A QUALITATIVE MULTIPLE CASE STUDY EXPLORING HOW THE LIVES OF HIGH SCHOOL MALE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM MEDIATE THEIR READING AND WRITING INSIDE THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

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ABSTRACT

LILY A. GATES. A Qualitative Multiple Case Study Exploring How the Lives of High School Male Students Enrolled in an Alternative Education Program Mediate Their Reading and Writing Inside the English Classroom. (Under the direction of DR. CHANCE LEWIS)

Historically, male students have been known to score lower than their female counterparts in reading and writing on standardized measures of academic success. While scholars, teachers, and even policymakers have attempted to explain and mitigate this gender gap in reading and writing scores, male students have had little opportunity to offer their insight into the research. Moreover, there is limited research about the causes of the perceived gap in reading and writing scores, or the potential ways in which the high school English classroom could be reimagined to provide a solution.

This qualitative multiple case study explored how the experiences outside of the classroom in the lives of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediate their reading and writing in the high school English classroom. Furthermore, this study explored how high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive pedagogical elements in the high school English classroom. In particular, this study focused on the experiences outside of school of three high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program. These stories were told through individual, narrative portraits composed by the researcher which were composed based on the analysis of data from two focus group sessions and two semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Findings from the study indicate that there is a need to expand the understanding of literacy skills, as well as how they are recognized, practiced, and assessed in the high school English classroom.

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DEDICATION

First, I want to express my gratitude for a God who loves me and there's nothing that I can do about it – and who definitely has a sense of humor. I am forever grateful for every blessing the Lord has poured out on me when I am far from worthy.

Ultimately, this work is dedicated to Daddy who is the hardest worker I know and has sacrificed so much for me. To Mommy who is the definition of love and is the person that I dream of being. To Brent who is everything to me and the world's best hype man. To Hommy who loves me more than I will ever deserve. To Theo, the honorary Dr. Dog, who changed my life in all of the best ways. And to Michael Ray Robinson who is the reason that I am even in the classroom at all.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Reportedly, male students in the United States have fallen behind in academics for several decades (Center on Education Policy, 2010; DiPrete & Buckmann, 2013; Whitmire, 2011). More specifically, male students have scored notably lower than their female peers in the areas of reading and writing on standardized tests in the academic setting (Reilly et al., 2019). Notably, female students have outscored male students on the reading test section of the National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP) every year it has been administered since 1971 (Loveless, 2015). The topic has been covered by a plethora of viewpoints from those of literacy scholars to those of journalists. Even policymakers have attempted to explain and correct the continuing gender gap in standardized measures of reading and writing (Thomas, 2018).

In the United States, a slight narrowing of the gender gap in reading and writing scores happened in the 1980s, but the 1990s ushered in another expansion in the gap between male students' performance on reading and writing tests compared to their female counterparts (Reardon et al., 2012). At the start of the 21st century, the perceived gender gap in reading and writing fell under scrutiny as authors and literacy scholars attempted to explain the perceived gender gap in these scores. As male students have been scoring lower in terms of reading and writing skills than their female counterparts for decades, it is imperative to note that a variety of professionals have attempted to explain the phenomenon yet have failed to reach a conclusion. Additionally, several scholars have attempted to create a conversation on the gender gap in reading and writing scores around that of race, yet the perceived gap in literacy scores extends beyond one demographic qualifier (Auxier et al., 2021). Cornwell et al. (2011) found that, in teacher-student assessments in primary grades, the female-male gender gap in reading scores is

nearly 300% larger than the White-Black reading score difference (p. 3). Therefore, investigating the perceived gender gap in literacy scores through the lens of race places limitations on the generalizability of the studies. The perceived gap in literacy scores for male students is a much broader issue than one identifying demographic category. In turn, the gender gap persists, as does the search for answers.

In the quest for answers and a solution to the gender gap in reading and writing scores, particularly those at the high school level, politicians have attempted to develop incentives and mandates to close the gap. Ongoing statewide assessments increased when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed in 2001 (Huntsberry, 2014). The ways that teachers assessed their students had to change in order to accommodate political promises, yet on paper, the gender gap in reading scores only widened as students moved to elementary school where they began reading to learn rather than learning to read (Plucker et al., 2010). Additional initiatives, such as assessments that were supposed to be a benchmark of success for primary schools, yielded results of often misidentifying students, especially males, as struggling readers (Catts, 2021). As many of these assessments are concentrated at the elementary school level, the data to explain the gender gap in reading scores at the high school level is severely lacking. The assessments used in the high school English classroom, such as the English II End of Course Exam, are supposed to provide teachers, school administrators, and districts with information about how well the students are performing on grade-level reading and writing tasks. However, many of these assessments use strategies which do not test a student's reading and writing skills, but rather how well they can assimilate into the mindset that the test maker had while creating the questions and answer choices (Reilly et al., 2019).

While the data suggesting high school male students are "struggling" with reading and writing skills stems from measures of standardized testing at the high school level such as the English II End of Course Test, the American College Test (ACT), and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), it is important to note that these tests are often mislabeled as tests of literacy (Harris, 2020). These standardized tests require students to be assessed on measures of reading and writing which are often narrowed down to multiple-choice options; however, the definition of *literacy* is actually much broader (NCTE, 2020). As the perceived gender gap in reading and writing scores often places male students as "underachievers" or "struggling" has often been referred to as a "gender gap in literacy," it is crucial to understand that literacy means far more than simply being able to obtain a proficient score on a standardized test of reading and writing (Catts, 2021).

Literacy transcends the act of answering questions about reading or writing for a scripted prompt or answering a series of multiple-choice questions, and contains elements such as speaking, listening, storytelling, and making cultural connections to what is read or written (NCTE, 2020). Therefore, this study emphasized the need for recognition that it is possible that the measure being used to rate a high school male's proficiency "literacy skills" may be inaccurate. As a result, the study highlighted ways in which male students have been inaccurately labeled as "struggling" readers and writers by school systems. In turn, the study shifted the narrative of the "male literacy gap" to a place where high school male students are viewed as experts in literacies which transcend the academic space.

The high school English classroom is typically the space where literacy skills are refined, but it may not always provide a place of comfort for all learners. However, this space holds the potential to evolve into a powerful, identity-forming space for male students who have been

perceived as “struggling” readers or writers (Landrum et al., 2019). While much of the body of scholarly research on the topic of the male literacy gap is situated in the elementary English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, the problem does not end in that grade span (Bausch, 2014; Senn, 2012; Wessel-Powell et al., 2018). High school students may be in the last phase of their traditional educational career, yet they are still falling into the perceived reading and writing gap that is evidenced by standardized testing data from the NAEP. The high school English classroom is a space where literacy skills are traditionally practiced and refined, yet political agendas throughout the recent decades have made way for a new English class rooted in test preparation for reading comprehension assessments at all grade levels (Catts, 2021). In this space, high school male students could be reading tales of tragedies and triumphs and seeing themselves as the hero of their own stories (Brittenham et al., 2018). While the space has been dimmed by negative labels and the push to read for punishment because of a score, rather than power to be used in life, the English classroom could be redesigned as a place where the high school male students’ assets as people, meaning makers, and creative beings are honored (Cook-Sather, 2006). Furthermore, the negativity surrounding high school male students in terms of reading and writing scores often leads to negative consequences that extend beyond the classroom walls.

While the cause of the gender gap in reading scores may be ambiguous, one negative effect is prominent. According to Lynch (2016), male students at the high school level who are struggling with reading and writing, according to their teachers or test scores, are more likely to encounter problems with authority figures which lead to disciplinary action in the school system. These same students who face suspensions, or the ones who are eventually expelled from school, are more apt to drop out altogether or find themselves unable to assimilate into traditional

schooling environments (Lynch, 2016). In turn, this leads to a greater number of male students who choose to drop out of high school while their female counterparts are graduating at higher rates (Reeves et al., 2021). As male students often do not find their identities in school, they become increasingly dissatisfied with their schooling experiences (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). As these students potentially do not feel successful in school because of the labels of "struggling" or "not proficient" that have been placed on them by school systems, their confidence in academic work diminishes (Bower, 2019). As the labels that are placed on them, often by administrators or teachers, indicate that they are not successful in academic spaces, male students potentially start to view themselves as being incapable of fitting in at school (Catts, 2021). Moreover, an increased sense of anxiety may be prominent in male students who have been prescribed the label of being a "struggling" reader by the school system as they potentially feel scrutinized or "tracked" through remedial level coursework (Bower, 2019). As a result, male students who have been labeled as struggling readers and/or writers by schools often have a hard time finding their place in the academic realm, and therefore have a greater potential to exhibit behavioral concerns or drop out of school altogether.

Many of these high school male students who feel unwanted or out-of-place in traditional schooling because of their perceived struggle with reading and writing skills are placed in Alternative Education Programs (AEPs). AEPs have been defined on several levels but are traditionally understood as places where students who have difficulty functioning at their traditional "home" school (Foley & Pang, 2006). These difficulties typically consist of academic struggles which place students at-risk of choosing to drop out, and/or exhibiting social and behavioral problems (Wilkerson et al., 2016). Also, many high school male students who are placed or choose to enroll in an AEP have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers

(Wilkerson et al., 2016). However, the same high school male students who are labeled as "struggling" in reading and writing, and find themselves in an AEP, may assume alternate identities of power and strength in other spaces beyond academia (Love, 2013). In fact, it is likely that they are practicing alternative methods of reading and writing beyond the high school English classroom where they can feel empowered and safe to express themselves. The notion that high school male students are not finding a place to feel successful in demonstrating their reading and writing skills in the traditional classroom indicates that there is a need to explore the places where they *do* feel comfortable exploring reading and writing. The ways in which their lives and relationships outside of school mediate their literacy practices inside the high school English classroom could prove to be quite powerful in explaining and mitigating the gender gap in literacy skills.

Furthermore, with high school male students historically scoring lower than their female peers on standardized tests of reading comprehension, as well as reports of male students finding the English classroom to be a feminine space, it is evident that the male perspective is needed in order to create an environment in the high school English classroom where the male student feels empowered (Parkhurst, 2018). Moreover, how high school male students are perceived in their families and their communities may prove to be different than the ways that they are seen in school. Additionally, the ways in which they socialize with their families, peers, and communities outside of school could inform their perceptions of reading and writing in the academic space. Therefore, investigating how the lives outside of school of high school male students inform their ideas about reading and writing inside school could hold the potential to provide insight into the perceived gender gap in reading and writing scores in high schools.

With the voices of male high school students being absent from the research on the gender gap in literacy, the previous studies offer very little information on how the lives of high school male students outside of school mediate their reading and writing inside of the classroom. As high school students are developing their relationships and potential careers outside of the academic space, it is likely that their lives beyond the scope of academia inform their motivations inside of the classroom in relation to reading and writing (Lynch & Zwerling, 2020). Kirkland (2009) noted that many males in the high school space have rich literacy practices which extend beyond the classroom and are not necessarily considered to be academic in nature. Therefore, while very few scholars have examined how the high school male student perceives his English class, their ideas and experiences could prove to be instrumental in creating positive change in the quest to close the literacy gap. In turn, it appears that many high school male students have been perceived as "struggling" by their school systems, yet it is important to investigate how their experiences outside of the classroom have mediated their perceptions of literacy.

While scholars, politicians, and educators have attempted to explain and mitigate the male literacy gap for decades, one voice has been absent from the conversation that holds the potential for true, positive change: that of the male student. The voices of our male students have often been silenced by the deafening noise of policymakers or school systems who are trying to solve the problem, yet the greatest instrument for problem-solving is being overlooked. In the quest to close the male literacy gap, the ability to listen to the perspectives of male students is imperative.

Over the past two decades, researchers have paid particular attention to the perceived male literacy gap at the secondary level. However, this study emphasizes how the current

generation of male students is still being characterized by a literacy deficit. While academia has evolved in terms of pedagogical practices and technological innovations, high school male students are still underperforming in areas of reading and writing on standardized tests in their English classes when compared to their female peers. This study extends the work of previous literacy scholars by exploring the perceived male literacy gap through the experiences of the male students through a more current lens.

Researcher Positionality

My own experiences as a high school English teacher have shaped my research. I believe that great teachers do not ask questions to their students, but rather to themselves. This study holds the potential for an answer that I have returned to for over a decade: Why are there so many male students enrolled in my remedial high school English classes? Throughout my career as an educator, I have had innumerable male students in my English courses that are designed for "struggling readers." Because of this obvious concentration of a single gender in my courses, I started to wonder if there was not necessarily a "race gap" as reported by numerous researchers, but rather a gender gap (Lynch, 2016; Tatum, 2017; Williams, 2015). As I surveyed the demographics of my own classes, I realized that male students were not *only* Black and Brown. They were not *only* from low socioeconomic classes. And they certainly were not "struggling readers." They were a rainbow of skin tones, a myriad of life experiences, and a melting pot of cultures.

As students in a course inevitably morph into pseudo-families, I started thinking about my classes as a community and a family unit. The problem was, our community did not view the skills they were learning and using in English class to be tools of power—instead, they viewed these exercises as a form of punishment. They often did not see themselves as readers, writers, or

speakers of wisdom in the academic setting. Instead, they saw themselves as "strugglers" and "stragglers" because of the labels that had been placed on them by the school system. Additionally, many of them *did* enjoy reading and writing, but their confidence in their literacy skills had been overshadowed by negative labels placed on them by the school system.

They brought a rich musicality of stories and experiences to the classroom. I learned more from them than I did in my twelve years of private education and five years at a public university. Because of the disconnect between negative labels and the powerful identities of the family-unit emerging in the classroom, I made it my maternal mission to investigate where reading, to them, went wrong, and how the English classroom can be transformed to feel *right* for self-expression and storytelling. Year after year, I watched large numbers of high school males trickle in and out of my remedial courses, but saw very few, if any, female students on my rosters. Before I even met the students in my classes, I was given a plethora of data points about their reported inadequacies in literacy skills. I was told they would struggle and would probably be incapable of doing "quality work." I was warned about them. But what the school system did not tell me was that these boys were funny, tough, resilient, and wise. They did not tell me that their stories would shape my own story and keep me in the classroom for far longer than I ever thought possible. They did not know that these boys were *friends, sons, brothers, cousins,* or *uncles*—not problems. We were, and are, *family*.

Ironically, it was the first-born "son" who not only brought me to the classroom but kept me there and ultimately inspired this study. As I was gifted a group of 30 male students and four female students in a 10th grade remedial English class during my year of student teaching, I started to notice a gender gap in reading and writing. Michael, the small boy with the big personality in the front row, captured my attention immediately because he embodied what it

means to be a storyteller. He was in the "lowest group" (as labeled by the academic counselor at the time) and hated reading, but was a great artist, could detail his aunt's baked spaghetti so well that I stayed hungry, and once wrote a personal memoir that he titled "My Koolaid Life." He told me that his life had the potential to be sweet, but he felt like God had forgotten to add the sugar. He did not need a lesson on identifying metaphors in the text when he *was* a metaphor. The school might not have seen his academic potential in reading and writing, but his mind and mouth were bubbling over with stories. His peers admired him, and his closest friends wanted to be him. It was through my interactions with him that I started to consider how the lives of high school male students outside of school could greatly mediate their reading and writing inside of the classroom.

Statement of the Problem

The problem lies in the lack of high school male voices and experiences used to inform reading and writing curricular choices and instructional practices. Although research states that high school male students are underperforming in reading and writing, educators and researchers must look beyond the classroom to understand how the lives outside of school of these students mediates their reading and writing skills. Because it is apparent that male high school students are using spaces beyond the academic setting in order to create, practice, and use rich literacy skills, it is essential to investigate these experiences which mediate their reading and writing in their high school English classes. The lives of high school male students play a significant role in shaping their identities; therefore, it is imperative to understand how their lives outside of school impact their identities as readers and writers. While researchers have attempted to pinpoint the cause of the gender-gap in standardized reading and writing scores, the dropout rate, and the measure of reading and writing skills, it is important to consider the idea that the voices and

perceptions of the male students in high school have rarely been explored.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative, multiple case study explored the ways in which experiences outside of school in the lives of high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP have mediated their reading and writing skills in the academic space. Because the voices of the high school male students who comprise the perceived gender gap in reading and writing scores on standardized tests are often unheard, this study allowed those same students a platform to share their thoughts, experiences, and ideas. This study also explored how the voices of high school male students enrolled in an AEP could potentially inform curriculum and instructional practices in the high school English classroom. The classroom space itself holds the potential to help students express themselves and construct their identities through literacy practices (Frankel, 2016). Furthermore, reading stories with teachers and classmates is a key component of becoming a critical thinker, yet high school students often create strong literacy practices outside of the classroom and beyond the pages of a book (Buck, 2012). Therefore, the voices of the high school male students enrolled in an AEP within this study provided information on how to reimagine the high school English classroom so that it is a more comfortable atmosphere for male learners.

Significance of the Study

Several researchers have attempted to examine the cause and potential solutions of the gender gap in reading and writing skills at the elementary school level, yet few studies focus on this phenomenon at the high school level (Husband 2014; Scholes et al., 2020; Wood & Jocius, 2013). Moreover, researchers have explored the literacy gap as it pertains to race, yet few scholars have examined the literacy gap in terms of the male gender at the high school level (Bryan, 2020; Byrd et al., 2021; Haddix, 2009; Sciurba, 2014). However, this study magnified

the voices of the high school male student in respect to how their lives outside of school mediate their reading and writing in their English classes. Additionally, the participants provided clarity on how they perceived the curriculum and instruction in the high school English classroom. Moreover, students enrolled in AEPs have traditionally been categorized as not being able to be successful in the traditional school setting (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). This study is significant because it:

1. Explored how the experiences of the high school male student outside of school could potentially inform curriculum and instructional practices in the high school English classroom
2. Informs high school English teachers, administrators, and literacy researchers about the perspectives of high school males who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers on high school English pedagogy

Research Questions

In order to explore the perceptions of high school male students enrolled in an AEP on reading and writing, the study explored the experiences of male students enrolled in a southeastern AEP high school. To gather meaning on how lived experiences outside of school mediate a student's perception of reading and writing inside the English classroom, and how those perceptions can be used to reimagine the high school English classroom, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediate their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom?

2. How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework which guided the study is that of Sociocultural Theory. According to Vygotsky (1978), human learning takes place as people interact with others and make meaning from experiences. Therefore, students' learning cannot be controlled or assessed in the classroom alone. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that people learn on two levels: the first level being a person's interaction with other people, then the second level being within the learner. This study, rooted in Sociocultural Theory, was used to gain perspective on how high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP are using their lives and interactions outside of school in order to inform their own understandings of literacy. As the study is positioned in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the research questions aimed to investigate how the students first learn from their experiences outside of school, then internalize those experiences to form a perception of reading and writing in the classroom space. These perceptions hold the potential to inform classroom instruction in the high school English classroom; additionally, they can be used for the argument to expand literacy practices beyond reading and writing that students engage in.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory has often been detailed on four different aspects of cognitive development when it comes to student learning. One of those aspects, *tools,* references the ways in which a student moves from the social learning level to the personal, meaning-making level through the use of words, art, or writing (Wang et al., 2011). Social learning happens when children are influenced or shaped by their parents, guardians, caregivers, peers,

and/or society as a larger unit (Wang et al., 2011). The person learns, socially/from others, then he/she continually makes meaning from these various aspects (Vygotsky, 1978). This is a continual process as a person continues learning from those around them, then applying those understandings to personal experiences; the process is aided by *tools* such as the written and spoken word, ways of communicating with people, media, etc. (Wang et al., 2011). These tools mediate learning and development as they help a person derive meaning from social interactions, cultural expectations, and outside influences. Another aspect, *mind*, refers to the part of the learner that transcends a person and focuses on how history, culture, and relationships work together (Wang et al., 2011). Combining these two aspects emphasizes the importance of learning about the high school males' literacy practices through a detailed account of their lives outside of the classroom (Johnson, 2012). This is relevant to the ways in which high school male students, particularly those enrolled in AEPs, may view reading and writing because the combination of *tools* and *mind* indicates that there is a connection between how the *mind* makes meaning from experiences in life and the ways in which a person perceives *tools* of learning such as reading and writing. This combination of two aspects of cognitive development creates the idea that the ways in which students engage in their everyday lives plays a crucial role in the meaning they derive from learning experiences in the classroom. Therefore, by using Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory as a guide, this study explored how students' experiences outside of the classroom mediated their ways of practicing literacy and finding purpose in reading and writing inside of the high school English classroom.

Critical Literacy Framework

Essential to this study is the incorporation of Critical Literacy Framework which "...encourages students to question issues of power—explicitly disparities within social

constructs…" (Coffey, 2016, p. 2). While a large part of the study is about better understanding how experiences outside of school mediate reading and writing inside of high school English class for high school male learners, a secondary component of the study was understanding the perceptions of high school male students about their high school English classes. In turn, the potential to reimagine the high school English classroom so that it is a more welcoming space for male learners to practice literacy skills was a result of the study. Because of this, the Critical Literacy Framework has a place in this study as it is rooted in the empowering nature of literacy. Critical Literacy, as understood in the work of Freire (1972), has links to self-empowerment through reading and writing rather than merely being able to recognize words on a page. As the data revealed that high school male students enrolled in an AEP often view reading and writing as unrelatable, or even as a punishment, the Critical Literacy framework provides a way of exploring the ways in which reading and writing can empower students to create positive change in their lives (Janks, 2013). The Critical Literacy framework suggests that students use literacy practices in non-academic ways that help them "read the world" as they "read the words" (Janks, 2013, p. 227). As there are potential societal and cultural ideologies that place restrictions on male students and how they construct their identities as being "academic" or "non-academic," the Critical Literacy framework not only exposes such restrictions of ideologies, but also enables male high school students to see their abilities to dismantle oppressive titles given to them by school systems and "re-write" their own stories of success.

Overview of Context and Methods

This study used a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design. The design sought to investigate, through the stories of lived experiences of three high school male students enrolled in an AEP, the ways in which reading and writing are mediated by lives outside of

school. The study was conducted at the site of an alternative school that serves students in Grades 6-12. This school serves an entire county of around 100,000 people in a rural area. Located in the Piedmont of Southwestern North Carolina, the school has a population of approximately 150 students. It is at Title 1 School with male students comprising 72% of the students. Fewer than 5% of the students enrolled in this school scored on the proficient level on their end-of-course English test.

The sample population for this study was procured from criterion sampling procedures. Moreover, the sample population was selected using convenience sampling to gain the preferred group of students for the study. Students had to meet the following criteria in order to be selected for the study:

1. Identified as male by their home school
2. Between the ages of 15-19
3. Enrolled in the Student Promise AEP (as detailed below)
4. Identified as a struggling reader and/or writer by previous standardized test scores as reported by their home school

Currently, I work as a high school English tutor two to three nights per week in an AEP which is housed at the alternative school previously described. The school is governed by the core beliefs of safety in school, student-centered decision making, empowering students to make positive changes academically and personally, collaboration with families and communities in order to ensure success and high school graduation, high expectations for students and staff, and data-driven decision making. The majority of our students are male students as identified on their birth certificates. Students who are enrolled in the program have either already dropped out of high school, or have been labeled as being "at-risk" of dropping out by their school counselor(s)

and/or administrator(s). The students who are enrolled in this AEP take online, district created, self-paced courses via Canvas Learning Management System to receive credits toward earning their high school diplomas. Students take all elective courses during the mornings at the local community college so that they can have some type of trade work certificate by the time they receive their high school diploma. An additional part of the program is that students are required to attend two-hour face-to-face sessions known as "seminars" at least two nights per week. During the seminar session, students receive one hour of face-to-face academic support/tutoring. The other hour of the seminar is spent in small groups. Teachers, counselors, and other community stakeholder volunteers take turns leading small group sessions. These sessions are dedicated to helping students build confidence, reflective practices, healthy relationships, and other social-emotional learning needs as identified by the AEP's principal. The principal of the AEP approved my research study and allowed me to use the small-group session time after the academic support time to conduct the study. Because the study focused on building confidence in literacy skills and self-reflection practices, students did not miss any academic support hours, but rather spent the small group social emotional learning time participating in the study.

After explaining the study, and obtaining parental consent from participants under the age of 18, and participant assent, I had seven participants who met the criteria as outlined above. Out of the seven participants, two of them chose to not participate for personal reasons, and another participant was not able to participate because of absences. Four participants participated in two focus group sessions and two semi-structured interviews. From the data collected from the focus group sessions and the semi-structured interviews, I created a narrative portrait for each participant. I used a research journal throughout the entire study so that I could reflect on

experiences, attempt to eliminate personal biases, and record experiences or observations which went beyond the scope of an interview or a focus group session.

Limitations and Assumptions

Limitations

I acknowledge that there are some limitations to this study. The case study design has been challenged in terms of generalizability and lack of rigor (Ellinger & McWhorter, 2016; Merriam, 1997). However, Ellinger and McWhorter (2016) pointed out that case studies are "...about real people and real situations" while reminding us that they "...illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study" (p. 3). This indicates that, while other qualitative methods give us snapshots of people/culture/history, the case study gives us rich, *in-depth descriptions* of a single snapshot which lead to further understanding. In order to ensure a quality, in-depth description and analysis of my data, my sample size was intentionally kept small. This lessens the generalizability of the study, but still serves as a contribution to the existing body of research on how to nurture literacy skills, particularly those of high school male students who have been labeled as “struggling” readers or writers in the English classroom. Additionally, while English (2000) criticized the portraiture method because of its inability to showcase multiple perspectives, Lightfoot-Lawrence and Davis (1998) reiterated that the researcher should search for the voice in the research that *deviates* from the norm and use this voice to understand multiple ways of viewing the phenomenon under investigation. Tracy (2013) commented that, “...It is important to stay open to multiple meanings. The question is not ‘What is the story?’ - but rather ‘What is a story here?” (p. 188). By weaving my own experiences as a high school English teacher into the narrative of the study, I provide a contribution to the

existing body of knowledge through a combination of research and *experience*.

Assumptions

There are a few assumptions which underlie the qualitative multiple case study. My own experiences as a high school English teacher and my interpretation of the research literature create three assumptions:

1. High school male students do not feel connected to the curriculum and/or instructional practices used in the traditional high school English classroom.
2. The high school English classroom is not a space where male voices are honored.
3. The lived experiences of high school male students mediate their reading and writing in the high school English classroom.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used in this study:

Academic Literacy: the ability to communicate fluently in an academic community; this includes reading, evaluating information, presenting knowledge, and debating knowledge through both reading and writing (Wingate, 2016)

Alternative Education Program: an alternative to traditional public school designed to address the needs of students who are at risk of failure in a traditional school setting because of poor grades, disruptive behavior, or truancy (Carver et al., 2010)

Dropout: when a student withdraws from school, typically including performance variables such as poor attendance, disruptive behavior, or course failure(s) (Morrow & Villodas, 2017)

New Literacy: the multiple ways that we interact with the world and the people around us, as well as how we are shaped by it and contribute to it, how we communicate with others, and introspectively, via writing, reading, listening, speaking, and creating (NCTE, 2020)

Autonomous model of Literacy: the ability to read a text, the ability to write a text, the ability to use language to speak, read, and write (UNESCO, 2021)

Literacy Practices: using literacy as a tool for engagement in society through various forms of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and creating (NCTE, 2020)

Reading Motivation: one's desire to read based on interest, perceived control, application to life, and/or social interaction (Tabaoda et al., 2008)

Reading Comprehension: the ability to read a text and correctly answer questions about the text based on how well a student understands what they read (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017)

Reimagine: using creativity to critically examine how current practices can be re-worked or transformed for improvement (Garrison et al., 2021)

Voice: perspectives, life experiences, personal stories (English, 2000)

Summary

The importance of this research is situated in the persistent need to not only understand the perceived male literacy gap in high schools, but also to create space in the high school English classroom where male students can feel empowered to both tell and craft their stories. The existing data indicates that male students who are labeled as "struggling" with reading and writing skills are more likely to not find their places in schools, and thus be placed in an AEP or drop out altogether. While high school male students are viewed as having low *literacy* scores by school systems, this study highlights the ineffectiveness of standardized testing measuring *literacy* skills. High school male students may not be scoring as high as their female counterparts on standardized tests in reading and writing, yet this study revealed that high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers actually do possess strong *literacy* skills that transcend the academic space. A qualitative case study was used in order to

better understand how the experiences outside of school of high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP mediate their reading and writing in the English classroom. The insight from these participants holds the power to inform high school English teachers, administrators, and literacy scholars as to how to make curricular and instructional modifications to create better experiences for high school males in the English classroom.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In this chapter, I outline the history of the perceived gender gap in literacy scores and how the high school English classroom holds the potential to be a transformative space where the voices of male students are amplified. I also trace the historical meaning of the term "literacy" and how the term has evolved over time. Additionally, I investigate the potential solutions that have been suggested by politicians and literacy scholars for closing the perceived male literacy gap at the high school level. Lastly, I examine the power of student voice as a means of transforming the high school English classroom in order to re-frame the narrative surrounding the reading and writing "struggle" of male students.

Brief History of the Shifting Gender Gap in School in the United States

Historically, the gender gap in education in the United States has undergone extreme shifts. As early as 1642, when the nation was just forming, there was a sharp focus on the education of males. While the people of Massachusetts recognized the importance of education, they did not foresee the role in which women would take in forming the foundation of the country (Elliot, 1893). Therefore, male students were broadly educated, but in the 1700s, female students were typically educated at home in "Dame Schools" where female teachers taught basic reading and writing skills (Madigan, 2009). In turn, male students were more educated than female students and female students were not allowed to be formally educated outside of the home until the late 1700s (Elliot, 1893). Again, male students gained more traction in education as females were only allowed in these schools during select months, and there were not any coeducational colleges in the United States until 1835 (Goldin & Kats, 2011). The limitations placed on female students made it possible for male students to pull ahead of their female

counterparts in their educational endeavors. The gender gap during this time consisted of female students falling behind their male peers because they were not allowed the same access to education.

However, in the late 1800s, the Civil War provided women with more opportunities to do the work that was previously entrusted to men such as owning businesses, running farms, or keeping up with plantation management (Wozniak, 2019). This new concept made room for female students to start being more formally educated rather than educated in the home. By the middle of the nineteenth century, female students were starting to outnumber male students in public schools (Tyack & Hansot, 1992). Girls even started outnumbering boys in high schools, and women started filling the majority of teaching jobs, especially in larger cities (Gershon, 2020). It was during this time that a debate arose surrounding "coeducation" as many traditionalists attempted to spread the idea that girls were intellectually inferior to boys as they feared women would take over roles that had been customarily filled by men (Gershon, 2020). In turn, the 1900s were filled with even more advances for women in the educational realm; the gender gap in education started to shift in the opposite direction.

Although women had more open access to education in the 1950s and 1960s, there were still twice as many men as women graduating college with a bachelor's degree (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). However, a dramatic shift in the education gap occurred in the 1970s. When the federal government passed Title IX in 1972, discrimination against women in education became illegal (Powell, 2022). While the enrollment of female students in colleges rose during the 1980s and 1990s, the enrollment rate for men remained the same (Aliprantis et al., 2011). From 1970 to 2010, the rate of men completing a bachelor's degree rose by 7%, but on the contrary, the rate of women completing a bachelor's degree tripled, rising from 14% to 36%

(Aliprantis et al., 2011). The gender gap in education continued to widen at this point as male students started falling behind their female peers in educational pursuits. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), by 2019, women were earning more college degrees than men at all levels of higher education. Currently, in 2022, around 60% of all college students are female; this trend further suggests that the gender gap in education is no longer placing females in the underachieving category, but rather placing males as stagnant and/or declining in educational attainment.

History of the Male Literacy Gap in the United States

Just as the United States has experienced a shifting in the gender gap of educational attainment as a whole, one particular area which has also experienced an evolving gender gap is that of literacy. In the early colonial period, it was important for all students, no matter their gender, to be able to read the Bible (Goldin, 2011). Even though female students were taught to read so that they could further their religious knowledge, they were not taught to write (Perlmann & Shirley, 1991). Women were not working outside of the home; therefore, the colonists did not believe that there was a need for them to know how to write since they were not signing documents (Perlmann & Shirley, 1991). According to Monaghan (1988), the gender gap in reading and writing ability was emphasized as fewer than half the women in colonial America were literate at the conclusion of the eighteenth century. Around 1790, males were the most literate gender as they were twice as literate as their female counterparts (Gershon, 2020). However, in the mid-1800s, a new concept known as “Republican Motherhood” emerged as many started to believe that women would be more suited to raise virtuous children who aided in the development of the republic if they were literate (Perlmann & Shirley, 1991, p. 53). Moreover, because of the large influx of female students in public education in the 1800s, the

gender gap was repositioned as female learners grew in reading and writing abilities, but male learners remained unchanged, or even declined (Monoghan, 1988).

The gender gap in literacy attainment further shifted to a place where women were becoming superior, and men were struggling, during the mid to late nineteenth century. The growing number of females who were educated and could read and write led to the feminization of school teachers across the country (Perlmann & Shirley, 1991). Consequently, what was a male *only* occupation in the colonial period, now shifted to an occupation filled by mostly women in the 1900s (Boyle, 2004). The reduction of agricultural trades and the increase of more urbanized cities during the early 1900s led to an even greater increase of literate female students, and in the 1940s, the Census Bureau and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) started to track the reading habits of Americans (University of Texas, 2015). In 1942, one of the largest studies at the time concluded that girls in both primary and secondary schools were reading much better than boys (Loveless, 2015). In an extension of the gender gap in reading, female students continued to outscore male students on tests of reading ability well into the 21st century (Reilly et al., 2019). This is continually evidenced by the female students in the United States who have outscored their male peers on the reading portion of the NAEP for over 50 years (Loveless, 2015). As the divide between male and female reading and writing scores on measures of standardized achievement increased, scholars and reporters started to take more notice in the 21st century (Loveless, 2016). In 2015, nearly twice the number of girls scored "advanced" in reading on the NAEP as did the boys (Quinn & Wagner, 2013). As male students have been scoring lower than their female peers for decades, the causes and potential solutions have been disputed by people from various fields of study, yet they have not succeeded in reaching a conclusive understanding of the problem. The perceived gender gap remains as the

search for better answers persists. The search for answers has led researchers on a journey where they are pushed to look beyond the scope of the gender gap in reading and writing scores, and more into the precise terminology which underscores what it really *means* to be literate.

Definitions of Literacy

Although the concept of school systems labeling male students as "struggling" has not seemed to evolve over the decades, the term *literacy* in and of itself has gone through multiple transformations. Literacy skills are generally tested through measuring a student's ability to read and comprehend texts, write about texts with proficiency, and discuss their findings with other students (Burns, 2012). However, as people and entire societies have evolved, it makes sense that the understanding of what it means to be *literate* has also changed. The historical definition of literacy is a stark contrast to the new, multi-faceted explanation of the term. In fact, the discrepancy between how literacy practices are *understood* and how they are *tested* in the high school English classroom indicates that there is a need to explore alternative curricular approaches and testing methods.

