Mostly Outside, Rarely Inside

SITUATIONS THAT PROMOTE LITERACY

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In one English class we observed during our study, we saw two of our boys with their heads down on their desks, apparently sleeping. They made a mock show of trying to wake up when asked by the teacher to start their assigned reading. As the bell rang, though, they sprang to life, and Jeff could not keep up with them as they jostled through the crowded hallway to the lunchroom. One of the boys did not even bother to buy lunch, hurrying to his favorite lunch table, already occupied by his waiting friends.

"Hey, have you guys seen this yet?" he exulted, as he pulled out the latest issue of *Maxim*. Though the boys did pause over several of the photographs, their real interest was in an article on the history of warfare. "This is one hot magazine," he told Jeff when he observed him looking on.

When the second boy arrived with his lunch tray, his plate was perched atop a wrestling magazine that was so quickly grabbed by a friend, his plate nearly overturned. "Hey, hey, hey! Careful with the merchandise!" he joked, holding the magazine protectively to his chest.

In the next two chapters, we take up a magnifying glass to look more closely at the literate activity of the boys in our study. If we are going to understand these activities, we have to include how they practice and respond to literacy both inside and outside of classrooms. As the opening story makes clear, boys' attitudes toward literacy in the lunchroom or at home might be very different from their attitudes toward literacy during fourth-period English.

Reading Logs

The data we will use to take this fine-grained look at literacy center around daily literacy logs that the boys kept of all of their literate activities, widely construed to include television and movie viewing, video game playing, magazine reading, music listening and concert attendance, Internet surfing, and the like. (See Appendix B for the log directions we provided.) Through these logs, we hoped to see not only how boys engaged and disengaged with varieties of literate activity, but also how these activities were embedded in and how they played out in their daily lives.

Each boy was interviewed every four to six weeks about the contents of his log. We analyzed log interviews from forty-six of the boys. We also observed the boys as often as possible in their classrooms and sometimes on informal occasions outside of class or school.

In an article in which he focuses explicitly on the connections between flow and literacy, Csikszentmihalyi (1990b) provides a justification for our approach when he asks, "If literacy is for the sake of the children, how come we so rarely bother to find out what they want to use it for?" (p. 136). When we bothered to find out, the boys provided fascinating answers.

The central finding from this data set is the sharp difference between the literate practices inside and outside of school. As was true for the magazine readers in the lunchroom, the literate lives of all the boys outside of school were surprisingly varied and rich, but this home/outside/real-world literacy was practiced in ways that looked quite different from the literacy they were asked to practice in school. While the boys were often passionate about the literate activities they pursued outside of school, they usually saw school literacy as a tool, not as something to be passionate about. (There were limited occasions when school literacy mirrored the features of home literacy in ways that motivated and assisted the boys, and we'll be examining those carefully.)

Even though the boys believed in the importance of school literacy in theory, as we discussed in the last chapter, they often rejected and resisted it in actual practice because it was not related to immediate interests and needs. Jamaal, who was serving several detentions for skipping school, provides a perfect illustration. Like most of the boys, he articulated a belief that you had to go to school and do your work: "I noticed that I had a really hard time learning everything after I'd been out. You need to be in school to, you know, learn everything and so you'll be ready for life." When Jeff confronted Jamaal with his chronic tardiness, school skipping, and failure to do homework, he replied, "I know, I know. My actions don't match my words." He expressed that school was important but that it just didn't work for him.

As we saw in the previous two chapters, school literacy was related in the boys' minds to the far-off future; home literacy was about immediate interests in the here and now. School literacy was a means to an often unrecognized and ambiguous end; home literacy was a concrete and immediately satisfying end in itself.

For example, Fred was grounded by his parents for his entire eighth-grade school year because he refused to do homework. He maintained that school is school and home is home. He explained, "It was boring staying in my room, but homework is even more boring, so I would rather stare at the wall." Though Fred was an unenthusiastic reader, he did read to pass the time while he was grounded, especially the *Star Wars* books he got from his best friend. Ironically, he even wrote book reports on them for extra credit.

Then there is Mick, who was functionally illiterate but who subscribed to car magazines. He flipped through the pages to find articles of interest based on the photos and graphics, and looked for someone to read them to him when he thought they were especially important.

Another student, Zach, named himself as a reader, yet he refused to read on vacations. He cited his need to "get away" from school—clearly perceiving "reading" as a school activity not to be pursued when not in school.

The fact that many of the boys saw their home and school literacies as entirely unconnected was also apparent in the way some of them omitted experiences from their logs. For example, on one fortuitous occasion, Jeff was at the same movie theater as two of the boys. They did not see him, but he heard them excitedly discussing the upcoming movie, talking about reviews they had accessed on the Internet and had heard from friends. They said they could not wait to weigh in on current discussions about the movie. Afterward, Jeff found them in the lobby laughing and arguing about "the flick." However, the boys did not record this activity in their logs.

Similarly, on another occasion, Jeff was working in the school library when one of the boys came in, began to read the sports page of the local paper, and then shared various game situations, statistics, and predictions about the NCAA basketball tournament with a friend. But he did not record this reading in his log.

We had been very explicit with the boys, stating we wanted a regular record of their daily activity from the time they awakened until they went to sleep, so we could get a sense of the rhythms and experiences that occupied them each day. We emphasized that they should record any activity that could be considered engaging with or composing a text—ideas expressed in any form that engaged them.

The boys in our study were generally very good and complete about recalling and recording in-class forms of reading. They cited videos watched for class and political cartoons and photographs used in class; most recorded that they read notes from the chalkboard or from their notebook; almost all of them talked about reading math problems. So they construed literacy quite widely, as we had suggested to them, when they were in the classroom.

Yet as we've noted, some of the boys initially failed to record literate activities we had observed when these fell outside of classroom situations. When Jeff asked the boys why they had not included these activities in their

logs, they generally indicated surprise that we were "interested in that kind of stuff." Ricardo explained, "I thought you wanted to know about reading, you know, to learn and stuff." In other words, he thought we defined literacy solely as "schoolish literacy." Once we emphasized again to the boys that we were interested in the widest possible range of literate activity, this problem was largely resolved in the subsequent logs.

In Chapter 2 we saw how our boys had many interests and passions that gave them great pleasure, and we discussed how the reasons underlying those interests and passions seldom extended to their literate activity in school. In Chapter 3 we looked at their attitudes toward different ways of being literate and at various influences on literacy, including the influence of ethnicity and class. In this chapter, we take a close look at how school and life literacies are perceived and practiced in mostly different ways, how our boys valued and devalued certain kinds of literate activity, and the connection of these attitudes to specific ideas about how people should be and behave. We conclude the chapter by considering how these findings challenge us as teachers to assist boys in becoming more competent in their literate activity.

Though we analyzed the logs and log interviews by looking for new codes and themes (that is—open coding), we quickly found that the same major codes we had used for the activity ranking and profile data also worked with this data set. Though we did identify and use nearly one hundred additional subcodes, we found that all of these could still be clustered around the four major principles we've identified from the work of Csikzimihalyi (1990a).

We'll discuss three of those themes in this chapter, saving the final theme for the next chapter, in which we focus on the reading materials that boys found most appealing.

Findings: A Sense of Competence, Control, and Challenge

Exercising a measure of control over literate activities—and appearing and being competent in them—were overwhelmingly important to the boys in the study.

Competence

Research has demonstrated that people who consider themselves to be competent enact very particular social practices to mark their identity as competent member of a particular *community of practice*. For example, kayakers prepare their kayaks, use particular kinds of language, and interact in various ways to announce and maintain a sense of competence. The same is true for waitresses, librarians, tailors, game players, and all other communities of practice. As Lave and Wenger (1991) assert:

> Learning . . . is a process of becoming a member of a sustained community of practice. Developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeably skillful are part of the same process. (p. 65)

One of the ways the boys demonstrated the importance of competence was through their admiration for the literate work of others and their expressed desire to enter into that community of competence. Robert, for example, loved the facility of the rapper Cannabis; Ricardo loved the movies of Quentin Tarantino. Most of the boys revered some sports figures or musical artists for their skill and competence.

Robert spoke this way about Cannabis:

> He on a different level than all them rappers because most of his stuff he don't write down. He just say it right off his head. What goes through his head, he just come out with it. That's what I like about him. And, he don't always talk about running around killing people, how much money he got and all of this different types of cars and houses. He talks about what he go through in real life. He talk about real-life stuff because he went to college. Because he said the way he raps, it's like he's mathematical.

Maurice brought the same belief in the importance of competence to his writing that Robert brought to his listening. He told Michael he reads his poems over and over:

> Just to make sure if it makes sense or not, because who wants to hand in something that doesn't make any sense. They're going to look at you like, "This kid doesn't know what he's doing. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

But as we saw in Chapter 2, the downside of this emphasis on competence was the boys' reluctance to take on tasks in which they did not feel competent. Aaron, for example, asserted that he avoids his work for English "because I'm not good at it." Fred extended the argument by describing to Michael how he feels when he is engaged in a literate activity in which he does not feel competent:

> Fred: I think that I told you about this before about my comprehension.
> Michael: Yeah, you said that you had trouble with that.
> Fred: I don't know why. If I am, it is weird if I, I feel that I have a lot of pressure on me. And when I have a lot of pressure I get real nervous

because I have lived a life where I am real nervous. And when I get nervous I get real hot and I get real sweaty, and sometimes I felt real lightheaded like I am going to drop. And I get nervous during some tests and, I don't know, I guess that that could be why I can't concentrate that well.

Michael: But you didn't get nervous in your math test?

Fred: Math—that's fun to do; I enjoy math.

The importance of competence was also affirmed by Ricardo. He maintained that you "better be competent" because "what you do is who you are . . . like a lot of people know me as a good photographer. So I guess that is a thing that I would identify with."

Huey seemed to be following Ricardo's advice. He explained that he avoids certain topics to deepen his knowledge in areas in which he is already something of an expert:

> I'd rather be real good at something than know a lot—well, I'd rather be real good at something than have a little bit of knowledge about a lot of stuff. . . . I feel it's better to be the best at something than to be average and know a little bit of everything.

This notion of a circumscribed area of competence was echoed by many of the boys. And when the boys felt competent in literate activity, they found it fun as well, whether it was playing video games; being able to talk about and critique wrestling shows on television; designing a virtual role-playing game home, hypermedia stacks, or websites; or even learning something new.

