

Ideologies about Gender and Literacy in the Academic Lives of Young Men: A Qualitative
Study in Three High School English Classrooms

by

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To Molly, Theo, and Freddy

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Abstract

Since the turn of the 21st century, the media and educational scholars have both responded to, and fostered, panic about the alleged literacy deficits of young men (e.g. Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Sommers, 2013). This dissertation instead asks how gender matters to students in English class (if at all) and how students access and navigate circulating stereotypes about gender and literacy, including deficit-based stereotypes. The qualitative study draws on interviews with 31 male and female high school students at three college-preparatory high schools (one coed, one all-female, one all-male) to investigate the ways in which locally circulating ideologies about gender and literacy (Street, 1995; Butler, 2007, West & Zimmerman, 2005) contribute to student practices and perspectives on English Language Arts (ELA) literacy. The study reveals consistent patterns of belief about gender and English class across all sites; but, for students, these shared ideologies served as raw material for idiosyncratic performances of identity relative to ELA literacy practices. Students almost unanimously accessed the belief that female students have more success and engagement in English class. Students also believed, somewhat paradoxically, that specific ELA literacy events (e.g. writing a literature analysis essay) are gender neutral—just a part of doing school. In Street’s terms, students understood literacy events as ideologically autonomous even as literacy practices were affected by ideologies about gender and literacy. These explanatory ideologies included beliefs about gender and communication style, emotional maturity, work ethic, and commitment to gender-justice. In particular, the circulating ideology about gender-justice, in which female students should be

engaged with such issues while male students should only be *exposed*, highlights potential limitations for making gender an explicit topic in class. Still, since conditions appear favorable for renewed panic about the education of young men (Weaver-Hightower, 2009), this dissertation concludes by promoting meta-analytic approaches to gender in ELA classrooms that potentially increase all students' repertoires for critical gender awareness and encourage them to disrupt the perceived neutrality of literacy event.

Chapter 1: “I Continue to Believe That”: An Introduction to Deficit Narratives about Young Men’s Literacy

“I mean girls probably do better in [English] class. I realize I'm betraying my gender by saying this but I think that all girls would say that and any guy who's willing to tell the truth is also saying that. So. It's probably true.” So said Stan, a 10th-grade student in a coed English class. I interviewed him along with his teacher and fifteen classmates after I observed their class every day from October through December 2014. Stan’s conclusion is not an outlier. His classmates generally agree. His teacher agrees. National and international test scores suggest his experience fits a wider pattern as does some literacy research and a gaggle of media accounts. Stan’s own case, however, raises questions about the stereotype that male students lag behind females in interest and success with the English Language Arts (ELA); he is considered a top student by his classmates, and I found him to be engaged and engaging in class. His example shows not only the danger of accepting stereotypes at face value but also of dismissing them. It is *not* a low-stakes move for Stan to observe the stereotype in an interview and shirk it in the classroom. Even to name it, one has to be “willing to tell the truth” and leery of “betraying...gender.” This dissertation study is a qualitative investigation of how 31 high school students, Stan among them, navigate ideologies about gender and literacy in English classrooms at three different schools.

While the focus of this dissertation is on students in specific classroom contexts, this introduction examines the swirling deficit discourses about young men and literacy in American popular culture since the turn of the 21st century. I do not attempt to be exhaustive in representing the discourses. I also make no claims about if or how the specific moments rooted

in these discourses reach my study's participants. My purpose instead is to offer a glimpse of the broader ideological environment from the past twenty years inhabited by students, teachers, administrators, parents, policy makers, and scholars when it comes to thinking about the reading and writing of adolescent males. This background places this study's findings into a cultural context. While it would be inaccurate to claim that the specific events and discourses described in this introduction are definitely on the minds of participants, it would also be misleading to portray any discourse of adolescent male literacy deficit as an entirely local affair.

While I focus primarily on how these discourses circulate in schools, it is important to stipulate that analogous beliefs operate off-campus as well. In 2001, the writer Jonathan Franzen appeared on NPR's *Fresh Air* with a provocative explanation for declining Oprah Winfrey's offer to make his novel, *The Corrections*, part of her book club: "So much of reading is sustained in this country, I think, by the fact that women read while men are off golfing or watching football on TV or you know playing with their flight simulator or whatever. I continue to believe that" (Gross). Franzen continued by arguing that affixing the "Oprah's Book Club" logo codes the book as for women only and lamenting that he held out "some hope of actually reaching a male audience." To summarize: In America, women read and men don't and especially don't when a woman recommends it. That recognizable generalization (one that I define in this dissertation as an 'ideology about gender and literacy') held so much meaning for Franzen that he declined the monetary boon of being chosen by what was probably earth's largest book club.

The truth of Franzen's generalization is, of course, debatable. Perhaps some people heard his comments and thought, "Yes, that's true, my uncle dislikes reading and enjoys golfing." Maybe others resisted: "I'm a man. I read novels recommended by Oprah." I imagine too that some dismissed him altogether as spouting 'just stereotypes.' Franzen, however, draws on very

recognizable ideas about gender and literacy in America. In examining how students like Stan navigate these forces, we have the chance to observe how one might use cultural understandings of gender and literacy to position oneself in the world, intellectually and socially. Ideologies about gender and literacy are not 'right' or 'wrong'; they are resources upon which people draw, though not always consciously. I am not suggesting that these ideologies are never harmful. For example, when I heard Elsa, a female participant in this study, say “there is sort of a little presence in your head when you're in science that makes you sort of be like this is science and females and science historically speaking, don't mix,” there seemed to be a clear line from a stereotype to systematic societal inequity. I am also not claiming that all people equally have the power to use ideologies about literacy as identity-resources. Stan, a white male, might suffer fewer or more benign consequences from negative stereotypes about literacy than an African American male, and he might also have an easier time resisting them. What I am saying, however, is that the social meaning of a stereotype has power in relation to how people manage it in context; simple dismissal or acceptance is often neither an option nor an accurate way to describe the situation.

The Oprah-Franzen example, of course, can feel trivial: who ultimately cares if your uncle decides to read *The Corrections*? The stakes, however, seem higher when we start talking about *children and school*. Phrases like 'low reading level,' 'achievement gap,' and 'remedial writing' show up in alarming newspaper headlines, and cultural discussions about stereotypes, gender, and literacy can move quickly to calls for legislative inquiries. After all, literacy is a weighty factor in determining success in school and in life, and failure on state reading and writing proficiency tests prevents students from graduating. On these terms, the difference

between one's readiness to talk about a novel at a party and one's readiness for college and career is a meaningful one.

A central aim of this study is to explore, through school-based qualitative research, the in-context circulation of ideologies embedded in a particular literacy-based deficit narrative: the sex-based literacy achievement gap that sees female students consistently outperform male students on most measures of reading and writing. I do not mean to be elusive when I say, though, that I examine the attitudes surrounding the gap while remaining agnostic about the empirical reality of the gap. The achievement gap itself, real or not, remains outside the questions with which I am concerned here. There is, to be sure, longitudinal testing data showing male students behind female students on measures of reading and writing overall, within discrete social categories (e.g. race and socioeconomic status), and in many different countries (NCES 2015; NCES, 2011; OECD, 2014). No one disputes the data per se and the persistent testing gap *should* at least raise questions. I acknowledge too, though, that many scholars and policy makers take issue with some aspects of the gap and with focusing on young men's struggles specifically (Mead, 2006; Sadker, Sadker, and Zittleman, 2009). I readily agree that many of the responses to the sex-based achievement gap come across as reductive and regressive—and that the assessments underlying the numbers are not unassailable. But these questions, again, are not centrally my questions. When it comes to the gap itself, I approach the attitudes toward young men's literacy without assuming a deficit *but also* acknowledging the deficit discourse often surrounding them.

This discourse about young men's¹ literacy circulates in conversations about education in America—in schools, academic research, governmental assessments, and the popular media.

¹ Clearly, demographic categories like 'boys' or 'young men' or 'adolescent males' are imprecise groupings, and authors who write about gender and literacy with K-12 students show quite a bit of variation in terms when referring

Glance at the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or Time Magazine or guysread.com, and it seems that a general group called ‘boys’ struggles to read and write. The reasoning, not always fully visible at a single location, goes something like: boys aren’t good at / don't like reading and writing (at least in the way schools ask them to) *which means* boys do poorly in school (especially in English classes) *which helps explain why* a generation of boys is in trouble (generally). The leaps in logic are perplexing and often full of conjecture. For example, might this particular panic rise from stubborn ideas about male privilege? Are some becoming concerned with the achievement of young men, not because males are really behind, but because the system has slowed in helping them get ahead? While such an argument is compelling, it is not the argument most often made about young men and literacy. To illustrate how this popular deficit rhetoric can circulate, I briefly examine three sites: the NAEP in reading and writing, media coverage of the boys’ literacy crisis, and an annual series of young adult books called *Guys Read*.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading and Writing

Linking the boys’ crisis to an apparently neutral arbiter like a test score is an important rhetorical move in ideological discourse about young men and literacy. The "war," "trouble," "failure," or "weakness" of boys is sourced to no single empirical source, but almost all deficit-based accounts take up the low test scores of young men on the reading and writing exams of the NAEP. Tables 1 and 2 below show longitudinal achievement gaps between male and female students in reading and writing. Tables 3 and 4 show that the gaps persist across racial categories

to their focus group. I will generally use the terms 'young men' and 'young women' when referring to the high school students on whom this study centers, but I also use 'boys' and 'girls' and 'male students' and 'female students,' especially when my analysis is in conversation with an interlocutor who uses those terms. Out of a desire to avoid mind-numbing lexical repetition, I will try to mix it up but also make every attempt to make it clear to whom I am referring specifically.

as well.² There are many ways to parse the NAEP data on reading and writing as it relates to student sex. Females score better than males on the reading exam and better still on the writing exam. This trend has persisted over time and always by a wide margin.

Table 1.1: NAEP 12th Grade Writing Scores by Student Sex, 1998-2011 (NCES, 2011)³

	Female	Male	Gender Gap
2011	157	143	14
2007	162	144	18
2002	160	136	24
1998	159	140	19

Table 1.2: NAEP 12th Grade Reading Scores by Student Sex, 1992-2015 (NCES, 2015)

	Female	Male	Gender Gap
2015	292	282	10
2013	293	284	10
2009	294	282	12
2005	292	279	13
2002	295	279	16
1998	298	282	16
1994	294	280	14
1992	297	287	10

Table 1.3: 2011 NAEP 12th Grade Writing Scores by Race and Sex (NCES, 2011)

	Female	Male	Gender Gap
Overall	157	143	14
White	167	151	16
Hispanic	140	128	12
Asian	165	152	13
Black	137	124	13
American Indian/Alaska Native	153	137	16

² As Tables 3 and 4 hint at, the NAEP reveals damning racial inequalities in literacy for American school children. When comparing, for example, White students overall with other races on the 2015 NAEP reading exam, the gaps are astounding and far larger than the sex gap—a 30 point gap with Black students, a 20 point gap with Hispanic students, and a 17 point gap with American Indian/Alaska Native students. The gaps are all about the same size as they were in 1992. I begin to address the intersection of gender with race (and other identity categories) in the literature review and methods chapters and attempt to continue that analysis throughout this dissertation. For the purposes of Tables 3 and 4, I am pointing out that sex gaps exists *within* racial categories as well.

³ The 2011 *Writing Framework for the National Assessment of Educational Progress* is different from the one used for the 2007, 2002, and 1998 NAEP exams. The results from the 2011 NAEP writing exam are not statistically comparable for this reason. I bring the results together, however, to note a gender gap over time, no matter the writing framework.

Table 1.4: 2015 NAEP 12th Grade Reading Scores by Race and Sex (NCES, 2015)

	Female	Male	Gender Gap
Overall	292	282	10
White	301	290	11
Hispanic	279	272	7
Asian	304	291	13
Black	272	259	13
American Indian/Alaska Native	281	276	5

From an ideological standpoint, it is important that the NAEP itself advertises the sex gap on their website. One of the four "Top Stories in NAEP Writing 2011" is "Female students score higher than male students at both grades [8th and 12th]." If one scrolls down the center column to "Dig Deeper into the Writing Results," the next headline ("Gender Gap: Average Scores") flags the only graphical data on the entire front page: five graphs showing the difference between male and female students' overall scores, percentile scores, scores reorganized by race/ethnicity, scores reorganized by responses to the statement "writing is my favorite activity," and scores reorganized by number of key strokes made during the test. Student sex organizes the results on the NAEP homepage, which makes any casual dive into the website a dip into gendered waters. And, in these waters, a nearly unavoidable perception would be that boys struggle with reading and writing.

Despite their wide usage, there are reasons to be cautious about accepting NAEP results at face value and to instead see them as part of a difference-centered, ideological picture of gender and literacy. First, one alternate interpretation of the NAEP data is of a shrinking gender gap. The reading and writing scores are as close as they have been since the nineties. A narrowing narrative has not received much attention, but, over fifteen years after conservative pundit Christina Hoff Sommers named a war on boys, it seems possible that girls are losing some of the attention that ushered in richer academic opportunities for them. Second, the NAEP itself

is neither politically neutral nor a complete picture of the literacy abilities of students. The genesis of the NAEP came in 1963 when Education Commissioner Francis Keppel strategized that "if he could show that U.S. students were not doing so well ...or that there were substantial inequalities in the performance of significant groups of students or regions of the country, it would strengthen the case for some form of federal assistance to the schools, an issue that was then being hotly debated" (Mosher, 93). The NAEP was designed to test subgroups like student sex, but, from the start, it was motivated by political purposes, even if those purposes are not always clearly discernible today. The NAEP exams have never claimed to be more than a "snapshot" of writing ability, but they *do* inform national debate about education (Persky, 2012). While it would be more accurate, then, to say, "In 2011, female students scored higher than male students on two, on-demand writing prompts for which they were given 30 minutes each," that is never the headline. Despite being admittedly limited and political, the NAEP-generated snap conclusion that girls write and read better than boys still often uncritically informs debate.

Media Coverage of the Boys' Literacy Crisis

Viewed almost twenty years later, books like William Pollack's (1998) *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* and Sommers's (2000b) *The War against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men* appear to herald a new iteration of media panic about boys in America. The dust jacket for Pollack's bestseller makes the case bluntly: "Boys today are in crisis." Reports about struggling boys have appeared in the national media consistently since the turn of the century, running dissonantly parallel to a counter-narrative about girls' deficits in areas like math, science, and confidence (e.g. Hess, 2013; Kay & Shipman, 2014). In reference to a gender-based achievement gap in school, one can genuinely ask: which one? For the boys' gap, both academically and socially, they are portrayed as faring

far worse than girls on markers of success and happiness. So report *USA Today*, *Esquire*, *The Atlantic*, *Business Week*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and others (Sommers, 2000a; Mulrine, 2001; Kohn, 2002; Conlin, 2003; *USA Today*, 2004; Chiarella, 2006; Lewin, 2006; Whitmire, 2006; Tyre, 2006; Jayson, 2009; Sommers, 2013; Leonhardt, 2014; Edwards, 2014).⁴ Despite slightly different foci, the articles ring consistent alarm bells. For example, the following smattering of points appear in at least two of the above pieces: young men are less likely to go to college and most graduate schools than women and less likely to succeed once there; there are more girls than boys in student government, honor societies, and other extracurricular activities; young men are a year-and-a-half behind in reading and writing; young men are more likely to take Ritalin, be enrolled in special education, commit suicide, fight with their families, and kill people. In yet another reminder of how fraught perceived educational deficits can be, the articles, though often starting with *educational* statistics on the poor performance of males on national assessments, move to a wide-ranging narrative of *societal* ills linked to young men. The cause and effect relationship is murky. While research shows the cost of illiteracy to be high (e.g. NCES, 2002), it is worth asking how slippery is the slope from remedial English to jail—and for whom is it most slippery?

⁴ Lest the steady march of newspaper and magazine articles seem like a parade of one-offs, three of these articles became book-length treatments. Most prominently, Sommers (2000; 2013) released an article in *The Atlantic* and two editions of a book, all provocatively titled *The War Against Boys*. The 2000 book version was further subtitled *How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*, but re-subtitled *How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men* in the 2013 second edition. Peg Tyre wrote an article for *Newsweek* called "Education: Boys Falling Behind Girls in Many Areas" (2006) before publishing a book-length treatment, *The Trouble with Boys* (2008). Richard Whitmire followed his *New Republic* article "Boy Trouble" (2006) with his book *Why Boys Fail* (2010). These issues are not isolated or marginalized; the dust jackets of the books by Whitmire and Tyre contain endorsements from prominent names in education like former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, former U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, and educational historian and Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch. The forward to Whitmire's book is written by former Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools Michelle Rhee. Both Whitmire and Tyre are dust-jacket endorsed by Jon Scieszka.

The articles' difference-based, bellicose tone is also noteworthy. The titles flaunt the success of female adolescents as an ironic reversal and implicitly present that success as a zero-sum game pitting young men against young women: "The New Gender Gap"; "Are Boys the Weaker Sex?"; "At Colleges, Women Are Leaving Men in the Dust." Throughout many of the articles, there is an undercurrent of titillated shock. Sommers (2000a) suggests, "The triumphant victory of the U.S. women's soccer team at the World Cup last summer has come to symbolize the spirit of American girls. The shooting at Columbine High last spring might be said to symbolize the spirit of American boys." Conlin observes, "When the leaders of the class of 2003 assemble...most of these boys are nowhere to be seen. The senior class president? A girl. The vice-president? Girl. Head of student government? Girl. Captain of the math team, chief of the yearbook, and editor of the newspaper? Girls." Rather than focus on the success of female students, the articles center on the perceived reversal of female students dominating stereotypically male territories like sports, leadership, and math.

Importantly, the media coverage tends both to react against what are perceived as the 'successes' of feminism as well as to adopt some feminists' difference-based methods to aid boys. For example, Michael Gurian (founder of an eponymous Institute for explaining how boys and girls learn differently) argued in a 2009 interview: "We have been in the decade of the girl. We have studied, understood and continued to value what girls need in the new millennium. We now need to ratchet up what boys and men need so we can have a whole new society" (Jayson). Gurian's comment on the "decade of the girl" shows how turn-of-the-century discussions about struggling boys are often understood in the context of discussions about struggling girls from the 1980s and 1990s. Sommers (2000a) encapsulates the shift by challenging Carol Gilligan's (1982) influential research from *In a Different Voice* (which in part argues for a feminine value of care

and a masculine value of justice) and then suggesting that boys would (rightly) benefit from the same difference-based attention. As a way of illustrating the efforts boys need, Sommers points to the American Association of University Women's (AAUW) 1992 report *How Schools Shortchange Girls*: "The educational system is not meeting girls' needs. Girls and boys enter school roughly equal in measured ability. Twelve years later, girls have fallen behind their male classmates in such key areas as higher-level mathematics and measures of self-esteem" (1). Sommers suggests that the AAUW report led to a number of initiatives: attention to involving girls in class, a focus on female engagement with math and science, and the removal of sexual harassment from schools. Relying on 'good for the goose, good for the gander' logic, Sommers pushes for an equivalent set of programs for boys ranging from academic to social.

While my central purpose in this introduction is to provide an impression of, rather than intervene in, the broader discourse about young men and literacy in America, it seems important to plainly state that I consider Sommers's line of argument about gender and difference to be a false equivalence. The boys' literacy crisis of the 2000s and efforts to assist girls in the 1980s and 1990s are *not* analogous. To apply the lessons of the latter to the former is to risk misapplying them. The logic, however, is seductive. If one assumes, first, that boys really are struggling in school, and, second, that a focus on gender difference helped girls in the '90s, why wouldn't a similar approach help boys in the 21st century? Another way to think about a focus on female students in the final quarter of the twentieth century is that feminist scholars and activists addressed a *de jure* and *de facto* lack of access rather than an achievement gap. It was not (and is not) that equal numbers of male and female students enrolled in advanced physics and computer science, but male students outperformed female students; there were just not many girls in those rooms. Today, even with improved access of female students to math and science classes, an

achievement gap favoring male students exists (NCES, 2015a; NCES, 2016), and a lack of access persists in computer literacy, computer science, and engineering classes (Sanford 2005; Selfe and Selfe 1994; Herring 2003; DeVoss 2011). An important, but little-discussed, distinction between the girls/STEM and boys/ELA situation is one of access v. achievement. While schools and other hierarchical structures systematically excluded female students from scholastic and professional opportunities, male students rarely have access problems. Male students often test lower in reading and writing but not because of physical absence from English classes. The issue, then, seems to be one of achievement; male students, given what is equal access, do worse on many measures of reading and writing.

Guys Read

While the NAEP reports and media accounts aim to draw attention to struggling boys, the *Guys Read* website and books explicitly attempt to remedy the perceived lagging literacy of adolescent males. In doing so, they reveal circulating ideologies about young men and literacy implicit in much of the broader conversation. In 2005, Jon Scieszka, the author of children's classics like *The Stinky Cheese Man* and *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, edited a collection of very short literacy narratives by male authors called *Guys Write for Guys Read*.⁵ He used the money generated from the book's sales to create and maintain the website, guysread.com. Starting in 2010, Scieszka began editing yearly volumes of genre-organized short stories under the *Guys Read* label: *Funny Business* (2010), *Thriller* (2011), *The Sports Page* (2012), *Other Worlds* (2013), *True Stories* (2014), *Terrifying Tales* (2015), and *Heroes and Villains* (2017). Scieszka spells out the purpose for the *Guys Read* products in the introduction to

⁵ In 2008, the Library of Congress named him the first ever National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, a position in which he was followed by the likes of Katherine Patterson (*Bridge to Terabithia*) and the late Walter Dean Myers (*Monster*).

the initial volume: "The problem is that there are a lot of boys who are not all that crazy about reading. Kids know this. Parents know this. Teachers and librarians know this. National statistics for the last twenty-five years show this. But we need to do something to change this. So the basic idea of Guys Read is to help get boys interested in reading by connecting them with things they will want to read" (8). He captures so much of the popular and scholarly discussion in this quasi-mission statement. First, there is a "problem" with boys and literacy.⁶ Second, anyone who spends time with boys "knows," at least anecdotally, about the "problem" (just as Stan, in the beginning of this introduction, considers this common knowledge). Third, we need "to do something," and the *Guys Read* stories themselves reveal at least one version of what might be done. In Scieszka's words: "They are funny, action-packed, sad, goofy, gross, touching, stupid, true—and all very short" (8). Probably not coincidentally, these characteristics might have come directly from some of the academic literature on helping young men who struggle with reading—a literature discussed in depth in the literature review of this dissertation.

Intriguingly, one purpose of *Guys Read* books, unlike *The Corrections*, is to address an assumed sociological, educational problem: adolescent males' lack of interest in, and competence for, reading.⁷ I am not suggesting that books marked as intended for guys *or* girls are necessarily striking; any trip to the bookstore reveals texts for which an identity-based audience is easily decoded. Nor am I suggesting that there is anything invidious about *Guys Read*. It is, however, fascinating that Scieszka produces and markets the series as a sort of literacy intervention. Even

⁶ Scieszka says "reading" not literacy. The tendency of some of those interested in the subject to focus on boys' reading rather than writing is something to which I shall return.

⁷ The conflation of 'interest' and 'competence' is a fascinating aspect of the *Guys Read* project. One assumption underpinning the putatively high-interest genre stories is that interest leads to (evolving) competence. I tend to buy that connection generally; most people are more likely to read a book if a friend tells them, "Hey, I think you'll find this interesting." That said, given the rather uncomplicated stereotypes about gender and the often oppositional stance *Guys Read* stories take to school, it seems uncertain how Scieszka's project might result in his audience's interest or competence for the types of books students usually read in English classes.

the pledge-drive ethos of the stories donated by the all-male authors in the original *Guys Read* volume tells a tale of something-gone-wrong. These books, hyper-aware of the broader narrative about struggling boys, offer a closer look into both contemporary ideologies about young men's literacy and the interventionist response. Many of the stories' authors are male (all 90 in *Guys Write for Guys Read*) and a handful are authors of pedagogical texts about young men's literacy (e.g. William Brozo, Michael Smith, and Jeffrey Wilhelm); nearly all of the stories' protagonists are also male; illustration is prominently featured in all of the volumes; genre choices are directed at stereotypes of 'what boys like' (e.g. humor, action, non-fiction, thrillers, sports, and science fiction).

The authors of the literacy narratives from the initial 2005 volume frequently step into a meta-commentary about boys and literacy with explicit, though inconsistent, messages on gender, literacy, and school. Snippets from *Guys Write for Guys Read* include:

- "It's just astounding, amazing, and startling what a guy can pick up by reading" (229).
- "**Guys DON'T CARE ABOUT SCHOOLWORK!** We do it to shut our parents up, sure, but we know it doesn't really matter, since we're all going to be rich, famous sports stars when we grow up" (219, his caps, his bold).
- "I thought it was the funniest story ever, but the other students looked confused. Ms. Ayala got mad and sent Ramiro to the principal's office, and he was paddled three times" (203).
- "Reading can be, for many folks, good in and of itself. But for me—for lots of men and boys—reading is the means to reach an end. The end being a fuller understanding, appreciation, and even expertise in an area: wrestling, baseball, fly fishing, computer graphics, model rockets, science fiction films, rap music, or martial arts" (129).

Guys Read offers ideology-laden versions of what it means to be a young male and a reader, and, just as the student participants in my study express, these versions can be contradictory. For example, based on the statements above, one can learn a lot by reading but doing so in school is just going through the motions. Reading is not a joy in and of itself, but books sometimes elicit

the kind of laughter that results in corporal punishment. These paradoxical stances demonstrate challenges that arise when one attempts to intervene in an ideology about gender and literacy without disrupting the ideology itself. One has to dismiss academic reading or reject Oprah while also being part of a project that presumes literacy to be a social good.

Putting Ideologies about Gender and Literacy in Context

Whether in the media, national test scores, or young adult texts, a broad, deficit-based narrative circulates, and this narrative often correlates with the perspectives of the participants in this dissertation study. For example, the ideology, evident in *Guys Read*, that young men read one thing and young women another is one of many that also came up in my interviews with students. The ideology's paradoxical manifestation for *Guys Read* authors, however, is one way of highlighting the importance of learning more about how *students* navigate these tricky seas. By their nature, the purposes of NAEP, media accounts, and *Guys Read* are at a macro, societal level, but my study investigates the operation and manipulation of these global ideologies in local context.

Teachers too seem to orient themselves to the circulating ideologies. Respected scholars of literacy and teacher education have drawn on their experiences to wonder about what is going on with young men and literacy, and anecdotal observation can be generative so long as it does not by itself warrant broad conclusions and recommendations. Michael Smith & Jeffrey Wilhelm (2002) begin their research-steeped *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, with a reflection about their work with in-service teachers:

We have heard them describe 'problem classes' with statements like 'Of course, that class has sixteen boys and only five girls...' The explanation need not continue, for those statements are met with nodding heads and sympathetic glances. If you have lots of boys in an English or language arts class—or so the conventional

wisdom goes—you can expect to have problems. We've been fascinated to see teachers who would never link a troubled classroom to their students' racial, ethnic, or social class background feel comfortable linking the problems to the relative proportion of boys and girls (1).

The apparently common-sense nature of ideas about gender and literacy, these “nodding heads” and unnecessary explanations, illustrate how quietly entrenched gender can be in teachers' and students' thinking. And, while actual gender performances do not exist without the intersections of other parts of one's identity, the naming of gender as a “problem,” as Smith & Wilhelm observe, can be more permissible than other social categories. One might certainly wonder how gender becomes salient for these teachers and whether gender stands in at times for race or social class.

Deborah Appleman, in her preface to Bruce Pirie's (2002) *Teenage Boys and High School English*, also voices what she believes to be a common understanding among English teachers about adolescent males: “Teenage Boys and high school English. Before this phrase became the title of Bruce Pirie's important new book, it was a combination of words that often worried the hearts of English teachers everywhere” (ix). Appleman testifies to the worry in her own teaching as well as the work of the pre-service teachers she supervises. These worries and problems suffuse the writing about young men's literacy by and for English teachers. Apart from contestable political claims or dodgy test scores, discourses about boys and literacy are often ones of uncertainty and deficit. Importantly, Smith & Wilhelm and Appleman draw on English teacher lore about male students as an opening to a more detailed examination. Not everyone gets there.

On a more personal note, the connection of questions about male students' literacy to some of my own experiences as a high school English teacher drive me to examine the deficit

rhetoric rather than to dismiss it. My first professional development session as a high school English teacher involved a whole-faculty workshop about gender and learning with Dr. Leonard Sax and his book *Why Gender Matters* (2005). I called roll every year for five years in English classes with mostly male students in my class for struggling readers and with mostly female students in my honors American Literature course. As a field instructor for student teachers, I saw beginning English teachers struggling to make sense of their observations that many of their male students would not read at home and of their mentor teachers' ad hoc recommendations for male students specifically (e.g. a mentor recommending frequent free-writes because "boys struggle with writing"). Though anecdotal, my experiences in secondary English education over the past ten years push me to both acknowledge and complicate a conversation I know to be occurring in schools.

I argue, then, that the reactions to troubling, but complex, indicators about young men lead potentially, but not necessarily, to an overbroad and unhelpful sense of a boys' crisis. That said, the examples from this introduction—and many others—also show the powerful explanatory power of gender as a social construct. We should not dismiss Stan's belief that "girls probably do better in English class" or Franzen's idea that "women read while men are off golfing or watching football" or Appleman's, Smith's, and Wilhelm's observations of real teachers and students grappling with their boy problems. True, performances of masculinity can vary almost to the individual, and, yes, gender intersects with other social categories like class and race, but ideas about gender can make a great deal of difference. The boys' literacy crisis would have lacked the energy to make such waves unless people like Sommers and Scieszka were tapping into already extant ideologies about gender. But agreeing that issues of masculinity

and literacy demand rigorous questioning does not mean that I intend to ask the same ones that have already been asked.

The purpose of this qualitative, multi-site dissertation study is to examine students' perceptions of, and orientations to, ideologies about literacy and gender in three specific English classrooms. In short, I found each student's navigation of these ideologies to be unique, in the strict sense of that word, *and* evidence of how global and local interpretations of these ideologies matter to students in patterned ways. For the participants in this study, categories and ideologies of gender performance are not the opposite of individuality; they are one of the raw materials from which it is so compellingly enacted. When understood this way, the empirical 'truth' of ideologies can be beside the point. Linguist Deborah Cameron (2007) refers to these sorts of beliefs about gender as "myths" in the sense that they can be false but also in the sense that they "are a story people tell in order to explain who they are, where they have come from, and why they live as they do...[S]uch stories have consequences in the real world. They shape our beliefs and so influence our actions" (4). The "story"-tellers in my project draw on shared ideologies about gender and literacy to narrate their performances, and those of their classmates, in English class. In a broad sense, this study illustrates the way in which people can act, simultaneously, as members of identity-based groups and unique human beings.

This central finding suggests a new way to approach the specific conversation about the literacy practices of male students, a conversation that, over the past twenty-years, has stalled. *The War against Boys* remains *The War against Boys* even in a new edition (Sommers, 2000; Sommers, 2013), and one counter-narrative, *Failing at Fairness* (Sadker & Sadker, 1994), has only become *Still Failing at Fairness* (Sadker, Sadker, & Zimmerman, 2009). I also rely, however, on aspects of this previous work. In his introduction to *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*,

Thomas Newkirk predicts, "There is often a considerable lapse of time before a major study is recognized beyond a small group of researchers—if it ever does get that recognition" (xi), and I build especially from many of Smith & Wilhelm's premises, questions, and research methods. This study aims to restart the conversation about literacy in the lives of young men by turning to the construct of ideologies. Thinking about gender and literacy through the prism of ideology acknowledges the power of stereotypes and common sense but also benefits from the affordances of critical gender and critical literacy perspectives.

The central research question guiding the project is: *How do ideologies about identity and literacy contribute to student practices and perspectives on literacy in a high school English classroom?* This study works from the premise that a productive way to study young men's apparent struggles with literacy is to examine how students navigate identity performances in relation to in-class literacy activities, within the context of circulating ideologies about literacy and identity. These performances may be influenced by many aspects of a student's identity; the initial broadening of the lens beyond gender allows me to interrogate the salience of gender and to better understand the way students perform in response to different literacy activities. In other words, part of the motivation for this study is to explore the difference gender makes in the apparent struggle of boys in English class. Unlike many studies about young men's literacy in the past twenty years, this project studies both male *and female* students as central research participants. The variety of participants is in part an effort to more accurately describe what can be attributed to gender (and what cannot). If one only studies boys, it becomes too easy to describe performances relative to masculinity. This study also supplements its examination of ideologies about gender and literacy expressed by students in interviews with observations of students' in-class performances in the participating classrooms.

In the literature review, I argue that scholarship is largely bifurcated along difference-driven and (pro)feminist (Lingard & Douglas, 1999) lines. Broadly speaking, the former values straightforward, but often gender difference-based, recommendations for English teachers which Weaver-Hightower (2008) argues have become de facto guides for teachers; the latter advocates critical approaches to gender, and identity, in school. I reframe that split conversation through a theoretical approach drawing on both the (pro)feminist move to work under critical gender frameworks and the difference-driven scholars' impulse to confront familiar notions of gender with which students and teachers work. I draw on Street's (1995) ideological model of literacy and Butler's (2007) and Connell's (2005) theories of gender performativity and masculinity (respectively) to introduce 'ideologies about gender and literacy,' which I define as highly naturalized belief systems about how given identity/gender performances work (or do not work) in relation to in-context literacy practices. This theoretical model undergirds the qualitative research design and analytic framework of the study, consisting of six weeks of in-class observations as well as semi-structured interviews with 31 male and female students at three college-preparatory high schools in the Upper Midwest (one coed, one all-female, and one all-male).

In chapter 4, I find that ideologies about gender and literacy held power for students in English class but also that their in-context circulation challenges the efficacy of difference-based curricular and pedagogical recommendations purporting to be friendlier to male students. Participants almost unanimously accessed the belief that female students had more success and engagement in English class, even at the all-male school. Paradoxically, however, students often believed specific ELA literacy events (e.g. writing a literature analysis essay) to be gender neutral—just a part of doing school. To explain the power of gender, students instead relied on

(and sometimes resisted) ideologies about broad gender dichotomies in communication styles, social development, and work habits. In the terms of an ideological model of literacy (Street, 1995), students understood literacy events as ideologically autonomous even as literacy practices were affected by ideologies about gender and literacy. For example, male students might do poorly on a literary analysis essay because they lacked the maturity to analyze complex characters but not because gender mattered to the writing process itself. By contrast, students often believed their male peers did better in science classes, a finding that aligns well with stereotypes about school subjects but complicates ideologies about gender and disciplinary literacy practices. After all, shouldn't hard work help female students in chemistry class too?

Chapter 5 analyzes the way that participants described, and oriented themselves to, circulating ideologies about gender and gender justice, especially what some called feminism, in English class. I find that, when the topic of gender-justice arose with regard to an ELA literacy practice, female students were expected to be fully *engaged* while male students need only be *exposed*. Participants believed such conversations were likely to occur in these three English classes, but this chapter shows that the majority of students who raised the topic in their interviews considered it of more interest to female students. These findings affirm existing scholarship that argues for the utility of critical conversations with students about the work of gender in classrooms but also suggest that students be prepared to have such conversations based on locally extant ideologies about gender. In other words, this particular ideology deserves special attention because it speaks to how this dissertation's findings and recommendations would be best presented to students and teachers.

Weaver-Hightower (2009), a (pro)feminist scholar who writes about the politics of boys' education initiatives, predicts that another public wave of the boys' literacy crisis is likely. I urge

scholars to address these questions in the current, relatively low-panic environment with progressive, practical approaches that work for students and teachers. Without assuming the salience of gender in any given context, I recommend that teachers provide structured opportunities for their students to describe and question beliefs about gender and literacy that circulate in their classes with two particular goals in mind: 1) the productive disruption of the neutrality of literacy events; 2) the expansion their students' repertoires of critical gender analysis. Importantly, based on the results in chapter 5, it seems that many students—in particular male students—do not see engagement with critical gender work as applicable to themselves or their English coursework. As one method of disrupting circulating ideologies and engaging in critical gender analysis, this study's findings also suggest that students take on comparative analysis of ideologies about gender and other school subjects, especially subjects where gender stereotypes might be flipped (e.g. math, science, history). Replacing difference-based assumptions with meta-analytic reflections best suits students who draw on, but are not controlled by, patterned ideologies about gender and literacy.

Chapter 2: Orientations to Gender Difference: A Review of the Scholarship about Young Men and Literacy

If we do not want *The War against Boys* to be the only voice heard by teachers and parents, then someone else has to speak in a way that responsibly resonates with their experiences of working with young men and literacy. I explored some media perspectives in the introduction, in part because ideas about students' literacy, including their own, can become inflected with broader conversations and beliefs about gender. In this literature review, however, I limit the scope of the material to scholarly writing focused on young men's literacy practices. To put it succinctly, while there has been no shortage of attention to young men's literacy, especially in the media, rare is the scholarship that theorizes gender in its intersectionality and complexity but also validates students' actual experiences with gender and literacy in the classroom. The exigency for my research is within this approach. Other researchers have asked vital questions about gender/young men and literacy and offered intriguing answers, but the participants in these long-running conversations often seem to separate themselves from and/or to misunderstand each other. One might think of a noisy school cafeteria where different tables of students chat about the same semi-scurrilous topic. Each table's underlying assumptions, purposes, and backgrounds lead to varying conversations, and they only hear each other in passing snippets on their way for drink refills. One purpose of my review is to both surface and find links between the often contrasting assumptions and ideologies about gender and literacy in scholarship about young men.

I focus on two approaches to scholarship about young men and literacy: (pro)feminist and difference-driven. Weaver-Hightower (2003) proposed four categories of literature coming from what he calls the “boy turn” in educational studies: popular-rhetorical literature, theoretically-oriented literature, practice-oriented literature, and feminist and pro-feminist responses⁸ (474). I touch on the popular-rhetorical (e.g. *The War against Boys*) in the introduction and include a central voice of the theoretically-oriented (Connell’s *Masculinities*) as part of the theoretical framework of this dissertation study. Still, while texts from both categories inform the broader conversation about young men, neither focuses primarily on the pedagogy and curriculum of English classes. Weaver-Hightower defines the practice-oriented literature as “concerned with developing and evaluating school—and classroom—based interventions in boys’ academic and social problems” and the pro-feminist “response” as a “critique” of that “concern.” While it was arguably true in 2003 that pro-feminist work on boys began as a “response” rather than a proper “literature,” I assert in this chapter that (pro)feminist scholarship on young men has evolved to create its own “interventions in boys’ academic and social problems” (e.g. Rowan et. al., 2002; Alloway, 2003; Martino & Kehler, 2007b). As a result, (pro)feminist literature should now be considered practice-oriented as well in that these scholars intervene in questions of young men’s literacy *prima facie*, not simply as a reaction.

To replace practice-oriented as a category, I use the term ‘difference-driven.’ Unlike the generally self-declared (pro)feminists, the scholars whose work I label as difference-driven do not attach this label to themselves nor do they generally share a specific theoretical or political approach. Some (pro)feminists (e.g. Martino & Kehler, 2007) call difference-driven scholars conservative, but that is generally both inaccurate and specifically denied by the difference-

⁸ While Weaver-Hightower (2003) refers to “pro-feminist” with a dash, Weaver-Hightower (2008) switches to parenthesis (i.e. (pro)feminist). I adopt the later usage.

driven scholars themselves. They might, in fact, prefer a categorization such as Weaver-Hightower's 'practitioner-oriented' or 'practical' as they all explicitly aim to recommend pedagogy and curriculum for the teachers of young men. As will become clear, I admire and draw from their impulse to speak directly to those who perceive young men to be struggling in English class. That said, declaring their take on an often heated conversation 'practical' or 'practitioner-oriented' too easily implies that (pro)feminist scholars' ideas are *impractical* and *not* practitioner-focused. Such an implication can lead to the poisonous conclusion that feminist educational practices are not realistic or too difficult to enact, distracting educators and students from the 'real' work of ELA education. At the risk of falling into a semantic quibble, a label other than 'conservative,' 'practitioner-oriented,' or 'practical' is necessary, and I offer 'difference-driven.'

Interestingly, difference-driven and (pro)feminist scholars both orient themselves around ideologies about gender difference in English class, but (pro)feminists seek to disrupt these ideologies while difference-driven scholars are more inclined to rely upon them, or at least leave them intact, in their approaches and interventions. The difference-driven scholars' move to proceed from cultural ideas about gender difference is what I mean in suggesting that they attempt to speak directly to students' and teachers' lived experiences and the consequences of those lived experiences. Gender difference is a common model for making sense of the world and, as this dissertation shows, making sense of English class. It is, of course, not the only model. Butler argues, gender theory can "open the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibility ought to be realized" (viii), and I argue in chapter 3 that theories of gender and literacy provide a way to account for the importance of difference without necessarily orbiting around it. For the purpose of this literature review, however, (pro)feminist

and difference-driven scholars implicitly and explicitly use difference as a crucial reference point, and my terminology reflects that.

Under these labels, one can generalize about (pro)feminist and difference-driven scholarship. (Pro)feminist scholarship fronts a critical gender perspective and critiques hegemonic masculinity but often oversimplifies scholarship that takes young men's literacy struggles at face value. In addition, though right to emphasize heterogeneous performances of gender, (pro)feminist work can too quickly dismiss meaningful beliefs about young men and literacy and/or omit plug-and-play recommendations for English teachers. Alternatively, difference-driven scholarship responds directly to visceral concerns about young men and literacy but frequently adopts a difference-based approach to gender and literacy (e.g. guys would like more jokes in class but girls would not) that relies on simplistic, static conceptions of gender. I conclude this review by making the case that there is space for a (pro)feminist approach to the thorny issues involved in studying young men and literacy that accounts for the power of beliefs about gender difference. This means engaging the world in which ideologies about gender (even ones that seem regressive or simplistic to some) have real explanatory power. By also interpreting students' descriptions of localized ideologies through a (pro)feminist lens, I arrive at an approach to the literacy of young men that is simultaneously progressive and pragmatic.⁹

Remaining Calm; or Ideologies as a Peace Treaty for the Study of Young Men and Literacy

In order to conduct ethical research on this topic, it is essential to carefully define the exigency behind an investigation of gender and literacy with an emphasis on young men. My own purpose is to examine high school students' perceptions of the difference gender makes in

⁹ Both (pro)feminist and difference-driven scholarship might potentially be considered 'pragmatic' in the philosophical and colloquial sense.

their English classes,¹⁰ but I explicitly distance this project from crisis-based motivations. Such a move is necessary, I believe, because nearly all of the American scholarly work on young men and literacy (to say nothing of the media fervor) seizes on an apparent gender-based literacy gap to define, at least in part, a purpose for their work. There are two key assumptions embedded in this alleged crisis: 1) young men really do perform poorly relative to young women on measures of literacy; 2) this poor performance is new and/or newly important for young men.

As explained in the introduction, the first assumption is probably true, at least in a sense. The 2011 NAEP exam in writing and the 2015 NAEP exam in reading show an achievement gap relative to sex. To be sure, these statistics elide important details. For example, the literacy constructs (e.g. timed, on-demand writing) required on the NAEP are limited but are not widely portrayed as such. Even so, the results from national (and international assessments like PISA) are consistent in portraying a gender gap. The second assumption, however, is more complicated. The NAEP website, in its prominent placement of sex-based difference, seems to imply that the gap is news, but it is almost certainly not new news. John Locke's (1996) *Thoughts Concerning Education*—in addition to recommending hard mattresses and regular defecation—bemoans boys' lack of facility with language as early as 1693, and scholars have traced continuing worries about boys' achievement in school over hundreds of years (Cohen, 1998). In perhaps the most intriguing example, Voyer & Voyer (2014) show female students getting better grades than male students in language-based subjects since 1914. They offer a grade-focused, quantitative meta-analysis of 369 samples of past academic research from 1914-2011, elementary school through college. They find that female advantage exists in all subject areas but that the course subject is a

¹⁰ To be as clear as possible, beliefs about gender-based deficits *do* circulate for students in this study, but my project is not concerned with whether such beliefs are accurate in any empirical sense. I do seek to understand their explanations for, and orientations to, any deficits they observe.

significant variable; the largest gender grade gap is in language courses (where ELA grades are categorized) and that gap increases from elementary school to high school.¹¹ All told, young men's literacy struggles over the past 20 years cannot rightly be considered a change in the status quo.

My argument, then, is that one reason studying ideologies about gender and literacy is important to study *now* is because they can help us predict and react more thoughtfully to potential literacy panics. While the lack of novelty is an effective argument against regressive calls for enacting a mythical set of boy-friendly, old-time educational practices, it is shallow cause for dismissing the issue entirely. The repeated eruptions of concern about young men and language learning should point toward hard questions about ideology and literacy. Where ideologies about gender and literacy exist, literacy panics about young men are full of potential energy—like the proverbial boulder at the top of the hill, just waiting for a push. One can boil it down to a sort of equation: ideology about identity and literacy (e.g. young men do not like the texts teachers assign in school) + reactive agent (e.g. national test scores showing 12th grade males performing poorly on a reading test) = young men's literacy panic. The ideology about identity and literacy is somewhat stable and often dormant. When the reactive agent (e.g. NAEP scores) possesses sufficient energy to activate a previously circulating ideology, a panic becomes likely—the boulder starts heading down the hill—because the information delivered by the reactive agent 'makes sense.' Of course boys score lower, we say, I haven't been able to get Bluto to read a book since 5th grade.

¹¹ Voyer & Voyer include other findings of note to this discussion: a) North American schools show a much larger student sex gap in language courses than Scandinavian schools; b) when only US schools are considered, racial composition does not affect the magnitude of gender difference; c) Voyer & Voyer tested for private v. public schools as a significant variable in the gender gap but found none in any subject.

