A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXAMINING THE LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF MALE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

Ari Raymond Colondres

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A qualitative study examining the literacy experiences of male middle school students inside and outside of school

By

Ari Raymond Colondres

A dissertation submitted to the

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In partial fulfillment of the

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University of the Pacific
Stockton, California

2023
A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXAMINING THE LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF MALE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXAMINING THE LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF MALE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

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By

Ari Raymond Colondres
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife and muse, Maya. We met as freshmen in 1999 at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. She was a social service major, hoping to travel the world helping those in need. I was an aspiring Computer Engineering major who hadn’t realized how much he disliked math. “You know, you’d be a great teacher,” Maya said one evening. Over twenty years later, having changed degrees, we are both teachers and loving it!

One could say we have a healthy rivalry. In fact, it was upon considering her 2nd master’s degree and not wanting to be outdone, that I decided it was finally time to pursue my dream of earning a doctorate. For the record, “You were right all those years ago, Maya, and I am grateful for your friendship, guidance, and love.”

“Try and top this, Maya!”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you goes out to my mom, Marsha, for helping instill in me, at a very early age, the love of learning and service that has guided my work with my students every day inside the middle school classroom. A deepest thank you to my two sons, Nadov and Zev, who cheered me every step of the way. They showed me that literacy looks different to different people, and their incessant and healthy questioning of my authority allowed me permission to question my own beliefs about literacy.

A profound thank you goes out to my dissertation chair Dr. Rachel Hallquist, for providing calm guidance and an extraordinary amount of time during this years-long process. Thank you to my co-chair Dr. Rachelle Kist Hackett, for always pushing me to dig deeper and hone my methodology. Thank you to Dr. Suzanne Arnold, whom I met many years ago during my teacher preparation program at the University of Colorado, for keeping me grounded and focused on the real-world implications of my work. I could not have asked for a more kind, caring, and professional team.

Last, but not least, this study would not have been possible without the comradery and support of my fellow cohort mates from the first year of the Transformative Action in Education program at Benerd College. When I wanted to give up, they implored me to continue. When I had writer’s block, they helped me organize my thoughts. Thank you.
A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXAMINING THE LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF MALE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

Abstract

By Ari Raymond Colondres

University of the Pacific
2023

A literacy gap is a difference between a person’s ability to read for understanding and meaning-making and their anticipated ability to read for their grade level. A larger proportion of males are at least one or more years below grade level in reading ability compared to their female peers. This reading difference is called the gender literacy gap. Students over one year below grade level are at an increased risk of dropping out of high school and face the possibility of diminished lifetime earnings. Gender, low levels of motivation, low socio-economic status, low engagement, and school perceptions of literacy are risk factors present in the literature.

Middle school male students did not recognize how they used literacy outside the classroom as they interacted with literacy differently outside and inside the classroom. Out of the classroom, male middle school students used digital platforms such as Google, YouTube, and WhatsApp to learn about topics of authentic or personal interest. Physical media, such as textbooks, were referenced inside the classroom to complete teacher-assigned tasks. Data showed a significant preference for peer support outside and inside the classroom. However, inside the classroom, when the textbooks proved unsatisfactory, the students reached out to the teacher for assistance. This misalignment between how students learn produces adverse outcomes for male middle school students.

**Keywords:** literacy, gender, motivation, socio-economic status, engagement, multiple literacies
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A gender literacy gap exists amongst many children who attend public schools in the United States, with males consistently underperforming in reading compared to their female peers. A literacy gap, as determined by standardized exams, is a difference between the extent to which a person can read for understanding, meaning-making, and grade-level expectations. A child entering public school with a literacy gap (defined as having a limited vocabulary at this age than what would otherwise be expected) will fall further behind their peers without early targeted intervention as a more extensive vocabulary makes it easier to learn to read (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Foster & Miller, 2007). Later in life, these students are at an increased risk of dropping out of high school and face the possibility of diminished lifetime earnings (Renteria et al., 2019). A larger proportion of males are at least one or more years below grade level in reading ability than their female peers. This reading difference is called the gender literacy gap. Nevertheless, curricula and teaching methods used in public schools to close the literacy gap do not consider gender.

The current educational environment is one in which there is an extreme teacher shortage. Any recommendations regarding gender equity in literacy curricula (accounting for the differences in how male and female students learn to read) must add little to teachers' workload. Therefore, when designing this study, it is imperative to consider what teachers face in the classroom. Approximately 133,000 teachers leave the education profession each year in the United States (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). This number excludes the nearly 66,000 teachers leaving yearly due to retirement. Practitioners (teachers) who change school sites or leave the profession entirely for work in other non-related fields are considered teacher
turnover for the sake of this study. Teacher turnover is separate from teachers who retire, as that does not have the same negative consequences for the schools they leave behind. Teachers need actionable and easily understood insights into how their students interact with literacy outside the classroom. This study aims to provide teachers with students' voices. With this knowledge, it may be possible for these overworked teachers to make informed discussions regarding their curricula to engage underperforming male readers better.

**Background**

Literacy is a vital skill to have for all students. Reading and writing effectively in different genres or domains allow greater information access. Students are expected to engage in various forms of communication in their personal lives brought on by the internet and smartphones. Schools are more reliant on technology. Distance learning depends on computer literacy skills, such as navigating online curricula and free platforms like Google Classroom. Without the literacy skills necessary to communicate effectively on these new platforms and technology, students can be left behind and may not learn to the best of their abilities. These technologies only existed a couple of decades ago.

The emphasis on literacy is why English standards make up a significant proportion of the Common Core State Standards (California Department of Education, 2022). Unfortunately, many students that enter formal schooling in the United States with a literacy gap will leave school with an achievement gap. “Even if schools do not create the gap, they certainly do not do what they could to ameliorate it” (Loveless, 2015, p. 10). There is a disconnect between how male students interact with literacy in their personal lives and how they are expected to engage with literacy in school. Specialized curricula aim to reduce the literacy gap for all students.
regardless of gender. However, the growth in achievement is equal between male and female students. The result is that a gender literacy gap remains despite available interventions.

Gender equity in literacy is increasingly a global problem. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), given to 15-year-olds from sixty-five participating countries in three-year cycles, shows that male readers across the globe struggle to match their female peers' reading abilities (Broz et al., 2014). The success of female reading achievement is more impressive given that, globally, girls still face literacy challenges (mostly limited access to formal education) that male students do not face (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). The gender literacy gap sharply contrasts the near parity between genders in math achievement. Several studies by Ready et al. (2005) and Foster & Miller (2007) focused on early childhood education and its possible positive ramifications for student literacy outcomes. Studies showed that early targeted reading intervention could help students of both genders equally reduce the literacy gap. However, the gender literacy gap remains a global phenomenon.

**Impact of Teacher Shortage on Literacy Instruction**

A teacher shortage has created obstacles to reducing the gender literacy gap. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, California faced a teacher shortage (Walker, 2019). For this study, the researcher defines teacher shortage as “the inability to staff vacancies at current wages with individuals qualified to teach in the fields needed” (Sutcher, 2016, p. 1). The shortage of teachers has increased pressure on the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (an agency of the executive branch of California) to simplify and reduce the pathway new teachers take when entering the profession.
The severe teacher shortage and lengthy pathway for fully credentialed teachers to enter the profession have increased the number of non-traditionally credentialed teachers working in schools. Teachers are now entering the classroom with little to no prior teaching experience. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing requires new teachers to receive two years of on-site training (induction) at the expense of the individual school districts. This training is expected to occur alongside and in addition to the teachers’ regular work duties. The result is that many teachers have little time and experience working with reluctant male readers (Ingersoll, 2001; Sutcher et al., 2016).

Any novice teacher must meet all professional standards while differentiating instruction for students who enter the classroom with various reading and writing abilities. In addition, many teachers have students with legally binding Individualized Education Plans (IEP) that increase the complexity and workload these teachers face. Balancing these demands and the need for high-quality literacy instruction is more complex as it is common for general education teachers, particularly at the secondary level, to have over one hundred and seventy-five students.

Current research points to the benefits of beginning formalized reading instruction earlier than currently offered (DeLuca & Hughes, 2014; Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Spencer, 2011). However, early education has been recommended for many years. Presently, California does not require students to attend kindergarten. The mismatch between what researchers show is necessary to close the literacy gap (earlier targeted reading intervention) and existing California educational policy that does not require formal schooling until six years means that any literacy gap will only get more expansive by the time the student reaches middle school. Curricula at the middle school level require a significant degree of reading comprehension. As students encounter more complex subjects and concepts, literacy gaps can often determine how much a
student can or cannot learn. The learning deficit results compound as the student moves on to high school, as concepts often build on one another. The effects of high teacher turnover, combined with the increasing literacy needs of students, means that effective teaching strategies must consider the different skill levels of novice and experienced teachers.

The teacher shortage has hampered the efficacy of literacy instruction. Teaching professionals experience high levels of burnout, which was true even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of this turnover is twofold. Firstly, students at urban schools have more teachers with less experience than their peers attending suburban, more affluent schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Secondly, existing policy decisions intended to address the literacy gap, specifically non-compulsory preschool and transitional kindergarten, may be challenging to access for impoverished families. Typically, the pathway for new teachers requires a diploma from an accredited four-year university, demonstration of essential skills and content competency via standardized testing, various methods courses, English language learner certification, student teaching, licensure fees, and the completion of induction within two years of initial placement. However, due to the teacher shortage, uncredentialed teachers can begin teaching with little to no training. Students of Title 1 schools, where achievement and literacy gaps are significant, are disproportionately affected as many new teachers are hired in these schools. It is unrealistic to expect educators to teach literacy with fidelity and to be able to spot and diagnose reading deficiencies, all the while completing their state educator licensure requirements. Teachers (especially novice teachers) do not have time to experiment with multiple unproven literacy strategies. The result is an increasing need for strategies informed by students' voices in the various ways underperforming male readers interact with literacy.
Description of the Problem of Practice

The current focus of literacy instruction has been to require formal seat-based schooling (traditional classroom) earlier than previous generations, maybe even in preschool (Strang, Piasta, 2016; Spencer, 2014; Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012). Seat-based schooling will be explained further in chapter two. The hope is that early formal literacy instruction will catch any literacy gap between male and female students before it becomes too large. However, little is said of the older middle-school-aged male reader who, despite earlier intervention, still lags far behind his female peers. This study addresses this omission by examining the literacy experiences of middle school boys in and out of school.

Current reading interventions treat male and female readers the same. However, male middle-school-aged readers disproportionally struggle with literacy compared to their female peers, as seen in the 2018 PISA results (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Today, literacy instruction follows a prescribed formula, with students progressing from start to finish linearly, even though literacy acquisition is not linear. Students begin formal schooling with varying levels of literacy ability. For many students, formal education starts in the first grade. At pre-determined times, screenings are performed, and students that fail to make adequate progress receive standardized interventions ranging from the assigning of scaffolded reading material, more time spent with direct instruction from the general education classroom teacher to the replacement of an elective class with that of a reading support class at the higher grade levels. Despite these interventions reading growth in California has been stagnant since 2017, as evidenced by the 2019 Reading State Snapshot Report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019).
Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The gender literacy gap can be explained via two theoretical orientations, cognitive/science or social-psychological. Ma (2008) considered both orientations in their study of school contexts and found that an academic achievement gap exists in reading and math because “learning […] involves different cognitive processes” (p. 455). The widespread prevalence of a gender literacy gap, seen over many decades via PISA results (OECD, 2021), would support the cognitive/science theoretical orientation. However, “gender gaps in math and science, which were apparent in achievement data for a long time, have all but disappeared” (Loveless, 2015, p. 16). The reduction in the gender math achievement gap supports the second theoretical orientation, socio-psychological. The socio-psychological perspective explains gender differences within the context of home, school, and community (Walkerdine, 1988). Ma explains that “from the social-psychological perspective, gender gaps in favor of females in reading […] are created from traditions, cultures, and ideologies” (2008, p. 455). Therefore, the socio-psychological orientation provides the theoretical framework for this generic qualitative study into the underachievement in reading by male middle students.

The research questions, semi-structured interviews, and data analysis will explore how gender differences in the context of school (role of teachers), the role of family, and the community (gender stereotypes) impact student reading achievement.

Purpose of the Inquiry

The gender literacy gap is a global phenomenon with many lifelong consequences. This study explores how gender stereotypes and the role of parents and teachers may interact to exacerbate the gender literacy gap. This study aims to help teachers better understand how their
male readers interact with literacy both inside and outside of school so that they may better adapt curricula to meet the needs and interests of their male students.

**Inquiry Questions**

Has anyone ever asked male students about their experiences with reading in school? Male middle school students have unique developmental needs and interests that must be considered when adapting curricula to close the gender literacy gap. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following overarching research question and two sub-research questions.

**Overarching Research Question**

How do school (role of teachers), the role of family, and the community (gender stereotypes) impact the reaching achievement of male middle school students?

Research question one. How and in what ways do male middle school students engage with literacy outside of the classroom? (gender stereotypes & role of the family)

Research question two. How and in what ways do male middle school students engage with literacy inside the classroom? (role of teachers)

**Methodology**

A generic qualitative approach, grounded in constructivist epistemological assumptions (there is no universal truth), guides this research into the underachievement of male middle school students. A generic qualitative methodology “is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies” (Caelli et al., 2003, p. 4). Instead, this study borrows methods from Case Study methodology, such as semi-structured interviews, but deviates from the constraints typical of case studies, such as narrowly defining the case. Generic research approaches have several advantages. According to Lim (2011),
this tendency [toward flexible methodological approaches] is natural and even inevitable for those conducting their research on a topic or in an area where few theories or empirical studies have been available. … However, even when a significant amount of research literature and theories are available in their field, some researchers still find merit in the generic qualitative (p. 53).

Research around literacy and gender exists. Nevertheless, a need remains for further investigation into how middle school males engage with literacy. Possible outcomes of this research include information that teachers can use to engage underperforming male readers and an increase in these students’ understanding of how they engage in literacy daily. Methods include purposive sampling of middle school male readers for semi-structured interviews, memoing and systematic across-case analysis, sorting data and removing extemporaneous information, and breaking down data by research questions (Hudon et al., 2021).