At home, the boys engaged in literate activities in which they already felt some competence, and they did so in situations with friends who could help them be more competent and who encouraged them to work through challenges. They were rewarded by the immediate payoffs in being able to apply or export what they had learned (e.g., use it in conversation). In contrast, the chances to build on competence in supportive social situations in school were much more limited, and the boys often felt that school put them in a position of being incompetent or feeling incompetent. Some of the boys indicated that they would rather avoid work that made them feel incompetent and suffer the consequences, expressing the attitude that "it's better to say the reading assignment is stupid than to admit or look like you are stupid."

The Role of Teachers

On the surface, the boys' emphasis on competence would seem to bode well for their relationships with teachers. Just as their friends helped them become increasingly competent in their out-of-school activities, teachers, it would seem, would assist them in becoming increasingly competent in their in-school activities.

The young men, in fact, saw providing this assistance as a teacher's role. Marcel, for example, talked about what good teachers do: "They will help you any time that you need it." Sisqó argued that a good teacher is "One who sees your trouble and helps you." Haywood revealed that he was "willing to read really hard stuff if the teacher is willing to help me." But unfortunately, the boys reported that they did not feel they regularly received that kind of assistance from teachers, at least not in a form in which they were willing to accept it.

Again and again we heard the boys talk about what we came to regard as an implicit social contract that the boys felt teachers generally reneged upon. This implicit contract appeared to have several regular features:

1. A teacher should try to get to know me personally.
2. A teacher should care about me as an individual.
3. A teacher should attend to my interests in some way.
4. A teacher should help me learn and work to make sure that I have learned.
5. A teacher should be passionate, committed, work hard, and know his or her stuff.

If a teacher met even one of these conditions in the eyes of the students, the boys tended to respond positively and to learn from and work hard for that teacher. When teachers failed to hold up their end of the bargain, the students echoed Herb Kohl's famous book title: "I won't learn from you."

Bambino was a case in point. We've earlier pointed out that he was a wrestling aficionado. While he realized that his wrestling expertise was not something he could bring easily to class, he wanted it to be noticed. He refused to do anything more than perfunctory work for many of his teachers. But he indicated that if teachers simply talked with him from time to time about wrestling, even for a quick minute in the hallway, he would be happy to do their work. That's all it would take: a recognition that he brought interests and expertise from outside of school to the table. Rev made a very similar contractual argument: "The teachers don't know you, care about you, recognize you. So why should you care about them or the work they want you to do?"

The boys wanted to be appreciated and known as individuals, and they were cynical in general about the teachers' desire to know or deal with them as individuals. Wolf provides a representative example

Michael: You sort of have an adversarial relationship to school.
Wolf: Yeah. I really don't like it. I don't like it only because I think for the most part, at this level anyway, it wants to make you into part of the collective.
Michael: Tell me what you mean by that.
Wolf: Ah, teachers don't want an individualistic child; they don't want that one kid that has got all of the energy, that is always hyper, that is a real individual. They want everybody to be in a seat listening to what they say so that they don't have any problems, no worries, no troubles. They want a collective. They want everybody to be that one model student that just sits there, asks the right questions at the right time, things like that.

Jigg advised teachers, "If you want me to learn from you, then be friendly, relate to me as a person, help me." Echoing the theme of needing assistance, Marcel said it is a teacher's responsibility to help him. Though he resists school, he said he would learn from a thinking, committed, and action-oriented teacher.

Neil described his favorite teacher as one who

> teaches and, you know, kind of gets with each individual student if he needs it and explains things over and over until you kind of get it. And it is a very helpful environment.

He further argued that this "good" teacher only gives the homework "you need, to freshen things up" and does not give busywork, as she recognizes the difficulty and busyness of the students' lives. Busywork was mentioned by twenty-four of the boys in connection with school, and they described it with disdain as a form of disrespect to them and their lives.

When teachers or other adults did express interest in students and their lives, the students responded with tremendously positive emotion. The boys in the rural public school, for example, loved their principal, as Timmy said, "because he knows your name and what you do. And he's happy for you if you do something good. He knows about it and he mentions it." One teacher was embraced by the boys in her school because she gave them birthday cards on their birthdays and attended their sporting and artistic events. Mark worked in the library of his school because he liked the librarian. Larry signed up to work on the literary magazine and Junior Exhibition because he liked the teacher coordinating it.

All of the boys in the private school spoke of their relationships with teachers there as a primary reason they valued the school. Liam made this clear to Jeff:

Jeff: OK. Now you mentioned the teachers, what's so special about the teachers here?
Liam: That they are willing to take the time to get to know you, ah, if you have a problem then you can always come to them. Gradually you get to know those people and you start to like them a lot. I know Mr. _____ is one of my favorite teachers, not necessarily as a teacher but as a person. I think that I have gotten to know him and he's gotten to know me this past year, and it has been important to me.
Jeff: Do you think that it is different at other schools?
Liam: Yeah. I know teachers still want to help, but they are not given the environment to help; they may have thirty students to a class. And it is much harder to deal with the student on an individual basis.

Liam went on to praise his school's class trips, community projects, mentor-mentee program, and other endeavors that he thinks helps teachers and students know and support each other:

> So all that encourages community and helping others so that you come to someone and say, "Hey, you are kind of slipping up in class; do you need any help with anything?"

Ricardo, also a student at the private school, repeated this idea:

> Teachers are supposed to care about you as an individual here. School here is about the whole person, not just Ricardo the math student or whatever.

Activities as Assistance

While most of the boys sought some kind of relationship with their teachers as a precondition for their learning, they also identified other features of learning activities and environments that would help teachers build upon those relationships. The most enjoyable and powerful form of assistance and support for reading that the boys identified were activities that involved active, participatory, hands-on response to the reading.

Jeff personally observed a striking contrast between a classroom that was not engaging students in activity and one that was. First, he observed one

ninth-grade class in which some of our boys were reading *Twelfth Night*. The teacher assigned several scenes each night and spent the next class period valiantly reviewing and helping the kids understand the assigned scenes. It became apparent to Jeff that none of the boys were doing the reading, and he confirmed this by asking the boys.

The boys revealed that they knew they could "get by" without doing the reading because the teacher was going to tell them the next day what the assigned scenes were about. Buda complained, "It's in a foreign language anyway! . . . It's too hard." The boys all agreed that they wanted to do well in the class, but they were unwilling to read the text. They had many strategies for "getting by," including asking questions of the teacher that showed confusion early in the class period; articulating expressions like "Oh, I get it now!" when the teacher explained something; thanking the teacher profusely; renting video versions of the text; reading Cliff's Notes; asking girls in the class for help; and so on. Jamaal shared a list of "get by strategies" that he kept along with his Cliff's Notes and Monarch Notes. When Jeff suggested that Jamaal was spending more energy on getting by then on actually reading, he just laughed.

This theme of getting by was obvious in many other situations as well. Lax professed to avoid reading in any situation where he could. Jeff and Yuri had an extended exchange about getting by:

> Jeff: You say that you really BS your way through school. Man, I am seeing and hearing this almost every day.
>
> Yuri: Yeah, just fix the teachers some BS. Everyone does it. I mean, there is, like, not one person in this school who does their reading. Even the kids that get 4.0 GPA, they BS.
>
> Jeff: Um, um.
>
> Yuri: My BS just isn't that good so I don't have a 4.0.

After Jeff observed the unified front of twelve boys who refused to read *Twelfth Night* but found ways to succeed in class nonetheless, he then observed a class from the same school reading *Romeo and Juliet*. In that class, everyone was obviously reading and enjoying the play. The students were performing various scenes, and they were also involved as "documentary producers," inquiring into issues like "family feuds," "the historical basis of *Romeo and Juliet*," "rules of dueling," and many other topics that came up during their reading of the play. They used digital video cameras to make and then edit scenes that were knitted together in an iMovie called *Looking for Romeo and Juliet*, based on the *Looking for Richard* movie with Al Pacino.

The experience in this second class indicates that even difficult texts can be made accessible by instruction. In fact, thirty-six of the boys indicated that when teachers created contexts that allowed them to pursue active responses and projects, they felt better able to meet the challenge provided by their reading.

The boys' favorite kind of assistance was various forms of dramatic activity, something that was mentioned as helpful by over half the boys. The most cited drama activity consisted of reenacting various scenes from the reading so that these could be shared, discussed, and reviewed. Another common kind of drama activity was trials of characters like Hamlet, Macbeth, Tom Sawyer, and others. Huey particularly lauded the trial project of Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, maintaining that he learned a lot not only about the play, but "about different legal systems and the courts."

Unfortunately, however, the boys seldom engaged in this kind of dramatic activity. In some ways this is understandable, for performing such elaborate dramas requires a good deal of instructional time. Given the boy's interest in drama, however, it seems that exploring other dramatic alternatives would make sense. For example, some of the boys talked about how much they enjoyed doing in-role writing, in which they wrote from the perspective of a character. Pablo talked about how much he enjoyed "hotseating," taking on the persona of a character and being interviewed by his classmates. Dramatic activities that are scriptless and short have the potential to involve more boys more regularly in drama. (See Wilhelm and Edmiston, 1998, for a discussion of a variety of alternatives.)

The boys' endorsement of teaching through activity matches Vygotskian and neo-Vygotskian notions of instruction, especially Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The assistance that is necessary to learning in the ZPD allows the learner to appropriate the problem-solving language and strategies of the more expert person who is lending the learner assistance. When the expert's knowledge has been internalized and used by the learner, then competence is visibly enhanced.

This idea of learning only when challenged to go just beyond current abilities also nicely matches Csikszentmihalyi's (1990a) ideas about flow and is reminiscent of Robert Browning's "A man's reach should exceed his grasp / or what's a heaven for?" Csikszentmihalyi (1990b) argues that "one of the most important tasks for a teacher is to make sure that students are neither too overwhelmed nor too bored by the material they must master" (p. 134). Our data challenge us to think about various ways to assist students. This might involve using drama, visual art, debates, and design projects, as well as

techniques such as think-alouds, symbolic story representation, and assignment sequences. These techniques make expert strategies visible and available to students in the context of real reading, and they help students practice and master these strategies over time.

Purpose

For the boys in our study, home literacy always had a clear and immediate purpose, whether it was to enjoy themselves with friends, find out about the latest dirt bikes or movie releases, or use a chat room to explore religious ideas. School literacy often did not have this obvious and pointed kind of purpose, but when it did, the effects could be powerful. Haywood, for instance, talked about how his Spanish teacher focused on speaking and communicating in Spanish and on the many ways this would be useful in travel, business, and a future in which many Americans will be Spanish-speaking. Haywood discussed the struggle to learn Spanish, but he also noted how satisfying it was when he could finally converse and use it: "It is good to learn and once I learn, you know it is kinda fun." Having a purpose aids the struggle; using your developed competence is the reward.

