Towards A ‘Pedagogy Of Hybrid Masculinities’: The Effects Of Teacher-Selected Vs. Student-Selected Informational Texts On The Literacy Achievement And Masculine Identities Of Middle-Level Males

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TOWARDS A ‘PEDAGOGY OF HYBRID MASCULINITIES’: THE EFFECTS OF TEACHER-SELECTED VS. STUDENT-SELECTED INFORMATIONAL TEXTS ON THE LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT AND MASCULINE IDENTITIES OF MIDDLE-LEVEL MALES

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband and my dad who both taught me what ‘hybrid masculinities’ look like. Dad, thank you for sharing your dreams with me and supporting me in achieving my own. You have always known how to motivate me and how to push me in the right direction. Andrew, you have shown me the tenderness and strength of masculinity through your predictable unpredictability. Thank you for bringing me into the gray area. I love doing life with you.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Nathaniel Bryan, my major professor, for his persistence in pushing me toward my best work. His mentorship truly changed my thinking; he taught me how good things can be better. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Rhonda Jeffries, Dr. Edward Madden, and Dr. Victoria Oglan, who have all had a significant role in opening my mind to the experiences and needs of others through their scholarship and instruction. I am honored by their willingness to share their time and expertise in this process. Finally, I would like to thank the boys who inspired this work. Although they may never know the impact they had, others will benefit from their voices.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether teacher-selected informational texts or student-selected informational texts best contribute to literacy achievement and engagement for middle-level males and to examine middle-level males’ perception of the relationship between masculine performance and literacy practice. For the purposes of this study, literacy achievement was measured using pre-test/post-test comparison on an assessment which measured participants’ ability to determine the central idea of an informational text while engagement and the relationship between masculine expression and literacy achievement were analyzed using observational field notes and semi-structured focus group interviews. Over a nine-week period during the first nine-week academic quarter, students participated in reading workshops during which one group was allowed to choose their own informational texts for literacy practice while the other engaged in literacy practice using texts the teacher-researcher chose.

Data were collected from a pre-test and a post-test, observational field notes, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. Using what the teacher-researcher proposes as a conceptual framework—a ‘pedagogy of hybrid masculinities’—which rejects categories of masculine expression, the results of the present study revealed no significance between teacher-selected or student-selected texts. Data collected from focus group interviews revealed boys’ layered and often-contradictory masculine performances that were at play in their literacy practice. In other words, throughout their literacy practice, boys negotiated the ways through which they performed their masculinity,
directly contributing to the ways that they engaged with texts and interacted with others.

The boys revealed the need for pedagogy which provides an individualized perception of success, the capacity for fluid masculine performances, and the visibility of counter-hegemonic practices. Study results guided the development of an action plan to communicate results with stakeholders, to provide professional development for teachers seeking to improve the literacy performance of middle-level males, and to conduct future research.

Keywords: counter-hegemonic practices, hegemonic masculinity, informational text, literacy, males, multiple masculinities, reading workshop
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DMS</td>
<td>Deerfield Middle School</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELs</td>
<td>English Learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRL</td>
<td>Free or Reduced Lunch</td>
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<td>GRP</td>
<td>Gender Relevant Pedagogy</td>
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<td>IEP</td>
<td>Individualized Learning Plan</td>
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<td>ILP</td>
<td>Individual Language Plan</td>
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<td>ISS</td>
<td>In-school Suspension</td>
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<td>PHM</td>
<td>Pedagogy of Hybrid Masculinities</td>
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<tr>
<td>PoP</td>
<td>Problem of Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSD</td>
<td>South School District</td>
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When asked, most students have a strong opinion about their English language arts (ELA) class. At the middle level, students either typically enjoy the time they spend reading and writing in class or they dread its approaching hour. Despite students’ feelings toward ELA, an increased focus on college and career readiness has invited ELA teachers to think critically about the ways in which pedagogy leads to success even after those opinionated students leave the middle-level ELA classroom (Burkins, Yaris, & Hoffman-Thompson, 2016). Anecdotal observations made by the teacher-researcher prior to the present study revealed that in an ELA class of 18 students, including 14 boys, the boys were far more likely to resist literacy activities and to voice their opinions of those activities as completely irrelevant to their lived experiences. The boys in the class often distracted other boys, made fun of those who were attempting to participate in class activities, or simply put their heads on their desks. Their behaviors demonstrated their aversion to ELA in the form of rejection and hostility. Through an analysis of their test scores and informal conversations with these boys, the teacher-researcher noticed that many boys not only disliked language arts, but many also lost ground in reading on state-mandated tests and were underrepresented in upper level ELA classes at the school such as Language Arts Honors and other accelerated ELA classes.