The panic is hard to stop because ‘common sense’ ideologies permit us to question the reactive agent less thoroughly than we otherwise might. With no underlying ideology (or a less common one), differential test scores elicit more of a “huh, I wonder why that is?” than an “of course! I knew it!” But with an underlying ideology, questions intended to slow one’s roll—like “was the test a valid one?” or “what kinds of writing did students do on the test?”—get rolled over by the increasingly large, fast, loud boulder. At that point, the only ways to stop the panic are to make compelling, equally ‘common sense’ arguments against the ideology or reactive agent (diverting the boulder) or wait for the literacy panic to end (all hills plateau somewhere). An approach fronting the examination of long-standing ideologies, rather than deficit-driven crises, prompts better questions and more circumspection before the panic boulder’s potential energy becomes kinetic.

“Nascent” and “Diffuse”: Where is the Scholarly Literature on Young Men and Literacy?

A review of work about young men and literacy reveals an apparent discrepancy even on the basic issue of whether there is a little or a lot of focus on these issues in America. The split, however, makes more sense once one differentiates between media attention and scholarly/governmental attention. On the one hand, those who deemphasize the sex-based literacy achievement gap argue that young men's literacy travails have already received quite a bit of attention *in the media*. Mead (2006) observes, "If you've been paying any attention to the education news lately, you know that American boys are in crisis" (1), and the Maine Department of Education (2007) declares, “Underachieving boys—by now we have all heard the media warnings that alert us to this phenomenon” (1). On the other hand, those who decry the gap argue that too little *scholarly and governmental* attention has been paid. Tyre (2008) counters, "Given the magnitude and significance of the problem, you might assume that a host of

research projects, government-funded studies, experimental pilot programs, academic consortiums, and private foundations are trying to come up with innovative ways to address the male reading deficit...you'd be wrong. Very little research is being conducted in this country on why boys aren't reading and writing well" (138-139). Whitmire (2010) agrees that the attention to young men's literacy is scant and further contrasts the inattention of U.S. policy makers to the government reports on the matter from Australia, Canada, and the U.K. Even some academic scholars who critique gender-based policy reform suggest that the attention in the States was different, and substantially less, than in other English-speaking countries (Lingard, Martino, & Mills, 2009).

Since boys' education has been the subject of government reports in Canada, the U.K., and Australia (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004; House of Representatives, 2002) and the American media has maintained a low hum of scandal in reaction to the boys' crisis since the early-2000s, it is something of a surprise there has not been more government and scholarly attention. Weaver-Hightower (2008), in his systematic analysis of the politics involved in issues of boys' education, gives a summary of the attention in the U.S.. He argues:

Despite the high visibility of the debates internationally, issues of boys and masculinity are still relatively nascent discussions in the United States. High-profile exceptions and certain movements around boys' education have been present for years, but the United States has yet to experience the concerted governmental and public panics about policy that has characterized the topic elsewhere, particularly not to the extent as in Australia. No U.S. Federal Government reports. No inquiries. Rather, stated simply, *the context for boys' education issues in the United States is diffuse, conservative, structurally and legally constrained, and localized.* (180, his italics).

Weaver-Hightower is accurate in describing the discussion of boys' education as "nascent."

These already circulating discourses would benefit from more sustained, scholarly attention. It is essential, however, that the nature of the questions guiding increased attention be ones that lead

the discussion somewhere new. Weaver-Hightower presciently notes that the media attention in the U.S. has tended to be “conservative.”¹² In this dissertation, I present a shift that would speak to progressive, (pro)feminist conversations already going on abroad without ignoring generative ideas about young men’s literacy already produced by American scholars (who have often been, in turn, misinterpreted or wrongly lumped together as conservative by scholars from abroad). This literature review places these scholars of gender and literacy into conversation. These critical voices might be especially effective in a country like the U.S. where a conservative government policy does not (yet) frame the discussion; progressive research and theory could offer that framing instead.

I focus most closely on scholarship in literacy studies and education that is guided by questions about adolescent males’ academic literacy which, as I have noted, tends to be viewed as understudied outside of the media. The second edition of Brozo's (2010) *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader: Engaging Teen and Preteen Boys in Active Literacy* reviews the literature on young men and literacy by noting, "Books that deal with both gender issues and literacy for boys, though still small in number, have increased...More rare, however, are books focused exclusively on the literacy needs of adolescent males" (2). Along with his own book, he includes only Smith & Wilhelm's (2002) *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men* and Tatum's (2005) *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males*. Brozo does not mention it, but I add to this literature review Bruce Pirie’s (2002) *Teenage Boys and High School English*. Also, though Brozo rightly classifies them as focusing on younger boys, I consider Thomas Newkirk's (2002) *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture* and Ralph Fletcher's (2006) *Boy*

¹² Weaver-Hightower (2008) is not specific about his meaning of “conservative,” but he is best understood in the context of his 2003 review of the literature of the “boy turn,” where he posited four categories, internationally, for reactions to the boy crisis: popular-rhetorical, theoretically oriented, practice-oriented, and feminist and (pro)feminist response.

Writers: Reclaiming Their Voices as still being important to the ongoing academic conversation about older boys and literacy.

Six year later, I still concur with Brozo about the paucity of research about young men and literacy *in the United States*, but he neglects to mention the distinct discussion happening internationally, where a measured literacy gap between male and female students exists (OECD, 2014; OECD, 2015)¹³ but so does a discourse critical of difference-based approaches to the gap. Intriguingly, no published literature review specifically focused on gender and adolescent literacy thoroughly analyzes the American conversation alongside the international one. Some of the reaction abroad takes a similar, difference-based approach to the books on Brozo's list¹⁴ (Millard, 1997; Maynard, 2002), but, unlike the work within the U.S., a hefty share of the scholarship outside the U.S. also challenges media and governmental narratives that describe young men as at risk. In the introduction to a special *Canadian Journal of Education* issue, Martino and Kehler (2007) explain, "We present the articles in this special edition as counter-narratives to such official stances vis-à-vis the status of boys' literacy attainment and as a more critical examination of the gendered dimensions of literacy and schooling" (401). As a sample of these important critics, this literature review includes Rowan et. al.'s (2002) *Boys, Literacies, and Schooling: The Dangerous Territories of Gender-based Literacy Reform* and Martino & Kehler's (2007a) article "Gender-Based Literacy Reform: A Question of Challenging or

¹³ Using assessments from the 2012 PISA, the OECD *Education at a Glance* (2015) report shows that, in the 65 countries included, girls outperformed boys in reading by an average of one entire year of schooling. In addition, though male students outperform female students in math (by about 3 months of school), male students in every country but 6, were more likely to be considered 'low achievers' in reading, math, and science (197). The report worries about the consequences for boys who perform poorly in all subjects calling it a "major challenge for education systems" and opining that it will "become easier for these students to build an identity based on rebellion against school and formal education" (197).

¹⁴ Maynard's book focuses on primary grades only, so I do not include it the literature review in this dissertation either. I include Millard's book, focusing on students in the middle grades, in a review of difference-based work on young men's literacy.

Recuperating Gender Binaries” from their special *CJE* issue dedicated to investigating “the issues intersecting masculinities, literacy, and schooling research.”¹⁵ These “counter-narratives” help to understand some of the American academic literature in a new light, but the international view also often paints that literature with a dismissive, overly general brush. In addition, these “counter-narratives” run counter to international narratives but fit awkwardly on an American context that has, for example, never included a federal government response to boys’ literacy travails.¹⁶

Difference-Driven and Deficit-Assuming: American Scholars and Young Men’s Literacy

Even a cursory look at the publication dates of the American scholarly books on young men’s literacy suggests a wave that has since receded: 2002 through 2006 saw six book-length treatments, but the next ten years have seen none.¹⁷ In the midst of this burst of interest, Weaver-Hightower (2003) identified the trend internationally as a “boy turn” in which boys’ advocates thought of boys as getting a “turn” of attention, and (pro)feminists criticized the “turn” away from girls. In his review, he lumps much of the American response focused on young men’s literacy together. Of Brozo, Newkirk, Smith & Wilhlem, and Pirie, Weaver-Hightower suggests, “A number of practice researchers have advocated aligning the curriculum and pedagogy of the language arts classroom with the interests and preferences of boys as a way to increase boys’

¹⁵ Martino & Kehler (2007b) begin their introduction by observing, “With an abundance of submissions from Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada we are satisfied that this special issue reflects the international scope of concerns expressed through media outlets and government agencies that have fueled a new gender crisis” (401). At the risk of sounding U.S.-centric, it seems a notable omission to leave out the land of the free and the home of *The War against Boys*.

¹⁶ The NAEP is congressionally funded and mandated—it is often called *The Nation’s Report Card*—but no official federal government response to the sex-based literacy gap has ever been taken. It is also true that the state of Maine Department of Education (2007) commissioned and released the *Final Report: Task Force on Gender Equity in Education*, but it is neither a federal policy nor focused primarily on literacy. The story of this report, however, is such a political and ideological barnburner that it probably deserves its own dissertation.

¹⁷ *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader* also came out in a second edition in 2010.

literacy skills and scores” (486). While I agree in a general sense that these writers might be called “practice researchers,”¹⁸ their central projects are diverse. For example, Pirie is a high school teacher engaged only with classroom practice, Smith & Wilhelm use systematic qualitative research, and Brozo relies on Lacanian archetypes of masculinity as an organizational theme. As a whole, the difference-driven literature on young men and literacy varies widely in methodology, argument, population of focus, and purpose.

Before analyzing the literature as a whole, I set apart Smith & Wilhelm's *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* because it is the difference-driven text that most informs my approach in this dissertation. Their book both fits into the difference-driven category (which I define as rooted in assumptions of gender difference and literacy deficit) but is also an exception to it. First, *Chevys* stands as the only example of systematic, qualitative research in the category. Smith & Wilhelm studied a diverse (racially, academically, and socioeconomically) selection of 49 male students at four school sites and made use of student interviews, student think-alouds of texts, student literacy logs, and student evaluations of learner profiles. Due to the extensive body of research, their claims are supported, and complicated by, a rich set of qualitative data. Second, despite the homogenization of young men in many difference-driven books, a crucial claim in *Chevys* is that studying young men and literacy stands as a useful enterprise even though, of course, 'young men' is an incredibly heterogeneous category. Their conclusion is worth quoting at length: "The boys were very different. They had different values, interests, and goals. Consequently, we're wary of lumping them together in a category called 'boys,' and we're suspicious of research that homogenizes them. But...we did this research with a teacher's eye. We asked ourselves whether

¹⁸ I imagine that nearly all lists of parenthetical citations contain generalizations to save space, and Weaver-Hightower attempts a literature review of literature about boys of all ages, in and out of school, and in all school subjects. For my literature review in particular, though, it is important to dig into the diversity of responses to young men's literacy.

our findings would give us something to go on in planning curricula and instruction. And we think they do" (183). Smith & Wilhelm define their research as practice-based—the findings, in their view, will help teachers plan and instruct—but the authors are aware of the ‘which boys?’ question. Many feminist and (pro)feminist critiques try to cast the literature on young men’s literacy as somehow uniformly unaware of gender as performed or heterogeneous. *Chevys* bucks that assumption.

Because of their systematic research, Smith & Wilhelm also offer a number of significant, research-based findings. One criticism that can be levied at the difference-driven literature on young men is that it lacks original, systematic research to make such supported claims. These authors rely instead on filtering teacher lore, memoir, and selected literature reviews through a prism of young men’s literacy struggles. Smith & Wilhelm themselves tactfully offer the following observation: "Much of the current discussion of boys relies more on anecdotal accounts than on systematic research. We don't want to minimize the importance of personal experience as a contribution to this conversation, but we would argue that such a far-reaching and important problem deserves a systematic look at a wide variety of boys from a wide variety of contexts" (xvii). The findings in *Chevys* are diverse. First, using a theoretical lens called ‘flow’ developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, they suggest that young men learn reading and writing (and presumably other subjects) best when they feel competent, are appropriately challenged, are given clear goals and feedback, and focus on immediate rather than future experience (28-30). Second, Smith & Wilhelm argue that young men thrive when literacy practice is made social and work harder when teachers make an effort to get to know their interests. Third, young men read and produce a broad array of texts but often have an impermeable border between out-of-school literacy and in-school literacy. For the most part,

their passion stays outside the classroom. Finally, one of their most significant findings is the apparent paradox that young men almost all exalt the crucial importance of literacy specifically and school generally, but, in practice, they often dismiss or glumly acquiesce to in-school literacy. In my study, I look more closely at the connection of ideologies about gender and the literacy practices students generally associate with "in-school."

Even though *Chevys* is without direct peer, Weaver-Hightower's broad assertion that difference-driven literature recommends changing curriculum to fit the "interests and preferences of boys" draws attention to three important trends in this body of work as a whole. First, these books often suppose male students to be at a literacy deficit in comparison to their female peers. Second, and more crucially, their recommendations reveal a controlling ideology of gender difference in many of their recommendations for English pedagogy and curriculum. Finally, I suggest that these recommendations from difference-driven literature about young men and literacy often seem to 'make sense' to teachers and students. For this reason, one would be wise to learn from, rather than reject, sense-generating ideologies of deficit and difference.

Importantly, nearly every author I label difference-driven is motivated, to different degrees, by a relatively uncritical acceptance of men's putative literacy struggles—or at least an awareness that these struggles are part of a familiar narrative. Consider their titles: *Misreading Masculinity*, *Reclaiming Their Voices*, *Engaging Teen and Preteen Boys*, *Closing the Achievement Gap* (bold face added). According to much of this literature, young men are disempowered, behind, misunderstood, and bored, and scholars' calls for change, be it through relevance, violence, or physical activity, come from a premise that young men *need* a change in English class to be successful.¹⁹ For example, Ralph Fletcher, who focuses his work on boys and

¹⁹ The authors I reviewed differ on their presentation of more successful male students. Smith & Wilhelm, for example, interview some male students who are quite successful in English class.

writing, often uses language of disenfranchisement to describe boys' position in writing classrooms, encouraging educators to "give them a seat at the table" and to "invite boys to be full citizens" (68). Pirie looks closely at deficit in explicitly addressing the quietly elided notion that, of course, not every young man struggles in English class. He explains, "When I talk about *boys*...what I usually really mean is *a certain subset of students that has difficulty valuing and succeeding in the subject English*—a group that includes some but not all boys, and certainly includes some girls as well" (20, emphasis his). He refuses to position himself with those conservative pundits who would lump boys together as one category. Instead, he wants to look, with breathtaking pragmatism, at *any* young man who struggles in English class (even, somewhat confusingly, at young women). He eschews category and defines by deficit. It is, however, a problematic assumption to define your target young men simply as any who struggle in English class. Defining by deficit not only elides pressing questions of, for example, race and socioeconomic status, but also paradoxically obscures relevant gender matters. Couldn't young men who are successful in English class confront the same stereotypes and perhaps benefit from the same strategies as their less successful male peers?

Given the assumption of male students' literacy deficit, the gender difference-based reaction makes a certain kind of sense. Targeting an underachieving group for a literacy intervention is often a commendable practice. Also, since gender as a social construct is so often a part of how people explain the world around them, beliefs about gender are an abundant resource for difference-based approaches to English class—even as those general beliefs about gender might not actually fit specific ecologies of young men and in-school literacy practices. Still, gender difference is often an explicit assumption. Fletcher posits that "boy writers" produce a particular kind of writing, and "as a group, boys possess particular strengths and weaknesses"

(8). Newkirk also ascribes particular characteristics to boys: "We have failed to support, or even allow, in our literacy programs the tastes, values, and learning styles of many boys." Brozo's entire project essentializes gender by definition, based around aligning texts for young men with nine masculine Lacanian archetypes (Pilgrim, Patriarch²⁰, King, Warrior, Magician, Wildman, Healer, Prophet, Trickster, and Lover). He suggests, "The templates for this uniqueness [as males] are found in masculine archetypes of humanity's collective past" (26). Pirie suggests that literacy education is too dominated by empathetic reading, a feminine tendency to prize connections to characters and muddle the line between fiction and non-fiction. His recommendation is to move to an analytic, masculine reading of an author's moves. Fletcher, Newkirk, Brozo, and Pirie show different manifestations of a difference-based ideology about young men: they have "particular strengths and weaknesses," their own "tastes, values, and learning styles," an innate correspondence to "masculine archetypes," and an affinity for analytic (rather than empathetic) reading. The corollary to this collective assumption, of course, is that young men naturally struggle with reading and writing in English classes that are not taking these fundamental differences into account. This belief underpins the gender-based deficit.

Given this foundational understanding of gender as difference-based, it should be no surprise to find a litany of curricular and pedagogical correctives based on that fact. As a way to synthesize this body of work on young men and literacy, I describe and evaluate a collection of common, difference-based recommendations made by these difference-driven texts. The included recommendations are not a comprehensive list, but together they serve to illustrate the broad ramifications of gender difference when applied to curriculum and pedagogy. To wit, the focus on relevance and student choice shows how gender difference can become a sort of whole

²⁰ This does not come imbued with any critique of a patriarchal society.

cloth approach to curriculum design while the focus on humor and violence shows how gender difference functions at a smaller, lesson-by-lesson level.

Relevance and Student Choice

Nearly every piece of literature on improving the literacy performance of young men offers a dose of curricular perspective on the necessity of allowing students choice in what they read and write. Smith & Wilhelm incorporate the idea of choice within the larger concept of boys' desire for control in their education. The authors observe, "The desire for choice and the ability to pursue one's interests as an exercise of freedom and possibility was pervasive throughout our study" (109). Fletcher adds, "What is the impact on a boy when his teacher tells him, subtly or explicitly, that what he wants to write about is not welcome...? First, he gets angry, resentful. Then, he turns off and gives you that 'Whatever' look" (43). In the writing on giving young men choice, so many of the recommendations become justified on the grounds that choice will allow students to transfer their interests from outside the classroom into English class. Traditional literacy curricula lead to male students' disinterest, but choice lets the outside in.²¹ The way in which these choices should practically be made is often left ambiguous. Would students choose the novel the whole class would read or would this be more of an outside reading assignment? Would the choice come from books already in the school library or would students bring in the books from home? For example, in this dissertation study, the teacher in the all-male class offered her class a choice between two books for *every* class novel, but those

²¹ Though this is not part of my overall argument about curricular relevance and student choice, I have an unrelated objection to this line of thinking. Perhaps priggishly, I am loathe to admit defeat in the effort to make more traditional literacy curriculum of interest to adolescents, male and female. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can be made boring, but so too can it be made engaging. I believe teachers should be wary of assuming that bringing in 'high interest' books will automatically lead to high student interest, let alone learning. When I taught high school English, I saw students bored and energized by *The Great Gatsby*, but I also saw the same boredom and energy from listening to Rihanna songs and writing essays about sports. The transition from outside interest to English-class resource is not an untroubled one.

books often shared many characteristics (e.g. Hemingway or Fitzgerald). Regardless, the practice-based literature about young men and literacy recommends incorporating choice, in whatever form, into English classes.

The notion of ‘choice’ is bound up with ‘relevance,’ another oft-recommended strategy for young men. As in, the books that young men are asked to read and the pieces of writing they produce should be made relevant and interesting to them as individuals. Importantly, this relevance might come from different angles; for example, Smith & Wilhelm recommend establishing a text’s relevance through pedagogical techniques like framing while Brozo relies on curated text choice to generate relevance. One affordance of choice seems to be that students would be likely to choose literacy curricula they find relevant. For reading, the literature presents a direct choice: either choose texts relevant to the lives of young men or do not expect them to read. Brozo asserts, “Teachers will never make significant progress eradicating boys’ difficulty with reading and learning unless they dedicate themselves to discovering boys’ interests and acquainting them with quality books related to those interests” (79). Even Brozo’s situating of Lacanian archetypes of masculinity can be read as a gesture toward relevance. What could be *more* relevant than drawing on one’s core psychological make-up? Also culturally situated, Tatum recommends, for African American male students, using movies like *The Hurricane* or *Finding Forrester* in which black male protagonists in difficult circumstances engage with reading and writing in part because the movies help “acknowledge their current existence while not allowing them to become limited by that existence” (48). Smith & Wilhelm argue persuasively, “Our data convince us that the reason boys reject schoolish forms of literacy is not that they see such literacy as feminized, but because of its very schoolishness—that is, its future orientation, its separation from immediate uses and functions, its emphasis on knowledge that is

not valued outside school” (84). Another way to examine their claim that boys reject irrelevant or "schoolish" literacy is through gender performance. Young men, in Smith & Wilhelm’s study, are not performing masculinity as opposed to femininity, but they are performing masculinity as opposed to school itself. School, in this version of masculinity, is “not valued” and “separate.” Thus, one suggested method of encouraging male reading is to allow relevant, and thus valued, literacies from outside to come into school. To recall a well-worn example, a boy obsessed with soccer might be encouraged to bring in a soccer magazine or an expository text like a soccer rule book.

Similarly, scholars propose difference-based solutions drawing on relevance for helping young men with writing. Fletcher offers suggestions to classroom teachers that are almost all directed at diminishing the “schoolishness” of writing. He recommends: “real and varied audiences” for writing; “the kind of classroom where boys feel ‘at home’”; the opportunity for “private failure”; “setting up ‘out of bounds’ spaces”; “out-of-school writing experiences” (37-38). Fletcher’s emphasis on helping students conceive of writing as a relevant, non-schoolish practice is apparent in every piece of advice (“real,” “at home,” “private,” “out-of-bounds,” “out of school”). Clearly, for Fletcher, as well as Smith & Wilhelm, improving boys' literacy comes by accessing their interests from outside of school. Interestingly, Pirie references Millard’s (1997) research suggesting that young men like to write about “plane crashes, war exploits, and murders, while girls...prefer writing which is self-reflective or empathetic” (quoted in Pirie, 67) in order to challenge students to push what comes naturally. In the end, however, Pirie admits, “This assignment isn’t a magic fix for the typical boy plot, full of adrenalized action. I still get stories with alien landings and chases in stolen cars, and, in truth, I wasn’t trying to eradicate all traces of boys’ interests” (69). For many practice-based authors, then, an assumption of gender

difference serves as a bedrock to relevance in writing, whether that relevance is encouraged (e.g. Fletcher) or seen as inevitable (e.g. Pirie).

Humor and Violence

Scholars who research the literacy of young men do not often go to the extreme of calling English curricula ‘feminized’—but they do see curricula as lacking the kinds of books young men most enjoy. The titles of Scieszca’s *Guys Read* volumes, like *Funny Business* or *Terrifying Tales*, show the kinds of books believed to be missing. In a way, topics like ‘humor’ and ‘violence’ go one presumptive step further than the idea of relevance, serving as broad examples of what these authors believe will be relevant; generally speaking, books that go ‘haha’ and ‘bang-bang’ will be a hit. Many authors suggest an inherent connection between humor and boys’ success in literacy. Brozo connects humor to the Trickster archetype, suggesting it “is irreverent, funny, and satirical...the impish side of the masculine spirit, poking fun at pomposity” (42). He suggests using, for example, Roald Dahl novels like *Willy Wonka* and *James and the Giant Peach* (though not *Matilda*). Like all Brozo’s archetypes, though, he explains them in strictly masculine terms, so, even if young women might be interested in Dahl as well, it would need to be for a different reason. Smith and Wilhelm agree that humor is a visceral experience that helps students “lose themselves” (196), and Fletcher argues, “...humor gives them [boys] a crucial way to express their authentic voices” (68). The focus is on bringing into school what is most immediate and real to male students. Words like “authentic” and “lose (oneself)” imply that school literacy is fake and boring, exactly the kind of place where no one could be connected enough to laugh. If teachers want male students to succeed in literacy, school must be the kind of place where students can risk caring enough to crack a smile.

In addition to humor, the literature on the literacy of young men often fixates on the place of materials containing violence in reading and writing classrooms. Newkirk argues that a backlash occurred against the topic of violence in schools after the shootings at Columbine. He suggests that we “move beyond the predominant censorious attitude toward popular culture and open up to the transgressive pleasures of boyhood” (12). Fletcher also suggests allowing at least some violence in student writing. He gives two interesting reasons: “[B]oys will be more invested in their writing and in the workshop as a whole when they see that they can bring their passions into it,” and that boys might earn “social capital—violent writing is classroom currency that can be 'spent' and used to bond with friends” (54). It is important to note that none of these authors are encouraging literal violence. Newkirk’s argument, in fact, is that one does not give students enough credit when one conflates reading and writing about violence with actually doing violence. An English class could, ideally, be a safe space where students engage productively with issues of violence in society. That nuance is not, however, always carried through in practice: in my dissertation study, the one teacher spoke about choosing *Beowulf* as a book she thought her male students would like because of the sword fights and gore.²² All of this to say, a mindset of gender difference sometimes drives scholars to push for more violent texts for young men, but no one is exactly saying, “Let’s make English class a more violent place.” Even so, one potentially unwelcome result of scholarly texts *specifically about young men’s literacy* advocating engagement with violence is the repeated connection of young men and violence. Surely, if there is one masculine stereotype that everyone could agree would be best eliminated rather than humored, it would be a proclivity for brutality. The suggestion of encouraging violence in classroom literacy seems especially ironic given that the media frenzy

²² She also noted that many of her female students ended up getting into Seamus Heaney’s language, if not the violence.

around boys' troubles in the 2000s conflated issues of literacy with societal problems like suicide rate and murder.²³

The Lessons of Difference

It would seem beyond dispute that naming and presenting a particular pedagogy or piece of curriculum as 'male/female-friendly' essentializes gender difference. This conclusion is sometimes treated as a 'gotcha' moment, and, in the next section, I elaborate on the (pro)feminist critique of that essentializing move. In practice, however, these recommendations reveal how narratives of gender difference manifest in English pedagogy and curriculum. In the interviews for this dissertation study, students tap into similar assumptions and narratives about gender. Some students accept them, some reject them, and some land somewhere in between, but gender-difference is a meaningful resource circulating in these classes. The practice of adding funny books or physical activity for young men draws on recognizable ideas about some masculinities, and these ideologies about gender circulate in English class as ideologies about gender and literacy. Even so, it is important to probe exactly how difference-based beliefs about gender function when imported into English classes and to perhaps critique the way the beliefs are implemented.

Any transfer of a broad ideology about gender from outside of school to inside of school should be closely scrutinized. Even if the stereotype that, for example, young men like joking around more than young women circulates widely, there is nothing obvious about moving that love of fart jokes into English class. The slope from general stereotype to English class

²³ I want to be clear in noting that I support Newkirk's suggestion that English class could be a space to critically engage with questions about violence in society. More, gender should probably be a part of those conversations. My worry, however, is that literacy deficit-driven books about young men lead to the inclusion of violence as a corrective to a 'feminized' ELA curriculum. Put otherwise, we *should* critically read, write, and think about societal violence in English class, but we should not do that *because* young men are at a literacy deficit.

stereotype, however, can be a slippery one in difference-driven literature about young men. Pirie dwells on teenage males' reticence to express emotion and their reluctance to speak in class when compared with female students. He cites Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* to import stereotypes about language and gender from broader society into English class specifically.²⁴ Pirie also frequently references the pseudo-psychology of Pollack's *Real Boys* and Gurian's *Boys and Girls Learn Differently* as evidence of the emotional risks of being male in English class (thus also importing texts with conservative approaches).

One should also be wary of how female students fit into the picture for scholars writing from a difference-based perspective. Weaver-Hightower argues that this practice-based literature on young men's literacy rewriting curriculum for boys might concomitantly "hurt many girls, whose preferences may be in conflict with the traditional, stereotypical preferences of boys" (486). Is this, then, a zero-sum game? I doubt the difference-driven scholars would see it that way, and they nearly all explicitly claim that their projects are in no way intended to disadvantage female students. That said, female students do seem to take on a strategic invisibility, or to become an afterthought, in these books. For example, Brozo, building on his archetypes of masculinity, seems to argue for a sort of trickle-down benefit of the male focus for female students. He lauds the creation of a "Guys' Rack"—part of an in-class library full of books for young men—and suggests, "Female students do not feel disenfranchised by his [the teacher's] system because they know they are free to read a Guys' Rack book as well" (93). He adds that reading "books that depicts males as multidimensional individuals who break masculine stereotypes do as much to erode girls' rigid conceptions of boys as they do for boys"

²⁴ I find, as described in the first results chapter in this dissertation, that students too have the tendency to fit broad gender stereotypes onto English class activities. This is part of the common sense of gender difference.

(9).²⁵ Female students, in these depictions, would need to be content to pick up the scraps of a male-focused approach. Frankly, it seems irresponsible, no matter the ideologies one seeks to tap into, to recommend this sort of differential access to pedagogy and curriculum.

Other difference-driven scholars take a more balanced approach, but, in a difference-based world, that means trying to season a curriculum soup just so—adding an action-packed novel here, a personal narrative there. Because their reasoning assumes a male deficit, however, most of the additions have male students in mind rather than female. For example, Pirie uses the contestable observation that female students excel at empathetic text-to-self and literary text-to-text connections while male students excel in movie-related text-to-text comparisons to argue that learning strategies should be additive, not exclusive. He says, “A cornerstone of my argument in this book is that we all—men and women—can be more than we are, and that we all would be enlarged by thinking in more than one way” (96). Pirie’s accretion of gendered literacy strategies is of course based on the premise of gender difference in pedagogy and curriculum. Pirie’s recommendation to implement film-to-text comparisons in class is called a male-friendly strategy. In Pirie’s view, that would not hurt young women because one can benefit by learning in new ways, but in Weaver-Hightower’s voicing of some (pro)feminists, it would hurt young women because it is aimed at young men. In addition, since male students are the ones assumed to be at a deficit, it seems inevitable that most of the “enlargements” in thinking would be coming from female students adapting to strategies explicitly intended for males.

A final caution about the approaches recommended for young men in English class, hidden in the plain sight of common sense, is that these approaches are often recommended for

²⁵ It is worth noting that, in Brozo’s book, there is no mention of a concomitant “Girls Rack” or discussion of how multidimensional female characters help boys resist “rigid conceptions” of girls. I do not think Brozo would disagree with those ideas, but he certainly does not address them, even in passing.

all students in non-gender based literature about ELA education. If, for example, one retitled *Boy Writers* something like *Young Writers*, few of the material recommendations would be out of place. Young women, most likely, would also enjoy writing about out-of-school experiences in a comfortable setting. Young women would also probably like to read books with humor in them and to move around in class. Pirie’s difference-driven text illustrates how best practices for teaching adolescent males could easily be described as best practices for all students. For example, in demonstrating how modeling and think-alouds might work well for young men in English classes, Pirie advocates for explicit instruction in reading and writing processes (as opposed to what he calls “voodoo”). Why? Pirie argues, “Doing that gives power to the person who learns the secret—the power to do things with texts. Boys like to have power. They like to learn the secret of how things work, and they like things to be explicit” (52). Unpacking literacy processes and giving power to students in their relationships to texts is, quite obviously, considered best practice for all students.²⁶ In another of Pirie’s examples, he plumps for student-generated essay topics that come from genuine driving questions by saying, “I stress that there is genuine *risk* involved in tackling a question for which you don’t already know the answer, and that risk is exactly what makes for real learning. (The idea that we grow through facing risks makes sense to boys)” (60). Again, using students’ genuine questions to elicit meaningful essays is well-established best practice for all students’ writing. It is only through a tacked-on parenthetical about why the strategy works for young men that a ‘boys as risk-takers’ and ‘girls as risk-averse’ binary comes into play. In this example, one can see Pirie’s process of matching pedagogy he ‘knows’ works with ideas he ‘knows’ about gender.

²⁶ The idea that young men enjoy feeling powerful also mixes in the problematic notion of offering power to an often hegemonic group. Of course teachers want to give all their students power in relationships to texts; the problem comes in retrofitting these empowering strategies as ‘for boys.’

It seems reasonable to argue, though, that even if a teacher is using a pedagogical best practice for a questionable reason, he or she is still giving students a top quality learning experience. If English teachers get training on developing excellent writing assessments because the principal hears young men are struggling, aren't all students still getting more enjoyable writing experiences? One might wonder, what is the danger in saying the recommendation is for boys? I would argue that this is why understanding circulating ideologies about gender and literacy is especially important. Take, for example, a think-aloud where the teacher composes an essay's introduction in front of the class. This strategy is not a 'boy friendly' strategy that, as some (pro)feminists would have it, necessarily harms female students. If a teacher, however, explains to the class that she heard that young men write better if they hear a think-aloud, the ideology about gender and literacy informing that claim comes to influence the positioning of students in the class, probably to the detriment of female students in this case. The think-aloud itself, though, is not better for young men than young women; instead, it is the ideological packaging or framing of that think-aloud. When Weaver-Hightower suggests that (pro)feminists worry about the consequences for young women of strategies that favor "stereotypical preferences for boys," it is usually not the strategy itself about which they should worry; it is the circulating stereotype, the ideology about gender and literacy that inhibits (or perhaps enables) female students in learning or practicing a literacy skill in class. The masculine packaging uses obvious markers of gender to code the curricular and pedagogical moves as *for* young men. These ideologies about gender and literacy are precisely what the research in this dissertation aims to bring attention to: What are they? How do they work in specific classroom contexts? How do individual students make sense of them?

The difference-driven scholarship on young men's literacy reviewed in this section surfaces, implicitly and explicitly, many important questions about how gender gets attached to literacy practice and how ideologies of gender difference, broadly speaking, might work to serve struggling male students. In other words, this body of literature picks up on the power and reality of ideology in a way that critics of difference-driven scholarship often too hastily dismiss as an essentializing move. I would suggest, though, that most of these texts undergird those ideologies with unsophisticated theorizations of gender. This results in recommendations that themselves rely on simple stereotypes about gender rather than the power of those stereotypes (i.e. gender difference vs. the difference gender makes). That said, these authors offer tantalizing glimpses of a path forward for thinking about the literacy of young men. I especially return to Smith & Wilhelm's conclusion: "We began our study wondering whether the category of 'boys' is useful to think with. After all of our research, we can only offer an equivocal answer: yes and no" (183). Using gender categories to think with *is* useful to the extent that ideologies about gender inform students' experiences with literacy in our English classes. The students in Smith & Wilhelm's study, as well as my own, reveal the meaningfulness of gender as an organizing tool, but when we undertheorize that tool, we are not honoring their experiences. We are missing the full complexity of that experience as well as the chance to teach students how to use it.

The Feminist and (Pro)Feminist Response

Weaver-Hightower (2008) points to a dearth of education research in the United States that takes a more theoretical approach to gender. The extant treatments are "often practice-oriented and relatively few theoretically oriented works on boys' schooling and masculinity have originated in the United States" (182). As a result, he suggests that books such as Sommers' *The War against Boys* have held sway, and these books tend to be conservative in orientation, to

ignore possibilities for “structural and political change,” and to fill the vacuum for schools searching for resources on the education of young men (182-183).²⁷ These critiques of the conservative media coverage and difference-driven literature in America find their most elaborated form from feminist and (pro)feminist theorists who begin with much richer theorizations of gender than those offered by the difference-driven authors. While I suggest that the objections do not account for the quotidian sense-making work that ideologies about gender and literacy offer to students and teachers, their ideas and critiques are crucial for thinking about how ideologies work as well as for making examinations of young men’s literacy ethical.

The feminist and (pro)feminist response is largely situated outside the U.S., in countries where government reaction to young men’s literacy struggles has been more robust. A broad comparison is that American difference-driven literature responds to assessments like the NAEP which show a boys’ disadvantage whereas (pro)feminist literature responds to government reports (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004; House of Representatives, 2002), high-profile media texts (e.g. *The War against Boys*), and the difference-driven literature I presented in the last section. Authors writing from a (pro)feminist perspective (e.g. Martino & Kehler’s “counter-narratives”) often argue that these sources leave notions of hegemonic masculinity and gender binaries untroubled. Still, the counter-narrative often smooths over the polyvocality of the putative ‘original’ gender narrative. Government reports, as one might expect, have multiple perspectives running through them. These reports often make possibly contradictory claims such as, for example, giving young men what they like to read while also advising teachers to help their students challenge harmful versions of masculinity. A central purpose of my attempt to put

²⁷ Weaver-Hightower is American and identifies himself with what he calls the “(pro)feminist” research of international scholars such as Wayne Martino, Bob Lingard, and Martin Mills. His research deals with boys’ education in Australia, save for some material about how that research might apply to the policy context of the United States.

the (pro)feminist and difference-driven approaches in conversation is to show how one can be pragmatic *and* theoretically sophisticated in pedagogical and curricular choices.

It is possible to turn one's attention to young men's experiences with literacy without being essentialist or undermining the cause of social justice. One would be overly harsh to describe the difference-driven literature discussed above as intentionally anti-feminist or disadvantaging female students. Each of those books goes out of its way to make a sort of apologia for focusing on male students and expresses a desire to do no harm when it comes to female students. Pirie, for example, asserts, "'Right-wing' and 'anti-feminist' hardly describe my leanings. But there is such a thing as anti-feminist backlash out there, and teachers interested in boys' education have to separate themselves carefully from such motivations" (7). Recall as well that Pirie goes so far as to confusingly define his target population of "struggling boys" as "including some girls too." In addition, Newkirk critiques Sommers to differentiate himself from anti-feminists: "In place of a solution or even a serious examination, we get the romanticism of the Right, the comforting myth that the answer lies in a retreat to a prefeminist, preprogressive past. Newkirk also concludes of the gender wars: "This debate is clearly dichotomized in an unhealthy misleading way and I would like to extract myself from it" (20). Pirie and Newkirk both criticize regressive frameworks and relate their desire to "separate" or "extract" themselves from that territory. While wishing does not necessarily make it so and neither of their books return in depth to the question of how their arguments and recommendations make sense for young women, (pro)feminists are mistaken in lumping these practice-based authors in with regressive, right-wing mentalities. Pirie and Newkirk do not write about young men from a feminist perspective and their primary pedagogy is not one of social justice²⁸ but neither are they

²⁸ Tatum identifies his project with social justice aims. That said, his adherence to difference-based pedagogy and explicit connection to the other difference-driven authors I reviewed makes him more like those authors than not.

anti-feminist nor dismissive of social justice. Clearly, none of these authors is actually looking to turn back the clock for *female* students even if their ideas for *male* students sometimes seem to implicitly disadvantage female students.

I also, of course, reject conservative and regressive reasons for focusing on young men. I call my approach in part pragmatic *not* because my central purpose is to offer specific solutions for helping young men with literacy (which makes my purpose different from many difference-driven authors I detailed above). I adopt the pragmatic label because I associate these scholars, in part, with meeting the issue of young men's literacy on its own, difference-focused cultural terms. A non-prescriptive exploration of the power of ideologies about gender and literacy and students' experiences of them requires a pragmatic approach in its acknowledgement that attitudes about gender are more difficult to change than a lesson plan. Smith & Wilhelm's and Appleman's anecdotes about their colleagues worrying over male students in English class do not reveal teachers with 'correct' or 'incorrect' mindsets. They reveal teachers whose thinking reflects global and local ideologies about gender and literacy. This claim, I argue, is not relativistic—it is realistic and pragmatic. The research driving this dissertation is descriptive of circulating ideologies and student positioning rather than interventionist in those ideologies (i.e. I do not study the effects of a curriculum unit derived from tenets of non-sexist English education).

That said, my research shows that *students* often smirk both at the assumption that 'boys like one thing and girls like another' and at the types of curriculum and pedagogy derived from that assumption. They are hyper-attuned to stereotypes of difference, but their experiences of ideologies about gender and literacy are varied and complex. For this reason, I find it essential to combine, in this dissertation project, an approach that is pragmatic about lived experience but

also progressive in more fully theorizing the difference gender can make in class. Weaver-Hightower (2008) offers a version of my explanation: “Boys’ education initiatives, despite their conservative associations, are not *inherently* conservative. Progressive educators can be and are concerned about boys’ issues. Nevertheless, objectively and empirically speaking, *the conservative interpretation of the boy debates is dominant, and conservatism has driven the direction of policy*” (53, emphasis his). I fully embrace his claim that there is nothing automatically conservative about studying young men, but I am very aware of the conservative company this dissertation keeps in doing so. Still, I suggest that the conservative dominance of policy on this issue comes neither from superior arguments nor nefarious governmental plotting; it is instead the result of conservative and difference-driven approaches making more sense and being more accessible to people’s lived experience. Say you ask two people for directions in a city you do not know well. One tells you to turn right at the fire station and left at the McDonalds. These are landmarks you can follow, tourist or townie. The other tells you to drive past the parking lot where the carnival happens every other year and then take a left at 42.3° latitude. We are more apt to listen to what sounds familiar.

But the (pro)feminist approach offers a rich theoretical grounding to those with both concerns about young men’s literacy and a desire to distance themselves from a conservative crowd. In fact, a number of (pro)feminists have tackled the issue of boys’ education as a backlash to perceived feminist gains (e.g. Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Martino, Kehler, & Weaver-Hightower, 2009; Lingard, Martino, & Mills, 2009), though work on literacy specifically is more rare. It is worth asking then: What is a feminist and a (pro)feminist in the context of literature about young men’s literacy? Sally Johnson (1997), a linguist, offers one way in which an investigation of young men fits into a feminist project:

Though all feminist work is ultimately (and rightfully) concerned with the effects on women of life within a patriarchal world order, I would argue that to concentrate exclusively on women and femininity is insufficient. What is needed *in addition* is informed study of the mechanisms of oppression, that is, of the specific ways in which men construct a world which so manifestly excludes and undermines women (13).

Johnson writes this in a volume of studies on language and gender called *Language and Masculinity*, but the application to literacy studies is clear. She emphasizes how research on masculinity can be beneficial and additive for a feminist project because it provides context when thinking about, for example, how NAEP scores reveal male students at a deficit. In complete isolation the scores show male students as struggling, but the understanding that the assessment exists in “a world which so manifestly excludes and undermines women” makes one’s questions immediately more circumspect in considering male ‘disadvantage.’

I would argue too that Johnson’s perspective pumps the brakes on the recommendations ‘for’ young men in English class without considering young women. As I showed, difference-driven authors generally profess a ‘do no harm’ stance for female students, but another way to describe their approach is that they essentially ignore female students. In nearly every project analyzed above, male students are the only ones interviewed or surveyed.²⁹ Some might be quick to cast this as these authors regressively asserting, “girls have had their turn,” but that is ungenerous; if one is studying male students’ literacy practices, it makes a certain kind of sense to study male students. That would not be sensible, however, in a feminist project as defined by Johnson because the study of young men takes place in the context of studying “the effects on women of life within a patriarchal world order.” In terms of methodology, I partly address this elision of female students in studies about young men’s literacy by including female students in

²⁹ Newkirk is somewhat of an exception to this observation in that he does interview female students.

the interview project³⁰ and creating interview protocols that asked just as many questions on ideologies about female students and literacy as about male students. This methodological decision, I argue, paid off. Some of the most insightful comments about masculinity and literacy came from female students. In addition, though, I learned a lot about how ideologies about gender and literacy affect female students. For example, Joanne, a female student in the coed class, observed an ideology about gender, “Girls are more emotional than boys” which she sees as stereotypically beneficial for literate practice because “girls of course are going to read into it more cause that's all we do is like jump to conclusions and blah blah blah blah” but also limiting for other, valued subjects in school, “I've had boys be like ‘oh let me guess you like language arts and history’ and I'm like ‘well yeah.’ They're like ‘classic’ because the classic thing is that math and science is a boys' thing and English and history is a girls' thing.” When one avoids limiting the pool of participants to male students, it quickly becomes apparent how intertwined experiences of gender and literacy are. Even though ideologies about young men’s literacy drive much of this dissertation, a feminist approach drives it to acknowledge that it is neither practical nor ethical to think about these ideologies as somehow separate from female students. They too affect, and are affected by, ideologies about gender and literacy.

(Pro)feminists take a slightly different approach. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to wade into debates on nomenclature and in what way men can be feminists, but critical research on boys’ education often identifies itself with (pro)feminism. The (pro)feminist website *XY* defines (pro)feminism as “guided above all by a commitment to feminism” and “intended to advance feminist goals of gender equality and gender justice” while “encourage[ing] men to involve themselves in personal and social change towards gender

³⁰ Though this was not my initial intention, I actually interviewed *more* female students than male students. See the chapter on methodology for more.

equality.” In general, this stance seems to apply to some men who support feminist goals but, for a variety of reasons, decline to refer to themselves as feminists. Lingard & Douglas point to a couple of complicating factors for (pro)feminists, “particularly in relation to the balance between focusing on the costs of masculinity and support for feminism, and also regarding the question of which feminism pro-feminist men ought to be pro” (5). I cannot resolve these thorny issues, but it does point, of course, toward disagreements among (pro)feminists who might prioritize a focus on “the costs of masculinity” (i.e. damaging hegemonic masculinities that devalue English class) and (pro)feminists who prioritize “support for feminism” (i.e. girls’ education). This study implicitly suggests that this is a false choice, but my main focus is on how ideologies about masculinity and femininity circulate in English class, not which manner of (pro)feminism is best.

What *is* important about feminism and (pro)feminism for this project is that both offer important critiques of a difference-driven approach to young men’s literacy that have been relatively unheard by American scholars. Lingard & Douglas argue that studying boys’ education is important but that “any focus on boys needs to be located within a broader gender equity framework informed by a commitment to social justice” (161). In practice, this statement of purpose is reflected in (pro)feminists’ central critique of difference-driven and conservative literature about young men and literacy: it essentializes young men as at a literacy deficit and relies on inadequate theorization of gender and broad homogenization of which boys are actually at a deficit. Among other drawbacks, the under-theorization of gender leads to a bifurcated curriculum and pedagogy based on reductive, binary notions of gender. In order to crystalize these ideas in action, I look closely at two (pro)feminist texts that focus mainly on literacy: Martino & Kehler’s article “Gender-Based Literacy Reform: A Question of Challenging or

Recuperating Gender Binaries” and Rowan et. al.’s *Boys, Literacies and Schooling: The Dangerous Territories of Gender-Based Literacy Reform*.