More than that, purposefulness seemed to be part of competence. As Joe expressed, "People who know what they are doing know WHY they are doing it."

Problem-Oriented Work

The boys' desire to have a clear purpose for their literate activity was manifested in the way they pursued problem-centered work. Wolf, for example, described to Michael how his nonschool reading agenda was organized around problems or questions:

> Wolf: I just like to know stuff. If I don't know something, I will just sit there and listen to people and just kind of ask a lot of questions, I mean, I just look at little kids and they ask questions like, "Why is the sky blue?" and then some parent will just sit there like "eerrrwww." I try to ask questions like that, just real simple questions that some little kid would ask, that seem idiotic, they're so simple, but they have complex answers. I like to ask questions like that, especially if I don't know anything. I like to go from know nothing to having a base from which to work from. Because you don't know anything, you don't even know where to start, that's the problem.
>
> Michael: Once you have the base, do you then do the work? Do you see what I'm saying?
>
> Wolf: Once I have a base, I go out and I try to get some information. Especially if I like it. If I don't like it so much, I'm not too worried about it. I'll ask a lot of questions, and maybe I'll read the pamphlets or something if they have them, but if I really like it, I'll just try to get as much information as I can.
>
> Michael: Give me the last time you really liked something and went out and got that information.
>
> Wolf: Well, I liked the medieval events and stuff, so I got a lot of information on that the last time.

Wolf continued to discuss how he attends Renaissance fairs with his girlfriend and how doing so posed a problem to him. He wanted to know how he should dress, act, speak, and interact as a person living during the Renaissance. Notice too how Wolf likes to learn about something he already knows a little about and will learn about something in great depth if it grabs his attention, dropping it altogether if it does not.

Wolf was one of the committed readers in our study. As we have noted, Mick was not. Yet he too was willing to read to solve a problem, especially if it related to making or building cars.

Many of the boys expressed a willingness to read to inquire into an issue that would lead to designing a visible product that could be shared or used. For example, the boys were happy to read for school projects such as making video or hypermedia documentaries, completing a bridge-building project, doing a zoo project, creating dramas, preparing public presentations or exhibitions, and even doing I-Search papers in a history class.

The intense enthusiasm the boys expressed for these projects was as notable as the dearth of such projects. The boys were grateful for such activities but saw them as anomalies. They considered participating in such projects "good luck" and did not expect school to offer more such activities. Outside of school, however, they were always in situations in which they were using, applying, or making something that required literate knowledge and competence: playing video games, using the Internet, fixing a dirt bike, discussing issues they had learned about with friends.

Self-Expression

The boys were generally much more willing to put in the effort needed to gain competence when they had the chance to express themselves in ways that marked their identity. Maurice, for example, spoke about his graphic artwork: "You have to put your personal stamp on your work. You don't do it like everybody else. Have your own way."

The emphasis on expressing themselves also informed the boys' enjoyment of their discussion with friends. Ricardo loved to watch movies with friends so they could critique and express opinions about them. He said, "After a movie I definitely, like if I'm with somebody, I definitely discuss parts of it with them, usually, like, on the way home, the drive home, it's usually like, talk time." This talk time provided a chance to "vent" their opinions.

The important of self-expression extended to in-school discussions as well, as Neil told Michael:

Neil: With Algebra and German II we take a lot of notes on those classes because they are basically the ones that don't harvest from your mind. It is not stuff that ah, you produce. It is stuff that you have to learn and then repeat back to them, so it is really two different types of learning.

Michael: So in English you do the harvesting. I love that metaphor. And then in the other ones you do—

Neil: You are taught it and you have to, just, kind of tell it back to them.

Johnny admired his English teacher and enjoyed the class:

> I like the way he teaches more than any other teacher. He likes to get our opinion on what we do in class. All my other teachers—they don't care what we say. They just do their own thing.

As a result, Johnny claimed he was more invested and willing to work in this class. He felt more control, competence, and respect in a class where he had a voice.

The desire to express themselves extended to assignments and tests. Sisqó, for example, enjoyed his world religion class because he was encouraged to compare and contrast different views and to make decisions for himself. Wolf enjoyed "Problems in History" questions because they allowed him some choice and the chance to express his opinion:

> We have the opinion type where they ask you something. They ask you, like, what do you think about it, and then we have one that we can go in the book to look for that answer, like it was a set answer already. [I like the opinion ones] because the opinion one, you got more options. You could put whatever you want, basically, whatever you feel is the answer as to what the question is.

Unfortunately, the chance to express an opinion was not something most of the students felt was encouraged by school. Yuri put it this way: "School is not a place where I can express my feelings or be myself. School is just something that can keep me away from doing that." Their perception jibes with the research of Nystrand and his colleagues (1997), who found that teachers ask very few questions for which they don't have specific answers in mind. Interestingly, the boys in the private school felt more encouraged to express themselves, something those students attributed to small class sizes, teacher-student relationships, an atmosphere of mutual respect, and an emphasis on educating the whole person.

Powerful Ideas and Depth

Understanding something of interest in great depth was another motivation to develop competence. Rudy, Neil, Buster, and several other boys all rejected computer research as being "too easy." As Rudy put it, "You can do the research, but you don't really understand it with any depth or anything." The importance of depth of learning resonated throughout the interviews. In fact, the boys as a group critiqued school learning as being superficial: a code related to their critique of "insufficient depth" was used for data from twenty-nine of the boys. These boys argued that school leaps from topic to topic, and that textbooks in particular do not provide the basis for the deep understanding that was important to a sense of competence and control. They indicated that in school they just went through and did unconnected assignments; at home they worked over time to develop very particular sets of understandings and skills that could be used in new situations.

In his discussion with Michael, Robert provided a specific example of the wider attitude:

Michael: Of all the reading that you do in school, what's your least favorite, would you say?

Robert: English.

Michael: And why is that?

Robert: Because after we finish reading, we just go on to something else. We go on to something else to do. Like, she'll give us some different work. After we read, we just close the book and do different work.

Michael: And you would rather do what?

Robert: Do work, like, responding to the story, like that.

Control

In Chapter 1 we quoted Csikszentmihalyi (1990a), who wrote that acquiring knowledge controlled from the outside brings no joy. Morimoto, Gregory, and Butler (1973) make a similar point:

> When change is advocated or demanded by another person, we feel threatened, defensive and perhaps rushed. We are then without the

> freedom and the time to understand and affirm the new learning as something desirable, and as something of our own choosing. Pressure to change, without an opportunity for exploration and choice, seldom results in experiences of joy and excitement in learning. (p. 255)

The reading logs made it clear that the boys wanted to control the knowledge they acquired. They wanted choice.

Choice and Interests

Throughout our study, it was clear that the boys wanted to do reading that fed preexisting interests. The data contained no direct statements that interests were developed through reading; instead, the boys felt that interests were developed before reading and then could be fed and nurtured through reading. This was one reason choice was so important to them.

As Greene (1988) maintains, exercising choice allows a person to "choose oneself" and consciously mark his or her identity. Robert, for example, chose himself through the magazines he subscribed to for free by filling out "special offer" coupons and then declining a paid subscription when the free issues ran out (at which point he would subscribe to other magazines). At the time of the study he subscribed to and read *Slam*, *Vibe*, *Source*, and *East Bay*, magazines that fed his interests in sports, music, and fashion.

Similarly, Ian chose himself in his hyper-studio project. He discussed this with Jeff:

> Jeff: What do you think that you will choose to research for this hyperstudio project?
>
> Ian: I'll do piano because I play the piano, or I might do football because I like football.
>
> Jeff: So you are going to learn more about something that you already know something about?
>
> Ian: Yeah.
>
> Jeff: OK. Great. Do you have questions about football or piano that you want to pursue?
>
> Ian: Not really, I mean, I just like to learn about stuff that, you know, I kinda like to learn a little more about. I already know something, so I want to know more.

When Jeff asked Ian if he had ever developed new interests through school activity or reading, he said no. This was true across the boys (with one notable exception that we will discuss later). Interests were brought to school, not developed in school. If we believe that school has a function in developing and nurturing interests, this is a problem that needs attention. We argue that schools do have such a function, particularly given the evidence here and elsewhere that shows how interests relate to and contribute as a resource for learning. (See, for example, Hidi's, 1990, review of research.)

Whitehead (1961) explains why interest is so important. He asserts that knowledge always begins with interest or what he calls *romance*; pursuing the romance deeply over time leads to *precision*; and precise knowing then leads to *generalization* because it helps one see how the area of interest is like, and unlike, related areas. Generalization, in turn, leads to new romances. Deeply cultivating student interests, according to Whitehead, is the necessary first step toward assisting them to becoming knowledgeable. However, devoting the time necessary to developing precision, generalization, and further romance is antithetical to American schooling's incessant push for the superficial coverage of information.

The desire for choice and the ability to pursue one's interests as an exercise of freedom and possibility was pervasive throughout our study. Ian, like many of the boys, championed the sense of control he got from playing video games and lamented the lack of control he had in school. Drake talked about the control he had working in his garage and how he never experienced this control or sense of competence in school.

In opposition to the boys' general disdain for the superficial way computers were used in school, the boys embraced the use of electronic technologies in their home literacies. Wolf loved using the computer at home, explaining, "It gives me the freedom to learn about what interests me." Ian echoed this, maintaining that "Writing on a computer gives more choice and control to me." Bodey too felt that computers gave him more "freedom and possibility" as a reader and writer, indicating that the hyperlinks on websites helped him see related topics he might be interested in pursuing and noting that he enjoyed exercising choice about whether to do so.

The boys almost universally felt that school denied them choice and control and therefore any sense of personal agency or competence. When Jeff asked two of his groups from the public schools for a metaphor for school, both groups agreed upon *prison*. When Jeff indicated that he thought their choice was cynical, he was met with scornful laughter. "Look," they told him, "from the minute you enter the front door until the minute you get off the bus, you are told exactly what to do. You have no freedom whatsoever."

Similarly, Lax argued that "being a man means controlling your choices." He said that school did not allow for that control: "School just forces you to do things." But like most of the boys, he saw no way to change school.

On those few occasions when they were allowed choice in school, the boys embraced it. Rudy was very pleased to be studying animals in science, saying "I like animals and know something about them" and appreciating the choice "about what animal to study."