Reading is a complex process. Students possess multiple intelligences and may read proficiently in various technical, figurative, and conversational (social media) styles. Unfortunately, due to educational policies enacted during the No Child Left Behind Act and, most recently, Race to the Top, which has relied heavily on standardized tests, schools have narrowed their view of proficient reading to that of the academic domain. This researcher will go into further detail regarding the methodology of this study in Chapter Three.

**Significance of the Inquiry**

This study contributes to practice and scholarship by examining the literacy experiences of male middle school students inside and outside of school. When using a generic qualitative methodology, it is essential to “consider the format of your findings, and the audience that will read them, [as this] will also increase their potential for evidence translation and diffusion”
(Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 157). Reducing the gender literacy gap will positively impact male readers' preparedness for success in the workplace and college (Mikulecky, 1982; Carson et al., 1992). The findings can help teachers make better-informed decisions regarding curricula and how to engage male readers. Secondly, the participants may better appreciate how they interact with literacy inside and outside school.

**Delimitations**

Initial participant recruitment took place via advertisement at a local medium to large, urban (as defined by the United States Census Bureau) middle school located in an affluent area within 50 miles of Sacramento, California. As a middle school classroom teacher at the study site, this researcher's insider role meant that efforts were made to reduce conflicts of interest and ethical issues. In addition, the data collection phase of the study took place outside of the regular school day. The study's timeframe was during the Fall semester when fewer demands were placed on the school site than in the Spring semester (state mandatory testing takes place in the Spring). Further information regarding delimitations is presented in Chapter Three.

**Chapter Summary**

Teachers have many demands, including attending to the social-emotional needs of their students, meeting all state content standards, adhering to Individualized Education Plans, and completing all state licensure and state certifications. These demands on teachers can make effectively engaging underperforming male readers extremely challenging. This study aims to inform teachers about the literacy experiences of underperforming male middle school students. In semi-structured interviews, the research will describe young male readers’ everyday formative experiences and what interactions with literacy pique their interest or motivation, helping teachers make informed curricula decisions and increasing engagement, thereby lowering the
gender literacy gap. Chapter 2 of this dissertation will look at the literature carefully to help guide and frame this study.
### Definitions of Key Terms

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<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>increases reading comprehension by involving the learner in higher-level critical thinking skills (University of Washington, 2022)</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>presents male or female characteristics but is not directly tied to biological sex at birth (World Health Organization, 2022)</td>
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<td>Induction</td>
<td>a two-year, state-mandated district-driven support program for new teachers that focuses on support cycles of inquiry around teachers’ individual development goals (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2022)</td>
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<td>Literacy</td>
<td>ability to communicate proficiently via reading and writing (Roser &amp; Ortiz-Ospina, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>desire, whether internal or external, to complete a particular task (Murayama, 2018)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple literacies</td>
<td>the concept that learners make meaning of information via various modalities including, but not limited to, just the written word (Multiple literacies, 2016)</td>
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<td>Reluctant reader</td>
<td>a person that dislikes reading on command, as is typically required in a school setting (Snowball, 2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socio-economic status</td>
<td>a metric used to denote class based on a combination of education, income, and occupation (American Psychological Association, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher shortage</td>
<td>the difference between the available classroom positions and the number of qualified educators willing to work in those positions at the current wages being offered by school districts (Sutcher, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Title 1</td>
<td>part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, first passed in 1965, provides supplemental Federal funding to schools with children from low-economic families to help those students meet state educational standards (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover</td>
<td>teacher turnover excludes those retiring practitioners but includes both practitioners who change school sites or leave the profession entirely (Colorado Department of Education, 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban school</td>
<td>located within cities that have at least a population of 100,000 or more residents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006)</td>
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A gender literacy gap exists among children who attend public schools in the United States, with males consistently underperforming in reading compared to their female peers. This review of the available literature sought to explore the possible effects of gender on students' literacy outcomes in the United States and how alternative instructional approaches may benefit male students. Specifically, would curricula with an equitable focus on gender provide positive outcomes for male students who enter formal public schooling with a literacy gap (defined by a proficiency level of at least one year below the student's current grade)?

The 2019 Reading State Snapshot Report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) showed that only 30% of California students scored at a proficient level in reading, which was statistically similar to the amount found proficient in 2017. The report showed that those female students scored, on average, 11 points higher than their male peers in reading proficiency (Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Male students will have lower academic success levels and an increased risk of dropping out of high school and college (Rentería et al., 2019). Students who graduate will face an increasingly competitive job market that places high demands on literacy abilities. Finally, as adults, they will endure reduced prospective lifetime earnings and possible adverse health outcomes. Despite this, many literacy curricula and teaching methods used in public schools do not consider gender. Gender, low levels of motivation, low socio-economic status, low levels of engagement, and school perceptions of literacy (role of the teacher) are risk factors present in the literature. Curricula that consider students’ voices may provide positive outcomes for male learners with a literacy gap.
Literacy Gap

Literacy is an increasingly vital skill to have. Reading and writing effectively in different genres or domains allows greater information access. Unfortunately, the literacy gap between male and female students will widen for those entering formal schooling in the United States. The gender literacy gap is increasingly a global problem. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), given to 15-year-olds from sixty-five participating countries in three-year cycles, shows that male readers across the globe struggle to match their female peers' reading abilities (Brozo et al., 2014). Several studies focused on the literacy gap in early childhood education and its possible ramifications for student outcomes (Ready et al., 2005; Foster & Miller, 2007). Globally, girls still face literacy challenges (mostly access to formal education) not experienced by their male counterparts. Students with a literacy gap will be at an increased risk of dropping out, having diminished lifetime earnings, and possibly increasing adverse health outcomes, such as dementia (Rentería et al., 2019).

Many studies in the literature have focused on the literacy gap and recommended that all children begin literacy instruction earlier than is currently required. Yet, they disregard the needs of older readers. Callaghan and Madelaine (2012) researched the need for early reading instruction. They found that any literacy gap must be addressed in preschool earlier than current educational policy requires. California does not require formal schooling until first grade (usually age six). The study found that children are developmentally ready for pre-emergent literacy instruction as early as three. The authors recommended that reading instruction include shared reading strategies and that teacher preparation programs include teaching techniques encompassing dialog (reciprocal speech between two individuals, reinforcing typical sentence structures).
In later years, students with a literacy gap face stigmatization by peers. They increasingly understand that they experience more difficulty with reading and may resent and resist intervention efforts by educators. The idea of being pulled out of class to meet with a reading teacher (one possible intervention) can be an anathema to them. As the demand for content knowledge in higher grades becomes increasingly significant, educators face the difficult task of finding accessible materials for their students. Even students with basic reading skills (decoding, phonemic awareness, and fluency) have difficulty comprehending what they read in middle and high school. The struggle with reading and the lack of high interest and appropriately challenging reading material makes closing the literacy gap later in life more challenging (Becker et al., 2010; Froiland & Oros, 2014).

**Traditional Approach to Literacy Instruction Overview**

The current state of traditional public education has revealed an increasing need for alternative approaches to literacy. Public schooling in the United States can look very different depending on region or location, mainly due to local school governance and funding. However, much of this changed with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which tied federal funding to students' academic performance in Language Arts and Math. With many states adopting the Common Core Standards ten years later, NCLB had further consolidated literacy instruction into a one-size-fits-all, economically viable curriculum.

Today, literacy instruction follows a prescribed formula, with students progressing from start to finish linearly, even though literacy acquisition is not linear. Students begin formal schooling with varying levels of literacy ability. Formal education starts in first grade (approximately age six). At pre-determined times, screenings are performed, and students that fail to make adequate progress receive standardized interventions ranging from the assigning of
scaffolded reading material, more time spent with direct instruction from the general education classroom teacher to the replacement of an elective class with that of a reading support class at the higher grade levels (Spencer, 2011). Despite these interventions reading growth in California has been stagnant since 2017, as evidenced by the 2019 Reading State Snapshot Report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019).

The struggle to close the literacy gap for all students has led to a doubling down by policymakers and educators. A recent push has been to require formal seat-based schooling earlier, maybe even in preschool (Strang, Piasta, 2016; Spencer, 2014; Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012). The hope is that early formal literacy instruction will catch any literacy gap before it gets too large.

Educators need to address literacy early in the life of students. The literature shows that any literacy gap present at the beginning of formal education will widen without explicit literacy intervention (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Foster & Miller, 2007; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the one-size-fits-all approach to literacy instruction brought on by Common Core is ill-equipped to address the literacy gap (Spencer, 2014). It may be that a confluence of risk indicators or misinterpreted research findings have led to a misunderstanding of the underlying issues facing young readers, especially male readers.

**Collaborative Learning**

The importance of peer acceptance for middle school students in fostering engagement inside the classroom was an area with plenty of relevant research. Middle school marks a major shift in the lives and routines of adolescent students. In elementary school, students spend most of their time inside the classroom with one teacher and even get escorted as a whole class to different parts of the school site, such as the cafeteria for lunch and the playground for recess.
However, in middle school, it is expected that students navigate a typically larger building mostly on their own to as many as seven different classrooms, be able to locate the gym for physical education, and know which line to stand in the multipurpose room for lunch. A study by Laursen & Veenstra explained the results of this major change in the lives of students, adolescents quickly learn to rely on close peers for companionship, protection, and guidance as they navigate novel contexts where norms are established and enforced by peers. Afraid of the social consequences of nonconformity, most conclude that the best way to get along is to go along (p. 891, 2021).

The effects of this structural and developmental change in the lives of adolescent students are that effective collaborative learning can often be a tool to help engage middle school students and increase student learning while helping them learn skills that consider and honor their developmental need for socialization.

Collaborative learning can be an effective method of promoting learning, social skills, and teamwork amongst both male and female middle school students. However, it is important to note that many factors, such as group composition, group size, and the design of the task and group process, can influence the effectiveness of group/collaborative learning. According to Armstrong (2008), there are two distinct types of group structures,

Achieving [collaborative learning] involves finding a balance in the relationship between the number of shared [norms] and the nature of the collective goal (extrinsic or intrinsic). The more extrinsic the goal, the more [teacher-derived guiderails] are required to ensure that the group can achieve the goal in an effective manner. When there is no extrinsic goal […], fewer shared structures are required, and the group’s performance can be more exploratory and improvisational (p.103).
The California Common Core State Standards include the need to teach speaking and listening skills in the 6th through 12th grades. According to the standards, students must “engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly” (California Department of Education, 2022, p. 66). The inclusion of communication skills in middle school, along with reading and writing skills, demonstrates the importance of being able to work successfully with peers. Effective collaboration and communication skills not only support learning but also aid in positive social behavior.

In a study by Wentzel & Watkins (2002), “students who perceived their classmates as emotionally supportive also reported pursuing goals to behave in socially appropriate ways, displayed positive levels of social behavior more frequently, and earned higher grades than those who did not.” The implication is that effective peer support can help increase student learning. However, there are risk indicators that demonstrate the increasing need for effective collaborative learning.

**Risk Indicators**

The literature identifies multiple risk factors that may lead to a reduction in literacy outcomes. Such indicators include gender, low motivation, low socio-economic status, and school perceptions of literacy (role of teachers). Details regarding these indicators are listed below.

**Gender Stereotypes**

Reading achievement amongst males is the highest indicator of whether males can attend college (Stoet & Geary, 2020). Nevertheless, a gender reading gap afflicts male students
worldwide. Ma (2008) found that two theoretical orientations could explain the gender literacy gap, cognitive/science or social-psychological.

From the cognitive science perspective, a gender gap favors females in reading […] because learning […] involves different cognitive processes. From the social-psychological perspective, gender gaps in favor of females in reading […] are created from traditions, cultures, and ideologies. (p. 455)

The complexity of reading acquisition and gender makes finding a single cause challenging. There may be a confluence of indicators that together play a role in gender differences in reading achievement.

What is clear from the literature is that a gender gap does exist (Gambell & Hunter, 1999; Logan & Johnston, 2009; McGeown et al., 2012). The 2018 PISA results, the latest available, "show that girls outperformed boys in reading by 25 points [even] after accounting for students' socio-economic background" (OECD, 2021, p. 114). A recent study by Stoet and Geary (2020) found that female enrollment in post-secondary education was higher than males in Western countries like the United States. However, the same study found that parity in college attendance between men and women in many other countries like Mexico masked lower male reading achievement and female societal discouragement, part of the social-psychological theoretical perspective (Ma, 2008) from seeking higher education.

**Motivation / Engagement**

Motivation and engagement are significant indicators of a person’s willingness to read and utilize key comprehension strategies. Research shows that many male readers fail to find narrative fiction (novels) engaging and thus are not compelled to maintain interest or use
comprehension strategies (Becker et al., 2010; Cook & Artino, 2016; Froiland & Oros, 2014).

Instead, male readers tended to pick up non-fiction and informational texts on topics of interest.

Not all risk indicators were found to have equal weight concerning reading achievement. Froiland & Oros (2014) highlighted the complexity of literacy acquisition research findings in a nationally representative longitudinal study that found that motivation, perceived competence, and classroom engagement were predictive of adolescent reading achievement. In fact, "Intrinsic motivation/perceived competence and engagement, although small, were collectively comparable to the effects of SES and more than the effect of ethnicity variables" (Froiland & Oros, 2014, p. 12).