One of the most sustained (pro)feminist responses to conservative and difference-driven approaches to literacy pedagogy and curricula comes in a 2007 special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Education* edited by Martino & Kehler (2007b) (where their article also appears). They offer a central theoretical critique³¹: These pedagogical strategies “treat symptoms, as opposed to dealing with the root causes of the problem of gender identity and structural inequality” (402). They argue further, “It is only by interrogating assumptions about boys, masculinity, and schooling, and by adopting a sophisticated conceptual or analytic framework that attends to the social construction of gender...that a more informed basis for pedagogical reform can be established and justified to improve boys’ literacy skills” (408). Their rejoinder to recommendations like adding humor or relevance to the curriculum is that these approaches treat symptoms of young men’s apparent disinterest in reading and writing, not the underlying issue of hegemonic masculine performances associated with poor achievement on academic literacy tasks. In addition, adding humor “recuperates gender binaries” (413) which are the same binaries that create problems for young men in English class in the first place. For this reason, even an explicit recommendation to critically address masculinity in class falls flat because “such conceptualizations of critical literacy are discordant with the pedagogical strategies that are advocated throughout the entire document, which incite teachers to take gender differences into

³¹ In addition to their critiques of boy-friendly pedagogy and curriculum, Martino & Kehler also point to the call for more male teachers as well as more single-sex schools as further fruits of this wrongheaded approach to gender and literacy in schools. I will incorporate their prescient critiques of pedagogy and curriculum into this literature review but not the other two. Those ideas are not at issue in the American difference-driven literature I analyze in this literature review.

account by catering for boys' particular learning styles and needs in the literacy classroom" (421). One cannot, then, simultaneously "recuperate" *and* "challenge" gender binaries.

Rowan et. al. elaborate many of Martino & Kehler's themes. They call their approach for addressing issues of young men and literacy "transformative" and argue, "To work within a transformative framework it is necessary first to acknowledge that there are multiple ways of being a boy. It is also necessary to recognize that every individual boy accesses, performs, and transforms multiple versions of masculinity in various contexts or at various times" (67). This framework goes further than simply recognizing the socially constructed nature of gender and masculinities. It gets at a complexity that much difference-driven literature about young men's literacy lacks by suggesting that, as individuals, young men could be doing gender differently depending on the locally available "versions of masculinity" and the literacy task of the moment in English class (e.g. group work vs. lecture vs. writing workshop). The notion of individualized boys' access, performance, and transformation of masculinities already implies the mistake in taking an essentialist view of young men—whether than view comes from systematic research or personal experience. Rowan et. al. argue, "If...we keep looking *inwards* to this same set of [masculine] characteristics in order to come up with a solution to the 'problems' produced by traditional discourses around masculinity, we run the risk of *reproducing* rather than *critiquing* those discourses that produce the problem" (71). This is much the same argument that Martino & Kehler make about "challenging" or "recuperating" binaries with "reproducing" and "recuperating" hegemonic masculinity taking the blame for essentializing the masculine characteristics that can, in practice, be in a state of flux for students. For example, if a teacher brings in *Beowulf* because 'young men like violence,' how does a young man feel when he finds Beowulf's predictions about Grendl ("he will run gloating with my raw corpse and feed on it

alone”) to be a bit much? Or if, for whatever reason, he just does not like this particular epic poem? Even a broader and apparently innocuous recommendation like increasing the relevance of curriculum runs the risk of homogenizing assumptions. To which young men is this curricular choice relevant? Who is the imagined audience and who is left out?

While Rowan et. al. and Marino & Kehler would both label the difference-driven American research on young men’s literacy as essentialist, Rowan et. al. offer a bit more sympathy for the difference-driven perspective, and, in doing so, light the way for the progressive, pragmatic approach of this dissertation. They suggest that difference-based, essentialist perspectives “are associated with ‘solutions’ of the ‘easy,’ ‘quick fix,’ ‘off-the-shelf,’ and ‘one size fits all’ variety” while anti-essentialist perspectives (like theirs) “acknowledge the *appearance of natural* behaviors or properties but see these as things to be explained rather than as explanations in and of themselves. They seek to ‘denaturalize’ taken-for-granted assumptions about the way things are, and insist on looking at how characteristics, behaviors and potentials are *produced* and *made* to appear natural” (198-199). There are two important points in their stance. First, since essentialist pedagogical and curricular recommendations seem simpler and faster, it is easy to associate them with the practical, but (pro)feminist scholars do not think of their own ideas as impractical—they argue for a shift in focus. That said, it can be inconvenient to have one’s ideas always labeled ‘hard’ or a ‘slow fix.’ Second, their focus on the putative naturalness of gender difference and thus difference-based pedagogy and curriculum shows the power of the *ideology* of essentialism. While I agree that a more careful approach can help, I argue for a combination of these approaches. It seems possible to acknowledge the variety of possible performances around naturalness rather than requiring teachers to tear down a well-constructed gender regime. It seems possible to acknowledge gender difference but also be

(pro)feminist in this way. Rowan et. al. argue, “It is no easy matter to distinguish between essentialist and anti-essentialist mindsets. Often it may be one thing to align oneself with an anti-essentialist perspective—to feel committed to it—and another thing altogether to be able to operate on it effectively in an informed way in daily practice” (203). Their acknowledgement of this murkiness, they hint at the power of a (pro)feminist and difference-driven collaboration.

Clearing the Static: Connecting the (Pro)Feminists and the Difference-Driven

Before collaboration is possible, there are crucial ways in which the (pro)feminist approach and the difference-driven approaches do not hear each other. Martino & Kehler attribute the views on masculinity and literacy to which their issue responds to “media outlets and government agencies that have fueled a new gender crisis” (401). One would assume, then, that they take aim at government reports (such as those from Ontario and Australia) and popular books like *The War against Boys* rather than scholarly books like *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys*. Newkirk and Smith & Wilhelm, however, are cited by *Me Read? No Way!*, the Ontario report, and Martino & Kehler themselves link Smith & Wilhelm and Newkirk to views such as: “The problem is often identified in terms of the failure of schools, and more specifically teachers, to accommodate boys’ interests and learning styles. This accommodation is often attributed to the impact of feminization” (407). It is not impossible to read Smith & Wilhelm and Newkirk this way³², but by conflating them with conservative government and media reports, Martino & Kehler add rigorous literacy research to the sources that they begin by critiquing. This too-broad generalization can be seen as well in their introductory suggestion that the articles in this issue “provide a research-based perspective and, hence, what we consider to be a more informed

³² They are wrong, though, to imply a feminization argument to either Smith & Wilhelm or Newkirk. This is much more a trait of conservative media texts.

analysis of the factors impacting on boys' engagement with literacy" (404). It is true that not all the difference-driven authors presented above endeavored to present original research (e.g. Pirie and Fletcher) and others conducted what might be described as supplementary research like limited surveys (e.g. Newkirk) or described self-administered curriculum units (e.g. Brozo). To lump Smith & Wilhelm's rigorous qualitative study and analysis together with media polemics, however, draws stark attention to the disconnect of the (pro)feminist critiques and scholars seeking to deal with the academic literacy practices of young men in terms of gender difference.

Two examples illustrate how this miscommunication operates. First, Martino & Kehler's extended critique of *Me Read? No Way!* relies partly on critiquing the sources the government relies on, often *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*: "Using Smith & Wilhelm (2002), the document [*Me Read? No Way!*] presents the following truths about boys, while failing to engage with other research that raises questions about the taken for granted assertions about expressions of masculinity vis-à-vis boys' engagement with literacy (see Alloway et. al., 2002, Martino, 2003; Martino & Berrill, 2003)..." (415). One a priori critique Martino & Kehler make of *Me Read? No Way!* is that the report draws on the wrong sources³³ ("Using Smith & Wilhelm...") as Smith & Wilhelm do not challenge the "taken for granted assertions" about young men's literacy as (pro)feminists do. The assertions (not) in question are: "Boys take longer to read than girls do"; "Boys read less than girls"; "Girls are better than boys at reading and most expository texts"; "Boys are better at information retrieval than girls are" (415). It is true that *Me Read? No Way!*

³³ Without getting too inside baseball on this, Martino, Kehler, and other (pro)feminist scholars do seem unfortunately unheard when governments put together reports about boys' education. Weaver-Hightower (2008) explains how, in the bids to rewrite Australia's *Gender Equity Framework*, a proposal from Martino, Weaver-Hightower, Martin Mills, Bob Lingard, and other (pro)feminists lost out to a bid from more conservative authors (113).

attributes these claims to Smith & Wilhelm, but these are not actually *their* findings.³⁴ They come from an early review of prior research in *Chevys* that is prefaced with this note: “We’ve warned against overgeneralizing, yet we realize that research that identifies characteristics of groups can provide a useful starting point for teachers by alerting us to issues we might encounter in our work with individual students” (10); and ends with their “worry” that: “teachers have been shown to use this research in ways that emphasize traditionally socially constructed notions of maleness and to reinforce boys’ current general tendencies rather than to expand on or redefine them” (12). In addressing Smith & Wilhelm’s research only through *Me Read? No Way!*, Martino & Kehler present it devoid of nuance or careful disclaimer—to say nothing of leaving out the voices of the actual students who make up much of the study itself.

A closer look shows Smith & Wilhelm pointing to a long tradition of difference-based gender research as “a useful starting point.” They are not saying “boys read less than girls,” but they are saying we have to account for the reality of people’s lived experiences in which that seems true. This is important, in part, because these ideas about gender and literacy might very well come up in work with individual students. These ideologies appeared in their interviews with students just as they did in my dissertation study. What’s more, Smith & Wilhelm explicitly worry about the way difference-based explanations of gender and literacy, in Martino & Kehler’s phrasing, recuperate gender binaries rather than “expand” or “redefine” them. I am not suggesting that Martino & Kehler and Smith & Wilhelm share theoretical frameworks; the former’s is avowedly (pro)feminist and the latter’s is, I argue, more difference-driven. What I am pointing to, however, is that Martino & Kehler appear more apt to critique the way in which

³⁴ In Smith & Wilhelm’s list of citations for their literature review, three of the sixteen sources are authored or coauthored by Wilhelm.

difference-driven authors are taken up by government or media entities than to engage with the affordances a difference driven approach could add to a (pro)feminist one.

It seems especially ironic that Martino & Kehler miss some of Smith & Wilhelm's nuance given that the *very next section* in *Chevys* addresses Martino's work directly.³⁵ The way in which Martino is taken up in *Chevys*, though, again demonstrates a bit of miscommunication between (pro)feminist and difference-driven scholars. Smith & Wilhelm present Martino as "among the most provocative" writers about literacy and masculinity. They suggest, "Martino's work bluntly argues that hegemonic versions of masculinity are not consistent with being literate, and are in fact militant against and undermine literacy and literate behavior" (12). Descriptors like "provocative," "bluntly," and "militant" (in reference to Martino's description of hegemonic masculinity) cast Martino's arguments as being somewhat on the fringes of the conversation about young men and literacy. Smith & Wilhelm *do not* dismiss or even directly critique his views—in fact, they invoke Martino throughout *Chevys*—but they do make him seem like something of an outlier.

It is important to understand too that Smith & Wilhelm's research review works in an additive way, discussing different researchers and theorists in turn without necessarily declaring allegiance to an overall theoretical or interpretive framework. It fits, I argue, their approach: Lots of authors have good ideas, and one can draw from all of them. One limitation of this approach, however, is that some of the scholars at the table make awkward conversation. The section in which Smith & Wilhelm present Martino's ideas directly precedes a section devoted to Millard's (1997) book *Differently Literate*. While Smith & Wilhelm draw on her advocacy for critical theory as a way to make students aware of gender in English class (an idea (pro)feminists could

³⁵ One caveat, of course, is that Smith & Wilhelm's 2002 publication date means they don't have access to some of Martino's more elaborated late 2000s work.

work with), they also note, “Millard suggests that boys are disadvantaged in academic literacy as a result of current curricular emphases, teacher text and topic choices, and lack of availability of texts that match their interests and needs” (14). Thinking about young men as “disadvantaged” or in need of relevant texts recalls difference-based devotees, and Smith & Wilhelm also cite Millard’s work among the sixteen sources in the list that appears in *Me Read? No Way!*—the one that Martino & Kehler take to task in their 2007 article. Sandwiched between lists of authors’ difference-based recommendations and Millard’s complex but still difference-based approach, Martino’s perspective seems a fish out of water. Smith & Wilhelm position Martino as answering “the critical question *why*” (12) these sex-based literacy differences exist, but Martino would most likely not grant the truth of the assertion he is supposedly explaining.

My argument, first, is that most difference-driven literature about young men and literacy lacks a coherent, research-based approach to gender. They can become, as I argued of Pirie’s polyvocal guide for teachers, a mishmash of generic best practices, gender stereotypes, and personal experiences. But I also assert that (pro)feminist researchers can seem unhelpfully removed from the ideologies about gender and literacy circulating in English classes. Weaver-Hightower (2008)³⁶ describes the pitfall: “A main tactic of the (pro)feminist resistance has been to provide theoretical reasoning for why boys are not a problem, a notion contrary to the lived experience of many educators, parents, and social workers. Practitioners are left to look for help from only conservative popular-rhetorical texts with a practitioner focus. This, again, is how such texts become de facto policy” (91-92). This is a fair and important critique that suggests the “de facto policy” for educators most often comes from work that meets educators where they

³⁶ Weaver-Hightower offers, in my view, an accurate, clear-eyed description of the landscape of boys’ education in the U.S., and, as such, I rely on his interpretations to set up many parts of this literature review. It is worth knowing, then, that he is American and identifies as (pro)feminist, but much of his work is primarily focused on the Australian context.

are—viewing young men’s literacy as a problem. In foregrounding qualitative interviews about ideology, identity, and literacy in English classes, I prize the “lived experience” of the students in this study. I attempt to validate that experience, to begin in a world in which ideologies about gender (even ones that seem regressive or simplistic to some) have real explanatory power. By interpreting students’ descriptions of localized ideologies through a (pro)feminist lens, I arrive at an approach to the literacy of young men that is progressive and pragmatic.

There are many affordances of such a combination. When Martino & Kehler argue, “It is only by interrogating assumptions about boys, masculinity, and schooling, and by adopting a sophisticated conceptual or analytic framework that attends to the social construction of gender...that a more informed basis for pedagogical reform can be established and justified to improve boys’ literacy skills,” they point to these intriguing possibilities. For one, their call for “a sophisticated conceptual or analytic framework that attends to the social construction of gender” highlights the paucity of theory on gender driving difference-driven texts about boys and literacy. That addition would not be antithetical to the difference-driven project, for most of the difference-driven texts express adherence (or at least openness) to social constructions of gender. That gender theory, though, rarely *drives* such projects. Smith & Wilhelm, for example, refer to Connell’s work on masculinity and include a section called “How We Can Help Boys: Examining Social Constructions,” but their main theoretical construct is Csikszentmihalyi’s learning theory of ‘flow.’ Difference-driven literature about young men’s literacy rarely includes extended discussion of gender theory. One reason for this is that difference-driven research tends not to accept a critical stance toward gender as a central question or force. As I detail in the theoretical framework for this dissertation, I adopt a critical stance toward gender and engage at

length with Butler and Connell in analyzing hegemonic masculinity, gender performance, and gender transgression in the three classrooms involved in this study.

Martino & Kehler also suggest one must “interrogate assumptions about boys, masculinity, and schooling” in order to enact ethical pedagogical reform. On the surface, this seems to be a smart direction. After all, most difference-driven scholars of young men and literacy take on this project in some way—though Martino & Kehler might suggest they do not. Newkirk investigates assumptions about boys’ experiences of humor and violence. Smith & Wilhelm’s finding that young men simultaneously value school and are disinterested by it is as complex a challenge to assumptions as one can find anywhere in literature about gender and literacy. That these explorations do not ‘count’ for Martino & Kehler suggests that the “interrogation” for which they call relates back to their call to “challenge” rather than “recuperate” gender binaries in gender-based literacy reform. At the risk of falling into a dispute about semantics, it would seem to follow then that ‘questioning’ and ‘exploring’ issues of gender in class would not be enough. Their suggestion creates a new binary—one can either recuperate *or* challenge traditional understandings of gender—and, when one underestimates the role essentialism can play in gender and literacy, that all or nothing stance has the potential to elide teachers’ and students’ experiences and starting places. Perhaps students and teachers are not yet able to position themselves as ‘challengers’ of the gender order. Does that mean necessarily that they must be complicit in recuperating a gender binary? The difference-driven literature on young men and literacy, though often not critical enough of gender ideologies, does bring their stubborn reality to the forefront—just like Smith & Wilhelm’s and Appleman’s anecdotes about all those nodding heads on boys and literacy.

The difference-driven literature frequently attempts to make pedagogical and curricular recommendations, but these almost universally come under fire from (pro)feminists. Martino & Kehler suggest, “Through advocating a focus on boys’ interests within the context of a more hands-on approach to literacy learning, attention to developing intellectually demanding and problem-solving tasks relevant to the demands of life outside of school have been glaringly absent...It is not enough to just select texts that cater to the stereotypical interests of boys in the English Language Arts classroom without taking into consideration knowledge about the impact and effects of various masculinities on boys’ lives” (424). To be sure, difference-driven authors do sometimes make stereotype-based recommendations, but as I showed, (pro)feminist authors tend to cherry-pick the most flagrant examples while eliding the more nuanced ones. When developing their own recommendations, (pro)feminists offer a couple of types. For one, they call for, as Martino & Kehler put it, “intellectually demanding and problem-solving tasks.” These proposals recall the sorts of recommendations from difference-driven authors who advocate think-alouds or meaningful driving questions for writing. These are good ideas, but one must include the caveat that they are good ideas regardless of gender being in the discussion or not. (Pro)feminists also call for a concomitant focus on gender in class—or “taking into consideration knowledge about the impact and effects of various masculinities on boys’ lives.” This is an important approach but a concomitant caution is that calling for talk about masculinity and literacy in school might very well be easier said than done. The same ideologies that lead to common sense but stereotyped pedagogical recommendations might make positioning to talk about gender a troublesome move for students and teachers. Difference-based assumptions about gender and literacy practices nearly always draw on broader cultural understandings of gender difference, just as students do. If gender constructions are how one makes sense of family

dynamics or romantic relationships, then their translation to English class can make deep-rooted sense. Even if one accepts the (pro)feminist project of a wholesale upending of the gender order in life, school, and English class, it is worth noting that this is a lofty and difficult goal.

Finally, Martino & Kehler are far more critical of gender as a construct than they are of literacy. They critique “assumptions” about “boys, masculinity, and schooling” which might be otherwise stated as critiquing ‘ideologies’ about “boys, masculinity, and literacy.” Indeed, (pro)feminists are thorough in surfacing the often untroubled notions about gender because, for them, these common sense beliefs are part of an oppressive regime. (Pro)feminists, however, tend to undertheorize literacy. For example, Martino & Kehler draw on Alloway et. al. (2002) in emphasizing “analytic and conceptual frameworks...to inform classroom interventions designed to improve boys’ engagement with literacy in school” such as “a repertoire for representing the self” which means “understanding the ways in which boys learn to represent themselves in school as gendered subjects and how this impacts on their engagement with literacy” (419). Students evolving representations of self “impact on their engagement with literacy,” but literacy is rarely represented as acting on them. As I will explore in the discussion of the theoretical framework in the next chapter, literacy and literacy practices are ideological in themselves (Street, 1995; Brandt & Clinton 2002). When I describe an ideology about gender and literacy, I seek to explore the interplay between ideologies about literacy and ideologies about gender.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

For the students in this dissertation study, neither gender nor literacy could be considered a neutral or stable construction. My interviews with them showed that both constructs were, alone and in conjunction, often freighted with awareness of past experiences, stereotypes, and expectations. The theoretical and methodological grounding of this study accounts for both the patterned power of global and local beliefs about gender and literacy *and* the variation in how students navigate these beliefs in the classroom. In order to organize and offer language for students' perceptions of, and interactions with, gender and literacy in this dissertation, I propose a theoretical construct called 'ideologies about gender and literacy,' which I define as highly naturalized belief systems about how given identity/gender performances work (or do not work) in relation to in-context literacy practices. Prior research on young men and literacy sometimes uncritically constructs definitions of literacy and/or gender that are mistakenly singular and not derived from context. Even (pro)feminist authors, who offer sophisticated theoretical renderings of gender performance, spend less time unpacking the nature of the 'literacy' around which performances of gender operate.³⁷ Students, in that view, perform gender around relatively neutral literacy events. The last chapter argued that autonomous views of literacy and difference-based views of gender are not sufficient to adequately respond to conversations about young men and literacy as well as incommensurate with the way in which students in this study experienced gender and literacy in English class.

³⁷ This is perhaps because literacy is rarely the sole focus of (pro)feminist studies, so relying centrally on literacy theory might be a poor choice for their projects.

This chapter proposes, instead, the construct of ideologies about gender and literacy which both theorizes gender performances and situates those performances within an ideological model of literacy. This chapter also demonstrates how this theoretical model undergirds the qualitative research design and analytic framework of the study, which consisted of six weeks of in-class observations as well as semi-structured interviews with 31 male and female students at three college-preparatory high schools in the Upper Midwest (one coed, one all-female, and one all-male). As a construct, ideologies about gender and literacy draws on rich theorizations of literacy and literacy practices (Street, 1995), gender performativity (Butler, 2007), masculinities and hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2005), and gender's simultaneity with other identity factors (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). So defined, ideologies about gender and literacy allow for account of, and ethical reaction to, the ideological sense-making included in students' and teachers' views of how gender can become salient relative to literacy. The theoretical construct informs the research design, a qualitative interview and observational study in English classrooms. It also serves as a framework for data analysis that identifies circulating ideologies, and participants' orientations to them, in order to induce the differences gender can make from students' contextually defined perceptions of both gender and literacy. In short, these participants orient to similar understandings of identity, but their orientations are also unique, in the strict sense of that word.

Lifting the Veil of Autonomous Literacy

I suggested in the previous chapter that the scholarly research about young men and literacy is usefully categorized as difference-driven or (pro)feminist, but one consistency across categories is an assumption of what Street labels an autonomous model of literacy. To demonstrate how such perceptions of autonomy manifest in terms of gender and literacy, I

consider the manner in which the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) becomes fodder for concerns about boys. The NAEP describes itself as “the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas” (NCES). The NAEP reading and writing exams set off alarm bells about ‘boys’ every two to four years when they reveal them to be lagging behind female students in these measures of literacy. The noisy panic, however, can overwhelm the sober but necessary point that the NAEP’s assessment constructs claim to measure “what students know and can do” in reading and writing but in reality constitute a fairly narrow vision of reading and writing. The NAEP Reading exam is a mixture of multiple choice and constructed-response items in response to information and literacy passages, and the NAEP Writing exam consists of two on-demand essays for which students get 30 minutes each (NCES, 2015d; NCES, 2011b). Despite this, the discourses about young men and literacy, whether in the conservative media or the difference-driven or (pro)feminist scholarship, take for granted the conflation of reading and writing writ large with the NAEP’s specific construction of these skills. That conflation lends NAEP’s construction a veil of comprehensiveness and neutrality.

Lifting the veil of literacy’s autonomy, however, permits one to examine students’ identity work relative to literacy as a recursive social process rather than as orientation to a fixed point. I adopt Street’s (1995) ideological model for this purpose, and his theory of literacy directly responds to scholars who advocate an autonomous model,³⁸ a model which I argue invisibly stultifies the conversation about young men and literacy. Olson (1977) crystalizes the

³⁸ Street does not consider autonomous and ideological models of literacy to be ends of a spectrum. Rather, the ideological model of literacy *incorporates* an autonomous one. In Street’s (1995) words: “The ideological model...does not attempt to deny technical skill or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing [i.e. parts of what assessments like NAEP measure], but rather understands them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power. In that sense the ideological model subsumes rather than excludes the work undertaken within the autonomous model” (161).

autonomous view in a history of literacy as a progression from "utterance to text"—or, as a development from oral to written language and then on to the apex of "essayist" technique through which the meaning of written text can be understood independent of context. In Olson's words, the "task now was to create autonomous text—to write in such a manner that the sentence was an adequate, explicit representation of the meaning, relying on no implicit premises or personal interpretations" (268). Ong (1986) adds that structuring thought through writing actually changes the way one thinks (for the better): "Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form" (24). In short, Olson and Ong argue that, ideally, literacy clarifies thought and reasoning such that it can be practiced and understood independent of (or autonomous from) context, identity, and culture.

Many students in this study held an autonomous view of their reading and writing tasks in English class—though they did not use the word autonomous. For them, composing literature analysis or reading *Much Ado about Nothing* was normalized as just doing school, with identity performance rarely a factor. Students also relied, somewhat paradoxically, on beliefs about gender more broadly (e.g. differences in communication practices or maturity) to explain the contrasting success of male and female students in English class. In short, literacy tasks themselves were autonomous but the doing of them could often be explained by beliefs about gender. As such, any simple dismissal of an autonomous, skill-based understanding of literacy misses the continued relevance of this model to participants' experiences. The resonance of differential success relative to a neutral idea of literate skills shows the social meaning of how

low test scores often ‘mean’ that less literate young men think less abstractly than more literate young women.³⁹

If being able to write a thesis-driven essay is unquestionably a valuable indicator of skill and intelligence, how is one to read some students’ lack of skill in writing one? Or their apathy towards the task (i.e. a stance like ‘yes, that is important, but it makes me very bored’)? Students in this study do not usually question the validity of the literacy they are learning in English class, a finding that recalls Smith & Wilhelm’s paradoxical realization that their participants simultaneously value and devalue the literacy work they do in school. Street’s description of the power and invisibility of autonomous literacy helps explain this. He suggests, “The language of ‘function’ disguises and effectively naturalizes the ideological role of literacy in contemporary society. The pedagogized literacy...becomes, then, an organizing concept around which ideas of social identity and value are defined” (125). Indeed, what Smith & Wilhelm’s participants call “schoolish” literacy is so naturalized in its value that it invisibly organizes students’ performances. The difference-based scholars of young men might argue that an academic task such as writing a thesis-driven essay is important, which means one should focus on making the task accessible to young men. This assumption underlies, for example, Pirie’s assertion that think-alouds will let young men feel like experts, or Fletcher’s call to make writing classrooms more welcoming to boys. The recommendations are based on gender performance around a stable notion of what valuable ‘literacy’ means. Thus, even if gender could be thought of as

³⁹ As I detail in the next chapter, however, the most basic literate-illiterate binary does not apply to young women and young men in my study. Yes, the young men are ‘behind’ or ‘struggling’ relative to young women, but no one would call them illiterate or even unintelligent in the sense that Street details about the Western view of some non-Western cultures. That said, the taint of illiteracy—invoked by people like Sommers—connects to the way young men are described as behind.

constructed and performative, literacy is not. Their answer to the question of low skill or apathy is to address pedagogy and curriculum mainly *in terms of gender*.

Literacy as Ideology

This study seeks to denaturalize, based on a critical literacy perspective, the dominant autonomous conception of literacy often circulating in English classrooms. Street (2003) suggests that the autonomous model neglects ideologies about literacy and the impact of culture by “disguising the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal” (77). For Street, places like schools often attempt to import 'literacy' as if that idea exists as a unified and self-contained thing. While I argue that (pro)feminist approaches would benefit from richer theorizations of literacy as well, disrupting the autonomous model in difference-driven scholarly literature especially exposes the flaws in a difference-based approach. Gender difference makes sense as a mindset when literacy is a constant, but once “the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin” literacy are made explicit, one can turn the focus from gender difference to the difference gender makes for students on ELA literacy tasks. Such a shift means, for example, placing less emphasis on surface-level observations like ‘six female students but only one male student got an A on the unit novel test’ and more emphasis on examining what aspects of gender performance (if any) played a part in students’ experience of reading that novel or taking that test.

Street’s ideological model of literacy provides the language and structure for understanding the difference gender can make in literacy practices once one dispatches the illusion of neutrality. He defines the model:

[L]iteracy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill...it is always embedded in socially constructed, epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in

which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. It is also always embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market or a particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological,' they are always rooted in a particular world-view and in a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others (77-78).

A few strands are crucial in the above definition. First, when literacy is defined as ideological, the way “people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of...identity.” It is not only, then, that some students choose to perform a given identity in English class and this somehow results in a given stance toward literacy practices. Students’ conceptions of reading and writing themselves *require* identity performances. The circulating ideologies about which I inquire in this dissertation study come as much from the nature of the literacy in the classroom as they do from identity or gender performance independently. Second, literacy “is also always embedded in social practices, such as those of...a particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts.” In this case, the “particular educational context[s]” in whose literacy practices this study is “embedded” are three specific English classroom contexts. The “effect” of students “learning” this contextually defined literacy is *also* dependent on the social constructions of these classrooms. While an autonomous model would assume that a specific, externally-defined set of literacy skills holds sway, this dissertation, in adopting an ideological model, uses internally-defined valuations of literacy and concomitant circulating ideologies about this literacy. In the next section of this chapter, I also examine how theories of gender performativity interact with these circulating ideologies. Of course, external definitions of literacy (“what students know and

are able to do”) hold sway inside these classrooms because the autonomy of literacy is itself ideological, but other ideologies about literacy circulate as well.

Street’s definition of ‘literacy practices’ makes interviews with students a fruitful approach for investigating ideologies about literacy in school. He ascribes to Heath (1983) the term ‘literacy events,’ which indicates the variety of oral and written moments in everyday interaction, but makes ‘literacy practices’ a more capacious term. He explains that they “indicate ...the cultural uses and meanings of reading and writing. Literacy practices I would take as referring not only to the event itself but the conceptions of the reading and writing process that people hold when they are engaged in the event” (133). These “conceptions”—students’ ideas of who ought to be participating in that literacy event and how they ought to be doing it—do become visible when, like Smith & Wilhelm, one asks students about them. For example, writing a thesis-driven essay is a literacy event, and, as Heath’s well-known study finds, one that is affected by the background and culture of that student. In that way, if one’s family emphasizes skills that correlate with such a writing task, then that student might be more ready to execute such a practice. Street’s extended definition takes into account not only culture, but students’ “conceptions...when they are engaged in the event.” Through interviews with 31 high school students, I sought to determine how participants perceive their own performances relative to class literacy practices (e.g. reading a specific novel), their beliefs about how identity and gender matters (or not) for the practices, and their awareness of others’ beliefs or stereotypes about the practices. With this understanding of a literacy practice, students’ awareness that young women generally do better in English class, for example, becomes part of the literacy practice itself. I argue that literacy practices are only locally comprehensible through the discovery of their connections to ideologies about identity/gender and literacy as understood in that context.

An important caveat to my focus on local ideologies and understandings is that, of course, many of the resources students deploy to perpetuate and make sense of ideologies about gender and literacy are *not* locally sourced. For example, one of my participants, Stan, spent a couple minutes of his interview trying to match the English class personas of himself and his classmates to characters from *The Breakfast Club*. Brandt & Clinton (2002) propose accounting for these broader, more global ideologies about literacy and identity/gender. They ask, "Can we not see the ways that literacy arises out of local, particular, situated human interactions while also seeing how it also regularly arrives from other places—infiltrating, disjuncting, and displacing local life?" (343). These "limits of the local" open up the ideological picture by accounting for non-local ideas within a given context. In this dissertation, I examine how broader cultural ideologies about gender (often manifested through stereotypes) have an effect on specific contexts, even as each classroom context remakes the global ideology in local terms. Global ideologies about literacy and gender are present in popular and scholarly debates about how to help male students succeed (e.g. males generally are poor at communication). Though each student and class make their own sense of such wider ideas, Brandt & Clinton theorize how a student's performance during a literacy activity can be specific to context without presuming to ignore ideas imported from outside the community.

Gender and Ideologies about Literacy: Performative, Heterogeneous, and Intersectional

The questions driving this dissertation focus on how students understand gender specifically, in the context of identity more generally, as interacting with the literacy practices from their English classes. As I have argued, the panic around young men and literacy gained traction, in part, because the idea of male literacy deficit struck a familiar chord. The examination and complication of that resonance drives this project. My aim, however, is to

engage with gender differently than media pundits like Sommers and difference-based scholars like Brozo.⁴⁰ They often treat gender as fixed, homogeneous, and independent of other identity markers. That model is incommensurate, however, both with lived experience and with the ideological model of literacy guiding my research. Street suggests, “Within school, *the association of literacy acquisition with the child’s development of specific social identities and positions*... must be understood as essentially *social* processes: they contribute to the construction of a particular kind of citizen, a particular kind of identity” (127, my emphasis). Though what Street means by the “association” of “literacy acquisition” and “development of specific social identities” is vague, literacy as ideological presupposes the continuous social construction of identity. Difference-based scholarship about young men and literacy too often short-circuits more complex approaches to gender by generalizing, and, for the specific students in this study, I rely on a more localized, social approach to determine what difference gender makes in their English classes.

I theorize gender as performative, heterogeneous, and intersectional. Butler⁴¹ (2007) offers language for how one's work in school, as well as other contexts, serves to perform gender, and her discussion of gender as performance explains how ideologies about gender and literacy function. She suggests that the performativity of gender "revolves around...the way in

⁴⁰ My approach to gender as performative, heterogeneous, and intersectional, however, shares much with (pro)feminist scholars of young men’s literacy and their critical approach to gender.

⁴¹ It seems important to note, first, that Butler writes primarily about women, and, second, that the first question she considers has to do with how the performances of non-normative sexual practices might undermine the received gender order—a reason Butler is often credited with contributing to queer theory. My study does not centrally take up issues of sexuality (though see my final chapter for a discussion of what it means for a female student in the coed class to be “questioning” if her male classmates read some marked texts). That said, Butler’s definition of performativity and her conclusions about the application of non-normative gender performance guides this dissertation. When she writes about “the fear of losing one’s place in gender or of not knowing who one will be if one sleeps with someone of the ostensibly ‘same’ gender,” I replace the last conditional about sleeping with someone with a question about engaging in literacy practices outside the locally established gender norms.

which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself” and also “is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (xv). Butler argues that all people have a strong motivation to consistently "act" in ways consistent with the gender they assign themselves (or that is assigned to them). Further, Butler (1990) asserts, "Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all" (279). If, as Street suggests, literacy is always ideological, students in an English class need to repeat their gender performance correctly in relation to, for example, reading books. It is important that gender make a contextually appropriate difference, and there are incentives for doing so and disincentives for failing to do so. When Street proposes “the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being,” one way in which approaches to reading and writing are “rooted” is through a dynamic, lived knowledge of these incentives and disincentives.

Students in my study often resisted these incentives and disincentives by explicitly challenging ideologies about gender and literacy on gendered terms. Resistance is performance as well. Butler’s 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble* glosses her work on gender as a way to open what had been previously closed and to oppose idealized and/or hierarchical expressions of gender difference (i.e. different valued femininities). She explains that her book “sought to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent assumptions” (viii). Butler’s suggestion that such beliefs have the potential to “foreclose” how the situation might be otherwise is crucial. ‘Of course,’ these assumptions would say, ‘we should let young men choose what they want to read.’ And, ‘Of

course, their choices will be relevant to them.’ But the same assumptions and ideologies that limit gender performance in the first place will also limit their selections and one’s perceptions of what they will find relevant. In order to remove limits, Butler argues, her theories “open the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized” (viii). The participants in this dissertation study fill in these possibilities for themselves, and Butler’s theorization of gender provides a scaffolding for understanding these possibilities without prescribing them.

The participants in this study show that gender has the potential to create possibilities as well as to limit them, even if there can be incentives and disincentives attached to this creation and limitation. These possibilities are one way in which gender performances become heterogeneous, an observation that both my study and Smith & Wilhelm’s make about their participants. For young men specifically, Connell (2005) theorizes the heterogeneity of masculinity, which among my participants, is observed by both male and female students. Connell argues that there is not one essential version of masculinity but many masculinities. He adds that “it has become increasingly clear that different masculinities are produced in the same cultural or institutional setting” (36). Thus, the heterogeneity of masculinity exists within contexts as well as across them. Each version, of course, brings with it sets of incentives and disincentives, and, in the classroom, these are in part determined by the interaction of gender with circulating, context-specific ideologies about gender and literacy. What’s more, available gender performances, though heterogeneous, are created relationally and in-context, more unstable isotope than noble gas. Connell suggests, “To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We have to examine the relations between them...to keep the analysis dynamic, to prevent the acknowledgement of multiple masculinities collapsing into a

character typology” (76). The creation of inert ‘types’ (e.g. the boys who like sports, the boys who read fantasy novels, etc.) can be a pratfall of difference-driven literature about young men and literacy, one I seek to avoid in explicitly defining gender as heterogeneous. Each research site produced masculinities relationally, and thus slightly differently, depending on class make-up. In part, this dynamic creation of masculinities is what I mean when I say that I am interested in the circulation of ideologies about gender and literacy *in context*.

One performance of masculinity bears particular mention: hegemonic masculinity. Difference-based scholarship about young men and literacy, driven by a rhetoric of male deficit, tends to portray young men as victims and elide the specter of hegemony; in Fletcher’s words, teachers need to “give them a seat at the table” rather than persevere about their dominance. (Pro)feminists take the opposite approach, defining as a purpose of their work the critique of hegemonic gender regimes, and I fully adopt their awareness and exigency for my study. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). Hegemonic masculinity is of course also developed in relation to other available gender performances. Connell: “Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (76). The contexts of my study did not lack systems of male privilege. For example, both male and female students across three sites saw discussions of gender inequity in literature to be discussions *for* female students. In another example, one male student explains his poor effort in English class through an awareness that males tend to do better in school “when it matters” (in the temporal sense) and so plans to

work harder at that point. His comment is a stark acknowledgement of the influence hegemonic masculinity has on his performance relative to literacy work in class.

Foregrounding issues of hegemonic masculinity is especially important in my project about young men and literacy because such a perspective casts a wary eye on the crisis rhetoric. Instead, male deficit narratives can indicate sites where male hegemony fights for restoration. Connell argues:

Most of the time, defense of the patriarchal order does not require explicit masculinity politics. Given that the heterosexual men socially selected for hegemonic masculinity run the corporations and the state, the routine maintenance of these institutions will normally do the job. This is the core of the collective project of hegemonic masculinity, and the reason why the project most of the time is not visible as a project... Yet crisis tendencies in the gender order do emerge, and in response to them hegemonic masculinity *is* likely to be themetized (212-213).

In a government institution like a school, “the routine maintenance” of the institution would generally be enough to reproduce the inequality hegemonic masculinity enforces—and would thus be invisible in classrooms. The crisis indicated by books like *The War against Boys*, however, shows just such a disruption in the gender order, and some of the “response” to that crisis draws of themes of restoring hegemonic masculinity. One example of this restoration work is the difference-based pedagogical and curricular recommendations made by conservative and difference-driven authors. That is not to say that all recommendations are in the service of restoring hegemony, but one would be hard pressed to explain Brozo’s reliance on “honorable” masculine archetypes to improve young men’s literacy as anything other than explicit “thematization” of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, even as the literature emerges from the throes of the latest boys’ literacy crisis, this dissertation project relies on the theory behind hegemonic masculinity in order to ask questions about young men’s literacy without seeking a restoration of

hegemony. This is, I suspect, what Weaver-Hightower (2008) has in mind when he argues that studying young men can be a progressive enterprise, a goal I explicitly take on in this project.

Concomitant with theorizing gender performances as heterogeneous is establishing gender as always embroiled⁴² with other aspects of one's identity. Lingard, Martino, & Mills (2009) observe that much more attention in the U.S. has been paid to race and education than gender and education, but it is ironically also true that difference-based work on young men's literacy often elides race and other markers of identity in favor of the homogenous Boys. Critics rightly challenge this lack of nuance with an oft-repeated question: which boys are struggling? Though I avoid debates about where the 'real' literacy deficit is, the stance of this research project is that gender is never *only* about gender; or, as West & Fenstermaker (1995) argue, "No person can experience gender without simultaneously experiencing race and class" (13). It is perhaps unsurprising that scholars who rely on difference-based logic tend to ultimately delete race and class from their analyses. West & Fenstermaker conclude that "if we conceive of gender as a matter of biological differences or differential roles...this prevents us from understanding how gender, race, and class operate simultaneously with one another. It prevents us from seeing the how the particular salience of these experiences might vary across interactions" (19). Though I eschew a difference-based conception of gender for a performative and relational one, my study admittedly focuses predominantly, though not only, on gender. In part, this decision emerged from a desire to directly take on scholarly literature that uncritically takes up masculinity and its relation to literacy. I am, of course, wary of the possibility even a non-difference-based approach can preclude understanding of how aspects of one's identity "operate simultaneously." This wariness results in my interview protocol which avoids mentioning any social category (e.g.

⁴² West and Fenstermaker do not support the term intersectionality though I use it in this dissertation. No matter the term, my assumption, as well as theirs, is that identity is always simultaneously sexed, raced, and classed.

race, gender, class, etc.) for the first two-thirds of the interview in an attempt to grasp ideologies about identity and literacy capaciously. The answer to ‘which boys?’ in this project is always ‘the boys *and girls* in these three English classes.’

Still, by limiting the influence of difference, I aim, rather than invisibly assuming “the particular salience” of gender, to determine instead *if* gender is salient and, if so, in what way. Street himself does not pay special attention to gender⁴³, but focusing on gender as part of overall identity, I argue, fits within his conception of an ideological model. These “specific social identities and positions” could very well be situated around gender performance, assuming that gender is a salient factor for a student or for groups of students in context. Relying on student interviews, I argue that gender is often, but not always, salient for many of the participants in this study. Again, though, I do *not* claim that gender identities (‘what it means to be a young man or young women) can be separated from other identity categories (e.g. ‘what it means to be a young Latino man) or from more comprehensive identities (‘what it means to be me’). I am also not suggesting that gender is necessarily *more* salient than other identity markers. I am, however, presenting evidence that ideologies about gender (especially masculinity) and literacy are quite meaningful in the experience of the students in this dissertation study. An ideological model of literacy helps situate these experiences of gender within a non-neutral notion of literacy.

⁴³ Street frequently notes that an ideological model of literacy helps one understand how hegemonic male uses of literacy have historically dominated female uses. For example, he argues, “*The uses of literacy by women*; its association with informal, non-religious, and non-bureaucratic practices; its affective and expressive functions; and the incorporation of oral conventions into written usage—all are features of literacy practice that have tended to be *marginalized or destroyed by modern, western literacy with its emphasis on formal, male, and schooled aspects of communication*” (my emphasis, 109-110). One can see, then, how the low achievement of young men relative to young women on something like the NAEP—a “schooled,” “male,” autonomous measurement of literacy if ever there was one—surprises on a surface level. Shouldn’t males do better on a ‘male’ test? The performative, transgressive model of gender I describe accounts for this terminological slippage—dominant masculinities are far from the only types—but I heard multiple students grapple with a vague sense of dissonance when describing how even though males were dominant culturally, their male classmates seemed anything but powerful in English class.

Ideologies about Gender and Literacy

It is worth making explicit my presumption that the performance of gender/identity within an ideological model of literacy is of consequence for students' learning. Students' navigation of different social identities (gender, racial, socioeconomic, geographic, etc.) influences their learning even when academic content appears neutral. Ambrose et. al. (2010) articulate a “developmental and holistic” perspective of learning in which “students enter our classrooms...with social and emotional experiences that influence what they value, how they perceive themselves and others, and how they will engage in the learning process” (3-4). This way of looking at how students learn—an implicit argument for research on how social identities like gender play a role in classrooms—is not self-evident. A reasonable teacher might say that good teaching is good teaching no matter the student or content. Still, a more holistic approach encourages teachers and researchers to inquire into how students make sense of the world around them, academic and otherwise.

This approach makes grappling with local ideologies about gender and literacy one integral component of the “social and emotional experiences” that go into a holistic picture of learning. When, for example, Elsa says, “I can imagine the stereotypes aren't great about males in English class,” she articulates an ideology about gender and literacy that students—male and female—need to orient themselves toward during the learning process that happens in that classroom at Fielding High School. Of course, student identity orientations are varying and malleable. Some students might not even see what Elsa sees in that classroom. Others might note that same ideology but dismiss it, accept it, be motivated by it, and/or be confused by it. Certainly too, the impact of ideologies about gender and literacy might be mitigated or negated by certain pedagogy or school structures or family beliefs. Still, the developmental and holistic

model of learning Ambrose et. al. articulate shows the danger in ignoring social and emotional realities in the classroom.

In using ideologies about gender and literacy as a theoretical frame for this dissertation, I am attempting to emphasize, rather than downplay, the performativity, heterogeneity, and intersectionality of gender. The concept of ideologies about gender and literacy allows for an account to be made of the sets of global and local attitudes, stereotypes, and beliefs about gender and literacy that people make use of every day. It is one way of seeing how group identity can be, paradoxically, fodder for the most individualized performances. When Stan, at the opening of this dissertation, explains that everyone knows female students do better in English class, he is drawing on what he views as a widely known ideology—a view that is borne out in his particular context and the two others in this study. It matters that he is White and upper-middle class because that affects the way he is able to position himself around that gender ideology, but the ideology itself, as described experientially by the participants of this study, brings gender to bear as a salient identity binary: young women do well in English class, young men do not. The same gender binaries exist in other parts of cultural conversations (e.g. communication, emotional capacity, asking for directions), and they make a difference in people’s lives. As *The War against Boys* or *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader* indicate, cultural significance attaches to even untroubled understandings of gender and literacy.

In summary, as I consider them for this project, ideologies about gender and literacy: 1) are defined as highly naturalized belief systems about how given identity/gender performances work (or do not work) in relation to ideological literacy practices; 2) can be invisible to students but can also be consciously resisted, accepted, ignored, enforced, etc.; 3) are relational and thus derived from each classroom context but also have the potential to reproduce patterns based on

more global understandings of gender and literacy; 4) become active when a gender is a contextually salient aspect of identity performance. These ideologies about literacy might be discoverable through different types of data. As I detail in the next section on methodology, I gather data through students' responses to interview questions about gender and literacy practices and students' in-class stances toward and interactions around various literacy-based activities. The ideologies about identity and literacy are expressed implicitly and explicitly and are influenced by global and local ideas about gender. The research methods also assume that ideologies about literacy and gender will depend on the particular contexts of each school site where I conducted interviews and observations; ideologies about literacy exist in different contexts, and what constitutes a(n) (un)successful performance might differ depending on site.