Traditional Definition of Literacy

Defining the word "literacy" appears to be a simplistic task, but the term is haunted by ambiguity. The notion of defining the term "literacy" proves to be difficult when considering the complexities of purpose and use. In the early 15th century, the term "literacy" stemmed from a Latin word meaning "having knowledge of letters," but the term, as well as the definition, has evolved over the centuries (Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 12). Being able to distinguish between letters grossly underscores the importance of the written and spoken word. Furthermore, one may be able to distinguish between letters, but not derive *meaning* from particular combinations of letters, words, or sentences. In colonial America, the act of reading, but not always writing,

created the definition of what it meant to be *literate* (Reid & Wearmouth, 2002). Additionally, the act of being *literate* was usually coupled with spiritual education; therefore, it was not until more formal, coeducational schooling experiences that scholars started defining literacy outside of the realm of religion (Monaghan, 1988). During the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s, the quick production of paper greatly reduced the cost of making books (University of Texas, 2015). As a result, during the 1800s, literacy was defined as the ability to read and write as students in public schools had greater access to textbooks and creating literate students became a key goal in formal education within the United States (University of Texas, 2015). Throughout the 1900s, the definition of literacy remained mostly unchanged, but in the 1970s key literacy scholars such as Schofield (1973) and Graff (1979) started conducting large-scale research on connections between literacy and social and economic development (Limage, 2005). According to Limage (2005), the generation of scholars in the late 20th century made a case for investigating and expanding the previous definition of literacy.

Today, in the 21st century, the term "literacy" has a somewhat fluid connotation. While there is not a common definition of literacy, scholars have come to contest the notion that literacy is merely the ability to write and read text (Deagle & D'Amico, 2015; Frankel et al., 2016; Henderson, 2021; Perry, 2012). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) defines literacy as "...the way that we interact with the world around us, how we shape it and are shaped by it" (2020). This definition underscores the power of literacy to not only enable people to read and write, but radically change the world through interactions with others. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), literacy is the ability to "...identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (Montoya, 2018). While both NCTE and

UNESCO offer abstract definitions of literacy, both organizations highlight the importance of a person's *experiences* both within the context of reading and writing and in the world at large. This focus on an experience does more than simply offer a reading or writing score from student performance on a standardized test; it reinforces the idea that people are *made* of stories and have the power to continually, metaphorically pen their own chapters in life.

As the traditional definition of literacy appears to be evolving, the measures in which schools are "testing" students' literacy abilities remain stagnant. In turn, this often places male students as lacking literacy proficiency (Catts, 2021). Street (2003) referred to the traditional view of literacy as merely reading and writing as the "autonomous model" where introducing literacy—autonomously—will improve perceived "illiteracy" no matter the context, culture, or economic conditions (p. 77). Street (2003) extended the assertion that autonomous literacy is "benign" and void of social practices by underscoring how school systems often deny the power of literacy and ignore those whose literacy practices are marginalized by relying on measures of standardized testing in reading and writing to prescribe a literacy "score" to a student (pp. 77-78).

The New Literacy Model

While the traditional, "autonomous model" of understanding of the term "literacy" implies that it is something that can be tested and quantified, there is a need to reexamine the meaning of the term which transcends an academic understanding (Street, 2003, p. 77). The autonomous view of the term "literacy" tends to define the U.S. school systems' idea that reading comprehension scores on a set of uniform reading tests can determine a student's literacy abilities (Burns, 2012). However, the New Literacies Studies (NLS) first emerged in the first decade of the 21st century and offers a more ideological model that is more sensitive to the

sociocultural nature of literacy development (Burns, 2012). The current definitions of "literacy" from NCTE (2022) and UNESCO (2018) situate it as brimming with life and possibility based on an individual's own creativity, communication skills, and interpretation of experiences. These definitions imply that literacy skills are not always strengthened in the academic space. The way students engage with peers, create meaning from the world in which they live, and retell stories of their own lives proves that literacy goes far beyond the identification of letters. Literacy is a part of life which contributes to a student's identity formation as they come to understand both themselves and others around them. Consequently, students are almost constantly building identities through the literacy practices in which they engage on a daily basis. Similarly, when readers create meanings from texts, they are engaging their previous knowledge of experiences, understandings, and cultural practices in order to make connections to that text (Burns, 2012). The NLS promotes the concept that the "...ideas we ultimately take away from a text or interaction develop largely in and through social engagement" (White & Hungerford-Kresser, 2014, p. 645). Because students are developing their ideas through social engagement, it is imperative to investigate the ways in which high school male students are using social engagement in their own lives, beyond the classroom, in order to build robust literacy skills.

This keen focus on engagement with others and the *experiences* in a students' life playing a role in refining their literacy skills implies that literacy practices shape a person's identity. NCTE (2019) emphasized the malleable essence of the term literacy; as the world changes, so does the meaning of literacy. This evolving meaning of literacy coincides with the ways in which a student's lived experiences continually shape his worldview and identity. As students encounter innumerable experiences throughout their lifetime, their understanding of who they are and their places in the world comes into focus. Literacy practices shape identities as a person

develops these skills within social practices that involve engaging in activities that are historically, socially, and culturally grounded (Frankel et al., 2016). While literacy is about lived experiences, it is also connected to personal histories, as well as "...narratives, life possibilities, and social trajectories of all individuals and groups" (NCTE, 2019). Therefore, literacy skills transcend the traditional, academic concept of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Levine & Horton, 2019).

As the definition of literacy continues to evolve, there is a movement to shift the traditional definition of that of reading and writing to a more comprehensive understanding of literacy which includes the functionality of speaking, listening, engaging socially, and effectively communicating (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Street (2003) emphasized the difference between the autonomous model of literacy and what he refers to as the "ideological model" of literacy (p. 78). Street's (2003) ideological model of literacy underscores the "...importance of a culturally sensitive view of literacy practices" and places literacy practices as a way of life, not merely a neutral skill to be obtained in primary school (p. 77). The ideological model of literacy is rooted in shifting world-views and social acts which are constantly evolving and forming the identities—a stark contrast to the autonomous model of literacy employed by most school systems (Street, 2003, p. 79).

Critical Literacy

As the definition of literacy has shifted over time, a new framework emerged as a way of blending the tradition of reading and writing with the new understanding of literacy as being a cultural element. The Critical Literacy Framework is rooted in theoretical concepts from the 1920s and stems from ideas found in the Frankfurt School, a place where scholars attempted to develop social theories about class-based power struggles which were rooted in Marxism and

free from political influence (Yoon & Sharif, 2015). According to Morrell (2008), in the 1940s, Paulo Freire's research emphasized the importance of literacy education highlighting the culture and personal experiences of students. Additionally, in the late 1980s, Friere and Macedo (1987) worked together to underscore the idea that reading does not mean recognizing words on a page, but rather "...reading the world" (Morrell, 2008, p. 81). Today, the work of those early scholars culminates into the current understanding of Critical Literacy as a way for students to have a vehicle to understand and examine daily experiences within society "...with a view to understanding what it means to locate and actively seek out contradictions within modes of life, theories, and substantive intellectual positions" (Bishop, 2014, p. 52). From this idea, Critical Literacy is an approach to learning where students examine various texts and/or mediums of communication in order to analyze the relationship between the text and the societal implications it provides (NCTE, 2020).

The idea that using digital tools to acquire and demonstrate critical literacy skills has recently emerged as more students are engaged in meaningful acts of reading and writing in digital spaces (Avila & Moore, 2012). In the first decade of the 21st century, Jenkins (2009) noted that web-based tools allow students to engage in "...greater participation in our larger culture…" but these mediums are often restricted within schools because they are not deemed "educational" based on traditional conceptions of literacy (p. 516). As the digital world exploded with social media platforms such as Instagram in 2010, Snapchat in 2012, and more recently, TikTok in 2016, Gainer (2013) pointed out that these platforms allowed students to see that information is "never neutral and always mediated by sociocultural, political, and historical contexts of when, where, why, and by whom they were created" (p. 18). Practicing tenets of Critical Literacy in the classroom expanded even farther when the Covid-19 pandemic shifted

public schools around the United States to online learning (Sá et al., 2021). Students had to learn how to quickly develop a critical approach to reading and writing in a digital space as they were not only completing schoolwork online, but also relying on social media platforms to stay connected with friends and family (Yoon, 2020). As the definitions of the term literacy have evolved over the decades, school systems and teachers alike have attempted to weave in Critical Literacy practices into the high school English classroom. However, just as the definition of literacy itself has been shrouded in ambiguity, the ways in which the high school English classroom has evolved has often been erratic and often frustrating for both teachers and students. As the high school English classroom has adapted over the years where teachers are to perform curricular overhauls in order to meet the standards of policy makers, the overall goal and vision of what it means to strengthen literacy skills in high school may have been lost.

The High School English Classroom

The definition and understanding of the term *literacy* is perhaps best showcased in the changes in curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom throughout history. While the first high school during the colonial period was used to educate only the male, elite members of society, the concept of high schools quickly widened as America raged wars on its own soil and sought to educate children who would be the future of the democratic process (Cubberley, 1920). The implications of these changes lead some scholars to believe that the current curriculum and instruction rooted in the autonomous literacy model used in America's high schools may be a contributing factor to the perceived literacy gender gap in high school male students.

Curriculum in High School English: A Historical Overview of Change

During the 1600s and 1700s, high schools were beginning to emerge and were often known as "Latin Grammar Schools" or "academies" and students received a classical education in terms of their literature courses (Cubberley, 1920). Literature was often taught in Latin and each school's principal (headmaster) created the curriculum based on what he deemed to be the needs of the community (Bacus, 1974). However, during the mid-1800s, the high school English literature curriculum started to shift away from classic Latin and started using the vernacular, English (Cubberley, 1920). When the Civil War ended, a movement for free, public education for *all* spread quickly throughout the nation and there was still a stark focus on the needs of a community rather than a standardization of curriculum (Bacus, 1974). High schools became more diverse in their course offerings and reading materials in English classrooms as the nation felt like individual needs were of utmost importance; this was not a problem at the time, because the high school diploma was a terminal degree (Culburtson, 2012). Between 1870 and 1910, there was a surge in college attendance, and such extreme diversity in high school coursework became a problem for colleges' admission requirements (Lackney, 2015). A need for uniformity within curricular choices in the English classroom at the high school level was elevated after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 as college attendance rates plummeted because both male students and teachers were drafted to aid in the war (Culbertson, 2012). Since both high schools and colleges were losing males to military drafts, schools across the nation were challenged to prove their practical value (Bacus, 1974). As a response to this need, The National Education Association (NEA) created college entrance requirements which would emphasize uniformity in the high school English class's curriculum (National Education Association, 1899). According to the NEA (1899), the goal was that every student in every high school across the country would

be prepared to read and write in order to be a part of the system of government or take a leadership role in times of need (Culburtson, 2012).

The standardization of curricular choices and instructional practices prevailed as the NEA created a set list of content and literature that would be taught in high school English classrooms across the country as early as 1892 (National Education Association, 1894). However, during the World War I era, high school English teachers started to seek more autonomy in their curricular choices and instructional practices (Applebee, 1996). During the Great Depression and the decade that followed, the high school English classroom became a place where students' basic needs were met, and educators were fighting to have a voice rather than have to submit to uniformity (Culburtson, 2012). It was during the 1930s and 1940s that teachers started providing an approach to reading and writing that was more grounded in experiences rather than mandated literature guides (Applebee, 1996). This idea extended during the 1950s and 1960s as NCTE released a pamphlet called *Censorship and Controversy* in response to McCarthyism (NCTE, 2022). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Ralph Tyler, an education scholar, started promoting the idea that the nation needed a way to measure learning and educational standards should be based on objectives from the course rather than the memorization of facts in a piece of literature (Hlebowitsh, 2021).

The High School English Classroom in the Age of Standards

The 1990s and early 2000s became known as the Age of Standards and by 2001, the federal government controlled the teaching of reading (Culburtson, 2012). After No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed in 2001, many schools were left scrambling to "teach to the test" and focus primarily on mathematics and reading (Learning First, 2018). Because NCLB required schools to test "proficient" in reading by the year 2014 or face serious punishment such as school closing,

subjects that encouraged strong *literacy* skills, rather than reading comprehension skills, were often pushed aside or abandoned altogether (Learning First, 2018). This means that students were severely underserved in subjects which allow them to exercise their creativity and build meaning from life experiences through art, expressive thought, or music (Learning First, 2018). These subjects suddenly became unimportant for students because of the rigorous focus on preparing students to be tested on their reading *comprehension* skills. In turn, it is evident that reading and writing became robotic acts of submission for students who had to merely satisfy a test maker's interpretation of a reading passage. The high school English classroom quickly morphed into a space where students practiced guessing what someone else wanted them to think about a text rather than a place where they were free to experiment with words, writing, and self-expression (Culburtson, 2012).

The frustrations of learners are illustrated in the reading test scores of students, but it is likely that the data offers a skewed perception of students' levels of literacy abilities, particularly those high school males. The United States Department of Education (2020) reports that girls are scoring higher than boys at Grades 4, 8, and 12 in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); however, the assessment does not test skills reflected by Street's (2003) ideological understanding of *literacy.* It can be assumed that standardized test scores offer limited information on male students' perceived underachievement in reading. Yet, there is limited research examining alternative methods, as recognized by school districts, to assess a student's literacy skill set. Standardized reading tests may assess a student's reading comprehension level of subjective reading tests, but they leave several areas "untested" that could reflect a student's true literacy ability (Catts, 2021). While test scores often position high school male students at the bottom level of achievement, literacy practices extend well beyond

the simplicity of answering questions on a reading test (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). Moreover, standardized reading tests used in public school classrooms across the country rely heavily on a student's prior knowledge and language proficiency, but they fail to test a student's literacy skills which exceed the rigid guidelines of textbooks and scripted curriculum (Catts, 2021). Because literacy has been classified as a sociocultural practice which is embedded in the life experiences of students, there is a need for research which explores how these "underperforming" male students are using strong literacy skills which may not be defined as "academic." Many high school male students have rich literacy practices from their own sociocultural experiences which transcend items which can be quantitatively scored (Catts, 2021). Therefore, the data that suggests male students are severely underperforming in reading achievement might be significantly distorted and provide an inaccurate representation of the strength of the high school male students' literacy practices (Cervetti & Wright, 2020).

The Feminization of Schools

With the perceived gender gap in reading and writing scores placing high school male students as "struggling," it is important to note that not only the curriculum, but who is teaching it, may impact the male students' experience in the classroom. High school male students often view the English classroom as a feminine space where reading and writing are not defined as masculine activities (Parkhurst, 2018). As early as the 1840s, the United States started to see a rise in female teachers replacing their male counterparts in the classroom (Boyle, 2004). During this time period, the Industrial Revolution created more, better paying jobs for men, and women were viewed as a bargain for schools to employ as teachers (Boyle, 2004). By 1950, the federal census revealed that nearly 75% of America's teaching population was female (Parker, 2015). By 2017, this statistic remained consistent with approximately 76% of public-school teachers

being female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The feminization of schools is a possible contributor to the gender gap not only in education, but specifically in reading and writing. According to Sarroub and Pernicek (2016), the male identity often lacks a safe space for development in the high school English classroom, therefore they are more likely to reject a reading curriculum and lack motivation to engage in literacy practices at school. Moreover, a permeating deficit-mindset surrounding male students in the English classroom restricts their ability to construct their identities and limits the type of instructional materials used by teachers (Love & Hamston, 2003). Alloway and Gilbert (1997) noted that the traditional view of masculinity impedes the high school male's engagement and achievement in reading and writing. Activities that have been socially constructed as "feminine" such as self-reflection, expression of feelings, and creative sharing of personal experiences may cause male students to resist reading and writing instruction and ultimately not see themselves in the high school English classroom (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997).

Deficit-oriented approaches to male reading instruction often misplace students as "struggling readers" when they do not identify with the curriculum being used (Love & Hamston, 2003). Scholars have suggested that high school male students tend to choose texts which complement their own definitions of masculinity, but when these diverse texts are absent from the "struggling reader" curriculum, these same male students often have difficulty forming connections with the literature (Hinchman et al., 2010; Love & Hamston, 2003; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020). Their rich literacy practices which extend beyond the classroom are silenced as male students are not viewed as being "academic" (Kirkland, 2009). Their own voices and stories are absent from the complex narrative of the human experience when male students are negatively labeled, yet these students need to be given the opportunity to *add* their voices to the

conversation surrounding the literacy gap. While very few scholars have examined how the high school male student perceives his English class, their ideas and experiences could prove to be instrumental in creating positive change in the quest to close the perceived male literacy gap at the high school level. While many high school male students have been referred to as "struggling" in their English classes, this study investigated how they define themselves in terms of their literacy skills and practices.

Effects of the Literacy Gap in High School Male Students

While the causes of the perceived literacy gap within high school male students are debatable, the effects of the gap are obvious. High school male students with low reading and writing scores are known to have higher rates of suspensions and placements in alternative education programs (Grahl, 2019). Additionally, high school male students with low levels of literacy, as defined by the autonomous literacy model, are more likely to drop out of school altogether. These high school male students who have been labeled by their school(s) as having low literacy skills are more likely to live in poverty and even engage in criminal activity (Grahl, 2019).

Relationship between Literacy Struggles and Discipline Issues in School for Male Students

As there is a direct correlation between a student's low reading and writing scores and crime, the implications of the gender gap in reading and writing scores is further emphasized by the fact that males who were 16 - 17 years of age comprised 73% of juvenile court cases in the United States in 2018 (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2021). As high school male students often do not find their identities in school, they become less likely to feel comfortable in an academic setting (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). These feelings of dissatisfaction lead to behavioral problems in school, feelings of resistance toward authority figures, and even the potential for

dropping out of school (Halx & Ortiz, 2011). According to Lynch (2016) male students at the high school level who are considered to be “struggling” with reading and writing skills are more likely to receive disciplinary action in the school system. This is further evidenced by the fact that the Civil Rights Data Collection (2017) shows high school male students in the United States are suspended nearly twice as often as their female peers. These same students who are suspended or expelled from school are more likely to drop out altogether (Lynch, 2016). This concept indicates that the high school male students who account for the gender gap in reading scores may be trickling over into the data that accounts for the gender gap in drop out rates.

High School Males Sent to Alternative Education Programs

Before students drop out of school altogether, many of them are assigned to, or choose to attend, Alternative Education Programs (AEPs). Alternative Education Programs first appeared in the United States in the 1960s and were often found in urban or suburban areas rather than rural ones (Raywid, 1999). While there is not an agreement among the educational community as to what clearly defines an AEP, these programs in the public education system within the United States narrowed in scope in the 1980s (Raywid, 1999). Young (1990) noted that during the 1980s, an increasingly conservative social climate and the growing number of students testing below grade-level on standardized assessments led to the idea that AEPs were for students who were disruptive or failing in traditional schools. While the definition of an AEP may be broad and diverse according to local or state educational districts, the typical understanding of an AEP in the 21st century is a public school (typically a high school) which serve students who are struggling behaviorally and/or academically in a traditional, mainstream school (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022).

According to Kho and Rabovsky (2022), 57% of students enrolled in an AEP in the United States are male. Additionally, Chiang and Gill (2010) conducted a study in a large city within the United States and found that students enrolled in AEPs perform significantly lower than their counterparts in traditional high schools on tests of reading achievement. As these high school male students who struggle with reading are more likely to receive disciplinary action than their peers, they are more likely to be forced to enroll in an AEP if they wish to obtain their high school diploma (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). This idea of being "pushed out" of traditional high school increases feelings of distrust toward the educational system and further creates the idea that these high school male students do not "belong" in the classroom (Lynch, 2016). School systems who send these students to AEPs often create the idea that the students are not wanted or welcome in the classroom (Lynch, 2019). On the contrary, while AEPs have their downfalls, they also benefit many students who attend across the nation (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). AEPs typically provide students who have the highest needs with an alternative avenue for success (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). While many high school male students are sent to AEPs because they are not finding success in the traditional high school setting, the AEPs may actually aid them to find unique paths to create their own versions of success (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022).

The Drop Out Effect of the Male Literacy Gap

When high school male students do not find success in traditional high schools or AEPs, they often become dissatisfied with the schooling experience as a whole and choose to end their educational careers. In 2018, 88% of female students were graduating on time, whereas only 82% of male students graduated on time (Reeves et al., 2021). Additionally, according to Reeves and Smith (2021), male students are severely underrepresented in colleges across the nation because male students are more likely to be labeled as illiterate and eventually drop out of high

school. Stewart (2022) noted that developing strong literacy skills is a crucial component of decreasing the drop out rate and increasing lifelong success beyond the classroom. While the causes of the gender gap in reading scores at the high school level have been studied little, it is apparent that more information is needed in order to keep these young men in school and ensure that they find their "place" in an academic setting.

When students drop out of high school, their chances for economic success later in life is dramatically reduced (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Moreover, nearly 75% of state prison inmates have dropped out of high school or are considered illiterate (ProLiteracy, 2019). When these high school male students drop out of school, communities of unskilled workers are created which have a high likelihood of increasing the crime rate and/or the number of people living in poverty (Michon, 2016). The connections between literacy, staying in school, and lifelong success are clearly related, yet little is known about how to target high school male students who have been labeled "struggling readers" before they make the choice to drop out. These students appear to not be finding their identities at school; therefore, they are turning to alternative methods to construct how they view themselves, and how others see them. As they are negatively labeled at school, they could potentially prescribe themselves a label which equates to "struggling" in the outside world. Students do not have a choice in the labels given to them by school districts, but they do have a choice to drop out of school altogether, without parental permission, by the age of 16 in most states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Since literacy skills appear to play such a crucial role in keeping male students in high school in order to receive a diploma, we are in need of research which explores how ideological model literacy skills can be practiced and strengthened in order to help high school males see their places in school.

The Quest for Solutions to the Gender Gap in Literacy

Scholars, politicians, and teachers alike have attempted to find ways to mitigate the male gender gap in reading and writing scores at the high school level. The differences in ideas about how to close the gap are as vast as the potential causes for the perceived literacy gap itself. While several strategies have been suggested for implementation in high schools around the United States, the gender gap in literacy scores, as defined by the autonomous literacy model, persists.

A Suggested Shift in Labeling: From "Risk" to "Promise"

Several studies have suggested that while standardized reading tests position high school male students as "struggling readers," the students have rich literacy skills and see themselves as readers and writers *despite* what their test scores say (Kirkland, 2019; Main, 2008; Scammacca et al., 2013; Street, 2003; Triplett, 2007). High school male students are often given academic classifications as either being "on track" or "struggling," yet what students see in themselves often differs from their prescribed label (Frankel, 2016). Additionally, the "struggling" label sometimes extends to the classification of being "at-risk" for many high school male students (Fink, 2017). Many male students are given the classification of being "at-risk," in relation to their imposing failure, from the time that they are in elementary school (Fink, 2017). Typically, these "at-risk" students are characterized by their low test scores, poor academic performance, concerning home lives, and/or lower socioeconomic status, but not by their immense potential for success (Fink, 2017). They never seem to get the chance to construct their own identities without the preconceived, negative labels administered by a school system. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2007) argued that language matters and these students deserve the chance to write their own life meanings rather than accepting living with the false label of imminent failure. This concept implies that high school male students need to have the chance to explore who they are

and how they see the world with their own words. As scholars have emphasized the importance of shifting the term “at-risk” to “at-promise” at the elementary level, it is necessary and important that high school students are given the opportunity to make meaning from their experiences rather than adopting the negative terminology given to them (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). This is why it is crucial that we allow high school male students the opportunity to see the potential “promise” of a great future rather than the impending “risk” of disaster. This promise is conceivably able to be made through ideological model literacy practices in the high school English classroom where male students can build their own stories of success through alternative curricular choices and instructional practices.

Attempts for Solutions from the Political Realm

Politicians have also attempted to find a solution for the gender gap in reading scores, yet their efforts have only intensified the frustration of school systems and students alike. Continuous state-wide assessments increased when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed in 2001 (Huntsberry, 2014). The face of assessment changed in order to accommodate political promises, yet on paper, the gender gap in reading scores only widened (Huntsberry, 2014). Moreover, the affiliated initiatives of Reading First and Early Reading First were also created so that schools under this legislation would be required to engage in end-of-the-year testing to evaluate progress in reading achievement (Catts, 2021). This type of assessment was supposed to be a benchmark of success for primary schools, but the results of the tests often misidentified students, especially males, as struggling readers (Catts, 2021). As many of these assessments are concentrated at the elementary school level, the data to support and explain the gender gap in reading scores at the high school level is severely lacking (Huntsberry, 2014). Even though researchers have debated potential solutions to the gender gap in reading scores for decades, one

question has remained at the forefront: why do male students, as they reach high school, seemingly increase underperformance in reading and writing skills compared to their female counterparts?

Suggested Solutions for Curricular Changes

Some literacy scholars suggest that the persistent gender gap in reading and writing scores at the high school level is due, primarily, to the male students' lack of reading engagement (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020; Smith & Wilhelm, 2004). According to Allington and Walmsley (2007), many high school male students labeled as struggling readers are given a prescribed set of reading curriculum which further lowers their engagement in what they are reading. As the age of standards began in the 1990s, and seemingly continues today, the test-taking climate in high schools is what informs curricular choices in the high school English classroom (Catts, 2021). This is especially true for students who have been identified as struggling readers according to their reading test scores (Allington & Walmsley, 2007). The texts that are used in high school English classes, especially those for struggling readers, usually lack engaging plot lines and diverse voices (Atkinson, 2009). According to Atkinson (2009), high school male students lack enthusiasm for reading, therefore engagement is low, and their reading and writing achievement scores decrease as they age. Therefore, Barrs (2000) suggested that high school male students need to be allowed to not only have a choice in the reading material that is used for instruction, but also need to be exposed to instructional practices that highlight ways reading can be purposeful for them in their lives outside of school. Moreover, Barrs (2000) indicated that high school male students are disengaged with reading because they do not feel as if the prescribed curriculum gives them an *experience* that is able to be applied to their lives outside of school. According to Clark (2018), the current reading curriculum being used in public

high school English classrooms across the country ignores what is really happening in the lives of students. This reading curriculum that is void of any real-life connections potentially pushes high school male students farther away from the act of reading because it is not applicable to what is presently happening in their lives, communities, and the world (Clark, 2018). Loveless (2016) suggested allowing high school male students to read texts which enable them to see themselves, and the real struggles that they face, in the literature used in the high school English classroom in order to increase enthusiasm for reading and ultimately build robust literacy skills.

Motivation and The Freedom to Choose

While supporting learners who may have been labeled as a struggling reader or writer at the elementary level often looks like intensive phonics instruction or creating systemic learning paths, there are two underlying elements that apply to all learners at any level of schooling: motivation and personalization of learning (Lexia Learning, 2021). In terms of motivation, the Self Determination Theory (SDT) as proposed by Deci and Ryan (2004), underscores the idea that students' motivation to learn is determined by their perception of having the power to make choices. For example, Deci and Ryan (2004) noted that students are more motivated to learn when they believe that they are making choices that help them reach their own personal goals and learning targets. However, in many school settings, these types of experiences where students are allowed to make choices and construct their own identities of empowerment are often highly limited, if not discouraged (Guay, 2021). Without an environment to support students in decision-making and empowerment techniques, students are often left feeling restricted, combative, or even frustrated with their schooling experiences (Guay, 2021). Most students, no matter the age or gender, are impacted by SDT as the interaction between the student and the school as a social context may shape how learning happens; however, students

who have been labeled as “struggling” readers and writers may be particularly negatively impacted (Guay, 2021). Deci and Ryan (2004) noted that students need to feel a certain level of competence in what they are demonstrating in order to be motivated to learn and develop. When students are given a “struggling” label and assigned to remedial level courses, that feeling of being competent diminishes and, once again, students are left disconnected to their schooling experience (Deci & Ryan, 2004). As high school male students have been labeled as “struggling” readers and writers, it is likely that their motivation to practice literacy skills in the academic space has diminished and they do not feel connected to academics.

Possibilities for Closing the High School Male Literacy Gap Beyond the Classroom

Because the existing body of research indicates that high school male students potentially feel out of place in the high school English classroom, it is likely that they are using spaces beyond the academic setting in order to create, practice, and use rich literacy skills. Students are developing and refining literacy skills even when they are not in the classroom, so the high school male potentially uses other methods of literacy skill-building beyond merely reading and writing about the stories in the curriculum of his English class (NCTE, 2020). As Street (2003) suggested that school systems around the nation are unjustly employing the autonomous literacy model to rate male students as “struggling” in literacy skills, it is probable that male students are flourishing with the literacy concepts found within the ideological literacy model. Students actually conceptualize literacy skills through various objects in their lives, cultural practices within their communities, and the places where they interact with others (Lenters, 2018). While the evaluation of a high school male’s literacy skills cannot be determined by singular, uniform tests, the acquisition of literacy skills cannot be learned and practiced in an academic vacuum (Lenters, 2018). As high school male students are traditionally scoring lower than their female

counterparts on standardized tests involving autonomous literacy skills, we can infer that their giftedness in literacy may be found in a place other than the restrictive boundaries of testing in the high school English classroom. This study emphasized that the literacy practices these male students are engaging in beyond the academic space may prove to be valuable in reimagining the high school English curriculum in order to be more engaging for the male learner.

Art as a Literacy Practice

The title of the English Language Arts classroom itself infers that literacy is an artform. However, this type of art in the English classroom is often overlooked because it loses value as rigorous test preparation usually overshadows the creative implications of the subject. Miller and Hopper (2010) suggested that art is a means where students can practice creativity, enhance their own independent thinking, and also develop valuable social skills. Therefore, art is closely intertwined with literacy skills as students engage in literacy practices outside of the classroom in order to grow personally and socially (NCTE, 2020). This intersection of art with literacy implies that there is a need to investigate how art could play a role in literacy-building practices of high school male students. Kirkland (2009) went as far as to imply that the tattoos of young men "...speak to the quiet and unexamined human story of literacy" (p. 375). Forms of art which are on paper and on flesh hold the ability to silently tell stories of the human experience. Therefore, expressions of literacy outside of the classroom in creative form should be examined as a means of empowering the high school male student. The stories behind the art that male high school students are creating or "wearing" may inform the ways in which they value literacy practices and position themselves in the high school English classroom. The ways in which they choose to engage in art outside of the academic realm that "speaks" in symbols or visual representations of

emotions could inform curriculum and instructional practices in the high school English classroom.

The Power of Storytelling

Creating meaning from lived experiences and cultivating an empowered voice stems from being a storyteller (NCTE, 2020). The stories we tell others, and the stories we tell ourselves, help us to make sense of who we are and our places in the world. Storytelling has proved to be a powerful practice for passing along traditions, remembering history, creating cultural practices, and building identities for thousands of years (Landrum et al., 2019). The high school English classroom has the ability to be a space where male students practice the art of narrative writing and telling in order to refine their own identities (Landrum et al., 2019). This practice allows students to not only see themselves as the heroes of their own stories, but also to learn from others, build empathy, and exercise analytical thinking which transcends the academic realm (Landrum et al., 2019). Storytelling in the classroom may help male students construct meaning from their lived experiences as well as transform their understandings of themselves, their communities, and their place in the world (Brittenham et al., 2018). The high school English classroom should be deconstructed in order to identify how the space could become a platform for students to not only tell their own truths, but also learn from the truths of others. This could be the place where high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling readers" could rewrite the narratives of the labels that have been given to them. According to NCTE (2020), "...literacy is the way that we interact with the world around us, how we shape it and are shaped by it." Therefore, it is important that we consider how the English classroom curriculum at the high school level could go beyond the simplicity of reading a novel and incorporate social practices which highlight the strengths of all literacy skills.

Conclusion: The Most Important Voice is Missing

While researchers have attempted to pinpoint the cause of the perceived gender gap in autonomous literacy at the high school level, it is important to note that the voices which comprise that gap, as well as their unique thoughts and perceptions, have rarely been explored. Muse (2020) suggested that the voice of the male student is often absent from the conversation on the gender-gap in literacy proficiency, yet their perspectives are "...especially significant in multicultural spaces because they can create an intercultural atmosphere that offers a particular microphone to the speaker of the story" (p. 193). In order to not only explain the gender gap in autonomous literacy performance, but also rewrite the narrative of "struggling" male readers so that they feel a sense of belonging in academic space, the voices of the high school males who embody such labels were amplified in this study (Cook-Sather, 2006). This study passed the metaphorical microphone to high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP so that a greater understanding of their literacy practices outside of the classroom space could potentially inform curricular choices and instructional practices used in the high school English classroom.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This qualitative multiple case study explored how the experiences outside of school of high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP mediate their reading and writing in the English classroom. This study explored the literacy practices of these students outside of school, how they shape their literacy practices at school, and the students' perceptions of reading and writing pedagogy in the high school English classroom. Moreover, the data gathered and analyzed from this study can inform the curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom in order to further understand the cause of the male literacy gap. According to Baxter and Jack (2015), the qualitative case study is used to explore a complex phenomenon through intensive description and analysis of a single unit. In this case, the study was used to investigate the "single case" of how experiences outside of school mediate reading and writing inside of school and the "single case" of the perceptions of high school males about their high school English classes. The study explored the complexities of the high school male's lived experiences outside of school and how those experiences mediate their reading and writing in the academic environment, as well as how they perceive their high school English classes.

Participants in this multiple case study were high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP and have a history of low reading and writing scores as reported on their academic transcripts. Positioning this study at this time in participants' academic career provided insight into how their lives outside of school have influenced their reading and writing in the classroom, and ultimately led them to enroll in an AEP. Vygotsky (1978) underscored the notion that learning does not occur in an academic vacuum, but rather across time as people construct meaning from experiences. Therefore, the study emphasized how the experiences of high school

male students outside of academia mediates their learning inside of the classroom, particularly in areas of reading and writing. As the purpose of this study was to better understand the literacy practices of high school male students outside of school, how they shape their literacy practices at school, and the students' perceptions of reading and writing pedagogy in the high school English classroom, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediate their reading and writing in the high school English classroom?
2. How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

Research Design

A qualitative, multiple case study design was used for this study. I chose to use a qualitative research design because my goal was to understand *how* lived experiences mediate a high school male student's reading and writing in the classroom setting. Building on the tenets of sociocultural theory, I wanted to better understand how the participants create meaning from lived experiences, and transfer those meanings into the academic space where they practice reading and writing. The case study method was used because this method allowed me to explore a phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) explained the real-life context as a type of circumstance where the researcher has little control over the events in the setting. Additionally, the real-life context emphasizes participants in a situation or setting that is naturally occurring to them (Yin, 2018). Additionally, as I had the goal of amplifying male voices, the case study limited my position of power and placed me as an observer and listener

(Yin, 2002). In this study, the phenomenon under study is how high school male students' experiences outside of the classroom mediate their reading and writing inside the classroom. The context of this study falls within the AEP setting as high school male students engage in reading and writing in the academic setting after they have not been successful in the traditional school setting as determined by their high school counselor and/or principal. By exploring the ways in which these students view reading and writing in an academic setting after they have left the traditional classroom, I was able to capture rich descriptions of their feelings and experiences about *two* educational settings: the traditional classroom and the AEP environment. As such, this study has the potential to contribute to the body of research surrounding the male literacy gap by informing high school English curricular and instructional practices in both traditional classroom settings and AEP locations.