Meaningfully absent were studies that focused on engagement as a stand-alone indicator. Instead, there were several instances where motivation and engagement were used together or interchangeably, and low engagement resulted from low motivation. For this study, engagement means involving “students in the learning process [which] increases their attention and focus, motivates them to practice higher-level critical thinking skills, and promotes meaningful learning experiences” (University of Washington, 2022). The lack of detailed research on engagement as a stand-alone predictor of reading achievement is surprising, given the number of professional development seminars that focus on increasing reader engagement. For example, the seminar titled "Practical Strategies for Supporting Struggling Readers (Grades 6-12)" by the Bureau of Education & Research (BER) touts it would "Increase the Engagement of Your Struggling Readers" (2021). Motivation to read may be a necessary precursor for student engagement in the reading comprehension strategies necessary for effective learning.
Low Socioeconomic Status

There may be many causes of a literacy gap in students. However, the literature strongly suggests that socio-economic status (S.E.S.) might be the single most significant predictor of whether a student will enter school with a literacy gap. Several studies found a literacy gap between high and low-SES students and established the need for earlier-than-expected childhood education (Strang & Piasta, 2016; Spencer, 2014; Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012). The later the student enters formal education, the higher the gap.

Strang and Piasta's (2016) findings were consistent with Callaghan and Madelaine (2012) but differed in their recommendations. They both agreed (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Strang & Piasta, 2016) that a significant literacy gap exists in students earlier than previously known. Studies show that children can enter first grade with various levels of literacy readiness and “that by the end of the first grade, students who enter school prepared to engage in phonics at the kindergarten level possess the decoding skills necessary to begin to seriously transition into subsequent phases of literacy development” (Foster & Miller, 2007, p. 178).

The researchers found (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Strang & Piasta, 2016) that low socio-economic status could account for a 0.5 -1.0 standard deviation gap. “Thirty-three percent of the students in the low readiness group came from families below the poverty line […] socio-economic status is an important factor in predicting school readiness” (Foster & Miller, 2007, p. 178). Students with a higher SES expanded their reading and writing abilities at a higher rate than their lower SES counterparts. Like the previous study's authors (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Strang & Piasta, 2016), there was a prediction that high-quality literacy instruction delivered earlier than previously expected could close this gap. If the literacy gap gets wider every year, one would logically conclude that literacy interventions delivered earlier than
previously conducted should close this gap. However, this was not the case, as can be seen by the exponential growth rate of the higher SES students compared to the lower SES cohort. Therefore, any literacy instruction or intervention would need to occur before kindergarten. Early intervention for all readers is well researched. As a result, this study focuses on middle school-aged learners who, despite early intervention, still lag their female peers in reading ability.

**Schools’ Perception of Literacy or Role of Teachers**

Schools’ perception of what counts as literacy can impact student reading achievement. In a literature review by Taylor (2004) about a gender reading gap, a personal anecdote described how her adolescent son thought reading in his English class was not connected to the real world. Gabe was reading information books to discover what he wanted to learn about the computer, and he was writing on message boards and in chat rooms to learn more, but he did not connect these acts with the type of reading and writing he did at school. (p. 292)

The author's son failed to see how reading in school connected with what he was reading in his personal time, but he also struggled to make inferences on classroom assignments. Schools' narrow view of literacy can reduce male readers' confidence (Taylor, 2004). The significance of this limited view of what “reading should be” and the overemphasis on the importance of fictional texts “contributed to the stigmatizing of larger (male) groups that did not appreciate that kind of reading in the same way” (Asplund & Prieto, 2017, p. 1061).

Spencer’s (2014) qualitative study looked at reading instruction in New York during the Common Core rollout to explore further how traditional curricula approach literacy instruction. The author asserted that legally mandated scientifically based scripted reading intervention programs narrowed the lens of literacy. This discounted the vast cultural knowledge students
brought into the classroom with them. The author proposed that educators question how a literacy gap is determined to exist in the first place. If literacy gaps exist, then empirical data should be used to implement future literacy curricula to account for the impacts of their adoption. Gender, lower motivation, lower socio-economic status, and school's perception of literacy (role of teachers) were all risk factors well represented in the literature. However, studies investigating alternative pedagogy were mainly conducted outside the United States.

**A Gap in the Literature**

A literature search found studies (Ionescu et al., 2010; Kirkham & Kidd, 2017; Shank, 2016) exploring the role of alternative educational approaches in reducing the literacy gap in general, although not specifically along gender lines. Multiple studies have focused on the overall benefits of alternative types of education, including Waldorf education (Cunningham, 2011; Kirkham, 2017; Shank, 2016), but not specifically on how these approaches could be used in traditional schools to reduce the gender reading gap. One such alternative approach is Waldorf Education. Waldorf Education is based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who created an adult school for the employees of the Waldorf-Astoria Cigarette Company in Germany in 1919 (Miller, 1992). Waldorf uses developmentally appropriate education that aims to teach the whole child: head (thinking), heart (feeling), and hands (willing). Steiner believed, "Education should never work against a person's destiny, but should achieve the development of his own predispositions… the fullest clarity of thought, the most loving deepening of his feeling, and the greatest possible energy and ability of will" (Mc Dermott, 1984, pp. 341-342). Waldorf schools have spread to many countries worldwide yet remain relatively unknown in the United States.
Waldorf education's difficulty in expanding in the United States can be explained mainly by the vastly different approaches to education between Waldorf and traditional schools. Traditional schools concern themselves with mostly higher-level cognitive approaches to learning that tend to neglect the needs of the whole child (Kirkham & Kidd, 2017; Tsai, 2012). Fortunately, studies have shown that Waldorf's approach to creativity, specifically their use of art and other multimodal forms of expression in education (Shankland et al., 2010; Westby, 2017), indicated potential positive benefits. Alternative forms of early childhood education, especially Waldorf education, use creativity to help students acquire and develop literacy skills (Cunningham, 2011; Kirkham, 2017; Shank, 2016; Shankland et al., 2010; Westby, 2017).

Rudolf Steiner's holistic and developmental approach to human development means that literacy is taught using storytelling and imagery to convey abstract ideas. Around age seven, children in Waldorf schools use images and highly engaging stories to learn about each alphabet letter. Consequently, these letter-sound relationships become real. "The power of the image is that it enables students to see or imagine concretely the topic at hand" (Uhrmacher, 1993, p. 95). For example, "When the letter "S" is first introduced to the children through a dramatically told story about a snake, it is presented through an assortment of special words all included for their beauty as well as their phonetic relevance" (Petras, 2002, p. 52). Later, students learn vocabulary using natural objects in nature. Shared experiences in nature are used to teach literacy skills.

Waldorf's approach to literacy, precisely its later start age of seven years and story-based reading curriculum, may produce higher student reading comprehension outcomes (Chauncey, 2006; Suggate et al., 2013). Research showed that students from both traditional and Waldorf schools achieved the same reading proficiency in almost every measure, regardless of when they
started formal instruction. However, students who learned to read later had higher comprehension skills. The participants had moderate to high socio-economic status (SES) and high parental involvement (Suggate et al., 2013).

Language is complex, including both concrete and abstract concepts. Students attending Waldorf schools only begin formal literacy instruction at the age of seven, which contradicts the approach taken by current researchers who recommend children start as early as age three. However, waiting until children are at least seven years old ensures that they have better executive functioning, which means they will be better equipped to receive instruction about abstract ideas.

**Discussion and Implications**

A study by Chauncey (2006) titled "The Waldorf Model and Public-School Reform" explored the resistance Waldorf education faces in the United States. Modern, traditional education, especially a common-core-based curriculum, focuses solely on the cognitive mind, ignoring a person's social and emotional aspects. Waldorf education includes its curriculum's imagination, creativity, service, and judgment/problem-solving skills. These skills are difficult to measure with current assessments. Since testing results dictate school funding, Waldorf education would be challenging to incorporate into traditional schools.

Reading is vitally important for success in secondary school. Students are increasingly required to read complex texts on global issues. They must utilize pre-reading and post-reading comprehension strategies to fully understand new information. Despite interventions, there has not been much improvement in the reading proficiency of California students for over two decades. Even today, only thirty percent of eighth-graders in California tested proficient in
reading in 2019 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). The low level of reading proficiency has severe implications for educators hoping to close the literacy gap.

Teaching to the whole child is difficult to quantify and thus study. The funding model used in traditional public schools requires demonstrating proficiency in reading, math, and science via high-stakes testing. The state can assume control over a school that fails to make adequate yearly growth. In this environment, traditional schools are loath to try curricula that are not research-based. Nevertheless, males continue to fall behind their female peers concerning reading proficiency as it can be challenging to quantify whole child-based education such as Waldorf. Aggregated data from Golden Valley Charter River, a Waldorf-inspired public school in the greater Sacramento area, shows that their third through eighth-grade students perform above “standard met” by seventeen points according to the 2019 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) results, the most recent data available (California School Dashboard, 2022). According to CAASPP, a reader who performs at “standard met” is on track to graduate high school and college and is career ready. Waldorf education aims not to instill society's aims and goals into generations of youth but to help develop fully self-actualized people that can then lend their inherent talents to the world (Miller, 1992). Literacy instruction incorporating Waldorf's holistic approach by storytelling and imagery would contrast reliance on rote memorization and repetition to learn abstract concepts. Instead, "Educators would do well to think about whether their lessons have adequately used image, rhythm, movement, and storytelling in meaningful ways" (Uhrmacher, 1993, p. 100). Literacy instruction informed by Waldorf would be most effective if implemented during teacher preparation programs since educators create new habits and routines.
The current testing environment presents a significant obstacle to Waldorf literacy implementation. The California Department of Education mandates 175-180 days of instruction per the Local Control Funding Formula (2021). The state-mandated testing window for the CAASPP is late spring. This high-stakes test, which determines school funding via Annual Yearly Progress reports, ties up several crucial weeks of the school year, limiting instruction time. In addition, many districts administer assessments such as the Measure of Academic Performance (MAP) test in the early fall and winter to predict their student's potential performance on the CAASPP. These tests (used for accountability in public schools) typically take multiple days each. The limited number of school days means that any changes to how literacy is taught would need to replace ineffective curricula instead of just augmenting them.

**Limitations of These Studies**

Literacy is complex. Thus far, the research has been narrow in scope, focusing on a limited set of risk indicators such as gender stereotypes, motivation, SES, and schools’ perception of literacy (role of teachers). The literature largely excludes students’ voices. What do underperforming male readers find interesting to read? How might educators leverage their students’ interests or the ways they like to learn? Any research into reducing the gender literacy gap would need to be longitudinal to better quantify their lasting impact on students. In addition, further comparative research would be required to discern the role of families in student reading proficiency using male and female participants. Further studies need to examine how male readers interact with literacy outside of school so that educators can make informed decisions regarding curricula.
Summary

A review of the available literature shows that a literacy gap exists and that gender is a risk factor. Efforts to reduce the gender literacy gap have focused on early formal education. However, male students still lag in reading proficiency compared to their female peers. The literature shows that alternative pedagogical approaches, such as those utilized in Waldorf education, may help reduce the gender literacy gap. However, further research is needed to explore how middle school male students interact with literacy outside the classroom.

Challenges to research are present. Specifically, public school teachers’ high turnover and burnout rate mean that any research must be concluded within a year or avoid methods that require permanence, i.e., classroom teacher, instructional coaches, and assistants. Studies must be flexible and dynamic and include male middle school participants. Fortunately, generic qualitative research utilizes flexible methods appropriate for the investigation into reducing the gender literacy gap.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The literature review found in Chapter Two clarified that a reading achievement gap existed between male and female students. Findings from current research demonstrated the need to provide formal reading instruction as early as first grade with the hope that any literacy achievement gap could be addressed early before getting too big in the higher grades (Strang, Piasta, 2016; Spencer, 2014; Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012). However, male middle school students still struggled with reading (Brozo et al., 2014). Risk indicators such as gender, motivation, low socio-economic status, and the school's perception of what counts as literacy (role of the teacher) are represented in the literature.

Reading is a complex process. Students possess multiple intelligences and may read proficiently in various technical, figurative, and conversational (social media) styles. Educational policies enacted during the No Child Left Behind Act and, most recently, Race to the Top have relied heavily on standardized tests. As a result, schools have narrowed their view of proficient reading to that of the academic domain (Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Spencer, 2011).

This study aimed to explore how seven middle school students described their reading experiences in and out of school. The findings were intended to help teachers effectively engage their male readers, thus helping to reduce the male-female reading gap (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Male students lagged behind their female peers in reading achievement (Brozo et al., 2014). The consequences of this gender literacy gap were well documented and included an increased risk of dropping out of high school, lower lifetime work earnings, and a decrease in overall health outcomes (Ready et al., 2005; Foster & Miller, 2007).
A generic qualitative methodology helped uncover commonalities amongst underperforming male middle school readers, amplified their voices, and helped educators create or adapt curricula that targeted and benefitted similarly reluctant groups. The overarching research question was how do school (role of teachers), the role of family, and the community (gender stereotypes) impact the reading achievement of male middle school students? This chapter details the generic qualitative approach, methodology, research design, and methods used to answer the research question, such as the participant selection strategy, instrumentation, and data analysis for this study.

**Approach**

A generic qualitative approach informed by the social-psychological theoretical orientation (Ma, 2008) was deemed most appropriate when used to answer questions about what or why a phenomenon occurs. “All qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and the world. The primary goal of a [generic] qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25).

Specifically, a generic qualitative research design was recommended in situations where a researcher’s “primary goal...was to uncover and interpret those meanings” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). The research questions, semi-structured interviews, and data analysis explored how school (role of the teacher), community (gender stereotypes), and the role of families impacted student reading achievement. The socio-psychological perspective explains gender differences within the context of home, school, and community (Walkerdine, 1988). Ma explained that “from the social-psychological perspective, gender gaps in favor of females in reading [...] were created from traditions, cultures, and ideologies” (2008, p. 455). Therefore, the socio-
psychological orientation provided the theoretical framework for this generic qualitative study into the underachievement in reading by male middle students.

Methodology

This study’s generic qualitative research method fell within constructivist epistemology and borrowed heavily from case study research design. As in a case study, generic qualitative research is “highly inductive; uses open codes, categories, and thematic analysis” (Lim, 2011, p. 52). For this study, the data was semi-structured interviews of how the participants “interpreted their experiences, how they constructed their worlds, and what meaning they attributed to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

Careful consideration was necessary to guard against any potential researcher bias. As the researcher interacted with the data looking for emergent themes and patterns via across-case analysis, memoing in a research journal aided in identifying and bracketing bias. The research journal provided a form of rigor to the study, thus minimizing implicit researcher bias. In addition, member checking, where the researcher summarized the interview to the participant, ensured that the students’ voices were represented.