Research Design and Methodology

In order to qualitatively investigate the actual circulation of the ideologies about gender and literacy described above, I rely upon the voices of high school students speaking about the way in which they see their own and others' identity/gender mattering (or not) in English class. I analyze these interviews individually and collectively in relation to a central research question: How do ideologies about gender and literacy contribute to student practices and perspectives on literacy in a high school English classroom? To incorporate various answers to the question, I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with students in English classes at three high schools: one coed, one all-female, and one all-male. To gain a contextual understanding of how these classes operated on a day-to-day basis, I also observed six weeks of class at the coed school as well as four class sessions each at the all-male and all-female schools. I analyzed the interviews through inductive, thematic coding.

Research Sites and Recruitment

The observations and interview participants came from three English classes at three different high schools in two cities in the Upper Midwest. City A is the site of a large university and has a population of around 100,000. City B is a large city at the center of a metropolitan area with a population in the top 30 in the United States. Fielding High School is a grade 6-12, mixed-gender private school in City A. Samuel High School is a K-12 all-female private school in the suburbs of City B. St. Richards High School a grade 9-12, all-male private school with a Jesuit affiliation in City B. I selected sites based on the principle of maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) in which one investigates similar patterns across variation. In this case, the primary pattern under analysis was ideologies about identity/gender and literacy across three classroom settings. By including a coed, all-female, and all-male school, the central point of variation in research site selection was student sex. Including single-sex classes serves as one check on potential analytical oversimplification based on stereotyped notions of gender. For example, I show how many of the same ideologies about gender and literacy circulate in all three classes, including ideas about female students at St. Richards and ideas about male students at Samuel. Though each context affects the ideology, these similarities across variation demonstrate that, as Brandt & Clinton predict, the influence of the global as well as the local and, as West & Fenstermaker suggest, “the accomplishment of race, class, and gender does not require categorical diversity among the participants” (31).

This complex set of contexts also permits the project to disrupt, and recognize the power of, the ideologies behind difference-based models of gender. Such models have often led to a set of pedagogical and curricular recommendations for boys only (e.g. Brozo). Some even argue, based specifically on a difference-model, that single-sex classes are an answer for young women

who struggle in math and young men who struggle in English. Using these three classrooms builds questions about gender and gender-difference into the project without exaggerating gender's salience in comparison to other performed student identities. Even when all the students in a class check the same demographic box for sex, students still perform gender, in its performativity, heterogeneity, and intersectionality, in various ways relative to ideologies about literacy. In a way, it is the single-sex classes that prove how limiting a gender difference-based can be for students. To crib from Smith & Wilhelm's study, neither the boys nor girls are boys and girls in the same way.

There is, of course, some irony in claiming to question difference-based models of literacy education by selecting sites based on 'different' gender enrollments. That said, studying ideologies about literacy and gender through the classroom interviews and observations of mixed-gender, all-male, and all-female classes guards against unwarranted conclusions about male students, a focus of this study. The majority of research about young men's literacy practices thus far uses only young men as research participants. This study adds to that work by asking female students, too, about how ideologies about literacy and gender affect them and how they see the ideologies affecting their male classmates. The move to include female students benefits the study in two crucial ways. First, by primarily using interviews to identify circulating ideologies, the data is somewhat limited by students' self-perception and openness. Having female students as participants broadened access to operating attitudes and stereotypes. For example, many female students spoke about the influence of what they called feminism when reading and discussing literature in class, but no male students brought feminism up by name. Through the female students' explicitness, however, thematic coding revealed times when the male students spoke more subtly about gender and power. Second, from an ethical standpoint, I

had trouble with the notion of only studying male students at these predominantly affluent, White schools. The history of female students being systematically denied equal access to rigorous curriculum (AAUW, 1992; Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009) remains frustratingly present. Including female students in the primary design for data collection fronts the way in which circulating ideologies about gender and literacy might limit them, even in an English class discourse in which female students are often seen as superior students.

One possible confound within the site selection is that St. Richards is a Jesuit school while the other two schools hold no religious affiliation. While these classes are not meant to be representative of mixed- or single-gender classrooms and the results are not generalizable to ideologies about gender and literacy in other classes, it is possible that students' orientations to the religiosity at school affected the presence and circulation of ideologies. For example, almost all of the students at St. Richards participated in faith-based service activities, and one, Joe, was part of a theological discussion group after school. Especially in the fifth chapter on gender-justice ideologies, I explore how students' identities as people of a certain faith might become salient in the way they view literacy and English class. Clearly, I was not able to control for the effect of the religious affiliation, but still selected the school because it was the only all-male research site to which I could gain access. I attempted to mitigate the effect of this confound through the interview protocol. It did not include specific questions about religious identity but did structure the interviews to keep the salience of identities student-defined until the final third of the conversation in order to determine how their identities interact with ideologies about literacy and identity broadly (not just gender).

Once I obtained site approval letters from the administration at each school and IRB approval from the University of Michigan, I began the process of recruiting one class at each

school. I worked with administration to identify English teachers willing to participate in the project. I met with each recommended teacher to select a class based on convenience to them and basic appropriateness for the project (e.g. a required English class rather than an elective). At Fielding, Ms. Liu's class is a 10th grade, non-honors British literature class with 16 students. At Samuel, Ms. Bradstreet's class is an 11th grade Advanced Placement American literature class with 17 students. At St. Richards, Ms. Mead's class is a 12th grade Honors English IV class with 11 students. In each class, I worked with the teacher to find 10-15 minutes during their class to present the study and solicit volunteers for interviews. I explained the study as consisting of interviews about students' perceptions of how identities play a role for them or for their classmates in English class. I also noted that I would observe the class as often as possible during the semester. I simultaneously asked each teacher if I could interview her as well. The student volunteers acquired parental permission on a consent form and signed an assent form as well. I offered each participant a \$20 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time. I agreed to accept all volunteers and interviewed six of eleven students in the St. Richards class, nine of seventeen students in the Samuel class, and all sixteen students in the class at Fielding. All three teachers also agreed to be interviewed.⁴⁴

Participants

Before beginning their interviews, I asked students to complete a demographic and attitudinal survey (attached in Appendix A). The survey gathered information about race, parents'/guardians' education, education to which the student aspires, languages spoken at home,

⁴⁴ I used the teachers' interviews for contextual support rather than primary data for analysis. Demographically, all three teachers are female which is not out of step with national data (77% of all high school English teachers are female). Ms. Bradstreet (at Samuel) and Ms. Mead (at St. Richards) identified as white. Ms. Liu (at Fielding) identified as Asian-American.

and socioeconomic status as perceived by the student. In addition, the survey asked students to identify the grades they usually got in English class as well as how those grades compared to their grades overall. Finally, the survey inquired about students' level of confidence at reading, writing, and discussing in the ways their English class generally asked them to. As noted, all 16 students at coed Fielding High School agreed to participate in the study, and, for St. Richards and Samuel, the students interviewed roughly correlated to the demographics and attitudes of the class overall.⁴⁵

As a whole, the survey indicates a high level of homogeneity among participants' demographics and orientation to English class, no matter their school, but through interviews and observations, this dissertation finds a number of difference-based ideologies beneath the veneer of sameness. Figure 1 contains the demographic information for the student participants at Fielding, Samuel, and St. Richards, and Figure 2 breaks down the demographics of students at Fielding by student sex. Students self-identified answers to all these questions. Especially for categories like parents' education and socioeconomic status, I valued knowledge of how the participants self-identified rather 'accuracy' based on outside criteria.

Table 3.1: Participant Demographic Information at Research Sites

	Race	Participants' Parents' Education ⁴⁶	Participants' Aspired Education	English at home?	Participants' Perceived Socioeconomic Status
Fielding High School (16)	* White (10) * Asian (1) * African-American (3)	* Graduate degree (15) * College degree (1) * Some college (0)	* Graduate degree (13) * College degree (2) * Some college (1)	* Yes (11) * Yes, but there are others (3)	* Above average wealth (8) * Average wealth (8)

⁴⁵ As part of another study going on at Samuel and St. Richards, I was able to obtain demographic and attitudinal information for all the students in the class.

⁴⁶ The survey asked students to identify education information for both their parents. In the totals in the table, I used whichever parent had reached the highest level of education. Also, for the graduate degree category, the survey listed different options, including: doctoral degree, master's degree, law school, and medical school.

	* 2 or more (2)	* High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* No (2)	* Below average wealth (0)
Samuel High School (9)	* White (9)	* Graduate degree (6) * College degree (3) * Some college (0) * High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* Graduate degree (8) * College degree (1) * Some college (0) * High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* Yes (9) * Yes, but there are others (0) * No (0)	* Above average wealth (5) * Average wealth (4) * Below average wealth (0)
St. Richards High School (6)	* White (6)	* Graduate degree (4) * College degree (1) * Some college (1) * High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* Graduate degree (5) * College degree (1) * Some college (0) * High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* Yes (6) * Yes, but there are others (0) * No (0)	* Above average wealth (4) * Average wealth (1) * Below average wealth (1)

Across the three classrooms, the participants in this study can be described as predominantly White, wealthy, native English speakers with highly educated parents. The students hold similar educational aspirations as well. The participants at all schools are majority White, and, at Samuel and St. Richards, completely White. At Fielding, though, 19% of students identified as African-American, 6% as Asian, and 13% as two or more races which means that 38% of the class identified as non-White or a race in addition to White. In a similar pattern, all of the fifteen participants at St. Richards and Samuel spoke only English at home while this was true for 69% of Fielding students (i.e. 31% spoke at least one other language at home). Measured by their family's socioeconomic status, nearly all participants at Fielding, Samuel, and St. Richards described their families' financial situations as being either of above average wealth or average wealth with 50%, 56%, and 67% respectively reporting above average wealth. In addition, the participants' parents were highly educated with all but one a part of families in which at least one parent holds a college degree. What's more, 66% of participants at St. Richards and Samuel and

a remarkable 94% of participants at Fielding had at least one parent with a graduate degree. As one might expect, over 80% of participants in all three classes aspired to earn a graduate degree after graduating from college.

Table 3.2: Fielding High School Participant Demographic Information by Student Sex

	Race	Participants' Parents' Education	Participants' Aspired Education	English at home?	Participants' Perceived Socioeconomic Status
Female students (9)	* White (6) * Asian (0) * African-American (2) * 2 or more (1)	* Graduate degree (9) * College degree (0) * Some college (0) * High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* Graduate degree (8) * College degree (1) * Some college (0) * High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* Yes (7) * Yes, but there are others (2) * No (0)	* Above average wealth (3) * Average wealth (6) * Below average wealth (0)
Male students (7)	* White (4) * Asian (1) * African-American (1) * 2 or more (1)	* Graduate degree (6) * College degree (1) * Some college (0) * High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* Graduate degree (5) * College degree (1) * Some college (1) * High-School (0) * Less than High-School (0)	* Yes (4) * Yes, but there are others (1) * No (2)	* Above average wealth (5) * Average wealth (2) * Below average wealth (0)

Figure 2 shows that among the male and female students at Fielding, there are few group demographic distinctions. A slightly higher percentage of male students speaks a language other than English at home (43% vs. 22%), and in a starker distinction, a higher percentage of male students describes their families as having above average rather than average wealth (71% vs. 33%).

While the class at Fielding differs slightly from the classes at Samuel and St. Richards in regard to students' grades, their measures of confidence at reading, writing, and discussing in their English classes were similar (results shown in Figure 3). I solicited this information on the student survey because I anticipated that issues like grades and confidence on literacy tasks in

English class could affect circulating ideologies about literacy in the class. While *zero* participants in the study reported usually receiving any grade other than an A or a B, only 56% of the participants in the Fielding class described themselves as A students whereas 67% of the St. Richards participants and 100% of the Samuel participants did.⁴⁷ In addition, 31% of the students in the Fielding class described themselves as getting *worse* grades in English class relative to their other subjects while only one participant at Samuel and no participants at St. Richards described themselves this way. It seems entirely plausible that this grade discrepancy is the result of the Fielding English class not being an honors class while the other two classes are. Another factor could be that a few Fielding participants described Ms. Liu as a more difficult grader than they were used to. Still, the similarities of the school sites (i.e. private, college-prep, demographically similar), as well as the fact that only two students in the whole study describe themselves as better in English, indicates, I would argue, that these students share many similarities in their attitudes toward English class.

Table 3.3: Participant English Class Profiles at All Research Sites

	Grades in English Class	Grades in English Compared to Other Classes	Confidence to Contribute to Class Discussion ⁴⁸	Confidence to Read the Texts Usually Read in English Class	Confidence to Write the Pieces Usually Written in English Class
Fielding High School (16)	* Mostly A's (9) * Mostly B's (7) * Mostly C's (0) * Mostly D's and F's (0)	* Better in English (0) * About the Same (11) * Worse in English (5)	* One (0) * Two (3) * Three (3) * Four (4) * Five (6)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (1) * Four (5) * Five (10)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (3) * Four (11) * Five (2)
Samuel High School (9)	* Mostly A's (9) * Mostly B's (0) * Mostly C's (0) * Mostly D's and F's (0)	* Better in English (1) * About the Same (7) * Worse in English (1)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (2) * Four (3) * Five (4)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (0) * Four (3) * Five (6)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (1) * Four (6) * Five (2)

⁴⁷ Since I interviewed all the students at Fielding but just over half the class at the other two sites, it seems possible that selection bias in accepting volunteers led to weaker students in the St. Richards and Samuel classes eliminating themselves.

⁴⁸ The survey asked for answer on a Likert Scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = not at all confident and 5 = very confident.

St. Richards High School (6)	* Mostly A's (4) * Mostly B's (2) * Mostly C's (0) * Mostly D's and F's (0)	* Better in English (1) * About the Same (5) * Worse in English (0)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (0) * Four (3) * Five (3)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (0) * Four (2) * Five (4)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (0) * Four (3) * Five (3)
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On their confidence measures, in fact, their self-descriptions are more similar.⁴⁹ On a Likert scale from one to five, the Fielding participants' average confidence ranking for reading tasks in English class was 4.6 compared to 4.7 at Samuel and 4.7 at St. Richards. For the writing tasks generally expected in English class, the Fielding students averaged a 3.9 rating, the Samuel students a 4.1, and the St. Richards students a 4.5. Finally, in terms of personal confidence in contributing to class discussion, Fielding students averaged a 3.8 rating, Samuel students a 4.2, and St. Richards students a 4.5. While the participants at St. Richards were always the most confident and the Fielding participants always the least, the gap is not large (never more than 0.7). In addition, all the classes in this study, including the all-male class, can be characterized as fairly confident in their ability to do what is usually expected of them in English class though the Fielding participants exhibit more of a range than the other two.

Figure 4 shows these participants English class profiles broken down by student sex, and there is little discernable difference between the male and female students: just over half of males and females usually get A's in English (though a higher percentage of males claim to get worse grades in English than their other classes—43% vs. 22%). Their confidence rankings are similar as well for contributing to discussion (female 3.7 vs. males 3.9), reading texts in English class (female 4.7 vs. males 4.4), and English class writing (females 4.0 vs. males 3.9). Again, the

⁴⁹ During the beginning of the interview, I asked students to describe the types of reading and writing they usually did in English class. Put simply, there was little variation among the three classes. These were all literature-focused classes; reading meant novels, plays, and short stories and writing meant literature analysis through close reading. In addition, class discussion at all three sites most often meant teacher-directed whole class discussion with some time for small group work.

design of this project is not meant to be generalizable—perhaps these English class profiles would look different if the study included more or different sites. Also, though the site and participant selection did not include a mechanism for ensuring similar levels of achievement and confidence in class, these levels were fairly standard. In this context, then, the circulating ideologies about language and gender were not necessarily ad hoc explanations for obviously differential success in English class; the ideologies tapped into something else.

Table 3.4: Fielding High School Participant English Class Profiles by Student Sex

	Grades in English Class	Grades in English Compared to Other Classes	Confidence to Contribute to Class Discussion	Confidence to Read the Texts Usually Read in English Class	Confidence to Write the Pieces Usually Written in English Class
Female students (9)	* Mostly A's (5) * Mostly B's (4) * Mostly C's (0) * Mostly D's and F's (0)	* Better in English (0) * About the Same (7) * Worse in English (2)	* One (0) * Two (2) * Three (2) * Four (1) * Five (4)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (0) * Four (3) * Five (6)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (1) * Four (7) * Five (1)
Male students (7)	* Mostly A's (4) * Mostly B's (3) * Mostly C's (0) * Mostly D's and F's (0)	* Better in English (0) * About the Same (4) * Worse in English (3)	* One (0) * Two (1) * Three (1) * Four (3) * Five (2)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (1) * Four (2) * Five (4)	* One (0) * Two (0) * Three (2) * Four (4) * Five (1)

The similar attitudes of participants suggests, perhaps, a group of students across three sites with similar orientations toward English class, but, as I suggest later in the dissertation, ideologies about gender and literacy swirl underneath this apparent homogeneity. For example, one oft-repeated belief from participants *at all three sites*, justified in various ways, is that female students do better in English class than male students. This circulating ideology, however, seems not to be borne out in their confidence rankings. Participants from St. Richards are, if anything, more confident than any other class, and there is little difference between the male and female students at Fielding. I would suggest that this highlights an ideology of what Street calls autonomy when it comes to the performance of literacy tasks in English class such as writing an essay about a novel or reading a play. Gender, I will show, comes into play, but seemingly not at

the level where literacy is perceived as autonomous. Perhaps these English class profiles also help explain the lack of panic shown by male students in this study even given outside crisis rhetoric about them and their own sense that female students do English class better. If they are doing fine at the reading, writing, and discussing in class, it seems possible to them that the rest is just noise. This dissertation, however, investigates the nature of that noise in these classrooms specifically.

Participant Interviews

I interviewed all students during their free periods so that they would not have to miss class. Since the length of class periods at all three schools was about 45 minutes, these periods dictated the length of the interview as well. At all three schools, I worked with the participating teacher and school staff to find a suitable space in which to speak with students alone, outside the presence of their teacher or classmates. At Samuel, this space was an office in the school library; at St. Richards, it was a wood-paneled administrative conference room; and, at Fielding, we spoke in an echoing, unused dance room with one completely mirrored wall. I audio recorded all interviews.

I interviewed the 31 student volunteers and three teachers volunteers using “semi-structured,” “open,” “depth-probing” interviews (Glesne, 2011; Seidman, 2006). Interviews lasted around 45 minutes. I took observation notes during each interview and wrote a summary of my impressions of each as soon as possible afterwards. (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995). I entered the interviews with broad questions for all participants but also prepared a number of possible sub-questions to “follow-up, ask for clarification, seek concrete details, and request stories” (81) as advised by Seidman (see Appendix B and Appendix C for full interview

protocols). Not all questions were asked to all participants, and I sometimes asked follow-up questions not included on the interview protocol.

I aimed to avoid assuming the salience of gender over other identity markers while also ensuring that I probed students' perspectives on the salience of gender in their English classes. Structurally, one way I accomplished this was by delaying questions specifically about gender until the final part of the interview. After gathering brief background information, the first part of the interview consisted of questions about participants' impressions of their own orientation to the reading, writing, and class discussion in their English classes; the second part inquired broadly about the sorts of identities that tended to work well in English class (or not); and the third part of the interview asked about gender patterns students observed on various literacy tasks in English class as well as their explanations for these observations and any examples they could provide.

Semi-structured interviews served the purposes of the study by facilitating broad opening questions and targeted follow-ups based on participants' answers. I sought to investigate ideologies about language and gender without assuming the presence of these ideologies in these contexts. For example, in the gender-themed finale to the interview in the coed class, I began with questions about gender "patterns" in achievement and enthusiasm. In the single-gender classes, I opened the gender-section with a counterfactual question asking them to imagine changes to their class specifically if their school suddenly became coed. Both these questions are attempts to surface ideologies without asking about specific beliefs about gender and English class but also to allow the interview to probe these beliefs once students bring them up.

One of the most difficult aspects of these interviews was the balancing act of soliciting students' perspectives on how gender works in class without prompting them to overstate the

salience or importance of gender. As Street suggests, an ideological model of literacy requires an investigation of literacy practices as defined by local sites, and this project sought to uncover locally-defined ideologies about gender and literacy by asking students about them. Still, when Brandt and Clinton note the “limits” of a localized approach, one limit in particular is determining how global ideologies work in, and are transformed by, the local context. For instance, during the middle of the protocol section about gender, I asked specifically about gender difference: Did students see a “difference” in English class (e.g. in achievement, enthusiasm, in-school reading practices) between male and female students? I then usually asked follow-up questions about whether students were aware of “stereotypes” related to gender on that topic and whether these beliefs/stereotypes about gender difference had any effect on them. While I do believe the introduction of difference in the protocol caused students to address gender difference when they would not have otherwise, this approach had affordances and limitations: the interviews solicited many students’ perspectives on widely-circulating ideologies about gender, literacy, and difference, but that perspective was not always generated organically.

All that said, I suggest that, despite its limitations, the move to be direct in asking about the difference gender makes in English class gained access to important student perspectives. First, students often found these interviews challenging, and the time frame for completing the project did not allow the opportunity to slowly draw students out. For example, Sam at Fielding responded to the first questions about gender and English class this way: “This is a really awkward topic cause I don't, I can't really understand myself as a male.” Though students were sometimes excited to talk about their experiences with gender in class, the potential “awkwardness” of the topic meant that students were often not likely to bring it up on their own. I conducted a number of interviews during which students never mentioned gender through 30

minutes of broad questions about identity, but it only took one, open-ended question about gender to unleash a torrent of ideas and experiences. Would those ideas have surfaced without my mentioning gender specifically? Probably not. Does that mean that their perspectives on gender and English class are less passionate or real? I would argue not.

Second, I prefaced the section about gender in part by saying: “I know that not all male and female students are the same, that it’s not like all male students do X in class and female students do Y. I just want to know if there seem to be any patterns in your English class based on gender.” I also inquired into students’ knowledge of “stereotypes” about gender in English class in addition to their personal beliefs. Without assuming gender difference, these hedges allowed students to talk about the power ideologies about gender and literacy held in class. Finally, while this dissertation admittedly focuses more on the majority of participants who describe how they see the role of gender in class, students also felt comfortable saying that they simply did not see gender as salient in certain aspects of English class. For example, when I asked Marie if she saw patterns in gender and achievement in class, she thought for a second, frowned, and replied, “Not really. It kind of seems like, I don't know.” Her reply is representative of the students who felt that, for some parts of English class, gender was just not all that important.

Researcher Observations

To add context to the ideologies about gender and literacy surfaced in the interviews, I also conducted a number of non-participatory class observations during which I took observation notes. At Fielding, I observed class nearly every day from October 20th, 2014 through December 10th, 2014. I also videotaped some of these classes.⁵⁰ This period of time included half a unit on

⁵⁰ The filming was part of another project on student discourse in which I was also involved that occurred at the same time. In addition, 10 class sessions at St. Richards and Samuel were also videotaped (these by student

Beowulf and a whole unit on *Much Ado about Nothing*. In addition, from October through December, I observed three class sessions at St. Richards and four sessions at Samuel. In addition, I watched ten videotaped class sessions from each school. I observed more classes at Fielding purely out of convenience; the ease of traveling to that school made more observations possible within my research budget. I also used the time in class before and after these observations to talk with students, so it seems possible that the rapport I developed with students at Fielding made them more comfortable during their interviews than the students at Samuel or St. Richards. In addition, my more consistent presence in the Fielding class made them slightly more likely to refer to moments in class they knew I had seen—though, for whatever reason, they did not often draw on such immediate examples. My central goal in conducting these observations was for them (as well as the observation notes) to add my subjective, impressionistic detail to the ideologies emerging from the interviews.

Coding and Analysis

As a structure for analysis, I used qualitative inductive/interpretive coding (Hatch, 2002) to discover themes based on the ideologies about gender and literacy observable in the interviews. The identification of ideologies about literacy practices in the data depended on students' perspectives, and many of the attitudes were implicit as well as explicit. Hatch suggests, "Most studies will be richer and findings more convincing when interpretive analytic processes are used along with or in addition to typological or inductive analyses" (181). Once I transcribed the data at the word level with standardized spelling across participants (Preston, 2000; Bucholtz, 2007), I interpreted interview responses in order to develop insights and

volunteers). The videos were also transcribed as part of that project. While I used access to all these videos as part of the process of getting a feel for these classes, they do not constitute a primary source of data for analysis.

conclusions about how ideologies about gender circulated and affected in-school literacy practices. Essentially, the process involved a recursive procedure of reading the data for "a sense of the whole" (181), writing researcher memos, assigning provisional codes based on interpretation, finding places where codes are supported and challenged, and changing codes / recoding based on new observations. I began transcribing, reading the transcriptions and writing memos during data collection but waited to complete all interviews before studying the memos as a whole for "salient interpretations" (181) or "salient domains" (162). Once interpretations and domains emerged from the memos, I created codes based on them. I used these codes to analyze interview transcripts. Each initial round of coding produced new insights which necessitated changes to the codes and, thus, another round of coding. Throughout this process, I continuously looked for any data that conflicted with my interpretations. After a relatively stable set of themes emerged from the codes, I began the process of drawing the analytical conclusions that underlie the findings of this dissertation.

I argue that using inductive/interpretive coding for a project based on ideologies about gender and literacy allows for participants' descriptions of how ideologies circulate in context to emerge. Gender is a ubiquitous organizational structure, but outside assumptions about how that organization happens can taint analysis; I actively work to avoid the imposition of my own ideas about gender and literacy. Coding with an inductive approach allows such ideologies to emerge from the data rather than my own (as study designer and primary coder) preconceived ideas. In addition, inductive/interpretive analysis allowed for frequent recoding based on continued, refined analysis. Given the structure of this study, with a large number of interviews taking place in three contexts, the study benefited from a coding system that demanded consistent reanalysis of the themes explaining and organizing the data. Hatch recommends continuously reading the

data for "a sense of the whole" during analysis which allowed for analysis of circulating ideologies both within one classroom as well as across all three classrooms.

Ethical Considerations

During the interviews with students, I was acutely aware of how talking about identity put students on their guard. Sam, as mentioned above, had no problem telling me the questions sometimes felt awkward to him. To protect them, I collaborated with the IRB committee at the University of Michigan on a full review of the study, attempting to design structures that protected their interests and comfort. Specifically, my interview protocol promised students the chance to think about questions before answering, to skip questions, and to end the interview at any time. In addition, I guaranteed the confidentiality of their answers, both from other people at their school (e.g. peers, teachers, administrators) as well as in any writing I produced from the study. That confidence created funny moments. Before I observed class one morning at Fielding (and after interviews with students had begun), Fiona grinned at me and, in a stage whisper, said, "You know all our secrets now!" All to say, I take their protection seriously, but I cannot say I removed all that was "awkward."

As part of that care for my participants, I avoided assumptions about their intentions when talking about gender and literacy and focused on how their words and actions were part of an overall ideological system in that context. I valued students' trust and found them to be brave in their openness, so, though I inevitably found some participants' statements troubling, the conclusions I drew on such statements linked to broad themes and patterns rather than presumptions or judgments about students as people. This move was especially important given the age of my participants and the easily accessible cultural conversations that circulate about identity. Adolescents are constantly drawing on the world around them in a sense-making

process, so, when a student makes a statement like ‘men are better with directions and women are better with language,’ it really does say more about an ideological system of gender than that student’s specific beliefs.

Finally, the inclusion of female students in my research design, which I argue makes for a richer data set, is also part of doing ethical research, even when one focus of the dissertation is on responding specifically to discourses about young men and literacy. So much of the scholarship about young men, especially difference-based scholarship, takes a myopic approach in speaking with, observing, and writing only about young men. While this myopia is a methodological and interpretive concern given a relational and intersectional theorization of gender, it is also an ethical one in its elision of feminine perspectives. Part of studying an often privileged group like the young men in this study must be a consideration of the way their privilege attaches even in contexts like English class where deficit rhetoric circulates.

The Methods and Theory of Studying Young Men and Literacy

I have argued in this dissertation that the research gap about young men and literacy is, in part, a methodological and theoretical gap. Researchers who have focused on difference-driven recommendations for helping young men tend to undertheorize constructs like gender and literacy and design studies that rely on personal experience and anecdotal evidence to support conclusions (with the notable exception of *Chevys*). They also most often elide female students from the picture entirely. Even researchers who take a (pro)feminist stance usually portray in-school literacy as autonomous. This move leads to studies in which they depict students’ performance of gender but not their conceptualization of the literacy with which gender allegedly interacts.

I designed this study to fill in some of these gaps and to show that one can situate research about young men and literacy as progressive and pragmatic. For all the cultural talk about young men's literacy, there has been some hesitance to devote time and resources to studying the topic. Perhaps such studies would seem to imply that, if one studies young men, one is not studying young women or not studying the array of cultural identities that intersect with gender. For the former, I would argue that the results of this study show that including young women in the design only emphasizes the extent to which gender performance is relational; it would be difficult to understand the issues surrounding young men's literacy without also understanding young women's—and vice versa. For the latter, I agree that theories of intersecting identities are crucial to understanding students' experiences in English classes, and I designed the interview protocols to prompt students to think about identity more comprehensively. Still, I found remarkably consistent ideologies about gender and literacy that emerged in the three contexts for this study. Gender mattered to these participants, and it mattered in consistent ways. That is not the only important identity-related story to tell, but, for students, gender is one way they can explain parts of English class and research has rarely given them the chance to elaborate. In addition, there are real limitations to again telling the worried educators to whom Smith & Wilhelm and Appleman refer that identity is a complicated theoretical construct. Maybe so, but students and teachers make sense of English class, at least in part, through gender, and this research project seeks to meet them on that ground.

Chapter 4: “I Guess They’d Be More Vibrant”: Ideologies about Gender and Literacy in Three High School English Classrooms

Difference-driven educational scholarship about young men and literacy often introduces readers to their topic with the general *sense* that young men are oil in the water of an English class. As I pointed out in the introduction, Smith & Wilhelm (2002) relate, “If you have lots of boys in an English or language arts class—or so the conventional wisdom goes—you can expect to have problems” (1). Or, as Appleman (in Pirie, 2002) puts it, “Teenage Boys and high school English. Before this phrase became the title of Bruce Pirie’s important new book, it was a combination of words that often worried the hearts of English teachers everywhere” (ix). In mandated English classes, then, the “*conventional* wisdom” of “English teachers *everywhere*” is that young men will be “problems” to “worry the hearts” of English teachers. Though not only a contemporary issue (Cohen, 1998), such an ideology, whether accepted, resisted, or otherwise, has the potential to exert a pull globally and locally. Clearly, ideologies about gender and literacy arise frequently in larger cultural discourse. As described in the introduction, when Franzen declined Oprah’s Book Club by suggesting that men do not read because they are “off golfing or watching football on TV or you know playing with their flight simulator or whatever” (Gross), he perpetuated a circulating ideology, and made a high-stakes business decision, based on his belief that the literacy practice of reading novels is ideological *in terms of* a particular gender performance involved (a performance, ironically, that Franzen himself would seem to belie). It is perhaps no surprise that these attitudes circulate in classrooms as well.

These recognitions of gendered beliefs, however, should not become end-points or untested assumptions. As I have argued, the participants in this study used ideologies as resources for a breathtaking variety of individual performances. Even within the clearest patterns of articulated belief, then, my analysis in both chapters 4 and 5 is slow to generalize away students' performative idiosyncrasies relative to ideologies. Each pattern contains variation, the texture of a student's unique performance. This approach is not wholly new: Smith & Wilhelm, too, avoid uncritical acceptance of assumptions about gender by focusing on the role of literacy in young men's lives, drawing conclusions about gender and literacy based on patterns that arose, and then allowing students a measure of individuality within their conclusions. I take a somewhat different, but complementary, tack in examining male *and female* students' understandings of, and orientations to, circulating ideologies about gender and literacy practices. This chapter casts a wide net across all participants in the study to examine ways in which students navigate stereotypes about gender and literacy in three high school English classrooms, and I draw from the entire pool of 31 interviews I conducted with students. Of course, the contexts of the interviewees' classrooms varied. The 16 students from the coed school sat in class with male and female students, and their commentary drew on that immediate fact. Also, since I was able to observe about two months of their classes, they could make more claims based on observations of class events that we had experienced together. I include as well responses from the other 15 students in the all-male and all-female English classes. Worth repeating, of course, is that some of these students had not been at school with the opposite sex since elementary school—or ever. Remarkably, though, the students in the single-gender classes still described clear generalizations and stereotypes about gender and literacy in English class.

This chapter presents three central findings. First, English, as a school subject, is marked as gendered feminine for the participants in all three classrooms—even for the all-male class—but that did not prevent a number of students who self-identify as male from performing viable and explicitly admired versions of masculinity that included passion for, and academic success in, English class. Second, when students’ explain *why* female students are generally more engaged and successful in English than their male peers, their reasoning often relies on particular ideologies about gender and ELA *literacy practices* (similar to what Green et. al. (1990) call studenting, or “doing life in classrooms”) rather than gender and specific ELA *literacy events*. Though the literacy events in ELA curricula occasionally have gender associations for students, ideologies about essentialized gender traits, maturity, and work ethic more often explain why male students struggled in class. In other words, for students, the literacy events they were doing in English class (e.g. writing an analytical essay) did not appear explicitly gendered, but *how* they accomplished the, to them, autonomous literacy practice (e.g. having the emotional maturity to analyze complex fictional characters) did. Street (1995) compares the more broadly defined literacy practices to literacy events as defined by Heath (1983). Literacy practices “refer to both behavior and the social or cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing” and “incorporate not only ‘literacy events,’ as empirical occasions to which literacy is integral, but also folk models of those events and the ideological preconceptions that underpin them” (2). This distinction shows how beliefs about gender and literacy practices can come to affect perception of the class as a whole even as the literacy events themselves appear neutral. This finding asks hard questions of claims about the feminization of English curriculum as well as the efficacy of difference-based recommendations that would make that curriculum friendlier to male students. Third, as a dichotomous opposite to English class, students

understood their science and math classes to be marked as gendered masculine. This finding aligns well with stereotypes about school subjects, but complicates ideologies about gender and disciplinary literacy practices (e.g. work ethic). Shouldn't work ethic help female students and hurt male students in sciences as well?

A View from 10,000 Feet: English Class as a Female Space

To begin, it seems important to ask a bedrock question: do the students in these three high school classrooms hold consistent stereotypes or generalizations about gender and literacy in English class? Certainly, research suggests that *teachers* hold subject-level beliefs about their classes in which English curriculum is considered more “permissive” and math curriculum more “constrained” (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995), but this research has not explored the implications of these disciplinary perceptions for student identity performance. While I have previously laid out a diverse body of popular, governmental, and scholarly work on gender and literacy (especially young men's) from the last fifteen years, I refrain from assuming that these students—or any students—have necessarily been touched by that knowledge. As explained in the Methods chapter, the interview protocol is structured to examine questions about identity widely and without assuming the salience of gender, at least initially (though the interview concludes with questions specifically about the difference gender might make for students).⁵¹ Students offered a fairly holistic picture of how they saw identity working in class, and gender became salient as a part of that work.

⁵¹In the gender section of the interview, the three general questions I asked all students were: What are students' own observations about gender patterns and the role of gender in their English classes? Are students' aware of ideologies or stereotypes about gender and literacy (whether they believe them to be accurate or not)? What are students' understandings of how these ideologies and stereotypes affect them in school? Per the semi-structured format, depending on students' answers, I followed up with them variously, so not all students responded to the exact same questions.

One pattern that emerged at a general level is that, for the students who participated in this study, English class was a space in which female students had more success—usually, but not always, defined by both engagement in class and academic achievement—than male students. Of note, when students talk about English class, they refer not only to their current class specifically (the one in which I observed them) but to the majority of English classes they had ever taken. In this chapter, I place students from all three classes into conversation, and even in single-gender schools, where both sexes are not physically in the current school space, similar ideologies about gender and literacy circulate. While these ideologies may always be situated locally, their consistency even across classes with different compositions of student sex (as well as at different schools and in different cities) suggests the wider sweep of the ideologies. I am not claiming that any finding could be generalized, but it seems significant that they occurred across three classes.

During the final third of the interview, I asked students specifically if they saw any pattern about who does well in English class based around gender, or whether gender was not important. On this basic level, most students saw gender as a salient factor organized around more success in class for female students. I quoted Stan, a student at coed Fielding High School, at the outset of this dissertation: “I mean girls probably do better in [English] class. I realize I'm betraying my gender by saying this but I think that all girls would say that and any guy who's willing to tell the truth is also saying that.” His classmates generally agreed. At Fielding High School, twelve of the sixteen students believe their female classmates do better in English class, including all seven of the male students in the class (though only five of the nine female students). In addition, four of the six students at St. Richards saw female students as superior in English, despite the reality that none of them had gone to school with their female peers since, at

the most recent, 8th grade—four years ago.⁵² It is also noteworthy that, of the six students who did not see female students as outperforming male students, *none* of them saw male students reverse the pattern; instead, they either saw no difference or did not view gender as a salient factor.⁵³

In order to demonstrate the strong currents of gender in English classes, I begin with the six who *did not* agree with the majority. Two of the six students (Fiona from Fielding and Derek from St. Richards) did not personally believe that female students do better, but, when I asked if they had ever heard any stereotypes about gender and achievement in English class, they said yes. Fiona begins, “Some people would just like English more or science. Doesn't really matter what gender they are,” but also remarks on having heard stereotypes to the contrary: “I heard that girls usually do better. I guess. People just like say that guys just don't focus as much on the reading or something. But I don't really see that. I don't focus too much on the reading.” Fiona links to a more generalized version of personal identity (“some people would just like English more”), but also both accesses the stereotype about female students’ success in English class and uses herself to refute the stereotype by connecting herself more with the “guys” within that false, to her, generalization. She even mirrors the language of what “some people say”—both she and her wrongly pigeonholed male classmates “don’t focus too much on reading”—to position

⁵² I don’t have consistent data on this question of students’ perceptions of achievement for the all-female class. I interviewed the nine participants from that class before the six participants in the all-male class, and I did not initially include a direct question about comparative patterns in achievement in the interview protocol for the single-sex classes. Katerina, the final student I interviewed in the all-female class, inspired the tweak when she reflected on her English class experiences at a coed middle school. When I asked her (somewhat off-the-cuff) if she saw any patterns based on gender, she replied: “I guess it was girls did everything and boys did nothing more than did girls do one thing and boys do another.”

⁵³ It is beyond the scope of this study to speculate on how their teachers’ performances of gender might have played a role in shaping their students’ beliefs. I repeat, however, that all three English teachers in this study are female which fits the national trend: 60% of all secondary teachers, and 77% of all English teachers, are female (NCES, 2012).

herself against what she calls a stereotype. Fiona and Stan begin to reveal the variety of ways students can position themselves around beliefs about the difference gender makes. They both perceive themselves as outside the gender order in English class, but Stan sees himself as an exception to a real trend whereas Fiona uses her own example to refute the ‘truth’ of the stereotype in the first place.

In the all-male class at St. Richards, the two students who perceived no gender-based difference in achievement still reported echoes of female superiority. Derek, as I noted, was aware of the stereotype that female students do better in English: “I guess maybe females tend to be more—uh—stereotypes I guess would be they’re more like creative. Or they’re more like artsy so maybe they’re better writers.” When I asked if he found any truth in the stereotype, he replied, “I don’t think so. I mean I know a lot of people here [at St. Richard’s] who are just as creative.” Like Fiona, Derek uses his experiences to refute the stereotype (though he offers his peers as an example rather than himself). Again, even when dismissing the stereotype, he still notes its place in the all-male school just like his four classmates who understand the gender difference in English class to be true. The sixth student I interviewed at St. Richards, Joe, agrees with Derek that no gender difference exists in English class but relies on faith in his male peers’ development to contradict his own prior observations. He explains,

I haven’t had any girls in English class since eighth grade. And you could say that girls did better then but I mean that’s eighth grade so like you know some of the boys they’re not really focusing on school. They don’t really care. [It’s been] proven, like people of younger ages, girls are better students. So from that perspective in eighth grade I’d say that but I’d say by senior year of high school we have to have evened out by now. So I don’t think at this point for seniors in high school I don’t think there would be a difference.

Joe’s answer is complex. He draws on a pair of connected beliefs about gender and school that come up at all three schools. First, young men often do not “really care” about school or are “not

focusing.” Students often link this lackadaisical mindset to what they describe as scientific proof about the concept of ‘maturity’ (“proven, like people of younger ages, girls are better students”). The second belief, however, is the idea that once male students ‘mature’ or ‘start trying,’ they will not have a problem catching their female classmates (“evened out”). Though Joe does not think that “seniors in high school” would be included any longer in these constructs of maturity, he is taking a sort of blind leap; there is something almost exasperated in his conclusion: “we *have to have evened out by now.*”

These “no gender difference” students are intriguing, in part, because they show how real a resource ideologies about gender and literacy can be even when one actively denies or protests them. Students called this gender and achievement ideology ‘just a stereotype’ and ‘old,’ but almost every participant knew about it.⁵⁴ To be clear, though, sixteen of the twenty-two students I asked about gender and achievement patterns in English class observed that, *in their experience*, female students did better. Stan, as noted above, believes that “anyone who is willing to tell the truth” can see English class in these gendered terms. In Stan’s class at Fielding, this truth-telling was not necessarily easy. For example, Sam explains, “Typically I’d say female gender [does better]. I don’t understand how or why to be honest but I just feel like they do better than most males. I never like to...this is a really awkward topic cause I don’t, I can’t really understand myself as a male, and I definitely can’t understand women.” Sam underscores how expressing beliefs about gender can be an “awkward topic”; Sam is not sure he “understands” himself as a male, his female classmates, or why they seem to do better in class. One can

⁵⁴ Interestingly, Wanda at Fielding inferred a male advantage in class participation as part of a pattern of larger gender inequity. She said, “I know I’ve heard like a lot of stereotypes that women are more soft-spoken and sort of like not as assertive and that men are much more assertive. I don’t believe in that at all. I feel like I’m personally like an example against that. I feel like I’m an assertive person and I’m a woman, so. But I don’t know I just don’t like society’s standards.” Though she stands out as a notable exception to the general ideology of female success in English, her determined positioning against a different well-known stereotype (i.e. assertive male-passive female) is quite similar to Stan’s positioning against male struggle in English class.

practically see him grappling with gender and its meaning for his English class. In another wrinkle, Sam's classmates Sofia and Greta bring up (like Stan) the fear of bias in explaining this ideology about gender and literacy. Sofia shrugs, "*I don't want to like be biased. I think often girls do better,*" and Greta affirms, "I think generally females do better in class... There's always the few exceptions definitely like with males and definitely with females. There's always exceptions, but I think that generally females do better. *And that's not like a biased opinion.*" Gender clearly puts these students on their guard. I interviewed them in a one-on-one setting after six weeks of seeing them in class every day, and they still spoke about notions of gender with a mixture of nervous energy and reserve.

The exact nature of what female students are better at in English class sometimes remains vague. Billie (a female student) and Gene (a male student) combine to demonstrate how, in the coed class at Fielding, the evidence to support the ideology is very much in the eye of the beholder. Gene offers, "I think the females do better in English. That's just from what I've noticed by what my friends' grades are, I guess. I mean, I'm just talking about grades. I'd say in terms of like contributing to the class that's more equal." Alternatively, Billie suggests, "I don't see any difference in like grade-wise. I see that in our—in my own class that a lot more of the participation comes from the female side. And the males often sit closer to the back." These two students, sitting five desks away from each other, agree that female students do better in class. Billie defines that in terms of participation (with which Gene explicitly disagrees), and Gene defines it in terms of grades (with which Billie explicitly disagrees). For what it is worth, Billie is 'correct' on both fronts. Female students, as measured by word count and my own observations, participate more, but, as measured by students' self-reports of their grades, there is no significant gender difference (female students report 5 A's and 4 B's, male students report 4

A's and 3 B's). In general, the participants agreed that female students tended to outperform their male classmates in reading, writing, and/or participation, but not necessarily on all of these points.

Still, while one might talk about an ideology as if it is a physical presence, one cannot hold an ideology in hand. Instead, like scientists identify black holes by measuring the gravitational effect on the stars and gas around them, one only knows an ideology about gender and literacy by measuring the reaction to it. And, saying this with incredible respect for adolescents, high school students are sensitive instruments of measure. Participants' non-specific sense that female students do better in class is convincing evidence for a generalized ideology about gender and literacy. Students are not generally counting turns at talk or averaging essay grades; they just have a gut feeling around which they decide how to position themselves. Sam, after admitting to his awkward feeling, eloquently sums up the gender gap he perceives by paying attention to the way he sees it exerting a powerful gravitational pull on his classmates. He ventures:

Female students will like talk more, express more. And just tend to do more in English class than male students. Male students would mostly...we would just kind of sit there and listen. And female students would be more—can I say vibrant? I guess they'd be more vibrant in class. Like with gestures, words, thoughts, sounds and stuff.

In one sense, Sam's point is that his female classmates do a better job at the literacy event of participating in English class discussions. Female students "talk more" whereas male students "sit there and listen." Since participation is a valued (and often evaluated) part of English class, such a difference is not inconsequential. In another sense, though, I would argue that Sam is describing an active/passive binary that moves beyond 'class participation' as a discrete skill. Sam's observation that female students "just tend to do more" is similar to Katerina's (from the

all-female class) recollection of her coed middle-school English class that “I guess it was girls did everything and boys did nothing more than did girls do one thing and boys do another.”

Female students “do everything”; they “express more”; they “do more.”

These reflections are not usually tied to specific literacy events like writing an essay—as Billie correctly sees, grades are equivalent in her class. Sam cuts to the heart of the issue in his description of female students as appearing more “vibrant” in his English class. He sees this vibrancy through their “gestures, words, thoughts, sounds and stuff.” This list is breathtaking in its description of not just the quantity of class talk but also the quality in terms of content (“thoughts”) and the energy with which that content is delivered (“gestures,” “sounds”). It’s not necessarily one thing; it’s everything. Toss out, for a second, NAEP scores or longitudinal studies of grades—it is important to ask questions about how, in this context, male students passively “sit there and listen” without feeling energized by subject matter. Outside of measures of discipline-specific English class skills, there is a gendering of passion and excitement for English class. Raw performance data is certainly important but so is joy in learning—and the performative ability to express that joy. To be clear, this absolutely does not mean that individual female and male students perform according to type. Stan and Fiona, for example, do gender in a way that acknowledges but shirks that expectation.