The study employed a multiple case study design in order to create a more robust understanding of how the lives outside of school of male students impact their reading and writing in the classroom. By selecting three separate cases for the study, three separate lived experiences will inform the understanding of how a student's life outside of school mediates his reading and writing in school. The differences and similarities of lived experiences provided insight into how the high school English curriculum can better reflect and value the literacy practices that these students engage in outside school in order to be a more inviting space for the male voice inside the high school English classroom.

Site of Research

The study was conducted at the site of an alternative school which provides a meeting site for the AEP. The alternative school building is a shared school for students in Grade 6-12 from a county located in the southeastern part of North Carolina. I work as a high school English

tutor and online course facilitator for the principal of the school who has initiated two AEPs within the same county. Along with the principal and several other stakeholders within the school system and the community, we developed the idea for a pilot program in which the sample population was enrolled.

The pilot program was created because of a growing number of students who were dropping out of high schools in the county. As a research team, we hypothesized that there was a need for an AEP for students who were seemingly not successful in traditional schools, and had either chosen to drop out, or were at risk of dropping out based on poor attendance and a lack of credits earned for coursework. We worked with our partners at Communities in Schools (CIS) to target this specific population of students from the five traditional high schools in the county. The Family Engagement and Advocacy Coordinator at CIS, along with local high school counselors, recruited approximately 30 students for the pilot program, and 25 of those students completed applications for the pilot program called Student Promise (pseudonym). In order to be selected to participate in Student Promise, students have to be between the ages of 15 and 19. They must have already dropped out of a traditional high school in the county or be referred to the program by a counselor at their traditional high school because of their high risk of dropping out stemming from low attendance and/or a lack of earned credits for class work.

At Student Promise, students are enrolled in the academic courses that they need to earn a high school diploma, but their elective courses work differently than they typically do at a traditional high school. First, students do not earn letter grades in their courses, but rather credits for sufficiently meeting state standards on self-paced, virtual courses designed by certified instructors within the county. Instead of taking traditional, elective courses, students have the opportunity to take certification courses at the local community college. This way, students

attend the community college and take courses during the day, and they work on their self-paced coursework during the evening. If students elect to not take classes at the community college, they enter a certification program through the local Goodwill Industries affiliate. The goal is that these students will not only graduate high school with a diploma, but also with a professional certification to earn employment within the community.

Students who are enrolled in Student Promise are not only required to attend community college classes or certification courses at Goodwill Industries, but they also have to attend two-hour sessions known as "seminars" two nights per week at the AEP's home site. During the seminars, students receive one-on-one and small-group academic support from the creators of the self-paced courses and from academic coaches. An added component of the seminar is the one-hour class that occurs after the one hour of academic support. During the class, students go to different sessions which are led by teachers, principals, or community stakeholder volunteers. These sessions are dedicated to helping students build confidence, reflective practices, healthy relationships, and other social-emotional learning needs as identified by the AEP's principal. They also have sessions on career-readiness skill-training where they work through team building exercises, learn how to build résumés, and practice soft skills such as networking or time management.

The participants that I recruited were enrolled in Student Promise during the Summer of 2022 and started the program in the Fall of 2022. During the Fall 2022 semester, I worked with the students in an academic coach/English tutor role. After discussing the research project with the AEP's principal, we decided to use the sessions after academic support to conduct my research. Because the participants were learning how to grow their confidence in literacy skills, as well as practicing self-reflective practices which was one goal of the seminar, the principal

encouraged me to use seminar time, and time before academic support started, in order to conduct the research.

Participant Sample

Sampling was strategic and purposeful because I wanted participants who would provide rich descriptions and details for the study (Palinkas et al., 2013). Convenience sampling was also used as I recruited participants from a setting that was accessible to me as a researcher and educator (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). While many of the students who are enrolled in Student Promise are already 18 years of age, there was a small group of students who were underage. In order to participate in the study, students who were 18 years of age had to provide assent, and underage students had to provide assent, but also garner parental consent. In order to participate, students had to meet the following criteria:

1. Male gender as reported on birth certificate
2. Enrolled in the Student Promise AEP
3. History of failure in English courses in the traditional high school setting and/or lack of proficiency on standardized reading/writing tests as reported by school counselor and/or principal
4. 15-19 years of age.

While I acknowledge that gender does exist on a spectrum, I recruited participants who fit the traditional definition of a male as assigned on their birth certificate (The Jed Foundation, 2022). The potential participants were all identified as males on their birth certificate, and they also all self-identified as males. Additionally, while race was not the primary focus of this study, the demographic data of the males enrolled in the AEP indicates that approximately 62% are White,

23% are two or more races, and 15% are Black. Therefore, in order to most closely represent the demographics of the school, I selected two White participants and one multi-racial participant. From the approximately 15 potential participants, I recruited seven students to participate in the study. While the study consisted of three separate cases, I used the data collected from the initial focus group session to further refine the sample to three participants. I looked for students who offer rich, detailed descriptions during the focus group. Additionally, I looked for participants who had strong personalities and seemed to enjoy telling their unique stories. I also looked for participants who seemed to display different ranges of confidence when it came to not only speaking to me and the other participants, but also in their own reading and writing abilities. The sample size remained relatively small so that I could develop "fruitful relationships" with participants to "...enhance the validity of fine-grained, in-depth inquiry in naturalistic settings" (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 483). By keeping the sample size small, I was able to provide an in-depth analysis of how the participants' experiences outside of school mediate their reading and writing inside the English classroom. At the same time, while using three separate cases, I had the opportunity to examine multiple perspectives in relation to the research questions which were posed.

Because I had been working with all potential participants for a few months before the study started, I built relationships with them and considered which students may be the best fit for the study based on willingness to discuss life experiences and strong opinions on reading and writing that I had already heard from them. Once the IRB was approved, I explained the study to the potential participants and sent each of them a follow-up email where they confirmed their willingness to participate. For potential participants who were under the age of 18, I explained the study to their parent/guardian when they came to sign them out of the seminar session. If the

student drove himself home, I called the parent/guardian and explained the study. I then delivered the assent forms to the participants who indicated that they wanted to participate in the study, or sent them home with their child since the parents/guardians indicated that it was okay to do so. Confidentiality was explained to each participant and each participant's parent/guardian if they were under the age of 18. Confidentiality agreements were also contained on the consent and assent forms presented to participants and their parent/guardian if they were under the age of 18. Both students and parents/guardians were encouraged to ask questions before providing consent and assent.

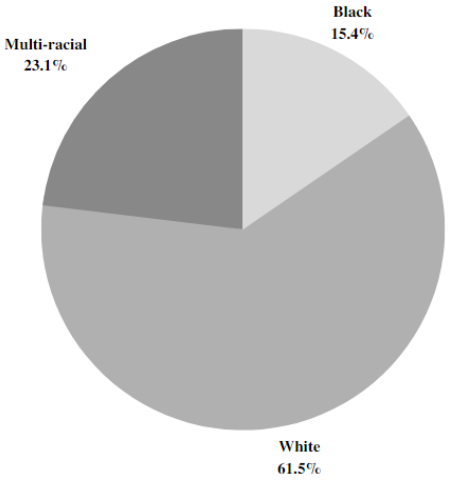
Participant Descriptive Data

While the personality of each participant will emerge throughout the narrative portraits provided later in Chapter 4, I feel that it is necessary to acknowledge the similarities and differences of the participants regarding age and race. At the beginning of the study, I received parental consent and participant assent to have access to basic, demographic information on student records which were collected when participants enrolled in the AEP. The information that I had access to included name, self-reported race, date of birth, and standardized test score data from English Language Arts classes from the participant's 7th grade school year, 10th grade school year (when applicable), and ACT score (when applicable). This data was used not only to confirm eligibility for participation, but also to help me construct a more richly detailed narrative portrait for each participant. As mentioned in Chapter 1, several researchers have attempted to study the "race gap" in reading and writing scores, yet I am investigating the perceived *gender* gap in reading and writing scores (Lynch, 2016; Tatum, 2017; Williams, 2015). While race is not the central focus of this study, I feel that it is important to acknowledge that the racial makeup of my participants accurately reflected the overall demographic of the AEP as reflected in the chart

below.

Figure 1

Demographics of Potential Participants enrolled in the AEP



Total Number of Males Ages 15-19 Enrolled in AEP	13
White	8
Multi-Racial	3
Black	2

Yin (2018) underscored the importance of exploring the similarities and differences of participants when conducting a qualitative study, therefore being privy to the demographic data for each participant led to a more detailed understanding of each participant's story soon to be explored in this chapter. As outlined in Table 1, three participants served as the three separate cases in this study. All three of the participants were identified as males by the traditional definition of a male as assigned on their birth certificate (The Jed Foundation, 2022), were 17 years of age, and identified as "not proficient" in the areas of reading and writing as reported on their standardized test scores in order to participate in this research which employed a sociocultural lens. Each participant chose a pseudonym for himself in order to protect his identity and any identifying information that was relayed during the interviews and/or focus group sessions.

Table 1

Participant Basic Demographic Overview

Participant #	Pseudonym	Age	Self-Identified Race	Proficiency on 7th grade English Language Arts End of Grade Test	Proficiency on 10th grade English II End of Course Test
1	Joe	17	White	Not proficient	Not proficient
2	Dredge	17	Mixed Race	Not proficient	Did not take
3	Michael	17	White	Not proficient	Not proficient

Data Collection Methods

The case study method relied on multiple sources of data for a more in-depth analysis (Hyett et al., 2014). In order to triangulate the data and analyze "deep and varied sources of information," the study included two focus group sessions, two semi-structured interviews, and a researcher journal (Smith, 2018, p. 1044). As Vygotsky (1978) noted the importance of lived experiences and meaning making through social interactions, I employed various components of the ideological literacy model within the proposed methods. The focus group sessions provided spaces where participants could engage with other participants, as well as myself as the researcher, so that they could derive meaning from their own experiences as well as the experiences of others. The creativity activity that participants engaged in within the first focus group session provided a creative outlet for participants to practice literacy skills which may transcend the academic space. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews provided safe spaces for participants to share their thoughts and feelings where they were positioned as the experts. As Vygotsky (1978) described learners being influenced by their environment(s) and culture, both the focus group sessions and the semi-structured interviews provided outlets for participants to

exercise their understandings of literacy practices in high school English class as they have been mediated through their experiences outside of the classroom.

Table 2

Data Collection Methods Timeline

Order	Study Method	Data Collected	Participants	Time
1	Initial Meeting (Researcher Journal)	● Audio Recording ● Audio Transcribed ● Researcher's thoughts/reflections in Journal	7 Participants	30-45 min.
2	Focus group 1 (Researcher Journal)	● Audio Recording ● Audio Transcribed ● Researcher's thoughts/reflections in Journal	5 Participants	45 min-1 hour
3	Focus group 2 (Researcher Journal)	● Audio Recording ● Audio Transcribed ● Personal literacy portrait activity ● Researcher's thoughts/reflections in Journal	5 Participants	30-45 min.
4	First Semi-Structured Interview (Researcher Journal)	● Audio Recording ● Audio Transcribed ● Researcher's thoughts/reflections in Journal	3 Participants	30-45 min.
5	Follow-up	● Researcher's thoughts/reflections in Journal	3 Participants	15 min.
6	Second Semi-Structured Interview (Researcher Journal)	● Audio Recording ● Audio Transcribed ● Researcher's thoughts/reflections in Journal	3 Participants	30-45 min.
TOTAL TIME PER PARTICIPANT				3 HOURS - 4.25 HOURS

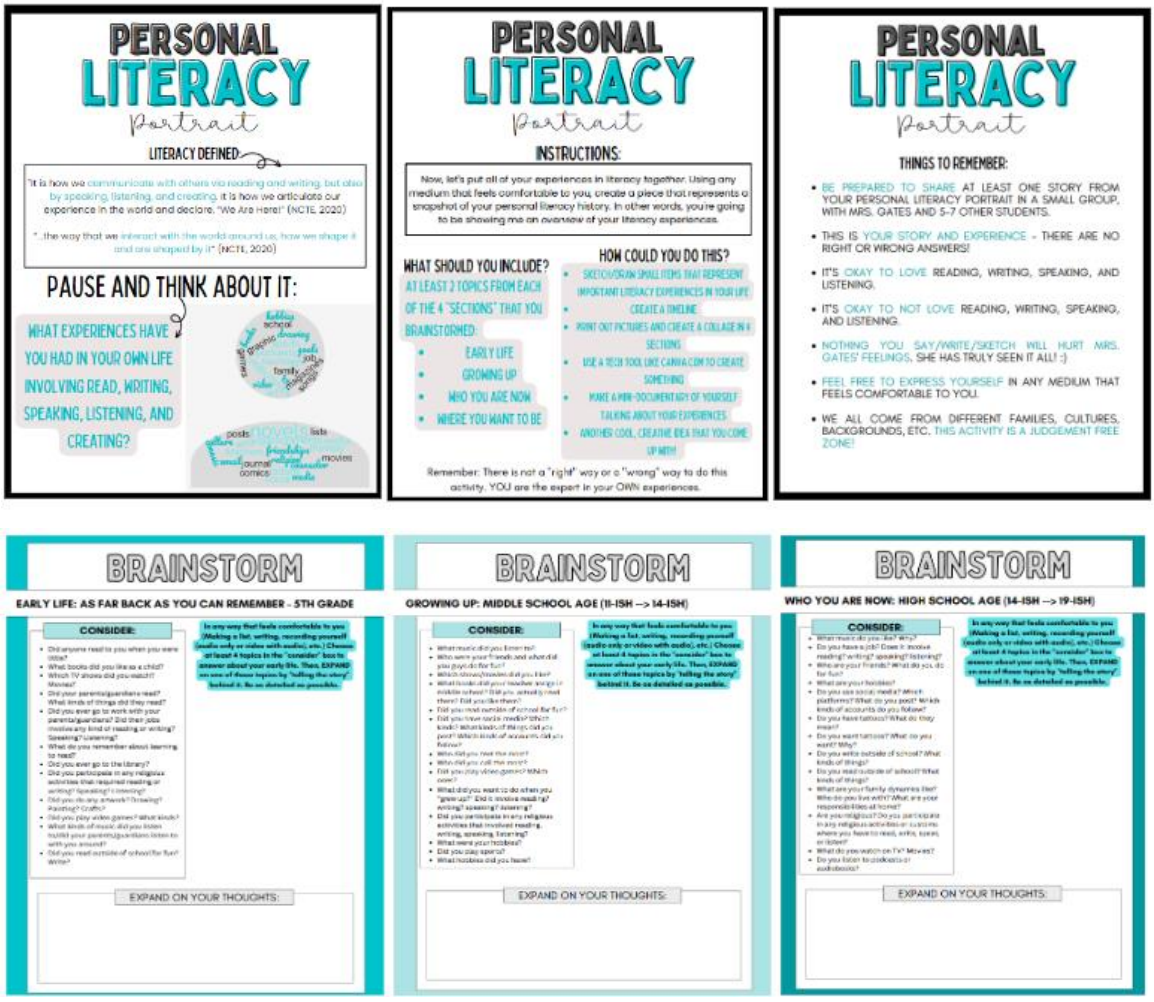
Focus Group

Brown (2015) noted that a focus group (FG) lends researchers valuable opportunities to observe and explore group dynamics that otherwise would have been "invisible" (p. 87). Using a focus group for this study was appropriate because I was interested in how the high school male students' voices can add meaning to existing knowledge. Using focus groups allowed me to see a

group interaction where the participants engaged in conversations about reading and writing in the high school English classroom. The FG sessions also allowed me to further explore the experiences of the participants in their previous high school English classrooms. The participants gave richly detailed information that could potentially inform the body of research about how to improve curriculum and instructional methods used in the high school English classroom. I was particularly drawn to the idea that a FG creates an "…engaging atmosphere which prods young people to explore issues more broadly and encourages them to formulate and expand on abstract ideas and personal experiences" (Thompson, 2019, p. 285). Because I was interested in understanding how the high school English classroom could be a more engaging space for male learners, it was important to create an engaging atmosphere where students felt comfortable sharing ideas and stories so that I could learn from them. Before the first focus group session, I had an initial meeting with the participants to explain the process of the study. I outlined what the focus group sessions would consist of, I showed each participant how to access their individual folders on Google Drive where all transcripts and interview questions were kept an available for review, and I gave each participant a brainstorming guide for the activity which they would be participating in during the first focus group session.

Figure 2

Brainstorming Guide for Personal Literacy Portrait



During the first focus group session, participants engaged in an activity known as "Personal Literacy Portrait" creating. Thompson (2019) mentioned that having an interactive activity for participants helps to create a relaxed environment. Therefore, the first focus group session consisted of probing questions and the "Personal-Literacy Portrait" activity (Henderson, 2021, p. 180). The focus group was guided by a few core questions (See Appendix D) which probed the participants to speak about their experiences in reading and writing outside of school, as well as meaningful encounters and activities in their high school English classes. The FG activity, known as "Personal Literacy Portrait," inspired participants to consider how their own

lives outside of school have mediated their reading and writing practices in the English classroom (Henderson, 2021). The activity consisted of the participants using a medium of their choices to form representations of the multiple literacies found within their own lives. Participants recounted how the people, places, events, connections, etc. in their own lives have incorporated reading and writing and, in turn, informed the student's own literacies (Jones, 2018). Henderson (2021) explained how using Personal Literacy Portrait allows space for both the portraitist and the researcher to "...holistically view and humanize" lived literacy experiences of a person by "...recognizing and respecting their hardships, dreams, realities, resilience, and proclaim them as cultural and literate beings" (p. 181). By incorporating this method into the study, I was able to not only add an asset-based approach for participants to view the literacy practices within their own families, but I also strengthened my understanding of their perspectives through their use of art. Through the students' use of art and/or words, I was able to start to shape a narrative where I was not only listening *for* their stories, but also acknowledging that my presence was impacting their stories and, ultimately, my research.

The first FG lasted for approximately one hour and was recorded and transcribed using Temi.com transcription service. During the Personal Literacy Portrait activity, participants used a combination of art and written words to engage in an asset-based approach to literacy. The mode of expression was left up to the participants as literacies extend beyond word-based reading and writing. They were allowed to freely choose their method of expression to further align with their unique literacy practices. This approach encouraged participants to consider the ways in which their own lives outside of school build strong literacy skills (Henderson, 2021). In turn, this method allowed me to listen *for* their literacy stories as they had conversations about literacy practices both outside and inside the high school English classroom.

During the second FG session, participants chose one story/experience from their Personal Literacy Portrait to verbally share with the rest of the FG. I shared a personal story from my own personal literacy portrait activity first. This seemed to add a layer of comfort for students and helped them to feel like I was the one to "break the ice" first. At first, they were a little reluctant to share their stories. However, they immediately started making connections to one another's stories, and even found a few surprising things that they had in common. I also allowed students to ask me questions about my personal literacy portrait. They enjoyed this and even poked fun at me for not having a cell phone until I was 16 years old, and getting in trouble for having "bad music" (as my Daddy so lovingly called early 2000s Hip Hop music) on my iPod touch many years ago.

Participants were asked if they felt comfortable with the other focus group members and myself asking them questions about their personal literacy portrait. Since they all agreed that questions were okay, we enjoyed spending time talking with one another about funny, but sometimes emotional stories that they shared. The purpose of this sharing of stories was to get a better understanding of which experiences in literacy that the participants found valuable, which ones stood out to them, and which ones made an impact on their lives.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Using participant interviews was central to understanding the experiences of the participants in this study. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), the interview method is relational, non-evaluative, and person-centered (p. 127). The interviews helped in capturing the participants' perspectives firsthand in order to amplify their voices in this research study. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were used in this study. Semi-structured interviews allow room for follow-up questions specific to the individual to allow for a unique conversation

to take place (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 134). Because every student's story is unique, the semi-structured interview model allowed modifications to be made to questions in order to produce fruitful conversations with rich data. While a structured interview provides the same set of questions for each individual participant, the semi-structured interview allows room for an initial, consistent set of questions, but freedom to employ questions that may not be planned, but are unique to the participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Because I was interested in how the experiences of each participant mediate their reading and writing in the classroom, it was important to have flexibility in the interview style. As the semi-structured interview allows participants the freedom to further express themselves without a rigid set of questions, it was a more fitting interview style for the research study which explored the various perspectives and experiences of each participant.

Research related to the high school male students' life experiences mediating their reading and writing *in their own voices* are limited, therefore using semi-structured interviews in this study amplified their input. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Temi.com transcription service. Each participant participated in two one-on-one, semi-structured interviews throughout this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the second focus group session, and again, at the end of the study, after participants had a chance to read their individual narrative portraits.

Initial Interviews

Each participant was interviewed after the conclusion of the second FG session using a semi-structured interview protocol (See Appendix F). These initial interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes and allowed me to learn more about each participant's background, specifically how their lives outside of school have mediated their reading and writing in their

English classes. Vygotsky (1978) noted that people are actively creating their own knowledge through experiences in life and relationships with others, therefore people *construct* their knowledge based on experiences. In turn, constructivism moves people into a space where they are constantly making meaning based on the world around them and the interactions that they have with it (Tierney & Pearson, 2021). Using a constructivist lens, Tierney and Parsons (2021) noted that "...differences in understanding [of reading and writing] are culturally anchored" (p. 49). By exploring the lived experiences of the participants through their own words, I allowed myself to enter their unique worlds. Gaining insight into their ideas, emotions, and opinions allowed me to explore connections between their experiences and the ways in which they perceive reading and writing in the classroom. These connections ultimately assisted me in creating each participant's narrative portraits, and in the development of themes which will be explored in Chapter 4.

Final Interviews

A final, semi-structured one-on-one interview occurred with each participant after I had constructed each participant's narrative portrait and they had time to read over the work. This interview was used as a time for the participants and myself to co-construct their narrative portrait. A semi-structured interview protocol was used for this interview (See Appendix G), but the main focus of this time was the fact that participants assisted me in editing their narrative portraits in order to ensure accuracy and convey the proper tone. The purpose of this final interview was to allow each participant to provide further insight into the research questions based on data collected in the initial interview, focus group sessions, and Personal Literacy Portrait activity. The final interview served as a space for students to share additional information or experiences.

Member Checking

In order to co-construct narratives, member checking took place at various times throughout the data collection and analysis process. First, each participant was given access to interview protocols and focus group session protocols in a private Google Drive folder unique to each participant. Participants were also provided with an audio transcription of the focus group sessions before the first semi-structured interview took place. Participants had the ability to request a modification or to add anything to this transcription. Participants also had the opportunity to read a transcript from their first semi-structured interview before I started constructing their personal narrative portrait. Once I completed each participant's personal narrative portrait, they were provided with a copy to read. At the second semi-structured interview, participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on the personal narrative, as well as add, edit, or remove any pieces that they deemed necessary. Because I wanted to amplify the "missing voices" from the conversation on the perceived literacy gap, I wanted to give my participants every opportunity to include their own voices, reflections, ideas, and thoughts into the study. While it is impossible to remove myself completely from the study, I endeavored to co-construct the narrative portraits so that participants are viewed/understood in the way that *they*, as the experts, intended on being portrayed.

Data Analysis

For this research study, the first research question sought to explore how the lives outside of school of high school male students in an AEP mediate their reading and writing inside the high school English classroom. My reflection journal was one source of data and I used it to record my thoughts, questions, and musings before and after each focus group session and one-on-one semi-structured interview. I also collected data from recorded and transcribed focus

group sessions and one-on-one interviews. Data analysis led to the organization of three themes for research question one, with one sub-theme assigned to each major theme. All of the themes and sub-themes are named and have subheadings that are direct participant quotes. These direct quotes are from one-on-one interviews and provide a comprehensive overview of all three participants' experiences. While all three participants have had different life experiences, while performing a cross-case analysis of the data, I discovered that they had more commonalities in the ways in which their lived experiences mediate reading and writing in the high school English classroom rather than differences. To be considered a theme, at least two of the three participants had to share that common experience, belief, or thought. Because of this, I was able to formulate themes which exemplified common experiences in, or thoughts about reading and writing in the high school English classroom.

Because a case study is an in-depth investigation into a phenomenon occurring within a particular context, multiple means of data analysis are required in order to create a more refined understanding of the problem at hand (Baškarada, 2014). When analyzing data found within qualitative research, Ravitch and Carl (2021) emphasized that it is important to remember that, "...processes are nonlinear and ongoing is a key feature of an integrative approach to qualitative data analysis" (p. 238). In this study, data analysis occurred in continued phases alongside data collection. Data analysis included both within case and cross-case analysis (Yin, 2018). After using Temi, a transcription service to transcribe the individual interview and the focus group interviews, I spent time checking through the transcripts myself to check for any discrepancies. Once transcripts were finalized by myself for clarity and accuracy, each participant was given his individual transcript from the one-on-one interview, as well as the focus group interview, to confirm the accuracy of the quotes that they said. Once each participant confirmed the accuracy

of the transcripts, I began the inductive coding process for the within-case analysis. In order to highlight the real, raw spoken language of the participants, I started by using In Vivo coding which placed the participants' spoken language at the forefront of the coding process (Manning, 2017). Since this study aimed to place the participants as the experts, their words were valued and used to make preliminary codes. From these preliminary codes, I used Lindlof and Taylor's (2011) practice of breaking down data and "...reconstituting [data points] into" themes (p. 243). After reviewing the transcripts multiple times, the themes which I created served as pillars of my analysis where the In Vivo codes acted as subcodes under main codes that I developed. After the within-case analysis from the first semi-structured interview and the within-case analysis including focus group data were conducted, I performed an additional read of all transcripts with my two research questions in mind. I developed a chart of all codes and used Stake's (1995) concept of categorical aggregation to match specific themes and codes to the research questions. I used these codes, subcodes, and themes to construct the participants' narrative portraits.

Once I constructed each narrative portraits, each participant read his narrative portrait and looked for areas that needed refining, editing, or deleting. I conducted a final semi-structured one-on-one interview to allow each participant to co-construct his narrative portrait with me. This process relied heavily on the participant reading his narrative portrait several times before the semi-structured interview. Then, during the interview, the participant provided details as to how the narrative portrait should be edited, changed, or enhanced in some areas. After working with the participants in the final, semi-structured, one-on-one interview, I edited the narrative portraits that can be found later in Chapter 4. I also used the data from the final semi-structured interview to refine themes, codes, and subcodes for the discussion on themes found later in Chapter 4.

Focus Group Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis helped me to observe patterns within the data that was later used to inform each participant's narrative portrait. The thematic analysis was a way for me to identify, organize, and analyze themes found within the collected data (Smedley & Coulson, 2017). Because I needed a type of data analysis that was flexible enough to allow for the evolution of themes, as well as side-by-side data gathering and simultaneous analysis, thematic analysis was central to this study (Nowell et al., 2017). Organizing the data from the focus group sessions first allowed me to organize it into emerging themes or concepts which were only refined by the semi-structured, one-on-one interviews.

After initially recording the Focus Group session data, I used Temi.com to transcribe it. I read through the transcriptions from Temi.com several times, as I listened to the audio of the focus group sessions, to ensure that the transcriptions were accurate. I then divided the focus group session into individual participant labels. This way, I could develop preliminary codes for each individual participant. From there, to begin the within-case analysis, I used NVivo software during the first coding cycle to chart initial codes from each individual participant. Using an inductive approach to coding, I read through the transcript multiple times to develop those preliminary codes. Through this process, I highlighted keywords and phrases that could support particular codes. From those codes, I synthesized the codes and I then created a set of themes which became the pillars of my analysis. After several readings of the transcripts, I developed sub-themes and assigned In Vivo codes, which Saldana (2013) described as the participant's "own words" or "verbatim coding" to both my main themes, and the sub-themes. Once I had repeated this process for all five of my initial participants, I selected the participants which provided the richest descriptions and met the criteria as previously outlined to create my final

group of three participants who would form the final three cases. I used these themes and sub-themes from the three individual participants to conduct a cross-case analysis once all focus groups and semi-structured interviews were complete.

Interview Analysis

When analyzing data found within qualitative research, Ravitch and Carl (2021) emphasized that it is important to remember that "...processes are nonlinear and ongoing is a key feature of an integrative approach to qualitative data analysis" (p. 238). Therefore, I continued to read through the focus group transcripts multiple times to code, and re-code, in order to attempt to gain a holistic understanding of the focus group data before I began the semi-structured interview process. The initial cycle of coding from the focus group data allowed me to see emerging patterns which were used as guides for the semi-structured interview data analysis.

After the initial phase of thematic coding which occurred after the focus group sessions, I used pattern coding for my second cycle of coding which occurred after the first semi-structured interview, and refined after the second semi-structured interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Temi.com. Again, I read through the transcriptions from Temi.com as I listened to the interviews, to check for accuracy. NVivo software was used for pattern coding during this cycle. According to Punch (2013), pattern coding is "...a more abstract concept that brings together less abstract, more descriptive codes" (p. 174). This was a way for me to group initial findings from the focus group data analysis along with the data analysis of the semi-structured interviews into a smaller number of themes. Once I had the initial codes and patterns, I used them to develop themes that were relevant to the research questions. Themes were reviewed and refined in order to inform my creation of the narrative portraits, and for the discussion of themes located in Chapter 4.

Narrative Portraits

The use of portraiture naturally requires that the researcher's interpretation is underscored (Hackmann, 2010). Because of this notion, portraiture requires the researcher's biases and experiences to be explicit (Hackmann, 2010). Portraiture contrasts with traditional notions of research because it becomes a lens through which the researcher processes data and their voices are used to expose their interpretations of the data through an autobiographical element (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1998). Portraiture allows the researcher to become a part of the story, which creates a deeper level of understanding for readers rather than a "detached" investigator's point of view (Henderson, 2010, p.53). Because of the ways in which the study was deeply rooted in experiences and storytelling, the combination of focus group sessions and semi-structured interviews informed my construction of each narrative portrait and ultimately created a research *experience*. As a whole, portraiture is a method of research which blends art with science to showcase a researcher's perspective through reflective narratives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1998).

Using Portraiture as a data analysis method allowed me to enhance the stories of the participants in the study. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1998) stated, "Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life" (p. 1). Because I am a high school English teacher, this method proved to be beneficial in my understanding of how high school male students not only bring their own life experiences into the classroom, but also how they perceive certain curricular choices and instructional practices. As we co-constructed the personal narratives, I learned not only about the participants, but also about myself as an educator.

A critique of the portraiture method is the perceived lack of intensive data analysis (Yin, 1994). However, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1998) suggested that the strength in the portraiture method is that it brings the researcher *into* the analysis as a way to further triangulate the data. As my own experiences inspired my research topic, it is only fitting that portraiture was used in this study as a way to extend my own understanding of the teaching of high school English.

Cross Case Analysis

After the within-case analysis from the focus group sessions and the semi-structured interviews, I performed a cross-case analysis. I performed an additional read of the transcripts where I kept the research questions in mind. From there, I used NVivo software to develop a chart of all of my codes. Using Stake's (1995) concept of categorical aggregation, I noted which codes address the particular research questions. Then, I located the codes that provided the richest descriptions and pulled those from the list to serve as pillars of focus for the analysis. These pillars formed the final themes that are discussed in Chapter 4, as well as the sub-themes. I used In Vivo codes to highlight the *real, unaltered* spoken and written language of the participants in order to support each theme and sub-theme. In Vivo coding emphasizes the actual words used by participants and how their unedited word choice can prove to be more meaningful than terms prescribed by a researcher (Manning, 2017).

I used themes from both the within-case and cross-case analysis to weave together individual, personal narrative portraits for each participant. I used a "voice-in-dialogue" analysis of each participant's data (Chapman, 2005). By emphasizing the real, spoken and written words of each participant, including the exchange of dialogue between researcher and participant, and participants amongst themselves, a narrative portrait emerged that captured the unique stories of

both the participants' and the researcher's experience in the study (Chapman, 2005). As the narrative writer, I focused on two areas of interest in order to construct each narrative portrait:

1. The untold *story* behind my experiences in the proposed research project: English (2000) noted that constructing the narrative of the research creates a cohesive, aesthetic understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Additionally, English (2000) reinforced the idea that in order to develop an "...authentic, real, and revelatory" narrative, the portraitist must be an active member in the research study (p. 23). The research journal that I kept throughout the entirety of the research study assisted me in not only reflecting on my biases, but also to document the emotions, questions, and interactions between myself and the participants. This journal helped me to "... learn as a scholar, participate as an activist, and reflect as a student" (Chapman, 2005, p. 33). By telling the "story" of the research project, I provided a narrative version of the timeline of events and interactions with participants that created authentic emotions and ideas for myself, as both the researcher and the "student" learning from the participants/experts.
2. *Connections* to personal practice: Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggested that, because the researcher brings her own experiences to the research study, "...she must use the knowledge and wisdom drawn from these life experiences as resources for understanding, and as sources of connection and identification" with the participants (p. 95). As a high school English teacher, I feel as if my preconceived notions and biases about curriculum and instruction in the high school English classroom will be nearly impossible to omit from the study. Therefore, I used the narrative portraits to pen my understanding of how

the data derived from the semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions inform ideas and practices within my own high school English classroom. As the researcher, and an active listener of the participants' stories, I am "...inevitably shaped by these profound…autobiographical experiences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 95). Therefore, I composed narrative portraits that outlined my own learning from the participants as it relates to my understanding of teaching high school English.

Research Validity

The study contributes to the current body of research in that it provides a better understanding of how the experiences of high school male students mediate their reading and writing in the classroom, and how high school English classrooms can be reimagined in order to create a more welcoming, positive learning environment for male students. To accomplish this, the study amplified the voices of high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP in how their life experiences shape their reading and writing, and how they perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom. To help increase the trustworthiness of this case study, I triangulated the data by using multiple sources of data collection and by member-checking throughout each phase of data collection. Member checking is a process by which participants are given open access to transcripts, interview questions, and the analytical thought process in order to accurately represent the participants' voices (Birt et al., 2016) Simpson and Quigley (2016) mentioned that member checking is a way to move some of the power away from the researcher and place it in the hands of the participant(s).

Because of the qualitative nature of this case study, along with the portraiture method, I, as the researcher, was closely intertwined with the overall narratives. Because of this, I applied

strategies throughout the study in order to reduce researcher bias and reflect on the ways in which my own assumptions and previous experiences were impacting the nature of the study. I used a research journal to specifically reflect on how my own beliefs about classroom instruction in the high school English classroom was potentially influencing the study.