Methods

The researcher relied on semi-structured interviews with seven participants. The interview protocol included questions, each seeking to address a particular research question necessary to explore the meaning of the participant's literacy interactions and experiences in and out of school (see Appendix A). Thematic analysis was used to uncover commonalities among the participants' experiences amplifying their voices to inform how gender differences impact student reading achievement. Merriam & Tisdell (2015) explained further,
“The data analysis involved identifying recurring patterns that characterize the data. Findings were those recurring patterns or themes supported by the data from which they were derived. The overall interpretation was the researcher’s understanding of the participant's understanding of the phenomenon of interest (p. 24).

**Participant Selection Strategy**

As in generic qualitative studies, purposive sampling was used and was a procedure in which “researchers purposively selected participants and data sources that could answer the research question” (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 3). The researcher focused on sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade male middle school students between the ages of twelve and fourteen. The principal of the study site granted permission to the researcher (see Appendix E) and emailed the recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) to the parents of the entire student body. Teachers at the study site advertised the opportunity to participate in the research by posting the recruitment flyer in their classrooms and an electronic version to their Google Classroom websites. Parents and guardians of potential participants contacted the lead researcher via email or by completing an electronic interest form via Google Forms (see Appendix H). The researcher contacted interested parents and guardians to answer any questions and arrange the signing of the permission and assent forms via DocuSign.com.

The criteria outlined below (Table 1) were used to identify individuals with the relevant experiences to address the research questions that framed this study relating to the role of teachers, families, and the community’s impact on student reading achievement.
Participant selection criteria included male middle school students between eleven and fourteen that tested below their expected reading level. Parents showed initial interest in learning more about the study but were hesitant to admit their child tested low on reading assessments. It was important for the lead researcher to verbally communicate to parents that the researcher believed their children were literate, but current measures employed in schools failed to capture that. Parents/guardians received informed consent forms, and their minor-aged children signed assent forms per Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements. CAASPP data was obtained with permission from the parents of the participants. Of the sixteen parents that indicated their interest in the study, 50% signed the permission and assent forms. Qualitative research emphasizes depth over breadth. As such, a maximum of seven participants were selected for the study of those permission slips received.

Further participant recruitment followed a snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling is appropriate in qualitative research with hard-to-reach populations such as middle-school students, especially during various COVID-19 restrictions on in-person meetings. “In this method, the existing study subjects recruited additional subjects among their acquaintances.
Sampling continued until data saturation” (Naderifar et al., 2017, p. 2). The importance of peer acceptance for middle schoolers made it a challenge to discuss the nature of this study openly. Conversely, participants were more inclined to participate once they knew others at their school were already interviewed. Therefore, snowball sampling was a helpful recruitment solution for this study.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher acknowledges that gender identity is multi-faceted and exists on a continuum. However, for the sake of this study, gender was binary as multiple data sets already collected information in that manner (male-female). Only self-identified male students participated in grades sixth, seventh, and eighth. Participants’ parents/guardians were asked to select the appropriate annual income using the Free and Reduced Lunch criteria to denote high or low socio-economic status (see Table 2).

This study utilized multiple data collection and instrumentation measures to maximize the validity of the research results. Such measures included semi-structured interviews (one per person with the possibility of a follow-up), free and reduced school lunch eligibility, and memoing. The study's timeline had approximately ninety days spread over the Fall semester (August – October) to remain flexible to account for individual family commitments and the various demands placed on the teachers.

The study site had many demands on its approximately 185 school days from the school district and the state. For example, all students took the Renaissance reading and math assessments in the early fall and winter. These tests typically took multiple days, quickly tying up an entire week of usable instruction time. Also, teachers were protective of the time leading up to these exams as the results were shared district-wide. The state-mandated testing window
for CAASPP was late spring. This high-stakes test, which determines school funding via Annual Yearly Progress reports, tied up several weeks of the school year as teachers and site administrators wished to maximize instruction time and limit distraction. After any holiday or 3-day weekend, time was highly valued as teachers reviewed concepts and material for understanding. All communication took place off-campus and via video conferencing, electronic mail, and messaging applications as the sole methods of communication between researcher and participants in consideration of the time demands placed on the study site,

Participant solicitations included posted flyers (see Appendix B) both physically in teachers’ classrooms and virtually on their websites, with the permission of the school site principal (see Appendix E). The researcher discussed the study, via phone, with the president of the Parent Teachers Organization (PTO), and it was agreed that he would share the nature of the research and the recruitment flyer with the entire board (see Appendix G). Teachers were asked to provide contact information regarding the study to all students in their care in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) which protects student privacy. Parents who felt their children met all the participant requirements, including the reading requirements, contacted the researcher. Snowball sampling was employed as necessary to recruit seven male participants. The researcher is an employee of the study site. Therefore, no district-specific reading data will be used during this study to reduce the potential for any conflict of interest between the researcher and the school district. Trust is essential for the researcher/participant relationship. Therefore, no direct questions to the student regarding reading proficiency were asked. Instead, the families of prospective participants will self-identify their demographics and grade-level reading proficiency.
Semi-structured interviews. All the participants were interviewed one-on-one via the video conferencing software Zoom (with the option of a follow-up interview as needed). The interviews were recorded using the Zoom record feature. Recordings were transcribed using the Trint website. The researcher made tremendous efforts to bracket his subjective experience with reading in school so as not to misconstrue participants' experiences, thus contaminating the findings. Eleven, twelve, thirteen, and fourteen-year-old male middle school students may have difficulty verbalizing their reading experiences. Therefore, elicitations in the form of pre-arranged questions were provided and can be found in Appendix A.

The interview protocol developed for this study relies on a simple framework of open-ended questions using a semi-structured interview style. Questions were phrased using common and familiar language. Otherwise, “without sensitivity to the impact of particular words on the person being interviewed, the answer may make no sense at all, or there may be no answer” (Patton, 2015, as seen in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 117). There was one interview per participant, each lasting no more than 30 minutes. A single follow-up interview was available but deemed unnecessary for data saturation. Memoing was used during the analysis phase to capture personal connections and revelations for further analysis. ZOOM’s automated recording service provided the initial audio used to transcribe the interviews using the Trint website. Subsequent refinement of the transcript was conducted manually by the researcher. The researcher preserved the original transcriptions for further analysis with only extemporaneous; personally identifiable material removed. The interviewer paid particular attention to verbal and non-verbal cues and remained conscious of not dominating the conversation. All video sessions were recorded to aid in the later analysis and maintained securely for three years per IRB requirements.
Free and reduced school lunch qualifier. The state qualification criterion, as seen in the Free Eligibility Scale Meals, Snacks, and Milk table (See Table 2), was used to determine the lower socio-economic status of each participant. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, only qualifying students received discounted or free school lunches (currently, all students receive free school lunches regardless of eligibility). “Thirty-three percent of the students in the low readiness group came from families below the poverty line […] socio-economic status is an important factor in predicting school readiness” (Foster & Miller, 2007, p. 178). This widely understood predictor of lower achievement is why qualifying for reduced or free school lunch also determines if a school receives supplemental funding to help close the achievement gap.
Memoing. The researcher was an active participant in the study and kept a research journal to capture connections and thoughts for continued review and reflection. As the researcher coded the data, themes emerged. “Memos were reflective interpretive pieces that built a historical audit trail to document ideas, events, and thought processes inherent in the research process and developing thinking of the analyst” (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 4). Memoing allowed for a running record of the researcher’s thoughts and helped to highlight any potential bias.

**Final Sample Demographics**

Sixteen parents completed the study’s initial interest form, with nine signing the consent and assent forms. Seven of nine student participants were ultimately interviewed, with the other two rescinding their consent by failing to communicate with the lead researcher. The participants

Table 2
*Free and Reduced Lunch Eligibility (California Department of Education, 2021)*

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>$57,356</td>
<td>$4,780</td>
<td>$2,390</td>
<td>$2,206</td>
<td>$1,103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For each additional family member, add:</td>
<td>$5,824</td>
<td>$486</td>
<td>$243</td>
<td>$224</td>
<td>$112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were interviewed once via zoom for between 25 – 30 minutes. All participants identified
themselves as male. The ages of the participants ranged from 11 years to 13 years, with grade
levels between the 6th and 8th grades. Most participants (86%) scored level 2 (standard nearly
met) on the CAASPP, with the remainder scoring level 1 (standard not met). Refer to Table 3 for
a breakdown of the participant demographics.

Table 3
Participant Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>CASSPP Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7th</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>7th</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>6th</td>
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<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>7th</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis Procedures

Semi-structured interviews made up a significant portion of this study. “Data analysis (of
interviews) was a complex procedure that involved moving back and forth between concrete bits
of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description
and interpretation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). To aid that process and to produce “a
more organized, rigorous, and analytically sound qualitative study” (Vanover et al., 2021, p.
134), interview questions were organized by the research question and according to the
constructs of the theoretical framework (role of teacher, gender stereotypes, and the role of the family).

An iterative, multi-step process was used to code the approximately 30-minute interviews. Immediately transcribing the interview from the audio recording improved accuracy. Zoom’s automated transcription service created a rough draft of the interview. The researcher further analyzed the rough transcriptions by hand for accuracy, translated any colloquialisms, and balanced them with audio to account for emotion.

Data from the interviews were coded using the electronic qualitative analysis software Dedoose. In addition, the audio was played back in slow motion without stopping to reveal any nuances that might otherwise have been missed when the audio was paused multiple times. Next, the audio was played in sync with the transcription, and any sensitive, identifiable, extemporaneous dialogue struck through, leaving the original text for context.

As expected of qualitative research of the constructivist’s sort, the researcher's thoughts and reactions during the interviews were analyzed via memoing for possible researcher bias and to capture possible follow-up questions, trends, and thoughts.

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) connected each research question with its interview questions. In this way, the data could be initially sorted by research question. The semi-structured nature of the protocol allowed for substitutions and the addition of questions. The goal was to, as thoroughly as possible, describe the reading experiences of male middle school underperforming readers.

After completing five interviews, coding, and analyzing the data, four patterns emerged, and data saturation occurred by interview seven as no further patterns were found.
Patterns in the Data

The first interview question, “What do you do with your friends on the weekend?” quickly revealed the first pattern in the data. All the participants highly valued leisure time with peers, with twenty-two incidences identified. The questions about clubs and sports revealed the second pattern, that team sports took up a significant portion of the participants’ weekends, with nineteen incidences identified in the interviews. Questions about how the participants learned inside the classroom revealed the next two patterns, school tasks that could be completed within a group increased participants’ learning, and many small tasks that participants could excel in were preferred over those with longer tasks, fifteen times and twenty-six times, respectively. Please see Table 4 for details.

Table 4

Patterns in the Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ #1: How and in what ways do male middle school students engage with literacy outside of the classroom?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Leisure time with peers was highly valued.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Team sports took up a significant portion of the participants’ weekends.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ #2: How and in what ways do male middle school students engage with literacy inside the classroom?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Participants perceived school tasks that could be completed within a group to increase learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Many small tasks that participants could excel in were preferred over longer tasks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trustworthiness and Credibility

Careful consideration was given to the methods selected for this study based on their ability to capture the participants’ experiences. While the researcher acknowledges the external societal, cultural, and economic pressures impacting reading acquisition, these issues are beyond this study's scope. Implicit biases of participants and the researcher can threaten the validity of the study’s findings. As a current employee in good standing with the study site, the researcher has professional relationships with current employees, including teachers, counselors, and the school principal. The researcher tried to bracket this subjective experience via memoing to avoid misconstruing participants' experiences, thus contaminating the findings.

The simple act of researching a topic denotes that a problem exists and must be solved. This researcher values reading and must be careful not to unknowingly transfer those values to his participants, unintentionally influencing the results. To mitigate social desirability, “it is important that the information [in the study be] presented judgment-free. This is regarding everything from the advertisement of the study, the formulation of the questions, and the way in which the information is treated afterward” (Farnsworth, 2019, Social Desirability section).

Memoing aided in continual reflection of the following guiding questions: what status the researcher has in the community (insider-outsider), who will benefit from the research, how any findings will be distributed, and what patterns emerge.

The following strategies maximized the chances of genuinely capturing the participants' experiences with reading in middle school.

Interviews

Each participant partook in one interview, with a follow-up interview available for data saturation as needed. One-on-one semi-structured interviews allow for deeper understanding.
The questions were crafted to be as judgment-free as possible to increase the chances of capturing the authentic experiences of each participant. In addition, stereotype threat informed the sequence of questions. “Whenever [an individual is] in a situation where a bad stereotype about one of [their] own identities could be applied to [them], such as those about being old, poor, rich, or female [they] know it. [The person] knows that anything [they] do that fits the stereotype could be taken as confirming it” (Steele, 2011, p. 5). This phenomenon implies that the interview must proceed thoughtfully and purposefully to ensure the comfort and trust of the participant. For example, one of the very last questions asks, “Some people would say that you cannot really learn using apps on phones or tablets. What would you say to them?” This devil’s advocate question is intended to dig deep to understand better the participants’ beliefs surrounding using personal electronics to aid learning. The risk of asking this question too early in the interview is that the participant may feel an undue burden to alter their response out of fear of confirming the stereotype that when males use personal electronics, it is not considered literacy.

The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for re-wording and question substitutions as needed. The protocol necessitates that the interviewer pays careful attention to the interviewee, using body language to know better when to ask follow-up questions seeking more profound understanding, or moving on from a question that may make the participant uncomfortable. Interviews lasted no more than thirty minutes to avoid participant fatigue, which might encourage the interviewee to falsify their responses to hasten the interview. The virtual meeting software (Zoom) recorded the interview allowing for careful analysis and aiding in creating follow-up questions as needed to saturate the data. Member checking provided a second
chance to ensure the participants' voices were correctly captured. The limitations of this interview approach are discussed in Chapter 5.