Educational researchers investigate boys’ lack of interest and effort in ELA and note a trend of underachievement for boys in ELA across and beyond the United States for the last several decades (Frank, Kehler, & Lovell, 2003; Jameson, 2007; Kent, 2004;
Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010; Pennycook, 2011; Wu, 2014). However, boys in the United States are in the “epicenter of the ‘boy crisis’” (Bristol, 2015). Parkhurst (2012) argues that, in the 21st century, literacy, economics, and class, are intrinsically intertwined, but male and female students spend far less time reading and writing than they did twenty years ago. He highlights boys as being more likely than girls to have a negative attitude toward literacy activities which he attributes to the relationship between “time spent reading and reading competence” (p. 14).

According to Bristol (2015), boys’ performance in school depends upon “several factors including race, class, and how masculinity is performed” (p. 61). While the issue of male underachievement is not limited to literacy, according to Bristol, it is the area of school performance most affected by gender discrepancy. Kirkland and Jackson (2009) discuss literacy as a form of social practice therefore literacy instruction which refuses to acknowledge students’ social and cultural context is weak in its effectiveness at engaging students and providing opportunities for literacy practice to be relevant for all students. This social and cultural context includes gender expression, and the literacy classroom, where students read and write, has the potential to be a place where students regularly negotiate the ways in which gender and masculinity are performed and reified. The teacher-researcher sought relevant pedagogy which would foster lifelong learning for all students while specifically seeking to acknowledge, value, and teach all masculinities represented in the language arts classroom which Bristol (2015) argues many teachers are unequipped to provide.
Statement of the Problem of Practice (PoP)

The identified Problem of Practice for the present study is in the area of English language arts (ELA) at Deerfield Middle School (DMS) (pseudonym) in the South School District (SSD) (pseudonym), a suburban school district located in South Carolina. The SSD’s current ELA curriculum does not meet the academic needs of adolescent males in the way it does for adolescent females, as evidenced by the teacher-researcher’s observations and district-level performance on the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards¹, South Carolina College-and-Career Ready Assessments², and the MAP Growth test³. Preliminary investigation by the teacher-researcher revealed that the SSD’s curriculum lacks texts relevant to the lived-world experiences of adolescent males who need “educational experiences that account for their socialization” (Bristol, 2015, p. 61). Preliminary investigation also revealed that many teachers feel unprepared to utilize strategies that provide gender-relevant reading materials for adolescent males in general education ELA classrooms at DMS.

One of the important issues concerning male underachievement in the ELA classroom is the notion that there is a single cause for the literacy concerns of adolescent males’ disengagement. Males’ disengagement from literacy is not a direct result of one educational initiative, social concern, psychological characteristic, or developmental condition. Instead, it results from numerous factors, and not every male in middle-level ELA is underachieving. Watson, Kehler, and Martino (2010) “express...concerns about

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¹ The Palmetto Assessment of State Standards assesses student performance on South Carolina reading standards from 2009-2014 in South Carolina. The test included multiple-choice questions and a writing prompt (Sheehan, personal communication, October 16, 2015).
³ The MAP growth test is a national norm-referenced test which students in the SSD take three times per school year. The test shows reading growth over time (NWEA, 2018).
the ways in which boys’ literacy underachievement is defined and taken up within a context that continues to represent all boys as victims or as the ‘new disadvantaged’” (p. 356). Instead, they see the literacy problem for boys as a multi-dimensional problem built by layering multiple factors including race, class, and heteronormativity in such a way that the problem is singularly a gender issue.

Bristol (2015) maintains that socialized gender expectations shape attitudes toward schooling and literacy at a very early age and that as boys, in particular, navigate these socializations, they experience conflicts. Gender expectations on pre-school boys reinforce the necessity for active play. However, upon entering school, the typical female pre-school teacher is more likely to support quiet, calm activities which negatively affect a young male’s socialization upon entering school (Bristol, 2015; Hamilton & Jones, 2016). Boys who demonstrate an interest in activities not aligned with hegemonic masculine performance risk ridicule and marginalization. Later, as boys manage their masculine performances, they continue to experience conflict as their family, teachers, and peers reify and police behavior thereby categorizing and essentializing boys into salient performance categories that are limiting and destructive (Bristol, 2015; Sears, 1991; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2013). In the ELA classroom, further conflicts continue, as the teacher may not have the knowledge of or the freedom to provide culturally and socially relevant texts within the context of tight, district or state-mandated curriculum.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine if teacher-selected or student-selected informational texts best contribute to literacy achievement and engagement, as well as to determine how boys perceive the relationship between their varying masculine identities
and their willingness to engage in literacy practice. The teacher-researcher sought pedagogy which supports expression of varied masculinities for middle-level males in the language arts classroom (Bristol, 2015; Connell, 2005; Wilhelm & Smith, 2004).