Risks, Benefits, and Ethical Considerations

The study had the potential to reveal valuable insight into how the high school male's experiences outside of school mediate his reading and writing inside school. In turn, this is a valuable contribution to the body of research about how to structure the high school English classroom in terms of curriculum and instructional practices. A potential benefit of this study was that the participants might have grown more confident in their literacy skills and began to feel more "at home" in an academic setting. By expressing their ideas in a format that is asset-based, and by hearing the perspectives of other peers who may have experienced similar things, there was the possibility that the participants would feel a sense of camaraderie that made the academic experience a more inviting one.

Summary

In order to better understand the male literacy gap at the high school level, this qualitative case study used a multiple case design to explore how the experiences outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an AEP mediated their reading and writing in high school English class and how they perceived curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom. Data was collected from three high school male participants who were enrolled in an AEP. Data included two focus group sessions and two, one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was conducted both within case and across cases to answer each research question.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Overview

Throughout this study, my intention was to explore the ways in which experiences outside of school in the lives of high school male students who are enrolled in an Alternative Education Program (AEP) have mediated their reading and writing skills in the academic space. Thus, this qualitative study intentionally employed a multiple case study design to analyze interview and focus group data. This data, combined with my own research journal, was also used to create narrative portraits for each individual case. As I am a high school English teacher and act as an English tutor for my participants, it would be impossible to remove myself entirely from the narrative being constructed. Therefore, I employed Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis's (1998) idea of portraiture construction, which allows the researcher to use her own voice, blended with the voices of the participants, in order to deviate from the role of a detached investigator, and instead embrace the voice of a storyteller. The purpose of this chapter is to provide excerpts of the stories told by three high school males enrolled in an alternative education program in order to provide insight into the following research questions:

1. How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediate their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom?
2. How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

Each question was informed through the participants' lived experiences, reflective concepts derived from the experiences, and an analysis of the data from the stories the participants shared

with me. A more in-depth understanding of each case was created through careful data analysis and narrative portrait construction. This study took place within a "real-life" setting, which Yin (2018) emphasized is a place where participants are in a setting that is naturally occurring to them. Within this context, participants engaged in focus group discussions and semi-structured one-on-one interviews during their regularly scheduled seminar sessions at the site of the alternative education program (as detailed in Chapter Three). Furthermore, participants reflected on "real-life" experiences and potential ways in which those experiences mediated their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom (Yin, 2018).

Research Question 1 explored the stand-out lived experiences, which occurred outside of school, as told by each participant. Each participant was encouraged to reflect on the key pillars of their lives, thus far, by time periods which were categorized as: Early Life (life up until 5th grade), Growing Up (middle school years), Who You Are Now (high school), and Where You Want to Be (the vision for the future and experiences that have shaped that choice). Interestingly enough, participants started to voice connections between these experiences and their own perceptions of reading and writing in the classroom without me prompting them to do so. Therefore, a naturally occurring conversation about life experiences mediating reading and writing in the high school English classroom unfolded. These conversations, held through focus groups and one-on-one semi-structured interviews, were carefully analyzed using an integrative approach where data analysis occurred in continued phases alongside data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This way, the within-case analysis served as a starting point for the cross-case analysis as each participant had different life experiences, yet expressed similar perceptions of reading and writing in the high school English classroom that eventually built themes to be later explored in Chapter 4.

Research Question 2, which explored how high school male students who are enrolled in an alternative education program perceive high school English pedagogy, was informed by conversations held in focus groups and within one-on-one semi-structured interviews. This question was designed to explore the particular *place* where reading and writing in the academic realm is typically used most in high schools—the English classroom. The participants' shared stories and experiences from Research Question 1 ended up informing Research Question 2. In Chapter 4, the stories of the participants will clearly highlight how they seem to be unable to disentangle the idea of reading and writing, as a whole, from the high school English classroom space. Furthermore, the stories of the participants reinforce the importance of the role of the educator in high school English classrooms as it pertains to their sense of belonging and/or motivation to engage.

This study reflects Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory as the participants in this study were encouraged to reflect on how their lives outside of school had mediated their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom. Moreover, this study was rooted in the sociocultural belief that students first learn from their experiences and relationships outside of school, then internalize those experiences in order to form perceptions of the academic space (Vygotsky, 1978). As the narrative portrait of each participant unfolds, it will become evident how each participant has clearly, though often unintentionally, used his experiences outside of the English classroom in order to form sharp opinions about what reading and writing mean inside the high school English classroom; furthermore, the narrative portraits will reveal how the participants use their experiences outside of the classroom in order to gauge the usefulness of reading, writing, and their English classes as a whole.

This chapter is organized into three sections to address the research questions. Section

one, “The Genre,” begins with a brief introduction of how the study’s results can be viewed as an extended metaphor. In the second section, “The Chapters,” I will provide a narrative portrait for each of the three participants. Each narrative portrait will be presented as a different chapter. Section three, “The Book Report,” will unfold emerging themes and each participants’ significant statements aligned with each theme that were generated from careful data analysis. Before I share the findings as relative to the research questions for the study, I will provide general participant descriptive data to add another layer of detail to each case being explored.

The Genre: An Extended Metaphor

“This is an island. At least I think it’s an island.” (Golding, 1954, p. 7).

While I never planned on incorporating a single genre or novel into this study, an interaction that I had with my participants during the recruitment process led me to view this study in the form of a metaphor that is only enhanced by a single novel that is considered a classic text, and still taught in most high school classrooms within the United States (Hasan & Sharif, 2020). The novel *Lord of the Flies*, while originally published in 1954, holds timeless themes about growing up, masculinity, and survival that are still applicable today (Hasan & Sharif, 2020). The idea for the use of this novel stemmed from an encounter that I had with a participant during the phase of the project where I was recruiting potential participants.

According to the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the portraiture method in qualitative work serves as a means of grappling with unrecognized assumptions and implications of educational practice with particular regard to groups who have had their voices limited (AERA, 2009, p. 482). I was astonished to find that my potential participants were *excited* about putting in the work needed to amplify their voices on how their lives outside of school mediated their reading and writing inside the academic space. When I spoke to one

potential participant about the study, another potential participant overheard our conversation and *asked me* if he could participate. The word spread about my study, and I was soon faced with an abundance of voices just waiting to be heard. I did not realize that I had assumed that finding participants would be a difficult task. These young men were not only anxious to share their stories, but they were excited about the possibilities that could stem from their tales. Strangely enough, it was another unrecognized assumption that I held that gave me the idea of viewing the results of the study as an extended metaphor.

A metaphor is a comparison of two things without using the word "like" or "as," but an extended metaphor is "...defined as a linguistic metaphor extending over more than one clause whose language relates directly to both the metaphorical source and target" (Crisp, 2008, p. 291). As the results of the qualitative data analysis unfold throughout the rest of this chapter, an extended metaphor will become clear as the participants themselves are compared to survivors on an uncharted island. The metaphor is extended by teachers being compared to invading pirates, the high school English classroom itself being compared to an uninhabitable island, the rocky cliffs upon which the survivor stands being compared to the confidence and identity that outside forces have helped him build, and the rising sun being compared to his ambition.

I will use excerpts from the classic novel *Lord of the Flies*, published by William Golding in 1954, to highlight the similarities between the participants' perceptions of themselves, their high school English classes, and the ways in which their lives outside of school mediate their reading and writing in the academic space. Golding (1954) created a story about boys of all school ages who are stranded on a deserted island and must use their wit, leadership skills, and resourcefulness in order to survive.

The survival story extended metaphor idea came to me early in the study, but was shaped

throughout the interviews and focus group discussions as the participants continually reminded me of characters, events, and conflicts that are found within the pages of *Lord of the Flies*. As I analyzed the data and reflected on the experience of the research study as a whole, I was continually brought back to a conversation that took place during the initial recruitment of participants. While I was attempting to explain my study and the purpose behind it, I provided some background information and included that there is a perceived gender gap in reading and writing scores at the high school level. When the potential participants asked me to explain what this "really meant," I simply said, "The girls appear to have higher scores on standardized tests of reading and writing than boys do." Participant #1, who chose the pseudonym "Joe" for himself, responded by saying, "Is that supposed to bother me or embarrass me?" I quickly responded that it definitely was not meant to do such a thing, and I believed that those scores were not always indicative of skill. "I can tell you why our scores are so much lower right now," Joe quipped. He then responded with the line that has driven the entirety of this study: "We're just out here trying to survive."

An Overview of the Extended Metaphor

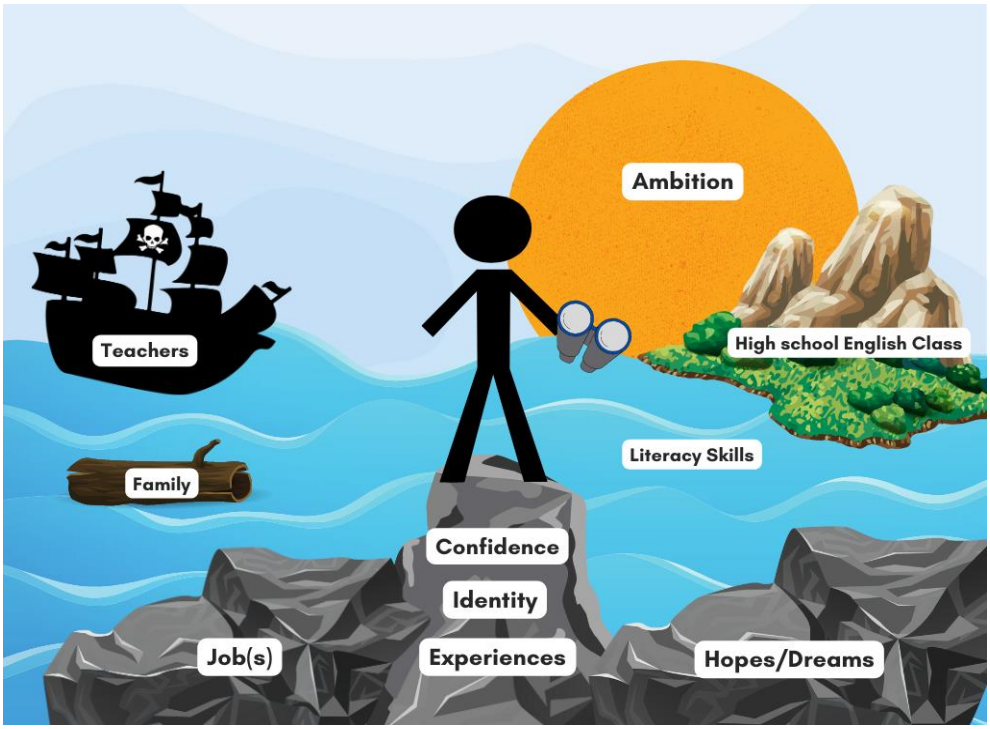
"The three boys stood in the darkness, striving unsuccessfully to convey the majesty of adult life"

(Golding, 1945, p. 94).

Before unveiling the narrative portrait of each participant and beginning a discussion of the themes that I created from a careful data analysis, I find it necessary to include a detailed explanation of the survival story's extended metaphor. While composing each participant's narrative portrait, then completing a cross-case analysis, the extended metaphor came to life. While I have labeled each extension of the survival story metaphor in the image below, the extended metaphor will continue to be refined throughout the discussion of themes.

Figure 3

Graphic Representation of the Survival Story Extended Metaphor



The High School Male as a Survivor

The first component of the extended metaphor forms the central understanding of the comparison. The high school male who is enrolled in an AEP is compared to a survivor. According to Cambridge University Press (2011), a survivor is a person who has continued living life successfully despite facing difficult experiences. However, in the context of this study, I am choosing to define a survivor as a person who is still actively engaging in the academic process necessary to earn a high school diploma in hopes of creating personal success in the future. One of the key shared characteristics of the participants in the study is that they have all chosen to leave the traditional high school setting, or been forced to leave by a school's administration. While they are all of the age to legally choose to drop out of school altogether, all

three of the participants chose to be a *survivor* in the sense that they know a high school diploma is a stepping stone to more opportunities for success.

In Golding's (1954) novel *Lord of the Flies*, school-aged (elementary through high school) males survived a plane crash and are left stranded on an island; in this study, high school males enrolled in an AEP survived some form of negative experience(s) in the traditional high school setting and are left stranded at the AEP. I am aware that the terminology "left stranded" conjures up negative connotations, however, for the sake of the extended metaphor, combined with the participants' discussions of how they feel the school system views them, the terminology will suffice. In the figure above, the survivor (the high school male student enrolled in an AEP) is holding binoculars. These binoculars represent the search for meaning, purpose, and understanding that will be outlined in the discussion of themes below.

High School Teachers as Invading Pirates

The second component of the extended metaphor involves high school English teachers being perceived as the enemy by high school males enrolled in an AEP. While teachers were not a central focus of this study, every participant passionately discussed the negative impact that teachers had on his experience(s) in the high school English classroom. In Golding's (1954) novel, one boy surveys the island upon arrival and states, "This is our island. It's a good island. Until the grownups come to fetch us we'll have fun" (p. 35). Throughout the focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews throughout this study, it became evident that the participants perceived high school English teachers as invaders who come to steal joy, break down confidence, and even perpetuate negative self-talk. The survivor story metaphor is extended through the idea that the high school English teacher can be compared to a pirate coming to invade the survivor's land (life) and take away their treasure (confidence).

The High School English Class as an Uninhabitable Island

The next extension of the survival story metaphor is the idea that the high school English classroom is often perceived as an uninhabitable island by high school male students enrolled in an AEP. Throughout the data collection process, it became apparent that the participants felt very isolated and uncomfortable in the high school English space. The boys in Golding's (1954) novel describe an island as a "scar" when it is noted:

> All round him the long scar smashed into the jungle was a bath of heat. He was clambering heavily among the creepers and broken trunks when a bird, a vision of red and yellow, flashed upwards with a witch-like cry; and this cry was echoed by another. (p. 1)

This reference to the island as a scar relates to the high school English classroom space as some participants discussed interactions that occurred within that space that have clearly left a lasting impression on them—similar to how a physical scar remains on the body. In the discussion of themes below, it will become clear that the high school male students enrolled in the AEP do not see the high school English classroom as a place where they belong.

Family as a Potential Life Preserver

The floating log in the figure above represents the ability of families to play a crucial role in the life of the survivor. It adds to the metaphor of the survivor in the sense that the possibility of clinging onto the log for support is there, but another possibility is that the log will be full of holes and simply collapse and sink under the weight of the survivor. In *Lord of the Flies,* one boy continually tells the rest that his father is in the Navy and will soon be there to rescue them; yet, he does not arrive (Golding, 1954, p. 13). Additionally, another boy, obviously not wanting to address where either of his parents are, focuses on his aunt and how she will worry about him

(Golding, 1954, p. 14). These connections to families being important, yet also fulfilling a plethora of roles in a survivor's life, are also evident within the study. The participants recounted several stories that placed family members as central characters in their quest to not only create better futures for themselves, but also to survive and receive their high school diplomas. The participants were well-aware that some family members are encouragers of success, while others act as catalysts for success because the participant wanted to succeed/survive in order to get away from their families. In the discussion of themes below, it is evidenced that family members play a key role in a survivor's life, and especially in the ways in which he views reading and writing inside the high school English classroom.

An Ocean of Literacy Skills

The extended metaphor continues with the concept of literacy skills being as vast as an ocean. While the study highlights how high school male students enrolled in an AEP perceive reading and writing in the high school English curriculum to be disorienting, the thematic discussion below will also highlight the ways in which the participants suggest using literacy skills which extend beyond the bounds of reading and writing. Golding (1954) depicts a scene in *Lord of the Flies* where one boy is sitting and staring out over the water (p. 111). It is stated, "Wave after wave, Ralph followed the rise and fall until something of the remoteness of the sea numbed his brain. Then gradually the almost infinite size of this water forced itself on his attention" (p. 113). The participants within the study highlighted infinite ways that literacy practices can be practiced, refined, and celebrated within the high school English curriculum. NCTE (2019) highlighted the fluidity in the definition of literacy, therefore the ocean in the extended metaphor serves as a reminder that literacy practices are ever changing, shifting, and flowing from the imaginations of all people.

The Rocky Cliff of Confidence

Confidence plays an important role in the life of the survivor; the metaphor is extended through the comparison of the rocky cliffs to the confidence that the survivor needs to build a firm foundation in the world. Elements such as job(s), identity, experiences, and hopes/dreams combine to build the survivor's confidence in who he is and who he will become. Golding (1954) describes the rocky cliffs in *Lord of the Flies* by stating that, "Here the beach was interrupted abruptly by the square motif of the landscape; a great platform of pink granite thrust up uncompromisingly through forest and terrace and sand and lagoon to make a raised jetty four feet high" (p. 13). The uncompromising confidence on which the survivor stands is not always self-made. It comes from a variety of experiences that he has had in his own life and also plays a role in how he not only reads and writes in the academic space, but also how he perceives the high school English classroom. Within the thematic discussion below, the words and phrases from the participants will highlight how confidence, while sometimes rocky or unstable, is a necessary component of experiencing personal success.

The Warmth of Ambition

The last component which completes the extended metaphor of the survivor is the rising sun. In the conversations with the participants, it became clear that it was their ambition that acted as their motivation to survive. All three participants wanted something more for themselves—whether that be money, a different job, or simple contentment with their lives. In the extended metaphor, the sun represents the ambition which symbolically warms the survivor from the coldness of the world and guides the survivor when he feels he has lost his way and cannot see the point in trying. In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding (1954) points out that, "With openness came the sun; it dried the sweat that had soaked their clothes in the dark, damp heat"

(p. 17). The metaphorical warmth of ambition opens opportunities for the survivor and often makes the hard work worth it in the end.

Chapter 1: Joe's Narrative Portrait

"The half-shut eyes were dim with the infinite cynicism of adult life" (Golding, 1954, p. 137).

Since Joe is the participant that originally gave me the idea for the extended metaphor concept, it seems only fitting that I begin with his narrative portrait. Joe is dichotomous in nature in that he is the person who everyone wants to be friends with, yet he made it very clear to me that he "doesn't like anybody—he doesn't like people." When Joe walks in a room, it is not his voice that you hear, but the voices of everyone else happily greeting him. He is a natural, quiet leader, but he does not know it; or, if he does know it, he simply does not let on that he cares. He is 17 years old, but he has a very grown-up presence about him in that he is a conversationalist, he's quick-witted, and he knows every Hank Williams Jr. song ever made. Joe typically performs well on academic assessments without studying, and he is hyper focused on one thing: *making money*.

While Joe gave me the famous line, *we're just trying to survive*, he also gave me details as to what exactly this means for him. Joe's family remains somewhat of a mystery to me because as I asked him questions, his answers only gave me a bigger puzzle to put together. He comes from a blended family composed of his biological father, his stepmother, one "real brother" and three step brothers. Joe told me that his biological mother "left when I was two, so I don't really know her or anything about her." He punctuated the story of his biological mother by stating, "She could be dead for all I know." While Joe lives with his father, brothers, and step mother, he indicated that "Mamaw is my person. She's always there for me." He informed me that Mamaw, his grandmother, owns her own business, along with her late husband, and has

done very well financially. Joe's father owns chicken houses and Joe, himself, works as a diesel mechanic and estimates that he works 45-46 hours per week. Joe is resourceful and business-minded, so he bought a few chainsaws with the money that he earned from diesel mechanic job. He uses these chainsaws and employs a few friends of his to do side work on the weekends cutting trees. His ultimate goal in life is to move to Montana and own a ranch. He is in the alternative education program to earn his high school diploma because he missed so many days of school in the traditional setting that he was unable to gain credit for his high school courses. His work schedule is his top priority because "school doesn't pay the bills."

Joe continued to give me small bits of puzzle pieces about his family, and particularly how his experiences with his family have mediated the ways in which he reads and writes in the academic setting. He indicated that his father would "make us sit down at the table every day after school and read." He followed up this anecdote by telling me "I don't really mind reading. Like, I used to read and get my AR points. Like, I did really good on them. That was my stuff." I did a quick search on what AR points were, and I found that AR stands for Accelerated Reader and generally consists of students in elementary school reading books and taking computer-based quizzes to earn points (AR points) based on the book's perceived difficulty and the number of questions the student answers correctly (Thompson et al., 2008). Students are typically given a goal to hit based on AR points, and parties and/or prizes are awarded to students who have hit or surpassed the goal (Thompson et al., 2008).

This story about Joe's AR points made me think about how he is able to find value in something when he sees a quantifiable purpose behind it. For example, he saw the purpose behind gaining AR points in order to achieve a certain number goal, which ultimately led to a physical reward. Now, he sees a purpose behind working—earning money. So, how do I, as a

high school English teacher, not only help my students to see purpose in the work, but actually create that purpose through the high school English pedagogy? Have I tried so hard to follow the steps of what it means to be a "good teacher" like creating the foldables, providing choice reading assignments, and making the flipped classroom videos with the best special effects, or have I merely been chiseling away at the facade of what learning truly is? Joe's words made me think that perhaps I have created a beautiful surface of being a high school English teacher, but I do not want to stop at being a book cover so pretty that a person cannot help but display it on a shelf. It is not about the cover, but rather about the story that draws people in. How I have been teaching may seem pretty on the outside, but is there real depth to it? Have I shown my students what the purpose behind the learning truly is? It is the purpose behind the metaphorical book cover, and/or the teaching and passing on of knowledge, that Joe reminded me should always come first.

On the other hand, Joe's insights reveal that he is motivated by tangible "rewards." In elementary school, his reward for winning the AR point contest came in the form of a prize from the teacher. Currently, as he works on his schoolwork in the AEP, the reward that he envisions is a high school diploma. When he is working outside of school, those rewards come in the form of a paycheck. Joe appears to be driven by his motivation to achieve something that he can see. I am left wondering how I could duplicate the "magic" of AR points into the high school English classroom through an adapted version of the reading contest. How might giving students like Joe a tangible reward to work for impact their motivation to engage in the high school English classroom?

He added on to his musings about purpose by stating, "You need to know how to read fluently. I get that. You need to know how to write properly. I get that part. But what do I need to

know about Gatsby and Shakespeare?" This line of thinking was not totally foreign to me, as Joe has expressed, on several occasions, that he does not feel like the work he is doing in his high school class translates to something that he can apply to his life in the "real world." He has obviously spent time thinking about how high school English classrooms could be different, because he offered a *real-world* example to me that offers insight into how he would like to see the high school English experience change. Joe stated:

> Now, I ain't really into politics because I ain't old enough to vote. So, I don't really care. This is what I think, though. This is not Democrat or Republican, this is a straight up thing that I think y'all could do to improve the economy. I think that if they changed schools and taught us how to make money, then things would be ten times better. Right now, schools teach us how to work for somebody, not how to be a boss. So, you're teaching us how to do things where we could make 14, 15, 16 dollars an hour, but what about if we learned things that bosses need and people start making 30, 40, 50 dollars an hour—our economy will be running way better than you think.

Joe's example made me realize that it is not only the curriculum that is important in the high school English classroom, but it is also the overall power dynamic. What would happen if I let more of my students make decisions that would not only impact their reading selection, but also how their time, space, and interpersonal skills are managed? Am I teaching them to be compliant, or am I teaching them to be *bosses* who take charge of their own learning? I asked Joe about my thoughts and told him how I struggled with doubt that students would do their work if I did not assign specific due dates, partners, and project ideas. Joe did not provide a clear answer to me, but rather a question for me to think about. He asked me to think about when the first high school was built. I was confused, but he continued, "They put em' in a building and then taught

em' the same thing. Nothing's ever changed. Ever. Today, we're in a completely different world. Completely different. But the only thing they've changed after hundreds of years, yeah…the only thing they've ever changed is now we have laptops." Joe's question prompted me, once again, to question my own teaching practices. I will be the first person to admit that change terrifies me. I worry about failure based on change, but what Joe inadvertently told me was that failure cannot happen if we are willing to try something new. It is not the latest technology or the works of Shakespeare that will suddenly make students find purpose in the work and engage in the material. It is the teacher who is willing to start again, try something new, and be okay with relinquishing control over what she thought she knew to be true.

Joe also had passionate feelings and thought-provoking ideas about how important a teacher's role is in the high school English classroom. I severely underestimated how much teachers would be talked about throughout this study. In fact, while I did not have an interview question crafted that specifically asked participants to speak on teachers, it was a topic that was brought up throughout every session—and especially throughout Joe's. When I asked Joe to think about his high school English classes at the traditional high school, and at the AEP, he continually spoke about teachers rather than the classes themselves. He spoke highly of the teacher he had during his freshman year because "he just got it, and he let me get away with a lot of things." I pushed him to tell me more about what this meant and he replied with "No, not a lot of things. Just, if I did it, he graded it and told me that English is all about opinions. Everyone has an opinion, so everyone is right." When I tried to reword the question to get Joe to focus on aspects of his high school English classes in the past that stood out to him as being particularly positive or negative, he responded with "I don't know. I hated all of em' the same. I had a teacher that I didn't like the most. He went on to tell me that she was like a witch. I swear. She

had nothing good ever to say or be around. Like, she was just terrible all the time. And she was mad about everything. She couldn't stand me, though. Mostly because of my brother." The last line of Joe's passionate discourse about the teacher he "hated" made me curious. I prompted him to tell me more about the brother and the connections that the teacher was making to him. He stated, "Oh, he did a lot of stuff. He was the biggest drug lord of the county. But we don't act nothin' alike. If he walked in here, in front of me, you'd be like, who's this kid?" Clearly, the opinions of a teacher and the overall feelings that a student receives from a teacher are important—even to someone who claims to *hate people*. If Joe, someone who firmly states his dislike for people, continually refers back to the person charged with leading the high school English class rather than the class itself, there is an important takeaway about the role of an English teacher. Joe ends his thoughts on teachers by reflecting:

> And I don't understand it. I mean, that's just how school is, though. You put a bunch of kids in a space, you teach em', you stress em' out by telling him that if he fails, he isn't gonna do this. He's not gonna be anything. So, teachers are stressing kids out for most of his life. You let him go on his own. I mean, it brings more stress and more bull crap than it does anything. Teachers don't teach us anything that we need to know.

I found it so interesting that Joe used the pronoun he/his instead of they/them. It was almost as if he was talking for all male students and the ways that teachers make them feel. Is this something that Joe saw happening with teachers and male students? Or was he merely projecting his own feelings onto the entire male student population? Either way, the sharp focus on stress and feeling like a failure really resonated with me. Perhaps the emphasis does not need to be placed on the completion of assignments, but rather the ability of a student to reach their personal goals outside of school based on choices he makes inside of school. If we become

willing to change what happens inside the high school English classroom, perhaps male students would feel less stressed about failure which appears to ultimately lead to a shutdown of emotions. When we create the pedagogical change needed to show students purposeful connections between their lives outside of school and the activities inside of school, we could potentially alter the disconnect many male students see between their personal lives and their academic lives. Joe indicated that this pedagogical change should come in the form of a power shift so that students have the opportunity to make decisions about the experiences that they have in school. In the high school English classroom, this could look like students and teachers working together in order to co-construct curriculum and/or instructional practices. Joe indicated that the high school English classroom *does* need to be reimagined, however, his insights imply that the change should come based on the ideas of students.

As I ended my time with Joe, I asked him to think about things that he engages in outside of school that relate to reading and writing, but may not be considered academic in nature. It was my goal that he ended the interview in a way that made him feel like he was an expert in some area of reading and writing even though he might not see himself that way in the classroom. I wanted to show him that not all reading and writing take place in an academic vacuum, and he is skilled beyond measure in so many aspects of literacy that extend far beyond basic reading and writing skills. He immediately thought of the ways that he uses reading and writing at his job in order to make more money. He has quite the hefty load of responsibilities as he is in charge of "billing, keeping track of service calls, and creating invoices." Joe was also eager to show me his Instagram posts, which showcased the new truck that he recently bought for himself. He showed me photographs of his truck and he had obviously spent time making sure the photos were aesthetically pleasing. The lighting was incredible and many shots showcased a sunset that

looked like a peach snow cone in the background. He provided clever captions to his pictures like “Let me bless your eyes” or “Keep it Western.” He also pointed out a photo of him that he posted where he is riding a bull. He captioned it “Don’t be all hat and no cowboy.” I asked him if he still pursues this as a hobby and he told me no, that his bull riding stopped when he “started having to pay bills.” Lastly, he pointed out that he has tattoos that act as symbols on his body. I reiterated that this is similar to how we find symbols in literature that we read, but Joe did not seem to be too interested in discussing that connection, so instead, I asked him to describe his tattoos to me and the meaning behind each one. He started by saying “Well, my sleeve. Okay, that’s what’s not finished. The piece that I got on it right now is a revolver. My grandpa always carried a revolver in his overalls. No matter what. At the bank, coming to eat with me at school, he had it.” He told me that this revolver is supposed to symbolize the relationship that he and his grandfather had, but he also mentions another tattoo that he is adding to the sleeve. Joe talks about getting a guitar tattooed on his arm to match the guitar tattoo that his father has. “It is going to be a picture of the guitar that Hank Williams Jr. always played.” However, it was his statement about the other piece he wishes to add to his sleeve that stood out to me the most. Joe stated that “there’s gonna be a longhorn with broken horns on the backside. And it’s going to have a compass behind it with everyone’s initials.” I thought it was interesting that he specified that the horns should be broken, so I inquired about this. He stated, “Well, in a cowboy’s world, I guess you’d say something that we always say. A bull with broken horns is just as good as any other bull.” This statement made me realize that this is, perhaps, what students want their teachers to know. They may look different, come from different backgrounds, or have things about them that seem to be “broken.” However, just like a book cover, what is on the outside never tells a person’s full story. Their lives are the metaphorical books: full of complex

characters, shocking twists, inspirational messages, and pointers on how to *survive.*

Chapter 2: Dredge's Narrative Portrait

"This is our island. It's a good island. Until the grownups come to fetch us we'll have fun"

(Golding, 1954, p. 35).

Dredge was my participant who heard me speaking to someone else about the project, and asked if he could also participate. I was surprised by his willingness to share his thoughts on anything related to English class because he has a noticeable, physical reaction every time reading or writing are mentioned. When someone mentions reading, writing, or English class to Dredge, he physically shudders and always says "I hate it." It was interesting to me that Dredge seems physically disgusted at the mere thought of reading or writing, yet he was enthusiastic about sharing his thoughts and stories from his own life that related to the topic.

As I began to learn more about Dredge and his life outside of school, I started to notice how he desperately clings to childhood while the grip of adulthood tries to yank him loose. Dredge is 17 years old and noted that he enjoys basketball, hunting, and working out, but does not yet have a job. He is always laughing and enjoys "breaking the law by shooting off fireworks in parking lots and shooting spider ball guns at people" because "it's fun until you get caught." Dredge also chuckled to himself as he informed me that he has a restraining order out against him at the traditional high school that he left because "somebody snitched on me at school so I can't go back. Like, I was blowing an air horn and then I got snitched on, so I can't go back anymore. Like, I can't set foot on the grounds. I enjoy causing chaos at that school." His comment about chaos made me consider all of the times that I have intended to bring order to an English classroom, yet that order appeared to cause frustration for my male students. As a teacher, we are educated on creating rubrics, checklists, and highly detailed expectations, but

does this rigidity cause more frustration than structure? I am left thinking about how this concept plays into the idea of control. When students feel out of control in some aspect of their lives, do they seek ways to exercise control in areas that may feel oppressive? As Dredge continued talking about rule-breaking and chaos creation, I prompted him to talk more about his family so that I could further investigate my hypothesis about control and frustration.

Dredge's details about his family offered insight into how his life outside of school mediates his reading and writing inside of the academic space. Upon beginning the interview with Dredge, one of the first things that he told me was that he wanted to be a welder and "my mom has already looked into it. There's a program at some western college out in Texas." This was my first indication that his mother plays a key role in his life. Dredge noted that his dad is a custodian at a local elementary school, but he seems especially proud of his mom and comments that "she is a nurse and she is also the person in his family that he is the closest to." When I asked him if he had siblings, he revealed that "Yeah, but I don't see em' ever because, like, I'm adopted so my siblings are nowhere to be found*."* He paused for a moment then continued by telling me that "My mom told me. Okay, my mom and my other, my, my real mom and mom now, they communicate. She asked me if I wanted to talk to my real mom and I told her no." Interestingly enough, he also shared with me how his mother has been a part of his reading and writing journey. When I brought up English classes that he had in the past, he physically shivered and stated "hated them. I was not reading no 300-page book, two of them a semester. I cheated but I was never there, so I made my, my mom helped me to do it." I am drawn to the way that Dredge almost said "I made my mom…" yet he goes back and changes that phrasing to "My mom helped me to do it." Dredge obviously has respect for his mother, and appreciates what she does for him, yet he also seems to be fighting some conflicting idea within himself

relating to control. “Making” someone do something is very different from someone “helping” with an assignment. This leads me to question how Dredge is viewing his teachers in relation to how he views his mother’s “help.” Does he see the teacher’s role as someone who is there to be “made” to do something or someone who is there to support his efforts? Furthermore, what does this imply about Dredge’s idea of control? Does he feel a lack of control in his high school English classroom that makes him seek control in some aspect of the literacy skills that he is being *told* to practice? Perhaps he feels like his teacher is attempting to control him by “making” him read, so he is subconsciously attempting to exert that same kind of control over his mom who is trying to *help* him with reading.

After thinking about what he had told me, he added, “My mom used to read books like all the time. But, I ain’t seen her pick up a book in months. When I had to read for 30 minutes every day in elementary school, I didn’t want to read it. My mom just read it for me.” Moreover, Dredge’s anecdote about his mother helping him with the book he was supposed to read for his English class led into a different discussion on books, teachers, and advocacy that started to alter the way that I saw Dredge’s life outside of school influencing his reading and writing in the academic space.

When Dredge was speaking about his mother and the help that she had given him in the past on his English assignments, I was particularly drawn to a single statement that he made in passing. It obviously did not stand out to him, yet I asked him to repeat himself when he said “I never went to school. Like, I started to stop going to school altogether when they started reading a book.” I knew that he had strong, negative feelings about reading and writing, but I never realized that it would be strong enough to make him stop going to school altogether. When I asked him to clarify, he told a specific story about a book called *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue

Monk Kidd. He stated, “The reason that I stopped going is cause my mom seen this thing on a test that had like, racism in it. And that’s when the teachers started calling my mom complaining about me. I got suspended for, I got suspended for things I didn’t even do.” Dredge was eager to show me a picture that he had taken of an English test that his teacher gave on the book. One of the questions contained a racial slur that was from a quote in the book. Dredge noted that “My mom called the school and her about it, but they never called her back. They haven’t called her back to this day about it.” He follows up this statement by talking about his refusal to do any work in his English classes from that point forward. When I questioned him about what he did instead, he shrugged and stated, “sat there, looked confused, and cheated.” I wondered if this was not stressful or anxiety-inducing. I know that if I was sitting in a class, and had not read the assignment, I would constantly be worried that a teacher would call on me to answer a question. However, I see that Dredge is more so resigned in his feelings because he feels a sense of control over his ability to choose to not do the reading.