From a holistic perspective of English class as a subject, stereotypical gender performance often means vibrant success for female students and passive mediocrity for male students; but, with the exception of class participation, the discrete skills practiced in class are often perceived by students to be autonomous from ideologies about gender. In other words, the generality that female students do better in English class is not some top-down control mechanism for all literacy events that students encounter. In the beginning of the interview

protocol, I asked students to describe the curriculum and pedagogy of their English classes by detailing, for example, the essays they wrote, texts they read, and discussions they had. Then, for the interview questions about gender, I revisited these student-generated examples and asked if they saw gender patterns related to academic success or engagement with these English class literacy tasks. Especially for reading- and writing-based work, students tended to see academic literacy events as gender-neutral. While the next section of this chapter engages with students' explanations for how they see gender mattering in class, it seems important to detail how gender can also become invisible for these same students.

Few students found gender to make much of a difference on specific literacy events like reading novels or writing essays, though gender-based ideologies about *genres* of book, and to a lesser extent genres of writing, did circulate for some students in all three classes. D'Brickshaw is typical of a student who sees gender as not mattering to the work he is asked to do in English class. His responses to the questions seem mystified. On the potential role of gender in reading texts in class, he replies, "Um, uh, hmm. I'm not sure... I think I notice about the same." As for writing the essays they usually write in class, he responds, "No, not really. It kind of seems like they're the same. I don't really see a huge difference." Like some of his classmates, D'Brickshaw thinks of gender as irrelevant when approaching these English class staples. His classmates are "the same" when it comes to gender.

Ideologies about gender are especially absent when it comes to writing the sorts of analytic (usually literature analysis) essays students described writing in English class.⁵⁵ At St. Richards, Derek describes writing as "pretty universal, I guess"; Mark explains "I feel like that's

⁵⁵ A few students brought up stereotypes about creative writing as a genre. For example, Lily notes, "The stereotype for guys is just not be a big fan of creative writing...or they're like a poet, a genius that writes the most plot twists ever." Even this recognizable belief about gender and writing, however, is, first, about a (non-academic) genre rather than a specific literacy skill and, second, an exception to the rule.

[writing] all neutral between male and female”; and Jaime “assume[s] that all genders do kind of the same writing.” At Samuel, the girls mostly agree. Eliza observes that writing “all seems pretty like gender neutral to me” and that “boys would probably write the same analytical essay on the same book.”⁵⁶ Wendy adds, “I mean really in any school—coed, all boys, all girls, you know—the purpose of writing assignments is really to help you develop skills that you can apply to any work.” At the single gender schools, words like “neutral,” “universal,” and “same” pervade students’ thinking about gender and writing as they imagine the writers and writing assignments at schools other than their own. Students at Fielding echo the belief that writing and writing assignments in English class are gender neutral. Like D’Brickshaw, Sam “can’t see really any difference” between how his male and female classmates would approach writing in class. Fiona too is explicit about the irrelevance of gender to writing in school: “It doesn’t matter if they’re a girl or a boy. I think they just wouldn’t want to write it [the assigned essay] if they don’t want to and if they did they did.”

Students’ perceptions of ideologies about gender and reading break in two directions. On the one hand, students express clear, gender-influenced ideologies about *genres* of books, especially the stereotype that males like books with action/sports and females like books about relationships/romance. On the other hand, an ideology of gender neutrality circulates about the skill of being an apt reader as an academic literacy event in English class. Sure, students said, we know there are stereotypes about who likes certain types of books, but school is school. Importantly, students could hold both ideas at once. For example, Lily, from Fielding, uses the boys/action, girls/romance stereotype to parse in-class books only minutes before eliding gender as a factor on how students read in school. She begins, “I think that a lot of female students like

⁵⁶ Just to emphasize, Mark and Eliza both use the word “neutral,” and that is a descriptor generated by them. I do not supply that language in the interview question.

to read more of like oh look there's like a love plot in there and it's not like kill Grendel kind of thing." She picks out *Beowulf* as a male-friendly, "kill Grendel kind of thing" book and generalizes that female students would be happier with a book more focused on a "love plot." Lily, however, quickly makes a distinction between broad stereotypes about gendered preferences for genre and the way individual students treat the reading of these texts as in-class literacy events. She explains: "I think it depends on what kind of person you are within that gender. I mean, people who really care about school, I find that they like to read more like intellectual books. And then people who are like I don't really like school but I know that I have to do it kind of people, they're like I don't want to read at all." In a way, school, and how students orient themselves to it, tends to elide gender from reading tasks and makes a book more about "the kind of person you are within that gender." Another female student in Lily's class, Billie, puts it more bluntly: "In class, we're all forced to read the same thing, and we also have to like all look into the same areas and look at the same depths so there's no difference."

The students at Samuel and St. Richards express similar ideologies about reading's autonomy from gender as an ELA-based literacy skill even as they too recite gender-based ideologies about genre in non-academic reading. Rebecca suggests that the reading they do "is pretty neutral," and Gabriella believes that it "depends on what kind of person there is. I don't really think that there's that much of a divide between what girls like and what boys like." Mark alludes to the veil of ideological autonomy reading a book *in class* can offer: "It's really gender neutral when you read a book here [at St. Richards]. It's you know it's not because we're males, it's because it's just it's a good piece of literature from you know Shakespeare." Like so many

other participants, Mark sees “reading a book here” as reading in a sort of identity-vacuum; it has less to do with gender than being focused on “a good piece of literature.”⁵⁷

Reading and writing in English class, then, are not usually associated with ideologies about gender and literacy. Perhaps this is because students do not usually choose the books or the essays in school (“we’re all forced to read the same thing”; “all genders do kind of the same writing”). Perhaps it is because canonical curriculum appears natural to students (“it’s a good piece of literature from Shakespeare”; “boys would probably write the same analytical essay on the same book.”). Whatever the reason, though, reading and writing in English class are seen as ideologically autonomous from gender *despite* students’ belief that gender matters quite a bit to the class as a whole. This apparent paradox is crucial because so many gender-based recommendations, especially ones that focus on young men’s putative deficits (e.g. Brozo on relating texts to masculine archetypes), take aim at ELA curriculum. But, for the students in this study, where deficit rhetoric about male students does circulate, neither males nor females understand the content of ELA curriculum as a coherent way to explain deficits.

Interestingly, the majority of students described participation in class discussion, usually about a piece of literature the class was reading, as being more common and robust for female students. For example, Katerina explains how this ideology-rich terrain affected her male classmates from middle-school: “In English class, it was more like the girls would raise their hands and the girls would answer the questions more than the boys would. And if a boy did it was kind of like a weird thing. Like not so weird that we were like what are you doing but weird

⁵⁷ One crucial point I explore at length in the next chapter is that participants believed that male and female students interpreted these “neutral” texts quite differently. Though the act of reading the text was more or less equivalent, male and female students, as Eliza puts it, “do different things with them.” Importantly, though, this post-reading interpretive work did not change students’ perspective that the texts they read in class were ‘just reading’ or ‘just literature.’

kind of like ‘look at him -- he's answering a question.’” ‘Weird,’ of course, is a crucial word. In the context of her middle school, a male student raising a hand was not verboten; it was just outside the norm, and something a male student would have to do knowing he positioned himself against circulating stereotypes. Such observations explain participation as contrary to the more gender-neutral beliefs about reading and writing. After all, verbal expression in class is a literacy event, one that is often evaluated by teachers and included in broad ELA speaking and listening standards. Participation’s possible exceptionality is visible in students’ descriptions of ideologies about essential gender traits, maturity, and hard work.

On the whole, ideologies about gender and literacy suffuse all three English classes in this study even though literacy events like reading and writing are not usually described in gendered terms. One way this situation becomes evident is through the male students, like Stan, who position themselves as counterexamples to the holistic description of English class as a female space. Jack, a student at the all-male school, considers himself to be strongest in his English and history classes. When I asked him if he knew of any stereotypes about gender and school subjects, he responded quickly with a familiar one: “I think men are more thought of to be better at math and science. And women are better at like English and history, like the humanities.” Worth noting, of course, is that Jack, a high school senior, has not been to a coed school since elementary school, but he still quotes the same ideology about gender and school seen at the other two sites of this study. I asked Jack if he found that stereotype to have any basis in reality, and when he responded, “I think there might be a little bit of truth to that,” I inquired into the possible misalignment of his academic identity with ideologies about gender and literacy. Was he, as a male student who excels in English, ever affected by the stereotype that males were not as good in English classes? Jack shook his head: “I mean not really. I mean I

would say I'm better at like English and history and it doesn't make me like upset or anything that women are generally thought to be better at that. Like I'm totally fine with that.” Jack’s reaction serves as an example (albeit one coming from an atypical school context) of why crisis rhetoric about young men’s literacy is often overheated. That said, he also shows how male students, successful or not, have to position themselves relative to this stereotype. Jack is not “upset” and is “fine with that” ideology, but his stances infer its gravitational pull—it is something he has to be fine with, to not be upset about. I pick up on Jack’s and Stan’s complicated performances relative to the notion of stereotype threat in the implications section of this dissertation.

If it seems counterintuitive that a school subject could be gendered but not necessarily the literacy events within, I recall one of Smith & Wilhelm’s essential findings about their young male participants: Even as they often declared English class to be boring, they almost never argued that it was unimportant. Or, as Smith & Wilhelm put it, “Every one of the respondents talked about how important school was for the future” (63), but “the boys’ discussion of school and of reading is almost entirely future-directed. The pleasure of learning and the pleasure of reading were not something they focused on” (66). By adding female students to this study, I can offer evidence to supplement the ideology about gender and literacy in these three contexts: Young men more often faced stereotypes against enjoying “the pleasures of reading” than their female peers. As Smith & Wilhelm show, though, performing as though reading is a pleasure is different from performing as though it is useful. In these specific contexts, underperforming at academic literacy events like writing an essay or reading a book serves no visible academic or social purpose for these students, but performing vibrancy while doing so is something different.

Joanne⁵⁸ distills the trick: “I would definitely say the girls are more enthusiastic” in class, but “I’ve noticed that boys are...really good at essay writing...like not necessarily they like to do it but they’re like really good at it...These boys that get like amazing grades on these really hard essays like analytical essays and it just like amazes me every single time.”

Myths of Mars and Venus: Gender and ELA Literacy Practices

Students’ consistent belief was that female students did better in, and were more passionate about, English class—or at least they knew this was a stereotype—but the same students often saw reading and writing as ideologically autonomous from gender. How, then, did English class become perceived as a female space? The circulating notions of gender really come to the fore when I asked them *why* they thought females did or did not have more success. Participants explained these differential beliefs by relying on broad ideologies about gender and ELA literacy practices and then grafting them onto ideologies about gender and literacy events in English class. These ideologies about gender and ELA literacy practices arose, most often, in three forms: ideologies about gender as a series of essential traits; ideologies about hard work; and ideologies about maturity.

It is important to emphasize that scholars have demonstrated how the content of a course almost always extends beyond explicit curriculum like reading novels and writing essays. Green, Kantor, & Rogers (1990) argue, “Successful students have learned how to read the academic norms and expectations that are signaled through the language and social actions that make up classroom life” (360). Moje (1997), in demonstrating the importance of “timeliness and orderliness” in a science classroom, adds that “discourses of school success...constitute

⁵⁸ Joanne was one of the four students in the Fielding class that saw no gender difference in English class achievement.

discursive practices highlighted in...many classrooms” and suggests that if Green et. al.’s notion of “studenting” continues to be conflated with learning, “teachers and students will continue to engage in those discursive practices” (11). When it includes studenting, “learning” in an English class can come to cover a lot of ground. The participants in this study describe English classes as places where female students do better, but there is plenty of ground other than the putatively gender-neutral territory of reading and writing on which they might perceive themselves as standing.

As an overall category, my terminology—ideologies about gender and ELA literacy practices—uses Street’s broad definition of literacy practices (“the conceptions of the reading and writing process that people hold when they are engaged in the event”) to examine where and how gender becomes salient to the “conceptions.” Per Green et. al. and Moje, being “engaged in the event” can mean participating in a wide array of “academic norms and expectations,” and the expectations of gender performance will not necessarily be equivalent across them all. I found that, in Street’s terms, both the literacy practice and literacy event are seen as ideological by the participants but in different ways: the event is ideologically autonomous as it relates to gender and the practice is ideologically inflected by gender performance.

One way to read these beliefs about gender and ELA literacy practices is that they serve as part of the process through which literacy becomes ideological in this context. That is, actual literacy events (e.g. writing an essay, reading a poem) are seen by students as autonomous—and not gendered—but normative overall performances of gender are perceived as differential. One might expect scholars to be more critical of social constructs like gender and literacy, but the arguments made by the difference-driven literature about young men and literacy often rely upon the same logic as the students in this study. They implicitly present literacy practices as

autonomous but argue that they need to be pitched to students in gendered terms. For example, Pirie (2002) suggests using genuine questions to drive writing, and he notes, “I stress that there is genuine *risk* involved in tackling a question for which you don’t already know the answer, and that risk is exactly what makes for real learning. (The idea that we grow through facing risks makes sense to boys)” (60). He summons a gender stereotype (risk loving boys) in order to pitch what he perceives as a neutral skill and best practice (asking good questions, “real learning”). As I argued in chapter 2, however, teachers would do better to challenge the types of stereotypes Pirie reifies. Convincing students to take risks in their writing is valuable work, and when Pirie relies on a discourse of gender difference to assign risk taking to young men, he creates a zero sum game in which, despite some of his stated intentions, female students lose. To be sure, Pirie’s logic resonates with many of my participants, but, by failing to approach both gender and literacy more critically, he misses the larger opportunity to disrupt the types of circulating beliefs that actually stand in the way of “real learning.”

Gender as Essential: “Emotional” Women and “Silent” Men

One crucial pull of ideologies about gender and literacy is the connection students infer between them and more general ideologies about gender. While obvious in a sense that gender ideologies from outside the classroom would operate within as well, the process through which students in this study import non-scholastic ideologies about gender into school is crucial for understanding how to talk about gender in an ELA setting. Paul, a student at the all-male school, uses a video he saw in health class about general gender differences to explain how he sees differences in school. He explains, “I remember a couple stats where it was like the males’ average vocabulary is this and the females’ is this much larger. And then when men were put in a like a directional test they did better than women so they’re better with direction. It said men

have a general inclination to be better at math and sciences and women generally are better at English. And like that was kind of accepted as facts.” Paul taps into the sorts of “general inclinations” that are often used to explain gender differences—women as more verbal, men as more directionally able—and grafts them onto schoolwork: male students better at math and science and female students better at English. As gender is a construct through which people make sense of the world, it hardly seems surprising that students would use purported gender differences to explain school, whether there are really any differences at all empirically.

As Paul’s memory of the video from health class shows, gender differences in school subjects often rely upon ideologies about essentialized gender traits and school subjects as a whole rather than ideologies about the specific literacy events of the subject itself. When Wanda, a student at Fielding, explains why gender matters in school, she draws on the “permissive” English, “constrained” math perception that Grossman & Stodolsky found among teachers *in conjunction with* essentialized gender traits. She explains:

Math sort of has one answer and one equation. And English has like a plethora of answers and it can be whatever you really want it to be as long as you can really give it evidence. I think that women are--it just seems like it's more comfortable for them to be able to sort of think with their own brain and use their own ideas and their own thoughts and their own opinions with it while men sort of want to be able to like get the answer right.

Her comparison of gender traits to disciplinary characteristics is direct and meaningful. Math “has one answer” and men “want to be able to get the answer right.” In English, the content “can be whatever you really want it to be” and for women “it’s more comfortable...to use their own ideas.” Wanda offers a separate spheres view with English class as open—“it can be whatever you want it to be”—but still rigorous—needing “evidence.” Her note about “evidence” clarifies the legitimacy of the “permissive” English curriculum. It seems important too that Wanda does not use terminology connected to high school students specifically like ‘female students’ or

‘guys’ in her answer (though that is the language from the interview questions). It is men and women who work like this, not just the younger versions of them.

Whether Wanda considers her female classmates’ apparent comfort with English class to be a ‘good’ thing or not, Joanne did not see such a gendered interpretation of disciplines to be a net positive. She views the disciplinary ideology that female students are better at English as a backhanded compliment. She reports:

There’s a good stereotype that females do better in English classes because we’re more emotional and like that’s all... We take things and blow them way out of proportion. That’s why English class is good for us because we’re like ‘oh yes the blue pen does signify.’ I don’t know, it’s like that type of deal where I’ve heard the stereotype of like ‘of course you’re good at English because like you’re a girl and girls are always good at English and like blah blah blah blah.’ I’ve gotten that a lot.

Joanne, like most students in the study, knows the stereotype that female students excel in English class. In fact, she even voices an imaginary person explaining this relationship as causal—“of course you’re good at English because like you’re a girl”—an explanation she has “gotten... a lot.”

Joanne’s description of this ideology about gender and literacy is even more remarkable because she understands it as linked to broader cultural ideologies about gender and emotions. Females, in this understanding, are better at English class because they are “more emotional and like that’s all,” and one can perhaps see why Wanda believed her comment about “evidence” to be necessary. The image, then, of an emotional woman and a staid male—something straight out of a difference-based Mars and Venus book—grafts neatly onto English class. Joanne implicates the traditional content of English class, such as the interpretation of implicit symbols in literature, in this conflation. Female students supposed willingness to venture an opinion that “the blue pen does signify” is linked, in this ideology, to females’ emotional tendency “to blow

things way out of proportion.” One can easily imagine the disciplinary opposite: a calm, rational scientist examining concrete evidence.

Stan too draws on the notion of silent males in following the familiar script that anyone “willing to tell the truth” would agree that his female classmates do better in English class. When I asked for an example, he points immediately to participation and reading, saying the male students in his class “just don't really match the English mentality in that kind of way.” To emphasize, he at no time says they do not have the skills to write or think analytically. It is not, then, that they lack the smarts, but they do not “match the English mentality.” As a rationale, Stan points to ideologies about gender from outside school as coming into school. He observes: “I feel like guys might have the mindset of trying to be manly, like the manly silence. It's like sitting back, it's like looking around. But girls aren't worried about that. They just want to go out and do well in school, but guys want to like impress each other with the manly silences, you know [impersonates manly silence].” Stan draws on a couple of masculine types that he recognizes from outside of school. Throughout his answer, he explains the stereotype of the inexpressive male, exemplified by what he calls the “manly silence.” He explicitly sees this as a reason male students do not match the “English mentality”; it is because they have the mindset of “trying to be manly.” Stan’s phrasing is intriguing for the way it taps into notions of gender performance. “Trying to” implies no finished, absolute state of masculinity but rather a striving performance *toward* a masculine ideal through an orientation to English class. Even his descriptions call on actions and the body—“it’s like sitting back, it’s like looking around”—and Stan ends his answer by physically impersonating a slumped, removed pose. His sullen posturing draws a stark contrast to the way Sam describes “vibrant” female students and their “gestures, words, thoughts, sounds and stuff.”

Stan makes a direct comparison between the performed masculinity of the “manly silence” and what he describes as an insouciance that allows female students in his class to do better. Since they “aren’t worried about that,” female students do well in English. I would argue that he overstates the case about female students; Joanne, for one, illustrates the baggage that comes with performing a femininity associated with vibrancy and emotion. In addition, research suggests that male students can perform hegemonic versions of masculinity that includes ELA success (Skelton & Francis, 2011). Still, for Stan, having to perform masculinity hinders academic performance, at least in English class. He describes the pressure of males feeling the need to “impress each other” which highlights the stakes of these ideologies about gender and literacy, especially ones that come so directly from broader notions of gender and correct performance. Just as an English ‘mentality’ could omit people who prefer one, direct answer (Wanda) or excel in spatial reasoning (Paul), ideas about communication as a gender trait mark English class. By this logic of the stereotype, male students, in order to succeed in English class, need to set themselves up against at least one cultural notion of what it means to be a man.

It is worth remembering, though, that Stan thinks of himself as doing exactly that. When I asked him how he dealt with the “manly silence” stereotype since he obviously showed vibrancy in class (as observed by me, his classmates, and, not least, himself), he gives a complex answer. He explains, “It used to affect me when I was younger and less secure. I would do the stony silence thing, but that's just stupid cause I have things to contribute you know. I've got friends in that class, like I don't I'm not worried about anything, so I'm willing to contribute.” Stan recalls a time when took on a different positioning with the ideology that male students should not venture opinions in English class (“I would do the stony silence thing”) but now dismisses that position as “stupid” because he has “things to contribute.” How, though, did he come to see

himself as needing to contribute? Was it a teacher's intervention? A friend-group change? A school-wide program for questioning dominant views of gender? Not exactly. Stan identifies a key difference between his past identity—the one who performed in accordance with the stony silence stereotype—and his current identity, which he positions against it: the mature security to position himself that way. When he says, somewhat ambiguously, that he is not “worried about anything,” he connects this with maturity and the support of friends. Stan's past ‘worry’ (and position with the stereotype) might have been about being labeled as ‘not manly’ or even ‘not heterosexual,’ but he feels both internal and external support for changing his positioning. Of course, one can wonder whether, if removed from a comfortable environment, Stan would feel similar comfort in his positioning against such an ideology about gender and literacy—if such an ideology existed, for example, in his first college English class. I would say, optimistically, that he probably has a better chance than someone who cannot articulate an experience of shirking a gender stereotype.

He also has the experience of seeing his classmates react to that performance, and their reaction during interviews is a volatile mix of admiration and agitation. As I noted, Stan frequently serves as the exception to broad student observations about female students' passion and male students' silence. Gene, for example, seems to have nothing but acceptance for Stan's obvious love of the subject. He observes, “He [Stan] likes English. I guess it's just always been his favorite subject and he you know reads a lot outside of school and has good ideas. He likes the class.” There is seemingly no hidden rebuke of Stan's unique (for this class) positioning; to Gene, Stan “has good ideas” and “it's just always been his favorite class.” It is, most likely, reactions like Gene's that Stan has in mind when he talks about feeling support for his avid participation in class.

Interestingly, though, other classmates express an undercurrent of discomfort with Stan's somewhat singular performance. Fiona observes that her female classmates are more enthusiastic but also notes, "Based off of Wanda and Stan...I think they emit the same amount of energy when they talk about English. And they like smile when they do it. But I guess I would say girls [are more enthusiastic] because...it's all I see is Stan who's really happy." Fiona's commentary demonstrates the way in which ideologies about gender and literacy play out, as Street argues, socially. She uses her own position as disinterested to deny a stereotype about superior female students, but Stan's "energy" is only an exception to the real, to Fiona, trend of lethargic male students ("But I guess I would say girls"). While obviously not an explicit rejection of Stan's performance, Fiona singles him out without any explicit praise ("all I see is Stan who's really happy") and seems perfectly willing to position him against the norm. Fiona's classmate Lily offers what sounds more like hostility toward Stan's performance. She supports her point that female students show more enthusiasm in class by saying, "Like I said, a lot of the guys in my class are just kind of like I don't want to do this. Except for like Stan. I think Stan is very like that word means this and I'm gonna, I don't know." Lily lacks patience for the "I don't want to do this" crowd of males—she smirks at them as "bros" elsewhere—but Stan's marked passion for, and competence in, English gives her pause. He is, literally, an exception ("except for Stan") for her. That exceptionalness manifests, though, as a kind of know-it-all stance. Lily leaves unsaid what Stan's "gonna do" by trailing off with "I don't know," but there is clearly something slightly troubling for Lily about Stan's irregular passion play.

Perhaps Elsa's reaction to Stan provides the most holistic rendering of the mixture of admiration and suspicion toward Stan's singular performance around ideologies about gender and literacy. She begins by laying out a stereotype about gender and literacy: "Guys aren't

stereotypically supposed to be all like poetic and sitting and spouting poetry dramatically. If you do that, people will probably be a little questioning. I feel like guys in English are you know stereotypical movies and stuff, they sort of sit there. And they'll occasionally ask their question if they're asked. I feel like they're not expected to input a lot or understand a lot." Elsa, like her classmates, is conversant in the stereotype that guys "sort of sit there" in English class. For her, the opposite of that masculine passivity is something like "spouting poetry dramatically," which, although it is another recognizable type of masculinity, leads Elsa to suggest that "people would probably be a little questioning" of that type of guy. When I asked Elsa if she thought there was any truth to this circulating stereotype, she observes that most of her male classmates need to be prompted in order to contribute in class—except Stan: "Like Stan will say and give a great answer. He's usually totally just very specific and sometimes offensive about it." Elsa's belief that Stan can "give a great answer" that is "specific" puts him in marked contrast with his male classmates. Elsa asserts that they "don't tend to say a lot and they don't tend to say things that are really like in depth like dramatic about their personalities and things. It tends to be more factual or like a little in depth." Again, she associates the "dramatic" and "personality"-related as being outside the traditional masculine arsenal, and the "factual," such an asset in the "one answer" world of science and math, as being the normative male work in English class. All told, she lauds Stan (he can "give a great answer"), but also calls his comments "offensive" and associates them with the type of guy about whom people might be "a little questioning."

Elsa brought up Stan one more time in her interview with me. She asserted: "If you just sat and counted all the different times people would raise their hands, you'd see that the female students raise them much more frequently than the total of the males. Like excluding Stan probably. I don't think he counts. He raises his hand all the time." Clearly, Elsa means that Stan

does not “count” in her identification of a trend. Still, when Stan “raises his hand all the time,” his performance relative to that ideology-laden literacy event of class participation is marked as non-normative for his gender. The circulating ideologies about gender and literacy in his class have a real effect. Even as Stan “has good ideas” and can “give a great answer,” he also has to face some of his classmates’ doubts (“a little questioning,” “offensive,” “I don’t know”). Given this evidence, one only appreciates more Stan’s conscious positioning *against* the “stony silence” ideology. He has “things to contribute,” and so he does. But when he says, “I’m not worried about anything,” one’s understanding of the prevailing ideologies about gender and literacy gives credence to Stan’s knowledge that resistance could be something to worry about.

Maturity and Hard-Work

As the last section shows, essentialized gender traits like masculine “stony silence” or feminine “emotion” graft onto ideologies about gender and the literacy practices of entire school subjects—and how one can or cannot ‘do’ those subjects. I focus in this section on two other patterns that, for participants, explain female superiority across the coed and all-female contexts: maturity and hard work. Notions about maturity and hard work, like communication, certainly appear applicable outside of English class as well, but, unlike communication, maturity and hard work would initially seem less freighted with gendered connotations. But, in these classrooms, local observations of maturity and hard work helped to explain why female students found more success in English class.

Stan, as quoted above, connects his decision to engage more actively in English class than his male classmates, in part, with age and maturity. He says stereotypes “used to affect me when I was younger.” He is absolutely not alone. In addition to ideologies about gender and communication, students repeatedly brought up ideas about maturity to explain performance in

English class. Most simply, students expressed a circulating ideology about gender: female adolescents are more mature than male adolescents. In the context of their English class, this ideology about gender became an ideology about gender and literacy practice: since female adolescents are more mature, their ideas in English class are deeper and more developed.

This ideology presented itself across two of the three sites, for students in the coed and all-female classes. Katerina, a student in the all-female class, put it this way: “I've always been told that girls are more mature than boys. So for our *Scarlett Letter* conversation we had this one whole day where we just talked about the difference between guilt and shame. I think it's because girls are more thoughtful than boys. I'm not sure that would have happened at an all-boys school or at a coed school at all.” She explicates the ideology in a couple of key ways. First, she brings up what seems to her the natural and ubiquitous notion that female adolescents are more mature than their male counterparts. It is something she has “always been told.” Second, Katerina links maturity to positive elements of her (all-female) class. That belief leads, in her view, to a high-level definitional conversation about *The Scarlett Letter* which happens only because “girls are more thoughtful than boys.” As I will discuss, her invocation of maturity in female students is, for her, salient in English class more so than in science class. Why maturity offers insight into literature but not necessarily the periodic table is a generative question, and students offer ideas throughout this section.

The transference of a broad idea about gender and maturity to a specific conversation in English class illustrates both the explanatory power of ideologies about gender and literacy (‘X literacy event happened because of Y gender understanding’) as well as the performative resource of the ideology for individual students. Katerina sees her part in a conversation about guilt and shame as part of a coherent, mature performance of femininity in her English class. In

her view, that same performance would be more difficult (if not impossible) in an all-male or coed class. I emphasize that while Katerina's claim about the unlikeliness of the guilt-shame conversation is doubtful in an experimental sense, what is important here is the idea that students 'do English class' believing that the ideology about gender and maturity applies (or can apply) to said classes.

John, a student at the coed school, echoes the notion that female adolescents are more mature and connects this paradoxically to both success in some areas of school and riskier social behavior. He starts by saying, "In high school the average is for females to do better," which he explains by observing, "Females definitely matured a lot faster for our grade like females started getting unfocused in school, like doing I guess doing bad stuff probably like around like eighth grade summer. ...Girls in our in our grade like you can compare them to college girls. They make the same decisions that college girls make. Whereas the guys are still kind of like freshmen." His side-by-side understanding of maturity in terms of outside-of-school behavior and academic performance is a tetchy connection and highlights students' possible imprecision and variation in using terms like mature. Males are less mature, which hurts them in English class, but also less engaged in "bad stuff"⁵⁹ which should help them. His female classmates, in John's binary, are more mature which helps performance in English class but also causes them to be "unfocused in school" (though, as he notes, they still do better). I collected no data to support or question John's suggestions about his classmates' social lives, but it does seem important that his beliefs about gender and maturity are consistent across social contexts. This consistency shows how ideologies about gender can work differently depending on where they are employed. For John, being a "college girl" is a positive identity in school—after all, people in college are

⁵⁹ I did not inquire into the specifics of the "bad stuff" though my assumption is that he is referring to things like drinking and sexual behavior.

generally pretty smart. But performing a more mature identity could also be risky when done too soon outside the friendly confines of a classroom.

His classmate, Sofia, also understands female adolescents as more mature but connects this more concretely, and with fewer ambiguous connotations, to English class than John. She says,

I think often girls do better in English class. I think it's a maturity thing too. The most mature people are the ones that do the best because it's complicated what we're reading often and you really have to think about things that are serious and not just see always the humorous side of it because some things are humorous but then some things you really do have to take seriously. I think girls often mature faster than boys.

For Sofia, maturity manifests, in one way, as the ability to understand “complicated” literature and is a direct link to female students outperforming male students in English class. In this view of learning, in order to “do the best,” one needs to master a complex external set of ideas. Mature people, who tend to be female, have the best access to nuance, to complications. In another way, however, Sofia sets up maturity as the ability to do “complicated” tasks because one takes them seriously. To explain, she invokes a binary of gender difference: Female / mature / serious vs. male / immature / humorous. Of course, the general stereotype that males are funnier or appreciate humor more than females rears its head, and Sofia says “that boys usually have a better sense of humor than girls.” It is possible, in Sofia’s view, to have a sense of humor and do well in school, but that takes maturity, and female students are the ones best able to do that. Even in this short answer, Sofia brings multiple, intertwined ideologies about gender and ELA literacy practice to bear on specific literacy events from English class.

One important caveat about students’ beliefs about maturity and achievement is that there is some question about how long such immaturity will last. Dweck (2006) suggests that growth mindsets (as opposed to fixed ones) prioritize thinking about intelligence as developed rather

than innate; people with growth mindsets tend to succeed in the long term. To take the ideology about gender and maturity on its own terms, ‘maturity’ seems more ephemeral than something like the ‘manly silence.’ People mature and grow, don’t they? Or is there a presumption that, like a Judd Apatow comedy, males dwell in perpetual adolescence? John offers a growth-oriented, if disturbingly blasé, response. When I asked John if his idea that high school males are seen as less mature and less successful had an impact on him, he reasons:

I guess the stereotype for males, I think, in high school the average is for females to do better, but then as soon as it gets to more like serious things, males take over. I've definitely been gravitated toward thinking like it's okay if I don't try so hard right now, that I'll get it. I'll really start trying harder like further on.

To be clear, John is not celebrating what he sees as a privileged status for males; he prefaces the above by declaring this an “unfortunate” situation. But John looks at the ideology about maturity and his own potential for growth in a bifurcated way. On the one hand, this ideology lowers his motivation—“it’s okay if I don’t try so hard right now”—and helps to explain, like it does for Sofia and Katerina, why females do better in English class. On the other hand, though, John does typify some parts of a growth, rather than a fixed, mindset. He believes that with a kind of procrastinated hard work (“I’ll really start trying harder like further on”), he can get better in school and then in his professional life. In other words, he does not doubt his potential for growth. And this is disturbingly bolstered by knowledge of a system of male privilege.

It is important to note, however, that this study shows two notable variations to the general discussion of maturity I have presented so far. First, none of the students at all-male St. Richards brought up maturity as a way to describe why female students tended to better in English. The interview protocol did not ask about maturity—all the examples that arose came organically from students—and, though the young men at St. Richards had no trouble conjuring beliefs about hypothetical female peers who outperform them in English class, they never

imagined these young women as more mature.⁶⁰ Perhaps the absence of comments about maturity have to do with these seniors feeling close to college (a notable marker of getting older). Perhaps St. Richards, a Jesuit school, places extra emphasis on service and being “men for others” which made a performance of immaturity less desired. In any case, that particular ideology about gender and learning was not present for the students in that class.

Stan, at Fielding, represents a second variation to the general pattern of maturity as a gendered explanation for differential performance in English class. He did, as I noted, explain that his own burgeoning maturity led him to “contribute” to his current English class more than his “strong, silent” performance in middle school English classes. That said, his notion of maturity is slightly different from many of the other participants in this study. For him, maturity was not an issue of having the ability to grasp complicated concepts (Sofia), to be thoughtful (Katerina), or to focus as a learner (John). He was always capable of any of these learning behaviors in English class, but he only did the “stony silence thing” when “younger and less secure.” For Stan, the issue was being mature and “secure” enough not to care about restrictive ideologies about gender and literacy practices in his English class. Stan’s explanation, though a slightly different invocation of ‘maturity,’ is meaningful because it emphasizes the performances students use relative to ideologies about gender and learning. Teachers are not situating class discussion, for example, in a way that benefits female students; instead, male students are either not mature enough to engage deeply with the material or not mature enough to shirk circulating ideologies about gender and learning that apply in that literacy event. Whatever the case, there

⁶⁰ It is possible that Joe from St. Richards has something like maturity in mind when discussing how his 8th grade male classmates did not focus on school and his belief that, at younger ages, female students tend to do better. Still, in 12th grade, he no longer thinks this is the case, and, even in 8th grade, I would be hesitant to ascribe a “lack of focus” necessarily to immaturity.

seems to be some hope among the male participants that male students will eventually mature—or at least that this is within their control.

This potential for change also seems present in another ideology about gender and ELA literacy practice frequently mentioned by the students at coed Fielding: hard work. That is, female students work harder in English class than their male classmates. Intriguingly, Dweck mentions hard work specifically as one part of successful growth mindsets. She finds that if one is dedicated to the process of learning and improvement through hard work⁶¹, growth is more likely. In this sense, John’s confidence in his ability to “start trying harder farther on” is not a growth mindset exactly but rather a sort of confident postponement of growth. In any case, it certainly seems noteworthy that, for the students in this study, two ideologies about gender and learning associated with a growth mindset (maturity and hard work) have become accessible most commonly to female students.

Participants were clear that female students simply worked harder. Lily, a student at Fielding, observes, “There are a lot of like really hard-working like girl students, I think. Like especially at [Fielding] just people who really care about grades and a lot of the male students are kind of like blow-offy. They're just kind of like I don't want to do this, I'm not going to do this.” Fiona, another student in the coed class, notices a similar breakdown in pure work time: “I know for some guys that's the thing is where they come and they're like, ‘you know what? I spent an hour on this,’ and like, ‘oh, we spent, I spent five.’” For Lily and Fiona, female students are “hard-working,” “care a lot about grades,” and spend a lot of time on their work for English class whereas their male classmates are “blow-offy” and do not have the desire to put forth effort or time.

⁶¹ Dweck also emphasizes the importance of learners’ willingness to take risks by experimenting and failing with different approaches to a problem.

The work-differential observation is not limited to female students. D’Brickshaw sees his male classmates paling in comparison by doing the minimum: “What I’ve seen at least over the years is that during readings or when the teacher assigns reading assignments, the guys would just read like that assignment and you know that’d be it. But most of the girls that I’ve talked to in English would like read that and then go on to the next chapters.” Gene sees a similar difference: “They [female students] concentrate better, sometimes they work harder. And it shows up when you get your grades back.” John concurs, saying “I think there’s definitely more males that don’t go a hundred percent,” and Christian voices the generalization as well: “It’s a stereotype that males don’t put as much effort.” As a circulating ideology about gender and ELA literacy practices, a male who does work hard in English class is marked as performing against type, just as Stan is constantly noted as an exception. Also, keeping Dweck’s emphasis on hard work in mind, these sorts of comments are an admission from young men about procrastinated growth. As D’Brickshaw explains, these students are not dismissing the necessity of reading in English class—there is no rebellion against reading Shakespeare—but going above and beyond or even, John offers, “one-hundred percent,” is not a level of effort they see in their male peers.

Jared lays out the case quite clearly about male students and hard work: “It’s kind of the belief that they [male students] won’t do the reading, they won’t do the homework. They’ll like scribble down some things...I guess there’s a stereotype that we’re worse students, like in kind of a way that we just like try less hard I guess. I feel that’s sometimes very prevalent.” When I pressed him to challenge that “belief” by coming up with disconfirming examples, he could not. He replied with an image of masculine performance relative to this ideology about gender and learning:

Like I said earlier, a lot less is written on the reading guides [by male students]. Like either sometimes if I’m running late and I’ll

like scan for the quote that we're talking about. So sometimes I'll do the reading but I won't do it thoroughly. So for myself I definitely feel like that's presented and then I know definitely other guys also skip the reading or like don't even do the packet.

Jared can point to specific examples to support his understanding of the ways that female students work harder and do better in English class (e.g. the reading guides). Jared does not use cause-effect language; he is not skimming the reading in English class because he thinks that's what males should do. He is, however, using his own performance as an example of how a gendered pattern of learning behavior can become evidence of for ideologies about gender and literacy practices in English class.

"Oh, I need to do the same": The Difference Gender Makes as a Performative Tool in English and STEM

The above ideologies about gender—communication styles, maturity, and hard work—arose from questions about literacy events from students' English classes. I established each student's individual perception of what these events were in his or her particular class, and, in general, their perceptions did not surprise: students read mostly canonical prose, drama, and poetry, write mostly analytical essays about literature, and discuss the literature as a whole class. To reiterate, even though students observed clear patterns of female students outperforming their male peers in English class, they rarely, if ever, associated either the curriculum/pedagogy or literacy events (except for participation) from English class with gender⁶²; in school, everyone

⁶² There were three somewhat patterned exceptions. First, some members of the all-female class believed that they tended to focus on interpreting canonical books in a "feminist" way more than a coed or all-male class would (though they still believed the books themselves would be similar). Second, the students at Fielding read *Beowulf* while I was observing the class, and a few students believed the violence in that piece was more enjoyable for their male classmates. Their teacher, in fact, told me in an interview that she chose *Beowulf* in part to appeal to her male students—though this was not a rationale she shared with her students. In addition, some of the students read *Persepolis* in their previous English class which they thought might have been more appealing (with its young female protagonist) to female students. Third, three students observed that they found it ironic that female students do better in English class since almost all the authors of, and characters in, the books they read are male.

had equal access to reading Shakespeare or writing a compare/contrast essay. Instead, students saw English class as a site of female vibrancy and superiority because of ‘natural’ advantages in maturity and essentialized gender traits like communication styles as well as an observed difference in hard work. The neutral literacy events in English class, in these students’ eyes, just lend themselves to specific areas in which female students have an advantage.

One important follow-up, though, is figuring out how these perceived advantages for female students functioned outside of English class. In other words, did female students’ vibrancy, maturity, and hard work show up in math and science classes too? If not, why not?⁶³ To begin to answer these questions, it is important to establish that students explicitly see themselves as performing as part of gendered patterns. These patterned performances clearly existed in English class. Jared explained that his sporadic reading homework completion is of a piece with his male classmates (“I know definitely other guys”). Interestingly, a few of the female students at Fielding credit (and perhaps blame) pressure from female friends as a reason they work so hard. Sofia, for example, observes: “I think girls are always trying to help each other do their best and like we kind of talk about our essays and stuff. And so yeah I definitely think it affects me...I hear then they're working all night on their paper, it definitely makes me you know 'oh I need to do the same.' There's kind of like that almost competitiveness but just really wanting to do well.” Sofia surfaces an interesting tension between collaboration (“help each other do their best) and competition (“that almost competitiveness”) amongst her female peers, but it seems clear that Sofia thinks of gender patterns in learning as having a direct effect

⁶³ One of the final questions on the interview protocol is a broad question that asks students to step outside of English class and talk about any gender patterns they notice in other school subjects. At Fielding, 11 of the 14 students to whom I asked the question brought up their male classmates as more likely than their female classmates to enjoy and/or do well in science and/or math class. Due to time limitations, I was unable to ask this question to two participants.

on her performance of working hard. She feels compelled: “Oh, I need to do the same.” Not to do so would position her against the ideology of the hard-working female student and with the ideology of the slacker male student. Though stereotypes often render male students as more competitive generally, Sofia’s reference to competition is closer to pressure to perform within gender norms than pressure to compete for achievement. In English class, the circulating ideologies lead to side-by-side race-to-the-bottom and race-to-the-top environments.

Importantly, John and Elsa tease out how these gender-based patterns flip depending on school subjects. John talks about how the work of his male peers in English class influences him to participate less, but he notes the opposite effect in his science class. Of English, he says, “If I see a bunch of girls talking, I definitely won’t. I don’t want to like add to their argument because I don’t know where they’re coming from, but if a bunch of guys are going I guess I’ll join.” John’s sense that “he’ll know where” his male classmates are “coming from” in discussions of English literature is a testament to the difference gender makes for him—his participation seems contingent on the relational performance of gender. He points to an equal but opposite effect in his science class: “I guess my natural instinct is like...the people that I’m friends with they’re guys and I sit around them. Like if they start talking, I start talking...I really like notice that guys like support each other whenever they give arguments.”⁶⁴ His “natural instinct” is to talk if the other students performing masculinity are talking and to remain quiet if not. Given class discussion, a possibly equivalent activity across school subjects, he speaks less in English where he does not know where female classmates are “coming from” but more in science where his “natural instinct” is to “start talking.” John feels “support” from that gender-based peer group.

⁶⁴ I was never in John’s science class, so I cannot speculate about what that support might look like. It is true that, in English class, John was part of a group of 3-4 young men that sat next to each other until Ms. Liu reassigned their seats because they were sometimes off-task.

Elsa also singles out science and English as school subjects where different ideologies about gender and disciplinary literacy practices apply. In English class, she was strident in her descriptions of female students' comparative success based on ideas about vibrancy, maturity, and hard work. She observes, "I just feel like they [male students] rarely bring up a really cool new idea that doesn't get shut down by another guy or a female." She draws on the ideology about maturity: "I guess in high school there's sort of pinning down the age groups and the maturity and stuff. And females are supposed to be much more mature and I guess they just sort of assume we're supposed to speak and understand more of the text." She invokes hard work: "Sort of the image of them [male students] just kind of being a little lazy. Because you don't exactly know why they're not answering." Elsa explains the luxury of not having her communication practices marked: "We can just sort of do what we want, say what we want. And I enjoy it. I hate to say it but I kind of enjoy that I can speak if I want and not speak if I want. People aren't going to be like she's talking too much."

Her celebration of these ideologies about gender (applied by her to literacy practices in English class) makes their disappearance to her in science class almost shocking. She explains, "I feel like in science, the first assumption is that a guy will be doing better...science is the one class where they pay more attention to females who do really well because it's just it seems almost like it's almost not as normal." Just as Elsa noted that people might be "a little questioning" if a male student showed too much passion for English class, she sees female success in science class as "almost not...normal." Surely, though, one might respond, female students' maturity helps them "understand more of the text" in English class—isn't reading an important part of science as well? And shouldn't the confidence to "speak when I want to" in English class translate to necessary scientific questioning and hypothesizing? They do not, at least not directly. Instead,

the new “normal” in science class calls for a different set of ideologies about gender and literacy practices to explain what participants saw as female students’ less successful performance in science class. It is not that female students might not still be perceived as harder workers or more mature; it is that it appears participants’ ideas about gender and science require a different set of ideologies for appropriate explanations.

With breathtaking precision and vivid imagery, Elsa explains how these ideologies about gender and science class function. Elsa explains:

In science I always feel like there's sort of this weird little thing that you feel when you're doing a science experiment or something. So I don't know exactly what it is but there is sort of a little presence in your head when you're in science that makes you sort of be like this is science and females and science historically speaking, don't mix. So it does. I feel like that sort of affects me in what I do in science and how I react to work and stuff.

This dissertation, of course, is centered in English classes, not science, and I do not have the data to make claims about science education. I know from spending hours at Fielding each morning, however, that Elsa walked every day from first period English to second period chemistry. As a contrast to English class, it was telling to see Elsa move both physically from one classroom to another as well as mentally from “we can just sort of do what we want, say what we want” to a “presence in your head when you’re in science that makes you sort of be like this is science and females and science historically speaking don’t mix.” She is aware of the historical and contemporary deficit discourse surrounding female students and science as she is aware of her own reaction to it. The deficit discourse becomes “this weird little thing that you feel when you’re doing a science experiment” and a “presence in your head.” She connects this “presence” to a classic science class event—an experiment. She is not troubled, at least explicitly, by the way her teacher has set up the experiment or by her lab partner or by the way her textbook

explains the experiment. The trouble comes internally, from something she “feels” and something in her “head.”

