at least in his class, feared looking like girls if they read. Third, many of the subjects and many other male students seem to be content to be average

and not try to earn As or Bs. Fourth, often as with the case of George, boys are too tired to worry about excelling in school because they are working long hours outside of school. Fifth, media does tend to portray rural people as uneducated and incompetent, so our rural boys do not see positive images of their culture on television or in movies.

However, at times they attack reading with passion and finish the reading assignment early. Isaac admits to reading to be exposed to the world outside his own state. The boys' goals hint that that they are not content to be average. Mike wants to be a meteorologist, Sam a school teacher, Isaac a philosopher or lawyer, Allen a surgeon, and George some position in agricultural banking. Having given this evidence, a few of the other boys do not seem to have such high goals. One wants to stay home and work on the farm, and another wants to be a mechanic.

Stigmatization may result from characteristics of working class lives that Rose discusses. There is a parallel between the urban working class and the rural identity. First, there is, to a certain extent, a geographic and cultural isolation that comes from living in a rural area. Second, there is information poverty. Thirdly, there are intellectual curiosity and literate enticements that remain hidden from the schools. Those include, for example, one subjects' fascination with cars and another subjects' desire to read classics on his own. Finally, there are feelings of scholastic inadequacy. Despite a confidence that they do well enough, some participants believe that their school curriculum lacks rigor. Rose's identification of socioeconomic "otherness" or stigmatization has some varying applications in this study. I must point out how different the lives of students in this study are from Rose's life. There is no abyss that would lead to such despair. Rural families support literacy and don't deal with violence and death the way Rose did in his life. But some of the subjects in the study may not see school as any kind of escape route, especially Isaac. Others in the study don't feel they need an escape route, particularly Sam,

Randy and George who feel satisfied with their education. In some ways there is a boundary that creates a feeling of otherness. Isaac feels it and Dean feels it when they talk about getting out of the state because it feels confining. I found evidence for reading as a class issue. Allen thought of readers as “more stuck up than I am.” Isaac also conveyed traces of a moral argument when he criticized his classmates for reading material that was too easy and did not challenge them intellectually.

A Pedagogical Challenge

A pedagogical challenge exists for teachers of rural boys to address not only various skill levels but also cultural and socio-economic variations in students' backgrounds. Teachers hinder boys' success in the classroom by failing to account for the rural male habitus. Newkirk even argues that schools are failing boys because “we have discouraged, devalued, or even prohibited the genres of reading and writing that are most popular with many boys, stories that include violence, parody, and bodily humor” (xvi). Wilhelm and Smith cite Elaine Millard and her conclusion that boys are disadvantaged in their access to literacy. This disadvantage is apparent in the text choices, curricular emphases and text availability for which teachers are responsible (14).

Through elementary school education and parental expectations to obtain basic reading skills, the boys are socialized into the literate world. However, beyond such basic skills, the boys are reluctant to engage in advanced literacy skills like understanding and applying advanced level texts. The subjects in this study are competently literate as Rose defines it. They can pass classes with the necessary literacy skills. What school-sponsored literacy demands of them, however, is the kind of critical literacy Rose describes, one that is more analytical and evaluative. As Rose puts it, they do not learn “influential talk” (192). This influential talk means

using the kind of language proficiency and cultural knowledge that leads to higher socio-economic status and full participation in a changing and diverse society. I think the cause of this is a combination of the reluctance of boys to engage with challenging texts and the reluctance of teachers to demand such reading. When teachers set expectations that do not acknowledge the masculine habitus and rural identity of their male students, both parents and students fail to see the necessity of such assignments, so boys fail to do the work or stumble through it at best. The divergence between the ideology of the school and that of the community are apparent.