I am constantly learning that the way that I feel, both as a learner and a teacher, is not the way that everyone feels. The process of uncovering this has proven to be one of the most difficult lessons for me to learn, as a teacher myself. I feel as if everyone should know that teachers act as guides and support systems, but what Dredge is showing me is that some students view teachers as enemies to conquer. He told me that “at the end of the day, it didn’t matter, because I still went home happy.” I asked if he ever got in trouble at home for not doing his work or for not going to school. He told me “No, because my mom knew, she knew what I was going through at school because it’s why I wouldn’t go. Like, I would leave early every day before that English class or I wouldn’t get there until late. So, she didn’t really care.” I cannot help but think that there is something more to Dredge’s strong dislike of reading. His automatic, physical

shudder to any mention of reading, coupled with his insistence that his mom helped him and "did not care" that he did not do his work in class makes me wonder if Dredge cannot read. He would constantly talk about how "hard" reading is, so I wonder if Dredge's strong dislike of reading may be because he needs an additional layer of support to strengthen his skillset. There is the possibility that his mother is aware of his struggle with reading and is attempting to help Dredge through it in private rather than in the school setting. Reflecting on Dredge's encounters in English class, and the way his mother plays a role in his processing, creates a series of questions for me to ponder. Why does Dredge view his mother as a supporter, but a teacher as an enemy? What qualities does his mother possess that the teacher does not—or vice versa? What can this show me about the ways in which I lead my own English classes, especially when the demographic is predominantly male?

When I prompted Dredge to think about the ways that he might use reading and writing in his own life, outside of school, he once again expressed strong, negative feelings. He immediately said:

> I don't write. I don't pick up a pencil except when I'm here and reading, it's stupid. It's, I don't know. It's hard. Something about it is just very hard. I don't want to look in a book and see words. I don't know. I can't understand how they're pronounced. You look in a book and see something. You have no idea how to say it. You don't know what it means.

I tried to understand what Dredge was telling me with this statement. I wondered if Dredge hates reading and writing so much because he feels as if it is difficult and he does not "understand it" or if he simply finds it to be a waste of his time. This goes back to my original thought that perhaps Dredge struggles with the act of reading and his feelings of frustration manifest as he

indicates that it is something not worth his time. I offered a story from my own life to see if I could better understand what he was trying to tell me. I told Dredge that I tell people that I hate math, but I really "hate" math because I have always struggled in the subject. I tell him that I do not like it because I do not feel as if I can be successful in the class since I mostly get problems wrong. On the other hand, I do not like science simply because I do not find it interesting. I can do the work, and I typically made good grades in the science courses that I had, but I do not like the topic because I find it to be unrelatable.

Dredge responded to my story by saying "I just don't like it in general. If I don't gotta do it, I don't. If it ain't going to help me live, then I just don't wanna do it. It ain't something I want to do ever." I still do not feel as if I have a firm grasp as to why Dredge has such a strong distaste for reading and writing, but I pushed forward and asked him to talk about any way that he can see reading and writing in his life outside of school. He notes that he "likes using social media apps such as TikTok and Snapchat." He also continually talks about his love for music and even states on multiple occasions how he wishes that teachers would let students listen to music as they complete assignments in class. He discusses the fact that he would like to be a welder when he gets older and points out that he may have to read things in order to learn how to do that job. He states "I only read stuff I know how to read. If I don't know how to read it, I ain't reading it and it isn't for me." I wonder how Dredge is defining "stuff I know how to read." Perhaps he meant that he only reads things he *needs to know*, but he moved on quickly and talked about a comparison between grades that a student receives and their level of intelligence. He said "You can be one of the smartest people, but not know how to do something. Like, you can be very smart in other things, but not the one thing. A grade should reflect what you're good at."

It seems that Dredge is trying to tell me that just because he does not like reading or

writing, or has a perception that he is “bad” at it, does not mean that he is incapable of being highly successful in another area. This makes me think that the ways in which students are being accessed on standardized, end-of-course English tests are not only highly subjective, but the ways in which I have assessed my own students might not be conducive to true learning. Personally, I am not concerned with a student’s score on an end-of-course test, but administrators that I have had in the past put quite a bit of pressure on me (and the other teachers) to have their students reach a certain level of proficiency on the assessment.

I have always agreed with my students when they tell me that they will not ever need to analyze a novel in “real life” unless they become an English teacher. So, I have always been more concerned with students learning how to use literacy skills to create opportunities for themselves. For example, I want my students to be able to think critically about experiences in their own lives that have taught them lessons on how to be more resilient, responsible, or brave. I want my students to develop the listening skills that help them to build empathy and see the world through the eyes of others who may have different beliefs, backgrounds, or cultural practices. I want my students to be able to confidently articulate their ideas through speaking and writing so that they can land cool internships or the career of their dreams. Dredge reminded me that often I let the pressure of the proficiency tab on the test score data dictate how I plan my lessons or assess my students. If that is not what true learning is to me, then I should reconsider why I use those methods in my own classroom.

While Dredge does not seem to want to talk too much about his life outside of school, he has quite a bit to say about what life was like for him inside of school. This makes me feel an immense sense of pride in him for his vulnerability and obvious desire to share his experiences so that others may not have to feel what he has been feeling. Dredge pointed out that he felt out

of place or unwanted in the academic setting. He notes that something needs to be done to "take the stress off" of students and adds to that by saying "maybe some people got family issues at home." He recalled a teacher telling him that "she didn't want me in there," and the only positive part of English class was "talking to peers around me." While Dredge does not seem to realize it, talking to people and effectively communicating is a large part of growing literacy skills.

It seems as if the task of reading and writing has been drained out of the larger vessel of what literacy skills truly are—a part of life which contributes to a student's identity formation as they come to understand both themselves and others around them (NCTE, 2022). While storytelling, communication, and literacy skills that go beyond the identification and formation of letters may not be tested on end-of-course examinations, they are clearly a crucial part of creating a more welcoming atmosphere for our male learners. I am left wondering how incorporating *less* novel reading and writing about texts, and more storytelling, communicating with peers about experiences, and hands-on creative projects in the high school English classroom may impact the end-of-course test scores. Would they improve them, have a negative effect on them, or would they simply stay stagnant? And if improvement, or no improvement happened, why would we not stray from traditional methods of curriculum and instruction in the high school English classroom? Even if test scores declined, would it still be "worth it" to keep large groups of students engaged in school and practicing skills that they will need in the *real world*, rather than having them hate a class so much that they stop coming to school altogether? While I do not ask these questions out loud, Dredge states that high school was:

> a terrible experience. Teachers make it a terrible place. It's like a prison. You can only go out of a classroom at a certain time, you cannot be on your phone. You can't even look at your phone during lunch now. You can't go to the bathroom unless it's an

> emergency or your parents call and give you special permission. It's just a prison. We can't go outside - do nothing.

Again, Dredge views school as the ultimate lockdown on any form of control that he may have. He feels incredibly restricted and limited in choices in the academic space. In his mind, school is a prison where he is forced to be under the control of teachers. He does not view his teachers as supporters, but rather as prison guards who are there to stop his fun and his choices. He gives the examples of not being able to go to the bathroom, be on his phone, or go outside as a way to support his idea beyond the high school English classroom. He sees control in all aspects of high school, not just reading and writing. Dredge showed me that sometimes surviving means removing yourself from a situation and/or building walls to keep the disappointment, frustration, and stress at bay. Dredge exercised the only choice that he perceived he had: deciding to not go to school. While he removed himself from a situation where he perceived a total lack of control, he is also brave enough to not be silenced by this perception and voice opinions. While his outlook on reading, writing, and what happens in the high school English classroom is bleak, he is ultimately choosing to control what he can and ultimately survive.

Chapter 3: Michael's Narrative Portrait

"He found himself understanding the wearisomeness of this life, where every path was an improvisation and a considerable part of one's waking life was spent watching one's feet."

(Golding, 1954, p. 76)

Michael is my participant who gave me an immense feeling of hopefulness, so I feel as if the chapters should conclude with his narrative as it lends itself to inspiring others. Michael is like a windy day in early spring—strong enough to cause damage, but sneakily cool enough to keep you guessing what tomorrow might be like. He is 17 years old but softly speaks with the

wisdom of a person who has lived for decades longer. Upon meeting Michael, who is the newest addition to the AEP, I was intrigued by how silently stoic he was, and how he was obviously an observer of people. He is one of those people who appears to be lost in thought, yet he is actually listening to everything that is being said around him, and quietly working it all out in his mind. When I originally approached Michael about participating in my study, he was hesitant. He stated that he "has trouble speaking in front of people because of my stuttering problem." What is interesting is, I had never noticed his "stuttering problem," and I do not believe that any of the other students had picked up on it either. While Michael did not say much in the focus group activities, he had quite a bit to say in our one-on-one interview which led me to understand why he works so hard, why he dreams so big, and what it meant when he said he "needed to get back on my feet a little bit."

When I originally sat down with Michael, I knew very little about his home life, his family, or his backstory. However, as he started telling me his story, I quickly came to learn how Michael's life outside of school has greatly influenced his reading and writing inside the high school English classroom. He immediately pointed out that he currently lives with his cousin and "my mom, she barely talks to me. Even before my phone was broken, she didn't text me." When I asked about his father, he told me that he was "the man I'd looked up to my whole life." However, one morning when he was "out feeding the horses," he "scooped out horse feed and found" that his father "had hidden his meth there." He said "I Facetimed my mom cause she's the only person I could run to really. She called the cops and everything and I was really emotional. I'm still scarred about it. I haven't been back there since. I haven't even went and got my tree stands over there." He notes that before his dad "started getting bad," they had "everything that a man could want." Michael then details his voyage through making sense of

what had happened through a slew of stories about who he has lived with. He talked about living with his grandparents who ultimately "kicked" him "out," so he started living with his girlfriend. While the overall story as to how Michael came to currently live with his cousin is still unclear to me, I do know that he has a fierce love, respect, and admiration for her and her sister. He said, "If it wasn't for them, then I wouldn't be here right now." What is interesting to me is that Michael sees every twist and turn in his life's journey as a chance to prove that he is a survivor. As he talks about the people in his life that have let him down, made him doubt himself, or spoke poorly of him, he constantly speaks words of life and encouragement to himself. He says things like "I'm thankful, I'm out here trying to make a point to everybody that hey, I'm here, and when I'm called worthless, I said okay, watch this. In five years, I'll be making twice as much money as you will."

Michael makes me wonder how I can explicitly teach this positive self-talk in my own high school English classroom. Part of being a storyteller is being able to have confidence in your story and feel empathy when hearing the stories of others. Michael beautifully embodies this concept, but I am not sure that he even realizes it. He describes himself as "shy" and "deathly scared" of talking to people, yet he exudes confidence and compassion; everyone wants to cheer him on. I am left thinking about ways that I can incorporate confidence building exercises into my English curriculum that would encourage male students to see themselves as the writers of their own stories—even when those stories may have unexpected plot twists. Michael has obviously captured the essence of what it means to not only be a survivor of trauma, but to thrive despite circumstances that may interrupt the flow of life's narrative.

As Michael began to transition to speaking about his high school English classes, specifically, he noted something that intrigued me. He stated that it "wasn't always the content

that was the problem," but it was "the teacher who made it bad." He went as far as to say "because of the teaching—100% because of the teaching." He notes that while he was in the traditional high school setting, English class was not his favorite and he "fought to not do it" and "I couldn't stand it." However, he took a moment to pause and think about what he had just said, then followed it up with "Now, my attitude about the whole thing has changed. My attitude towards school work in general has changed and all that." When I pushed him to expand on this idea, he said:

> My old school was nothing like it is here [the AEP]. Y'all will help one-on-one, but they wouldn't help one-on-one or not one-on-one. They would just tell us the lesson, and if someone asks a question—okay, I'm a shy person and I normally don't ask questions because I get it. But, if I don't get it, I might need to ask and you want them to help.

He went on to give me a specific example of a teacher, rather than a particular English class or assignment, that stood out as being particularly "bad." He commented, "She was the worst. She was, she's like a witch. She wouldn't do nothing. Gripe and complain about everything. And that's how I failed English because I swear she failed me when I actually passed." Michael's story leads me to think about my own grading practices and if I grade all students the same,or some more harshly than others. Of course, I do not want to think that I would ever not grade a student fairly, but with what Michael is telling me, it makes me wonder how we, as teachers, grade students, and specifically male students, in different ways. I would be interested in seeing what would happen if all students removed their names from assignments, and instead assigned themselves a number that was only revealed once grading was complete. How would that compare to a grade that I gave students when their name was on the assignment? Moreover, how can grading be reimagined in the high school English classroom when literacy skills encompass

far more than simple reading and writing? What is even more disheartening is that Michael appeared to really enjoy some kinds of reading, yet the teacher(s) made it impossible for him to find pleasure in even the things that he originally liked. He spoke about books like *The Giver,* the *I Survived* series, *Hatchet,* and *The Magic Treehouse* that he liked reading and wanted to find more books that were like them. He mentioned that writing was hard for him because "I'm pretty good at doing stories and all, but I don't proofread much. That's my downfall: I don't proofread. Also, when it comes down to it, I have trouble spelling." Michael talked about being so frustrated by the negative remarks and commentary on his papers by teachers that he did not even want to try writing any more. Again, what Michael shared makes me reconsider the ways in which I not only speak to my students, but the ways that I encourage them to speak to themselves. He said "When it comes down to it, to a hard assignment, one that you actually put forth effort toward—it really depends on the teacher. They don't always grade for ability, they grade for effort." It is interesting that Michael thinks teachers grade for effort rather than ability. I wonder how he personally defines these two concepts and how he has seen teachers grade based on each one. Interestingly enough, Michael actually answered some of my questions when he shared strategies that he uses in his own life that have led to ways that he tackles reading and writing in the classroom.

Just as Michael learned and/or created strategies to motivate himself to rise above circumstances that he was not in control of in his own life, he seems to have done the same thing in the academic space. Michael shared how he affirms his intelligence and ability to read texts when he gave his thoughts about standardized testing in the English classroom. He told me that if he were a high school English teacher, he would:

not make the tests have different levels because that's nonsense. Because somebody

> who's reading on a level one, they can read a book. Somebody who's reading on a level three, they can read a book. No matter what level a standardized test may give me, I know that I can read a book just as good as anybody else.

He goes on to explain how he believes that the questions on the tests are unfair and highly subjective. He also told me that strategies teachers have given him in the past do not seem to work, so he has created his own. He talked about how "doing vocabulary sucks" and many teachers have told him to define vocabulary words before he reads a text. However, he finds this impractical and does not see how it "connects to a text or helps you learn anything." Instead, he saves the vocabulary portion of an assignment for both during and after he reads a text. He tells me that he would rather stop reading, look up a word, then re-read the sentence to "make it make sense so it has some context." He talked about "going back to the vocabulary questions after I finish the reading stuff to see what I missed so that I can find it in the story."

I told him that a lot of teachers like to introduce new vocabulary at the beginning of a unit so that students have seen the word before they read it in a text. However, he reassured me that this "doesn't make sense to me or my buddies. We do it the backwards way because it makes more sense to us." The ways in which Michael has had to figure out ways to "survive" in his life outside of school have clearly trickled over into his survival skills in the classroom. He is a natural inventor of ideas and spends time thinking about ways to make things happen. Again, Michael references his "stuttering problem" when he discusses having difficulty pronouncing words. He talked about how much audiobooks or listening to a teacher read helps his comprehension of texts. He says that he "understands better when someone else reads instead of me reading because I have a problem with doing it." Then, he mentions, again, that he knows he has a problem with proofreading, so he has started using Google Docs. When he talked about

Google Docs, he looked at me and excitedly said, “You know how it proofreads for you? I love that. I love it.” It is interesting to me that Michael finds ways, without even realizing it, to support himself—even when teachers do not fulfill that role. He has learned that he has the power to turn any situation into something doable, even when it may seem impossible.

When I spoke with Michael about the ways in which he uses reading and writing in his everyday life, he offered insight into how he uses literacy skills that may not be considered academic in nature. Michael noted that used basic reading skills, and listening skills to learn how to train hunting dogs on his farm. He also states that “Facebook is for old people but I use Snapchat a little bit and texting, of course.” He also told me that he believes the outdoor activities that he enjoys doing require reading and writing that many people would not think about. He notes that:

> You have to make sure you’re reading the right thing when you’re getting ammunition for weapons and when you’re fishing. My uncle and I go up to the Broad River a lot and you gotta know what type of fishing pole you’ve got. You have to read and understand a lot of labels to do that right.

He added that he enjoys listening to podcasts about football and he is especially fond of country music. He seemed to flashback to an experience from a time when he was younger and added that:

> My mom and dad, they used to help me out at the table. Every day after elementary school, they used to sit down and help me with homework and read a book to me just for fun. We’d read a chapter every night. But then everything changed when mom and dad split. She, she didn’t really feel like doing anything anymore. She wasn’t the person she was before dad.

The fact that Michael chose to include this memory here tells me that he sees reading and writing as something intertwined with family. Because he pointed out fishing with his uncle and reading around the table with his mom and dad, I can see that literacy skills were, and are, helping Michael to form his identity. He has memories of reading and writing that may bring back painful memories, but also joyful ones.

What is intriguing about Michael is that he seems to be able to acknowledge that he holds the metaphorical pen to keep writing his own story into a brilliant series of success stories. Michael ends his thought process on reading and writing outside of the academic space with the idea for a tattoo that he would like to get one day. He detailed how he wants to get a tattoo of a "lone rider with a west background, got the mountains and the guy on a horse with his head down." He told me that he wants to get this tattoo because it symbolizes how "for most of my life, for the most part, I've been doing a lot of things on my own." What Michael does not seem to realize is that he does not have a "stuttering problem" and he is not "doing things on his own." He uses his voice to self-advocate, create incredible stories of resilience, and build the life that he is so worthy of enjoying. He has a multitude of people who cannot wait to see all of the things that he will accomplish. However, his lack of understanding about the many gifts he has pushes me to examine, once again, how I build up my own students in the high school English classroom. Do I make them feel confident in their life stories? Do I create safe spaces where they not only feel comfortable sharing, but feel compelled to share? Do I give them chances to learn from each other and feel not so alone? Michael's story reminds me that these male students are not simply survivors—theyare trailblazers.

The Book Report: A Discussion of Themes

The data collected and analyzed for this study provided information on how the lives outside of school of male high school students enrolled in an AEP mediate their reading and writing in the English classroom; it also provided information on how those same students perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom. In particular, after I analyzed the data, I generated three main themes per research question. For the first research question, the following three themes emerged: Perception of Purpose, Confidence is Key, and Future-Driven Mindset (see Table 3). Each of the three themes yielded a sub-theme which provided additional information about how the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an AEP mediate their reading and writing in the high school English classroom.

Table 3

Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes for Research Question 1

Research Question 1: How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediate their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom?		
Theme 1	**Perception of Purpose** *"Reading and Writing ain't gonna pay my bills."*	
	Sub Theme	**Outside Experiences inform identity in the Classroom** *"I'm a rule breaker, but I've been in trouble with the law too much."*
Theme 2	**Confidence is Key** *"I'm trying to make a point to everyone that, hey, I'm here."*	
	Sub Theme	**Family Makes or Shakes Mindset** *"Every time I screw up, even in the least little*

		way, they fuss at me."
Theme 3	**Future-Driven Mindset** *"Now I'm taking the next step in life, figuring out everything about it."*	
	Sub Theme	**Wishing and Wanting** *"I wish they taught millionaires how to be millionaires."*

Participants are identified by the pseudonyms that they chose for themselves at the beginning of the study and those that were used in the narrative portraits.

Lives Outside of School Mediating Reading and Writing Inside English Class

After a careful data analysis process, I developed the following three themes to address the first research question: How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediate their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom?

Theme #1: Perception of Purpose

As I shared in Chapter Two, high school males may feel disengaged with reading and writing in the high school English classroom because they do not feel as if it can be applied to their lives outside of school (Barrs, 2000). Moreover, Vygotsky (1978) noted that people learn on two levels: first, the interaction with others, then the second being within the learner. This indicates that students are developing perceptions of reading and writing in the high school English classroom depending on their own lived experiences and the ways in which they internalize them. This was evident as the participants discussed their experiences outside of school and how those experiences have led them to one common belief: reading and writing in

high school English class does not serve a purpose in *the real world*. The participants collectively believed that in order for something to be worthy of doing, it must serve them in *the real world* by enhancing their profits, their worldview, or their relationships with others. During the focus group sessions, the participants mutually agreed that reading and writing in the high school English classroom was not important because they had not found any reasons to rely on knowledge of novels or literary analysis essays in their everyday lives. Next, I will discuss the ways in which each participant justified his perception of purposeful reading and writing in the high school English classroom and how his individual experiences have influenced the identity he has created for himself inside the high school English classroom.

Joe

Throughout Joe's one-on-one interviews and the focus group session, he made it very clear that he had dedicated his time and energy into making as much money as possible. Joe is a hard worker and has the mindset of an entrepreneur as he detailed how he uses his money to make money. By working approximately 45 hours a week as a diesel mechanic, he was able to set aside money to buy chainsaws which he uses to cut trees as a "side hustle" on the weekends. Joe stated that "there isn't a point in English class because I could be making money." He follows that sentiment with "When I'm in class, I'm losing money. When it comes to school, I guess I just, I just have to do it. But it doesn't tell me how Bill Gates or Elon Musk made their millions." Joe clearly does not shy away from hard work, but when it comes to reading or writing in the high school English classroom, he feels that there is no purpose behind it. It does not seem lucrative to him; therefore, he cannot see a reason to try to enjoy it. When he expressed such a negative outlook on high school English class, I asked him what he would rather be doing. In my mind, I assumed that he would tell me about another class that he would rather be in, but instead,

he simply responded with “work.” He continued by saying “High school English might teach us what words mean, but when am I ever going to use that? I’m just sayin’, show me how to do some taxes or how to save some money.”

Outside Experiences Inform identity in the Classroom. While Joe was clearly very profit-focused, I could not help but notice how his outside experiences, especially his relationships with peers, created a “boss” mentality that bled over into the way he viewed himself inside the high school English classroom. In one of the focus group sessions, Joe talked about “always being littler than everyone else. He said everyone would be like—they thought they got to talk shit to me because I’m small. I couldn’t stand that. Really any time somebody would talk down to somebody, not just me.” He talked about getting into multiple fights when he was around 12 years old both fighting for himself, and for girls who he saw as being belittled. This often violent behavior and “I don’t like people” attitude that he adopted outside of the classroom seems to have helped him form a boss-like mindset that not only followed him into the high school English classroom, but also convinced his peers that he was worthy of their own time and hard work. He chuckled thinking about a particular experience that helped him get through an English class. He stated, “One time, we had this group chat of everybody that was in the class and everybody would send a piece of the homework. I never sent mine. I’d just copy everyone else’s.” I asked him how he got away with this and if it angered the other students. He said, “Nah, they understood. They expected it from me. Respected me. I wasn’t gonna do nothin’, but I was pretty smart, though. I was in that class—that class with a bunch of smart people.”

Because Joe has developed entrepreneurial skills in his life outside of school, he is clearly able to transfer some of those skills to the way that he is perceived by his peers. Joe sees himself

as a boss rather than a "worker," so he embodies that identity in the academic space too. Joe talked about his peers doing the "work" while he "gets the answers," yet when I questioned this, he acts like it is only natural. Joe used his "boss mentality" to again gain tangible results. The identity that he assumes at his job outside of school clearly impacts the ways in which he has formed his academic identity. This "boss" persona that he has adopted both inside and outside of the classroom appears to encourage his peers into thinking that he is not necessarily their equal, but more so someone who they need to please.

Dredge

When exploring Dredge's life experiences outside of school that mediate his reading and writing inside the high school English classroom, it became apparent that while he is also concerned with *purpose,* his perception of purpose in the high school English classroom is different from the other cases. Dredge focused on life experiences that were "fun," and he noted that reading and writing "weren't fun, they're terrible." When I prompted him to talk about the kind of job he wants in the future, he mentioned that he wanted to be a pipe welder. I asked what interested him in this career and he stated that "I don't know, it just looked fun and when I started doing it in Welding class, I really liked it. It was fun for me" While he told me on several occasions that he did not read outside of school, he mentioned that "when I look up stuff about welding and careers on Google, I saw that they have some good programs in other places but not really here." He continued by explaining the process of "regular" welding and "pipe welding" and how he needs specialized training for pipe welding that he cannot receive locally.

Dredge's sharp focus on the joy or "fun" that can be found in learning more about future career experiences leads him to believe that reading and writing in high school English class is an interruption of his fun. On several occasions, Dredge mentioned that the high school English

classroom “doesn’t help me understand anything more about what I want to do in life.” When he discussed ways that the high school English curriculum could be improved, he mentioned things like “career-related projects or more reading short passages about how we need to get ready to do what we want to do in life.” While Dredge talked about choosing a welding career because it looked “fun,” he also said several times that “English class ain’t fun.” To Dredge, it appears that there is no “fun” in his English class because he cannot find anything that relates to the career that he is interested in having. He noted that “reading books and writing papers aren’t going to help me in my career. Why would I waste my time doing them? I’m not going to do them.” His desire to learn more about a career, and actually practice welding because “it’s fun,” seems to shape his perception of what he feels that he should be reading and writing in the classroom. When he does not see those “fun,” career-focused activities happening in the English classroom, he appears to immediately categorize it as not being worthy of his time.

Outside Experiences Inform identity in the Classroom. Dredge’s experience in his life outside of school informed the identity that he has created for himself inside the high school English classroom. While he finds that the purpose of reading and writing in high school English is the opposite of what he considers to be “fun,” he has also formed an identity for himself in the classroom space that supports his thinking. Dredge told me that in his life outside of school he was a “rule breaker” and that he “got in trouble with the law too much.” Dredge laughed his way through the retelling of stories about “doing dumb shit with my buddies” and “getting in trouble too much with the cops.” Dredge mentioned that “all my friends know I’ll do anything. I don’t care. If it looks fun, imma do it.” When I asked him what he enjoyed about the activities that he had mentioned, he said “I don’t know, it's just fun. It’s fun doing dumb stuff and making people laugh.” Dredge seems to have adopted the fun-loving, trouble maker persona in his high school

English classroom. He told me that "people distracted me and I distracted people in English class. I wasn't going to do no reading or writing and, you know, we cannot sit in there right beside each other and do stuff." When I prompted him to expand on this notion, he stated that:

> I had this girl in there that I'd known since elementary school. She's a distraction to me. I don't know, everybody in that class was a distraction to me because I'm the class distractor or the class clown or whatever you want to call it.

He continued by saying "and then, I got kicked out like so many times because apparently I'm the class clown." Dredge seems to have embraced the rule breaker, "I'll do anything" for a laugh personality in his life outside of school; ultimately, this appears to have trickled over into the "class clown" identity he assumes in the English classroom. He said that the "only positive thing about reading and writing in English was any of the times that I was talking to my peers around me." He punctuated the sentiment with "but, that was when they started calling my mom complaining and I'd get suspended for, I got suspended for a day or something. For stuff I didn't even do. But most of the time I got suspended for talking and making people laugh. For distracting them I guess." Dredge has created a "rule-breaking" identity for himself through his experiences outside of the classroom where he focuses on having "fun" and "making people laugh." He uses those same pieces of his identity to shape the ways in which his peers, and potentially even teachers, view him in the high school English classroom. Even when he "gets in trouble" or "gets suspended" in school, it is typically because he is using his sense of humor to be a distraction to his peers.

Michael

Michael uses the relationships that he had in the past, and the relationships that he currently has, in order to create a purpose he sees for reading and writing in the high school

English classroom. While Michael spoke about the tumultuous relationship with his father and mother outside of school, he also voiced that he was determined to "not fall into the same trap" as his dad did. He talked about cutting off any ties to his father and "doing whatever it takes to get this high school diploma." He views reading and writing in high school English as something that "has to be done in order to get what I want." He noted that "when it comes to writing, I'm pretty good at doing stories and all." I mentioned that he gets to be the metaphorical writer of his own story, and he said, "Yeah, especially when life fell apart for me." As Michael seems to perceive reading and writing in the high school English classroom as a way to prove his ability to rise above situations that he perceives as making his life fall apart, he also uses another relationship in his life to positively influence these skills. Michael noted that the cousin who he now lives with is "the reason that I'm here today." He became emotional when describing the ways that he believes she saved his life. He jokingly commented that she "rides me like a dog with this reading and writing that I have to do for school. She tells me that I need to proofread and that I need to get these things done because we've got goals." The way that Michael uses the pronoun "we" indicates that he sees his success in the classroom as not just a personal success, but also as a "team" win and a way to honor the person who he sees as his savior.

Outside Experiences Inform identity in the Classroom. The things that Michael has experienced in his own life inform the identity that he has made for himself inside the high school English classroom. On several occasions, Michael voiced that he "didn't wanna ask anything" and that "I learned it on my own." While he refers back to his "stuttering problem" as being a main reason why he does not want to talk to people, it seems that he has also been conditioned to believe that he is a bother or a problem to others. He noted that "I don't really talk to anyone my age except my girlfriend; she's my friend and everything in the world. And guy

friends, I don't really have any." Michael exudes the vibe that he has everything under control, and does not need assistance. However, it also seems that he wants to remove any ways that he could possibly be a burden. The one-on-one interview was almost over when he mentioned that he had a sibling for the first time. He stated that:

> My mom is more worried about my brother than anything. He is eleven, yeah, I think eleven. We're about six years apart, so she is more worried about him than my stuff. Whatever I do, she has to make sure that she does it better with him. I mean, I mean, he's a little smarter than I was. He's not as shy as I am. I mean, just trying to talk here in English about reading and writing, I can't do it. I can't bring myself to. I have to worry. About literally everybody.

Michael has created an identity for himself as the silently stoic student who has everything under control, and finds himself in the position of "worrier" about others. He may be selfless, yet he also defines himself as "just scared."

Theme #2: Confidence is Key

As was mentioned in Chapter 2, Catts (2021) described the effect that negative labels, given by school systems, have on male students. Catts (2021) noted that, as male students are potentially labeled as "struggling" readers or writers, their confidence is more likely to diminish and they could potentially feel out-of-place in the space where reading and writing is most often practiced at the high school level. The data that was analyzed from the focus group sessions and the one-on-one interviews indicated that the participants' confidence was influenced by experiences and relationships that they have had in their lives outside of school; it also indicated that this confidence plays a role in mediating the participants' reading and writing in the high school English classroom.

Joe

Joe is the participant that, on the outside, seems to exude confidence. He clearly articulated what he wants in life, how he plans to get it, and how he thinks that the high school English classroom needs to change in order to fit his needs. However, I was interested in learning more about where Joe's confidence came from, and how that confidence influenced his reading and writing in the academic setting. He commented that "I know that I'm smart, but I don't even wanna be doing this crap. I know they tried to put me in an AP class and the first day, I told em' I was leaving." He related this instance to choices that he made in his life outside of school when his father paid for him to "play travel baseball and I was the best one out there. I played travel ball and I was so good that coaches were on me about it. That boy was on me about it. He literally sent three letters in the mail, even showed up at my house one time." He laughed and said "I didn't love it no more so I quit. There was no point in me putting my body out there for nothing." Joe had confidence that he was the best player on the team, and he acknowledged that he was smart. It seems that as long as he feels that he is good at something, he does not feel a need to prove it to anyone else. He knows that he is "*good at reading and writing*," but he feels like "*there isn't a place or a reason for reading and writing."* When he was discussing how he thought he was a good reader and writer, he paused momentarily and seemed to be thinking about something. He quickly added that:

> In my life, I get to choose what goes in my brain by what I do and who I hang out with. But, in English class, they give you, they give us these academics. They throw it in our brain. Most people forget it after two years outta high school. They go get a job working at an office and live a nine to five miserable life. They don't know anything else to do. I ain't letting that happen.

Joe's confidence that he will not be miserable in life, but rather make a life that he is proud of, mediates his decision(s) as to which reading and writing activity he deems worthy of participating in.

Family Makes or Shakes Mindset. Joe's family plays a clear role in the confident mindset that he possesses. He mentioned his dad on several occasions and noted that "dad makes that money with his chicken houses." He appears to look up to his father and he even noted a few key sayings that he has when he talked about having fun in everyday life. It seems that Joe's dad is the one that encourages a clear divide between work and play because Joe stated "dad always says there's a time and a place for play, but it ain't now." He also mentioned that his dad is the one who signed him up for travel baseball, and later football years ago. He noted that his dad is the one who "raised me when my momma left me." He talked about how his dad "isn't strict," but he "knows that he expects me to do something with my life." Joe also focused on his "person," his "mawmaw," as being someone who "expects a lot from me; she doesn't put up with no nonsense. She is bougee and expects all the high-class things." Joe's grandmother seems to give him experiences that show him what is possible and what he is capable of doing. She appears to contribute to his confidence in the way that she "expects" him to "act like somebody and go to school to be somebody."

Dredge

Dredge appeared to be the participant who lacked confidence in himself and vocally recounted the ways in which he was "not good at" things. He discussed a lot of "frustration and stress" when it came to experiences in his life outside of school. At one point, he even seemed to disassociate with what he was speaking about and said "some people got family problems at home." When I prompted him to expand on this, he repeated "I don't know, I don't know."

Dredge noted how he did not have "any hobbies that I'm good at" outside of school. He also added that he "doesn't have a job yet," but when I mentioned that it was exciting that he was going to be a welder in the future, he simply said "*I guess, I don't know*." When I asked him to think about things in his life that he is good at, or that he enjoys doing, he talked about "*Fortnite* and video games in general." This idea seemed to make him think about something in the high school English classroom because he stated "I can't get on my computer in English class, even though it could help me look up all those words that I don't know." It is intriguing that Dredge continually falls into a pattern of talking about things that he perceives that he is unable to do, rather than focusing on the things where he excels. Just as he struggles to come up with things that showcase his many talents and abilities in his life outside of school, he is not able to think of "a single good thing about reading or writing my English classes." He punctuated his thinking by stating that "I just can't do it. It's just so hard. I don't know why, but I can't do it and I'm not gonna do it."

Family Makes or Shakes Mindset. Dredge went on to discuss how, even though his parents are divorced, his dad:

> lives with us right now because he ain't got nowhere else to stay. Because he, he made a bad choice. So, they kicked him out and he had to come live with us. So, we're building a house and, uh, my mom's building a house, but I don't know if my dad's gonna go yet.