Again, I do not have enough data to detail ideologies about gender and science at the three sites in this study. One might speculate of course that the video Paul from St. Richards saw in his health class (“it said men have a general inclination to be better at math and sciences”) represents the sort of biological assertions about gender and science that filtered down to Elsa.⁶⁵ Still, for her, putatively general ideologies about gender and literacy practices that would appear easily unmoored from English class—does hard work really play better for Shakespeare than for Newton?—might not actually be so general or so easily transferred. One way to answer the question, then, about how well ideologies about gender and literacy practices transfer to other school subjects is to say that new disciplines bring new ideological contexts in which students create different performances. When students thought about their female peers and their success in English class, an ideology about emotional females and silent males serves as a tool to explain the split and reinforce its existence in English class. In science, however, Elsa’s male classmates are not “immature” or “lazy”; immaturity and laziness only comes up when discussing gender-patterned deficits.⁶⁶ Stereotypes and ideologies occurred to students only when they applied. Counterintuitively, the ideologies about gender in English class applied specifically to the literacy practices that occurred there, so one can rightly see an ideology about gender and maturity or gender and hard work as an ideology about gender and literacy in English class.

⁶⁵ I can report as well that Elsa’s science teacher was a woman who told me in an interview that she actively worked against those assertions with her female students.

⁶⁶ One note of caution is that female students in the interviews did not express a similar sense of a growth mindset (procrastinated or otherwise) that male students did about English class. Many students believed that, stereotypes be damned, female students did just fine in science. But for students who saw female students as being less welcome or performing less well in science, that ideology was fixed. The potential for growth did not seem as present.

In order to further illustrate the way that broad ideologies about gender become ideologies about gender and specific school subjects, one need only look at Joanne and Lily's comments about gender, hard work, and science class. Joanne too observes the pattern that participants believed male students to be more successful in science classes. She observes, "I've noticed the boys really really enjoy math and science. I've always noticed ever since I was like a little girl. I've noticed that boys seem to thrive in math and science." She also explains why she thinks this pattern exists:

I've never been really good at math and science especially in an environment like this where everything's extremely competitive...I have like (a conception) for this [science] class with these boys and they just like outdo themselves every single day and it's just like sometimes it can be a little much but I just try to remember like I'm doing the best I can...Like if we started a new unit, the next day these boys come in and they're holding something and they built something to do with the new unit...it's not a project we're not getting grade for it.

Just as D'Brickshaw and Jared describe female students reading ahead in a novel or writing more on a novel study guide, narratives of passionate, hard work get transferred to male students in science class. The young men "outdo themselves" and build a project they are not even "getting a grade for." Ideas about hard work are resources waiting to be applied to specific contexts, in this case the practice of building science projects. Again, when applied in terms of gender difference, this apparent ideology about gender and science enervates Joanne—she is not "good at math and science especially in an environment like this" and has to remind herself that she's "doing the best [she] can." It is worth repeating: the ideology about gender (hard work, passion) is the same but the disciplinary contexts are different.

Lily too explicitly points to a similar switch for young men in English class: "When you really really like something, the stereotypes kind of leave for female and male...Cause they're all like whoa that's cool or wait why does that happen again. Like in English if we're like wait I

don't understand how you got that meaning from that, can you explain, nobody really asks that question.” One can only bring a circulating ideology to bear if it applies, but the ideology circulates regardless. If the ideology, or “stereotype” does not apply, the “stereotypes kind of leave.” And, like Stan resists the ideologies about gender and learning applied to his English class, Lily resists the same ideology in science. She explains,

There's this one guy in my chemistry class, and he's very like ‘Oh I'm right about everything and I'm really smart and my brother like goes to Yale’ and all those kind of things. I was sitting in the front row and he was like right behind me and then this one girl asked her question and we had just gone over it and then he was like ‘did you really just ask that? We just answered that.’ I was like ‘oh no, like I can't ask questions.’ But then I did anyway because I don't really care what you say.

Lily tells a story about an intelligent, arrogant young man in her science class, who, like the students who Elsa describes as “shooting down” male students in English class, chides a female student for asking a question. The first lesson for Lily: “Oh no, I can't ask questions.” The students in the class are punishing this performance of femininity, and Lily, as a female student in science class, gets the lesson. Of course, the resolution is triumphant; Lily asks a question “anyway because I don't really care what you say.” She shows that resistant performances are possible relative to ideologies about gender in disciplinary context. Even so, her resistance also shows the presence of an ideology that needs to be resisted in the first place, one that not everyone (e.g. Elsa and Joanne) seems able to push against. Recalling the “anything” in Stan's “I'm not worried about anything,” Lily's “what you say” makes clear that a performance that pushes against the prevailing ideological winds is marked; it leaves people with something to say.

Conclusion

The participants in this study show that it is more meaningful to perceive broad ideas about gender as linked to school subjects holistically than to specific literacy events within that subject. That is, the close reading essay, the canonical novel, and the chemistry experiment are neutral; that is just doing school. But how hard one works at it or how well-equipped one's brain is, at this point in the maturation process, to master it might have a lot to do with gender. Circulating ideologies apply to gender and literacy practices but rarely to literacy events. For this reason, many difference-based solutions promoted by difference-driven scholars of young men and literacy are unlikely to work as intended. From these students' perspectives, why would a teacher need to switch to more male-friendly books if the course books have little to do with gender? It seems completely possible that the same ideologies about gender and learning would still circulate because they are applied to ideologically-loaded school subjects. Street's ideological model of literacy allows one to see literacy practices contextually and inclusive of the sorts of identity performances that accompany the literacy event. Thus, the literacy practice of reading a novel at Fielding necessarily includes Sam's point that females will be more vibrant in discussing it, Jared's note that male students will read it less completely, and Stan's performance in resisting those ideas. In this view, it is not just, or even primarily, the reading material that is responsible for the gendering. Students like Stan and Lily show that while performative resistance of ideologies is possible, it is also just that: resistance. Moves to improve literacy work in English class demands that some of the gender-based friction be sanded down and successful performances made a bit smoother.

I would not want to suggest that these ideologies about gender and ELA literacy practices were somehow equally salient for all students. In doing these interviews, it became apparent that

for some students (like Stan and Elsa) issues of gender performance in English class were a seething force in their lives. All I had to do was turn on the microphone. For other students (like Sam and Christian), the topic was clearly awkward or vexing to the point where it became difficult for them to formulate answers. For still others (like Marie and Mark), gender just did not seem all that salient. Especially for this last category, I am wary of eliding their voices. Still, when gender was salient in English class, the consistency with which ideologies about gender came to explain ideologies about gender and literacy in English class was striking—as was the way these ideologies mutated when it came time to explain male students’ advantage in science class. Important too is that even though not all students found English to be gendered as feminine or science gendered as masculine, almost no participants understood the disciplinary gender identifications consistently flipped. Gender did not always matter to students, but when it did, it mattered in remarkably consistent ways.

Chapter 5: Exposed but Not Engaged: Ideologies about Gender, Gender-Justice, and Literacy

Building from the findings in chapter 4 about how circulating ideologies about gender and literacy came to imbue students' perceptions of ELA literacy practices, this chapter examines a particular set of those ideologies that surfaced through student-generated claims about the way issues of gender-justice, especially what some called 'feminism,' arose in their English classes.⁶⁷ These comments came up as students were explaining their observations about gender patterns in achievement, enthusiasm, and/or class activities in English class. As the last chapter showed, students often felt female students outperformed their male peers in English class. The explanations for this were frequently expressed through broad ideologies about gender and literacy practices (e.g. stereotypes about communication, hard work, and maturity) rather than specific literacy events (e.g. reading a course novel). For students, conversations specifically about gender-justice were likely to happen in English class—mainly through the course literature and in-class discussion, and this chapter shows that, while not all participants mentioned this topic, those who did (61%) unanimously considered it of more interest to female students than male students.

For male students, the most common stance was dispassion, or a lack of personal engagement with gender-justice issues. This dispassion made ideological sense across all three

⁶⁷ Students occasionally mentioned other forms of justice (e.g. racial), including the more encompassing 'social justice,' during interviews though far less frequently than gender-justice. I would hypothesize that this happened *not* because gender justice was somehow more salient but because: a) single-gender classes might be likely to focus on gender as a factor; b) the interview protocol asked, during the final third, about gender patterns specifically.

English classes. Women became the provisionally unmarked referent of gender when issues of gender-justice arose. In that way, gender-justice became perceived as mattering to female students only. But for these female students, context mattered greatly; in the all-female class, students defined an explicitly feminist perspective as normative, but, in the coed class, female students could potentially become marked as “aggressive” in relation to the ideology about gender-justice. This ideology, and students’ orientation to it, allows for a different look at the way in which literacy events (e.g. reading a play by Shakespeare) can be perceived by students as neutral even as they consider literacy practices to be ideologically inflected, in this case by the relationship between gender performance and issues of gender-justice. I conclude that this particular ideology is especially crucial to investigate because (pro)feminist interventions (e.g. Martino & Kehler, 2007) often propose challenging gendered binaries in English class by engaging students in explicit, critical conversations about gender. This chapter shows that such interventions, to succeed in context, must effectively navigate locally circulating ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice in English class.

This chapter focuses on the students at coed Fielding High School, all-male St. Richards High School, and all-female Samuel High School, but Dr. Mead, the teacher in the all-male English class, offers a broad initial gloss of a circulating ideology about gender, literacy, and gender-justice/feminism. She is a respected teacher and speaks knowledgeably about her pedagogy and her students. She is also highly qualified to offer her students a feminist perspective on literature. Dr. Mead, as her title suggests, is a Ph.D in English literature, wrote a dissertation on feminist literature, and taught college courses in her specialty prior to taking a position at the high school. I asked the teachers in both single-gender schools a counterfactual question meant to turn up ideas about gender and literacy: If the all-male school started enrolling

female students, would anything about your teaching change or would it stay essentially the same?⁶⁸ She responded like this:

In terms of the way my approach would shift, I mean and this has to do with my own personal academic background...My background is in feminist literature. When I took my exams, feminist theory was a big part of it and almost all of the seminars that I taught they were upper level seminars...in women's lit and I was teaching in the women's studies department. So many of those texts I haven't and probably wouldn't share with the boys because they would not they would not care. They would not get into it and I notice that the body of literature I share with them is much more traditionally canonical and in that sense very populated by male writers and when I choose maybe a female writer I choose carefully. Like I would never teach Jane Austen ever. I don't think that many of them would be able to get behind that.

Dr. Mead, a credentialed expert in her field, feels that background to be more or less inapplicable in the context of this particular class. It takes hypothetical female students to give her permission to draw on feminist literature.⁶⁹ Again, this observation is not meant to be critical; she knows her students best, and, as this chapter will show, she makes the ostensibly 'correct' decision in view of her students' attitudes—though of course one cannot know the results of the counterfactual situation in which she did introduce her male students to what she considers more feminist texts.

Dr. Mead would not bring in feminist literature for the young men in her class “because they would not care” and “would not get into it.” Though she appears to use these rationales interchangeably, they are potentially subtly different. To “not care” seems to signify that male

⁶⁸ To emphasize, like the student interviews, the interview protocols for teachers bring up neither social justice nor feminist literature.

⁶⁹ Starting with “I notice that,” Dr. Mead shifts from her reticence to include “feminist” literature to a more general wariness to choose any text written by a female writer. I focus less on the latter for two reasons. First, the student participants in this study very rarely mentioned the sex of the author as a factor affecting their reaction to a book. I am not dismissing a possible effect on students, but I do not have data supporting that. Second, I would argue that the structure of Dr. Mead’s answer suggests that, when she says that she “chooses carefully” when it comes to female writers, she means that she avoids female writers who foreground a feminist perspective. Her line of reasoning, in my reading, is: a) her male students would not be interested in feminist texts; b) this makes her class’s reading list predominantly canonical and male; c) when she introduces a female writer, that writer would best not foreground a feminist perspective—or have some other way of hooking her male students.

students recognize feminist arguments and perspectives but find them not to be important enough to spend time reading or writing about. To “not get into,” on the other hand, seems to signify a more ambiguous stance. Students might actually “care” about feminist perspectives without developing and/or performing a commitment to those issues.

Dr. Mead’s summary highlights a perhaps troubling ideology about gender and literacy that exists at all three schools: young men are often seen as unenthusiastic when it comes to reading about, writing about, and discussing issues of gender-justice. Importantly, the ideology is not that the young men will be antagonistic toward those conversations; they will not (or at least did not in conversations with me) fulminate against reading books with strong female characters and by female authors, or protest discussions about hierarchical social structures. The language, instead, is that they would “not care” or “not get into it.” While these are not the same attitude, students’ responses often conflate the two, and, in this chapter, I argue that the circulating ideology about males and gender-justice is a dispassionate one. Important too, one can see Dr. Mead making clear pedagogical choices based on this ideology. Since her all-male students “would not be able to get behind” even a canonical female author like Jane Austen, she opts to offer a set of texts to her English class that is “more traditionally canonical and in that sense very populated by male writers.” In another context, Dr. Mead’s move to base her class around texts that she knows her students will “get into” or “get behind” might be met with approbation. Dr. Mead notes another ideology about literacy in making her decision: students should care about and show passion for the texts they read. While I would argue (and I believe Dr. Mead would agree) that teachers are often able to share or create passion with students, the ideology about gender-justice and literacy, in this particular context, proved too much to attempt to overcome.

This ideology deserves special attention, in part, because questions about male students' reactions to and performance around conversations about gender-justice are not present in the difference-driven literature on young men's literacy.⁷⁰ As discussed in the literature review, most of the academic responses that I dubbed difference-driven explicitly feared being labeled as anti-feminist for their focus on young men. Recall that Pirie knows "there is such a thing as anti-feminist backlash out there, and teachers interested in boys' education have to separate themselves carefully from such motivations" (7). Newkirk also criticizes Sommers to argue, "In place of a solution or even a serious examination, we get the romanticism of the Right, the comforting myth that the answer lies in a retreat to a prefeminist, preprogressive past" and concludes of the gender wars, "This debate is clearly dichotomized in an unhealthy misleading way and I would like to extract myself from it" (20). I would speculate that one unintended consequence of their aim to "separate" or "extract" themselves is that the manner in which male students, especially privileged ones, grapple with feminist ideas is understudied. In other words, in an effort to not be "anti-feminist" or "prefeminist," scholars miss the chance to encourage male students' engagement (or lack thereof) with gender-justice in class.

Newkirk astutely acknowledges the presence of a regressive ideology about young men and gender-justice that circulates culturally. Though I do not assume that regressive ideology's presence in the three classrooms in this study, one way in which this chapter aims to engage the wider discussion of young men's literacy is to examine to what extent the conservative/regressive understanding of a boys' crisis takes root with or is interpreted by the

⁷⁰ Tatum's *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males* is an exception. He advocates explicit conversations with African American male students about societal inequalities and systematic discrimination they face. That said, he connects his book to the more general discourse among difference-driven writers about *young men's* literacy and recommends what amounts to a difference-based approach on gendered lines. That is, he proposes units based on *Finding Forrester* but not *Akeelah and the Bee*.

students in these English classes. When Dr. Michael Gurian claims that “we have been in the decade of the girl” and now should focus on boys, are students actually influenced by that argument? Dr. Mead believes her class would be less than enthused by feminist literature, but is that because they want a “return” to male dominated literature or because they do not quite know how to perform relative to a gender-justice focus in literature?

In some ways, the elephant on the page is Sommers’s *The War against Boys*. The book is a flashpoint in the conversation about where young men ‘fit’ in discussions about gender inequality in schools (and English classes). The first edition, published in 2000, seemed to intentionally provoke a passionate, even antagonistic reaction in people who would call themselves feminists. In addition to the main title, with its proposal of a rarely imagined war against a traditionally advantaged group, the subtitle of the 2000 edition named names: *How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*. Sommers intends to show young men at a deficit and, for her, the deficit-driver is feminism. She appeals to lingering societal discomfort with the concept, but Sommers is not explicitly suggesting that female students should be denied equal access to, and opportunity in, school. What she controversially asserts is that some feminists believe in a zero-sum game. That is, if young women do better, young men do worse; or, if you design curriculum for females, you are automatically *not* designing it for males. Most simply, Sommers believes that if certain feminists run the show, the curriculum becomes feminized and boys lose out. To recall some book titles from the first decade of the 21st century, this is the trouble with boys and why they fail. Again, it is not my project in this dissertation to weigh in on the ‘reality’ of any gender-based deficit, but, given participants’ attitudes toward gender-justice on display in this chapter, one should inquire about the possibility that books such

as hers perpetuate conservative ideas about how young men can perform relative to ideas from those who are advocates for female students.

Finally, the circulating ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice call for specific analysis because the implications of this dissertation rely in part on arguments and recommendations derived from (pro)feminist scholars. These researchers, who I detailed in chapter 2, often recommend explicit work with students on the difference gender makes in school and point to the English curriculum as a place where constructs like heterosexism, hegemonic masculinity, and feminism might be addressed in a transformative way. This chapter shows, however, that the reception of such a transformative curriculum might well be influenced by locally circulating ideologies about gender and literacy. In other words, attempts to open up or transform gender performance broadly, or in English class specifically, need to navigate already ideological local waters. As the first results chapter in this dissertation shows, ideologies about gender and literacy in English class specifically present hurdles to enacting a progressive approach to questions about young men and literacy. For example, how can educators best approach questions of male privilege or gender inequality in an English classroom where an ideology of male deficit circulates? What about in a classroom where male students can be positioned as lazy, immature, and not actively engaged in class? Or, as this chapter investigates, what about in a classroom where issues of gender-justice themselves circulate as the material of feminine gender performances? One purpose of this dissertation is to describe the difference gender makes in the sorts of contexts where educators attempt to enact progressive, transformational pedagogy.

Shifting Definitions of Gender-Justice and Feminism

In order to best analyze how ideologies about gender and gender-justice circulate in these English classes, this section aims to underpin that forthcoming analysis with a clear set of terms. In this chapter, I use *gender-justice* rather than *feminism* as a general term for student talk about what they see as issues of *gender-equality*—though when students explicitly use *feminism*, I follow that. There are, of course, many definitions and orientations to feminism extant in the popular and academic literature as well as in the interviews with participants in this study. There is, for example, the feminism that Sommers takes to task as anti-boy in *The War against Boys*, the feminism and (pro)feminism that Lingard & Douglas (1999) suggest will help young men in school (as well as young women), and the fervent desire difference-driven authors have to not be seen as “antifeminist,” “preprogressive,” or “prefeminist.” In this study, students in the all-female class frequently describe their take on canonical novels as feminist, and there is the feminist literature with which Dr. Mead believes her male students will not engage. There is also the situation that Rowan et. al. (2002) describe: “[G]irls will articulate their commitment to equal rights...without wanting to attach themselves to labels such as ‘feminism’” (181). ‘Feminist’ or ‘feminism,’ then, can become catch-all terms loaded with ideological and historical baggage, and, for my project, terminology problems arise. For one, students’ descriptions of gender-equality, even when called specifically feminist, are not often moored to consistent, concrete definitions of feminism.⁷¹ More importantly, though, many students (mostly male but also some female) believe in gender-equality but do not, for various reasons, consider this a feminist perspective or consider themselves to be feminists. While I would perhaps label them differently than they would label themselves, I use ‘gender-justice’ as an umbrella term to respect and

⁷¹ Dr. Mead and Martino & Kehler are exceptions to this. They all link what they call feminism to specific ideas though, as I note later in this chapter, definitions and histories of feminism are contested as well.

include students' ideas about feminism(s) but also their less specific descriptions of gender-equality.

Notions of gender-justice become entangled with the purported young men's literacy deficit in different ways. In the three classrooms in this study, however, gender-justice and feminism are not concepts students apply to the achievement of broad demographic categories (e.g. Sommers or Martino & Kehler). Rather, students and teachers discuss gender-justice most frequently through its presence in the English curriculum. For example, students perform alignment with what they call gender-focused readings of *Much Ado about Nothing* or *The Scarlet Letter*, and Dr. Mead excludes literature she considers too feminist to interest her boys in class. What's more, a few participants use the term 'social justice' instead of, or almost interchangeably with, 'feminism.' Often, but not always, they see gender-justice as *part of* a larger social justice agenda.

In terms of how students' murky definitions of gender-justice, feminism, and social justice operate, it is also important to establish outside definitions of these concepts to help situate participants' in-context ideas. Robinson (2016), drawing from Rawls (2001), defines social justice as "about assuring the protection of equal access to liberties, rights, and opportunities" and "allocate[ing] a fair share of benefits to the least advantaged members of society" ("What is Social Justice?"). While students did not bring up social justice as often as gender-justice⁷², this sense of "equal access" describes most students' apparent meaning. Feminism, though at times described by students as simply part of social justice, circulated in different guises and almost always as a freighted term. This variance is perhaps rooted in complex definitions of feminism(s). Lingard & Douglass (1999), in their advocacy for

⁷² As I suggest, my guess is that this is because they were most often responding to interview questions about gender-patterns and performance in class rather than questions about race, socio-economic status, religion, etc.

(pro)feminism, note that even standard definitions of feminism are contested (“the question of which feminism pro-feminist men ought to be pro”) though, for (pro)feminists, all are situated within a “framework informed by a commitment to social justice.” Kohli & Burbules (2013) argue, “Gone are the days when it was possible (or acceptable) to make simple distinctions by labeling a variety of feminism as ‘liberal,’ ‘socialist,’ or ‘radical’” (2). Instead, even as they highlight the many flaws of a “wave” model of feminisms, Kohli & Burbules describe the waves as “the categories used in so many discussions of feminism” and important for “its influence on the development of feminism’s understanding of itself” (24). These categories, then, can be limiting but due to their wide use, I include them as admittedly arbitrary definitional touchstones around which this chapter explores the nuances of individual students’ understandings of gender-justice and feminism.

First-wave feminism can be cast as focusing on the Enlightenment idea of the equality of the sexes (e.g. politically, socially, professionally) and developing the notion that social constructions rather than biological limitations explain women’s often subordinate position to men. While the sexes deserved equal rights, some first-wave feminists extolled sex-based difference as a way of emphasizing the civilizing, maternal superiority of the feminine. Second-wave feminism retains a focus on equality of the sexes but adds a focus on reproductive rights and the way these connect to other forms of equality. These questions of reproductive rights, most immediately, demanded a rethinking of gender roles in and out of the domestic sphere. Finally, third-wave feminism—chronologically the ‘current’ wave—retains many of the second-wave’s critiques of power and reproduction but adds the ability to subversively appropriate images explicitly critiqued by the second-wave. The third-wave also often consciously presents

as more racially and sexually diverse than previous waves of feminism (Kohli & Burbules, 2013).

I am, in this dissertation, less concerned with definitional ‘accuracy’ (which, when it comes to feminism, seems elusive in any event) than with how students take up parts of the definitions of social justice and feminism in context and how these terms become implicated in ideologies about gender and literacy in class. No students—male or female—want to be seen as somehow rejecting the parts of feminism that fight for equality of the sexes. Also, I would argue that when difference-driven authors who write about young men and literacy desire extraction from the gender wars and hope not to be seen as “prefeminist,” what they mean most directly is that they do not want to be against the equality often seen as ‘achieved’ by the first and second waves. Even Sommers, in her 2013 reissue of *The War against Boys*, swaps out “misguided feminism” for “misguided *policies*” in the subtitle. She says, “I did not intend to indict the historical feminist movement, which I have always seen as one of the great triumphs of our democracy” (3). For Sommers, it is the “feminist lobby”—personified through policy-makers and researchers like Carol Gilligan, the American Association of University Women, David Sadker, and others—who distort feminism into an anti-male endeavor. It is worth restating, though, that the male students in this study perform with hardly a hint Sommers’s bellicose tone; they react with near total dispassion.

Methodologically, this chapter relies on a slightly different approach to the interview data than the last chapter. In part, this is because the interview protocol included *no* planned questions about gender-justice or feminism.⁷³ Every response quoted in this chapter involved a student

⁷³ Following the semi-structured construction of the interview protocol, I did prompt or briefly follow-up if students’ raised the topic of gender equality, feminism, and/or social justice. To emphasize, though, the theme of gender-justice came out of my analytic coding which took place months after the interviews. Put simply, it was not something I expected to find.

organically raising the topic, usually in response to questions about how gender worked for them in class. As such, not all participants weighed in on how they view ideologies about gender-justice operating in class, and I make no assumptions about the students who did not mention the topic. I rely, then, only on the students whose orientation toward gender-justice formed a noteworthy piece of how they see and position themselves and others in English class.

Similar to the findings in chapter 4, ideologies gender and gender-justice did not always matter to students, but, when they did, they mattered in consistent ways. I developed an analytic code for this ideology through inductive analysis of the interview transcripts and the code applied, in one way or another, for nineteen of the thirty-one participants. I assume that systematic inequalities such as white privilege, heteronormativity, and sexism exist in all three classrooms, so, in that sense, issues of gender-justice, feminism, and social-justice would be present in any talk about identity and literacy. It is worth noting again, however, that these 19 students gave unsolicited but overt descriptions of how gender and gender-justice became salient in thinking about identity and English class. In order to unpack these issues across three specific contexts, I include two types of data in this chapter: 1) systematic analysis of students in all three classes who specifically point to the relevance of gender-justice, or social justice more broadly, in a conversation about gender and literacy in English class; 2) rich description of moments during my in-class observations when an ideology about gender, literacy, and gender-justice manifests.

My argument is *not* that the young men in this study would be likely to oppose many of the tenants of a gender-justice or social justice approach. For example, a number of male students saw value in thinking about injustices suffered by female characters in a Shakespeare play. Further, I doubt that they would even dispute their own privileged place in society (though

they probably would not put it in those terms). My suggestion is that everyone involved understands young men as less likely to *engage* in conversations in English class that are understood to be focused on issues they define as centered on gender-justice. If one recalls their reported lack of passion in English class generally, as represented by Sam’s comments from the last chapter about “vibrant” female students, dispassion makes some contextual sense. Still, dispassion about gender-justice surfaces a consequential question: how can one prepare privileged young men to participate in discussions about justice and equality when these discourses do not, at first glance, seem relevant to them? When educators emphasize self-interest (as in, young men should be allowed to read books that *interest* them) as a dominant pedagogical value, I argue that they unintentionally risk inculcating a “self-interested” perspective of the world for young men. If the dominant ideological stance is something like, ‘I don’t disagree with you, but I also don’t care that much,’ what does one do? For teachers presented with a reductive decision like ‘convince students to care about X topic in a novel’ or ‘build a novel unit around students’ extant, explicit interests,’ it does not seem unreasonable to choose the latter. In fact, when taken out of the context of an ideology about gender-justice, experts might even advise that second option. In this way, the ideologies about gender-justice and relevance become self-perpetuating. If young men believe that gender-equality is not relevant to them, then their teachers might not design curriculum that encourages them to think about how their interests are involved; but when teachers design curriculum this way, they affirm the ideology all over again.

“I’m Not Saying Boys Can’t Be Feminists, But...”: Gender-Justice in Single-Gender English Classes

The power of ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice to inflect literacy practices in English class is most frankly displayed by looking at the single-gender classes at St. Richards and Samuel School. During the coding process, themes of social justice came up for seven of the

nine female students at Samuel and four of the six students at St. Richards. All of these eleven students suggested that female students would be, just as Dr. Mead predicted, more likely to “care” about and be “into” issues of gender-justice in English class.⁷⁴ They found this to be true, remarkably, even though none of them were currently in English class with the opposite sex.

Before exploring the ideology of male dispassion in response to gender-justice discussions in class, establishing the way in which gender-justice did (or did not) come up will help to narrow the focus on exactly what male and female participants perceived young men to not be passionate about. These students’ reflections arose most often in response to the same counterfactual that Dr. Mead responded to: What would happen (if anything) in English class if your school started enrolling members of the opposite sex? Common answers included a suggestion that nothing would change or the possibility that class discussions would begin to feature more heterosexual flirting and less focus on the academic material. But both classes also proposed ways in which the inclusion (or not) of gender-justice issues, and the naturalized ‘rightness’ of that, partially organize the class.

Some students in the all-female class believed that having a same-gender class allowed them to collectively focus more closely on what they named as feminist issues. Though Ms. Bradstreet, the teacher in the all-female class, explicitly raises questions about gender-justice for the texts they read in class, the students in the class see this as inevitable and natural; they would talk about these issues no matter what. Indeed, a majority of the students that I interviewed in the all-female class bring up gender-justice, often specifically using the term *feminism*. The class had recently finished a unit on *The Scarlett Letter*, and their approach to the novel informed

⁷⁴ The Samuel students often named feminism explicitly, but *none* of the St. Richards students used the word.

numerous responses. For example, Lilah speculates about the consequences of being in an all-female class:

Where we talked about Hawthorne's maybe potentially agreeing with the feminism idea but then not and then maybe like being a little bit more passionate about those things when we see them...[Explains example from novel]...And like the discussion was around the woman's role in that and how people see women but I don't know if that would happen if there weren't...it might still happen but maybe not to the extent and maybe not with the same opinionated response that you get out of an all-girl classroom.

Lilah provides a concrete example of the way she understands gender-justice issues entering her class's discussion. Her note that "we talked about Hawthorne's maybe potentially agreeing with the feminism idea but then not" reveals a specifically feminist frame for the work students are doing. One can almost imagine the guiding question for the day: In what ways can we consider Hawthorne a feminist? This frame leads, then, to her extended explanation of a specific textual example and her observation that "the discussion was around the woman's role...and how people see women." In other words, Lilah perceives both the large questions and specific textual analysis as informed by an investment in feminism.

In the theoretical terms of literacy events and literacy practices, Lilah's description affirms the basic literacy event (class discussion) and even the topic ("women's roles") as mostly free of considerations of gender. She hypothesizes that, in a basic sense, "It might still happen." Class discussion is ideologically autonomous; it is just doing school. That said, as a literacy practice imbued with ideologies about gender and literacy, class discussion accesses circulating ideologies about gender-justice. I return to this specific example shortly, as I explore what young men at St. Richards see themselves as *not discussing*, but, for now, I flag Lilah's comparisons about fervor (or, in Sam's words from chapter 4, being "more vibrant"). She sees her class as "a little bit more passionate" and imagines that a different sex-based class composition would lack

“the same opinionated response that you get out of an all-girl classroom.” As I will argue, the ability to perform being “passionate” and “opinionated” about gender-justice is something young men in other contexts are seen to lack. It is remarkable that these young women in a single-gender school are able to perceive, and perhaps perpetuate, ideas about what young men would or would not do in class.

Eliza also elaborates on what she sees as the context-specific content of a gender-justice curriculum. She says, “There's always this kind of like feminist undertone just because we're all women and we're all advocating for ourselves. I can't think of a book that we read that boys wouldn't read but maybe kind of the way we talk about it is different. I'm not saying boys can't be feminists. But maybe they would see it from a different lens.” Eliza’s qualification (“I’m not saying boys can’t be feminists”) is fascinating in its implication that, though not impossible, the expectation is that they would not be. She delivers a causative message about gender, English class, and gender-justice: she sees a naturalized “feminist undertone” *because* they are “all women” and “advocating for ourselves.” Not only does discussion about gender somewhat naturally come into their class, it comes in as a passionate advocacy which she calls feminist. This may not change the books they read in class, but the ideology about gender and literacy alters the way they “talk about it” and “lens” through which they see literature.

Katerina echoes Eliza but also suggests that even institutional text choice might be influenced by circulating ideologies about gender-justice in English class. She observes:

I think that there are things that we read and there are things that we get out of our readings because it's an all-girls school. Like we just read *The Scarlett Letter* and a bunch of us took a really feminist take on it with Hester Prynne as this amazing matriarchal figure who kind of crushes the patriarchy in Puritan society so I think a lot of us got that out of the *Scarlett Letter* that maybe an all-boys wouldn't have gotten out of the *Scarlett Letter*.

Katerina believes that Ms. Bradstreet even chooses some of the texts in English class as a result of the all-female audience (though a canonical book like *The Scarlett Letter* would seem not to be one of those texts). Like Eliza, though, Katerina emphasizes an interpretation of a classic novel hardly even available to a class full of males. Eliza and Katerina are not explicitly calling these hypothetical males dispassionate, as I will argue later in this chapter; young men might, even in Katerina's view, be passionate about the novel for different reasons. Instead, a feminist perspective is just not something young men are likely to "get out of" the novel. Still, I would suggest further that the stated *reasons* male students are not accessing feminism relate directly to a lack of passion-engendering self-interest. Males, in this ideology about gender-justice and literacy in English class, are not "advocating for themselves" and so will be less engaged in the discussion. Even Katerina's exuberant explanation of a collective ("a bunch of us") feminist interpretation of Hawthorne contains evidence of excitement and passion in its use of glowing language ("amazing"; "crushes") and theoretically precise language ("matriarchal"; "patriarchy"). Drawing on a circulating ideology about young men, these interpretations and this energy, for Eliza and Katerina, simply appears less available to their hypothetical male classmates in an English class.

Allison draws on the same ideology about young men to define the content of her own class. With a small smile, she suggests that her class brings up "more ideas pertaining to feminism. We do talk about that a lot"; she also guesses "I think that maybe teenage guys would not be as like delighted to talk about that or even understand it. Like the realities of the world of like inequality." While Allison's droll point that "teenage guys would not be as like delighted to talk about that" echoes Dr. Mead's belief that male students might not "care about" or "get into" feminism, Allison adds that they might not be able to "understand it" with the "it" being "the

realities of the world of like inequality.” Obviously, Allison’s is a fairly damning picture of “teenage guys.” She hypothesizes adolescent males might be experientially incapable of doing the curriculum Allison and her female classmates use in English class. In addition to *The Scarlett Letter*, Allison specifically mentions *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *East of Eden* as units where this feminist take on class units might be beyond young men. Regardless of the empirical truth of Allison’s claim, her comments highlight the strength of ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice in English class. For her, they delimit not only what is *advisable* in terms of curricular choices; they delimit what is *possible*.

Importantly, Gabriella sees the ideology that female students can approach gender-justice issues with more passion as a purposeful good. She remarks, “There’s been a few times where I thought that maybe we focused more on the strong female characters in books or we put more of an emphasis on the power that comes with them. I feel that definitely since we are from an all-girls school they want to incorporate things that will strike close to us so that we’ll maybe empower us to feel more capable in our own lives.” Gabriella seems to agree with Lilah, Allison, Eliza and Katerina that an all-female class would naturally focus on strong, female characters like Hester Prynne; that impression of the natural curriculum at her all-female school connects to an invisible ideology. She adds as well the idea that this focus is meant specifically to help them outside of English class, to “empower” them and help them feel “more capable.” There is something discouraging about the ideology expressed by these young women that their inspiring discussions about female empowerment are most possible in an all-female class or that their counterfactual male classmates would not be similarly inspired (or capable). Unfortunately, the data in this study suggests that ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice invoke dispassionate masculine performances. Lilah, Eliza, Katerina, Allison, and Gabriella believe that

male students would simply see the book a different way. Their beliefs raise difficult questions: In a world ordered by ideologies about gender and gender performances, how can one give students permission to be passionate? Eliza suggests the possibility that young men might be feminists too, but how might one lay the ideological groundwork for that possibility?

For the most part, the students at Samuel understand the gender-justice slant to their English class, which they almost all call feminist, as being ‘for’ them as female students. ‘Female’ becomes, in discussions of gender-justice, the conditionally unmarked referent of ‘gender.’ All of the students quoted above use “we” to describe the feminist focus of the class; it is not ‘student A’ who markedly brings the feminist reading but rather, as Katerina says, “a bunch of us.” This situation is important to flag as well because the female students at coed Fielding, while also often seen as espousing a gender-justice orientation, are also seen as needing to be “aggressive” to do so.

It is striking to see the way in which this ideology circulating in the all-female English class perpetuates ideas about how young men would not be “delighted to talk about” issues of gender justice in English class. These Samuel students have definite, though not exactly equivalent, ideas about what young men will and will not do in class relative to this ideology about gender and literacy. For Allison and Katerina, it seems possible that boys their age might not even be able to grasp feminism or a feminist reading of a text. Perhaps they presume that young men do not have the life experiences, the biology, or the self-interest to cotton to feminism. Still, it is disheartening to hear adolescent girls come to see an issue like the slut-shaming that they discuss in *The Scarlett Letter* as a ‘woman’s issue,’ as if they cannot imagine males in their age group seeing this as a problem that would be important for them. Given the possibility that young men *cannot* understand feminism, Samuel students’ alternative is a

relatively sunny one: perhaps young men are just not that enthusiastic about the perspective. They “would not be...delighted” or have an “opinionated response,” but, in this reading of young men, they are “not saying boys can’t be feminists.” Recall that Dr. Mead came to the same conclusion based on the same ideology in a different context—that her male students would not “get into” or “care about” feminist literature. One might assume too that her guess about her students would apply as well to feminist interpretations of ‘non-feminist’ literature. Do actual male students, then, internalize this same ideology, the one Dr. Mead guesses they do?

The answer to this question is, in context, not an easy one. For one, St. Richards is a Jesuit high school with the concomitant “men for others” credo. The school stops twice a day for prayer and each class begins with a ritual opportunity for students to put forth a name or social cause in their thoughts (e.g. “world peace” or “my parents”). In addition, each of the six students I interviewed participated in some sort of extracurricular service endeavor; three served in a program to be pallbearers in funerals for families who need them, three served as tutors for “less fortunate” children, and two helped organize the school-wide Christmas food drive. Derek, in particular, declared himself to be quite passionate about “human rights” and “environmental issues,” and he had recently returned from a trip to West Virginia to learn about mountaintop mining. Mark, in an explanation about how he tried to be a person who was a listener, ended by saying, “all races too—it doesn’t matter to me.” This background information is relevant because these are not students who would describe themselves as self-interested, and I would not describe them that way either. They would, perhaps, be offended by the idea that the literature they read in English class should focus only on people and issues of some immediate interest to them. While the St. Richards students do not have a gender-justice focus in English class, once the focus turns to reading, writing, and class discussion in English, four of them discuss the

influence of gender-justice or social justice. None mention feminism by name, and I continue to use the term gender-justice to avoid assuming how these young men would react to a named construct like ‘feminism.’

St. Richards students do talk about equality and gender, especially as it relates to first- and second-wave feminism, but women are the unmarked referent in the case of their talk about gender-justice. Paul⁷⁵, for example, does not believe that the all-male make-up of the class has any effect on curriculum. He notes, “This year...we're going to read two books that are specifically about like gender issues or the main characters are women who are like I think treated less equally...because Dr. [Mead] I think wants to expose us to that.” Paul’s use of the phrase “expose us” is important. The books about “gender issues” or “women...treated less equally” are seen as coming from the outside, in this case from their female teacher. Telling too is his equation of “gender issues” with disenfranchised female characters specifically. Again, gender-justice issues become women’s issues. Contrary to Allison’s perception, though, it would be inaccurate to describe Paul as “not delighted” to read these books—he seems fine with this ‘exposure.’ But discussion of the feminist issues in these books does not emerge ‘naturally’ for the boys at St. Richard’s as it does for the girls at Samuel. Instead, like Wendy thinks of seeing the “perspective” of misogynist texts, Paul seems to accept books that highlight gender inequality. When it comes to these books, it is *not* that Paul is unwilling to “see it from a different lens,” but that monocle comes from the outside.

Mark also suggests that their discussion of texts is not influenced by having only males in the class, calling discussion “neutral.” These nods to literacy events as ideologically

⁷⁵ Recall that, in the last chapter, Paul relayed findings from a video he saw in health class that male students do better in math and science because their brains do better spatially while female students do better in English because of a natural facility with language and vocabulary. He said that this video was presented to the class as scientifically accurate (i.e. not to provoke critical discussion).

autonomous and removed from ideologies about gender are in opposition to many female students at Samuel who often felt their class focused on feminism because they were young women. As an example, Mark brings up a time when the class discussed gender-justice: “I remember talking about *The Kite Runner* you know how like back in Afghanistan women are not really, they don't really have a voice in Afghanistan.” He interprets gender, like many of the female students did, as being a question of gender-justice, of women having “a voice.” In other words, a question about gender becomes, for him, a question about women rather than, for example, a question about the masculine performances of the (main) male characters in the novel. The lesson Mark draws from the class discussion of *The Kite Runner* is that “as Americans and also an all-guys school like with no women you understand that women are equal to us in America but not the same in Afghanistan.” He positions himself as American and a student at an all-male school in order to assert that learning about Afghani women is evidence of gender *not* having an effect on class discussions of novels. His class does discuss first-wave feminist issues like equality of expression, albeit from a Western perspective. That said, his suggestion that “women are equal to us in America,” while not at all ill-intentioned, shows a marked contrast to the sorts of conversations about contemporary gender discrimination occurring at Samuel. Like Paul, Mark is not antagonistic toward discussing gender-justice, but that conversation consistently marks gender-justice as outside his own immediate sphere.

Paul’s and Mark’s comments are fairly typical of the students from the all-male class: often avoiding or downplaying issues of gender- or social justice. Joe offers a similar perspective but from one of his literacy interests outside of English class: comic books. He observes:

You could say comic books are more male-dominated based on what female superheroes look like. They always have like extravagant you know whatever. They have costumes and stuff...I don't think when comic books make like an attractive female

superhero, I don't think they're discriminating against women or trying to like show some kind of gender inequality.

Joe engages with a question about gender-justice. He brings up a critical perspective of comics—“you could say comic books are more male-dominated”—and provides costume-based evidence of why that might be true. He goes on, however, to, like Mark, conclude that there is no gender inequality in his proximity, arguing “I don’t think they’re discriminating against women or trying to like show some kind of gender inequality.” It is interesting that Mark and Paul have gender inequality presented to them *in English class* (e.g. “Dr. Mead wants to expose us to that”) and recognize that inequality within the curated novel units. Joe’s encounter with ideologies about gender-justice and literacy, however, comes outside school in comic books, a site where he feels passionately connected to the text. Though he is aware of gender-justice readings of these texts, he does not agree with that perspective—though he is not hostile to the idea. On the whole, Joe, Mark, and Paul show the ability to understand gender-justice perspectives (without ever using the term *feminism*) and agree that these are important topics to be “exposed” to. In that sense, the way that young women at Samuel perceive ideologies about gender and gender-justice to circulate is not observable at St. Richards. “Exposure” is different from the sort of passion seen at Samuel (e.g. Hester as an “amazing matriarchal figure who kind of crushes the patriarchy”). The ideology about gender, literacy, and gender-justice at St. Richard’s, then, seems to be what Dr. Mead describes as her students “not getting into” issues of gender justice. They do “care about” it—when they see it—but the sort of self-interested passion seen at Samuel (e.g. “we’re all advocating for ourselves”) is absent at St. Richards. Gender-justice is not ‘for’ men.

Jamie, in some ways, agrees with Joe, Mark, and Paul, but he goes further by marking as female even the capacity to see feminist interpretations in English class. In his interview, Jaime talks much more specifically and extensively about gender-justice as well as social justice, so I

present his perspective at length. His ideas are sometimes provocative, so it seems important to note, first, that he does not necessarily speak for the other young men in his class, and, second, that he is an adolescent earnestly trying to figure out how gender works in class and life. I appreciate his candor. He begins by saying that there have been books in English class (he cannot remember which ones) that “dealt with women's rights because they wanted us to be exposed to that. They wanted to expose like ‘hey guys like don't forget there's women out there.’” His use of the word “expose,” like Paul’s, signals “women’s rights” as a topic that would not ordinarily be in the orbit of young men in an English class. Again, Jaime is not necessarily opposed to this decision, but he does not seem to find it a particularly compelling topic.

Still, like Joe’s suggestion that critics are mistaken to believe that comic books can be sexist, Jaime thinks some interpretations of class novels go over-the-top in finding discrimination against women. He says:

Sometimes if you see a piece of writing, it could make you think like ‘oh that's like the person like insulting women or maybe insulting men.’ Sometimes I think we overthink that too much. Like sometimes if it's literature and the guy slaps the girl...that might not actually mean that like women are lower than men. It could just mean like oh he just I don't know slapped her. I feel like sometimes with gender issues it can be too sensitive. Not everything has to be taken as like symbolic meaning with gender.

Jaime uses examples specific to English class to downplay the necessity of focusing on issues of gender-justice. His example is perhaps troubling. Jaime’s overall point is that, when it comes to discussing texts in English, “overthinking” often comes back to finding hierarchical inequalities and “symbolic meaning with gender” that are, to him, not actually there. Jaime recalls an intriguing echo of a stereotype that Joanne from coed Fielding High School rejected: that women are better at English because of an overly emotional, enthusiastic reaction to reading literature. She deadpans, “We're like ‘oh yes the blue pen does signify.’” In terms of social justice, Jaime

draws on the same difference-based belief about the gender and emotion (“it can be too sensitive”) to avoid reading gender inequality into a text, even one with explicit violence. Worth noting, though, is the way this denial is couched in terms of a common literacy task in English class—finding symbols in a novel.

Jaime also believes some of the texts they read in his English class, and the way his class discusses the texts, are specifically for male students. He observes:

I mean in an all-guys school, there's going to be some meninist feelings. There has been some stuff that we have read because there's no girls. Cause some stuff it's like gender sensitive and I'm sure it works both ways but like sometimes girls might get offended by certain readings we do. And I'm sure maybe guys get offended by some stuff all girls read maybe. I'm not sure but I think that sometimes in a classroom you can say stuff when there's just guys that you can't if there's girls in there.

Jaime seems to hold a particularly difference-based understanding of English class. Both all-male and all-female classes would probably read and discuss texts in ways that the other would “get offended by.” He again repeats his claim that certain texts and topics in English are “gender sensitive,” so discussing them in the presence of the opposite sex is like lighting a match in a room full of gendered TNT. Jaime attributes attitudes about gender held by students in his school to “meninist feelings,” an apparent tweak on ‘feminist’ (a word no students at St. Richards uttered). By invoking advocacy for men, there is a distorted echo of the Samuel students arriving, for example, at “a really feminist take” on *The Scarlett Letter*. One notable difference, however, is that while Samuel students understood these readings as “advocating for ourselves,” Jaime appears to think of “meninist” readings as a form of negation, of denying some forms of inequality.