The most useful results in this study came from identifying masculine notions rural boys hold. Teachers need to understand how rural boys relate to school literacy because teachers need to form relationships with these boys before effective learning can take place. Donehower advises that to avoid perpetuating the stigma of being a rural student, teachers must acknowledge students' strengths, understand where they are, and respect their literacy. In the case of this study, teachers must understand serviceable literacy and realize its value in a rural community. By making connections to this kind of literacy, a more rigorous curriculum can be developed that will prepare rural boys for future challenges that will require advanced literacy. Smith and Wilhelm advocate inquiry-based instruction to meet boys' needs for flow, competence, immediate feedback and socialization. They also promote keeping "literature" in the curriculum because of its relevant themes, but they advise supplementing with informational texts so boys feel some level of competency (194). One of the most valuable pieces of advice is to provide context for understanding and enjoyment because boys do not like to be bored (195). Smith and Wilhelm also suggest giving more choice to students in the type and length of texts and allowing them to present knowledge in a variety of forms. They point out that the ideology of schools seems to boys a monolith. Boys do not believe that schools can ever be different, so the

imperative lies with teachers. It is important to note that such changes I have described are benefits to all students, not just boys.

In my own experience, I have found some success with the structure of senior projects. Students in senior English are required to demonstrate communications skills by designing and creating a project related to a topic of his or her choice. The components of the project require each student to write for a variety of purposes, speak in multiple venues, read primarily non-fiction texts, and communicate with adults. Through these projects, the rural boys in my classes have developed a wide range of projects, including building demolition derby cars, a trapping presentation, a mock NFL draft research project, sports DVDs, automobile restorations, a golf mini-workshop, and an ATV safety training presentation. They are more willing to spend time writing a research paper related to such topics than literary ones. Furthermore, their level of competence in public speaking is high because they are discussing topics with which they are very familiar. As Smith and Wilhelm acknowledge, developing new teaching methods is time consuming and difficult; I can attest to the truth of this statement. The senior projects require me to work in their habitus and guide them in developing their questioning and research skills. I also must help them seek resources outside the school such as adult experts on their topic. The senior project requires students to work independently and manage their work to meet multiple deadlines. Success depends upon the students' willingness to take responsibility for his learning. This assignment becomes very personal, which is one reason it is successful. As Donehower advises, I am attempting to respect and understand their individual literacies while also helping them to both stretch those literacies and acquire academic ones.

Conclusion

One limitation of this project was not including a more comprehensive characterization of the values, attitudes and behaviors of this particular community from which the reader would benefit. Another limitation is that I am the participants' English teacher, which may have skewed candid responses. A chief difficulty in this study is a small data set which calls for cautious generalizations about rural boys. Smith and Wilhelm assert that often teachers and administrators use research to make stereotypical assumptions about boys (19). They caution that many boys may not be served because no one fits the "average." Our expectations of boys get locked into typical literacy behaviors rather than the individual's unique literacy behaviors. Two questions surface because of my study and warrant further investigation. What role do fathers play in the literacy lives of rural boys? This research calls for further examination of the role of sponsors, especially those who probably have significant influence over literacy. What is the public pedagogy of rural areas? Rural America's unique history and economy also shape literacy practices and a related study would be fruitful.

I asked the subjects to define literacy and evaluate their own literacy in order to understand how their ideas differed from mine, as well as to examine their literacy ideology. This study led me to question my own notions of what it means to be literate. When I questioned these notions, I discovered that my habitus reinforced the image of a literate person as one who read "important" books and could share insights about them. I still believe that an important part of literacy is the discovery of new ideas that help us interpret our world and discover truths about it. However, I question whether the classics are the best way for all students to achieve this. If literacy is being able to contribute to the survival of one's community or being able to survive economically, having read a certain book (or canon of books) does not necessarily make one

literate. However, it is notable that several boys do not consider basic literacy, defined as the ability to read and write, to be true literacy. They seem to recognize, as I do, that real literacy seems to require something more. For example, Dean considers literacy the ability to read, write, and *talk*. Rick and Allen include liking to read in their definition. Rick does not consider himself to be literate because he does not like reading. Allen does not consider himself to be literate because “I am not into reading and can’t understand what I’m reading, except the newspaper, I can follow that (politics and things).” The other subjects consider themselves to be literate, but also believe that a literate person is “well-educated.”