It was true across the boys that even very limited forms of choice were greatly appreciated. Bob enjoyed the sense of freedom at the private school because he felt that he was exercising more choice, both inside and outside of class. Like Bob, the private school boys generally indicated that there was "lots of stuff you have to do"—course requirements, required extracurricular sports and arts credits, service projects, school trips, and so forth. However, Bob also indicated that "There's always a choice, so you can do the things you want, or that interest you the most." He explained this further to Jeff:

> Bob: We get to choose what we do in some classes. You can do stuff that interests you more, like in our geography project. You can choose a country you really want to go to, or that you know something about. But I think that they should let you choose your classes too but still have requirements, too.
>
> Jeff: Do you have more choice or less choice here than in public school?
>
> Bob: More. I mean, public school you have to walk in single-file line down the halls. Here you can just walk around outside. 'Cause I just like walking outdoors, I think that it is fun.

Bob later indicated that the private school was much less "like a prison" than his public school had been.

Several of the students articulated how school and the way they were asked to read and respond militated against choice and freedom. Gohan told us that though he was interested in health issues, reading the health text "ain't really my thing [because] the book is like commanding you to do things. It's good to do them, but it's like, 'You got to do this.'"

Yuri expressed the same sentiment. He resisted being told what to read and what to think, as if "I can't make up my own mind." Yuri saw school as denying all his choices, and that's why he spent so much time in role-playing games (RPGs) in multi-user domains (MUDs) on the Internet. "There's freedom to be different in MUDs. . . . You can think for yourself—try things out." Thinking for yourself, inquiring into interests, and experimenting with new ideas were things Yuri felt school actively discouraged. In contrast, his Internet friends and role-playing buddies constantly encouraged him to learn in these engaging ways.

We concluded final log interviews by asking students what advice they would give future English teachers. Aaron began by offering a suggestion made by many of the boys: "Choice would be a big part of it."

The Exception That Proves the Rule

Despite the fact that virtually all of the boys talked about how they developed their interests outside school, it was very striking that nearly all the boys at two of the schools professed an interest in history, but only two boys in the other two schools indicated such an interest.

In the first two schools, we were able to tie the boys' interest directly to particular teachers and school activities. This indicates that new interest, though rarely developed in school and never acknowledged by our boys, could be cultivated under particular conditions, even for an academic subject. In one of the schools, every boy who expressed interest in history to us had been taught by the same middle school social studies teacher, who was "crazy about history" and who connected it to the local culture and history of the town. Most of these boys also took an inquiry-driven history class in high school in which they did I-Search projects. Every boy who had this class designated it as his favorite high school class, explaining that it allowed and encouraged students to make choices and pursue interests, and to make personal presentations of projects based on their findings.

The other school was actually set on a national historic site, which may have contributed to the interest. Outdoor class trips were taken, such as a bicycle tour to follow the routes of the Confederate troops on the way to Gettysburg and to visit the battlefield. Students then read books like *The Killer Angels* that followed the characters through places the students had visited. The students at this school roundly lauded their history teachers, one of whom is a regular contributor to national newspapers and magazines. One student at the school confided to Jeff that "We do history here at XXX."

This finding is particularly powerful. It demonstrates that passionate teaching and creative activities can develop and nurture interests and expertise in school subjects. Although individual interest is crucially important, this example suggests that situational interest, which "focuses on how the learning environment can capture or create interest" also must be attended to (Worthy, Moorman, and Turner, 1999, p. 13).

We'll discuss this idea in greater depth later, but it's important to note that the history teachers cultivated an interest in history in part by making history personally relevant, by giving some measure of control over learning history

to the students, and by engaging them in meaningful social activity. The importance of competence and the importance of the social were two themes that resonated in the boys' discussion of their favorite activities. It seems that our participants could develop interests in new academic content if the context in which they encountered that content resembled the context in which they developed their out-of-school interests.

Our data lead us to argue that ignoring boys' prior interests and skills harms our ability to teach them. But we are going well beyond arguing that schools should simply cater to these interests. The history examples show that teachers can develop and nurture interests if they attend to the conditions of flow experience.

To summarize our argument in this section of the chapter, throughout the reading logs and the related interviews, the boys sang a hallelujah chorus to the doctrine of choice and pursuing interests. Many of the boys professed to realize through the course of this study that they defined reading differently and more widely than school defined it, and that they were doing much more reading and textual reflection than they had previously thought. Bringing students to such a realization can be an important step in helping students to name themselves as readers.

The findings around the themes of choice and interests challenge us to offer more choices to our students in terms of texts, assignments, and projects in our classrooms. They challenge us to negotiate curricula organized around topics, themes, and problems of interest to the kids in the here and now instead of around mandated historical periods or canonical texts. They encourage us to move to more workshop-like settings as students pursue and design usable artifacts around projects of interest. At the same time, as will be seen in the next section, we will have to be careful to keep the challenge appropriate and to continually "up the ante," providing additional challenges as earlier ones are met and to explicitly offer our expertise during this process.

On the strength of these data, we'd argue that reading can be usefully embedded in and proceed from an activity with which the kids already feel comfortable. This is particularly important for resistant and reluctant readers. For these kids, reading about hunting or four wheelers is not reading *qua* reading, but rather an extension of their interest in hunting or four wheelers. But again, even more important is that the conditions of flow experience are part of the reading situation.

According to our boys, school is so defined, regular, and routinized that kids are starved for choice and a sense of personal agency. When Pressley, Schuder, and Bergman (1992) reviewed the cumulative findings regarding seven years of trying to implement strategy-oriented instruction into classrooms, they cited "control" as the biggest challenge. They argued that the success of strategy instruction requires that teachers let go of old patterns of traditional instruction, most significantly that they relinquish some of their control in order to support the growth of self-regulated, autonomous readers. Exclusive teacher control, they argue, works against student learning. A measure of student control works for student learning. Teachers need to see themselves as teachers of strategies that help students independently engage with content, and of processes—not teachers of the content itself.

However, choice can be complicated. Newkirk (2001) reminds us that simply telling students they have a choice may not work if the structures of the classroom communicate that only particular kinds of choices are valued.

As we argued in the last chapter, despite the boys' consistent criticism of the lack of choices available in school, they nonetheless believed in the importance of school. This means that teachers have much less of an obstacle facing them as they might have believed as they try to reach boys. If teachers can tap in to existing student interests, tap the conditions of flow to develop and sustain new ones, and show students the connection of learning to their lives, the data here suggest that even resistant students can become engaged learners.

A Challenge That Requires an Appropriate Level of Skill

One way to tap the conditions of flow is to provide appropriate challenges. For example, Robert spoke about the competence and satisfaction he felt and the control he held when writing raps in a way that he did not speak about school activity:

> I wrote a rap. I think it was yesterday, the day before yesterday. I wrote a rap because my cousin said he wanted to hear a little something from me because he got a singing group and he got a album coming out and stuff like that. He just wanted to hear a little something. He asked me can I rap. I was like, "Yeah, I can. I can write stuff." It's not really hard. But before you start off writing, you got to really think, like think how to start off. You just can't start off any different kind of way. It's like a certain way you got to put everything, like, in different orders. Like, you got to have one verse. You got to have a certain amount of lines.

Robert made it clear that having an appropriate level of challenge is important. Writing a rap provides a challenge, but it's a challenge he can meet.

The boys' desire for a learning/reading challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill echoes the findings about other activities stated in Chapter

2. It also builds on the insights offered in this chapter about their attitudes toward competence and control and how challenges are more attractive if related to preexisting interests.

We found it especially interesting that so many of the boys talked about their school experience as being insufficiently challenging. Twenty-nine of the boys mentioned that they thought their teachers expected too little of them. Here's Brandon, speaking with Jeff:

> Brandon: My feeling is we go way too slow. We have a lot of people at different levels, so I end up getting bored in that class and don't pay much attention.
>
> Jeff: So you want to move; you want a challenge.
>
> Brandon: I don't want a huge challenge, something that's impossible and keeps me up at night, but I want something that's faster than what we're doing right now and gives a challenge.

Wolf made a similar point. After describing how his psychology teacher made assignments easier and summarized texts for students instead of asking them to read, Wolf described the work he was asked to do as "mind numbing." Yet at the same time, he was enthusiastically reading a tome entitled *Evil*, a complex psychological study of the roots of evil, on his own.

The boys commented often about the lack of stimulating and challenging class work. Some, like Marcel, went so far as to say that work that was too easy led to failure:

> I don't know why I am just slacking off but my worse subject I am messing up in is Spanish. I am slacking it because, I don't know. I find it is not challenging enough, that is the thing, and if I am not challenged, you know, especially with something that I know. If I am not challenged, then I am going to get bored real quick. I am going to get bored real quick and then I am going to be like, I already learned this like in . . . When I was one years old my father already taught me all of this stuff, you know.

Marcel's failing Spanish was especially striking because he spoke Spanish at home.

On the one hand, many of them complained that their schoolwork was teaching them what they already knew. On the other hand, we sometimes also heard complaints when work was too challenging. But when the boys perceived a challenge as appropriate and interesting, they enjoyed taking it on.

Liam, for example, described the best reading experiences as game-like challenges, when "reading is a mental sport" for which he knows the rules and moves. Pablo liked texts that posed a human problem or an issue to figure out. He reported that on a trip to New York City, he "really enjoyed *Miss Saigon* [the Broadway musical] because it gives you a problem to figure out. A challenge to meet."

But often the boys didn't feel they could meet the challenges posed by school, and so they avoided them. This feeling was rooted in a number of more specific concerns, including ambiguity, length, style, and unfamiliarity.

Ambiguity

Maurice was among the boys who disliked the ambiguity of tasks in English that made it difficult for him to know if he had achieved success. Here's part of his conversation with Michael:

> Maurice: Yeah, I'm good in math. I like math a lot. That is a challenge, but sometimes, with word problems, I can't stand them. We had this problem in math called the coin problem. Oh, man! He put it on the board one day. We'll get it out, and I'd be close. I'd be like this much from the answer or one step away, and then the next day he'll have another one on the board so I'll think about using the procedure from yesterday to get the answer and it would be different. It would be totally way off. I like the challenge of them, but they're real hard though.
>
> Michael: You're smiling. You were liking the challenge in math class, but your creative writing class, you weren't liking that challenge so much. You know what I'm saying? I'm sort of interested in how they're different.
>
> Maurice: Because with math, it's like numbers and money involved, and you can look at the example and learn how to figure it out. It's a different way to do both things, to do math and creative writing. With poetry, you're reading someone's poem. You don't know how they feel. You're just reading their words, but they can mean something else.

Like Maurice, the boys welcomed challenges they could meet, especially when they felt they could monitor their success.

Length

This was an issue articulated by more than half of the boys, particularly the poorer readers. When we gave them the stories on which we asked them to do think-aloud protocols (data we'll address next chapter), most of them flipped through to see how many pages the stories were. Many made faces and commented on length before they made any attempt to see what the stories would be about. In fact, thirty of the boys complained that reading took

too much of their time, and an additional ten complained that they did not have enough time to read what was assigned in school.