Still, Jaime also suggests that he holds back on issues of gender- and social justice in his current, all-male context. He explains quite specifically why *he* does not generally engage with either social justice or gender-justice issues in class:

If other males don't really like to talk about certain racial issues or whatever that kind of makes you not want to talk about it either. You don't want to seem like the only kid. So yeah it definitely has an effect on my learning. I'd say that women will bring sensitive issues into it. So if you're talking about a book about like a racial issue you might be talking about race but then women are more likely to like turn it on and kind of change subjects, like 'oh you're only saying that because you're a man.' So they're more likely to like call you out for being a man than we would for them being a woman. Like abortion or birth-control. A guy may have an opinion but a girl will have a totally totally different view on it because it just affects genders differently. So, I think it's like you're more reserved, you're not as willing to fight a girl on an issue like that.

Jaime's reaction is complex. Unlike his classmates, Jaime intermingles notions of race and gender. He begins with race, suggesting that if his male classmates do not "like to talk about certain racial issues...that kind of makes you not want to talk about it either." It is worth noting that his class self-identifies almost entirely as White. In implicating students' identities in his class, Jaime proposes a sort of conditional silence. He would talk about race if his classmates would. He just does not "want to seem like the only kid." Then, his transition from race to gender—"I'd say that women will bring sensitive issues into it"—is somewhat opaque, partially because he introduces hypothetical female students. It seems most probable that he is saying that even if male students start talking about race, female students will "kind of change subjects" to gender. It also seems possible, though, that Jaime sees female students wrongly, to him, surfacing issues of gender within conversations about race ("you might be talking about race but then women are...like 'oh you're only saying that because you're a man'"). Regardless of Jaime's exact transitional meaning, he clearly suggests, in talking about race, that one reason for his silence would be a performance-based one of not wanting "to seem like the only kid," but that, if

anything, discussions about gender-justice are marked as ‘not for him’ even more than discussions about racial-justice.

For Jaime, just like a Mars and Venus book might assume, male and female students will always miscommunicate because gender means difference. On important issues of gender-justice like “abortion or “birth-control,” Jaime believes that they “affect genders differently” and for this reason, believes “it’s like you’re more reserved.” That sense of reserve is an apt phrasing of what Dr. Mead calls “not getting into” feminist tests, an ideology about gender, literacy, and gender-justice that pervades the students’ perspectives about young men in all three classrooms. His reaction, however, goes further in explaining how this ideology affects him in class. First, he directly links this ideology of reserve to a snag in his own learning experience (“it definitely has an effect on my learning”). He does not elaborate further, but his comment is intriguing: how does Jaime see an implied prohibition against discussing “racial issues” as affecting his learning? What parts of his learning? Does it work in the same way for gender? Second, he offers a hypothetical female classmate/interlocutor with whom he can imagine a conversation. She is antagonistic (“more likely to call you out”) and likely to use his identity against him (“you’re only saying that because you’re a man”). In a sense, he seems defeated by a belief in gender difference: “a girl will have a totally totally different view on it because it just affects genders differently.”

Jaime’s comments unpack some of the feelings that might lurk behind dispassion, behind reserve, behind silence. He is frank in explaining how gender and race factor into these feelings at school. He observes, “A lot of the people in our English classes are usually like White males so when they hear or see something saying like ‘oh like White men are like oppressing,’ they don’t really like that maybe...They dislike I guess the racist aspect of things, prejudice.” Perhaps

one of the impulses cueing dispassion, or Dr. Mead's reading that her students "don't get into" feminism, is fear. Jaime fears being called out as "oppressing" anyone. He fears being called a racist. He imagines that he and his male classmates will not "really like that." These fears perhaps explain Jaime's note about following defensive "meninist feelings" and the unwillingness to read too much into a piece of literature. What might he see if he looks too hard? Fear is harmful when it makes people insular and defensive, but I would argue that, when confronted, it has the potential to instead make people generous and thoughtful.

Jaime knows that his closed-off position relative to the circulating ideology about gender and gender-justice is of no educational or personal benefit to him. When he says that not talking about "sensitive issues" "has an effect on [his] education," he frets that the ideology denies him access to honest conversations, and, given his comments here, he seems to want to take part in conversations like these even as he fears being offensive to others or offended himself in class. At the same time as Jaime explains his reserve, he shows how unreserved he can be. So, we might ask ourselves as teachers, how can we invite students like Jaime into conversations about gender- and social justice without risking a still-dominant, hegemonic, privileged perspective from dominating our classrooms? How can we turn defensiveness into openness, fear into curiosity? How can we make young men—and young women—"delighted" to passionately engage with issues of gender-justice? These questions are challenging, but understanding the ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice in different contexts provide a starting place for that work, for meeting students where they are.

"Oh Yeah, It's Bad, Okay": Gender-Justice in a Coed English Class

Students at St. Richards and Samuel highlighted similar ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice, but they also did not draw their observations from actual classroom

interactions of male *and* female students. When Allison imagines “teenage guys would probably not be delighted to talk about...the realities of the world of like inequality” and Jaime worries about hypothetical female classmates will “call him out for being a man,” they speculate. This dissertation’s study design—looking for ideological patterns across contents—allows for an investigation of ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice in a coed setting as well. How, if at all, do stances like dispassion and exposure occur in a coed setting? Are women still the unmarked referent of gender when it comes to gender-justice?

While I observed the coed English class for about 10 weeks, they spent six of those in a unit on *Much Ado about Nothing* (and most of the rest in a unit on *Beowulf*). I conducted all 17 interviews for that class toward the end of the *Much Ado* unit. As one might imagine, students fairly frequently referred to *Much Ado* class sessions when I pushed them for examples during certain moments of the interview. I will not go too far into the details of these class sessions, but, generally speaking, they were structured around answering plot-based questions that students prepared for homework, reading aloud in class, stopping for moments of clarification, and having whole-class discussions based on teacher-prepared questions. They also watched film clips and dramatically performed key parts of the play. My observation notes show that the teacher frequently drew attention to moments where social hierarchies and inequalities presented themselves. For example, she explained organizations based on military rank (e.g. many of the personae dramatis had recently returned from war) and socioeconomic status (e.g. the Dogberry-led police force vs. the nobles they protect). Ms. Liu also frequently brought up issues of gender inequality and dominance—given Beatrice and her “O God, that I were a man! / I would eat his heart in the market-place” comment to Benedick, she could hardly avoid it. To read and discuss

the play in this particular classroom was to engage with issues of gender and inequality. Student interviews revealed, however, that not all student engagement took on the same ardor.

As this chapter and dissertation suggests, gender matters to students in consistently patterned ways, but the class at Fielding is a reminder that the patterns depend on context. I argue in this section that the ideology of male dispassion/exposure and female engagement with issues of gender-justice in English to which the students in the single-gender classes testified also exists in the coed English class at Fielding. Issues of gender-justice that the class discussed in *Much Ado* were perceived to be for female students. Even so, the context of this coed class affected how the ideology circulated. At St. Richards, the notion of exposure without “getting into” what were seen as women’s gender-justice issues held consistent sway, and, at Samuel, the students diligently pursued feminist readings of texts. At Fielding, though, some male students complemented dispassion for gender-justice with empathy for their female classmates’ perspectives, and some female students risked becoming marked as aggressive for being too passionate about issues of gender-justice. These examples, performative variations around circulating ideologies, suggest that surveying the ideological nuances of a given class must play heavily into any pedagogical or curricular intervention.

Before getting into the students’ interviews, it helps to spend some space exploring how interview comments can sit alongside specific classroom interactions. Take, for example, D’Brickshaw thinking about a specific in-class discussion. He explains why he likes it when people joke around in his English class. He says, “I guess it’s just like it takes a serious point in the book and makes it a little lighter on everyone. Like when we’re talking about Hero being a stale in *Much Ado About Nothing*, it’s funny for everyone cause—I don’t really know why it’s funny. It’s just like everyone laughs at it, you know bringing it up again in the next conversation

if we're talking about she's a stale, everyone starts laughing.” There are other reactions to the class’s discussion of Hero (Billie, for example, has quite a different take). For now, suffice it to say, the class defines ‘stale’ as ‘whore’ during a discussion of Don John and Borachio’s Act II scheming to ruin Hero’s reputation, and this nominal switch becomes a running joke in the class. D’Brickshaw gives a clear-eyed description of why: “it takes a serious point in the book and makes it a little lighter on everyone.” On a plot level, the “serious point” is that Shakespeare’s play sees Hero falsely accused of unfaithfulness, publicly humiliated by her fiancé at her wedding, disowned by her father, and nearly dying from shame.⁷⁶ Dissecting humor is difficult (“I don’t really know why it’s funny”), but my weeks of observation in the class allow me to confirm that, yes, ‘stale’ consistently got laughs. Read generously, calling Hero a ‘stale’ allows Shakespearean language to carry some of the water for adolescents coming to terms with Hero’s abuse. After all, students are talking about brutal misogyny when they are discussing *Much Ado*. D’Brickshaw knows that this is “a serious point in the book,” so one can infer that he neither ignores the brutality nor sees Hero’s treatment as anything less than horrifying. He prefers displacement of that discomfort, however, into laughter. Hence, ‘stale’ becomes a class joke, and D’Brickshaw avoids talking explicitly about the mistreatment of Hero.

D’Brickshaw’s explanation is implicit evidence that some students avoid discussions about gender-justice. Billie, a female student in the class, more explicitly suggests that some students avoid these discussions, and that these students are predominantly male. She sees the discussion about Hero in class as gender-divided in a way that D’Brickshaw does not when he says “it’s funny for everyone.” She says, “Sometimes the girls are more open to social justice issues and how it could affect them like feminist issues and equality. Whereas the guys don't

⁷⁶ Since this is a comedy, she is eventually redeemed in the fifth act by a fake funeral and married to her former persecutor.

actually focus in on feminist issues or equality. Like in *Much Ado about Nothing* there's lots of debate going on about how Claudio's a jerk and the guys aren't focusing as much right now on why this is so bad. They're just saying 'oh yeah, it's bad, okay.'" In a way, Billie accesses the same ideology about gender, literacy, and social justice that circulated at Samuel and St. Richard's: males do not "get into" gender-justice issues in English class and females do, a perception with implications outside school, as discussed in the next chapter. Billie twice refers to her male classmates' lack of focus. She sees it as part of a general trend differentiating the sexes as well as in a specific instance of class discussion about Claudio's misogyny and "why this is so bad." Billie is not suggesting, exactly, that young men do not agree with some basic perspectives in line with social justice and feminism.⁷⁷ Their reaction is better understood, to her, as a lack of engagement, a dispassion eloquently captured in Billie's deadpan voicing of male students' reaction to Hero's plight: "oh yeah, it's bad, okay." Read this way, D'Brickshaw's perception that many of his classmates use laughter at "serious" moments as a way to "make it a little lighter on everyone" is also a way to avoid "focusing" on the misogyny that Hero's treatment exemplifies. D'Brickshaw's explains where the laughter comes from, and Billie clarifies how it is read.

A number of other students point to the circulating ideology about gender, literacy, and (dis)passion for gender-justice. For some, male students' reticence to speak up about gender makes sense in a context of gender difference where the struggles of women only concern women. Sofia explains what she sees as a personal stake that female students have concerning

⁷⁷ When Billie says her female classmates are "more open to social justice issues and how it could affect them like feminist issues and equality," she seems to organize feminism and equality under the broader heading of "social justice issues." That said, her comments about her male classmates pertain more centrally to gender than to social justice more broadly. For example, she repeats "feminism and equality" when discussing males' reactions and provides a textual example pertaining centrally to gender.

gender inequalities: “I think especially with *Much Ado about Nothing*, there's a lot of gender, like women are being told to marry this person. So I think that girls maybe take it more personally, like 'I can't believe that women are being forced to you know marry men.' So there's definitely that a little, but there's a little bit more maybe anger in that.” She believes that female students, in discussions about “gender” in English class, “take it more personally” and with “more maybe anger.” Though Sofia does not name male students, her comparative statements make the differential implication clear.

Because women lurk, in the context of gender-justice, as the unmarked referent of gender, a “gender” issue like forced marriage is naturalized as “more” of an issue for female students. To be sure, no one doubts that Hero is mistreated; first-wave feminist equality narratives are accepted in this class. But the difference between reacting with “anger” or “personally” and reacting with laughter or “oh yeah, it’s bad, okay” is a stark one. The distinction illustrates the gendered remove at which this ideology about literacy and gender-justice places male students. They can of course call Hero’s treatment unfair or wrong, but it would not be thought of as affecting them personally whereas, per Sofia, female students can sometimes be moved to anger. Perhaps Jaime’s belief “when they hear or see something saying like ‘oh like White men are like oppressing,’ they don't really like that maybe” operates as a discomfiting silencer at Fielding as well. Also, as detailed in the last chapter, males at Fielding are often seen as less emotional, performers of Stan’s “manly silence,” and females are, per Joanne, seen as more emotional (to their hindrance and benefit). The reaction to conversations about gender-justice might draw on this as well.

Sofia’s logic that female students might be more moved to personal reaction by injustices to fictional female characters seems driven by what she sees as a predictable response. When I

asked her if students' gendered stances to gender-justice affected what *she* did or thought in class, she explained, "A little bit. I mean I think it bothers me to think that if I had been in that time period I would have been forced to marry someone because I was a girl. And so I think that guys would just have a harder time relating to that because it was really more women specific." In contrast to Billie and her somewhat damning "oh yeah, it's bad, okay," Sofia has a hard time blaming her male classmates for being dispassionate on issues that are more "women specific." One might, of course, rightly say responses to instances and systems of inequality should never be isolated to the group being discriminated against, but Sofia's empathy for her male classmates' lack of perspective shows the power of the ideology that women must/should care more about "women-specific" gender-justice issues. Their dispassion is so normalized for Sofia that it does not occur to her to question its appropriateness.

The implicit assumption is that equal rights are not an issue for the dominant group. Greta connects the ideology about gender-justice to the ideology about gender and enthusiasm in English class. She explains, "Well I think females generally care more about just like things in general [in English class]. I feel like in English it's a lot easier to get on like social topics. And not that men don't care about social topics cause like they definitely do. But I think that for some of the topics they're topics that like females care more about. Whereas men like don't really care about or just they're just more interested in learning about them." She identifies English class as a site where the discussion of "social topics" is more likely; she explains in a quote later in this chapter that "gender" and "power" are some of the most common "themes" in class. Female students' enthusiasm for English class generally correlates to their "caring about" gender- and social justice in the context of their English class. In addition, she tiptoes in an intriguing way around the way male students orient themselves to these conversations. Grace says both that they

“definitely do” care about social topics but when it comes to “some of the topics” that “they don’t really care or they’re just more interested in learning about them.” The idea of “learning about them” aligns with Paul from St. Richards who believes his teacher wants to “expose” him to issues of gender-justice. The sense of, at best, somewhat anodyne male interest makes sense for Greta in the same way that it does for Sofia, for these are “topics that like female students care more about.” Again, the way that gender-justice issues become “woman-specific” is so naturalized through this ideology that Sofia and Greta hardly blink at the dispassionate performance of their male classmates.

Most, but not all, of the students at Fielding who attempt to explain the terrain of their English class relative to gender- and social justice are female students. Since I did not ask specifically about these issues in the interviews, and dispassion reigns for male students, it might not be something they would bring up. But Jared does. Like Sofia, Greta, and Billie, Jared sees female students’ more engaged performance in English class generally as part of their personal interest in the kinds of topics discussed. He says,

I feel like in this class discussions girls have way--they react a lot larger to things that happen. Like I'm just kinda like 'oh wow' but they have really strong emotions with what goes on with like the connotations that are what's said and stuff. Which makes sense. So like *Much Ado About Nothing*, the way that Hero's treated, I know that there's like a lot better reaction, like a lot higher reaction from the females but that also makes sense because it's a female being targeted. So in a way they feel affected...It's not them being targeted, Hero is, but they feel it. So maybe that's what it is.

Jared, like his classmates, draws on the circulating ideology about gender, literacy, and gender-justice to explain the differential way in which students discuss the topic. He constantly compares the reaction of female students to that of male students (“react a lot larger,” “a lot better reaction,” “a lot higher reaction”). For Jared, his initial reaction is a surprised “oh wow,” apparently dismissing their reaction as overly emotional and embracing a distance from intense

discussions in class. He moves on, however, to conclude that this “makes sense.” One of the hallmarks of an ideology is the common sense of everyday belief, and, in this case, the more potent female reaction “makes sense because it’s a female being targeted.” His comment clearly echoes Sofia’s notion that females “take it more personally” than males when sexism arises in a text. The “sense” that this makes to Jared and Sofia clearly demonstrates the ideology that male students normally take a dispassionate stance toward issues of gender equality.

That said, his use of the ideology to make sense of the *Much Ado* discussion in class simultaneously denies an engaged reaction to himself and to his male classmates. In one sense, he does use the ideology to marshal empathy for his (female) classmates. He understands that “they feel it” when Hero is abused. The progression of Jared’s thinking is striking as he moves from “oh wow” to an empathetic “they feel it” in the span of four sentences. He no longer dismisses an emotional response, and really seems to consider their pain justified. Still, that differential, gender-based reasoning denies a passionate response to males when they are not “targeted.” In Dr. Mead’s clear-eyed prediction, the males “would not get into it.” To be clear, in hearing about how students’ approached gender-justice in *Much Ado*, I offer no definite claims about how these male students would react to issues of, for example, race or sexuality. What I suggest, however, is that, for this coed English class, an ideology about gender, literacy, and gender-justice often organizes male students’ literacy work into a pattern of dispassion about what they think of as issues for women.

Female students, of course, must also orient themselves to this ideology, and the female students at Fielding risked moving from naturalized and unmarked to aggressive and marked—a gender pattern not extant at Samuel. The participants from Samuel aligned with an explicitly feminist interpretation of literature. Nowhere in the interviews did a student name a classmate

who was inordinately interested in feminism or a time in class when a particular gender-based reading went too far. At Fielding, however, the possibility arose that female students could be labeled as too aggressive in the way they took up gender-justice topics in class. For example, discussions about forced marriage “bothered” Sofia, but she normalized her own reaction (and others’) as “woman-specific.” Marie, however, draws a distinction between herself and another female student, Wanda. Her description of Wanda’s reaction to *Much Ado* is brief and cause-effect focused: “[Wanda] she gets like...she's really into like feminism and that, so she gets into how horrible Claudio is.” In a basic sense, Marie affirms the ideology that female students are likely to engage with gender-justice (here, feminism specifically); in this instance, identifying as female seems an identity-based pre-requisite for “getting into” the misogyny of the play. Wanda’s “getting into” recalls Sofia’s belief that female students “take it more personally.” For Marie, Wanda’s passion for this reading of the play and her demonstrativeness in discussion connects to her performance as a feminist.

For female students at Fielding, though, the engagement with feminism that Samuel students show, and St. Richard’s students predict, is a tricky proposition. Marie takes a stance defined by partial opposition to Wanda’s. Marie does not identify as being “into feminism,” so, per the causative structure of her statement about Wanda, she would not feel the need to “get into how horrible Claudio is.” Based on observation notes, I can say that Marie was far less vocal about Claudio’s caddish behavior than some of her female classmates. This is not to say that Marie disapproved, necessarily, of how Wanda reacts to the hierarchies of the play, but Marie does single her out. Compared to the sort of collective feminist approach at Samuel, a description of a female at Fielding as being “really into...feminism,” complicates the ideology the female students would rightly be engaged with issues of gender-justice in English class. A conventional

masculine performance in light of the ideology would be to remain dispassionate toward issues of gender-justice in English class—getting into it, as Dr. Mead suggests, would be marked as not normative. Per Sofia, some affinity for the topic might be expected or normal for female students, but Marie’s example of someone she sees as noticeably engaged with feminism raises the possibility of increased performative risks for female students. For D’Brickshaw, who valued laughter at “serious” moments, one wonders how he would interpret a female student unwilling to chuckle at sexism.

Even Billie, who is nonplussed by her male classmates’ seeming lack of interest in feminism, cites an example of someone she views as ‘too’ feminist, a male English teacher (not hers) at Fielding who is also her tennis coach. Billie observes:

[He’s] very feminist and it kind of gets a little bit obtrusive and it's kind of scary at some points where he's like berating guys and like becoming like this super-feminist. It's very intimidating...It makes me scared of him a little bit...He has these opinions that are so loud and like forced upon everyone that it's just I feel like I have to listen or like something bad will like happen. Like he'll be like 'oh no you're a horrible student now. I'm going to fail you now.'

Some of the circumstantial details are different, of course, than previous examples. The person Billie refers to as “super-feminist” is not a person from the class in this study. He is also a teacher, not a student. His status is especially noticeable when Billie references a tangible punishment for being disinterested in, or critical of, gender-justice: grades. She suggests that people “have to listen” or he will “fail you.” It is unclear who the “you” is, but Billie draws on the broad ideology that male students are less likely to be engaged (“he’s like berating *guys*”) while also positioning herself as someone who sees “feminism” as having the potential to go too far, to be aggressive. In addition to using “very” and “super” to describe his brand of feminism, she calls him “obtrusive,” “intimidating,” and “loud” with his beliefs “forced upon everyone” which makes her “scared of him a little bit.” Billie does not identify herself as a feminist during

her interview or establish an explicit personal affinity for gender- or social justice, but it seems clear that she is not someone who would say “oh yeah, it’s bad, okay.” In a way, this makes her own oppositional stance toward this “very feminist” English teacher remarkable.

There seem to be, then, at least two orientations toward gender-justice or feminism available for those who would identify as engaged in the topic: a normative stance where female students “take it more personally” and a marked stance where students are too devoted to feminism.⁷⁸ While Billie and Marie suggest this noticeable feminism is true of other people, Greta marks herself as aggressive. She believes, like others, that gender-justice is a common topic in English class (“it’s gender, power, and something else are always the first three themes that are brought up”) and that female students care more about these themes (“females just definitely care probably more about gender generally than men do”). Greta, however, also made a distinction between students in class discussions who were more “respectful responders” and those who “blurted out.” Placing herself into both categories, she explained that when it came to “a lot of social topics like race and like gay marriage and like sexism like stuff like that,” she tended to be someone who was less respectful. She continues, “If I’m more passionate about the topic, then I probably won’t be as respectful cause I’ll probably be really like aggressive about it. And if it’s something that I feel like someone’s being really ignorant about then I probably won’t have any tolerance for stupid things that might come out of someone’s mouth.” Greta’s being “aggressive” about issues of gender-, sexual, and racial justice connects to being “passionate” and less than “respectful.”⁷⁹ In doing so, she explicitly orients herself to a circulating ideology

⁷⁸ Though I did not see an example of such a male student in this study, I would guess that, like Billie’s English teacher, young men might be marked as aggressively feminist as well. I would also hypothesize, however, that the bar for markedness would be lower for male students, perhaps placed at anything more than dispassion/exposure.

⁷⁹ Her notion of respect is probably also related to gendered notions of politeness, perhaps another way in which female students might become marked as aggressive.

about gender and gender-justice hinted at by Marie and Billie, that female students can be marked as aggressively feminist. This notion, of course, seems problematic, especially when compared to the all-female Samuel students' relatively untroubled engagement with feminism. At Fielding, the normative belief is that some sympathy with gender inequality is natural, but that there is such a thing as going too far. Confident, self-aware students like Greta happily take a marked stance of aggressiveness, but one wonders how this ideology plays a part in silencing other female students.

In order to make more concrete the possible effects of this ideology on male and female students, I present an example based on an in-class discussion of *Much Ado* and one student's (Gene) post-hoc interpretation of the exchange. The students involved in the discussion are Wanda and Greta. Remember that Greta, in her interview, identifies herself as "passionate" and "aggressive" about issues of gender-justice, and Marie identifies Wanda as "really into feminism." I am not suggesting that the discourse below proves Greta's or Marie's assertions, but it is an instance of a notably visceral in-class reaction to misogyny in the text. In the example, the class discusses whether, given Claudio's brutal treatment of Hero when he thought she had slept with someone else, he ever really loved her at all. The teacher raises the question near the end of the unit, by which time the two young lovers have reunited.⁸⁰

Wanda: Um, okay, Greta earlier said that Claudio thinks, uh he still thinks that he's in love with Hero {Mm hm} but I don't think that he thinks that he's in love with her, I think that he's just a <Hx> totally huge hypocrite jerk {Jerkface} jerkface person, he's just like, oh my goodness, all he cares about is him- is himself like, at first he's like, oh Hero's like really pretty I kinda wanna get in her pants I'm gonna marry her @ and then, then he's oh, she's a whore, man [snaps] she got away from me I'm just gonna go shame her now {Mm hm} it's like, you know all this felt for her before is just like, you know, who cares anymore she's just a whore, and then, you know, she's dead and he's like eh, whatever, (no loss) I can find another person to fuck. And then-

Teacher: Whoa, whoa @@ Yeah, I'm just gonna pull the cord on that rant, thank you.

⁸⁰ In the transcription below, the curly brackets indicate the teacher back channeling during Wanda's comments, the <Hx> is an exhale, and the @ is laughter.

Wanda: NO

Greta: Well I think, in rebuttal I think that um, I think he thinks that he loves her, like I honestly think that he thinks that he's in love with her, but I think that like, like like I agree with you, like he is like a jerkface and he like only cares about his honor but I think that he like, he himself like legitimately thinks that he like loves this girl.

While this class maintained a fairly informal atmosphere, profanity was uncommon; I never heard another “fuck” in the classroom. Wanda responds with singular passion to the suggestion that love somehow excuses Claudio’s actions. Her language escalates from an exhaled put-down (“huge hypocrite jerk”) to an expression of exasperation (“oh my goodness”). She then moves to voicing a hyper-misogynistic Claudio with semi-taboo sexual language (“get in her pants”), even more taboo language (“she’s a whore” where ‘whore’ replaces the contextually defused ‘stale’). Then, she gives her final impersonation of Claudio’s attitude: “I can find another person to fuck”. At this point, the class explodes into a mixture of laughter and murmurs, and the teacher “pulls the cord on that rant.”

A couple aspects of Wanda’s commentary reflect the circulating ideology about gender and gender-justice in her English class. First, she exemplifies a passion for gender-justice that her classmates suggest is the domain of female students. Wanda’s reaction makes sense in the context of Jared’s belief that female students “react a lot larger when it’s a female being targeted” or Sofia’s point that female students “take it more personally.” As such, the ideology seems to be operating just as the students have described it. Second, the somewhat limited reaction to Wanda is perhaps the more potent example of the ideology’s implicit pull. The teacher, in response to cursing, stops Wanda with a “whoa, whoa,” laughs, and ends “the rant.” Wanda responds with a loud but good-natured “NO,” and Greta, to whom Wanda was initially responding picks up the conversation with structured debate language (“Well, I think, in rebuttal...”). The class clearly notes the taboo language as well as the strongly argued position

with laughter, oohs, and ahhs, but I observed no official or unofficial consequences. The teacher does not bring regulatory power (other than stopping the turn at talk), and Greta does not bring conversational consequence as she continues the discussion fairly unperturbed. In fact, after the surprised reaction at the end of Wanda's turn, the class continues the conversation somewhat normally for 10 minutes. Wanda even takes another couple turns.

One might ask, though, if her performance of femininity relative to the ideology is judged as normative (e.g. female students "care more about sexism") or marked (e.g. "gets a little bit obtrusive and it's kind of scary")? I would suggest that the answer to this question depends on who one asks, and that uncertain reception further complicates female students' performances. In one way, Wanda remains in the field of possible feminine performance relative to this topic because she does not transgress the overall ideology that only female students are passionate about gender-justice in English class. Even a common stereotype (though not one I heard from students in this class) about males using more taboo language is repaired by its location within a gender-justice topic about which Wanda rightly performs passionately.

Still, even if female students are the unmarked referent for gender and gender-justice, the reaction to Wanda shows that female students can still perform in ways that are marked. Marie names Wanda as being really "into feminism," and Gene, a male student in the class, notes Wanda's language as an example of a performance unavailable to many. Unprompted, he brings up Wanda's comment about Claudio and Hero in our interview a few days later. To describe how he saw gender patterns working (or not) in class, he said, "I guess different ideas are sometimes interpreted differently based on which gender they originated. Like if a male student had said what Wanda said, it would have been received differently, like yeah, I guess swearing in class is different for males and females." He continued by explaining if a male student had said what

Wanda did “it would have been more like instead of like '[gasp] Wanda!', it would have been like 'that's really wrong, you're kind of a bad person for saying that. Shame on you.'” In one sense, Gene makes a limited comment about who has tacit approval to swear in class and what they can swear about. In a broader sense, however, he voices the notion that ideologies about gender can cause “different ideas” to be “interpreted differently.” What Gene seems to refer to by bringing up taboo language is the passion Wanda shows in condemning Claudio and how that would be “received differently” if that same “fuck” came from him. Using Wanda’s language himself, in Gene’s view, would be transgressive, not simply punishable but seen by his class as “wrong” and making him “kind of a bad person.” Gene perceives himself as not having access, in a performance of his gender, to that kind of passion. What he thinks of Wanda using the language is tough to parse. Perhaps he uses his comment about gender and inequivalent language to imply that he thinks Wanda’s stance could be marked as aggressive and “wrong.” But perhaps not. What is clear is that Gene reacted in the moment in the way that he could, with dispassion—though he brought the moment up with me in the interview, he did not make a single comment in class discussion that day.

On Ideologies about Gender-Justice and Meta-Conversations about Gender as a ‘Solution’

I conclude this chapter by sketching a question picked up in the implications chapter of this dissertation: How does this particular ideology about gender, literacy, and gender-justice in English class, and the varying patterns of its manifestations, complicate efforts to use meta-conversations about gender as a possible ‘solution’ to both male underachievement in literacy and the nefarious influence of hegemonic masculinity? Recommending such meta-conversations about gender are not an uncommon recommendation in the difference-based and (pro)feminist literature about young men’s literacy. Martino & Kehler (2007a), for example, argue that

reforming the approach to young men’s literacy in English class is a matter of exchanging a gender-difference approach for one that is critical of that assumed difference. In their words, they seek to “challenge” rather than “recuperate” “gender binaries.” As I argued in chapter 2 of this dissertation, this move to critical engagement is a crucial turn, especially when accompanied by the empirical research for which Martino & Kehler call. The logic appears sound. Since English classes presumably discuss gender and power in literature—and my participants confirm this—it sounds sensible to use these classes as a place to discuss gender construction and performance in the lives of students just as they do for the characters in *Much Ado about Nothing*. To be clear, I am not suggesting that such conversations are a bad idea; in fact, they seem all the more important. The findings in this chapter, though, indicate that discussions about gender in English class often become perceived as ‘for’ female students.⁸¹ This ideology, if it circulates in a given context, becomes a complicating factor around which an intervention will need to navigate.

Both difference-driven and (pro)feminist authors often recommend a critical approach to gender as a way to better serve all students in English class. The Ontario Ministry for Education’s *Me Read? No Way!* includes a section about fostering critical literacy in young men in which they encourage questions like “How are males and females represented in this text?” and “Does anyone or any one group benefit from this text? If so, who?” (33). In addition, *Me Read? No Way!* includes a section on “Exploring Masculinity” and recommendations meant to “help students learn to spot and challenge stereotypes” (35). Again, I am not suggesting that these questions might not be beneficial; Greta says that her class asks questions about “gender”

⁸¹ I have limited evidence for how the discussion of other justice-based topics would interact with work on gender-justice specifically. A few students (e.g. Jaime and Billie) seem to imply that even broader notions of ‘social’ justice would follow similar gender patterns, but that could very well be complicated with further, specific inquiry into justice topics other than gender. I would also speculate that the relative homogeneity (e.g. racial and socioeconomic) of my participants might have played a role in the answers about social justice. Put simply, this would be a promising area for further research.

and “power” with regularity. Within a classroom context, however, in which a circulating ideology about gender, literacy, and gender-justice encourages dispassionate male responses as well as the potential that female students could be considered “aggressive,” these recommendations seem somewhat naïve. Yes, the class might agree that Claudio benefits from his ability to cast Hero aside and then take her back, but what prevents them from inertly concluding “oh yeah, it’s bad, okay”?

(Pro)feminist authors also argue that these cursory critiques of gender in English class are not sufficient to help young men or young women. Martino & Kehler (2007a) note that the *Me Read? No Way!* recommendations about critical literacy are sourced to texts with feminist perspectives (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997) but argue that, in the context of gender-difference in the governmental document, “such conceptualizations of critical literacy are discordant with the pedagogical strategies that are advocated throughout the entire document, which incite teachers to take gender differences into account by catering for boys’ particular learning styles and needs in the literacy classroom” (421). Thus, they suggest that even if one could move beyond male students’ initial dispassion, following recommendations about critical literacy and meta-conversations about gender would lead to a situation in which preexisting gender binaries still hold sway.

(Pro)feminists offer their own solutions to the issue of young men’s literacy that draw on conversations about gender in class. Martino & Kehler engage, for example, Alloway et. al.’s (2002) ideas “to improve boys’ engagement with literacy in schools” (419). One such focus is on an analytic framework in which young men develop “a repertoire for representing the self” which “involves understanding in which boys learn to represent themselves in school as gendered subjects and how this impacts on their engagement with literacy” (419). In addition,

Rowan et. al. (2002) call for “gender mapping” in which they argue: “To effect any kind of challenge to the way literacy, masculinity, and schooling are conceptualized, teachers and students alike need to develop a clear understanding of how gender norms are constructed and how they impact upon individual’s lives” (189). They also detail a strategy called “countering gender narratives” in which they suggest, “Attempts to engage boys in literacy classrooms are fundamentally about getting kids to ‘buy’ different stories about masculinity... These alternative stories can be described as ‘counternarratives’” (190). These ideas certainly do not represent the universe of (pro)feminist recommendations, and none of these scholars believe that the institution of their practices will be somehow easy—quite the opposite. Still, in their attempts to relate literacy to “gendered subjects,” “gender norms,” and “stories of masculinity,” it seems clear that explicit grappling with gender is part of their program.

While I endorse parts of this program in chapter 6, circulating ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice complicate matters for male *and female* students. In the three English classes studied, gender quickly became associated with women’s issues and then with female students. One can imagine, then, that taking up the topic of “gendered subjects” or “gender norms” runs the risk of becoming an English class activity for the group of female students who can do so in an unmarked way. Having these meta-conversations about gender need to navigate contextual stances like Jaime’s fear (“when [his St. Richards classmates] hear or see something saying like ‘oh like White men are like oppressing,’ they don't really like that maybe”), Jared’s difference-based empathy (“a lot higher reaction from the females but that also makes sense because it's a female being targeted”), and Wanda’s possibly marked aggressiveness (“really into feminism”). In this way, getting a grasp of contextual ideologies about gender, literacy, and gender-justice in particular will prove essential for instituting any gender-based pedagogical or

curricular reform. “Challenging gender binaries” is not a mistake, but *how and when* one challenges is of crucial importance.

Chapter 6: “Why Don’t You Act Like This?”: The Implications of Meta-Analytic Talk about Gender and ELA Literacy

This dissertation repeatedly confronts an apparent paradox about identity—that group identity matters *and* that individuals act in idiosyncratic ways. Each notion, taken separately, can seem a coherent way to think about gender and literacy in English classrooms: Gender matters *or* it does not. This study shows, however, that this opposition is a false one. I saw almost limitless variation in the way students navigated ideologies about gender and identity in the classroom. Even though these ideologies rely on assumptions about stable identity categories, students often used categories and ideologies as flexible resources rather than mandated regimens. As I noted in chapter 1, ideologies about gender function as “stories,” just like Cameron’s myths of Mars and Venus. Students in this study frequently told similar stories. Some rejected one story to tell another. But each individual’s narration was decidedly original. The right question, then, is not *if* gender matters in ELA classrooms but rather *how* it matters, with the understanding that students’ and teachers’ beliefs about the *how*, though patterned, will be various.

These new sorts of questions are timely as the political climate around education suggests a resurgence of panic about young men and literacy. Weaver-Hightower (2009) hypothesizes conditions that could signal rising concern about young men’s education in the United States. The list is just as, if not more, relevant in 2017 as it was in 2009. The list includes conservative cultural politics critical of feminism and other equity-based movements, decreased governmental support for systems promoting and protecting the gains of women, and on-going media attention to the putative problems of young men (21-23). These glimpses of broader cultural conversations

about young men, even if they do not always appear to deal directly with literacy or English class, should be motivating to English teachers who interact daily with many of the deficit-driven stereotypes about young men and literacy but have no desire to turn back the cultural clock. There is, as of early 2017, a relative lull in the scholarly conversation about young men and literacy, and I argue that this is an ideal time to reset the terms of the conversation.

One way the results of this dissertation contribute to the scholarly discourse is by attending to students' rich descriptions of the way ideologies about gender and literacy became salient to their perspectives and practices in English class. The key elisions of media and scholarship about young men and literacy—a lack of criticalness about gender and/or students' lived experiences—can be seen as methodological problems (e.g. difference-driven scholars' tendency to not include female students or to assume the salience of gender) that lead to description problems (e.g. difference-based pedagogical recommendations). The participants in this study showed not only that students are quite willing to talk about when and how gender is salient to them in English class but also that their navigation of ideologies is complex. Joanne, for example, worries about the ideology that female students are seen as being more successful in English class because they are more emotional (“oh yes, the blue pen does signify”). She both ‘benefits’ from the ideology—she views herself as an excellent, symbol-interpreting English student—and sees its limitations as a potentially backhanded compliment. One implication of all this adolescent acuity, then, is the affordance of meta-analytic work on gender and literacy with students rather than top-down curriculum decisions (e.g. more or less work with literary symbols).

This critical meta-analytic work with gender and literacy will be more revelatory for students when driven by an ideological theorization of literacy that calls attention to circulating

ideologies about gender and literacy and disrupts the apparent neutrality of ELA literacy events. Drawing on Street's theoretical insight that literacy is *always* ideological, I suggest that this disruption simultaneously helps students concretize how stories about gender and literacy affect them in class *and* play an agentive role in determining the story they want to tell about themselves. I have argued that both difference-driven and (pro)feminist scholars often rely on autonomous assumptions about literacy—as do students. One of the most intriguing themes in chapters 4 and 5 is the way students interpret specific ELA literacy events (e.g. reading a Shakespeare play) as gender-neutral even though nearly all students also believe that female students consistently outperform their male classmates when the events are recast more capaciously as literacy practices (e.g. the feminist perspective needed to engage with Hero's mistreatment in *Much Ado*). Though difference-based scholarship disrupts gender-neutrality by conflating literacy events and practices, their disruption fails to allow agency for students in resisting simple notions of gender difference. Critical meta-analysis, however, is a way of using students' own orientations to ideologies about gender and literacy practices as a way to disrupt the neutrality of literacy events and to help them use the ideologies as resources for their own stories about success in English class. Steele (2013) suggests, in research about stereotype threat, substantial academic benefit for students who can name and manipulate stories about identity. I am not suggesting the imposition of gender in English class where students do not see it as salient; but, helping students engage with circulating ideologies about gender and literacy offers the potential of access to, and power over, those ideologies as more productive storytelling mechanisms.

In this final chapter, I briefly explore the potential implications of my findings for meta-analytic work on gender and adolescent literacy in English classes. Without assuming the

salience of gender in any given context, I recommend that teachers provide structured opportunities for their students to describe and question beliefs about gender and literacy that circulate in their classes with two particular goals in mind: 1) the productive disruption of the neutrality of literacy events; 2) the expansion their students' repertoires of critical gender analysis. Importantly, based on the results in chapter 5, it seems that many students—in particular male students—do not see engagement with critical gender work as applicable to themselves or their English coursework. This study's findings also suggest another method for productively disrupting the neutrality of literacy events: comparative analysis of ideologies about gender and other school subjects, especially subjects where gender stereotypes might be flipped (e.g. math, science, history). I conclude by arguing that the present lull in the popular and scholarly conversation about young men and literacy presents an opportunity to preempt crisis rhetoric and reset the discourse in terms that are progressive and pragmatic.

Opening New Spaces for Talk about Gender and Literacy in ELA

Presentations of educational research sometimes conclude with far-reaching recommendations and implications for pedagogy. This tendency toward large-scale message makes sense in a way; it is part of the pitch that the work is meaningful to people's lives. Not everyone, however, believes such broad recommendations to be useful. In a caustic send-up, educational historian David Labaree (2010) declares of his own culminating ideas: "Consider the list of suggestions...as an academic exercise in the most pejorative sense of the word. Don't worry; none of this will really happen" (245). Labaree's nihilism about the enactment of large-scale changes in curriculum and pedagogy is based, in part, on the variability of local contexts where, he suggests, "[T]here is no established set of professional practices that have been proven to work independent of the particular actors involved and the particular time and place of the

action...Teachers have to operate under the kinds of daunting conditions...that introduce unpredictable elements of will and emotion into the heart of the teaching and learning process” (151).⁸² Rather than stultifying, however, the variability and “unpredictability” should be informative, and two important extrapolations from Labaree’s skeptical stance ground this section. First, teachers should treat these pedagogical recommendations as sets of adaptable strategies rather than rigid formulas or regimes; and, second, these recommendations should be seen as aspirational rather than prescriptive—something to work toward rather than something to objectively ‘achieve.’ While I agree with Labaree about the snail-like pace of pedagogical change, I challenge his nihilism; in the face of teaching dilemmas, adaptation and aspiration should energize rather than enervate.

The research design of this dissertation focuses on the “particular actors” and “unpredictable elements of will and emotion” themselves in three specific contexts and describes students’ perceptions of the difference identity performance can make in the “teaching and learning process.” Again, the findings are not generalizable, but, given their consistency across all-female, all-male, and coed contexts, they are suggestive of the sorts of ideological patterns about gender and literacy that one might encounter elsewhere. The pedagogical implications in this section, then, are not intended to prescribe pedagogy or curriculum; they instead aim to help teachers and students account for and disrupt the difference gender can make in English classes.

It is important as well to rearticulate an assumption at the root of these implications: the study is not guided by a narrative of young men’s literacy deficit in English class. Such a narrative does, of course, circulate widely. From *The War against Boys* to NAEP to *Teenage*

⁸² Labaree also points to the notion of “loose coupling,” or the idea that the separation of discrete levels of the educational system (e.g. administrators, researchers, policy-makers, teachers, students) prevents the suffusion of changes to that system.

Boys and High School English, this deficit rhetoric can feel ubiquitous. What's more, this study found systematic evidence of that narrative in students' perceptions. In all three classes, the majority of participants thought female students did better in English class. Examining the narrative's power, however, is different than allowing it to guide ideas about pedagogy and curriculum. If one's assumption is that young men do worse in English class, if that idea makes 'sense,' it becomes quite reasonable to make recommendations *for* young men. As I argued in the literature review, much of the difference-driven scholarly literature about young men and literacy takes a difference-based approach to gender in part because it assumes a deficit.

If, instead, one alters the question from "how should we address this deficit?" to "how does accounting for ideologies about gender and literacy help to address the difference gender can make for students?", the pedagogical focus moves from fixing the literacy education of young men to honestly confronting these explicit and implicit ideologies in the classroom. One way that Smith & Wilhelm's *Chevys* study on the literacy of young men lays the groundwork for this study is by surfacing the nuanced beliefs that adolescents often hold about literacy practices. For example, Smith & Wilhelm conclude that their young male participants often believe that their literacy work in English class is irrelevant but also doubtlessly *valuable*—even if the exact nature of that value can be ineffable. Their finding provides a resonant complement to my finding that young men simultaneously think of English class as a site where female students do better—both in academic success and passion for the material—and *also* consider specific literacy events in English class to be independent of gender. Students do not seem to see gender as a factor in putatively neutral academic reading and writing events, so deficit rhetoric ceases to make sense at that day-to-day level.

Productively disrupting that neutrality can be a bit of a high-wire act. How can one retain students' faith in the value of core ELA curriculum, a value arguably rooted in part in its apparent autonomy, while also encouraging them to think about how the circulating ideologies about gender and literacy practices apply to literacy events as well? I would argue that meta-analysis might allow students to have it both ways: ELA curriculum *is* valuable but *is not* autonomous from considerations of gender. To be sure, I am skeptical of recommendations about curriculum and pedagogy that are tied to simplistic suppositions about gender, especially when linked to notions that curriculum and pedagogy are feminized. Pedagogical and curricular recommendations that are based on ideologies of gender difference will, in addition to possibly harming female students, struggle to find an audience with adolescents because, while often familiar, such ideologies seem irrelevant when the ELA curriculum often appears neutral and unmarked by gender. For example, Wendy believes, "Really in any school—coed, all boys, all girls, you know—the purpose of writing assignments is really to help you develop skills that you can apply to any work"; and Mark, from all-male St. Richards, holds, "It's really gender neutral when you read a book here [at St. Richards], it's you know it's not because we're males, it's because it's just it's a good piece of literature from you know Shakespeare."⁸³ These examples, however, smooth over the idiosyncratic ways that gender can surface within students' conceptions of literacy events like essay writing or play reading (e.g. Sofia's belief that her male classmates have trouble sustaining the needed focus to write essays). Disrupting this apparent neutrality through meta-analysis—getting students out of their autonomous literacy comfort zones—could be a productive, bottom-up approach for surfacing ideologies about gender and

⁸³ A methodological note, of course, is that both Mark and Wendy attend high-performing, college prep schools where an inherent respect of their teachers' pedagogy and curriculum might lend themselves to increased notions of neutrality. I would be fascinated to repeat this perception study in different school contexts.

literacy, but top-down, homogenizing curriculum changes steeped in notions of gender difference and deficit risks forcing these notions into contexts where they circulate in much more nuanced ways .

A meta-analytic approach is all the more pressing because gender, for my participants, is a salient factor in their identity performances relative to academic literacy, a cultural salience that scholars have long pointed out. Weaver-Hightower, (pro)feminist critic of the difference-driven literature, acknowledges the power of “the ‘good sense’ of boys’ reforms” and “the lived experiences of many educators, parents, and social workers” (91). The evocation of “good sense” and “lived experience” is precisely what I mean in referring to the power of ideologies about gender and literacy, and a reason one should not, in hindsight, be surprised at the way difference-driven texts “become de facto policy.” While I critique difference-based recommendations throughout, I argue too that difference-driven scholars tap into the lived experience of many students and teachers. Again, consider Stan, who opens this dissertation: “I mean girls probably do better in [English] class. I realize I'm betraying my gender by saying this but I think that all girls would say that and any guy who's willing to tell the truth is also saying that.” Stan’s reading of the gender and literacy landscape echoes reports of the “worried hearts of English teachers” from experienced teacher educators like Smith & Wilhelm and Appleman. In its orientation, this research is designed to emphasize the “lived experience” already within the “theoretical reasoning” of (pro)feminists while also expanding the diversity of “lived experiences” accounted for when one discusses young men and literacy (e.g. by including young women in the study). It is crucial to find a way to take ideologies about gender and literacy into account without resorting to a ‘he does, she does’ approach. Importantly, it is the perceptions of the *student* participants in my study (a constituency *not* mentioned by Weaver-Hightower above) that offer

new pathways for the creation of structures to allow students to think about gender in a generative way, taking context and the heterogeneity of identity performance into account.