He talked about how, while his mother is clearly a fierce advocate for him, she "doesn't care what I do. My dad is strict, but my mom doesn't really care." Dredge apparently feels as if his mother does not care about what he does, yet he also stated how she has helped him with work and even called teachers when she felt as if he was being treated unfairly. Dredge did not want to share any experiences in his life outside of school that may have indicated that his mother did not

care about him. However, he did share that his mother is a travel nurse and is away from home quite a bit. I am left wondering if Dredge has felt a lack of connection to his family in his life that has, perhaps, trickled over into the feeling of disconnect that he seems to experience while reading and writing in the high school English classroom. As I listened to Dredge speak about his family life, I was struck by his general tone of indifference. He appears to have very little confidence in his reading and writing abilities, but he also does not appear to be confident in how his family feels about his academic progress or the "trouble making" that he describes. There is a general lack of emotion behind his description of his family that stands out as potentially shaping the way Dredge sees himself. If he does not feel that his family cares deeply about who he is and what he does, perhaps he is left feeling slightly confused about how he sees himself. While Dredge mentioned that he "sees his dad sometimes," it makes me wonder how connected he feels to his dad. Dredge never mentioned his grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. The other participants all described strong connections to their families in some way. The ways in which Dredge's family does not seem to play a large role in his experiences outside of the classroom, perhaps he has difficulty shaping his perception of who he is and what he is capable of doing both inside and outside of the classroom.

Michael

Michael is a blend of perceiving himself as not being confident, yet simultaneously having a desire to build confidence. He continually acknowledged that he "can't talk to people" and he also mentioned that he "hates how shy I am." He talked about how, in his life outside of school, he became interested in "training bird dogs." He stated that he "would sometimes work on learning how to train them and actually training them for up to 12 hours a day." He notes that he was able to learn these skills both on his own and from a "man that's been like a father figure

to me back where I once lived." He discusses how training dogs once "made me nervous, but now I wanna have my own dog kennel with bird dogs that can be the next big thing." He discussed how learning how to train dogs helped him to build his confidence by "feeling like I could really excel at something even when it was super hard." He touched on his perceived inability to "talk to people" when he stated "so, I just worked for him but I also worked on my own. I saw that I had to talk to people in order to be a trainer, or even a head trainer someday." Michael seems to have found, through his own life experiences, that doing things that he perceives to be unable to do, will only build his confidence in his ability to do things. Michael also relates this confidence to how he views reading and writing assignments in the high school English classroom. He spoke about how he "used to try and copy and paste my papers because I didn't think there was any way that I could do it." However, he followed up that statement by saying "Yeah, but I don't do that now. I write it all. I mean, I write it all out. Hey, I figured out that I just gotta have my sources down and work through it piece by piece." After he pauses to think about what he has just said, he stated:

> Well, right now that I'm thinking about this, I used to fight to do things I thought I couldn't do. I'd fight to not do them, I mean. I couldn't stand it. But now, I see that if I suck it up and try it, well, my attitude about how I can do things is just different. My whole attitude has changed.

From Michael's experience with training bird dogs and learning to "talk to people" in his life outside of school, he seems to have discovered that he is capable of *building* confidence even when he is in situations where he feels uncomfortable. While he noted on several occasions that he was shy or did not like to talk to people, he also focused on how he pushed himself to talk to people because he knew that it would help him in the future. Michael also appears to have

learned that he can grow his confidence in the classroom rather than choosing not to engage in tasks that he perceives to be too difficult. His comment about his attitude changing once he started trying to do the work for himself rather than finding loopholes or avoiding it altogether indicates that he took what he learned through his lived experiences outside of school and applied it to his school work. Michael appears to be growing his confidence by pushing himself out of his comfort zone in everyday life; this new skill has trickled over into his work in the high school English classroom as he now tries to "jump on in there to get it over with—it looks bad sometimes but I know I can do it if I get my mind right."

Family Makes or Shakes Mindset. Michael's family has influenced the ways in which he not only engages in reading and writing inside the classroom, but also the ways in which he has formed a mindset about what he is capable of doing. As Michael discussed his family life, it became evident that his father has helped him to create the mindset that he "will be successful no matter what." On the other hand, it is his cousin that gives him the confidence to "set big goals" for himself and "do things that make me uncomfortable." He talked about how his cousin drove him to a job interview, and when he was so nervous that he asked her to go in with him, "she drove off and made me go in by myself." He chuckled and said, "but first, she took a video of me walking in because she's proud of me and wanted to show people that I did it." Michael clearly wants to make his cousin proud, and show his father that he is succeeding "despite dad's absence." Moreover, Michael spoke about men in his family that are "like father figures" and "spend time with me. Like, when we go to the shop to work on things we just hang out, talk, and say we're doing something but we actually just sit there and talk about everything." While Michael perceives some of his family members as unreliable, and others as supportive beacons of hope, it is evident that both "categories" of his family assist in creating his can-do mindset. He

referenced how this is also true in the reading and writing that he does for his high school English class by stating "I never did believe that I could be where I am right now in these classes. But, now she [his cousin] has pushed me to keep going. Now the ones back home are the ones lookin' like fools." Michael's family has helped him to develop confidence in two ways. First, his father appears to give Michael the motivation to *not* "end up like him." When Michael sees himself succeeding, both inside and outside of the classroom, his confidence grows. It is Michael's perception of his cousin's extreme faith in him that seems to increase his confidence. Even when he is "scared" or "nervous" about experiences in life like job interviews, his cousin seems to make him feel like he can do anything because she does not give him a choice to *not* do it. She motivates him to do the things that scare him, but in turn, those are the experiences that seem to help Michael grow his confidence. In turn, this seems to help Michael to see that he can achieve his "big goals" and confidently pursue a life that is much different from the life that his "dad chose."

Theme #3: Future-Driven Mindset

As noted in Chapter Two, Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the idea that learning does not occur only in an academic space, but rather across time as people construct meaning from experiences. The participants in this study reflected on how the experiences in their lives outside of school have led them to be driven by where they see themselves in the future. In a sense, the participants all highlighted ways that they feel as if reading and writing in the high school English classroom interrupts their future plans or slows them down as they try to build better futures. Within Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), there is a focus on learners being influenced by their surroundings. Therefore, within the focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews, I prompted the participants to reflect on the ways in which their environments had

influenced their reading and writing in the academic space. The participants emphasized the idea that they all felt a disconnect between the reading and writing that they were "told" to do in the high school English classroom, and the reading and writing that they felt they needed to do based on their previous experiences at work, with families, and in their leisure time. They all, both separately and collectively, asked the same question: "When will we need to read and write like this in our future?" Dredge punctuated the idea by saying "We'll never use this stuff again, so why is it such a big deal now?"

Joe

Joe, the participant with the questions that I could not even answer, prompted me to think about why we teach what we teach in high school English classes beyond the fact that "the state tells us to." While I interviewed Joe, I knew that it would be important to avoid "[perpetuating] the unequal power relationships" in order to highlight his true voice (Roulston, 2010, p. 56). Therefore, as I asked him questions, I also allowed space for him to ask me questions. He simply asked "If you weren't an English teacher, name a time when you would ever need to analyze a novel or write a literary analysis paper in your everyday life." As the participant who was most driven by profitability and being a boss in his future, Joe's question was fitting. He did not see space for academic reading and writing in his future, therefore he did not understand how these skills could potentially play a role in his perception of success. After thinking about what he just said, he adds to his statement that "Well, I mean you need some of English and reading and writing. I need to know how to read fluently. I need to know how to write properly. I get that part. But what do I need to know about these fiction stories?"

It is interesting that Joe makes a distinct separation between reading and writing in the high school English classroom that is necessary for survival in the future, and reading and

writing that he perceives will not make an impact on his future. He obviously tries to sort this out in his mind, but struggles to voice how he makes the distinction between the two when I ask him how reading and writing in high school English could be more useful to him and his future. He paused for quite some time then said, “I don’t know. I just don’t know. I don’t really mind reading, Like, I do pretty good with reading, but I always did terrible on the EOG [End of Grade test].” Here, Joe seems to be internally sorting out what he perceives as future-focused reading and writing, and reading and writing that is supposed to be preparing him for a test.

Wishing and Wanting. What is interesting about Joe is that, while he made several negative remarks about reading and writing in the high school English classroom, he also noted things that he wishes could happen to make the class better. Joe discussed that in his everyday life, he enjoys snowboarding, riding four wheelers, and he noted that “There’s always music on in my truck. But the genre depends on my mood. I have my moods.” I pointed out that he is using a literary device here with the word mood, but he shrugs me off. He stated “my music choice is all over the place, but it’s probably country 75% of the time.” I tried to point out that music is known as a mode of storytelling, but he light-heartedly rolled his eyes at me. He brought the conversation back to the idea that he does not believe literary analysis has a place in his future, but he “wishes they taught millionaires how to be millionaires.” I asked him what this might look like, and he was not able to give me a definitive answer, so I gave specific examples like reading memoirs of successful people in the business world or reading articles about how to create “boss-like” habits in your everyday life. He seemed to light up when I mentioned these things, and noted that “that’s a good point. I never thought about that. I learned a lot from my family who owns a business, but a lot of people don’t know about that kind of stuff.” Joe’s focus on the things that he wishes could be seen or used in the high school classroom indicates that he

would like to see more things that relate to his future. However, while Joe is always focused on the amount of money that he can make in the future, he also appears to be interested in the interpersonal relationships which can be forged through business endeavors. As he started thinking more about the things he has learned from being in a "family who owns a business," he mentioned that his family would have "fancy dinners with their work friends" where he had to "act fancy, too." He talked about the importance of "talking right" and "acting right" because "you gotta impress people." Since Joe would like to see more avenues for learning about "how to be a boss" in the high school English classroom, it is also important to note that he desires to learn these things so that he can increase his income in the future.

Dredge

Dredge, once again, used his fun-loving personality to talk about how his personal experiences have led him to believe that reading and writing in the academic space are not conducive to accomplishing his future goals. Dredge noted, on several occasions within the focus group sessions and the one-on-one interviews, that he felt like "it's hard to read books in general and bro, the language, it feels like how you would read a foreign language." He stated that "nobody read to me when I was little, we just watched *Duck Dynasty."* I thought that it was interesting that Dredge felt the need to explain that nobody read to him when he was little; he seemed to be attempting to create a reason to support why he did not value reading and writing in the high school English classroom now. He continued by emphasizing that "I never liked reading and writing in any form. I didn't do it when I was little and I don't do it now." He then asked, "When will I ever need this in my future? Like, my mom says I'm almost an adult and I can make my own choices. So, I chose to not go to school a lot and that's why I'm here [the AEP]." He continued by talking about how he "just wants to get out of the house and passing is all I need

to do. I don't need to be good at reading and writing, I need to pass." He noted that his future career goal of becoming a welder played a big role in how he performed on reading and writing tasks because he "didn't see a need for any of it outside of my welding classes." He is proud of the fact that he "passed the welding class with a 98." I encouraged him to think about how a 98% in a class was far more than "passing." He stated:

> yeah, but that's stuff I'm going to need for what I want to do. I really liked the automotive class and the woodworking class, too. In those classes we did stuff like build garden boxes for the city and five of us did all the work while the other 20 were outside playing cornhole.

This revelation was intriguing to me because I knew how Dredge valued fun and games. He chose to work on complex projects instead of playing a game when he felt as if the work related to his future career aspirations in some way.

Wishing and Wanting. While Dredge is the participant who is most passionate about his distaste for reading and writing in the high school English classroom, he still offered examples of how his life outside of school has influenced the things he wishes could happen in the classroom space. Just like Joe, Dredge acknowledged a love for music in his everyday life and stated that "music helps me concentrate and connect with what I'm doing." At first, I misunderstood and thought that he meant he would rather listen to music than complete reading exercises in the high school English classroom. However, Dredge clarified and noted, "No, like, when you're doing work, especially writing, you should be able to listen to music." He continued by focusing on how any class that "wasn't a core class" helped him to think about what he wanted to do for a job. He stated that "What I'm interested in, or what I like to learn about on my own time, is never mentioned in the English classroom." I asked him to elaborate on the things he chose to

"learn about" in his free time outside of school, and he responded by saying "Well, I think whatever you're interested in as far as a job goes is what you should be learning. Like, what you gotta do in that job, how you gotta do it, and the things you'll need. All that type of stuff."

Michael

Even though Michael is the participant who has a "just do what I have to do" attitude about reading and writing in the classroom, he still had quite a bit of wisdom to offer about how his future plans for himself influence his reading and writing in high school English classes. Michael clearly enjoys challenging himself in his everyday life outside of school because he talked about attempting to face his fears. He spoke about times in his life that pushed him to grow as a person, like leaving his hometown, his family "falling apart," and learning how to "do a lot on my own just to do whatever it takes to get a little bit of money in my pocket." He noted how all of these things led him to want to be a lineman, so he "needs to graduate on track." He talked about this future goal and said "one thing is the electricity thing. That's for me, I know, but I'm scared to even screw in a lightbulb." I commented that he is great at challenging himself and proving that he can do something even when it is uncomfortable for him. He said, "Yeah, it's just like in English class. I had to write a myth story and it took me four days. I hated it and I thought there was no way I could do it." It appears that Michael has used his experiences outside of school to teach himself that reading and writing inside high school English class can be challenging, but still worthy of doing. He is able to connect his fear to a greater good that will allow him to accomplish the goals that he has for his future. He followed up his line of thinking with "one thing is, I'm looking at land now even though I'm only 17 years old. So, by the time I get old enough to buy that land and all, prices will drop from up here to down there." He remembered that "stuff that I read in English class is more about a fake story, but we could read

stuff that isn't just for writing papers and all that. Like stuff that would help us know more about how we could budget to save for the future."

Wishing and Wanting. Michael noted several things that he wanted to see happening with reading and writing in the high school English classroom. He discussed how he wanted "to read books that aren't boring, but actually teach us something about living our lives." He related this idea to the *I Survived* series and "shorter articles that don't have words that embarrass me when I say them wrong." He also noted that he wants to grow his confidence outside of the English classroom and be able to do a job interview "without being so shy." He talked about wanting more reading and writing assignments that push him to "make up my own story and see how I can be a better person and maybe even get to travel in the future and learn more about other places." He talked about his love for music and how he wishes more song lyrics could be incorporated into the reading and writing curriculum rather than just "reading and writing where teachers only down a man about his work." Lastly, he focused on how he thinks that reading and writing in the English classroom need to be more "history focused so that we can learn more from the past and what not to do in the future."

Summary of Themes for Research Question 1

As a whole, the first research question explored how the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediated their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom. After analyzing the data, I found a theme which I titled Perception of Purpose. This relates to the concept that the experiences of the participants outside of school mediated the ways in which they perceived the overall purpose of reading and writing in the classroom. Stemming from this theme, I created the sub-theme of Outside Experiences Informing Identity in the Classroom. While the experiences of the

participants in their lives outside of the classroom shaped the way they perceived the purpose of reading and writing in the classroom, it also shaped the identities that they assumed in the English classroom. The ways in which their lived experiences influenced how they saw themselves as bosses, tricksters, or even burdens, trickled over into the identities they took up in the classroom. I also discovered that experiences in the lives of the participants outside of school mediated their confidence in reading and writing inside the classroom. Additionally, the families of the participants assisted in constructing their individual levels of confidence. Lastly, I found the theme of a Future Driven Mindset since the participants continually questioned how the reading and writing they were told to do in the high school English classroom would "help [them] in the future." From this theme, I developed a sub-theme of Wishing and Wanting since each participant offered ideas for things he "wished" he could do in the English classroom because it directly related to how he conceptualized his future.

Perceptions of Curricular Choices and Instructional Practices in High School English Class

After a careful data analysis process, I developed the following three themes to address the second research question: How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

Table 4

Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes for Research Question 2

Research Question 2: How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

Theme 1	**Isolation** *"You have no options. You're a failure. They basically tell you that you're gonna be a nobody."*	
	Sub Theme	**Creating Strategies** *"When I couldn't understand it, I made a different name in my head for it."*
Theme 2	**Lack of Connection** *"What they put in your head is just nonsense."*	
	Sub Theme	**A Lack of a "Point"** "*Go in, sit down, do what they tell me to do, then leave."*
Theme 3	**Breaking Rules** *"I acted how I wanted to act."*	
	Sub Theme	**Exploring New Possibilities** *"What you're interested in a job is what you should be learning."*

For the second research question, the following three themes emerged: Isolation, Lack of Purpose, and Breaking Rules (see Table 3). Each of these three themes also yielded a sub-theme which provided additional detail as to how the high school male student enrolled in an AEP perceives curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom. The themes, sub-themes, and statements from the participants that support the thematic analysis are discussed in the following section.

Theme #1: Isolation

The participants in this study all relayed feelings of being alone, or isolated, in their high school English classes. Lynch (2016) emphasized that male students who feel as if they do not belong in the academic space feel a greater sense of distrust toward the education system as a

whole. While each participant described his feelings of loneliness, each one concentrated on teachers who they felt like had abandoned them. However, an intriguing component of this perception of isolation is that each participant developed strategies for coping in order to survive *despite* feeling that they were alone in their quest. The participants emphasized that they felt a sense of not being wanted in the classroom, and having to either make a way for themselves to be noticed, or choose to leave the space by either not going to class or contemplating dropping out altogether. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Kho & Rabovsky (2022) discussed the many benefits of AEPs for students who may need an alternative pathway to success. All three participants discussed how their feelings of isolation in the traditional high school English classroom had somewhat evolved since attending the AEP in which they are enrolled. They discussed feelings of support as well as emphasized the importance of continuing to use strategies that they had created for themselves in order to survive.

Joe

Joe described himself as "definitely a storyteller, but not in the way that a teacher would think about." I found it strange that he separated his storyteller self from his school self, and prompted him to speak more about this. He stated, "I don't know, I got kicked out of classes. They didn't fail me, they just told me. They told me that they were putting me in a different class." He expanded on this by saying that "teachers wanted to see words on a page, not the stuff that I thought was right or interesting." Again, he brought up that "teachers didn't want me in class because of who I was. They thought that I was just like my brother." Clearly, Joe already felt that he had been labeled as being "bad" or "unwanted" before he ever even tried to showcase his reading and writing skills in the high school English classroom. He went on to talk about how "even though I was smart, I didn't have nobody in my classes. I didn't even enjoy the social part

of school because all my friends were going to a different school." He told me that he met the majority of his friends at work, and they all attended a different, traditional high school than he did. While Joe is the participant who has the "boss" mentality, he continues to express feelings of being alone or not having "someone to talk to." While Joe can tell a story so that everyone stops what they are doing to listen, he perceivably did not have as wide of an audience in the traditional high school setting. After all, what is the point in a good story if there is no one to tell it to?

Creating Strategies. As Joe felt a sense of isolation in the high school English classroom, he developed strategies to help him with the curricular choices and instructional practices that he experienced. Joe discussed his perceived struggle with the reading materials selected by his English teachers because of "all the things with such big words." He said, "I can't catch a big word like that. You give me a minute, and I probably can, but like I don't know, I ain't sounding it out. But I can't just sweep over it, either." When I prompt him to talk about how he handles this in class when he feels such a disconnect from his teacher that prevents him from asking questions, he laughed a little. Instead of explaining his strategy, he gave me an example of how he mitigated the issue with a specific novel. He said:

> When I was given *Harry Potter* to read, I knew I had to read it. Listen, there were some big words in that book and nobody's name made sense to me. So, what I did was, I made up different names for people so I wouldn't stumble in the story when the names came up.

He went on to explain that he renamed characters with "simple, understandable names so that I didn't get caught up and stuck on something." He noted that "for the other words that I didn't know, I'd just use my phone to look them up when I could." I asked him how he came up with

these strategies and he commented that "he had to." When I pushed him to expand on this, he said "I knew wasn't nobody else was gonna help me. It's not like the teacher was there to help me. That's not how it was at my school." I asked him about friends he had in the class and if he ever called on them for support since he previously discussed getting other students to simply "do his work" for him. He said "nah. I didn't have nobody. I was alone in that smart people class. I didn't really feel like I could talk to nobody." When Joe felt as if he had no one to turn to, he was able to create strategies that "helped [him] get by."

Dredge

Dredge talked about the ways in which he felt very alone when he was reading assigned books and receiving instruction from his high school English teacher in the traditional high school English classroom. He talked about how he "had to cheat because I knew my teacher didn't like me and wouldn't help me." He punctuated that statement with, "It would have been easier to do the work and just pass, but because of the teachers, I can't. The teachers would just kick me out so I missed a lot of what the things actually were that they were trying to teach me how to read." He talked more about the curricular choices and the instructional strategies when he stated:

> I can't even remember a single fun activity that the teachers would do with us, that's how miserable it was. I can't even remember a single book that they tried to make me read. The other people in the class would sit there and do their work or talk about what they read, but I was behind because I was out of class and had no clue what was going on.

I wanted to hear more about how Dredge viewed the other students in the classroom, and if he saw them as being friends or just another avenue of isolation. I asked him to talk more about the other people in his high school English class and how they played a role in his perception of the

pedagogical choices made by the teachers. He commented that “I had to do everything on my own. There were different activities to maybe do with other people, but they didn’t want me in their groups. I just sat there and looked confused.” I asked him if he would identify these encounters as stressful, and he stated, “No, I was used to it, nobody wanted me in there, the teacher didn’t even want me in there.” Once again, he referenced the time that he and his mother felt that the book that the teacher had assigned the class to read was “racist.” He noted that “none of the other parents cared, and the school would never talk to my mom about it. That’s when I just said forget it. I don’t need this anyway.”

Creating Strategies. Even though Dredge felt alone or unwanted when it came to methods of teaching and curricular choices in the high school English classroom, he created some strategies for himself that helped him to survive. Dredge referenced how important his phone was to him on several occasions, and commented that “one of the worst things about English class was that I couldn’t have my phone out. How could I even Google things that I didn’t know?” He continued by stating that “I did the bare minimum. I quit doing the reading and the writing that was too hard. Instead, I did the easy stuff that I knew I could get more points with like CommonLit.” CommonLit.org, a website that is described as a “comprehensive literacy program with thousands of reading lessons, full-year ELA curriculum, benchmark assessments, and standards-based data for teachers,” is full of built-in accessibility features for students like text-to-speech and digital note taking (CommonLit, 2023). Even though Dredge may not realize it, he is using the strategies that CommonLit makes available to students within their online platform. He continued talking about how he likes CommonLit instead of novels that his teacher has assigned him to read because “they’re actually stuff you can understand. I can’t understand how to read books. How am I supposed to remember what every little detail was, especially at

the end?" While Dredge created the strategy of picking and choosing the assignments he would complete and the things that he would read "in order to pass," he was also using strategies that are built into tech tools like CommonLit.

Michael

Michael echoed the same sentiments of the other participants about feeling alone in the high school English classroom. He explained that his "teachers would assign reading in books or even questions that we should do, but then they'd just go back and sit at their desks. I had to figure out everything on my own." He talks about being afraid to turn in assignments to teachers because he was so nervous about what they would say about his work. He commented that "I would worry super hard about doing the work that my teachers would give me—especially papers." He then mentioned that he did not have "friends or buddies or anybody in the class to help me out. I'm surprised I didn't get kicked out of that school because I would act out since the teachers didn't want nothin' to do with me." He thinks about his time in the AEP and how it is different from his time in the traditional high school English classroom. He said, "There's nothing here like what I went through there. When I was there, they would refuse to help me or to even talk to me. Like how y'all give one-on-one help, they won't want to help me, especially one-on-one, nothing like that." I asked him if he ever tried to talk to his teachers or ask them questions about the assignments. He commented that "They would just tell us what to do, but they didn't want to hear me talk when I might have a question. Okay, I'm a shy person. But I'll only ask a question when I absolutely have to know." He continued by talking about how he enjoyed English 2 because it was a World Literature class and he got to "learn about different places, nothing was ever the same. It changed around a lot." However, he brings it back to the sense of isolation that he felt when he said "I threw an eraser at a teacher because I was so

frustrated. I knew that she didn't want me there, and I wasn't going to go back there, so I said I don't care."

Creating Strategies. Even though Michael talked quite a bit about feeling unheard or unwanted in the high school English classroom, he also talked about ways in which he actively created strategies to help himself. Throughout our conversations, he mentioned several times that while he knew that he "wasn't good at grammar, commas, or proofreading," he used a strategy to help him do well on tasks that his English teachers had given him. He discussed the various functions Google Docs and how they had helped him to both read and write. Michael emphasized "It's really great how Google Docs will proofread for you. Especially because I'm not that good at spelling. It has a spell checker where I don't worry as much about what I'm typing." He also talked about how he thinks that his "eyes crisscross when I'm trying to read and all of that. Also, with my stutter problem I have trouble a little bit, especially with long words. But I can use audiobooks on YouTube or Google them and it helps a lot to hear them read out loud." Even though Michael may feel as if he is not a "good" reader or writer, he has found ways to make sense of the material that has been assigned to him through various strategies he employs through the use of tech tools.

Theme #2: Lack of Connection

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, there is a movement to expand the autonomous model of literacy into what Street (2003) referred to as the "ideological model" (p. 78). Street (2003) described the ideological model of literacy as a shift from reading and writing skills meant to be mastered in elementary school, to a more comprehensive understanding of literacy as a way of life. The data collected and analyzed in this study revealed that this shift in the understanding of literacy is necessary in order for high school male students to form connections with literacy

practices in their own lives. Throughout the focus group sessions, the participants continually reminded me that who they were did not connect to what they were experiencing in the high school English classroom. All three participants saw a stark disconnect between who they were and the curriculum being used, as well as the instructional practices being employed, in the high school English classroom. Furthermore, all three participants conveyed a keen, yet seemingly frustrating search for direction from high school English teachers. The lack of connection they found to the pedagogical choices in the high school English classroom led them on a quest to survive through attempting to uncover what a teacher *wanted them to do*.

Joe

Throughout our time together, but especially during the focus group sessions, Joe led the conversation surrounding a lack of connection between what was happening in the high school English classroom and who he was as a person. Not only did he not see how the reading material and writing exercises connected to who he was, he also did not see a connection between "tests and what was taught in class." When I asked him to talk about the activities that he had engaged in throughout his time in high school English class, he noted, "I don't know. I don't understand the concept of it. Like, teach us stuff and teach us about books and stuff—but then you give us an exam that has nothing to do with anything they taught." I pushed him to elaborate on this idea and he said, "I mean, there's no sense in it. It doesn't go together. Most of the time I've never even noticed anything that I've learned in an English class on my exam." He continued his idea of things "not going together" by saying "Like, even the vocabulary we have learned in English. All semester long words are thrown at me, but I have never seen those words on a test and I've never seen those words in real life. They don't mean anything to me." Joe continued by leading a conversation on books that had been assigned in the high school English classroom. The other

two participants both agreed with Joe that they could not name a single book that they were "supposed to have read." When I asked why they all chose not to read the material, Joe quipped "Because it ain't got nothing to do with me or my life. I can't relate to those books and the writing parts the teachers want me to do are just nonsense."

A Lack of a "Point". Even though Joe discussed not being able to make sense of the curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom, he also talked about "*trying to figure out what"* his teacher(s) wanted him to do. Joe was also the participant who attempted to connect what was happening in the high school English classroom to what he was seeing on the end-of-course exams. In his journey to understand how his own life connected to the material, he appeared to be searching not for his personal connections, but for what his teacher wanted him to connect with. He voiced that he "*wished they'd just tell me what they want me to do* because *I can't get in my mind, I can't see in my mind how all of this works together*." While the participants engaged in an interactive activity during the first focus group session in order to "create a relaxed environment," I was surprised to find that the activity created more stress than relaxation (Thompson, 2019, p. 12). As they engaged in the Personal Literacy Portrait activity as described in Chapter 3, Joe became agitated. Even after I explained that the way(s) in which they completed the activity was up to each participant, he repeatedly asked "But can I see an example?" He also said several times, "I don't know what you want." I explained that this activity was about the participants, and not myself, but Joe had such a hard time seeing himself connected to any literacy practices that he insisted on having me "give directions" so that he would "know where to start and how to do it." Joe seems to struggle to find a connection to many of the assignments that he saw in his high school English classes in the past.

When Joe does not see a connection to his life, he then move on and attempts to seek the direction that either the teacher or another peer is taking. He became agitated when I kept telling him that there was not a right way or a wrong way to engage in the activity. He said, “I don’t get how this is supposed to be me, I mean how this is supposed to relate to me when I don’t read and write like that outside of school. I need clear directions.” This seems to indicate that the high school English classroom has been reduced to students reading directions and writing answers. The room to think creatively or engage in artistic activities appears to be frustrating to Joe, perhaps because he has been attempting to read and write in the “right way” on state-mandated assessments that often leave very little room for creativity.

Dredge

Dredge, the participant who would physically shudder when he heard the words reading or writing, still voiced that he had thought about how the material that he saw in high school English class did not connect to who he is personally. He talked about how the material that he was “supposed to be reading” had “nothing to do with what I’m interested in.” He continued by noting, “That stuff was just stupid. There was no reason behind it. What we were doing just didn’t make any sense.” When I asked him to think about anything he had done in an English class that seemed to connect to who he was, he thought for quite some time. Eventually, he stated, “Well, the only book that I can think of even sort of being a good choice was *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. He noted that if I could write my own stories, instead of having to write about books, then I could be better at English.” He emphasized that “the only time I ever felt like I got anything we did in English is when I got to talk to my friends who sat around me.” I asked him to think about any activities that his high school English teachers did in class and he said “I can’t think of any fun ones. None of them had anything to do with anything. So, what was the point?

We were basically supposed to do a bunch of reading and worksheets, but that wasn't for me." He moved on to talking about how the reading that he saw in his English class did not "fit together." He said "I never saw how any of that stuff made sense. All of it was totally random and we'd just jump from passage to passage." He also said that "there wasn't nothing that I could relate to with all of them old books with the big words." He questioned how teachers selected texts for the classroom when he said "Why can't we ever see stuff from now—like current stuff? I don't get stuff like no Shakespeare or 500-page books. That's just too much and it doesn't ever have anything to do with us." It seems that Dredge does not see the connection between what he is being assigned to read and his current experiences. While we can definitely learn from historical texts, Dredge struggles to see how "old books" are important "in [his] life."

A Lack of a "Point". Dredge voiced, on several occasions, how he attempted to figure out what his teacher wanted him to do. He also became noticeably agitated during the Literary Portrait Activity when he "couldn't get it right." I encouraged him to remember that there was not a "right" or "wrong" way to do the exercise, but every time he tried to draw something on his poster board he would get up, sigh loudly, and say "I messed up, oh my god I messed up again." He asked me on multiple occasions, "What do you want me to do? Just tell me what you want me to do." I provided a brainstorming guide to attempt to alleviate some of his anxiety, but then he asked me to "just draw it for me." I indicated to him that he did not have to draw anything, he could choose to record his response in an audio format, use a Google Doc, or even write out bullet points. Instead, he went and sat next to Joe and asked him to "explain what you're doing." Dredge was focused on trying to do the activity in the way that he perceived was "right," yet he also noted how he struggled with teachers who "wouldn't just give me the answer." In the focus group, we talked about his frustration with reading or writing exercises not always having one

right answer. He said “that’s the part that’s the worst. Every little thing is supposed to mean something, but I don’t get it. Teachers want me to see things in what they give me to read, but I never see them and it’s frustrating. I wish they’d just tell me what to look for.” I asked him to consider how literature is fascinating because, according to our own unique life experiences, we may have different interpretations of the text. Dredge said that he “didn’t like stuff like that” because he “never saw what [he] was supposed to see.” I asked him who sets the rule for what he’s “supposed to see.” He was not quite sure how to respond to them and said “Well, I don’t, I don’t know. I just, I don’t get why a lot of this reading is important for me and it would be easier if I could just figure out what the teacher wants me to say about it.”

Michael

Michael’s lack of connection with the pedagogical practices in the high school English classroom appear to stem from his just-get-through-it mindset. Michael does not spend time thinking about how the reading materials or the teacher’s instructional practices may connect to his life because he is preoccupied with “moving on to what I really wanna do.” He does not see how reading or writing in the high school English classroom may connect, or even contribute, to what he wants to do in the future. He stated that “going back to texting, that’s the only way I really use reading or writing in my everyday life on a daily basis. What I’ve been given to read in class doesn’t have anything to do with me as a person or the stuff I think is cool.” He continued by emphasizing that “I know I gotta do it, but I just don’t see the point sometimes. We gotta write all these papers but how is a myth—reading them or writing them—going to have anything to do with me?” Like the other participants, Michael had difficulty remembering the titles of any books or stories that his teachers had assigned the class to read. However, he did talk about one book that stood out because his teacher had allowed the class to watch the movie version of the

novel, *The Giver*, after the class completed each chapter. Michael noted that "none of the other stuff really made a difference to me. I couldn't see why it mattered. But I liked *The Giver*, yeah, I liked how he had to fight to not be like everyone else." It seemed that Michael was able to form a connection with the protagonist in *The Giver* who fought to survive, but no other connections were made to outside texts or activities since Michael was not able to recall any other specific activities or texts that stood out to him.

A Lack of a "Point". Michael also noted a desire to "understand what the teacher wanted." While he notably does not ask a lot of questions, I observed him waiting to complete his Personal Literacy Portrait until he could see how the other participants were doing theirs. He told me that he "messed up" and even insisted on starting over with a blank sheet of paper. As the other participants attempted to draw certain items, Michael chose to do bullet points on his project. However, he said numerous times "I don't know if I'm doing this right." He also discussed frustration with English teachers who "gave me stuff to read but didn't tell me what to do." He talked about how he "can't stand creative assignments" because "there's too much flexibility." At one point, Michael paused doing his Personal Literacy Portrait and asked "Wait, how long does this have to be?" I told him that there were not any specific requirements, but to engage in the assignment until he felt it was complete. He voiced that he "wouldn't know when it was over, then" and he "needed to know if he needed to do more." Michael followed up his thoughts with "I just need to understand the point in what's in front of me in English. Sometimes, teachers don't tell me how to do it the best way. I know that I do my best sometimes, but it's like what I've done isn't what they like. I can't ever figure out how to do what they like."

Theme #3: Breaking Rules

In Chapter 2, I discussed how there appears to be a connection between high school males who are considered to be "struggling" readers and writers and discipline issues inside the high school setting (Halx & Ortiz, 2011). The participants in this study spoke about both disciplinary issues that they personally experienced in high school, and their own choices to go against rules that were set for them in the English classroom specifically. All three participants spoke about receiving punishment at school, particularly for something that happened in the high school English classroom. All three participants also relayed specific examples of ways in which they had purposefully gone against the rules; however, they also discussed suggestions for new guidelines or "rules" that would *make more sense* in the high school English classroom.