Most of the boys, in contrast, enjoyed reading short pieces. Jamaal said he "loved cartoons. They are short, to the point, and funny." Brandon read *Newsweek* because "the articles are short and you can get informed quickly." He would sometimes read a news magazine instead of doing school reading. Marcel professed to love poetry because "it is short and to the point. No messing around." Bodey said that he only read "in short bursts. Five minutes at a time. That's all the time I can sit there." Reading short, to-the-point pieces kept their attention and gave them a quick sense of accomplishment. In contrast, many of the boys saw the longer texts required in school as beyond them.

Style

Boys also had difficulty with the style of some of what they were asked to read in school, especially if they found the language too old-fashioned or too descriptive. Brandon, for example, complained that he often had problems with "the writing style that it's in. It's kind of hard to read; if it's not really modern English." Neil made a similar argument when he explained his problem reading *Cyrano de Bergerac*:

> It is kind of a lot different because the play was written in, like, the early nineteen hundreds and a lot of the things I don't think, were, as you know, right. Like humor. (Laughs.) I don't think that they all had it together with that. It was written in like, nineteen hundred, ten. Too dated. They didn't have it together around then.

Lax, like the majority of the boys, addressed the issue of what he saw as too much description. He wanted writing "to get to the action and the point." For this reason, he liked "plays . . . I just read what people say. There's no description and you get right to the point."

Fourteen of the boys overtly articulated that they rejected the texture of some texts, including Timmy, who told Jeff, "He should just say it, man!" when he talked about an author he felt used too much description. In contrast, home reading was usually short, to the point, and written in an accessible style. Home reading did not feature the texture and stylized descriptions of the school texts that sometimes frustrated our boys.

Unfamiliarity

The issue of unfamiliarity was raised in two different ways. Twelve students identified problems when they encountered new text structures. For example, Buda had difficulty with plays when his class began to read *Twelfth Night*. He claimed that he did not know how to read the way it was written, which caused "massive confusion." In fact, Esslin (1987) explains how scripts make use of twelve conventions that other texts do not use, and Buda's descriptions made it clear that he did not know the interpretive operations needed to make sense of the conventions dramas employ. Guy also complained about reading scripts.

Haywood had a similar complaint about Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, a text that could not be read "like a story. You have to read it in a different kind of way." As well, several middle school boys complained about the difficulty of reading their textbooks. The textbooks were less storied and much more dense than what the boys had read in elementary school, and they didn't have the appropriate strategies for dealing with them.

The boys also felt overmatched if the ideas in texts were beyond their experience. For instance, Sisqó complained that the worst thing he had read all year was the *Power of Myth*:

> I didn't really understand that too much. It was kind of too philosophical, I guess. Kind of deep and I did not really understand that.

On the other hand, they approved of texts that were appropriately challenging. Marcel maintained that good texts "fit the kids' level." Lax agreed that a book should "Give you something to chew on. Be tough, but not too much."

If we don't provide an appropriate level of challenge, they'll take it upon themselves, for we found that boys who did not feel challenged by school often made up their own challenges. Jamaal is one example. He engaged in various forms of passive resistance so that "school would have some kind of challenge." Every day in English he would put the overhead out of focus while the teacher was in the hallway. He successfully did so for more than thirty straight school days, irritating the teacher each day without being caught. It provided him with "a reason to come to school." Similarly, in science lab, another boy hooked bunsen burners to water spigots. He told us that when lab participants turned the spigot, the water would spray out of the burner, which would "dance around on the table tops. The girls would scream and everything!"

Stan was another boy who resisted school and experienced some difficulties there. In fact, he was told us he repeating English class because "I just didn't do the work," despite the fact that he was one of only seven highly engaged readers in our study. Though he avoided much of his schoolwork, he spent quite a long time planning how to "streak" across the football field during one

halftime. He successfully did this and was able to escape in a getaway car. Though he was later arrested, he cited this shenanigan as

> the highlight of my high school career. . . . It was a challenge, it was fun, and I did it. And I made a name for myself. Everyone still talks about it. It will be something everybody in my class will remember when they remember high school.

His prank served as an identity marker for him, one that he was confident would work for him well into the future.

Some of the boys even devised ways to make their reading and viewing more challenging by bringing in the element of competition. Ricardo creatively set up bets on outcomes of books and set up a big pool on the outcomes of Smackdown and Wrestlemania competitions.

The boys in our study needed a challenge. If they didn't find it in traditional school activity, they sometimes found it elsewhere. Their remarks also point to the next theme we'll address, the desire to see visible signs of their accomplishment.

Clear Goals and Feedback

Csikszentmihalyi (1990b) argues that a major problem with the educational system is that "To many children, even if they are dimly aware of the long term goals of education, the purpose of specific drills and lessons remains opaque" (p. 135). The boys' discussion of this issue resounded in our data. Mike complained, "Sometimes I don't understand what I am supposed to do. I just go for a try." Brandon complained that he often didn't understand "the assignment, the purpose, the criteria—nothing! And you still have to try to do it!" More than twenty of the boys made such complaints and contended that the absence of clear goals and feedback interfered with their motivation and homework completion.

The boys in our study wanted to understand the value of the work they were asked to do—and all too often they did not. Robert, for example, contrasted the reading and writing he was asked to do in English to the reading and writing he was asked to do in his health class.

> In English class, we mainly read about stuff like literature, reading over paragraphs and different stuff. We write paragraphs. Like, it would be a paragraph in the book with incorrect punctuation and stuff like that, and we'll have to read over it and make the right corrections. [But] in my other classes, like health class, we read about stuff like AIDS and how AIDS is passed on. Young teens and sex. Drug abuse. Stuff like that.

Robert clearly understood the value of what he was asked to do in health class because of the clear connection to his life. Without such a clear connection, he was baffled by why he was asked to do what he was asked to do.

Rev was even more outspoken in a statement that recalls the taunts of Baca's cell mates when he determined he was going to learn to read and write:

> English is about NOTHING! It doesn't help you DO anything. English is about reading poems and telling about rhythm. It's about commas and crap like that for God's sake. What does that have to DO with DOING anything? It's about NOTHING!

In response to follow-up questions to this passionate comment, Rev explained that he did not think English was about anything important or substantive, personally relevant, or socially significant. Why then, he wondered, did he have to do it?

Many students perceived the readings they were asked to do and the assignments associated with them as purposeless and contrived. "Busywork" was a term or concept used by twenty-four of the boys to describe school assignments, particularly in English. Neil, for example, described the uselessness of a summary assignment:

> It was a paragraph, and imagine trying to describe a movie in a paragraph. And at the same time keeping to the vocabulary of the chapter and what you are studying, like relative pronouns.

Neil described most school assignments as "contrived." Similarly, when asked about the purpose of different reading assignments, Lax professed not to know. Then he said they we are "mostly purposeless, I guess."

Jeff asked Brandon about a Shakespeare assignment few students were completing:

> Jeff: Why do you have to do it? Why do schools make you do it, if everybody's frustrated, and nobody gets it?
>
> Brandon: I really—there's really no answer to that question I can think of right now. They have us do it, but I really have no idea, but they're obviously doing it for a reason; I'm not going to just sit here with a grudge and not do it.
>
> Jeff: So you think there's a reason, but you don't know what it is.
>
> Brandon: I'm sure there has to be a reason because literally, like every school in the area, across the United States is reading Shakespeare. I don't know, he's one of the best classical writers I guess, there ever was, so it doesn't matter if I understand it. I just have to do it.

Most of the boys equated the purpose of assignments with getting a grade. If no grade was awarded, then they saw no purpose in completing the assignment since there was no other relevancy for them. There was no intrinsic value placed on the learning that might occur; in fact, this was rarely if ever mentioned. Even more nefarious, perhaps, is that the boys had no sense of their own critical standards. When asked how well they had understood a text, or how well they had done on an assignment, they almost always replied with their grade on the test, or said, like Buda, "I don't know. I didn't get my grade yet."

The reading the boys enjoyed—most of it outside of school though some inside it—always had a purpose. The boys talked about a variety of purposes or goals that informed the literate activity they enjoyed.

Getting Information/Figuring Out What Happens

The boys liked attending critically to texts in order to figure things out. Johnny, for example, maintained that "the biggest challenge is always to figure things out." He explained to Michael that he loved the movie *Sixth Sense* because he enjoyed the puzzle of figuring out the mystery and the satisfaction of "getting it":

> Johnny: Well, when you get in the movie everybody thought that Mr. Willis is still alive and then at the end he was actually dead. And, like, through the whole movie I was sitting there wondering like, "Whoa, is this guy really alive?" I was starting to catch on and it was a great movie. I love that movie.
>
> Michael: I need to know—tell me more about why?
>
> Johnny: Yeah, the mystery part to it and, like, how it just at the end it was like a big shock, and I love movies like that. The shock at the end of finding out. I hate movies that end and make you want more, like OK, where is the rest of the movie at, and that movie just, it ended right there. It was like the perfect place to end the movie. Most of the time that you go to a movie, they end and you think, can there be a sequel to the movie.

Similarly, Bob told Jeff that he likes

> not knowing and then to know. It's exciting to find out. Because you watch the whole play and you get nothing out of it, don't know what happened, then there is no point to it.

Johnny and Bob enjoyed texts that allowed them to figure things out and that had a definite conclusion. Both they and others voiced their displeasure when texts thwarted that desire. Neil, for example, complained about the movie *Magnolia* because it does not come to a satisfying conclusion. He maintained that the way the movie ended "was pointless." A number of boys complained that the texts they read in school similarly lacked a satisfying conclusion and a clear point.

Classic research on response to literature by Squires (1964) bemoans adolescents' intolerance for ambiguity. Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) helps us understand the source of that intolerance. Figuring something out is a clear goal. And once something has clicked into place, a reader or viewer gets the pleasure of immediate feedback. Ambiguous texts don't offer the same rewards.

Interestingly, the boys in general were willing to learn new strategies that could be used in immediate service for figuring something out, doing, or making something. When they had a need to know something to help them figure something out, they were open and ready to learn, quite a different stance from the resistance we often observed and heard them talk about.

For example, Mark talked about reading *Romeo and Juliet* like a mystery, to find out what would happen. He was satisfied when he understood the story. He described reading it like putting together a puzzle—it was satisfying when the picture came together and he "knew what happened." This was an exception for Mark, who claimed that most assignments in English were ambiguous. "You can't really study for it [English] because it's usually not clear what you have to know or do." This ambiguity of purpose deeply troubled him.