**Research Questions**

The following two research questions were selected for the present study:

1. Does teacher-selected informational text or student-selected informational text best contribute to literacy achievement and engagement and masculine identities for middle-level males?
2. How do middle-level males perceive the relationship between masculine performance and literacy achievement?

**Methodology**

**Rationale for Action Research**

Action research projects are born when “powerful research questions emerge from felt difficulties” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 31). Scores on state-mandated tests over the previous years indicated declining performance in reading for boys at DMS, and experiences in the teacher-researcher’s classroom reflected boys’ lack of engagement in literacy tasks. When students are not engaged in classroom activities, they are unable to practice the skills necessary to read and analyze texts critically. When they are presented with standardized test questions requiring those skills, their scores reflect the lack of practice. The present study focused “specifically on the unique characteristics of the population” (Mertler, 2014, p. 4) at DMS to increase the teacher-researcher’s effectiveness teaching analytical literacy skills to middle-level males. This mixed-methods action research study allowed the teacher-researcher to follow district-mandated
curriculum while also using varied processes through which students were presented with informational texts for literacy practice. Additionally, the teacher-researcher was immersed in literacy practice with males in both groups, allowing the voices of the male participants to be reflected in the findings of the study.

**Action Research Process**

Action research allows teachers to effect change in their own classrooms by responding to immediate needs. The aim of action research is not to generalize the results to a wider population but, instead, to address the needs of the population under investigation (Mertler, 2014). A unique characteristic of action research is the position of the researcher fully immersed in the context of the research. The teacher-researcher is not an uninvolved observer but rather an important player in the activities under investigation. The purpose of this study was to extend the teacher-researcher’s ability to engage boys in regular literacy practice and to determine how to facilitate individuals’ masculine expression in the ELA classroom most effectively. The action research process was a practical technique for achieving that purpose.

The present study followed the guidelines set forth by Mertler (2014) and included the four-stage process outlined below:

1. **The planning stage:** In this stage, the teacher-researcher revised research questions, conducted a thorough review of literature, and selected final research questions.

2. **The acting stage:** In this stage, the teacher-researcher selected a sample of participants who met the criteria for the study, grouped students into two groups, conducted a pre-test, implemented the reading workshops using student and
teacher-selected articles, performed semi-structured focus group interviews, and conducted a post-test. The teacher-researcher used descriptive statistics to determine the mean scores of each group’s pre-test and post-test and used a paired t-test to determine the statistical significance of each text-selection method. The teacher-researcher used inductive analysis of focus group interview data and observational field notes to categorize qualitative data into emerging themes (Mertler, 2014).

3. The developing stage: In this stage, the teacher-researcher developed an action plan for implementing the results of the study into classroom practice. This included describing pedagogical strategies informed by the results of the present study.

4. The reflecting stage: In this stage, the teacher-researcher shared results with colleagues, reflected on the implications of the results, and considered further research questions that arose from the results (Mertler, 2014).

In line with Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014), the research question arose from a “wondering” (p. 32) about the idiosyncrasies, needs, and interests of males in the ELA classroom. Anecdotal data revealed that all students represented in the teacher-researcher’s class had different social, emotional and academic needs; they also had widely different interests and motivations. The research questions accounted for the diversity represented among male students, and the evolution of the teacher-researcher’s questions throughout the planning process led to the exploration of pedagogy which “reclaim[s] schooling as masculine” (Watson et al., 2010, p. 357) for the varied masculinities represented in the ELA classroom.
Significance of the Study

The present study contributes to the body of literature on boys’ literacy underachievement by exploring the connection between masculine expression and literacy achievement while analyzing the ways in which middle-level boys’ masculinities embody even broader performances than Connell’s (2005) multiple masculinities. The goal of the present action research study was to determine how to best promote literacy achievement and engagement while also exploring the ways in which middle-level males perceive their negotiation of the relationship between masculine performance and literacy achievement. The present study has the potential to make an impact on the way in which teachers navigate tight curriculum in the era of high-stakes accountability (Eisner, 2013) while also making the classroom relevant and supportive to all masculinities represented. The present study builds on other studies in the body of educational research which seek to support boys in literacy practice (Bristol, 2015; Kent, 2004; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Summary of the Findings