Memoing

A research journal also called memoing in a generic qualitative study, helped capture how the researcher interacts with the data. Memoing increases the chances of capturing the participants’ experiences by helping to illuminate what is genuinely the participants' thoughts from those of the researcher. During the analysis phase of the study, trends in the data that might otherwise go unnoticed become easier to identify. During the interviews, memoing captured the rationale for any changes to questions and the reason for those changes. Memoing can aid in limiting researcher bias and increases the validity of the findings by increasing transparency and helping in the explanatory power of each step the researcher took and the rationale for those decisions.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's position in the study was a consideration that warranted special attention as Smith (1999) explained that historically much research had taken knowledge from communities with little thought or tangible benefit to the participants or the community at large. The underperformance in the reading ability of male middle school students was a concern due to negative lifelong consequences (Rentería et al., 2019). Therefore, this study intended to help the participants realize how they already engaged with literacy outside of school and to aid educators’ ability to reduce the gender literacy gap.

This study's research topic was familiar as the author experienced near-crippling social stigma and internalized beliefs of being a 'bad reader' when asked to repeat first grade for not meeting reading benchmarks. That formative experience led to low self-esteem and low
motivation to continue reading in subsequent years. This event's significance in shaping how the researcher developed as a reader would not become apparent for decades. It was not until the researcher became a middle school English teacher that he realized how impactful those early experiences with reading were in shaping his identity as a reader. Memoing helped bracket this experience so that the participants' voices could be better captured in the data.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study were primarily limited site access and the familial obligations of the participant during the study’s time frame of ninety days during the Fall semester (August – October). Participant bias was also a limitation as the participants may have wanted to give the researcher the information they thought he expected, even if it may not have been entirely truthful (Farnsworth, 2019).

The study site had approximately 1400 sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students. After accounting for the screening process, the researcher expected limited participation, a permission slip return rate of about 33%, and the necessity of the participants' availability throughout the ninety-day study.

**Summary**

This chapter introduced the approach and appropriateness of using a generic qualitative methodology to understand how male middle school students describe their literacy experiences in and outside school. A comprehensive explanation of the participant selection strategy, data collection, and data analysis derived from semi-structured interview transcripts and insights found via memoing followed. Trustworthiness and credibility, as well as limitations and efforts to minimize these effects, were also addressed. Findings are examined in detail in Chapter Four.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter thoroughly examines the findings and provides supporting evidence from the one-on-one interviews. Major themes such as peer relations/support and authentically meaningful purpose are explored in detail. A careful interpretation of both research questions ties all the findings together.

Discussion of Themes

Two themes emerged from the patterns in the data, Peer Relations and Support and Authentic Purpose. Male middle school students decided how to use their time, and the interview data showed that they spent it with friends playing team sports or multiplayer video games. They engaged with literacy to advance their skills in sports and video-games. For these students, literacy was not an end in itself. Instead, literacy was a process that allowed them to gain knowledge and further their expertise in the areas of their interests.

Research Question One: Literacy Outside of the Classroom

How and in what ways did middle school readers engage with literacy outside of the classroom? Peer relations and support emerged as a significant theme when exploring how and in what ways male middle school students engaged with literacy outside of the classroom.

Unsurprisingly to many in the psychology field or anyone who has spent extended time with pre-teens, peer relations were highly valued amongst middle school males (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Social interactions were prioritized both inside and outside of the classroom. For example, the findings showed that some of the participants went to great lengths to learn everything they could about online video games, where they would create sports franchises and individual and team abilities to compete against their friends in online play. Other
participants shared how they researched how to throw the perfect pitch to help their real-life friends on the playing field.

Several participants reported that organized sports with friends took up a significant portion of their weekends, with baseball, basketball, football, cross country, lacrosse, and volleyball mentioned in the interviews. Participant #16 reported having played baseball for over six years. Some participants even reported spending time during the sporting season participating in several practices during the school week and multi-day tournaments over the weekend. Participant #16 said, “I have a [game] on Wednesdays and Sundays. And two practices a week” (personal communication, October 4, 2022). Participant #5 explained that he attended his friend's games when he was not participating in his own organized sport. “Well, I'm either at my baseball game or I'm at Connor's (pseudonym) baseball game” (Participant #5, personal communication, September 27, 2022).

Many participants enjoyed practicing sports with their friends, typically outside at the park or nearby at a local school. Participant #11,

Lead Researcher: Do you [prefer to] practice alone or with your friends?

Participant #11: I [only] practice alone whenever my friends can't play outside.

Lead Researcher: Which practice do you think is more effective to help you become a better athlete? Working alone or with your friends?

Participant #11: With my friends, because then I don't feel that much stress too, like, have fun playing good basketball. I have fun playing it, and I get exercise, too (September 17, 2022).

An excerpt from Participant #10 expanded on the time commitment organized sports require,
Participant #10: On Saturday and Sunday, normally, I have tournaments for soccer and stuff. So that takes up the weekend, and then if I don't have soccer, I just hang out with friends and family.

Lead Researcher: So, the [sport] tournaments sometimes take both days. Saturday and Sunday?

Participant #10: Yeah.

Lead Researcher: Wow. Do you ever get tired, or are you just so excited?

Participant #10: I usually get tired on the fourth game.

Lead Researcher: Yeah. How many games are there on a tournament weekend?

Participant #10: Um, there's three minimum, but if you make it to the finals, then four.

Participant #10: Yeah. Okay. Three minimum. And then there's the next round if you make it (personal communication, September 17, 2022).

These excerpts from the interviews with the participants demonstrated the outsized influence sports had on this group of male middle school students. The students’ use of literacy outside of the classroom mostly revolved around furthering their knowledge and expertise in sports. From learning how to read and understand professional player biographies to learning about the technique behind a particular baseball pitch, the participants wanted to know everything there was to know about sports.

It is worth noting and may be an avenue for future study that not all participants’ friends played outside during the weekends or participated in sports. However, this was noted by only one of the eight participants in this study. Participant #11 shared during his interview that one of his friends from school preferred to stay indoors during the weekends and study,
Participant #11: Like my friends, we mostly play outside. But one of my friends, he doesn't like to play outside. So, he only likes to study a lot or more than us.

Lead Researcher: So, most of you guys like to play outside, but you still have one male friend that likes to instead study and read. Is he studying and reading because he's being forced to, or do you think he just likes to do that more?

Participant #11: He likes to do it more. He thinks it's enjoyable (personal communication, September 17, 2022).

The interviews revealed that the participants mostly stopped reading novels in 5th grade. The only exception was Participant #2, who explained that he still read the New York Times best-seller “Diary of a Wimpy Kid” series by Jeff Kinney,

Participant #2: When I was ten, I was reading the whole series of my favorite book.

Lead Researcher: What was it? The name of it.

Participant #2: Diary of a Wimpy Kid.

Lead Researcher: And you read the whole series?

Participant #2: Yeah, I [even] have one in my backpack [now]. I've been reading one of the newest ones.

Lead Researcher: It's the newest one, right?

Participant #2: Yeah. “Big Shot.”

Lead Researcher: Is it the book with the white cover?

Participant #2: I think it's the white one.


Unfortunately, the interview transcript failed to show the most telling part, which was the grimace on the face of the participant when he pulled a copy of the newest book in the series out
of his backpack. A search of the reading level for the “Diary of a Wimpy Kid” on Scholastic’s Book Wizard website revealed that the reading level for that series was approximately the early 6th grade or a Lexile score of 950 (Scholastic, 2022). A review of the other interviews showed that no other participants read novels. It is, however, worth mentioning that “Diary of a Wimpy Kid” is not on the approved list of grade-level texts at the school site, even though the content is arguably appropriate as the main protagonist is a middle school student. The author of this series, Jeff Kinney, talks about how he thinks his books support literacy. RL Stine (the author of the Goosebumps series) has also talked about this mismatch between the interest and excitement young adult readers have for his books and teacher perceptions of the literary importance of his work: some teachers claim there is little academic value in his work, but he claims they are valuable because they get young kids hooked into reading. With the Wimpy Kid books, the main character of this series is a funny, relatable “peer.” This aligns well with the findings that middle school male students are peer-focused. It makes sense that they would want to read about other middle-aged boys like them dealing with the stuff they deal with but in a comical way.

A preference for online multiplayer games was evident in the data, with over half of the participants expressing the benefits of multiplayer modes that allowed online communication between friends. For example, this excerpt from the interview with Participant #11,

Lead Researcher: So how do you stay in touch with him (long-distance friend)?

Participant #11: I use WhatsApp, or I just talk to him on my game.

Lead Researcher: Which game?

Participant #11: Fall Guys, or sometimes we play Fortnight Teams together (September 17, 2022).
The desire for peer support outside of the classroom, which manifested in time participating in organized sports or multi-player video-games, also manifested itself as a strong preference for friendship and group work inside the classroom. The participants shared that making sure that you had friends made school less stressful as “it was better to know people because if you didn’t know anybody, [school] was kind of stressful. You're like, I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know anybody around me” (Participant 5, personal communication, September 27, 2022). Participant #7 was even more specific when he gave advice to recent transfer students, “They should [introduce] themselves to the class to see if they can [make] any friends” (personal communication, September 27, 2022). The following excerpt from Participant #2 was particularly poignant as it explicitly linked friendship with positive mental health outcomes,

Making sure you have friends so you can stay happy while you're learning in school [is important] because if you don't have any kind of friends to support you, then you're kind of just sad. And you're [just] studying. It's not very healthy for your mental state (personal communication, September 11, 2022).

Not only were peer group acceptance and support vital to the students’ happiness and mental health, but their peer groups could also increase their learning. Participant #2 shared that “people in my group know about what we're doing, and they can explain how to do it. And I think I get a lot more learning in. You know while doing it” (personal communication, September 11, 2022).

Even though the participants preferred peer support and group work, there seemed to be a point at which friends could distract and get others off-task. The participants showed an awareness that not all peers were equally supportive of learning. To increase the efficacy of their
groups’ learning, some participants reported that they used things that could help redirect the physical energy of their friends, such as stress balls or fidget spinners, which would help their friends stay on task. For example, this excerpt from the interview with Participant #5,

Lead Researcher: If you want to make friends because it helps you be less stressed out, how do you know when your friends are distracting you?

Participant #5: If you're sitting there and they're trying to get you off topic, like saying, hey, what do you want to do after school when you're trying to learn about writing sentences?

Lead Researcher: Do all your friends do that all the time or is it just sometimes in certain classes?

Participant #5: It's some of my friends, not all of them, but there's a certain percentage that tries to get me off topic.

Lead Researcher: Why do they try to get you off-topic? Is it you? Do they enjoy spending time with you, or are they doing that to all their friends?

Participant #5: They're doing it to all their friends.

Lead Researcher: Do you have any advice for them?

Participant #5: One of my friends has ADHD. His name is (redacted). Maybe like a stress ball or fidget to mess around with instead of trying to get other kids off-topic.

Lead Researcher: That's good advice. Something that will help them fidget will help their brain stay focused (personal communication, September 11, 2022).

Participant #16 agreed that on-task peer groups were vital to learning,

Lead Researcher: So, do you learn better working by yourself or working with a group?

Participant #16: Working with a group.
Lead Researcher: Why do you learn better with a group?

Participant #16: There are other people to help me in the spots I didn't catch. Lead Researcher: Do your friends help you most of the time, or do they get you off task most of the time?

Participant #16: Oh, they help me most of the time (personal communication, October 4, 2022).

When given a choice, the participants preferred to surround themselves with their peers and lean into that support network when working on a learning task. Unfortunately, the interviews showed that much of the time spent in the classroom was devoted to independent work, where the teacher provided all the assistance, not their peers. “Lead Researcher: Are you working alone during class? Participant #5: Most of the time, by yourself” (Participant #5, personal communication, September 27, 2022).

It is clear from the interviews of the participants just how important peer acceptance and support were for this group of middle school students. The importance placed on peer groups was also supported by studies in the literature review, Laursen & Veenstra, 2021 & Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018. The importance of peer acceptance and support as a theme is in the knowledge that effective group work skills provide a better avenue for learning for this particular group of students inside the classroom than independent work. Speaking and listening and reading and writing are standards intended to be taught inside California classrooms. The findings of this study may remind educators of the importance of these skills and to incorporate those standards in everything they do in the classroom.

Where there were a perceived authentic meaningful to the participant purpose, middle school males engaged in digital literacy such as searching Google for reliable information about
astronomy, engaging with online educational resources such as Blooket and Quizlet, watching
YouTube videos to learn new techniques for sports, and using apps to understand and follow
Major League Baseballs’ team and player statistics. Participant #7 explained how he taught
himself to read baseball statistics using an app, an arguably difficult task,

Participant #7: On the ESPN [app], there are some buttons on the bottom of the screen
where it says scores. And then you click on MLB (Major League Baseball) or the NFL
(National Football League) app, and you could tap on your team, showing you the scores
or the stats or something.

Lead Researcher: How do you read those? Do you find that you always knew how to
read the stats, or did you have to learn?

Participant #7: I kind of had to learn to read the stats because it didn't make any sense to
me [at first].

Lead Researcher: What do you think has more stats, baseball or basketball?

Participant #7: I think baseball.

Lead Researcher: Which one do you think was harder to learn?

Participant #7: Probably baseball because it has more [categories]. And basketball just
has like scoring percentage and stuff. But baseball has OPS and stuff, like [On-base Plus
Slugging]. I mean, we know there's a lot of things.

Lead Researcher: How long have you been following the stats behind baseball?

Participant #7: I've [been doing] that for a while. I don't do it every day. I just do it
when I'm not watching the game or something.

Lead Researcher: [Statistics] helps you feel like you understand more. And it's fun.

Participant #7: Yeah. (Personal Communication, September 27, 2022).
Authentic purpose (learning about things of personal interest) even drove one participant to study hunting safety from a printed handbook. Participant #5,

“Lead Researcher: Was it a lot of reading? How did you prepare [for the exam]?