Immediate Function: Fixing Things and Making Things

Many of the boys read to fix things or to figure out how things work. Jeff had the following conversation with Rudy:

> Jeff: [You] spent about thirty minutes reading a calculator manual and computing. Is that something typically that you would do, to read a manual and then do something based on the directions?
>
> Rudy: If I can't figure it out I'll read the instructions, like to a board game or video game. I'll try and figure out all of the controls, but if there is other stuff that I can't figure out, I'll look at the manual.
>
> Jeff: So you first try and do it on your own?
>
> R: Yeah, but if I have any trouble, I'll read about it. I tried to do that in math class to make a program, and I couldn't figure out some of the stuff, so I looked it up in the manual.
>
> Jeff: Great. Now are there other things that you read manuals for, too?
>
> Rudy: Ah, mainly games, maybe like construction like models, building models, folding paper airplanes, stuff like that.

Many other students also used manuals, particularly to figure out video games. The "players" frequently went on to the Internet to "steal code" that could help enhance their ability to play the games.

Bob described in great detail to Jeff a bridge-building project he did. He explained that the realism of the project gave him a clear purpose. And because he was making something that would be used, there was clear feedback provided by the environment. It was also important to him that he was building something:

> Bob: Ah, it was just fun. It felt like we were ah, taking off class time to just like, it was fun. It was like you weren't in school.
> Jeff: Was it because it seemed real? Because you said it a couple of times?
> Bob: Yeah, it was really realistic. . . . Not like school.

Aaron made a similar point. He described to Michael his disengagement with English, but then he described how he was working on a hydraulics problem that interested him, and how he sought out and read very difficult technical information to try to figure out and solve the problem:

> Michael: When you were confronted with the whole hydraulics problem, you read a text that you really didn't understand in order to try to figure it out. It's like you weren't content with not knowing it. You know what I mean? This one [assignment in English], you seem much more content [not to have figured it out or to have completed it]. And the same thing when you said, "I'm not taking the AP in English because I'm just not good at that kind of stuff." But you seemed much more content with that [not taking up the AP English challenge].
> Aaron: I guess it's easier for me to not know something that I don't really care to know. I'm sure it's good to know, but whether I feel at this time that it's immediately important or not makes it a lot less important to me whether or not I actually go and find out about it.

Making and designing things was a major theme that helped the boys set purposes. It made their reading, in Aaron's words, "immediately important." It also provided clear feedback. They could see what they made and whether it worked or not. It's not surprising, then, that the boys enjoyed things like making video or hypermedia documentaries (Joe, Bodey, and Ian); making bridges (all six boys in that project went on at length about it); building robots (Paul, Bodey); creating a zoo (every boy in this project talked about enjoying it); or making a formal community presentation (all six boys who were required to do this cited it as an important and engaging experience).

The Reality Principle

Figuring things out, fixing things, and making things all connected to the boys' desire for realism, a theme expressed by every one of the boys in the study. One major subtheme of realism was the importance of "getting information" about real events or situations the boys wanted to understand. Bambino, for example, insisted that he wanted to read about things that were "connected to the here and now." Pablo wanted emotional engagement when he read and maintained that "the real has more emotional punch."

Johnny was interested in the meteorology unit of his science class because it was real and immediate to him, but he was not interested in astronomy because it was distant from his immediate experience:

> I wanted to do that [meteorology] because, I mean, I want to know what the weather is like. When I look at the Weather Channel and think, do these people actually know what they are talking about? And I want to see, I can have a little bit of understanding of what they are talking about. So when I took astronomy, I knew that it was going to be boring 'cause I mean it, it's about thinking about the stars.

Johnny gave up on reading *Pale Horse* for the same reason. "I was understanding it, but like, I didn't believe it. I was just like, no, I can't read this anymore."

Maurice said he likes rap because "It's real. About reality." Marcel concurred:

> I mean, the rappers today—it is what they have experienced, it is what they have been through, you know. That is what is going on and stuff, and like, I guess that is what I like about rap mostly. It is what I see around me. It is what I have been ways around.

In contrast, Maurice refused to read more than the first two pages of de Maupassant's "The Necklace" because it wasn't about real issues; it was just dealing with these "rich people" whose concerns he did not share. For many of the boys, the sense that something is "real" requires that it relates to their lives.

Rudy reported that he liked *Into Thin Air* and *Hatchet* because they were both real, though he was fully cognizant that the first was nonfiction and the second fiction. He rejected the Harry Potter books, though, because they "couldn't happen." Several of boys rejected fantasy on these grounds.

This brings up the interesting point that the few aficionados of science fiction and fantasy books perceived "reality" in these books. Yuri vociferously maintained that the fantasy he read helped him deal with real situations,

people, and emotions, and that fantasy connected to his immediate life far more than the more realistic books he had to read in school. Fantasy, he explained, gives "freedom to deal with [real] issues" in more powerful ways than could be done realistically. Fantasy, for the aficionados, connected powerfully to their real-life concerns with emotions, relationships, problem solving, and so forth. They were able to use the fantasy books as tools to think about the real world.

When boys enjoyed more canonical texts, they did so for a similar reason. Aaron enjoyed *She Stoops to Conquer* because the characters and situations struck him as real, particularly the "smart aleck guy" who reminded him of himself. When asked to write a poem from the perspective of a character from *Death of a Salesman*, Mike chose Biff. He explained the reason to Michael:

> Mike: I chose him because he was like a real character. He seemed to me real.
> Michael: What parts about him?
> Mike: His attitudes. And the things that he did. Like he tried getting forgiveness from his mom. Like giving her flowers and stuff. And like the way that he always tried to ah, disagree, or contradict his father. He would try to persuade him, try to not do what he was told.

On the other hand, Mike rejected *The Chocolate War* as not being real, but "weird. . . . It doesn't seem real."

Liam maintained that

> using something you learned is important, instead of just taking a test and learning how to use grammar or something. [In my favorite English class] we would actually go into discussions about how to apply what we learned. We would start out with discussing a book but then we would gradually slip into things that were more relevant. How to use and apply what we learned. And if you did that you would have proof that you actually learned something.

Though the boys constructed their notions of reality differently, they all privileged what they considered to be the real and discounted what was not.

Geography often played into this mix. Two students told us that reading about their own locality or a place they knew about or had personally visited made reading seem real. Nine other boys indicated that they liked to read about geographical areas they knew or that were close to home. This made it easier for them to achieve the goal of seeing a personal connection, of seeing themselves as part of the story, or of being "in the scene." By far the most popular rapper in the urban school was a rapper who grew up in that city. The local community connection helped the boys affiliate with him.

Guy said he enjoyed *The Perfect Storm* because much of the setting occurred in places he had visited, which is also why he chose it. He explained, "I picked it because some of it took place in ah, around Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket. And I have been there, so it was good." Several of the boys from Maine mentioned *Lost on a Mountain in Maine* as a favorite. And the boys from the private school enjoyed reading about places they had experienced on their class trips, such as *The Killer Angels* and its connection to a Gettysburg trip, something the school overtly planned and capitalized on.

The reality principle was also manifested in the way the boys read the newspaper. They read with the purpose of finding stories of immediate personal relevance. They tended to pay attention to the local news and local items like sports or the police report, where they would find out what was going on in their own neighborhood and might see names of people they knew. Robert made this clear to Michael:

> Michael: Do you like local stories, national stories, world stories? What kind of stories as you're going forward attract you the most?
> Robert: Local, local stories.
> Michael: Tell me why.
> Robert: Like what happened around in the area. Because I'm a hard sleeper and they be saying there be a lot of shooting going on. But, I don't be hearing that. I'll wake up, "Did you hear that shooting last night?" I'll be like, "I didn't hear nothing." I look in the paper, and it said a man got robbed. He got shot in the head in close range with a 12-gauge bullet, blew his brains out.
> Michael: And that happened close to your house?
> Robert: Yeah. And another one happened close to my house. I think he got shot in the back twice, yeah.

Keeping Track

Keeping track of things was also a major purpose for reading. Ricardo read to keep track of the upcoming movie releases and reviews. Mike and others read to keep up with the music scene. Sisqó often neglected homework reading, but he would read several sports magazines, watch news, and watch sporting

events so that he could keep track. On one weekend during the NCAA tournament, he watched sixteen hours of basketball. Jeff asked him about his heavy dose of TV:

Jeff: Now is it typical that you would watch that much sports or was it just because it was the tournament?

Sisqó: Probably because it was the tournament. And it was kind of like important. I like to be informed. Like in homeroom or lunch the next day so that I can have something to talk about.

Huey, who claimed that he "hated reading" and that "reading makes me sad," nonetheless had several Internet sites that he read at least once weekly to keep up with favorite sports teams, including the Virginia Tech Hokies football team and the Baltimore Orioles. "You have to know what's going on," he explained. This keeping track connected clearly to the theme of exportability (more on that later), since keeping track allowed the boys to appear knowledgeable and to share what they knew with significant others who valued that knowledge.

Game-like Structures

As we have argued in Chapter 2, games, by their very design, provide both clear goals and immediate feedback. Game-like structures supported much of the boys' literate activity outside of school. Twenty-seven of the boys, for example, mentioned enjoying playing games on their own, particularly video games. These boys often read, especially on the Internet, to help them in their efforts. Robert talked about enjoying word puzzles that he did in the local newspaper in the mornings before he came to school. Most of the boys did some regular reading to help them pursue sporting or hobby interests.

But game-like structures helped for school learning too, though, as we note in Chapter 2, they are not sufficient in and of themselves to create flow experiences. Twenty-four of the boys talked about enjoying games that were played in class in service of learning or supporting reading. Haywood said that "Games let you act like an expert," and he enjoyed playing the role of novice expert in video games or classroom games. Bob identified Spanish as his most enjoyable class because of the games they played. He explained this to Jeff:

Bob: Ah, like we have all these things to learn, we take notes and we study them in class and then like play *Jeopardy!* or something with them.

Jeff: So it is games that help you learn?

Bob: Yeah.

Jeff: Kind of fun structures that you do?

Bob: Yeah. That's what helps make it happen. The kids go wild. It's a lot of fun.

Helping Others/Service

Surprisingly, the boys saw a major purpose of their literate lives as putting themselves in the position of helping others. Service was an overtly cultivated idea at the private school and one of the public schools, which was part of a "Community of Caring" network. Every one of the private school students mentioned service as a purpose for learning. They talked especially about their work tutoring inner-city children. Sisqó put it this way:

> You can really help them. It feels good. Help them read and write better. Do math. They need the help and you can help them.