Joe

As Joe spoke about curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom, he also talked about something from his childhood that reminded him of his English class. He said "my stepmom, she, I don't know, she likes to have control over me. She used to make me write when I got in trouble." I asked him to talk more about this and he said "Yeah like, when I did something bad, I had to write pages and pages, front and back, of stuff like I will not do whatever I did wrong." He seemed to pause and reflect on that story for a second, then he added, "I got punished through writing. And that was bad, too." Then, Joe turned his attention to how he "broke rules" in the classroom. He stated that, in English class, he would "sit there all depressed. They'd make us read, then write, and I hated that. I'd always try to write before I read but that wasn't what she'd tell us to do. I didn't wanna do the reading." Joe perceived that, in his English classes in high school, he "didn't have no options." So, in turn, he broke the rules by choosing to not do anything. Again, he referenced his ability to "get work

from other people rather than doing the work for myself. It was just easier that way." Joe also took a moment to tell me one of his "secrets": using Quizlet.com. He said:

> Most teachers think that we're not smart enough to Google something. Most teachers are lazy. They tell me it's against the rules to copy and paste, but they get most of their stuff from things they've copied off of Quizlet, so what's the difference? If I'm breaking the rules, then they are, too.

Exploring New Possibilities. Joe commented that teachers often broke the rules in more ways than copying and pasting from Quizlet.com. He noted that "teachers aren't supposed to act like they do toward kids." I encouraged him to talk more about this concept, and he said "Aren't teachers supposed to like kids? Most of them don't. Most of them don't even wanna be there." He talked about how a lot of the teachers that he had in his English classes were "mean" or "negative about everything." Within our one-on-one interview, Joe spoke about an idea that he has to "remove all the negativity and stress put on kids" in English classes. He stated that "I can't speak for everybody, but in high school, the way I see it, you evolve over the years. You don't stay in one spot." He talked about how he thinks there needs to be different "classes according to what a kid thinks he needs in life." He expanded on this concept by giving an example. He said:

> Take me for example. My family owns a business so I know there's a certain way you gotta talk to people in the business world. The way I talk here and the way I talk to customers is a totally different Joe. That's what's missing in English class. Teachers do a lot of talkin' about books, but nobody teaches kids how to talk to people. Teachers are all pissed when kids don't say the right stuff about the books, right? But they don't ever teach nobody how to say the right things to people.

He paused and then explained this concept further by saying

> This was just something that was imprinted on my brain by my family, but a lot of people don't understand stuff like this. They don't need to be readin' books, they need to be learning how to speak. And when they get out to do an interview, they'll know how to act and what to say. People don't always know how to talk.

Joe also connected a new possibility for high school English class to "learning manners." He explained that "a lot of people don't know how to act around bougee people. My Mamaw taught me basic manners, and Dad always said that there was a time for actin' like you had some sense." It is interesting that Joe has clearly spent time thinking about the ways in which teachers "break the rules" and the ways in which the teacher could do things differently in the high school English classroom in order for students to have a more "useful" curriculum.

Dredge

Dredge gave multiple examples of how he had broken rules in his life outside of school, but also within the high school English classroom. He mentioned "distracting my peers on purpose and making people laugh when we shoulda been working" as his way(s) of going against what he was "supposed to be doing in class." On several occasions, both in the focus group sessions and in the one-on-one interviews, Dredge talked about "getting suspended multiple times." I asked him to elaborate on why these suspensions occurred. Even though Dredge claimed that he hated "the stories" in his English classes, he spent 10-15 minutes detailing several stories about his suspensions. He told them passionately and with enough detail that I felt as if I was right there beside him at the time of his suspension. However, he followed up his suspension stories with details of how he specifically got "in trouble in English class because I wasn't about to do what she was saying that I needed to do." Dredge talked about breaking rules by "refusing to do work, not readin' nothing, and doing the bare minimum." He

stated that “if she assigned us homework, I just didn’t do it. I didn’t write no assignment, especially no 300-word assignment, especially because I ain’t going to a college class.” He stopped for a second and thought about what he had just said, then, almost to himself, he mumbled, “That was a no go. No show, no go. I wasn’t doing all that stuff on my own with no help. They said it had to be on my own but no. Like zero help.”

Exploring New Possibilities. While Dredge was the participant who had the most negative things to say about high school English classes, he also had quite a bit to say about a way of doing things differently that he would like to implement. Dredge introduced the idea of reading “articles, not books—with like, short bursts of reading.” He then stated that, “Well, I also think that whatever you’re interested in for a job should be what you’re learning. Like, if you want to be a nurse then you need to be in this kind of English class where you read articles about medical stuff, if you want to be a welder, you’re in this type of English class where you read articles about more hands-on manufacturing stuff.” I asked Dredge what would happen if a student picked a field that they were interested in, then halfway through high school they changed their mind. He stated “Well, change their mind. That’s fine. People do that in college all the time. They’ve still had readin’ and writin’, so why does it matter what they’ve been readin’ and writin’?” He continued with his vision by saying:

> I mean, there’s plenty of teachers in a school that could have groups of kids and lead them in learning about whatever career goal they had in mind. There could be some kind of project with it. It ain’t always gotta be about reading a novel and writin’ about the book.

I asked him to think about a time in one of his English classes where he felt like the reading materials or the writing exercises were not about a book, but more so about something in “real

life." He paused and seemed to get frustrated when he could not think of an example. He said "That's just not, that's not like how you're supposed to do it. You gotta read like old stories and that's dumb." At this point, I asked him to consider the idea that maybe his teachers did not even have true control over what they were teaching, but rather they were given a set structured curriculum. He said "yeah, I mean I know we got tests and all that—and certain stuff we gotta read to do good on the test. But teachers don't have to do that. They could not do what the principal tells them or gives them or whatever." He seemed to get aggravated again and said, "I don't know, it's just like, nothing that they tell us we're supposed to do is actually important to us. They need to go against some of that stuff because, I don't know, it's just stupid."

Michael

Michael's discussion on breaking rules was surprising to me since he seemed to be the participant that was the most concerned with making people proud of him. He told me several stories about "getting in trouble" at school and even stated that "me and my buddies were funny, but we were trouble." He also discussed ways that he broke the rules in the high school English classroom when he "did things in the wrong order or copied and pasted a whole paper from the internet." Michael reiterated that he did these things that were "technically against the rules" in order to "get a good grade or not have to ask questions to the teachers." He laughed when he thought about one teacher who "never noticed that I copied and pasted that whole daggum paper straight from the internet." He elaborated on this and stated, "I did it and I still got away with it, I basically had it made at that school." Michael focused on the ways in which he also broke the rules when it came to reading as he talked about how his teachers "made me read the questions before I did the reading. But I never did that, it never made sense to me. I didn't do what they

told me because it didn't work for me. I always waited until the end to read the questions, but they didn't know that."

Exploring New Possibilities. Michael gave explicit directions for the steps that he would take to "fix high school English class." He stated that the first thing he would do was "Get rid of the end of grade tests. Because, like, the exams don't mean anything about a kid or how smart someone is. They make those tests so hard on purpose, especially for people who struggle with English." He also noted that he feels like the key to making high school English class a better place is "more reading out loud by the teacher. When the teacher reads to us, I can see it better in my mind. I can see what I'm supposed to be thinking about." Lastly, Michael stated that he thinks English class should be "made to feel like some kind of reward,especially at the end of the week." I did not understand what he meant by this, so I asked him to provide an example. He stated:

> Like, it makes you feel good when you get complimented for doing something right, not always hearing what you're doing wrong. Maybe kids need to hear more about their wins at the end of the week and get rewarded with some kind of something that has to do with what they're reading.

He told me that "for instance, when we were reading *The Giver,* we got to watch pieces of the movie if we did good on the reading throughout the week. Watching the movie was fun, but it also helped me to better understand the stuff I couldn't really get in the book." He reiterated that he knows "that you're not supposed to watch movies in class, but it really did help." He discussed his teacher mentioning that they "couldn't watch the whole thing at one time because it was against the rules," but he felt like watching the film was one of the only things that helped

him conceptualize the book. He talked about how “more teachers need to think about showing movies to kids so that they can see what’s happening that they’re reading.”

Summary of Findings

Based on the data analysis and narrative portraits presented in this chapter, the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an AEP mediate their reading and writing in the high school English classroom. To answer RQ1, experiences outside of school play a particular role in their perceived purpose of English class, the ways in which their confidence in reading and writing is built or dismantled, and how they see their future plans being supported by reading and writing in English class. Furthermore, in order to answer RQ2, findings from the study also indicate that the participants feel a sense of isolation within the pedagogical choices in high school English class, tend to fail to see a connection between the curriculum and themselves, and even break perceived rules in reading and writing. However, they also have reflective, innovative ideas that could help educators, administrators, and literacy scholars reimagine the curriculum and instructional practices used within the high school English classroom.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Overview of the Research

Over the last decade, I have taught high school English courses which have been labeled as “remedial” classes by administrators, and have been composed of mostly male students. In my quest to understand why I had/have an abundance of male students, and very few female students in my “remedial” English classes, I discovered that the male students in my classes had rich literacy practices which extended beyond the autonomous model of literacy of merely objectively assessing reading and writing (Street, 2003). I noticed that the community of learners that I was gifted with were bold, amusing, and wise. They could tell a captivating story, construct museum-worthy pieces of art with a tooth-marked nubby pencil on a sheet of scrap paper they found in my recycling bin, and they taught me far more about plot twists than I ever learned as an English major. As I started to question why these male students had been labeled as “struggling” when it came to literacy skills, I began to notice that these students did not always see themselves as readers and writers, but it was possibly because their skills were far more intricate than that. They embodied complex tales and they were metaphorically writing their own life stories even when they may have felt uncomfortable writing in the high school English classroom.

Over the years, the students in my courses would evolve into pseudo-families and we were able to form a vibrant community rooted in honesty, even when it was hard. Many of these high school male students expressed their disdain for their English classes, and continually voiced how the coursework did not relate to their lives. It was not easy for me, as their teacher, to hear comments about how they viewed reading and writing as a form of punishment. Being the teacher was difficult at times because their honesty forced me to grapple with my own questions.

Why did they need to read novels that they perceived as having nothing to do with their lives? Why did these writing assignments matter to who they were as people? Why was the definition of literacy skills so limited by the school system and the state testing system? Why was there such a big focus on how they performed on tests? This expression of discontentment and the lack of belonging that the students expressed led me on a journey to more so understand how the experiences in the lives of these boys potentially played a role in how they engaged in reading and writing in the high school English classroom. Moreover, it was the opinions of these same high school male students that inspired my curiosity in the opinions of other male students on curricular choices and instructional practices in their English classes.

As I learned more from my own students, I felt that there was a need for others to hear their ideas, too. Therefore, this research study is rooted in the idea that high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers by school systems need to have the chance to dispute that label and demonstrate their rich literacy practices which transcend the classroom space and the autonomous model of what literacy means (Street, 2003). While I started working as an English tutor in an AEP, I found that the high school male students who were enrolled also had strong opinions about their English classes and told many stories about the range of experiences they had outside of the classroom. I also discovered that the particular cohort, composed of mostly male students, had been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers by their previous, traditional high school. This study gave them the opportunity to reflect and share *how* their experiences potentially mediated their reading and writing in the high school English classroom. Additionally, the study gave them a place to freely share their thoughts about curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom. Because of these affordances, the overall purpose of the study was to better understand the literacy practices

of high school male students outside of school, how they shape their literacy practices at school, and the students' perceptions of reading and writing pedagogy in the high school English classroom. In order to address this purpose, the following two research questions were used:

1. How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediate their reading and writing in the high school English classroom?
2. 2. How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

To address the research questions, a qualitative multiple case study of three high school males enrolled in an AEP was employed as the research methodology. The multiple case study design allowed me to learn more about the experiences of the participants, and how those experiences mediate reading and writing in the high school English space. Furthermore, I was able to gain a better understanding of the participants' perspective on pedagogical choices in the high school English classroom as a whole. The case study method allowed the space for me to be a listener and a learner as I attempted to hear the voices of those who were labeled as "struggling" readers and writers, but who did not always seem to "fit" that description in my own experiences (Yin, 2018). Through focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews with the participants, I was able to not only explore the ways in which their experiences played a role in their reading and writing, but also how their perceptions of the English class were influenced by experiences outside of the classroom. I was able to compose a narrative portrait for each participant as I combined my own experience as a high school English teacher with their words, feelings, and emotions surrounding literacy. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) discussed

how the portraiture method not only shifts the focus onto the inherent goodness or expertise of the participant, but it also allows the researcher an opportunity to document his/her own personal interpretations of the data. Because it would have been impossible for me to extract my experiences as a high school English teacher from this study, I employed the portraiture method for reporting my findings. This method allowed me to document the real, spoken words of my participants while blending the ways in which the participants inspired me to think critically about my own experiences as both a teacher and a researcher. The narrative portraits in the previous chapter presented a modified, autobiographical element that strayed from the "detached" observer's point of view (Henderson, 2010, p. 5). As I co-constructed the narrative portraits with each participant, an extended metaphor developed where the high school male students who were enrolled in the AEP can be seen as "survivors" on an uncharted island. This metaphor which was explained in Chapter 4, is continued throughout this chapter as I include suggestions from the survivors for practice.

This study was positioned in Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory as I attempted to understand how the participants approached reading and writing in the high school English classroom depending upon their lived experiences outside of the classroom. As Vygotsky (1978) explained how people construct knowledge and make meaning based on their interactions with the world around them, this study focused on not only how high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP use their outside experiences to influence their reading and writing in the classroom, but also how they perceive pedagogical choices in the English classroom based on those outside experiences. This qualitative multiple case study provides insight for high school English teachers, school administrators, and literacy scholars to learn more about the perceived gender gap in reading and writing scores at the high school level. Moreover, the study positions

the high school male learners who have been labeled as “struggling” readers and writers as the experts who have knowledge to share that could potentially mitigate the perceived “gap” (Reilly et al., 2019).

Chapter 5 is organized into five sections: a) Comparison to the Literature, b) Summative Findings and Conclusions, c) Implications, d) Recommendations, and e) Limitations of the study. This chapter begins with a comparison to the literature to indicate how the study relates to current research, and how the data could potentially extend the literature to make novel contributions to the field of literacy research at the high school level. Then, this chapter will outline summative findings and conclusions based on themes that I outlined in Chapter 4. Next, I will share implications for high school English teachers and literacy researchers based off of themes which I discussed in Chapter 4. I will then unfold a series of recommendations from the participants/“survivors” themselves for school administrators and high school English teachers. Lastly, I will address the limitations of the study.

Comparison to the Literature

When compared to the literature, this study both validated current findings and provided insight on future direction when it comes to the perceived literacy gap of high school male students within the United States. While the definition of the word *literacy* has evolved over time to include identity forming practices such as communicating with others or making meaning from lived experiences, the majority of high school English classrooms across the United States still use the autonomous model of literacy when it comes to testing a student’s literacy abilities; this reduces *literacy* to the “benign” act of reading and writing (Street, 2003, pp. 77-78). In turn, this practice has potential negative impacts on high school students, especially high school male students who have traditionally comprised the perceived gender gap in literacy scores as

evidenced by data on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Moreover, high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers or writers by their school administrators or counselors may feel disconnected or unwanted in the academic space (Lenters, 2018). As a result, many of these students are either pushed out of, or they choose to leave, the traditional high school setting altogether (Lenters, 2018). While this concept could potentially account for the fact that male students drop out of high school at a higher rate than their female counterparts, it also affirms the notion that these students are potentially finding success in school through alternative pathways (Reeves et al., 2021). These alternative pathways may include Alternative Education Programs (AEPs) that give high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers or writers more options to receive their high school diplomas. By amplifying the voices of the high school male students who have been labeled as struggling readers or writers, high school English teachers, administrators, and literacy researchers can use Street's (2003) Ideological Model of literacy to potentially reimagine the high school English classroom so that it is a more welcoming, identity-building space for all students.

Definitions of Literacy

The autonomous definition of literacy places it as a passive skill that can be quantified and tested by school systems; typically, the autonomous model of literacy has been used on end-of-course exams in high schools and on standardized tests used for college admission such as the ACT (Street, 2003, p. 77). However, NCTE (2022) and UNESCO (2018) defined literacy as a means of forming identity, making meaning from lived experiences, and engaging in communication practices with others. Catts (2021) noted that literacy practices are not learned, practiced, or refined in an academic vacuum. Therefore, defining literacy as a simplistic task of

identifying and/or forming letters reduces its power to positively impact the world. Sarroub & Pernicek (2016) underscored the need for high school English teachers and administrators to shift their pedagogical approach to match the ideological model of literacy since literacy practices extend beyond answering questions correctly on a standardized test. This study affirms the crucial need to shift the ways in which high school male students are not only identified as "struggling" readers or writers, but to also expand the ways in which literacy practices are viewed, encouraged, and analyzed in the high school English classroom. This includes the need for literacy researchers to continue to examine and analyze the ways in which students' literacy scores are quantified.

The High School English Classroom in the Age of Standards

After No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed in 2001, schools were required to test "proficient" in reading by the year 2014 or they could potentially have their school closed (Learning First, 2018). This concept, combined with the growing "Age of Standards" that blossomed during the early 2000s, led to more classrooms teaching students basic reading comprehension skills so that they could score higher on end of grade exams (Learning First, 2018). As a result, activities that focused on reflective practices, meaning making from experiences, or creative thought were often replaced by objective measures of reading comprehension in the high school English classroom (Culburtson, 2012). Students need to be able to form connections, not just between themselves and the text, but also between their lived experiences and the activities that they engage in within the high school English classroom. Standardized test scores in reading and writing do not test a student's literacy skills or practices, but rather how well he can assimilate into the mindset of the test maker. This study underscores the importance of allowing students the room for creative thought processing and the time to

reflect on how their own experiences can be powerful stories to be both read and written in the high school English classroom. Rather than being assessed on reading passages that may offer little to no connections to the lives of students, students need more opportunities to explore opportunities to feel empowered by literacy skills they are already practicing in their everyday lives.

The Drop Out Effect of the Male Literacy Gap

When high school male students who have been labeled as struggling readers and writers feel unwanted or pushed out of the academic environment, they often drop out of school altogether (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Reeves et al. (2021) explained that high school male students are dropping out of high school at a higher rate than their female counterparts; additionally, male students are severely underrepresented at colleges across the country. When students drop out of high school, their opportunities for economic success are severely limited (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Additionally, Stewart (2022) highlighted the importance of helping students build strong literacy skills that build their confidence in order to reduce the dropout rate. This study confirmed that many high school male students who have been labeled as struggling readers and writers do not feel a sense of belonging in the academic space. Furthermore, they often resort to dropping out of school altogether when they feel disconnected from their academic coursework and/or their teachers. This study reinforces the importance of not only building positive relationships with all students, but particularly high school male students who have been given negative labels concerning their academic success. Also, this study highlights the need for more high school English teachers and educators to listen to their high school male students who have been labeled as struggling readers or writers. By listening to their insights, there is the potential to not only reimagine high school English pedagogy, but also

the opportunity to remove oppressive labels that often make students feel as if dropping out is the best choice.

High School Males Sent to Alternative Education Programs

Alternative Education Programs (AEPs) are often recognized by their population of students who have not found success in the traditional, public high school because of academic and/or behavioral concerns (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). Lynch (2016) noted that many high school male students are labeled as struggling readers and writers are often sent to an AEP by their administrators or counselors; in turn, this creates the notion that these students are pushed out of, or not wanted in, the academic space. While there may be a negative perception of AEPs being places for students who are not successful in the academics, many AEPs actually help students to find other options for success which transcend the academic space (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). Students who are sent to AEPs by their administrators, or students who choose to attend an AEP rather than a traditional school, often find great success because AEPs offer unique opportunities and pathways for students to thrive (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). This study reaffirmed the positive impact that AEPs can have in the lives of high school male students who have been labeled as struggling readers or writers. Furthermore, the study revealed a potential need for administrators to consider adding AEPs as alternative pathways for students earn a high school diploma.

Motivation and the Freedom to Choose

The Self Determination Theory (SDT) as described by Deci and Ryan (2004), highlighted the notion that students' motivation to learn is dependent on their perception of having the power to make choices. Guay (2021) explained that when students feel as if they do not have the opportunity to choose how they learn to reach personal goals, they often feel restricted which leads into a sense of combativeness. High school male students who have been labeled as

"struggling" readers and writers by their school systems may feel exceptionally limited in choices as "remedial" level curriculum is often prescribed to them (Guay, 2021). By giving students the freedom to choose how they interact with texts, and even the freedom to choose the *curriculum*, shifts their concept of themselves as learners. This study reveals that when high school male students have the freedom to make more choices about their learning, they may feel more like an expert and less like a problem in the classroom space. Additionally, this study underscored the importance of high school English teachers developing positive relationships with all students-but especially male students who may have been labeled as "struggling" in reading and writing. These positive relationships lead to a greater sense of trust in the classroom where bonds are strengthened and choices are honored. In turn, this helps to develop the students' sense of responsibility and identity as they become empowered by the choices that they make when it comes to their learning.

Art as a Literacy Practice

Because the ideological definition of literacy embraces creativity as being a vital part of exercising and strengthening literacy skills, students need more opportunities to create art work in high school English class. Engaging in creative art projects allows students to develop critical thinking skills beyond reading and writing texts (Miller & Hopper, 2010). Creating and/or analyzing art work gives students the opportunity to produce pieces that highlight their individual literacy skills which transcend the autonomous definition of literacy. By using various colors, symbols, or mediums in the creation of art, students can express their understandings of assigned literature through personal connections which they display in their art. Moreover, Kirland (2009) noted that high school male students often use tattoos as a way to "wear" artwork that "speaks to the human story of literacy" (p. 375). This study revealed that there is a need to

give students the opportunity to display understanding or make connections through artistic activities. Furthermore, the study affirms Kirkland's (2009) idea that high school male students are making symbolic statements through the tattoos that they choose. This idea indicates that high school male students *do possess* and *practice* rich literacy skills, but school systems may not consider these literacy practices to be "academic." Therefore, there is a need to incorporate activities into the high school English classroom where male students can practice and refine literacy skills even if they transcend the academic space.

The Power of Storytelling

When thinking about the ways in which the ideological model of literacy could be used to transform the high school English classroom, introducing storytelling into the curriculum could assist in creating a space where all literacy practices are honored and heard. Telling stories about lived experiences reinforces the idea that "...literacy is the way that we interact with the world around us, how we shape it and are shaped by it" (NCTE, 2020). When students write stories about experiences in their own lives, they practice reflective thinking. When they listen to stories told by others about their own unique experiences, they expand their capacity for empathy. By knowing the stories of others, they are forging relationships and shaping their own world views. Storytelling is a strong identity-forming tool in that the lived experiences which are being told are brimming with lessons, questions, and intrigue. This practice transcends the autonomous model of literacy which reduces it to the mere reading and writing of a text; storytelling encourages students to learn from both themselves and others (Landrum et al., 2019). This study affirms the need for incorporating storytelling into the high school English classroom. By allowing students to have the freedom to amplify their own stories in the high school English classroom, they have the opportunity to discover that literacy practices are empowering.

Summative Findings and Conclusions

It is my hope that this multiple case study attempts to answer questions that teachers just like myself have asked, especially when they look out into a sea of male students in their "remedial" high school English courses. As I discussed in Chapter 1, my former student who talked about God forgetting to put the sugar in the Kool-Aid of his life was the ultimate catalyst for this study. Today, the small boy with the big personality, who sat in the front row and snacked on Skittles every day at 9:50 am, is a man. He is 26 years old, still the funniest person that I have ever met, and keeps my life interesting with his stories. His stories are shortened now that we get a ten-minute window to talk at the prison where he is currently located. As he awaits his next trial, he calls and laughs as he tells me that he is "forced" to read books since there is no other source of entertainment. In his one hour of "out time" each day, he often writes song lyrics or doodles. I am reminded of the sketches he used to create for his peers and the one that I still have from his 10th grade art class exhibit. While he never said that he loved reading or writing in high school English classes, it is funny to me that he turns to literacy practices now as a means of escaping where survival goes beyond earning a diploma and there is not an easy way out. It is his story, and stories just like his, that inspired this study and will hopefully inspire countless other studies about male students and their literacy practices.

This multiple case study provides a starting point for getting perspective from the high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers by their school systems, just as the boy with the Kool-Aid Life was so many years ago. This study revealed that while high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP may be labeled as "struggling" readers and writers, they can actually be viewed as survivors who have had to metaphorically blaze their own trail in order to "survive." Furthermore, for the purpose of this study, the term

"survivor" is used to describe the students who are still actively engaging in the academic process necessary to earn a high school diploma in hopes of creating personal success in the future. While each participant in this study either chose to leave or was forced to leave the traditional high school setting, they are survivors because they are resilient; they do not give up even when the school system characterizes them by their perceived "struggle."

The data collected and analyzed informed RQ1 in a way that indicated that survivors' experiences outside of school mediate their reading and writing in the high school English classroom in several ways. First, the participants indicated that they did not find a purpose in reading and writing in English class because they did not perceive that it was helpful in showing them how to do "real life" things like "paying bills." Additionally, the data indicated that the participants' experiences outside of school helped them in forming an identity in which they often exercised in the high school English space which got them "in trouble." The data indicated that confidence played a key role in how they approached reading and writing in their high school English classes, and that their families often helped to create the level of confidence that they felt and/or exhibited. Lastly, the participants illustrated a future-driven mindset that they perceived was not supported by reading and writing in their English classes at the high school level. While they did not see their future plans or dreams being connected to the reading or writing in which they were engaging in the English classroom, they voiced how their lives outside of school led them to see specific needs for improvement in the reading and writing pedagogy they experienced.

Because of the participants' willingness to be honest and reflective regarding their opinions on curricular choices and instructional practice in their English classes, their ideas that were collected and analyzed informed RQ2. The participants shared a collective feeling of

isolation in their high school English classes when it came to curricular choices and instructional practices. They once again created their own original strategies to survive when they felt that the reading was “nonsense” or the writing was “a struggle.” Furthermore, the participants indicated a stark lack of connection between high school English pedagogy and who they were as people, beyond who they were as students. The data indicated that they found themselves continually searching for direction or instruction on how to please a teacher, rather than “making sense” of the reading and writing. Finally, rule breaking in the high school English classroom was something that the participants shared. Participants noted how they broke behavior rules, and also broke perceived rules of curricular choices and instructional practices in the English classroom. However, they also shared a plethora of suggestions for how listening to high school male students could create room for their ideas of new possibilities in English classes in high school. The themes that emerged, as outlined in Chapter 4, are used to inform implications and recommendations in the sections that follow.

Implications

This research study’s findings have implications for high school English teachers and literacy researchers who are both curious about the perceived gender gap in literacy scores at the high school level, and also committed to reimaging high school English pedagogy to improve personal outcomes for male learners. This study aimed to explore the ways in which experiences outside of school in the lives of high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP have mediated their reading and writing skills in the academic space. Additionally, this study aimed to explore how the voices of high school male students enrolled in an AEP could potentially inform curriculum and instructional practices in the high school English classroom. The implications of this study are supportive of expanding beyond the autonomous model of literacy in the high

school English classroom (Street, 2003). Moreover, the implications of this study suggest that student voices are an untapped resource that could potentially serve to positively impact the strengthening of literacy skills. Lastly, implications about Alternative Education Programs (AEPs) can be inferred from the data collected and analyzed.

For High School English Teachers

While many school systems may be unfairly labeling high school male students as "struggling" readers and/or writers, the data from this study implies that educators have an opportunity in their own high school English classrooms to dispel that label. Lenters (2018) indicated that the assessment of a high school male's literacy skills cannot be determined by a single, standardized assessment on reading and writing alone since these students are actually conceptualizing literacy skills through experiences that they have in their lives outside of school. Based on the data collected from the focus group sessions and one on one interviews with the participants, it is implied that there is a need for using multiple modes of storytelling in the high school English classroom, as well as for high school English teachers to practice co-constructing English pedagogy with high school male students. These practices could serve educators in promoting literacy skills and creating a space where male students can connect their own experiences outside of the classroom to the reading and writing used inside of the classroom.

Multimodal Storytelling

Based on the findings of the study, high school male students enrolled in an AEP find reading and writing in the high school English classroom to be restrictive and unrelated to their experiences outside of the classroom. Many of the participants expressed a certain amount of pride that they had in making decisions in their lives outside of the classroom; these decisions ranged from choosing a place of employment to choosing which relationships were worthy of

engaging in. Furthermore, results from the study indicated that there is a need to expand the choices of activities that students can engage in within the high school English classroom. The participants noted that, while they greatly enjoyed engaging in literacy-rich activities outside of the classroom such as listening to music and/or podcasts, reading and writing work reports to generate a profit, and even getting symbolic tattoos, these things were not considered academic in nature. Therefore, they felt as if their vast array of literacy skills outside of the classroom did not transfer into the academic space enough to please a teacher. The participants indicated that they enjoyed talking about things that happened in their own lives with their peers, and even writing creative stories, however they did not feel as if the English classroom had a connection to these literacy practices.

These findings suggest that multimodal storytelling could be implemented in the high school English classroom in order for male students to exercise the rich literacy skills that they have developed throughout their experiences outside of the classroom. Multimodal storytelling is a way of combining two or more forms of communicating such as written text, visual items like paintings, sketches, or collaging, and audio pieces (Victoria State Government, 2022). By incorporating various modes of storytelling into the high school English classroom, students could select the ways in which they display their literacy skills based on skills that they have already refined from experiences they have engaged in outside of the classroom. Additionally, multimodal storytelling can be used for showcasing real, lived experiences that students have outside of the classroom and connecting them to broader themes in literature. In turn, this could potentially help high school male students to see connections between the literature being study in the classroom, and the experiences that they have in their own lives.

Multimodal storytelling could potentially encourage high school male students to not make deeper connections between their own lived experiences outside of the classroom and their literacy skills inside the high school English classroom, but it could also help to reframe the "struggling" readers and writers as experts in literacy practices. Educators could allow students to create their own documentaries, podcasts, and/or graphic novels based on the ways in which their own lived experiences connect to state-mandated curriculum that is potentially unmalleable at the moment. This way, students would search for broader, universal themes found within a curriculum that may be perceived as lacking connection to their own lives. However, they are tasked with the opportunity to use multimodal storytelling in order to develop those connections and ultimately grow stronger literacy skills that build their confidence.

Co-constructing Lessons

Within the findings of this study, there is an implication that high school English teachers should co-construct lessons with their male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers. Co-constructing refers to the act of the teacher and the students collaborating in order to produce meaningful lessons in which the student assumes a greater sense of responsibility and ownership in their learning (Pauloski, 2020). High school English teachers can glean from this research the need to include high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers in the lesson-creation process so that they feel more included, rather than isolated, in the high school English classroom. Allowing students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers to express their ideas and opinions about curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom allows them to feel less like an interruption and more like an innovator. When students are encouraged to make meaningful lessons alongside their teacher, they are also using skills which extend beyond

reading and writing in the traditional sense. They are using organizational skills, critical thinking, and creativity along with developing self-monitoring techniques and leadership skills (Pauloski, 2020).

Co-constructing lessons in the high school English classroom could be used to enhance the high school male student's sense of connection between his own life and reading and writing in the classroom. The study revealed that many high school male students feel as though they are unwanted in the classroom, or that their English teacher is an enemy rather than an ally. The co-construction of lessons has the potential to replace the perceived power struggle between the teacher and the "struggling" reader and writer with a more positive outlook of what it means to be a teacher of knowledge. For example, the study's results imply that "struggling" readers and writers could feel empowered to share their ideas and to teach the teacher how to better incorporate literacy skills which go beyond the neutral skill of reading and writing (Street, 2003). In turn, students who have been perceived as "struggling" readers and writers could have the opportunity to showcase their vast literacy skills which incorporate the ways in which they "...participate in the larger culture" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 516). Additionally, the co-construction of lessons provides space for students and teachers to incorporate critical literacy into their high school English classrooms. Critical Literacy practices involve people analyzing texts in terms of finding relationships between texts and any societal implications which may be involved (NCTE, 2020). When teachers and students co-construct lessons in the high school English classroom, Critical Literacy practices naturally evolve as both the teacher and the students' roles are blended and they both work to actively discover, create, and evaluate the material(s) and practices which will be used.

For Research

By drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory, we can conclude that students' experiences outside of school mediate their learning inside of school; this study revealed that the experiences of high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP mediate their reading and writing in the high school English classroom. However, more research is needed as there is a plethora of information left to uncover on the topic. Further research that examines the perceptions of high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP that have strong, positive feelings about reading and writing in the high school English classroom would be beneficial; this type of research may provide new understandings about a possible disconnect between reading and writing attitudes and reading and writing scores. Moreover, it could be beneficial to extend this research by incorporating the perspectives of the high school English teachers both in the traditional high school setting, and in the AEP setting, in order to better understand the instructional practices being used with the intention of forming connections between the experiences of high school male students and the English pedagogy. Furthermore, the results of this study imply that there may be a place for the creation of additional AEPs which work in connection with traditional high schools, as well as the need for high school English teachers to shift the focus of the curriculum onto student voices.

Adding Alternative Education Programs

As there is not a commonly agreed upon definition of an AEP in the education community, this study's results imply that it may be beneficial for literacy researchers to investigate the positive effects of AEPs on the high school male student who has been labeled as a "struggling" reader or writer. According to Kho and Rabovsky (2022), AEPs are helpful to many students in the way that they can potentially aid them in finding unique pathways to

personal success. Every participant in this study expressed that they felt more connected to the AEP that they did their original, traditional high school. Perhaps there is a need for further researching how AEPs could serve as alternative pathways for students to refine and exercise literacy skills that may have previously not been considered academic in nature. An extension of this study could include investigating how adding AEPs to the traditional high school's graduation "track" could prove to be beneficial to decreasing dropout rates and overall feelings of isolation among high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers or writers.

Amplifying Student Voices

Further research is needed on the impact of incorporating the voices of students, especially those high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers. Amplifying student voices could potentially include things such as incorporating memoir writing into the high school English curriculum, allowing students space to create multi-modal creative stories for class analysis, and/or students co-constructing lessons with their high school English teachers. Literacy researchers could potentially conduct quantitative studies exploring the correlation between incorporating student voice and scores on end-of-course exams in the English classroom. Researchers could also potentially explore the ways in which incorporating student voices into the high school English curriculum impacted the ways in which students found purpose in reading and writing. Lastly, there is a need for exploring the comfort level of high school English teachers in incorporating more student voices into their classrooms, as well as the instructional strategies in which they already engage in which endeavors to do such.

Recommendations: Suggestions From the Survivors

The study revealed that the high school male students who had been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers (aka the "survivors") had a few suggestions for both school administrators and high school English teachers. These "suggestions" from the high school male students regarding ways to improve experiences in reading and writing in the high school English classroom serve as recommendations from the study.

For School Administrators

Because the participants in this study continually expressed a need for a systematic overhaul of the curriculum and instruction practices being used in the high school English classroom, administrators in high schools must give high school English teachers the freedom to try new things within their classrooms. High school administrators must first remove labels such as "struggling" or "at-risk" for high school male students as they are assigned to English classes. By focusing on the negative experiences of these students, their identities are limited to being built on what is "wrong" with their lives. When labels are removed, teachers can more freely select new curriculum and attempt to incorporate instructional practices that highlight the rich literacy skills of the students which extend beyond reading and writing. Administrators must allow their teachers, who usually know their own students best, to make choices about how the English classroom is structured in terms of curriculum and instruction. When teachers have the freedom to experiment with new learning techniques, there is the potential for students, like high school males who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers, to feel a greater sense of connection and community in the high school English classroom.