Participant #5: So, there's this book that you can get. I don't remember the name, but basically, I read over it a lot, and then my dad gave me a practice test before I went to take the actual test, which was a 100-question test” (personal communication, September 27, 2022).

Reading was not limited to informational text, as Participant #8 shared that he enjoyed reading Wings of Fire graphic novels and books like Dog Man. Participant #8,

Lead Researcher: Was that something you chose to read, or did a teacher assign it?

Participant #8: Um, something I chose to read.

Lead Researcher: Why did you pick that book?

Participant #8: I don't know because I really like Dog Man, and it's kind of like a Dog Man format. So, I asked my mom. I'm pretty sure she just got it for me one day, and then I'm like, oh, that's cool (personal communication, September 11, 2022).

Despite the interviews showing that the participants engaged in literacy outside of the classroom, there was an apparent lack of appreciation by the participants to the extent to which they already engaged in literacy. Instead, the participants believed that literacy was done inside the classroom. They did not use terms like comprehension or close reading in their interviews, but in the discussion of their preferred activities, it was clear that they did use literacy strategies all the time. The findings revealed that the participants used strategies such as activating background knowledge (schema), using context clues to derive meaning, asking questions, and
retelling new understanding. If there was an authentic purpose, often presented as something that piqued their interest, male middle school students engaged in literacy.

**Research Question Two: Literacy Inside of the Classroom**

Authentic purpose emerged as a significant theme when exploring how and in what ways male middle school readers engaged with literacy inside the classroom. Authenticity manifested itself as a strong preference for topics of personal interest or subjects with a clear, immediate payoff. The participants reported that their teachers inside the classroom focused on the reading and writing processes while, from the participants’ perspectives, omitting to connect the class work to real-world purposes satisfactorily or emphasizing purposes that were not viewed as meaningful to the participants. “In poetry, you must read [the stanzas] more than once (close reading skills) because you have to understand what they're talking about and go deeper into the sentences” (Participant 11, Personal Communication, September 17, 2022). The interviews showed that the participants never realized the ways in which they utilized close reading skills outside of the classroom.

Learning in the classroom did not mirror learning at home. When asked how they learned the best inside the classroom, many participants said they just listened to the teacher. None of the participants shared that they ever made meaningful choices on what to learn, instead just choosing how to prioritize their time. Elective classes matched closest to how the participants learned at home. For example, Participant #10 explained how in his Leadership elective class, he worked in a self-selected committee to plan a school event,

Participant #10: [At the beginning of class, the teacher] usually explains what we're doing, and then we go to our committees. We're working on the rally right now, just making stuff and planning. So, it's fun, but it's a lot of work.
Lead Researcher: In your leadership class, did you decide what committee to be on, or were you told what to join?

Participant #10: We voted. We just [wrote down] our choices, like 1 to 4. And then the [teacher] tried to give us what we wanted.

Lead Researcher: Did you get one of your top choices?

Participant #10: Yes, I got my 2nd.

Lead Researcher: And what were your choices?

Participant #10: I wanted to be on spirit and then lunch.

Lead Researcher: Wait, what's lunch?

Participant #10: We make the lunch music playlist that plays [during lunch for] all the [different grades].

Lead Researcher: I didn't even know that you guys chose that. That's wonderful. So, you have more freedom […], and you like freedom?

Participant#10: Yes (personal communication, September 17, 2022).

The participants perceived electives as more meaningful than some of their other core classes as they could quickly identify the learning tasks as providing an immediate payoff that could help them achieve mastery of topics that matched those of their personal interests.

**Interpretation**

**Research Question One: Literacy Outside of the Classroom**

How and in what ways did male middle school students engage with literacy outside of the classroom? Male middle school students regularly engaged with literacy outside of the classroom. However, they rarely used traditional printed books, as was often the case inside their school classrooms. Instead, middle school males turned to technology such as YouTube,
Google, Quizlet, and Blooket or worked directly with a knowledgeable adult such as a coach or tutor. Participant #7’s technology usage included tools such as a calculator, “but if I can't find the answer myself or can't do it on a calculator, which doesn't happen a lot, I ask my parents” (Participant #7, personal communication, September 27, 2022). One participant taught himself magic by watching YouTube and practicing his new tricks with his father. Participant #10 said,


Lead Researcher: And so, you're watching the videos with magic. And then do you do this by yourself or...?

Participant #10: Normally, and then I practice on someone like my dad.

Lead Researcher: Is it a lot of practice?

Participant #10: Kind of, yeah (personal communication, September 17, 2022).

Online resources such as YouTube were incredibly popular with participants. Again, Participant #7, “Like for baseball, there is this one pitch that I wanted to learn if I were to [play] pitcher. So, I watched my coach throw [the ball] a little bit, and I watched videos about it. I got it!” (personal communication, September 27, 2022). The drive for mastery was an essential motivator for the participants outside the classroom.

Online apps were one of many forms of literacy utilized by the participants. Multiplayer video games require a lot of time and literacy skills to fully take advantage of the features typical of newer video games. When participants were not playing sports with their friends, they often played online video games that required literacy strategies to win. One such game was MLB ’22 (Major League Baseball). Character development outside of the classroom took the form of player development in an online video game. Participants needed to read and comprehend player
biographies understand how to read player statistics, develop appropriate player abilities, make
team trading decisions, negotiate salaries, and risk injury during the simulated season. The
difference between the literacy skills demonstrated outside of the classroom and inside the school
was the medium and purpose (Participant #7, personal communication, September 27, 2022).
Participant 7 explained his preference for video,

   Lead Researcher: Now, what about reading? Is it possible to read any of this stuff, or is it
mostly video and then in person?
   Participant #7 I think it's easier to watch videos about [baseball] because you can see
them do it. I think you could read about it too.
   Lead Researcher: So [what’s] easier?
   Participant #7: I like watching videos about it because, in general, I think that it's easier
than reading because reading about it, you’d have to put more detail [using text], but
showing someone how to throw [a ball on video] would be easier because you could just
show them [how] you're doing it.
   Lead Researcher: And you can probably see a lot more than if you were to read it. I mean,
you can literally see the person doing it, and it's easier to understand (personal
communication, September 27, 2022).

Outside of the classroom, middle school male students used digital media to learn about
the things of interest to them. Inside the classroom, digital media was often replaced by physical
media such as photocopies, novels, and textbooks, and the purpose of using such media was to
complete teacher-assigned tasks. The difference between what engaging with literacy looked
like outside and inside the classroom made it difficult for the participants to connect the literacy
skills they used daily with those they learned inside the classroom.
Research Question Two: Literacy Inside of the Classroom

Male middle school readers engage with literacy differently inside of the classroom compared to outside of the classroom. Whereas outside of the classroom, literacy is used in pursuit of knowledge about topics of personal interests, inside the classroom, literacy is assigned by a teacher, often devoid of an authentic purpose or a purpose with an immediate and clear payoff connected to their interests. When asked about literacy in general, the participants often referred to an assignment in their English class as they did not connect what they did outside of the classroom with literacy. For example, the excerpt from the interview with Participant #5 about his earliest memories of reading,

Lead Researcher: What are some of the earliest memories you have of reading?

Participant #5 Probably in my English classes. I like hearing the book while I'm reading because it's like I know where I'm at more. Lead Researcher: It's like a pacing [aid].

Participant #5: Yes. Lead Researcher: And what grade were you in? Participant #5: Sixth grade. Lead Researcher: When you're listening to the audiobook and reading [the book], are you listening to the audio more, or are you paying attention to the words in the text?

Participant #5: I'm listening more to the audio. Lead Researcher: And do you feel like you remember books better when they're in audio format? Participant #5 Audio with the book [together], probably (personal communication, September 27, 2022).

The participant could recall the skill of listening to an audiobook and following along with a text but not the actual name of the text or the purpose for reading it. This omission was not unique to that participant.
Some participants enjoyed mastering literacy skills such as understanding figurative language even though the participant could not recall the purpose of learning that skill.

Participant #7,

The last thing I wanted to learn about was probably this new topic for English. It was explaining phrases. Lead Researcher: That's interesting. Can you tell me a little bit more about it? Was it poetry or figurative language? Do you know? Participant #7: It was figurative language. Lead Researcher: What did you like about it? Participant #7: You could learn what words meant, like, nouns or something. Lead Researcher: And how do you feel now that you know that stuff a little bit more? Participant #7: I think it's easier, so I could do it better (personal communication, September 27, 2022).

It was clear that the participant valued learning a new skill. However, it was telling that he described figurative language as learning about vocabulary and nouns. These elements of language were not the same things.

Just as the participants struggled to identify the skills they used outside of the classroom with literacy, it may be plausible, if not definitive, based on the wording of the interview questions, that they, too, failed to realize how they used literacy in their elective classes.

Participant #2,

So, this year, I'm starting in media production class, and I think it's really fun because I get to explore editing and how to use cameras. What [different] kinds of camera angles there are? I get to interview kids, and I just find that fun. And I also like editing a lot. That's another one I like doing. That's one of my other hobbies (personal communication, September 11, 2022).
Another difference between how literacy was used inside and outside the classroom was the emphasis on physical print media. Participant #16 shared his reasoning behind his use of physical textbooks,

Lead Researcher: And when you're working on the math work, is that something that you're using websites to help you with, or are you just using the [physical] textbook?

Participant 16: I'm just using the [physical] textbook, but I'm also using the online textbook.

Lead Researcher: Is there one that's better than the other for you?

Participant 16: The real [physical] textbook is better.

Lead Researcher: Okay. And what's easier about it?

Participant 16: The website is really laggy.

Lead Researcher: Is it laggy for other people or just for you?

Participant 16: For other people, too (personal communication, October 4, 2022).

The above excerpt illustrates how literacy differs from inside the classroom to the outside of the classroom. Printed media were rarely used by the participants outside of the classroom. Instead, Google and websites such as YouTube were referenced for help with learning. Despite the availability of digital textbooks at the study site, the participants mostly used physical versions of texts at school out of necessity due to website coding or connectivity issues. It is also important to note that the online version of texts seen inside the classroom was often exact digital facsimiles of the printed text, without the interactive components commonly found on internet-only websites such as Khan Academy’s supplemental math site (https://www.khanacademy.org).

The teachers’ role inside the classroom provided a unique insight into how literacy was used inside and outside the classroom. At home, digital media and knowledgeable friends aided
in learning. However, inside the classroom, the teacher was seen as all-knowing and the person from whom to seek out help. Learning was something that happened inside the classroom with the help of the teacher. Participant #16 explained,

Lead Researcher: How do you learn inside the classroom?

Participant 16: I don't know. I think I just listen to what the teacher teaches, and that is pretty much it.

Lead Researcher: Does that help you the most, or do you feel like you learn better working with others?

Participant 16: That helped me the most.

Lead Researcher: So, I'm going to ask again just because I want to ensure I got that on the recording. So, do you learn better working alone or in a group?

Participant 16: Working with a group.

Lead Researcher: You learn better with a group. Why do you learn better with a group?

Participant 16: Because there are other people to help me in the spots that I didn't catch.

Lead Researcher: Do your friends help you most of the time, or do they get you off task most of the time?

Participant 16: Oh, they help me most of the time.

It was telling that the participant equated learning with listening to the teacher. Yet, the following sentence said that he learned best when working with a group. This seemingly contradictory statement was repeated by other participants as well. The significance of this excerpt lies in the complementary nature of learning inside a classroom. There was a disconnect between their interests, preferred instructional approaches, and literacy activities outside of school and the instructional approaches and literacy activities at school. For the participants of
this study, the teacher was seen as the expert, with their friends supporting their learning of teacher-assigned tasks. Outside the classroom, friends still supported learning, but instead of seeking teacher assistance, knowledgeable adults such as coaches helped on topics of personal interest.

**Summary**

Middle school male students interacted with literacy differently outside and inside the classroom. Outside the classroom, middle school male students were intrinsically motivated and used literacy to further their knowledge of topics of their choosing, such as astronomy, multiplayer video games, and team sports. The students also chose to surround themselves with their peers and preferred to get help from their friends and knowledgeable adults, such as coaches, rather than from print media. They independently built skills and engaged in research: identifying questions, gathering resources, evaluating resources, and analyzing information.

Middle-school male students were extrinsically motivated inside the classroom and used print media such as textbooks to complete teachers' assigned tasks. The students would often seek assistance from the teacher when they needed help, even though they preferred the aid of their peers when given the opportunity to work in groups. Discussion of the research is examined in Chapter 5.
Male middle school students engaged in literacy differently inside and outside the classroom. Participants relied on printed or exact digital representations of textbooks inside the classroom to aid learning. In addition, the participants relied heavily on the classroom teacher as the sole source of help. The reliance on textbooks and the teacher for help starkly contrasted with the participants’ strong preference for multimedia resources such as YouTube and Google and the help of their friends and coaches when outside of the classroom. Discussion of these findings, their connection to the literature, implications, and recommendations for future study are examined in this chapter.

**Summary of Findings**

Male middle school students placed increased importance on peer relationships, relied on the support of their friends, and worked towards mastery of such things as magic tricks, throwing better pitches, learning about professional baseball statistics, and astronomy as long as they could quickly identify a meaningful payoff. In the classroom, male middle school students preferred group work and relied on the teacher’s help with classroom learning tasks yet only worked hard enough to demonstrate adequate ability.

**Summary of Major Themes**

Peer relations and support and authentic purpose were the two major themes revealed in the interviews. The importance of peer relationships during the pre and teenage years of human development was well documented in the literature (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018; Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). However, the extent to which male middle school students preferred the help of their peers both inside and outside of the classroom was revealing.
When given a choice, the participants chose to work in groups inside the classroom to complete teacher-assigned tasks. Outside the classroom, the participants preferred to play and learn about sports and surround themselves with their friends who shared the same interests. The revelation that the participants perceived their learning inside the classroom to be teacher-centered was significant in that it was in stark contrast to their preference for working with their peers. Fortunately, many types of strategies or frameworks, such as Inquiry, Project Based Learning, Appreciative Inquiry, and the Universal Design for Learning framework (CAST, 2022), could relatively easily be incorporated into the classroom, all the while meeting the California Common Core State Standards. The above teaching strategies had the added benefit of lending themselves to any authentic purpose, which was also significant to the participants.