Sometimes, a whole school group adopted a project. The private school's football team worked on an organic farm as a project. Though most of the work was physical, some literacy was involved in promoting the farm, keeping track of produce, and so on.

Robert, who was not a student in the two service-oriented schools, also saw literacy as a way to do public service:

> I wrote a little bit about it, like I try to stop people from selling drugs or doing drugs around my neighborhood. Stuff like that.

Function as Environmental Feedback

Many of the boys actively sought out contexts in which feedback was clear and immediate. Larry, for instance, loved to write songs and perform them in chemistry class:

> I just think that it is pretty awesome that kids can create music like we do so fast. We are pretty good; chemistry is kind of boring so we kind of talk to each other a lot. We kind of have this little group going. We write songs about chemistry just for the fun of it. We call each other "Boys with Noise." Sometimes we'll do our homework in rap or something. The other kids love it.

Larry's teacher allowed the boys to do homework in rap and devised assignments that encouraged the students to create and present artifacts

demonstrating their learning, such as writing newspaper articles about what happened when an element oxidized or was reduced. The boys were enthusiastic about the novelty of these assignments and the chance to perform and present what they had learned to their peers versus "just handing something in to the teacher."

Marcel was extraordinarily proud of a poem he wrote that was published in his town's newspaper. Deuce was proud of the raps he performed. Bob was proud of a country display he had made that was posted in the commons room of his school.

What This Makes Us Think About: Providing Assistance While Providing Control

The data presented in this chapter make us ask, "How can we provide the kind of assistance in becoming competent that the boys desired without taking too much control?" This is a question that is very important in literacy education, and we fear that many have answered, "You can't." At a recent conference, for example, we saw a major figure in the field argue for reading workshops in which students read texts of their own choosing without any teacher interference or assistance, precisely because she feared that any teacher intervention would lead to teacher control. In our view, many recent efforts to move away from teacher-dominated classrooms—a move we applaud—focus much more on eliciting students' responses than educating them.

But as much as the boys manifested a desire for choice and control, they also manifested a desire to be taught. And we think this teaching can take place in a way in which students feel more competent and more in control than they would if left to their own devices.

As we've stated, our belief is informed by Vygotksian notions of teaching and learning. We believe that learning only takes place when a teacher or a situation challenges what a learner already knows by addressing a misconception, building on what is known, or asking the learner to deepen or extend understanding and strategic activity in some way.

Both Vygotsky and Bakhtin (1984, 1986) highlight that learning is social and occurs in relationship. Like Vygotsky (1978), Bakhtin (1984, 1986) also argues that how we understand and act is always dependent on our past and present relationships with other people. Our consciousness is socially created. Bakhtin (1984) argues that we learn only in *dialogic* interactions through which we test and revise our perspectives as we converse with the perspectives of others: "To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth" (p. 293).

Much of what occurs in school, according to our boys, works against such dialogue and fits what Bakhtin calls *monologue*. For example, textbooks and curriculum present fixed meanings. As we've seen, discussions are usually recitations with preset answers. There is no chance for what Vygotsky calls *intersubjectivity* and Bakhtin calls *interillumination*, a process through which different points of view inform and illuminate each other in a person's consciousness. (See Edmiston, 1994; Wilhelm and Edmiston, 1998.)

While teaching as the presentation of information disallows students from such dialogues and therefore from voicing their own opinions and constructing their own understandings, other models of teaching show that this need not happen. For example, Tharp and Gallimore (1988) provide a model for breaking the frame of monologic thinking that parallels the process of reading. The process starts with a learner's personal experience and understanding, which must be activated and brought to bear (hence the importance of frontloading that we explored at the end of Chapter 3). The experience is then brought into dialogue with the challenge provided by a text or situation that offers a new perspective, and it continues to dialogue and negotiate with this perspective to build a new relationship or response that reworks the frame of our understanding. It is the teacher's job not to present information but to provide challenging contexts in which students can be confronted with new and more complex perspectives. It is then their job to help students gain the strategies for "reading" or understanding those new perspectives.

Vygotsky (1978) argues that when we dialogue we connect language with thought and feeling. He identified this as happening quite often during play, which he considered to be the most natural form of learning. This play-like quality of learning, in which language, thought, and feeling are connected, can describe what the boys exhibited in their out-of-school reading but rarely inside school. Bakhtin (1984) likewise argues that we are only conscious and alive when engaged in dialogue, but again we found that dialogue was rarely invited in school, even during discussions. (See Edmiston, 1994.)

This kind of sociocultural teaching focuses on the HOW—on ways of doing things and on developing procedural knowledge—rather than on the WHAT, which is known as declarative knowledge (often presented as monologue—as unquestioned facts). Vygotskian theory therefore emphasizes

activity and knowledge developed and used in activity, something that the boys in our study cried out for.

So how would this look in practice? Let's consider how this works in the case of video gaming, an activity embraced by many of the boys in our study, and the same source of inspiration that gave rise to some of the implications we discussed in Chapter 2. The boys exercised choice by selecting a game that interested them, and they set the difficulty at the appropriate level. They used what was learned at an earlier level and applied and built on this as they went to the next level. Often, friends provided assistance, helping each other to identify, understand, and use "cheat codes," which corresponded to the underlying conventions and structure of the game. This assistance occurred in the context of the game and was immediately used and applied to the task at hand. The game-like structures provided fun and a sense of clear goals and immediate feedback. As the boys improved, the challenge also increased, so the players were always operating just beyond their zone of actual development in ways that helped them improve, learn, and be able to do more.

How would a parallel to this engaging situation look in school? Since more global forms of curricular and instructional reform is the topic of our final chapter, we will address this question in more depth there. Here, we will discuss two ways that teachers might help students discover codes for reading that will help them become more competent and exert control.

Making Reading Visible

Just as friends and the Internet helped the boys see how they could more effectively play their video games, teachers can create classroom contexts that give students similar help in their reading. In a study of teacher talk during student reading, Mariage (1995) found that successful reading teachers understood their position as "a more knowledgeable other" whose role was to make their thinking and reading processes visible to students in order to support their students' efforts to comprehend and respond to text. Vygotskian instruction goes through a process of modeling (Show Me), of assistance in which expertise is gradually handed over to the student (Help Me), and then observation as the student independently uses the learned strategies in a meaningful context (Let Me).

The need to set appropriate challenges and to support the development of competence provides support for the work Jeff has done with students to make reading visible. Jeff has written extensively about using drama as one means of doing so (Wilhelm, 1997, 2001, forthcoming; Wilhelm and Edmiston, 1998), and the boys in this study spoke often of the way dramatic activities engaged them. It was perhaps the single instructional technique that was mentioned positively across the boys.

SRIs

To illustrate the importance of making reading visible, we'd like to turn instead to a technique that receives less attention: symbolic story representation. We'll use the letters SRI to label this technique as a way to differentiate it from sustained silent reading (SSR) (cf. Enciso, 1992). SRI is a technique that allows teachers to actively support particular ways of reading through the student creation and use of cutouts to dramatize not only what they are reading but how they are reading. (See Enciso, 1992; Wilhelm, 1997, 2001, forthcoming.) The cutouts (or found objects or pictures from magazines) stand for the characters, the setting, the reader, and particular moves that the reader takes to make particular kinds of meaning. Readers move the cutouts around to show where they have situated themselves, what they are doing, and how they are perceiving things at a particular point in the text.

SRIs are structured to make and highlight the student as the expert. When presenting an SRI, a student talks about his or her readerly activity, so the student is the world's only expert. The SRI requires students to explain the codes and conventions of the text. That is, in order to do an SRI, students have to understand the kind of details that are especially important in a particular kind of text, for example, the relationship between the physical setting and the emotional state of the characters in a Gothic piece or the stage directions in a play. They also have to name their skills and strategies as readers for dealing with these codes. Doing SRIs encourages students to see themselves as skilled and to understand how they are skilled, so they can transfer their strategies to new and more challenging situations.

The SRI addresses the need for competence and environmental assistance because it provides visible accomplishment, is a hands-on activity, and provides a way to talk about reading with others. It leads from reading to concrete function and performance, makes the invisible and abstract reading processes concrete, and sets new challenges by providing new strategies to try as students observe each other and borrow strategies. SRIs provide a safe forum for talk about emotions and personal response. The SRI also recognizes that students have many literacies, as it makes use of visual art, a kind of drama or puppetry, and often includes music or other arts. It brings together

ways of seeing, understanding, responding, and representing that cut across various sign systems.

SRIs can also be used to teach and support the use of new reading strategies. For example, the technique can be used to model how to pay attention to key details and infer a central focus or authorial generalization. The key details and central focus can be symbolized by cutouts that are used at appropriate times in the SRI performance as the reader explains how they were noticed and interpreted. This technique can be used for any convention of reading, such as noticing and interpreting symbols, understanding irony, recognizing and evaluating the aspects of argument, and so on. For example, one low-achieving student with whom Jeff worked used the technique to show how he was noticing key details and how they contributed to the central focus or theme of the story, "A Fisherman and His Wife." For instance, the student noticed how the color of the sea changed from light blue to dark blue to black over a series of scenes to show the wife's growing greediness. The student was amazed when Jeff told him that he was demonstrating a real understanding of symbolism, a mark of an expert reader. The students' SRI then provided the basis for a whole-class discussion of symbolism and how it appeared in the reading they had been doing. (See Wilhelm, forthcoming, for full explanations.)

Using think-alouds, drama, symbolic story representation and other techniques can allow students choices into ways of studying their own reading and that of others so that procedural knowledge is shared. When students make their reading visible, they can learn from and about each other. Such activities also make reading active and foreground the fact that reading is an active and transactional meaning-making pursuit that involves them, their backgrounds, their interests, their concerns, and their opinions. All of these are needs that resounded in our data, but that were rarely fulfilled by school reading activities.

Sharing Our Secrets

In Chapter 2 we told the story of Larry, the young man who had begun to see himself as a reader because his teacher had "been kinda showing me the road and the path." In the words of Margaret Meek, Larry's transformation suggests the power of "sharing the list of secret things that all accomplished readers know, yet never talk about" (cited in Thomson, 1987, p. 109). In contrast, we saw again and again in our data, boys who were not shown the road, who consequently felt lost, especially when they encountered new text types. We do not think that reading can be reduced to algorithms, but our research here does seem to support efforts to make as clear as possible what it is that readers do.

Michael, for example, has done considerable work with developing a theoretical rationale and practical applications for assignment sequences that teach students how to read particular kinds of texts (Rabinowitz and Smith, 1998; Smith, 1989, 1991b; Smith and Hamel, 1998).