The findings of the present study indicate no statistical significance between the use of teacher-selected texts or student-selected texts for literacy practice using informational texts. Additionally, semi-structured focus group interview data reveal that boys’ literacy achievement links directly to the ways in which each boy performs his masculinity and, most importantly, the way in which his masculinity is validated in the classroom. The findings led the teacher-researcher to propose ‘pedagogy of hybrid masculinities’ which rejects the notion that a single set of literacy strategies, text topics, or text-selection methods can be applied for the use of all boys. The varied masculinities
performed by the participants in the present study necessitated highly individualized pedagogies, which both challenge and confirm masculine performances that play a significant role in boys’ literacy practice.

**Limitations of the Study**

The present action research study targets a specific population of students at DMS and the results cannot be generalized to other groups of students; it can only inform others’ pedagogy. The study was designed to operate within the established curriculum at DMS using resources prescribed by the SSD. The study was also limited to the effects of informational text-selection methods and did not include literary or fictional texts. The findings of the present study are limited to participants’ performance on a set of questions that assessed their ability to summarize the central idea of an informational text and to identify evidence to support that summary. Data were gathered from assessments, participants’ in-class responses, the teacher-researcher’s observational field notes, and semi-structured focus group interviews.

A small sample size of six participants in the teacher-selected text group and seven participants in the student-selected text group also limited the study. The time during which the study could take place was limited two-hour portion of the school day during a nine-week period, and the teacher-researcher was only able to select participants whose academic schedule allowed for participation in the study during that portion of the school day. A larger sample of students whose performance was measured over an entire semester or school year would have provided more statistically relevant results that could be generalized to a wider population. Suggestions for future research are described in detail in Chapter Six.
Definition of Terms

*Academic engagement*: the degree to which a student connects with classroom content and activities and pursues them with personal interest (McMahon & Portelli, 2004).

*English Language Arts (ELA)*: the academic content area responsible for literacy instruction, the acquisition of vocabulary and the development of writing skills (Woodard & Kline, 2015).

*Gender-Relevant Pedagogy (GRP)*: pedagogy that takes into the account the lived experience of adolescent males with the goal of improving the underachievement of adolescent males (Bristol, 2015).

*Hegemonic masculinity*: male behavior that is widely accepted as masculine; often including dominance, power, and homophobic characteristics (Connell, 2005; Frank et al., 2003).

*Hybrid masculinities*: a notion proposed by the teacher-researcher that both extends and blends the theories of hegemonic masculinity and multiple masculinities

*Informational text*: nonfiction writing produced to provide information about a topic (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

*Literacy*: the ability to read and write (Literacy, 2016).

*Middle-level adolescent males*: students in grades sixth through eight who identify as male

*Multiple masculinities*: Connell’s (2005) theory of masculinity performance that maintains masculinity can be expressed in many different forms and that culture’s
acceptance or rejection of masculinities has a profound impact on individual’s identity

Non-identified as gifted: students who do not receive services in a gifted and talented program

Pedagogy of hybrid masculinities: a notion proposed by the teacher-researcher that suggests successful pedagogy for boys includes an individualized approach that represents and validates boys’ varied interests and masculine performances

Standardization: the process of outlining specific learning objectives for academic disciplines; often associate with testing of those objectives (Sleeter & Stillman, 2013).

Underperformance: not meeting expectations; performing below other groups of students (Bristol, 2015; Martino & Berrill, 2003)

Dissertation Overview

Chapter One of the dissertation discussed the context which informed the teacher-researcher’s exploration of boys’ literacy disengagement and underperformance in the ELA classroom. Chapter Two includes the theoretical framework for the present study, and Chapter Three reviews the historical framework as well as a review of relevant literature. Chapter Four provides the methodology for the present study and is followed by Chapter Five follows with an outline of the findings and interprets the results for the present study. Chapter Six details the teacher-researcher’s action plan to share the results with teachers and district curriculum directors as well as suggestions for future research.
Figure 2.1: Conceptual map for the present study
Chapter Two presents the conceptual framework for the present study. The conceptual framework focuses on Bristol’s (2015) theory of Gender Relevant Pedagogy (GRP) and Connell’s theory of multiple masculinities. Building on these frameworks and drawing from Schramm-Pate, Lussier, and Jeffries’s (2008) notion of hybridity, the teacher researcher proposes what she calls ‘pedagogy of hybrid masculinities’ (PHM).