Based on this study's findings, I recommend taking a more holistic approach to addressing the difference gender makes in English classrooms. Specifically, students drew on (and sometimes resisted) ideologies about broad gender dichotomies in learning—dichotomies they linked to factors like communication styles, social development, and work habits. Since these findings suggest that beliefs about gender from outside of class matter greatly inside of class, it would seem intuitive to address gender more broadly by, for example, having open, meta-analytic conversations with students about the role of gender performance or the effects of stereotypes in English class or in individual identity. The interviews with opinionated, passionate students in this study are themselves testimony to the willingness and acuity of adolescents in 'reading' the social landscape of their English classes.

In fact, some scholarship on young men and literacy has begun to argue for meta-analytic approaches to identity that have the potential to disrupt the neutrality of literacy events, but these approaches tend to smooth over the power of shared ideologies about gender and literacy. Smith & Wilhelm, for example, most centrally recommend what could be considered general best practices in the teaching of literacy in ELA (e.g. designing inquiry-based units, assigning level appropriate texts, employing pre-reading strategies), but they also begin to argue in favor of a critical accounting for student identity in their suggestion that teachers should adopt a stance of content-rigorous "caring." That is, "[Participants] wanted teachers to recognize them as individuals and to be concerned for them...But at the same time...they valued literacy and wanted to become more competent in it" (187). Their recommendation is, in one sense, supported by the findings in this study, especially in the way that the supposed gender-neutrality

of valued ELA curriculum belied a belief that gender performance is important to the successful enactment of that curriculum by students. My findings suggest, however, that students' individual sense of identity necessarily navigates shared, patterned ideologies. In part, "caring" about students needs to also mean caring about the ways in which they orient themselves to ideologies about course material in an English class.

Martino & Kehler (2007a), though they front a more critical awareness of gender, tend also to combine that criticalness with a best practices approach. They recommend that "such a model of pedagogy include a high degree of intellectual quality, high levels of connectedness in terms of curriculum content and its application to students' lives outside of school, supportive classroom environments where students feel valued and are encouraged to take risks in their learning, and a strong recognition and celebration of difference" (424). They also note, "Any approach to dealing with boys' education must address the effects of dominant masculinity and the limits it imposes on boys" (425). Again, suggestions such as "intellectual quality" and curriculum's "connectedness" to life outside of school are widely accepted. Since Martino & Kehler critique Smith & Wilhelm directly in their article, it is intriguing to see "supportive classroom environments where students feel valued" link to Smith & Wilhelm's invocation of "caring" for students. Still, one can see their critical (pro)feminist approach most clearly in their suggestion to foster the "recognition and celebration of difference" and "address the effects of dominant masculinity" and the "limits it imposes." Martino & Kehler advocate the kind of critical awareness that might help students address the broader notions of gender (e.g. communication styles and social development) that my study found to be most relevant to the circulating narratives of gender deficit in these English classes.

While the recommendations from Smith & Wilhelm and Martino & Kehler are important contributions, my study introduces a complication unaddressed in both the (pro)feminist and difference-driven literature on young men's literacy: The very "limits" of dominant masculinity that Martino & Kehler hope to disrupt potentially prevent that disruption. As discussed in chapter 5, circulating ideologies about gender-justice, especially what some called feminism or social justice, revealed a pattern in which female students were expected to be *engaged* with issues of gender equity while male students need only be *exposed*. Students believed conversations about gender-justice were likely to occur in English class, and the majority of students who raised the topic in their interviews considered it of more interest to female students. While promising, in a sense, that students expected issues like gender and power to be raised in English class, it is nonetheless problematic that both male and female participants believed male students to be reticent in engaging with these issues. For them, talking about gender in this way means talking about women's issues. As a result, the "recognition and celebration of difference" might be treated as other by some young men, and this study's findings point to the importance of preparing students to have such conversations based on locally extant ideologies about gender.

I propose two recommendations for taking account of the difference gender can make in English classes, but it is also important to stipulate three caveats.⁸⁴ First, it is worth repeating that I did not study, in an experimental way, the effect of these recommendations on students' orientations to ideologies about gender and literacy. I do draw on anecdotes from my end-of-project presentations to the participating classes (recorded in field notes and memos), but the

⁸⁴ I reiterate that this study is not designed for making pedagogical and curricular recommendations based on gender. That is, I offer nothing along the lines of: "if one wants boys/girls to do better in English class, it would be best to assign X text or Y writing assignment." The study is designed, instead, to help students and teachers grapple with ideologies about gender and literacy. I would speculate that surfacing such ideologies could help students in their approach to the class as a whole or certain literacy events specifically. But I do not have evidence to prove this.

anecdotes are meant as suggestive illustrations rather than evidence that a given activity ‘works.’ Second, these recommendations are *not* in any way intended as replacements for general best practices for teaching ELA. As noted in the literature review, other than difference-based recommendations (e.g. more humor or violence), the most common recommendations for young men and literacy stand on the safe ground of widely accepted practices like rigorous inquiry-based curriculum or question-driven writing. I too believe that following such principles will create better instruction for all students, but that belief is somewhat beside my point in this chapter. Finally, these recommendations, though they focus on gender, should not be read as implying that gender is disentangled from other, intersectional identity markers. As West & Fenstermaker assert, one is never just doing gender without also simultaneously doing, for example, race and class. West & Fenstermaker also suggest, however, that given markers of identity can become especially salient in a specific context. My findings, in addition to the wider, panic-driven rhetoric about young men and literacy, indicate that English class is a context in which ideologies about gender and literacy might often become salient. The recommendations in this section speak to that probability.

Recommendation 1: Use meta-analysis to: a) expand students’ repertoires of critical gender awareness; b) discuss ideologies about gender and literacy practices; c) productively disrupt ‘neutral’ literacy events in English class.

Based on the results in this study, it seems likely that male students may face challenges at the prospect of engaging with gender and identity in a critical way, and female students, in some contexts, could risk being labeled as aggressive in their positions on gender equity. Recall, for example, that Billie observes, “Sometimes the girls are more open to...feminist issues and equality. Whereas the guys don't actually focus in on feminist issues or equality...They're just saying 'oh yeah, it's bad, okay.’” And Jaime notes, “A lot of the people in our English classes are

usually like White males so when they hear or see something saying like ‘oh like White men are like oppressing,’ they don't really like that maybe.” These observations are important in and of themselves because they reveal how gender performance can be a barrier to students’ open, robust engagement with issues of equity generally. In terms of this chapter specifically, one would be hard-pressed to imagine the possibility of productive meta-analytic talk about gender when the prevailing ideology is one of exposure rather than engagement for male students. What’s more, how comfortable might female or male students be in challenging the neutrality of literacy events when they fear being marked as aggressive? Indeed, Billie’s and Jaime’s observations discourage gender meta-awareness activities without expanding students’ conceptions about who has license to engage with the activities in the first place. Otherwise, the students already equipped to have such a conversation will do so while the students who are not will likely remain silent, content to be “exposed” to ideas they view as outside their own experiences. Another possibility, much less common in my study, is outright resistance (e.g. Jaime’s note about “meninist feelings”) from students positioning themselves as resisters of the notion that conversations about gender and gender equity have a place in English classes.

Despite these challenges, my findings also point to the possibilities that providing class space could tap into students’ latent fascination with talking about gender. Gender, as this study has repeatedly shown, often matters to students. For example, Jaime, whose ideas about gender and gender equity in English class can sometimes seem problematic, notes, “If other males don't really like to talk about certain racial issues or whatever that kind of makes you not want to talk about it either. You don't want to seem like the only kid. So yeah it definitely has an effect on my learning.” Importantly, the reverse of Jaime’s conditional statement, that other males *would* like to talk about race and gender, implies two optimistic results of such a hypothetical environment.

First, if he is not the “only kid,” then Jaime would be more likely to critically engage in equity-based conversations. Second, Jaime would see that change as having an “effect on my learning.” In this sense, Jaime’s implicit faith that critical awareness of identity has a positive effect on student learning is the most intriguing implication of this study.

With both the barriers to, and possibilities of, expanding students’ critical gender repertoires on full display, meta-analytic work is best navigated through two simultaneous approaches: a (pro)feminist approach that specifically aims to increase students’ critical gender awareness *and* a pragmatic acknowledgement that circulating ideologies about gender and literacy might limit how critical individual students are willing to be. The (pro)feminist moves are compelling because they often resonate with the findings of this study. As noted in chapter 5, Alloway et. al. (2002) plump for analytic frameworks in which young men develop “a repertoire for representing the self” in which “boys learn to represent themselves in school as gendered subjects and how this impacts on their engagement with literacy” (419). Their move to look at both how (male) students are “gendered subjects” generally and their engagement with literacy specifically fits with the finding that my participants simultaneously believed gender to matter in English class broadly in terms of communication skills and maturity while also to be irrelevant in terms of literacy events in English class (e.g. writing a paper). Meeting students where they are, in the case of these three classrooms, means helping them to consider ideologies about gender in broad terms before moving to how gender matters on specific pieces of the ELA curriculum. In addition, Rowan et. al. (2002) recommend “countering gender narratives” by which they mean, “Attempts to engage boys in literacy classrooms are fundamentally about getting kids to ‘buy’ different stories about masculinity... These alternative stories can be described as ‘counternarratives’” (190). Like Alloway et. al., Rowan et. al. indicate the necessity of

examining gender broadly (“‘buy’ different stories of masculinity”) as a means of getting at how gender matters in English classes specifically. These varying “stories” call to mind many of the participants in this study who refer to the multiple and shifting performances of gender they have seen. Stan, for example, tells his own “counter-narrative” in recalling a time when he embodied the “strong silent type” before he “matured” into an exceptionally engaged male English student. It seems likely that Stan’s ability to talk about gender in such meta-analytic terms—to have a critical repertoire for thinking about gender—is one reason he found himself able to resist what he understood as a deleterious ideology about gender and literacy.

Amidst “counter-narratives” and “gendered subjects,” it is important to maintain an ethos of pragmatism when it comes to gender and English class. This ethos should not be confused with oversimplification or untroubled stereotypes. Still, I argued in the literature review that one affordance of difference-driven work on young men and literacy is its willingness to work *with* circulating ideologies. While I question many of their difference-based recommendations, their impulse to meet teachers and students where they are is the right one. Recall as well that (pro)feminist scholar Weaver-Hightower suggests that (pro)feminists have a tendency to theorize gender rather than speak to the realities of people’s lived experiences. It is meaningful, after all, that nearly everyone in Stan’s class, including Stan himself, considers him an exception to dominant patterns of gender and success in English class. Jaime, too, worries about being seen as “the only one” in his class who wants to talk about identity, and that worry leads him, unlike Stan, to keep quiet on the subject.

It is a mistake, however, to equate talking about and questioning beliefs about gender with impracticality, some hoity-toity distraction from the real curriculum. Helping students name and *work toward* questioning circulating ideologies about gender and literacy in English class

can be approached in ways that value lived experiences. Often understandably, (pro)feminist scholarship about young men and literacy is often drawn to product rather than process: Martino & Kehler say one is either “challenging or recuperating gender binaries,” and Rowan et. al. want male students to “buy” different narratives of masculinity. In the long term, these are laudable goals, ones which have the potential to foster a more ethical society and, more specific to this project, help all students do better in English class. That said, when many of the participants in this study consider gender itself to be a topic *for* women, “challenging” the old and “buying” the new constructs of gender can seem impossibly far away as analytical possibilities. I propose not a lowering of expectations, but a renewed focus on the process of *working toward* such progressive aims. Even if a student is not “challenging” gender binaries, it would be a small victory to have a student explicitly articulate that such binaries exist. Even if a student does not “buy different stories of masculinity,” it would be progress to grapple with the idea that different stories exist in the first place. What’s more, these aims are most pragmatic when the terms of conversation are local, student-defined ideologies about gender and literacy—not beliefs about gender as they should be or as they are in other places but as they are in specific classrooms with specific groups of students. When I suggest that this dissertation is progressive *and* pragmatic, I intend, in part, that the ends are progressive while the means are pragmatic.

This expansion of students’ repertoires for critical gender awareness has the potential to allow for meta-analytic talk about how gender works in specific English classes and, more specifically, for the productive disruption of neutrality in ELA literacy events. This study shows clearly that gender difference-based, deficit discourses circulate about English classes but that these discourses usually stand apart from specific curriculum and pedagogy. In the terms of literacy theory, students see literacy practices as inflected by gender, but usually not literacy

events. Thus, making changes to, or explicitly justifying the use of, curriculum and pedagogy based on gender does not make sense to students—even in contexts, such as the three classrooms in this study, where gender is often a salient factor. Still, since gender *is* a salient factor, expanding students’ repertoires of critical gender awareness, especially the use of meta-analytic talk about gender (and identity more broadly), will help students in the process of productively disrupting assumptions about neutral literacy events. This talk helps students get specific about how gender matters to them, in individual and patterned ways, when doing the specific work of an English class. Gender might not always matter but such talk offers opportunities for students to figure out when it might.

Disrupting the neutrality of literacy events is a method of helping students grapple, in practice, with Street’s theoretical insight that literacy is always ideological. In so doing, students might simultaneously grasp how stories about gender and literacy affect them in class *and* play an agentive role in determining the story they want to tell about themselves. Using Street’s model as an analytical tool, I showed how students often manage to keep literacy events and practices separate from each other, but, when ideologies about gender and literacy suffuse the practice, it is essential to help students question how neutral the event can really be.

Interestingly, difference-driven scholars conflate events and practices by using difference-based ideologies. The result is that the neutrality of literacy events is disrupted but in a way that is unhelpful to students because the disruption fails to invite students to grasp the agency to resist simple notions of gender difference. Take, for example, Joanne’s anecdote about the “blue pen.” Finding symbols in literature is surely an expected, neutral part of doing English class. For Joanne, however, it is also a time in class when female students’ alleged tendency for emotional overreaction makes gender a salient factor. Joanne knows the stereotype. She sees it as a reason

that people think female students do well in English class. But she also both embodies and resists it. She tells a familiar story in a new way. For my project, disrupting the neutrality of literacy events through meta-analytic talk must both reveal for students how ideologies about gender and literacy (including, but not limited to, difference-based ideologies) affect events *and* push students to critically disrupt those same ideologies.

It is a promising method, in part, because Steele's research about stereotype threat demonstrates dramatic benefits to helping students tell more positive stories about identity and school. He observes, "[A]ccumulating research shows that reducing identity threat...improves the academic performance of ability-stereotyped students" and suggests, among other strategies for threat reduction, "fostering hopeful narratives about belonging in the setting" (180-181). One way to think about disrupting the neutrality of literacy events is offering students the chance to tell a story about identity within a local context of circulating ideologies that includes "hope" and "belonging." Since the circulating stereotypes/ideologies about gender and literacy will most likely be similar for students in the same class, the disruption creates an opening for students to resist, affirm, and/or deny these local ideologies as best fits the individual. This is important because being agentic relative to shared stories might simultaneously help students in a historically advantaged group that is, in a given condition, negatively stereotyped (e.g. males in English class) as well as students who are seen to do well at a literacy event for a stereotypically negative reason (e.g. female students who interpret symbols because they are overly emotional). Helping students develop meta-analytic techniques for disrupting neutrality and building repertoires of critical gender awareness allows students to tell the stories they need to tell in a given ideological context.

Based on the results of this study, teachers might best initiate these conversations in terms of the larger cultural ideologies about gender and literacy, especially if teachers have already established this context with students. In other words, since students often saw literacy events as neutral, beginning with a question like “What does gender have to do with reading *Much Ado about Nothing*?” would most likely result in silence or a simple “nothing.” One advantage of beginning more broadly is that students seem to have a comfort level with discussing gender in terms of stereotypes. For example, the gender-specific final section of my interview protocol began by asking students for their own observations about gender patterns related to literacy tasks and then prompting them to consider any stereotypes about gender and literacy of which they were aware. Numerous times, students said something like, “Well, I don’t see many patterns with gender and English class, but I know that some people think...” Then, when I asked if there was, in their experience, any truth to these stereotypes, students often not only said “yes” but also spoke at length about how these notions of gender and literacy affected their own performances, often through acts of resistance to the stereotype. This is what I mean when I say that ideologies about gender and literacy matter even if few necessarily believe them to be true.

One activity for eliciting such ideologies is a stereotype discussion game, in which students generate, or are presented with, circulating stereotypes about gender and literacy and are then given a structured opportunity to grapple with the circulation of those stereotypes in their experiences. Locating material to present to students should not pose a great challenge, but guysread.com (e.g. “As a society, we teach boys to suppress feelings. Boys aren’t practiced and often don’t feel comfortable exploring the emotions and feelings found in fiction.”), the *NAEP* website (e.g. “Higher percentages of female than male students agreed or strongly agreed with

the statement, ‘writing is one of my favorite activities’”), and even this dissertation (“Guys want to do manly silences”) are helpful places to begin. Presenting outside material, not specific to a student’s own class or school, can be valuable in that students have freer rein to challenge the stereotypes as not applicable or greatly altered in their context—though it is important, of course, to avoid presenting outside ideas about gender and literacy as ‘factual’ or ‘what the teacher thinks.’ Participants in my study, for example, often (organically) referred to the stereotype found on guysread.com that male students dislike “exploring emotions and feelings found in fiction.” Some laughed it off. Many called it a stereotype. But a number of students—especially at Samuel and Fielding—linked the ELA-specific stereotype that their male classmates felt uncomfortable with emotion in fiction with a broad ideology about gender and maturity that explained male students’ struggles in English class. Consider the potential of a hypothetical conversation, for instance, between Katerina, who finds female students more mature and, thus, “more thoughtful than boys”, and Joanne, who squirms at being labeled an “emotional” female and, thus, more likely to say “the blue pen does signify.” It is less ironic than unfortunate that high school students in a 45-minute interview offer more nuanced ideas about gender and literacy than most of the more broadly circulating treatments of the subject. A stereotype discussion activity in class draws on this acuity.

More immediate than outside sources like NAEP, it could also be fruitful to ask groups of students to analyze the ideologies about gender and literacy that circulate in their own classes. Since some of the participants in this study found the topic awkward, surfacing these potential in-class beliefs is probably best accomplished through surveys or questionnaires that students complete independently. For example, I found interview questions like “Based on your experiences in your English classes, do you notice any patterns about how positive / enthusiastic

students are in class based on gender?” and “What gender patterns, if any, do you see in terms of the reading we do in class?” to elicit fascinating, unexpected responses on which class discussions might build. Presenting the class’s observations about gender and literacy, again, requires some tact. It makes sense to protect students by presenting trends in their answers to the class rather than specific points like “one of your classmates said...”. Or, if one is assigning the questionnaire to multiple sections of students (e.g. three different classes of English 10), the teacher might have one class react to quotes from students in other sections to provide a level of anonymity. While there are more hurdles to generating these in-context beliefs than having students grapple with broader ideologies that come from the outside (e.g. guysread.com),⁸⁵ the benefits are ample. At minimum, it is harder to dismiss ideologies that one knows circulate within one’s own school.

As an example, I found students to be intrigued by ideas about gender and literacy that came even from other schools in the study.⁸⁶ After the conclusion of the interviews, I presented some initial findings to the participating classes. As a way to provoke discussion, I presented students with quotes from the interviews such as Stan’s: “I feel like guys [in English class] might have the mindset of trying to be like manly, like the manly silence...but girls like aren't worried about that. They just want to go out and do well in school, but guys want to like impress each other with the manly silences.” Students then responded in small groups to a series of questions:

- 1) What explicit attitudes about gender and English class show up in this student’s perspective?

⁸⁵ I do not mean to imply that in-context and outside beliefs are separate categories. As my interviews showed, of course, students’ in-context beliefs often reflected broader ideologies.

⁸⁶ My impression was that having information from an all-female, all-male, and coed school increased students’ sense of curiosity. Each class seemed eager to hear what student in other contexts had to say—though the all-male and all-female students seemed most intrigued to know how the rest of the high school world lived.

- 2) What is your first reaction to these ideas about gender and English class? Is this an idea you've heard before?
- 3) What broader ideas about gender and English class do you recognize in this quote?
- 4) Let's imagine that you are talking to another student, either in school or out, who expresses such a belief. How would you imagine reacting? How do you think this attitude might play out in the student's academic life? Can you think of ways to create conversations about these issues?
- 5) How do you imagine such an attitude would affect this student's work in English class: Reading a novel? Writing an essay? Participating in discussion?

Students' responses to the quote and questions activity varied, of course, by class, but a three-part pattern emerged. First, students almost always laughed the kind of laugh that comes from a mixture of familiarity and discomfort. In one sense, they giggled because Stan means for his statement to be amusing—a “manly silence” is the sort of thing that seems silly when actually named. In another sense, though, they snickered because they wanted (the second part of the pattern) to question the ‘reality’ of such an essentialized attitude. After all, some of their male classmates were garrulous and their female classmates quiet. Perhaps a student him- or herself conflicted with Stan's portrayal (much like Stan himself does). Or maybe students disagreed with Stan that the purpose of a manly silence was to “impress.” Regardless, as students began to answer the small-group questions, their “first reaction” (from question #2) was often a resistant one. The questions, however, consistently pushed students toward the final part of the pattern: reflection on how the ideas voiced by Stan circulated in their lives. In my presentations to these classes, I rarely heard a student fail to “recognize” the gendered material on which Stan draws; that material was certainly something they had “heard before.” Or, as Elsa noted of beliefs about female students and science class, these ideologies were “a little presence in your head” even if it was a presence that many students told to be quiet.

As a whole, the laugh-question-reflect pattern in response to quotes prepares students to do the reflective work that question #4 encourages. For example, dealing with Stan's quote, students from the all-male class, at first, laughingly rejected the idea that the attitudes Stan voiced applied to them. After all, if everyone at an all-male school used "manly silence," it would be an eerily quiet place. Then, however, a few students noted how concision was highly valued in many of their classes, including English, and suggested negative consequences, implicit and explicit, for students who were seen as not just getting to the point. Other students pushed back, saying it was a good thing to be concise. Still others replied that some topics required longer answers, and it was important to be comfortable enough to speak at length when necessary. In general, the conversation—even in the truncated form of my one-time presentation to students—began to uncover students' nuanced understandings of, and orientations to, the ideologies about gender and literacy that circulate in their classes. What's more, in the St. Richard's classroom, where chapter 5 clearly shows critical gender issues as referring to women's issues, students began planting the seeds for a more capacious understanding of what it means to discuss gender—in literature and in life.

Question #5 points to an important component of the process of using meta-analysis to surface issues of gender in English class: disrupting the neutrality students in this study expressed about literacy events. Since gender seemed to matter to students holistically rather than in specific parts, I have argued that it would be more effective to begin with the more capacious construct of literacy practices before discussing with students how specific literacy events in English class, such as writing an essay, could be affected by ideologies about gender and literacy. Again, the aim is not to impose the salience of gender but rather to help students form understandings of how gender might be invisible on a day-to-day basis even as it is clearly

salient when thinking about the class as a whole. In a sense, disrupting this neutrality could be impactful because students experience English classes on a literacy-event-by-literacy-event level: Read two chapters; write answers to questions; discuss those answers in full class and group discussion; write an essay based on the book; do peer editing. With the possible exception of class discussion, most students found these events to be ideologically autonomous while the class was very much influenced by ideologies about gender and literacy. Asking students explicitly to explore how circulating ideologies about gender and literacy (other than autonomy) might impact their more daily work in class offers a consistent and long-lasting framework for thinking about gender critically.

To be clear, the aim of these activities is *not* to lead students to a prescribed perspective. In the stereotype awareness example above, the goal is not to reveal to students that “manly silences” are creating literacy deficits, as Stan seems to assume. The goal, instead, is to let someone else (e.g. NAEP, a student in another class) do the dirty work of naming ideologies about gender and proposing ways in which they connect to English class specifically. Steele shows that it is easier to resist and manipulate that which can be named. As I have noted throughout this dissertation, interviews with students about gender and literacy were often simultaneously energizing and awkward for students. One reason, I would argue, is that students are rarely given practice at talking about their classes in ways that are inclusive of identity. It is uncomfortable at times to think about themselves and their classmates in this way. Still, adolescents are hyperaware of these identities, and it does not take much prodding to elicit meaningful conversation. Again, though, the goal is not prescription (e.g. away from “manly silence”) but rather awareness of the difference gender can make in their classes.

Recommendation 2: *In developing student meta-awareness about gender, include students' beliefs about school subjects other than English class in the conversation.*

One of the most tantalizing findings in this dissertation is the way that ideologies about gender and literacy practices mutate when moving between school subjects. This apparent shift is tantalizing rather than conclusive, in part, because the research design situates this study in English classes specifically; I do not have all that much data on participants' perceptions of subjects other than English. Still, in chapter four, I explained how I sometimes walked with Elsa from her first period English class, where “we [female students] can just sort of do what we want, say what we want” to her second period chemistry class where a “presence in your head when you're in science that makes you sort of be like this is science and females and science historically speaking don't mix.” Her beliefs about deficit, confidence, vibrancy, and communication shifted over a 50-foot walk. Perhaps this should not be as disorienting as it felt to me in the moment. Grossman & Stodolski found that *teachers* hold subject-level beliefs about curriculum where English is considered more “permissive” and math more “constrained.” Though Grossman & Stodolski do not explore the influence of gender, such contrasts in perception seem ripe for gendered interpretations. Some of the participants in this study, Wanda for example, duplicate the permissive/constrained understanding and deploy it specifically to explain how female students excel in the openness of English class.

I recommend using the construct of disciplinary difference as a productive tool for helping students question the ideologies about gender and literacy that circulate in their English classes. In other words, one way of showing students how gender performances could be otherwise is to demonstrate how they *are* otherwise in different classes. For example, while many students suggested that female students work harder in English class, Joanne observes that

male students “just like outdo themselves every single day” in science class. John also sees “that guys like support each other whenever they give arguments” in science class while that is not the case for him in English class. Again, my purpose in recalling Elsa, Joanne, and John is not to affirm their perceptions of gender difference in school subjects; instead, the purpose is to highlight the way in which participants used the shifting disciplinary frame to think more expansively about gender performance in academic settings. Such a move might initially seem unintuitive. If an English teacher aims to start critical discussions of ideologies about gender and ELA literacy, it would seem sensible to limit that conversation to English class. These findings, however, suggest that students often use the same broad ideologies about gender to explain what they see as *different* gender gaps in school; hard work and maturity should travel, but, for my participants, they often did not. Placing such apparent contradictions on the radars of students has the potential to disrupt easy or essential conclusions about gender and school subjects.

Such potentially disruptive contradictions also increase the chances that conversations about gender and ELA literacy are ethical ones. Given the broad cultural narratives of young men’s deficits in reading and writing, it has often been the case that gender-focused interventions in English class assume panicked stories of failing boys. In other words, gender work in English class specifically tends to become for young men and *not* young women. Even limited to English class, such a move has been, and will always be, a mistake, eliding the stories of female students like Fiona, who considers herself an unengaged, struggling English student, as well as Greta and Wanda, who are labeled as aggressive in their engagement with issues of gender equity. By expanding the conversation to include other school subjects, teachers can disrupt a deficit-driven story about young men with questions about the silencing of female students that John and Lily observe in their science classes. What’s more, one might hope that articulating some of the

successful ideological mindsets about hard work, maturity, and vibrancy could lead to students transferring them from one subject to another, especially since students often do not perceive the specific learning events (e.g. reading novels, writing lab reports) to be gendered. That is, if hard work and vibrant participation lead to success in English class, they should work in science class too—and vice versa. Again, my focus is on ELA classes specifically but introducing students' beliefs about other subjects has the potential to disrupt the naturalness of how gender works in English class. Frankly, I think students might be more comfortable with this move than their teachers. For us, academic disciplines and their identity-based concerns can be matters of expertise and terrain. Derivatives can seem a long way from Dickens. For a student like Elsa, however, this separation, a 50-foot walk, is the difference between first period and second period.

“Why Don’t You Act Like This?”: An Invitation to Reflection

The quote in the title of this chapter comes from a rhetorical question that Lily used to wonder aloud about some of her male friends at Fielding. I had asked her, at the end of our interview, if she wanted to add anything else. Lily frowned, and moving from a contemplative tone to an exasperated one, said, “I’ve noticed that with a lot of my guy friends actually, they’re actually really smart. When we do the homework together, then I’m like whoa you don’t act like this. Why don’t you act like this?” Lily’s frustration, I imagine, is at the genuine heart of stories recounted in the media about parents’ and teachers’ despair over their sons’ and students’ apparent lack of passion for reading and writing in English class. It seems important to validate that visceral experience even as this study has gone about critiquing many of the answers to Lily’s question. There is no war on boys in ELA curriculum and pedagogy. In fact, many young men act, in English class, exactly like the idealized “this” to which Lily refers. This study has

approached the question more openly, by analyzing the many ways male and female students act in relation to English class and by inquiring how gender is implicated (or not) in their performance. The short answer is that gender sometimes mattered to students in these three classes, and, when it mattered, it did so in consistent ways. They relied on circulating ideologies about gender and literacy to explain why female students were sometimes more vibrant in class, why male students were less willing to talk about feminism, and why gender seemed to have almost nothing to do with writing a literature analysis essay. At the same time, the way that students oriented themselves to these beliefs showed them to be freighted suggestions rather than a *fait accompli*. In fact, they often got more out of resisting than accepting. The most exciting realization about Lily's question, in light of this study, is that students seem to be asking *themselves* the question already—though if the recommendations in this final chapter are enacted, they would do so more systematically, collaboratively, and with more support.

Further research on the circulation of ideologies about gender and literacy, especially using methods that would triangulate student interviews with data from in-class interactions, has the potential to offer a more precise account of how these ideologies manifest in class and how students interact with them. The research design that yielded the findings in this dissertation relied centrally on students' perceptions and explanations of beliefs about identity/gender and English class. While I found the voices of high school students to be illuminating relative to my research questions, it also seems apparent that critical discourse analytic methods could be insightful as a complement to qualitative interviews. Discourse analysis of classroom interactions, especially, lends the possibility of both locating circulating ideologies that students are somehow unable to see or explicitly name as well as demonstrating how students use ideologies. When, if ever, do ideologies about gender and literacy become explicit in class

discussion? How do students resist those ideologies? Do specific literacy events actually appear neutral in class? How do conversational patterns bear out (or not) the ideologies expressed by students? Are young men really so dedicated to the manly silence? Investigating the answers to some of these questions might, perhaps, be a fruitful way to disrupt limiting ideologies and to help students rethink class narratives in a more productive way. As a theoretical and analytical construct, I believe ideologies about gender and literacy is a rich one that would benefit students through use with various research methodologies.

This study suggests that students would find time taken to discuss questions of gender and identity in their academic lives to be time well spent. There is currently a lull in the discussion about young men's literacy in the United States. There has not been a new book-length treatment of young men's literacy in ten years. There have been critiques of boys' education in general (e.g. Mead, 2006; Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009), second editions of books about young men and literacy (e.g. Sommers, 2013; Brozo, 2010), and a smattering of magazine and newspaper articles grappling with new evidence of an alleged male deficit (e.g. Leonhardt, 2014). The overall state of the conversation, however, would best be described as a semi-colon rather than a full stop, and I would argue that a wide variety of students' voices should co-author the next clause. The fire of the most recent boys' crisis cleared room for these new approaches, but a recurrence of the boys' literacy crisis already looms. The questions and findings in this dissertation offer the opportunity to preempt the resumption of the same polarized conversations and bring progressive, pragmatic approaches to issues of gender and literacy.

Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Demographic and Attitudinal Survey

Student Information Questionnaire

Your Number for this Research Study: _____

Your Pseudonym for this Research Study: _____

Age / Grade: _____

Sex: _____

1) With what race(s) or ethnicity(ies) do you personally identify?

(For example: African-American, White / Caucasian, Latino, etc.)

2) What is the highest level of education your parents or guardians have completed?

MOTHER (if applicable)

- a) Doctoral degree b) Master's degree c) Law school d) Medical school
e) College degree f) Some college e) High school f) Less than high school

FATHER (if applicable)

- a) Doctoral degree b) Master's degree c) Law school d) Medical school
e) College degree f) Some college e) High school f) Less than high school

Guardian / Other Person Who Helped Raise You (if applicable)

Relation to you: _____

- a) Doctoral degree b) Master's degree c) Law school d) Medical school
e) College degree f) Some college e) High school f) Less than high school

3) What is the highest level of education that you hope to achieve?

- a) Doctoral degree b) Master's degree c) Law school d) Medical school

e) College degree f) Some college e) High school f) Less than high school

4) Is English the primary language spoken in your home?

a) yes b) no c) yes, but there are others

5) How would you describe your family's financial situation?

a) above average wealth b) average wealth c) below average wealth

6) How would you describe your grades in English class in high school?

a) mostly A's b) mostly B's c) mostly C's d) mostly D's and F's

7) How would you describe your grades in English class in comparison to your grades overall?

a) better grades in English class b) about the same c) worse grades in English class

8) If 1 = *not at all confident* and 5 = *very confident*, how would you rank yourself at the following things:

_____ : being able to contribute to class discussions in English class.

_____ : being able to read the kind of things we usually read in English class.

_____ : being able to write the kind of things we usually write in English class.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Students at Coed School

Introduction / Purpose Statement

Thanks for taking time to talk to me today. This interview will help me start to understand your attitudes about the sorts of things you do in English class: reading, writing, discussion, etc. There really isn't any right or wrong answer to any of these questions, and I hope you feel free to be open and honest. If there's a question you don't want to answer, that's fine, and it's also okay if you want to ask me a question or stop the interview at any time. I'll have you choose a pseudonym so no one can know who gave me what answers when I tell people about the research I'm doing here at your school. Your interview should take about 45 minutes. I'll start with some general questions about you as a student, then move into your attitudes about the stuff you do in English class, and then finish up with some questions about how you see the male and female students doing and performing the activities in your English class. Do you have any questions?

**** Do interview assent.***

While I get set with the audio recorder, I'll have you fill out this short survey. It's similar to the one you filled out before we started video-taping. Also, please fill out this receipt for the gift card you are receiving.

**** Do interview survey.***

Also, I am going to try to let you do most of the talking, so please don't think that my silence means that what you are saying isn't terrific. Really, I just feel lucky to get to pick your brain about this stuff. Do you have any questions? Ready to get started?

**** Start tape. Say date, location, student participant #, and pseudonym.***

Part 1: Background (5 min)

- * Tell me a little about how you see yourself as a student generally.
 - ...how would you describe yourself as a student in English class?
 - ...what are your favorite subjects? least favorite?
 - ...what sorts of extracurricular stuff do you do here at school? clubs? sports? activities?
 - ...what do you do for fun outside of school? what are you passionate about?

- * How, if at all, do you see your personality as a student connecting to your personality overall?
 - ...how would you describe yourself as a person generally?
 - ...does that outside-of-school self come into English class? Or not really? How so?

Part 2: Perceptions of In-School Literacy Practices (15 minutes)

a) Perceptions of Writing in English Class (5 min)

* What's some of the stuff you remember writing in high school (including this year) in your English classes [prompt: research, persuasive, literary analysis, creative writing]? ***How do you like the types of writing you do in school generally?***

... what's your ***favorite / least favorite*** thing (essay, story, editorial, etc) you've ever written in a high school English class? why did you like / dislike it so much?

...anything about your personally that connected / did not connect to it?

...what about other people in the class? Why do you think that?

* GO OVER CONFIDENCE RATING ON WRITING FROM SURVEY

...why do you think you feel that way?

...is there anything about you as a person that you think contributes to this?

...what about the students who would rank at the other end of the scale? is there anything about them as people that leads them to feel that way?

b) Perceptions of Reading in English Class (5 min)

* What are some of the things you remember ***reading*** in high school (this year and last) in your English classes [LIST 5-7, PROMPT FOR OTHER GENRES]? ***How do you generally like the reading you do in school?***

...novels? plays? poems? short stories? non-fiction like articles, newspapers?

...did you have a ***favorite / least favorite thing*** (book, story, poem, article) you've read? Why?

...anything about your personally that connected / did not connect to it?

...what about other people in the class? Why do you think that?

* GO OVER CONFIDENCE RATING ON READING FROM SURVEY -- ask for explanations.

...why do you think you feel that way?

...is there anything about you as a person that you think contributes to this?

...what about someone who would rank at the other end of the scale? is there anything about their personalities that leads them to feel that way?

c) Perception of Participation in English Class (5 min)

* How would you describe your participation in English class?

...when do you feel most comfortable participating in English class? least comfortable?

* GO OVER CONFIDENCE RATING ON PARTICIPATION FROM SURVEY

...why do you think you feel that way?

...is there anything about you as a person that you think contributes to this?

...what about someone who would rank at the other end of the scale? is there anything about their personalities that leads them to feel that way?

Part 3: Attitudes about Identity/Gender as an Organizer in Class (20 min)

So, one of the questions I'm trying to answer in this project is how students' identities as people (e.g. what kind of person they think themselves to be) might affect what students do in English class as well as how well they do in class. These next questions are about that.

- * How would you describe the students who **really like** English class?
...do you notice any patterns for the students who **really like English**, as in: "most of the students who enjoy English are...?"
- * How would you describe the students who **don't like** English class?
...do you notice any patterns for the students who **really don't like English**, as in: "most of the students who enjoy English are...?"

These next questions ask you to think about the students in your English class in terms of gender and any patterns you see in English class. I know that not all male and female students are the same, that it's not like all male students do X in class and female students do Y. I just want to know if there seem to be any patterns in your English class based on gender.

- * Based on your experiences in your English classes, do you notice any patterns about **who does better** in class based on gender? Why do you think that is? Can you give any examples? (PROMPT: In your experience, who tends to do better in English class, male or female students?)
 - ...do you know of any stereotypes about male students and success in English class?
 - ...do you know of any stereotypes about female students and success in English class?
 - ...as a _____ student, do you ever feel affected by that?
- * Based on your experiences in your English classes, do you notice any patterns about **how positive / enthusiastic** students are in class based on gender? Why do you think that is? Can you give any examples? (PROMPT: In your experience, who tends to be more positive toward English class, male or female students?)
 - ...do you know of any stereotypes about male students and enthusiasm in English class?
 - ...do you know of any stereotypes about female students and enthusiasm in English class?
 - ...as a _____ student, do you ever feel affected by that?
- * Again based on your experience, what (if any) are other differences you see between male students generally and female students generally in English class? Can you give an example?
 - ...are you aware of any stereotypes about differences between male and female students in English class?
 - ...as a _____ student, do you ever feel affected by that?
- * When it comes to **reading** in English class, do you think there is any difference between what male and female students like or are good at?
 - ...What stereotypes, if any, are there about the kinds of books girls like or are good at reading in school? What about boys?
 - ...Do you think there is any truth to those stereotypes?
 - ...Do you ever feel affected at all by these stereotypes / opinions?

* When it comes to **writing** in English class, do you think there is any difference between what male and female students like or are good at?

...What stereotypes, if any, are there about gender and writing?

...Do you think there is any truth to those stereotypes?

...Do you ever feel affected at all by these stereotypes / opinions?

* When it comes to **discussion** in English class, do you think there is any difference between what male and female students do? Or are good at?

...What stereotypes are there, if any, about gender and class discussions?

...Do you think there is any truth to those stereotypes?

...Do you ever feel affected at all by these stereotypes / opinions?

* Think about other subjects (not English). Do you see any patterns based on gender in terms of who does best? What about in terms of favorite / least favorite subjects?

...Do you know of any stereotypes about other subjects?

...Do you see any truth in those?

If Time Allows...

* In your experience, do English teachers generally treat female and male students differently in any way? How so? Can you give an example?

...would the gender of the teacher matter?

* Pretend for a second that Greenhills suddenly enrolled only **male** students but nothing else changed. Would you predict any changes to your English class? Why would you predict that?

* Pretend for a second that Greenhills suddenly enrolled only **female** students but nothing else changed. Would you predict any changes to your English class? Why would you predict that?

...how do you think they would like the types of stuff you read in your English class?

...what about the types of writing you do?

...any changes in discussion or in the types of activities that would work in class?

* Based on the kinds of things we've talked about today, is there anything you want to add? What other observations have you made about students in English classes? What should I be seeing when I sit in your English class?

Thank you again for agreeing to do this interview with me!

Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Students at Single-Sex School

Introduction / Purpose Statement

** Do gift card receipt.*

Thanks for taking time to talk to me today. This interview will help me start to understand your attitudes about the sorts of things you do in English class: reading, writing, discussion, etc. There really isn't any right or wrong answer to any of these questions, and I hope you feel free to be open and honest. If there's a question you don't want to answer, that's fine, and it's also okay if you want to ask me a question or stop the interview at any time. I'll have you choose a pseudonym so no one can know who gave me what answers when I tell people about the research I'm doing here at your school. Your interview should take about 45 minutes. I'll start with some general questions about you as a student, then move into your attitudes about the stuff you do in English class, and then finish up with some questions about how you see the male and female students doing and performing the activities in your English class. Do you have any questions?

** Do interview assent.*

While I get set with the audio recorder, I'll have you fill out this short survey. It's similar to the one you filled out before we started video-taping.

** Do interview survey.*

Also, I am going to try to let you do most of the talking, so please don't think that my silence means that what you are saying isn't terrific. Really, I just feel lucky to get to pick your brain about this stuff. Do you have any questions? Ready to get started?

** Start tape. Say date, location, student participant #, and pseudonym.*

Part 1: Background (5 min)

* Tell me a little about how you see yourself as a student generally.

...how would you describe yourself as a student in English class?

...what are your favorite subjects? least favorite?

...what sorts of extracurricular stuff do you do here at school? clubs? sports? activities?

...what do you do for fun outside of school? what are you passionate about?

* How, if at all, do you see your personality as a student connecting to your personality overall?

...how would you describe yourself as a person generally?

...does that outside-of-school self come into English class? Or not really? How so?

Part 2: Perceptions of In-School Literacy Practices (15 minutes)

a) Perceptions of Writing in English Class (5 min)

* What's some of the stuff you remember writing in high school (including this year) in your English classes [prompt: research, persuasive, literary analysis, creative writing]? ***How do you like the types of writing you do in school generally?***

... what's your ***favorite / least favorite*** thing (essay, story, editorial, etc) you've ever written in a high school English class? why did you like / dislike it so much?
...anything about your personally that connected / did not connect to it?

* GO OVER CONFIDENCE RATING ON WRITING FROM SURVEY

...why do you think you feel that way?
...is there anything about you as a person that you think contributes to this?
...what about the students who would rank at the other end of the scale? is there anything about them as people that leads them to feel that way?

b) Perceptions of Reading in English Class (5 min)

* What are some of the things you remember ***reading*** in high school (this year and last) in your English classes [LIST 5-7, PROMPT FOR OTHER GENRES]? ***How do you generally like the reading you do in school?***

...novels? plays? poems? short stories? non-fiction like articles, newspapers?
...did you have a ***favorite / least favorite thing*** (book, story, poem, article) you've read? Why?
...anything about your personally that connected / did not connect to it?
...what about other people in the class? Why do you think that?

* GO OVER CONFIDENCE RATING ON READING FROM SURVEY -- ask for explanations.

...why do you think you feel that way?
...is there anything about you as a person that you think contributes to this?
...what about someone who would rank at the other end of the scale? is there anything about their personalities that leads them to feel that way?

c) Perception of Participation in English Class (5 min)

* How would you describe your participation in English class?
...when do you feel most comfortable participating in English class? least comfortable?

* GO OVER CONFIDENCE RATING ON PARTICIPATION FROM SURVEY

...why do you think you feel that way?
...is there anything about you as a person that you think contributes to this?
...what about someone who would rank at the other end of the scale? is there anything about their personalities that leads them to feel that way?

Part 3: Attitudes about Identity/Gender as an Organizer in Class (20 min)

So, one of the questions I'm trying to answer in this project is how students' identities as people (e.g. what kind of person they think themselves to be) might affect what students do in English class as well as how well they do in class. These next questions are about that.

- * How would you describe the students who **really like** English class?
 - ...do you notice any patterns for the students who **really like English**, as in: "most of the students who enjoy English are...?"
 - ...what types of people do they tend to be?
- * How would you describe the students who **don't like** English class?
 - ...do you notice any patterns for the students who **really don't like English**, as in: "most of the students who enjoy English are...?"
 - ...what types of people do they tend to be?

These next questions ask you to think about the students in your English class in terms of gender and any patterns you see in English class. I know that not all male and female students are the same, that it's not like all male students do X in class and female students do Y. I just want to know if there seem to be any patterns in your English class based on gender.

- * Ignatius is, of course, an all-male school. In your mind, is there anything that happens in English class that is done specifically because the class is all-male?
 - ...the things you read?
 - ...the writing you do?
 - ...the types of activities you do in class?
 - ...the way that discussion works in class?
- * Have you ever noticed any patterns about **who does better** in English classes based on gender? Why do you think that is? Can you give any examples? (PROMPT: In your experience, who tends to do better in English class, male or female students?)
 - ...do you know of any stereotypes about male students and success in English class?
 - ...do you know of any stereotypes about female students and success in English class?
 - ...as a male student, do you ever feel affected by that?
- * When it comes to **reading** in English class, do you think there is any difference between what male and female students like or are good at?
 - ...What stereotypes, if any, are there about the kinds of books girls like or are good at reading in school? What about boys?
 - ...Do you think there is any truth to those stereotypes?
 - ...Do you ever feel affected at all by these stereotypes / opinions?

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