Tasks had to have an authentic purpose if male middle school students were going to engage with literacy inside and outside the classroom fully. According to the American Psychological Association, Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education,

Students persist in the face of challenging tasks and process information more deeply when they adopt mastery goals rather than performance goals. Mastery goals are oriented toward acquiring new skills or improving levels of competence. Students who hold mastery goals are motivated to learn new skills or achieve mastery in a content area or on a task. In contrast, students who adopt performance goals are motivated to demonstrate that they have adequate ability or to avoid tasks [to] conceal a perception of having a low ability (p.17, 2015).

Outside the classroom, the participants used literacy skills such as activating background knowledge, learning new vocabulary, seeking authoritative sources, viewing videos, using apps, and listening to knowledgeable adults such as coaches. It was not good enough to know a little
bit about a topic of personal interest. Instead, the participants shared that they strived to master issues as wide-ranging as astronomy, hunting safety, sports, and musical instruments. The desire for mastery, seen outside the classroom, was strikingly absent when the participants discussed how they used literacy inside the classroom.

The findings showed that authenticity was perceived by the participants as meaningfully absent from teacher-assigned tasks inside the classroom. Instead of learning about topics of personal interest or understanding the direct benefit of a particular lesson and striving for mastery, the participants described working just hard enough to complete daily assignments and only seeking help from their teachers to complete the tasks at hand. However, the findings did provide one example of a participant authentically using literacy strategies to achieve mastery of figurative language to help him better understand the meaning found in poetry. The payoff for that participant was clear; master the use of literacy strategies to better understand figurative language to decipher poetry.

The data was clear; when meaningful, authentic purpose aligned with classroom assignments, the participants showed determination to achieve mastery. This finding aligned well with the self-efficacy theory posited by Bandura, who stated, “expectations of personal mastery affect both initiation and persistence of coping behavior. The strength of people's convictions in their own effectiveness was likely to affect whether they would even try to cope with given situations” (p. 193, 1977). If a classroom learning task or assignment related to a topic the participant was interested in, they would go to great lengths to learn all they could about it.
Limitations

Coding and data analysis of the interviews uncovered patterns and themes. However, the online nature of the interviews posed some unique challenges. Specifically, the subjects were articulate but needed thinking time, which was hard to gauge due to the video format. It was difficult for the researcher to know when to prompt or elicit more information. Parents were unsure if they needed to stay with their children during the interviews. One participant's parent explained his reasoning, “I might need to interpret the answers from a parent’s perspective” (Participant #5, personal communication, September 27, 2022). Although parents' experiences with their children surrounding literacy were meaningful, the limited scope of this study meant that only the students’ experiences were being explored. In addition, unstable internet connectivity on the part of the participants’ electronic devices caused the audio to become unintelligible at times, requiring the researcher to ask the participants to restate their answers. Careful transcription of each interview using slower playback speeds was a time-consuming process that often took over two hours for each interview.

Some of the interview questions were more challenging to answer than others. For example, the question, “When was the first time you remember reading a book?” Typically, the participants could only think back to a recent book. Even then, follow-up questions about their book gleaned little information as they couldn’t recall much, such as why they chose the book or even the book's name. One participant said he thought his mom got the book for him but was unsure why she chose it.

Questions about experiences inside the classroom proved problematic. Specifically, when asked, “Tell me about a typical day in class,” participants who were interviewed early in the study often responded with a clarifying question, “Can it be about any class?” As a result,
the question was amended to preface that “you can choose any class. It doesn't matter which one.” To aid subsequent interviews, the lead researcher first prompted the participants to think of any class period they wanted to, and they could decide whether to share the class name with him or not. Using visual cues, the researcher could glean, using eye contact, that the participant was ready to answer. The participant would also give a verbal “okay.” This small “priming” seemed to allow for a more precise and thoughtful response from the participants.

**Connection to the Literature**

This research was narrow in scope and did not refute the efficacy or necessity of early childhood reading interventions. The concern in the literature was that male middle school students scored worse than their female peers in language arts on high-stakes standardized tests; despite educational policies emphasizing early reading interventions. However, the data showed that the participants were, in fact, literate and often engaged with literacy outside the classroom. Illuminating the discrepancy, between how male middle school students used literacy inside and outside the classroom, was the intent of this research.

The indicators identified in the literature review were gender, low motivation, low socio-economic status, and school perceptions of literacy (role of teachers). Of those four indicators, this study expanded our understanding of the role of teachers' and students’ motivation in literacy engagement. There was not enough data in this study surrounding the topic of male gender stereotypes or low socio-economic status to add to the body of literature.

A review of the available literature revealed near universal consensus that more and earlier reading interventions were needed to help close the literacy gap (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Foster & Miller, 2007). The literature also revealed that despite those efforts, male reading proficiency remained largely unchanged (Gambell & Hunter, 1999; Loveless, 2015; UNESCO,
Yet, mostly absent from the literature were studies that focused on the divergent ways male middle school students used literacy outside and inside the classroom and an apparent mismatch between in-class instructional approaches and student learning preferences.

Just as the literature demonstrated a lack of appreciation of how literacy was used in the real world, the study’s participants failed to connect the reading and writing skills they learned in the classroom with how they engaged with literacy outside the classroom. It was clear from the findings of this study and the work by Asplund & Pérez Prieto (2017) that male middle school students did engage with literacy in their personal lives to learn about topics of interest.

This study lent credence to alternative approaches to literacy instruction often seen in Waldorf school classrooms. Waldorf education teaches literacy in the content areas, such as writing in scientific journals or reading during units in history, not as a stand-alone class as was the norm in public schools (Chauncey, 2006; Huchingson & Huchingson, 1993). Data from the California Dashboard showed that children that attended Waldorf schools generally performed well on measures of reading and writing (California School Dashboard, 2022). This study added nuance and insight to the largely absent literature, as most prior studies focused on the science of reading acquisition and the importance of early reading interventions and not the divergent ways male middle school students engaged in literacy inside and outside the classroom (Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Spencer, 2011).

Implications

How literacy is taught in middle schools needs reexamining. As a classroom teacher himself, one of this researcher’s most significant concerns in middle school was his students’ lack of transference of reading and writing skills from their English classes to their other content courses. It was typical in this researcher's experience, for example, for students in science class
to fail to use pre-reading or post-reading strategies when working on science projects. When asked about this seemingly obvious oversight, students (again, in this researcher's experience) often explained that they thought those literacy skills were only used in their actual English classes. Reading and writing in the content areas were already part of state standards. This study’s findings suggest that if reading and writing in content classes, such as science, history, and math, could be made more explicit, perhaps the students would more readily use those skills as they could see a direct correlation or connection between the skills to read and write and their ability to learn about those subjects.

Male middle school students that struggle with reading and writing need special consideration. Currently, students who show difficulty via standardized language arts assessments are given intense interventions up to and including extra language arts courses. However, the literature review showed that a literacy gap still exists, and the findings of this study suggest that a different approach may be best. Instead of giving extra English courses to students that do not score well on standardized literacy exams, the data suggest more learning through authentic, collaborative learning models. The developmental need for peer acceptance and support could be addressed by pedagogical changes surrounding group work. Incorporating authentic reading and writing, where the students could see a direct benefit or payoff, into middle school classes would address students' need for a genuine purpose. Allowing various methods for students to demonstrate mastery of learning tasks, such as performance, multi-media, visual, and performing arts, would align how these students demonstrate mastery outside of the classroom, making the payoff easier to identify. Not only would students connect the literacy skills they used inside the classroom with those they used outside, but their social-emotional well-being could improve as well.
**Approaches to Teaching Male Middle School Students**

Several pedagogical approaches could support middle school male students. Those approaches include Inquiry, Project Based Learning, Appreciative Inquiry, and the Universal Design for Learning frameworks. At its core, Inquiry-based learning uses student-generated questions to drive learning. Four student steps are involved with this approach: developing questions, researching their topic, presenting their findings, and reflecting on the process.

“Despite its complexity, inquiry-based learning can be easier on teachers, partly because it transfers some responsibilities from teachers to students but mostly because releasing authority engages students” (Wolpert-Gawron, 2016, What the Heck Is Inquiry-Based Learning? section). When done well, students take ownership of their learning and are fully engaged in striving for mastery of learning as Inquiry places students’ interests at its center. In addition, the findings of this study showed the lengths to which students would work towards achieving mastery of their topics. Inquiry-based learning leverages the interests of learners such as those in this study and could help other similar middle school students.

Project-based learning is another approach teachers can use to help male middle school students. “Project-based learning is a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge” (PBL Works, 2023, What is PBL? section). Project-based learning mirrors male middle school students’ complex learning outside of the classroom. Authenticity was something that the study participants said was lacking inside the classroom. However, with project-based learning, students will be determined to learn all they can about authentic problems with real-world implications. With this pedagogical approach, students can better recognize the importance of the skills they are learning in the classroom and
how those skills could be utilized to address complex problems they may encounter outside the classroom.

Like Inquiry and Project-based learning, Appreciative Inquiry places the student at the center of learning and focuses on their strength, allowing them to take full ownership of their progress. Appreciative Inquiry can be used with other pedagogical approaches to learning as it helps students “practice positive reframing, appraise and identify their strengths and skills, select goals, create action plans, and take responsibility for their progress” (Helens-Hart, 2018, p. 220). Teachers that utilize Appreciate Inquiry in their classrooms will see their male students internalize that they are, in fact, good readers. That positive thinking will translate into students persevering when encountering challenging texts often seen on high-stakes state standardized testing. The study revealed that one participant demonstrated their hunting safety knowledge and was accepted into his local hunting club by effectively utilizing their reading comprehension abilities to understand safety regulations. The study's findings extensively documented this and other literacy accomplishments.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework developed by CAST.org to reduce the barriers students face inside the classroom when their learning styles and abilities differ from those of their peers. At its core, UDL comprises three main principles. Principle One motivates students to maximize their learning by sparking excitement and curiosity. Principle Two requires that information be presented in multiple ways. Lastly, Principle Three allows students to demonstrate their learning via various modalities. One of the most exciting aspects of the UDL framework is that it breaks the one-size-fits-all approach to literacy instruction that has been so common in secondary schools.
To be clear, the benefits of Inquiry-based Learning, Project-based Learning, Appreciative Inquiry, and UDL are that it helps students adopt mastery goals and take ownership of their learning, provide students with the authenticity of purpose they crave, which compels them to push past difficulties encountered in the classroom to advance their literacy ability, thus closing the literacy gap between male and female middle school students.

Educators and those in leadership roles would build system-wide capacity by endorsing Inquiry-based Learning, Project-based Learning, Appreciative Inquiry, and UDL. Closing the literacy gap requires explicit top-down approval and a multi-year commitment by district leadership and school site administrators. Instead of the teacher being the all-knowing person in the classroom, the student becomes the expert. Encouraging and allowing teachers to observe their peers utilizing these approaches and providing academic coaching to school staff and site-wide professional development would help assuage any apprehension these educators may feel at relinquishing the sense of control these approaches require.

Role of Teachers

Teachers are problem solvers. The California State Board of Education approved the content standards expected to be taught in all public schools after collaboration/input from educators through a public standards development and revision process. School districts and educators then decided how to achieve those standards inside the classroom. However, in the current environment of a severe teacher shortage and in the experience of this researcher, teachers rarely had the time to achieve mastery of those teaching standards, severely hampering their ability to utilize pedagogical frameworks that the findings of this study reveal are vital if male middle school students are to achieve “Proficient” on state-mandated high stakes testing such as CASSPP. English, math, and science were the only subjects tested in California.
Learning in the classroom did not mirror learning at home. When asked how they learned the best inside the classroom, many participants said they listened to the teacher and just worked hard enough to complete the tasks at hand. None of the participants shared that they ever made meaningful choices on what to learn, instead just choosing how to prioritize their time. In comparison to how they were expected to learn inside the classroom, the participants outside the classroom worked towards mastery of topics of personal and meaningful interests. Elective classes matched closest to how the participants preferred to learn at home. Some instructional approaches that allow for student voice and choice include project-based learning, choice-based learning, inquiry learning, or appreciative inquiry. All these approaches could be aligned to any content standards. At the secondary level, models like Advanced Placement (high school), Pre-AP (middle school), and International Baccalaureate (middle and high school) programs bring in authentic choice.

**Role of Family**

Only male middle school students that did not score well on state standardized tests participated in this study. The participant’s parents were not interviewed. Therefore, the role of families must be inferred from the participant’s experiences, as recorded in the interviews. A consistent pattern in the data was that all the participants partook in organized sports, with most of their weekends spent at practice or playing in tournaments. The time and money the families committed meant little unorganized free time was left available to pursue other interests. Any remaining free time was spent playing outside or competing in online multiplayer video games with friends.

The findings failed to clarify to what extent families instilled expectations that learning happened in school and not at home. The findings revealed that the participants needed to be
made aware of how they engaged in literacy outside the classroom. When asked what they read, many participants responded with a book they had read last in 5th grade. There still needs to be more information about the role of the family in how male middle school students engage with literacy inside and outside the classroom, and this could be an area of further research.

**Gender Stereotypes**

The extent to which gender stereotypes played in the underperformance of male middle school students could not be assessed within the scope of this study. Interviews with female participants may reveal meaningful data on this topic and be an area of future research.

**Implications for Research and Theory**

The socio-psychological orientation provided the theoretical framework for this study. This theoretical orientation viewed the gender reading gap through the context of schools or the role of teachers, family, and community, or gender stereotypes. The research questions, interviews, and data analysis revealed that peer group acceptance and support, authentic purpose, and striving for mastery goals were essential for male middle school students to engage with literacy.