For High School English Teachers

The study revealed that high school English teachers play a large role in how comfortable high school male students feel sharing ideas and engaging in reading and writing in the high school English classroom. The data indicated that high school English teachers need to incorporate more options for showcasing literacy skills as well as working toward helping all learners feel as if they are welcome and valued in the classroom.

Incorporate More Options for Showcasing Literacy Skills

Because literacy skills extend beyond reading and writing in the high school English classroom, there is a need for high school English teachers to expand the ways in which they showcase students' literacy skills. High school English teachers could introduce their students to podcasting through apps such as Anchor which allow students to create podcasts,even if a particular student is in a different location than the rest. Creating podcasts could help students to engage in literacy practices which involve collaboration and creativity while communicating topics that they find to be interesting. Additionally, podcasting could allow students to exercise critical literacy skills as they discuss and evaluate sources. Also, high school English teachers could incorporate more artistic practices for students to use to showcase their literacy skills. Since art is a way for students to express themselves as well as enhance their own critical thinking skills, it would be beneficial to allow students to analyze texts or practice creative writing skills through artistic mediums (Miller & Hopper, 2010). Students could create pieces of art, instead of writing traditional papers, in order to display their own connections to texts.

Provide a Welcoming Space for Male Students

This study revealed the ways in which high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and writers perceive their high school English teacher(s). High school

English teachers could potentially engage in relationship-building exercises which promote a more comfortable classroom environment for high school male learners. As the participants in this study expressed feelings of being unwanted or misunderstood by their English teachers, it is important that the teachers receive the proper support and training on how to foster meaningful relationships with their students. In addition to professional development on proper relationship building techniques, if English teachers incorporate more exercises where students can communicate activities and experiences that they are engaging in outside of school, there is a greater possibility that teachers can start to make connections with students beyond their school-based "struggling" labels. When we come to know the stories of others, we start to learn more about ourselves. By listening to students and learning their stories of tragedy and triumph, teachers can start to learn more about how they can become better listeners and encouragers of all students. In turn, high school male students could potentially start to see teachers as supporters rather than adversaries.

Limitations

There were a few limitations to this study which should be noted. First, this study was limited by the fact that the participants were enrolled in an AEP, and not a traditional high school. While being enrolled in an AEP offered a unique perspective in that the participants could discuss their experiences in the traditional high school English classroom, and even compare it to their experiences in the AEP, students who are still enrolled in the traditional high school could provide more insight into contemporary practices. Also, this study was limited by the researcher's decision to not provide parameters on "experiences" outside of the classroom. If the research questions focused on more specific aspects of "experiences" such as relationships or

cultural practices, one could have a better understanding of precise "experiences" that mediate reading and writing in the high school English classroom.

The young men that were interviewed were all 17 years of age and their perspectives are different from those who are just beginning their high school journeys. These limitations are likely to impact the findings in that the participants were seemingly solely focused on what they would do after they received their diplomas and moved on to their chosen careers. Females were excluded from this study, but the gendered analysis was purposeful because of the data that was explored in Chapter 1. Another study which focused on the female student experience surrounding the same researcher questions could provide an informative cross-case analysis. As the only researcher who worked on this study, there was the risk of bias, especially because I am an English teacher. To mitigate any potential researcher bias, I employed member checking after each focus group session and one-on-one interview. I also used a research journal to keep my own biases in check by reflecting on my experiences within the study.

Summary and Conclusion

The study provided insight into how the experiences in the lives outside of school of high school male students who are enrolled in an AEP mitigate their reading and writing in the high school English classroom. Additionally, the study provided a greater understanding of how high school male students who are enrolled in an EAP perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom. While it was my own experiences as a high school English teacher of "struggling" readers and writers who were mostly male that led me to conduct this research study, it has ultimately been my love of stories that students tell about their own lives that has encouraged me to never stop asking questions. From this research, I have learned how high school male students who have been labeled as "struggling" readers and

writers have experiences outside of school in which they practice rich, meaningful literacy skills. They often feel unheard by teachers and disconnected to high school English pedagogy, but they are resilient, wise, and bubbling over with stories to tell. This research also allowed me to think about the ways that I have both been an English teacher, and the ways that I currently am an English teacher. The participants pushed me to examine my own teaching practices in the high school English classroom and the practices in which I engaged in many years ago that I thought were "right." If I ever have a son one day, I would hope that he is as thoughtful, diligent, and full of joy as the boys that have blessed my high school English classroom and life. From this work, it is my hope that more teachers, administrators, and literacy scholars will keep asking questions and passing the metaphorical microphone to the young men who have so much to say. My favorite poet, Sylvia Plath (2008), once said, "So many people are shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully, if only you were interested in them." I hope that one day, high school English teachers, and the nation at large will express interest in the stories behind the statistics which create the perceived gender gap in literacy skills within the United States. The boys are more than willing to unfold quite wonderfully and talk—we just have to be willing to be interested.

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP SESSION 1 PROTOCOL

Research Focus:

How experiences in the lives of high school male students enrolled in an AEP have impacted their reading and writing inside of school. How high school male students enrolled in an AEP perceive previous and/or current English classes.

Research Purpose:

This focus group session aims to explore the ways in which experiences outside of school in the lives of high school male students who are enrolled in an alternative education program have mediated their reading and writing skills in the academic space. Because the voices of the high school male students who comprise the literacy gap are often unheard, this focus group session will provide a platform for high school male students who are enrolled in an alternative education program to reflect and document meaningful experiences relating to reading and writing throughout their lifetime. They will create a Personal Literacy Portrait during this session. Participants created their Personal Literacy Portraits during the previous focus group session.

[Participant Eligibility:

- Identified as male by birth certificate
- Between the ages of 15-19
- Enrolled in the School to Work AEP
- Identified as a struggling reader and/or writer by previous standardized test scores as reported by their home school

Research Questions:

1. How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediate their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom?
2. How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

Focus Group Mode:

- In-person
- Portraiture Activity brought to session

- Approximately 45 minutes
- Audio recorded
- Participants will sit in a circle in chairs in a common area at the site where the AEP meets.

Time: 45 min - 1 hour

Reminder for Interviewers:

- As you know, I previously described a Personal Literacy Portrait project. Today, you will be creating your own Personal Literacy Portrait! I am so excited to see all the cool pieces that you will create. You were given a brainstorming guide at the last session, but if you would like an additional copy to look at now, those will be provided.
- Show students the supplies that I have provided (art supplies, writing materials, papers, poster boards, etc.)
- Remember to be respectful of the other participants' stories and emotions. This is a SAFE SPACE for sharing.
- Are there any questions about the process?
- Ask if it's okay to record!
- Remind the group that they can relax and to just try to have fun with their project and it's okay to have conversations.
- Remember that conversations and discussions held within the group should remain in the group. Confidentiality is important and it is also important that we all feel comfortable sharing.

WARM UP QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS AS PARTICIPANTS ARE CREATING

- Ask about their day/week
- Ask how they are feeling about this process.

I will allow participants to work on their creative pieces as I walk around and observe/listen

As this will be more of a time for me to listen to conversations, very few scripted questions will be used. I have included 4 "starting points" to use if conversations about the research focus do not flow naturally.

1. Did you guys remember how you learned to read?
    a. Potential follow up question: Did you like reading when you were younger?

    b. Potential follow up question: Do you remember anyone reading to you when you were younger?
2. What kinds of reading or writing pieces did you enjoy or not enjoy doing in your high school English classes?
3. What kinds of reading and writing do you guys engage in on social media?
4. What kinds of music or songs do you listen to the most?
    a. Potential follow up question: What draws you to this kind of music?
    b. Potential follow up question: How is this kind of music or lyrics relatable?

Wrap up:
Thank you for your time today. You will be leaving your personal literacy portraits with me so that I can photograph them. You will find a photo of your own personal literacy portrait in your folder on Google Drive. We really appreciate your time! This has been such a fun experience and I really appreciate you being so open to share about your experiences with reading and writing.

Remind participants that they will need to come prepared to our next session to share at least one "story" from their personal literacy portrait.

Remind participants of the date of our next session.

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP SESSION 2 PROTOCOL

Focus Group Session 2 Protocol

Research Focus:
How experiences in the lives of high school male students enrolled in an AEP have impacted their reading and writing inside of school.

Research Purpose:
This focus group session aims to explore the ways in which experiences outside of school in the lives of high school male students who are enrolled in an alternative education program have mediated their reading and writing skills in the academic space. Because the voices of the high school male students who comprise the literacy gap are often unheard, this focus group session will provide a platform for high school male students who are enrolled in an alternative education program to share and discuss at least one meaningful experience that they have had with reading and writing throughout their lifetime. They will use the creative activity known as a Personal Literacy Portrait as a "starting point" for their discussion. Participants created their Personal Literacy Portraits during the previous focus group session.

[Participant Eligibility:

- Identified as male by birth certificate
- Between the ages of 15-19
- Enrolled in the School to Work AEP
- Identified as a struggling reader and/or writer by previous standardized test scores as reported by their home school

Research Questions:

1. How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program mediate their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom?
2. How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

Focus Group Mode:

- In-person
- Portrait Activity brought to session

- Approximately 45 minutes
- Audio recorded
- Participants will sit in a circle in chairs in a common area at the site where the AEP meets.

Time: 30 - 45 min.

Reminder for Interviewers:

- As you know, you previously completed a Personal Literacy Portrait project. I am so excited to see all the cool pieces that you created. We talked about choosing at least one story from your personal literacy portrait that you would be willing to share with the group.
- Remember to be respectful of the other participants' stories and emotions. This is a SAFE SPACE for sharing.
- Are there any questions about the process?
- Ask if it's okay to record!
- Remind the group that they can relax and to just try to have fun with their project and have a conversation.
- Remember that conversations and discussions held within the group should remain in the group. Confidentiality is important and it is also important that we all feel comfortable sharing.

WARM UP QUESTIONS

- Ask about their day/week
- Ask how they felt about the portrait process - did they enjoy it? Was it awkward? Did it remind them of anything that they had previously forgotten?

I will then transition and share two stories from my own personal literacy portrait and allow the participants to ask questions.

1. Is there anyone who would like to volunteer to share first? (If not, then go clockwise around the circle.)
2. [after first participant shares]: Would you be comfortable with us asking you questions about your story? If not, it's totally fine.
    a. ALLOW TIME FOR FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS
    b. How do you see this experience impacting your reading and writing in school?
        i. How do you see this experience impacting your experience in the high school English classroom?

    c. Allow time to comment on how we enjoyed the story. Thank the participant.
3. REPEAT PROCESS 1-2.
4. What was your biggest challenge with this activity/experience?
5. What was your biggest takeaway from this activity/experience?
6. Ask participants if they would like to add anything or share another experience.
7. Ask participants if I can keep their personal literacy narratives.

Thank you for your time today. Let us know if you can think of anything that you would like for us to add or if you think of anything else later. We really appreciate your time!

Remind participants that they will be receiving an email indicating that they were or were not chosen for 2 semi-structured interviews.

APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL

Research Focus:

How experiences in the lives of high school male students enrolled in an AEP have impacted their reading and writing inside of school.

Research Purpose:

This semi-structured interview aims to explore the ways in which experiences outside of school in the lives of high school male students who are enrolled in an alternative education program have impacted their reading and writing skills in the academic space. Because the voices of the high school male students who comprise the literacy gap are often unheard, this study will explore how male high school students who are enrolled in an alternative education program make sense of their lived experiences outside of school through reading and writing in their high school English classes. Emphasis will be placed on how life experiences outside of the classroom impact the reading and writing skills of the participants inside of the classroom. This study will explore how the voices of high school male students enrolled in an alternative learning program could potentially inform curriculum and instructional practices in the high school English classroom.

Interviewee Eligibility:

- Identified as male by their home school
- Between the ages of 15-19
- Enrolled in the Student Promise AEP
- Identified as a struggling reader and/or writer by previous standardized test scores as reported by their home school

Research Questions:

1. How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program impact their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom?
2. How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

Interview Mode:

- In-person

- Approximately 45 minutes
- Audio recorded

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol
Participant (pseudonym):

Date/time of Interview

Location of interview:

Reminders for Interviewer:

- Are there any questions about the process?
- Ask if it's okay to record!
- Remind the interviewee that they can relax and to just try and have a conversation.

1. Hey ____! As a reminder, I'm working on a research project for my dissertation at UNC Charlotte. The project is about the experiences in your life outside of school that have impacted your reading and writing inside of school. If you're ready to chat, I'm going to go ahead and begin recording now, if that's okay.

2. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. As you know, I am interested in learning more about your life outside of school and how your experiences may impact your feelings about reading and writing inside of school. I am also wondering about your experiences in high school English classes that you have had. I have some questions I want to ask, but I really hope we can just chat about what you remember and what you think. This whole interview should take no more than 45 minutes. If you would like to skip a question that's asked, that's no problem at all. Just let me know and we can move on to the next question.

What questions do you have? Are you ready to begin?

Great! Let's get started.

1. Start by telling me how old you are and a little bit about the things you enjoy doing outside of school.
    a. Potential follow-up question: (Participant may mention working/jobs/not having a lot of free time because of working) Tell me more about your job and the things that you do there.

   b. Potential follow-up question: (If participant does not mention working/job) Do you have a job outside of school? Tell me more about it and the things that you do there. If not, what kind of job would you be interested in having in the future?
2. Let's talk about your family unit. Who, in your family, are you closest to? Tell me more about this person.
   a. Potential follow-up question: (Participant may mention friends who feel like family) Why do these people feel more like family than friends?
   b. What are some of your favorite memories with this person/people?
3. Tell me more about your closest friends and how you met them.
   a. Potential follow-up question: Depending on how participant has met closest friends, more questions could be asked about things such as athletics, school, neighborhood, etc.
   b. Potential follow-up question: What are some of the things that you and your friends enjoy doing together?
      i. Potential follow-up question about activities like music, art, social media, etc.
4. Now tell me what high school is/was like for you. In other words, do you/did you enjoy high school? (Which parts? Social, Educational, etc.)
   a. Potential follow-up question about academics: What specific classes did you enjoy the most? Why?
      i. Which classes did you enjoy least? Why?
5. Tell me what thoughts or opinions come to mind when you think about English classes that you have/had in high school.
   a. Remind them that it's okay to love English or to not love English.

6. Have you had any stand-out positive experiences in English classes in the past?
   a. (Probing question if they struggle) Maybe a book that you enjoyed reading or a teacher that did a fun activity?

7. Have you had any stand-out negative experiences in English classes currently or in the past?
   a. (Probing question if they struggle) Maybe an assignment that you struggled with or a teaching practice that you didn't feel like was helpful?

8. What kinds of books or articles are you usually reading in your English classes?
   a. Describe your feelings about the books or articles that you read in English classes.

9. Describe your feelings about the writing assignments that you complete in your English classes.

10. If you were the English teacher, what is something that you would change, stop, or start in your English class?
    a. Why do you think this would be a good modification?

11. Outside of the classroom, what are some ways that you use reading in your everyday life? (This could be at your job, on social media sites, sending emails, etc.)

12. Outside of the classroom, what are some ways that you use writing in your everyday life?
    a. (Be sure interviewee has discussed reading AND writing)

13. Tell me about how you feel about reading in general - it does not have to be reading in school.
    a. Do your parents/guardians enjoy reading? How do you know?

14. How would you describe your reading ability? For example, do you think that you are an advanced reader, an average reader, or a struggling reader?
    a. Can you give me some examples of what makes you categorize yourself in this way?
    b. Do you think your grade reflects your ability

15. How would you describe yourself as a writer? For example, do you like creative writing/writing stories? Maybe you could see yourself writing a news report and giving factual information?
    a. Can you give me some examples of what makes you categorize yourself in this way?

16. What are some ways that you use reading or writing in your everyday life that a teacher might not consider to be "something for school?" For example, comic books, listening to a Podcast, writing a song, having a symbolic tattoo, etc.

17. Is there anything else that you would like for me to know about you when it comes to reading or writing?

Thank you for your time today. Let me know if you can think of anything that you would like for me to add or if you think of anything else later. I really appreciate your time!

APPENDIX D: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW 2 PROTOCOL

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW 2 PROTOCOL

Research Focus:

How experiences in the lives of high school male students enrolled in an AEP have impacted their reading and writing inside of school.

Research Purpose:

This semi-structured interview aims to garner additional, clarifying information from participants based on their responses to semi-structured interview #1, their participation in Focus Group, and reading researcher composed narrative portrait.

Interviewee Eligibility:

- Identified as male by their home school
- Between the ages of 15-19
- Enrolled in the Student Promise AEP
- Identified as a struggling reader and/or writer by previous standardized test scores as reported by their home school

Research Questions:

1. How do the lives outside of school of high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program impact their reading and writing practices in the high school English classroom?
2. How do the high school male students enrolled in an alternative education program perceive curricular choices and instructional practices in the high school English classroom?

Interview Mode:

- In-person
- Approximately 45 minutes

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Reminders for Interviewer:

- Are there any questions about the process?

- Ask if it's okay to record!
- Remind the interviewee that they can relax and to just try and have a conversation.

1. Hey ____! As a reminder, I'm working on a research project for my dissertation at UNC Charlotte. The project is about the experiences in your life outside of school that have impacted your reading and writing inside of school. I just wanted to do a follow-up interview after your experience in the focus group and our first semi-structured interview. I have also provided you with a copy of the narrative that I constructed about the information you provided throughout the research process.

2. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. As you know, I am interested in any additional information that you would like to provide on how your experiences outside of school impact your reading and writing inside of school. I have some questions I want to ask, but I really hope we can just chat about what you remember and what you think. This whole interview should take no more than 45 minutes. If you would like to skip a question that's asked, that's no problem at all. Just let me know and we can move on to the next question.

What questions do you have? Are you ready to begin?

Great! Let's get started.

1. Start by telling me how you felt about the narrative that I wrote about the information that you provided to me about your experiences outside of school and how they may impact your reading and writing inside of school.
    a. Potential follow-up question: Is there anything that you feel like I should add? Why?
    b. Potential follow-up question: Is there anything that you feel like I should change? Why?

2. Let's talk about your experience(s) in the focus group activity. Did you learn anything about other participants during this time that surprised you?
    a. Potential follow up question: Did you learn anything about yourself that surprised you?
    b. Potential follow up question: Did this experience teach you anything?

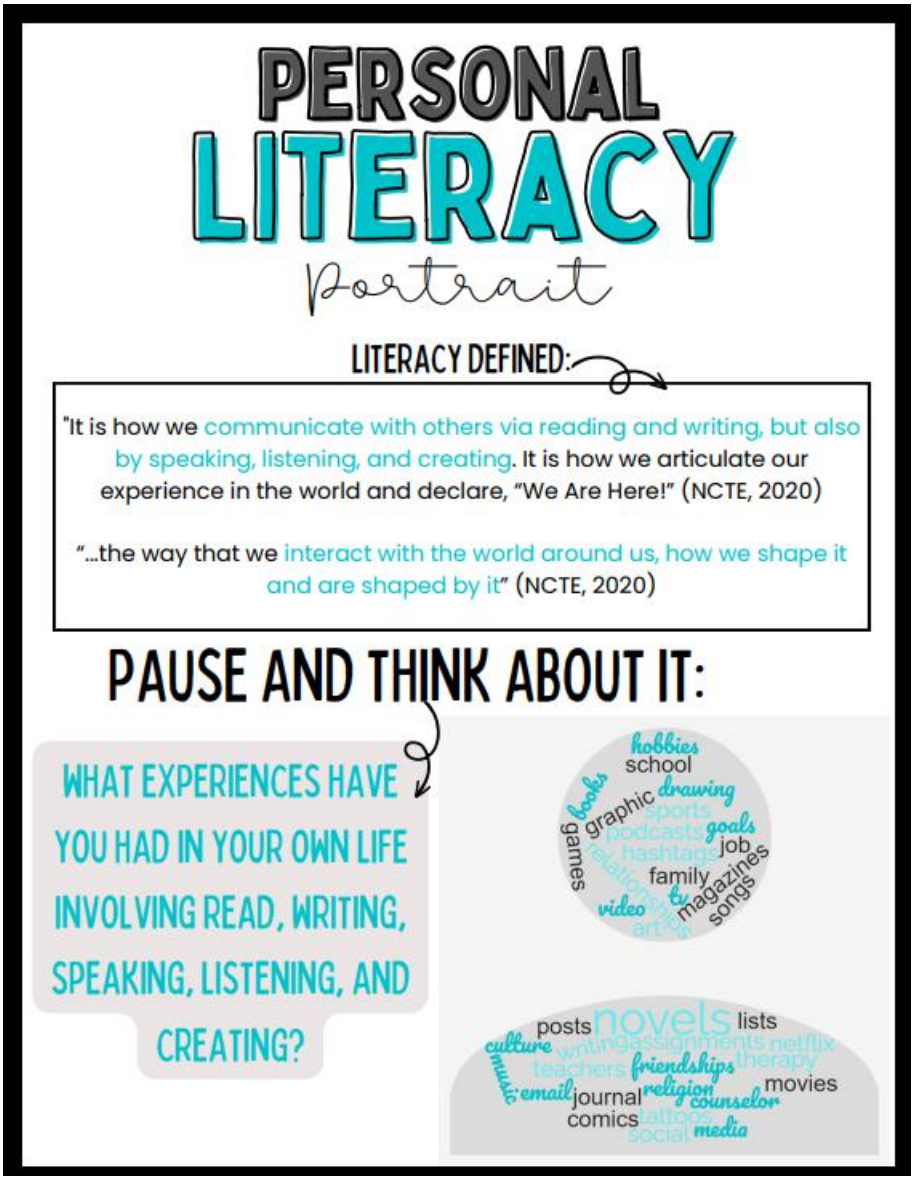
3. What other experiences have you had outside of school that you feel like have impacted your reading and writing inside the classroom that we maybe did not cover in the previous interview or the focus group?

4. Since our last interview, have you thought of anything that you would like to add about high school English classes?

5. Is there anything else that you would like for me to know about you when it comes to reading or writing?

Thank you for your time today. Let me know if you can think of anything that you would like for me to add or if you think of anything else later. I really appreciate your time!

APPENDIX E: BRAINSTORMING GUIDE FOR PERSONAL LITERACY PORTRAIT



BRAINSTORM

EARLY LIFE: AS FAR BACK AS YOU CAN REMEMBER - 5TH GRADE

CONSIDER:

- Did anyone read to you when you were little?
- What books did you like as a child?
- Which TV shows did you watch? Movies?
- Did your parents/guardians read? What kinds of things did they read?
- Did you ever go to work with your parents/guardians? Did their jobs involve any kind of reading or writing? Speaking? Listening?
- What do you remember about learning to read?
- Did you ever go to the library?
- Did you participate in any religious activities that required reading or writing? Speaking? Listening?
- Did you do any artwork? Drawing? Painting? Crafts?
- Did you play video games? What kinds?
- What kinds of music did you listen to/did your parents/guardians listen to with you around?
- Did you read outside of school for fun? Write?

In any way that feels comfortable to you (Making a list, writing, recording yourself (audio only or video with audio), etc.) Choose at least 4 topics in the "consider" box to answer about your early life. Then, EXPAND on one of those topics by "telling the story" behind it. Be as detailed as possible.

EXPAND ON YOUR THOUGHTS:

BRAINSTORM

GROWING UP: MIDDLE SCHOOL AGE (11-ISH –> 14-ISH)

CONSIDER:

- What music did you listen to?
- Who were your friends and what did you guys do for fun?
- Which shows/movies did you like?
- What books did your teacher assign in middle school? Did you actually read them? Did you like them?
- Did you read outside of school for fun?
- Did you have social media? Which kinds? What kinds of things did you post? Which kinds of accounts did you follow?
- Who did you text the most?
- Who did you call the most?
- Did you play video games? Which ones?
- What did you want to do when you "grew up?" Did it involve reading? writing? speaking? listening?
- Did you participate in any religious activities that involved reading, writing, speaking, listening?
- What were your hobbies?
- Did you play sports?
- What hobbies did you have?

In any way that feels comfortable to you (Making a list, writing, recording yourself (audio only or video with audio), etc.) Choose at least 4 topics in the "consider" box to answer about your early life. Then, EXPAND on one of those topics by "telling the story" behind it. Be as detailed as possible.

EXPAND ON YOUR THOUGHTS:

BRAINSTORM

WHO YOU ARE NOW: HIGH SCHOOL AGE (14-ISH --> 19-ISH)

CONSIDER:

- What music do you like? Why?
- Do you have a job? Does it involve reading? writing? speaking? listening?
- Who are your friends? What do you do for fun?
- What are your hobbies?
- Do you use social media? Which platforms? What do you post? Which kinds of accounts do you follow?
- Do you have tattoos? What do they mean?
- Do you want tattoos? What do you want? Why?
- Do you write outside of school? What kinds of things?
- Do you read outside of school? What kinds of things?
- What are your family dynamics like? Who do you live with? What are your responsibilities at home?
- Are you religious? Do you participate in any religious activities or customs where you have to read, write, speak, or listen?
- What do you watch on TV? Movies?
- Do you listen to podcasts or audiobooks?

In any way that feels comfortable to you (Making a list, writing, recording yourself (audio only or video with audio), etc.) Choose at least 4 topics in the "consider" box to answer about your early life. Then, EXPAND on one of those topics by "telling the story" behind it. Be as detailed as possible.

EXPAND ON YOUR THOUGHTS:

BRAINSTORM

WHERE YOU WANT TO BE: YOUR FUTURE

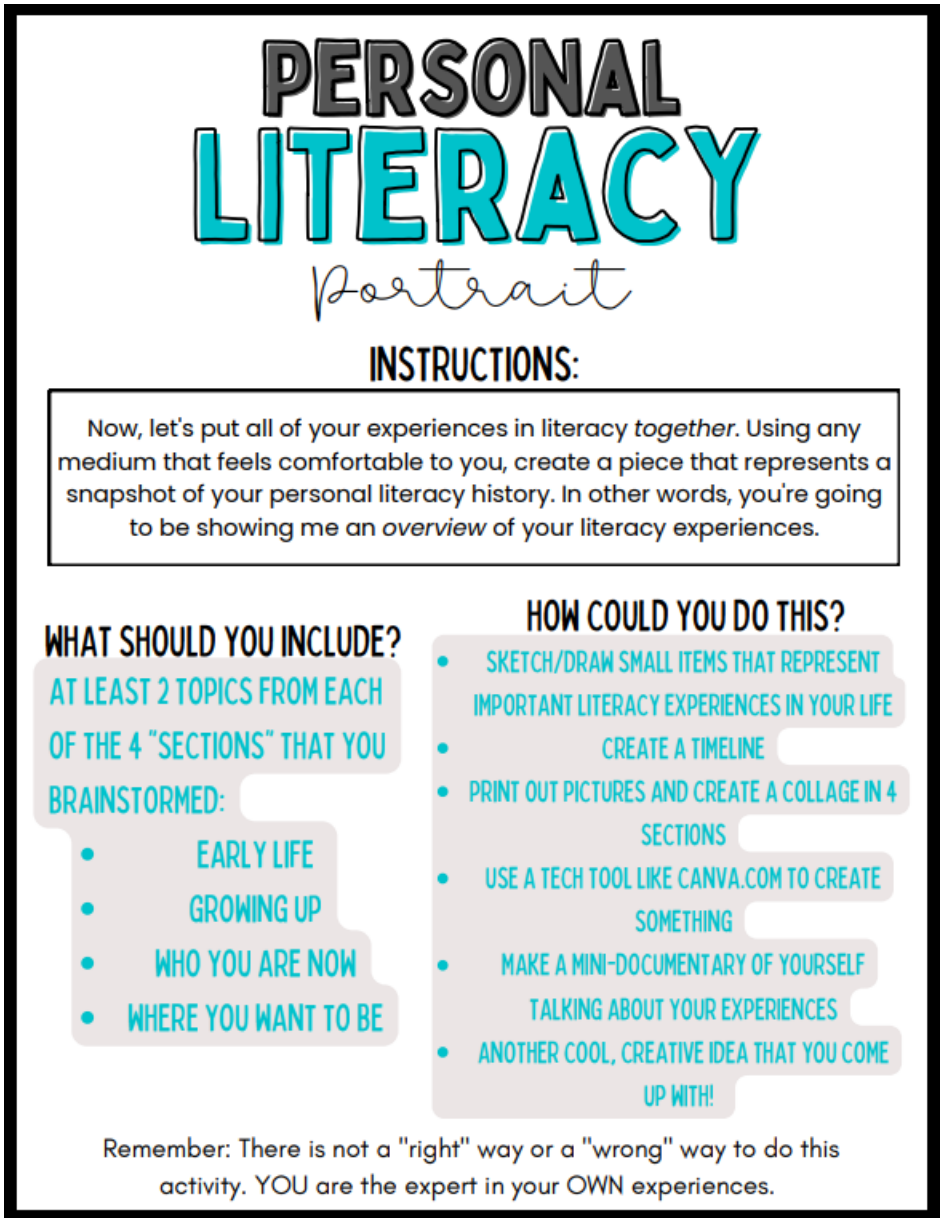
CONSIDER:

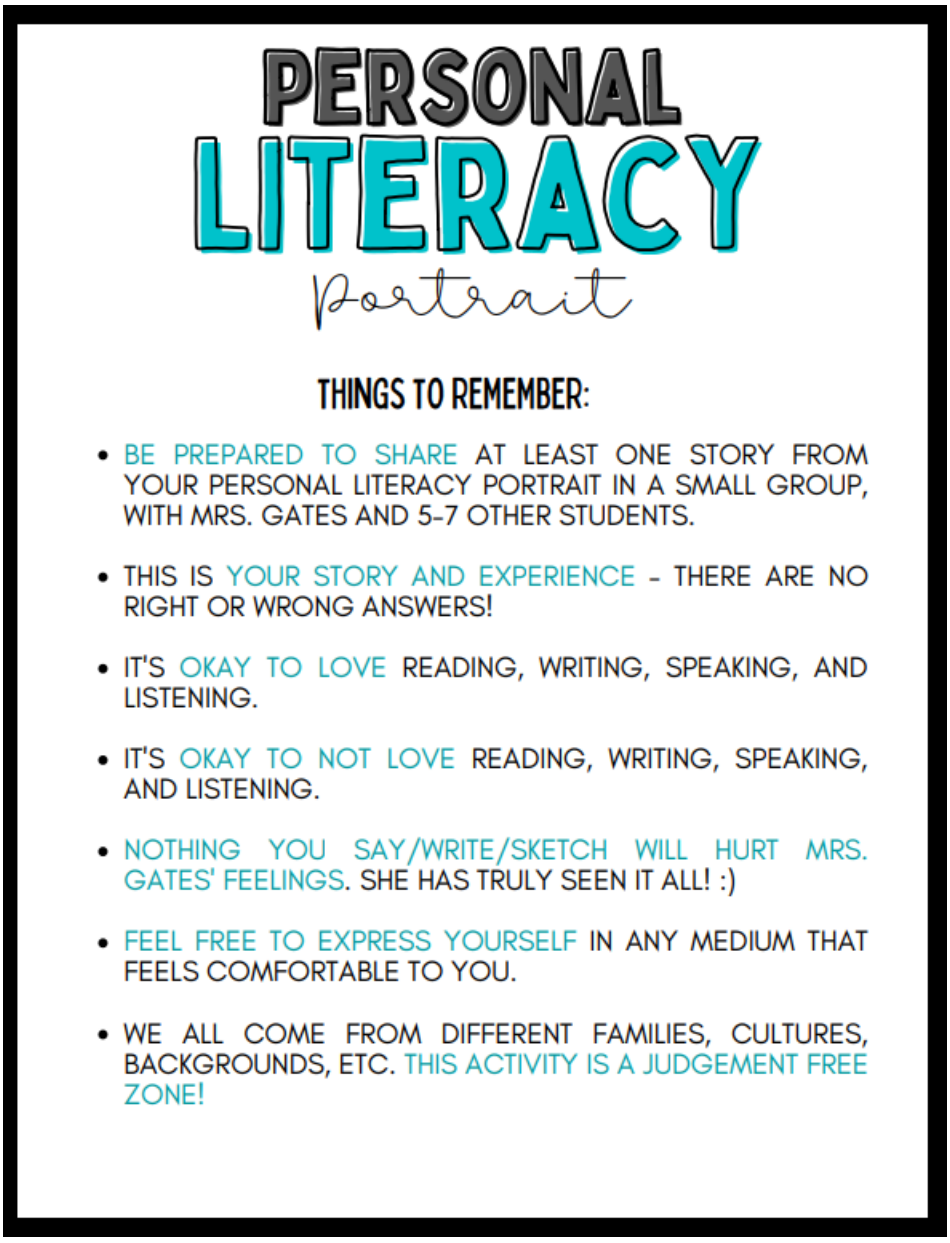
- What job do you eventually want to have? Does it require additional schooling?
- What is the main goal you have for your future?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years?
- What hobbies do you want to continue into your future?
- What things do you want to give up or stop doing in the future?
- How can reading/writing/speaking/listening help you get to where you want to be in life?

In any way that feels comfortable to you (Making a list, writing, recording yourself (audio only or video with audio), etc.) Choose at least 3 topics in the "consider" box to answer about your early life. Then, EXPAND on one of those topics by "telling the story" behind it. Be as detailed as possible.

EXPAND ON YOUR THOUGHTS:

APPENDIX F: PERSONAL LITERACY PORTRAIT INSTRUCTIONS




PERSONAL
LITERACY
Portrait
THINGS TO REMEMBER:
• BE PREPARED TO SHARE AT LEAST ONE STORY FROM YOUR PERSONAL LITERACY PORTRAIT IN A SMALL GROUP, WITH MRS. GATES AND 5-7 OTHER STUDENTS.
• THIS IS YOUR STORY AND EXPERIENCE - THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS!
• IT'S OKAY TO LOVE READING, WRITING, SPEAKING, AND LISTENING.
• IT'S OKAY TO NOT LOVE READING, WRITING, SPEAKING, AND LISTENING.
• NOTHING YOU SAY/WRITE/SKETCH WILL HURT MRS. GATES' FEELINGS. SHE HAS TRULY SEEN IT ALL! :)
• FEEL FREE TO EXPRESS YOURSELF IN ANY MEDIUM THAT FEELS COMFORTABLE TO YOU.
• WE ALL COME FROM DIFFERENT FAMILIES, CULTURES, BACKGROUNDS, ETC. THIS ACTIVITY IS A JUDGEMENT FREE ZONE!

APPENDIX G: PERSONAL LITERACY PORTRAIT EXAMPLE