Michael's work has focused on irony and stories with unreliable narrators. However, his ideas about identifying the "secrets" experienced readers know, and sharing them with students are applicable to other kinds of texts as well.

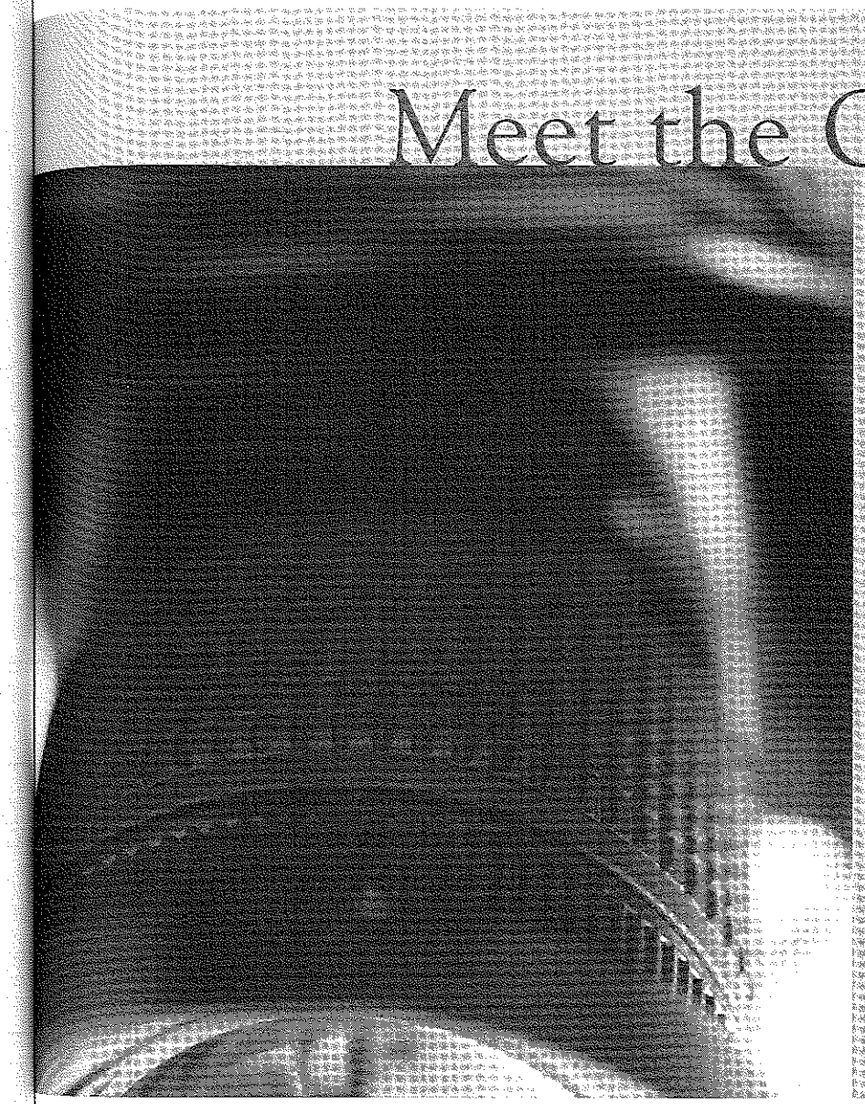
For example, as we noted in this chapter, a number of the boys complained about the difficulty they had reading plays. As experienced readers, we realize that plays are different from other texts in a variety of ways. One of the most significant is that dialogue is presented without the commentary of a narrator. That means that readers have to provide the commentary themselves. They have to understand the subtext that gives meaning to the words spoken. One way to help students understand and take on that role might be to show excerpts from Woody Allen's movie *Annie Hall*, in which the subtext of what characters are saying appears as subtitles. Students could then write their own captions for scenes in their favorite movies and share them with the class. Having been shown the path, they could then read a play or movie script on their own with a greater likelihood of success.

Both when students create and present their SRIs, and when they are learning to apply the reading codes that particular kinds of texts require of them, they are focusing on the HOW of reading. They are learning the rules of the game, the secrets that experienced readers know. They aren't silenced by a teacher's authoritative interpretation; rather, they are invited to apply their understandings of how to read in order to develop their own interpretations.

If we, as teachers, focused more on the how of reading, our students' experiences in school would more clearly resemble their experience out of school. We would help them develop their competence, which would in turn make them better able to meet the challenge of the texts we ask them to read. By making reading visible, we demystify it, and in so doing are able to provide students with clearer and more immediate feedback. We understand the impulse that drives teachers to focus more on particular readings than on ways

to read. We too have a stake in particular interpretations of favorite texts. But we think that stepping back from those interpretations, and helping students see how we came to them and how they come to their own understandings, is well worth the effort.

Meet the Crew



Bam

Wolf

Stan

Larry

Though most of the boys resisted school and school literacy in some ways, they all embraced literate activity in some form outside of school. Among the group, they did so quite differently and with different effects. Our portraits here are designed to provide some of the flavor of those differences.

Bam

Bam was an African American eleventh grader in the urban school. He was not an engaged reader, yet he had read *Of Mice and Men* over and over because his brother had given it to him. Bam had moved from Detroit to New Jersey and sometimes traveled back and forth to visit his family, who were very important to him. He was one of several students who wrote raps and poetry, but he did not write in school. He also wrote emails on an almost daily basis and felt that it was easier to express his emotions on the computer than in person. He maintained that he did "lots of writing" at home, but he said his teachers asked only for essays, which he did not consider "real writing" that dealt with real issues.

Though he loved pursuing personal research on the Internet, which he claimed he could not live without, when his English teacher tried to engage his cultural interest through a study of the Harlem Renaissance, he rejected this unit as disconnected to his life. When assigned to research the life story of Josephine Baker, he basically opted out because it did not match his preexisting interests. He wasn't a high achiever, but he kept a careful eye on his grades and planned to attend college and major in business.

We can't help but ask what would have happened if a teacher had engaged Bam's current interests with rap, his interest in humor and socializing, and his facility doing Internet searches, and had used these to develop situational interest in new topics.

Wolf

Wolf was a European American twelfth grader in the suburban school. He was in the average track, though we suspect that was more a function of his perfunctory engagement with school than with his ability. He was extremely cynical and funny about school routines, yet he was the only one of our participants who expressed a desire to be a teacher. Wolf loved history and was an avid reader of it. So was his father, and they often shared books. The passion that Wolf felt for reading only occasionally flashed in his classes. His enthusiasm for acting out *Hamlet* and for designing a coat of arms stood in stark contrast to his overt rejection of what he did on most days in most

classes. Sometimes he'd sit with his head on the desk. On occasion, instead of paying attention he'd write a story to show to his girlfriend and his best friend. Literacy was crucially important to Wolf. But school literacy seldom was.

When we think about Wolf, we wonder what kind of history teacher he will be. He knows his stuff. In fact, he told us that his history teacher often deferred to him to answer questions. We wonder whether he'll tell his students all that he knows or whether he'll engage them in the kind of project-oriented work he did when he investigated the Renaissance so he could join his girlfriend as a performer at Renaissance fairs.

Stan

Stan, a European American eleventh grader, was a very engaging young man who came promptly to all the interview sessions and was totally prepared. He even came to school when he was sick on two occasions when interviews were scheduled. He seemed to take great pleasure in sharing his life and literacy experiences, and in offering opinions on a wide variety of topics. He concluded each interview by giving Jeff a vigorous handshake and saying, "Thanks, man. I enjoyed it."

His enthusiasm for this project amazed his teachers and classmates, given Stan's reputation for missing a lot of school. In fact, he had failed English the previous year due to attendance and assignment completion problems and was currently taking two English classes to catch up.

Despite Stan's failure in English and his resistance to school as "not being a very mature environment," he believed that some classes "give you free rein" and therefore worked to "free your mind." He identified art and an inquiry-based history course as classes that helped him think for himself and exercise choice.

Though he disliked and did poorly in English, he loved reading about controversial issues. He had just completed reading a biography of Marilyn Manson, explaining, "I like him 'cause he won't conform. . . . He resists expectations." He professed to enjoy "conspiracy books . . . because they catch you off guard." He also enjoyed writing song lyrics for his band. He would quote song lyrics at length and apply them to discussions of politics, gender, and ethics. He was building a website for the band, too.

Stan loved the movie *The Matrix* for "its symbolic value" and discussed its construction at length. He claimed that a life goal was "to be aware and to be mentally developed."

We can't help wondering how a different kind of English curriculum would have engaged Stan and built on his interests in ideas, in texts, and in their construction. In fact, it was hard to believe that Stan was not engaged by English until we looked at the way in which it is usually taught—as the purveyance of information about artifacts instead of as an engagement with living documents that can be used to think about relevant ideas—the kind of engagement Stan sought outside of school.

Larry

Larry, a European American eleventh grader, had suffered from a lot of in- and out-of-school trouble. He had been arrested and had been having difficulty with his parents. But he said he had seen "the error of my ways" and had done his best to make amends. He felt that he was on the straight and narrow, and he was proud of this.

Larry played basketball on the varsity team. He had one very close male friend, and he dated a variety of girls. He had only recently bought into reading and schoolwork. He particularly enjoyed creative assignments where he could exercise his creativity and perform for the class. He felt that his relationship with a couple of teachers, particularly his English teacher, had helped him. He was gratified by her personal attention and by the fact that she suggested books she thought he would like, indicating the moral and political reasons why she thought the books would appeal to him. He was eager to read these books and excitedly talked about the connections he saw between them and his own life. One day, in fact, he excitedly rushed into the library to tell Jeff, "I've just seen *Cannery Row*! Cannery Row in action, man!" It turned out that he had witnessed a strike at the local bakery and had stopped to talk to the picketers, sharing insights from Steinbeck with them.

One of the rewards of his reading was using it to pursue a relationship with his teacher. Most important, he felt that his English teacher had "showed him the way," and had explicitly taught him the strategies he needed to be successful in reading the new kinds of challenging texts that she felt he would like.

Larry offers a challenge and a possibility to teachers. He was a student who resisted school and was outside the bounds of many cultural norms, but caring teachers who knew how to assist him to competence with reading and science brought him into the fold and allowed him to embrace school and literacy enthusiastically in a way he never had before.

In short, while there was much that the boys shared, in many ways they were quite different. But when we take them as a whole, we see that all of the boys were enthusiastic about literacy in at least some regard. Some of the most vocal critics of school were also among the most passionate proponents of features of texts that schools admire. Once again, our data seem to offer a harsh critique of schooling as we know it, but also the seeds of hope.