The socio-psychological orientation was insufficient to explain the nuances of the gender literacy gap fully. For a complete theory to emerge, there needed to be clarification surrounding what constituted family and gender and what specific actions or beliefs positively or negatively impacted reading achievement. It is also possible that no unifying theory will ever fully emerge to explain the differences in reading achievement among male and female students. Future educators and researchers must remain open to reimagining what it means to be literate in the 21st Century and what strategies will help students be more successful such as peer work or high-interest “texts,” that could bolster engagement.
Already, in this researcher’s middle school classroom, instructional approaches highlighted in these findings have helped to inform pedagogical adjustments that have anecdotally increased the engagement of male middle school students. For example, appreciative inquiry, which builds off what already works for students, has informed this researcher’s practice by utilizing inquiry-based learning, allowing his students to choose topics of personal interest and aiding in developing critical thinking skills that immediately assist in the mastery of topics outside the classroom.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

State-mandated high-stakes language arts testing has narrowed schools’ perception of literacy to that which can be easily tested. All the study participants used literacy in their daily lives outside of school but did not always test well on high-stakes language arts exams. None of the participants recognized that the strategies and skills they used to learn about things that interested them counted for literacy skills.

Organized sports required a considerable commitment from the participants and their families, which left little time to pursue other interests. Future researchers need to include students with varying interests and hobbies. A comparative study that broadened the number of participants and identifiers to have a more representative population sample between males and females would lend to a richer and broader data set. Parents and teachers need to be interviewed, allowing for the possibility of alternative perspectives. Current instructional approaches need to be revised for this group of students. When future researchers confirm the findings of this study, it is expected that they too will find that students might be more engaged with collaborative work, breaking complex tasks into smaller tasks, employing a variety of authentic “texts,” and helping students transfer their outside-of-school literary tasks to the academic context. These
instructional approaches to the content could lead to improved outcomes for male middle school students.

**Conclusion**

Findings from this study of male middle school students that did not test well on standardized tests revealed that they used literacy differently outside and inside the classroom. Two major themes emerged from the data: an authentic purpose and a strong preference for peer support and acceptance. Middle school male students will persevere to mastery if a learning task is perceived as meaningfully purposeful. Middle school male students needed to recognize how they used literacy outside the classroom since they interacted with literacy differently outside and inside of the classroom. Recommendations for future research included replication studies to confirm findings and comparative studies that included both male and female students, interviewed parents and teachers, and widened the population to include divergent middle schools.
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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interviewer Script:

Interviewer – “This interview should be over in about 30 minutes. There may be a 2nd interview if I have follow-up questions.”

Interviewer – “The purpose of this interview is to see if and how teachers, family, and communities affect reading.”

Interviewer – “The interview will be recorded with video. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to the recording. I’ll use this recording to make sure I understand everything you said.”

Interviewer – “I’ll also make sure to change your name everywhere it will be written down to help protect your privacy.”

Interviewer – “Remember, it is OK to stop the interview at any time to ask questions or if you just want to stop.”

Interview Questions:

I. Overarching RQ: How do school (role of teachers), the role of family, and the community (gender stereotypes) impact the reading achievement of male middle school students?

   a. Research Question 1: How and in what ways do underperforming male middle school readers interact with literacy outside of the classroom? (gender stereotypes & role of family)
1. **Interview Question:** What do you and your friends like to do together?

2. **Interview Question:** Suppose I just got a new phone/tablet. What apps should I download?

3. **Interview Question:** What apps do you use on your phone/tablet?

4. **Interview Question:** What hobbies, sports, or clubs do you participate in?

5. **Interview Question:** Suppose I was a new member of your team/club/hobby. What would I need to do to get better?

6. **Interview Question:** Some people would say that you can’t really learn using apps on phones or tablets. What would you say to them?

7. **Interview Question:** Some people would say that girls read more than boys. What would you tell them?

8. **Interview Question:** Give me an example of a time you needed to learn how to do something new?

9. **Interview Question:** What are your earliest memories of reading?

10. **Interview Question:** Tell me about a typical weekend?
b. Research Question 2: How and in what ways do underperforming male middle school readers engage with literacy inside of the classroom? (role of teachers)

1. **Interview Question:** What was it like for you when you first started middle school?
2. **Interview Question:** Are you finding middle school a different experience than what you expected?
3. **Interview Question:** Tell me about a typical day in class?
4. **Interview Question:** How do you feel when you are given a new class assignment?
5. **Interview Question:** How do you learn inside the classroom?
6. **Interview Question:** What was the last decision you made about what to learn?
7. **Interview Question:** Suppose your class just got a new transfer student. What tips would you give them to be successful?
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Participants Needed

Students needed for study
- We are interested in how your child uses literacy at home and at school?

What’s involved
- One (1) interview on Zoom
- Maybe a 2nd Interview if needed
- 30 minutes total
- Answering questions about reading

Does this study fit your child?

Participant Profile:
- male
- ages 11, 12, 13, 14
- grade level 6th, 7th, 8th
- may not score high on reading tests

Interested?

Researcher:
Mr. Colondres
Doctoral Candidate
a_colondres@u.pacific.edu
University of the Pacific
Appendix C: Parental Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian of Participant:

We’re inviting your child to participate in a research study. Participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to let your child participate now, you can always change your mind later. There are no negative consequences, whatever you decide. Your child will also be asked to sign an assent form so that they also understand what is being asked of them. The assent form is attached for your review, but I will also go over this with them.

OVERVIEW

**Purpose:**
I am studying how male middle school students that **DO NOT SCORE AS WELL ON READING TESTS AS WOULD BE EXPECTED FOR THEIR GRADE LEVEL** engage with literacy inside and outside of the classroom. The hope is that teachers could make better-informed decisions about the ways they teach reading and writing.

**Procedures:**
Interviews – there will be one of these with a follow-up as needed

**Time Commitment:**
Ability to join Zoom over a **3-week period with a web camera and mic turned on** for the following:

- Interviews should last no more than 30 minutes each

**Primary risks:**
We don’t expect any direct risks.

**Benefits:**
This research may not help your child directly. However, we hope that they will have a better understanding of how they already use literacy in their everyday lives. In addition, we hope the study will help teachers make better decisions about how they teach literacy inside the classroom.

What will my child do?

- Your child will be interviewed about their experiences with reading by me using Zoom video software. There will be one (1) interview with the possibility of one (1) follow-up interview that each last approx. 30 minutes.

Risks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible risks</th>
<th>How we’re minimizing these risks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some questions may be personal or upsetting</td>
<td>Your child can skip any questions they don’t want to answer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There may be social stigma associated with participation</td>
<td>Peer acceptance at this age (11-14 years) is developmentally important. Friends of participants may be curious about this study. We remind everyone what they tell their friends is up to them, but that it is ok to just say they are trying to help other kids their own age with their reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some may have negative feelings regarding reading in school</td>
<td>We will share that I have had difficulty reading and that reading can look different for different people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible benefits</th>
<th>This research will not directly help your child. We do, however, anticipate that it will help other kids who have issues with reading.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimated number of participants</td>
<td>5-7 male students between the ages of 11-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long will it take?</td>
<td>Approximately 30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future research</td>
<td>De-identified (all identifying information removed). You won’t be told specific details about these future research studies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recordings</td>
<td>We will record your child using the Zoom record feature. The recordings will be used during the study to help me understand subtle non-verbal communications that I might have missed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The recording is necessary to this research. If you do not want your child to be recorded, they should not be in this study.

Data Security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What identifying information will be collected and why?</th>
<th>We will collect your child’s name, age, grade level, reading level, gender, race/ethnicity, and approx. family income range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How long will my child’s data be kept?</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| How is data kept secure?                              | • All identifying information is removed and replaced with a study ID.  
• We’ll store all electronic data on a password-protected, encrypted computer.  
• We’ll store all paper data in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office.  
• We’ll keep your identifying information separate from your research data, but we’ll be able to link it to you by using a study ID. We will destroy this link after we finish collecting and analyzing the data.  
• As with any data collected online, there is always a risk of data being hacked or intercepted. We’re using a secure system to collect this data, but we can’t completely eliminate this risk. |
a research participant, problems, or complaints

Mandated Reporting

We are mandated reporters. This means that if we learn or suspect that a child is being abused or neglected, we’re required to report this to the authorities.

Signatures

If you have had all your questions answered and given permission for your child to participate in this study, sign on the lines below. Remember, your child’s participation is entirely voluntary, and you’re free to remove them from the study at any time.

☐ Check if YES: I agree to have my child’s interview recorded.

__________

Name of Child (print)

__________

Name of Parent or Guardian (print)

__________

Signature of Parent or Guardian       Date
Appendix D: Assent Form

Research Assent Form

What is a research study?

Research studies help us learn new things. We can test new ideas. First, we ask a question. Then we try to find the answer.

Important things to know…

- You get to decide if you want to take part. You can say ‘No’ or you can say ‘Yes’.

No one will be upset if you say ‘No’.

If you say ‘Yes’, you can always say ‘No’ later.

You can say ‘No’ at any time.

Why are we doing this research?

We are doing this research to find out how male middle school students that DO NOT SCORE AS WELL ON READING TESTS AS WOULD BE EXPECTED FOR THEIR GRADE LEVEL use literacy inside and outside the classroom.

What would happen if I joined this research?

If you decide to be in the research, we will ask you to do the following:

Interview (30 min): You would be on a Zoom call with only me. Your camera and mic would be turned on. I will ask for your opinion about literacy both at school and at home.
Optional 2\textsuperscript{nd} Interview (30 min): You may be asked to answer some new questions on a Zoom call. Your camera and mic would be turned on.

Could bad things happen if I join this research?

Some of the questions might be hard to answer. We will try to make sure that no bad things happen.

Your answers in the interview will be kept private. Only me, my supervisor, and your parents will know your answers.

You can say ‘no’ or ‘I don’t know about anything that we ask during the research at any time, and we will stop.

Could the research help me?

This research will not help you. We do hope to learn something from this research, however. We hope that you will have a better understanding of how you already use literacy in your everyday life. And someday, we hope it will help teachers make better decisions about how to teach literacy inside the classroom.

What else should I know about this research?

If you don’t want to be in the study, you don’t have to be.
It is also **OK** to say yes to joining this study and still change your mind later. You can **stop** being in the research at any time. If you want to stop, please tell me or my supervisor.

You will not be paid to be in the study.

You can ask questions any time. You can talk to **Mr. Colondres** or his supervisor **Dr. Rachel Hallquist**. Ask us any questions you have. Take the time you need to make your choice.

**Is there anything else?**

Please write your name below if you want to be in the research after talking. I will write my name too. This shows we talked about the study and you wish to participate.

________________________________________________________________________

☐ Check if YES: I agree to have my interview recorded.

Name of Participant _______________________________________________________

(To be written by child/adolescent)

Printed Name of Researcher _____________________________________________

Signature of Researcher _________________________________________________

*Date* ________________  *Time* _____________
Appendix E: Recruitment Site Permission Request

July 22, 2022

Principal ***
*** Middle School
*** *** *** Rd
***, CA ***

RE: Permission to Recruit for Research Study

Dear Dr. ***,

I am writing to request permission to email a copy of my participant recruitment flyer to the parents of students at *** Middle School in the *** *** Unified School District. I am currently enrolled in the Transformative Action in Education Doctoral program at the University of the Pacific.

My study is tentatively titled *A Qualitative Study Examining the Literacy Experiences of Male Middle School Students Inside and Outside of School*. I wish to answer the following research question: How do school (role of teachers), the role of family, and the community (gender stereotypes) impact the reaching achievement of male middle school students?

I hope you will allow me to email the parents of currently enrolled students a copy of my participant recruitment flyer (attached). Parents who permit their children to participate in the research will be given consent forms to be signed and returned to the primary researcher (copy enclosed). The student participants will also be asked to sign assent forms (attached).

If approval is granted, the researcher will meet with the participants for a 30-minute interview (there may be two of these) via Zoom off campus. No costs will be incurred by either the school, the school district, or the individual participants.

Your approval to recruit for this study will be greatly appreciated. All Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, including the protection of juvenile participants, will be followed. I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have regarding the research and this request. You may contact me at my email address: ***@u.pacific.edu or by phone at (***)***.****.

If you agree, kindly reply to this email stating that you give permission to email the parents of students the attached participant recruitment flyer. I appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ari R. Colondres
Doctoral Candidate
University of the Pacific
Appendix F: Parent Interest Email

August 15, 2022

Dear Parent/Guardian:

You have been selected as a parent/guardian of a middle school student at *** Middle School to participate in a doctoral research project. This research aims to understand how male students engage with literacy inside and outside school. Your child is eligible for this study based on their most recent CAASPP scores indicating they are performing one to three grade levels below their current grade.

Your child’s participation would entail a (1) 30-minute one-on-one interview with the researcher via the Zoom online platform.

Mr. Colondres, a *** *** Unified School District employee, is the lead researcher. This is an independent research study for his doctoral dissertation from the University of the Pacific. This study is not affiliated with nor sponsored by the school district. Your child’s participation is voluntary.

For more information and/or to be considered for this opportunity, please complete the interest form using the link (*** or by emailing ***@u.pacific.edu. Thank you for your consideration of this critical study. The researcher will contact you with further information if you are interested.
Appendix G: PTO Recruitment Letter

August 24, 2022

Dear PTO President *****,

I really enjoyed our conversation this afternoon and appreciated your taking the time to talk with me. I have attached my research flyer with a QR code at the bottom that will direct interested parents to a Google Form (link included below). This research explores how male middle school students engage in literacy at home. The information will help teachers and the district better engage students.

Thank you again for your time, and please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Ari
Appendix H: Research Interest Form Excerpt

Research Interest Form

* Required

Quick Facts:
You're child will be interviewed via Zoom for a maximum of 30 minutes. Questions will focus on how he learns best at school and at home.

The research findings will help teachers and school districts increase male middle school students' learning.

Student / Child's information

1. Name of Child *
   First, Last

2. Gender *

   Mark only one oval.
   
   [ ] Male
   [ ] Female
   [ ] Prefer not to say

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1TJuVvKLWnYxEF6_nIEnt00gy9T7jdew-BWfJc3t5DIQ/printform