One obvious consequence of a serviceable ideology is continued disengagement with the English classroom. This limits rural adolescents’ opportunities to expand their skills as well as opportunities to prepare for careers that call for a university education. They will lack knowledge of what Mike Rose calls “influential talk.” Their literacy in shop will continue to be high, but not necessarily in English or communications. While a passion for reading the classics is not required for anyone to support and sustain his or her community, it remains true that ideas are sacrificed by foregoing advanced literacy. Educators of rural males must reduce cultural isolation and information poverty, yet at the same time acknowledge all students’ literate identities. I am reminded every day of the profound and complex responsibility society has placed upon teachers. Ultimately, the goal for English teachers is to develop rich relationships with all of their students to help them develop healthy identities and insight about humanity.

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Appendix A - Interview Questions

General Literacy

What do you think it means to be literate?
Do you consider yourself to be literate?

Demographic Questions

Date of birth
Place of birth
Place or rearing
Gender/race: Do you belong in any ethnic/cultural group? How strong is this association to you? Does it matter a little, not at all, or a lot?
Type of household (childhood)
Type of household (current)
Great-grandparents' schooling and occupations, if known
Grandparents' schooling and occupations, if known
Parent'/guardians/ schooling and occupations, if known
Names and locations of all schools attended
What interests/activities/extracurricular groups do you belong to?

Early Childhood Memories (before school)

Earliest memories of seeing other people reading
Earliest memories of being taught to read
Memories of place where reading occurred
Occasions associated with reading People associate with reading
Organization associated with reading
Materials available for reading
Ways those materials were used/what did you do with them?
Did technology or media help you learn to read?

Reading in School

Earliest memories of reading in school
Memories of kinds of reading done in school
Memories of being taught by someone
Memories of self-instruction
Memories of being taught by someone your own age
Memories of how you were tested over your reading
What role did technology (computer, games, CDs) play in your learning to read?
What do you think of silent reading compared to reading aloud?

Reading with Peers

Memories of reading to/with friends

Memories of reading in play

Do you prefer to read with someone else over reading on your own?

Someone reading to you

Reading together

How do you handle assigned reading given as homework? Explain

Self-Initiated Reading/ Current Uses of Reading

What genres do you read now?

Tell me about all reading and writing you've done in the last six months.

Kinds of magazines/newspapers

Purposes (at different stages of your life; personal or job-related)

Required for class: describe the reading in those classes; how is it presented/what do you "do"

Where do you read (either homework or for pleasure)

Influential People

Memories of people who had a hand in learning to read (outside school)

What is your opinion of those who are good readers or those who read often?

Future plans and Geography

Past, current, future jobs

What are your plans after graduation?

Describe what you hope your own family will be like.

Would you do something different if you could? If so, what?

Is there anything you want to do (as job or personal interest) but that you don't believe you could do well?

Are there any classes you would like to take that are not offered by your high school?

Do you think living here limits your possibilities for jobs or personal interests?

If a better library were closer, would this affect your reading habits?

How is your life different than kids who live in cities or larger towns?

What is good (benefits) and bad (problems) about living in the city?

What is good (benefits) and bad (problems) about living here?

Values

- How important is reading compared to other activities?
- What activity(ies) make you “get lost” /lose yourself” in it?
- What motivates you to read?
- Do you ever make fun of reading assignments?
- What do you think the consequences of reading/not reading are?
- Who do you consider is your community?
- What does your community expect of you?
- How important is your school to you and your family?
- What are your parents’ expectations about your reading/education?
- In what way(s) are your parents involved with the school/your education?
- What are you best at? What do you think you do pretty well?

Sense of Literacy Learning

- What are your thoughts/observations about how you learned to read?
- What are your observations of how people in general learn to read?
- What is your opinion of reading in general?
- Do you think you are a good reader? How do you come to that conclusion?
- Do you think others consider you to be literate (identify “others”)
- What have others told you about your reading? What is your response to this perception?