**Gender Relevant Pedagogy**

The present study builds on Bristol’s (2015) GRP. Noting, “when gender parity exists—when boys and girls are enrolled in schools in equal numbers—girls perform better” (p. 54). Bristol articulates how GRP addresses the achievement disparity included in the present study’s Problem of Practice (PoP) He contends:

> GRP can serve as a framework to inform teachers’ dispositions when interacting with boys and the content they select to increase engagement and learning. The theoretical underpinning of GRP can—and should—be applied to all teachers working with boys who are disengaged and underperform in school. (p. 55)

Bristol’s theory is primarily concerned with empowering teachers to create the kind of environment that allows boys to succeed; however, Bristol rejects many of the quick-fix notions that are ubiquitous among teachers about how to teach boys most effectively. For example, Bristol rejects the notion that adding more male teachers to the profession will better engage boys and explains that is simply an effort toward the “remasculinization” (p. 56)—a hegemonic, heteronormative remasculinization—of school. Instead, Bristol’s GRP begins with building teachers’ “instructional capacity” (p. 58) to recognize the social and cultural forces acting upon individual boys that manifest themselves in the learning environment. Bristol acknowledges that both teachers and students bring their
own “socialized world view” (p.58) to the classroom, and GRP is the way that teachers connect and utilize their socialized experiences to understand and validate the socialized identities of the boys in the classroom.

Bristol (2015) outlines a socialization process that occurs throughout a young boy’s life, and he explains the way in which each stage of socialization leads to a place that creates academic difficulties in school. This socialization process begins with boys’ early gendered experiences, including simple activities like selecting toys that are blue or represent a socially acceptable masculine practice like mechanics or sport. Then, a boy’s first experiences at school are directly affected by, typically, a female teacher’s expectation for quiet, calm play. Bristol argues that this second socialization leads to frustration and disillusionment with the school environment leading to boys’ underachievement at the middle level.

The foundation for GRP lies in “providing…teachers with a context for understanding their own culture and how the interaction of teachers with students’ culture might affect learning” (p. 60). When selecting content for instruction, teachers must “use the observed interests of both male and female students to create and implement curricula that can facilitate engagement and further content goals” (p. 61). At the same time, Bristol clearly rejects pedagogy that essentializes all boys as a homogenous group with similar needs and argues that teachers should be responsive to the individual masculine expressions with which each boy identifies to avoid “reifying heteronormative behavior” (p. 62). Bristol explains that when teachers diversify their reading materials for boys and allow for “experiential learning opportunities” (p. 62), they have shaped an environment conducive to GRP, which can increase achievement and engagement for boys.
Critiques of GRP

First, although Bristol rejects essentializing all boys as a homogenous group, his description of the socialization process does not include a variety of masculine expressions. Instead, he focuses on hegemonic masculinity and the ways schools accommodate hegemonic masculinity which is loud, boisterous masculinity that hinges on power over others (Connell, 2005). Bryan (2018) specifically addresses the ways in which Bristol’s (2015) GRP reifies notions of hegemonic masculinity using “video games and graphic novels” (pp. 6-7) which uphold competition between dominant masculine expressions. Bryan suggests that, though Bristol (2015) invites boys to critique the power relationships represented in video games and other materials that represent hegemonic masculinities, this form of GRP “does not necessarily lead to lessons about the importance of acknowledging and valuing boys who defy hegemonic masculinity” (p. 7). Bristol’s GRP challenges the role of hegemonic masculinity in the classroom and argues that pedagogy that does not problematize essentializing all boys will lead to disengagement and underachievement for boys. What is missing from Bristol’s theory are specific ways to acknowledge and teach a variety of masculine expressions—which are important given that GRP is a pedagogical theory.

Second, Bristol’s (2015) GRP is more teacher-focused than student-focused. That is to say, Bristol most often articulates what the teacher should be doing to best educate boys, not necessarily what boys should be doing to expand their thinking and engage in academic practice. Bristol’s framework does not demonstrate the necessity for a student-focused classroom and, instead, suggests that teachers should provide better materials and pedagogical strategies to reach boys. At the same time, Bristol seems to focus exclusively
on engaging underperforming boys—not providing continued support for boys who are achieving. Given that GRP is based on cultural and social relevance, it seems amiss that such pedagogy would not look toward students who are achieving to understand better how their practices negotiate the social setting of the classroom. A student-focused literacy classroom should maximize the performance of those already achieving and look to those students to understand better how to support underachieving students.

Finally, Bristol’s GRP lacks the voices of students to articulate their needs and interests in literacy practice. Bristol does suggest that GRP requires that boys’ interests be represented in the teacher’s curricular choices; however, Bristol stops short of requiring that student preferences and needs drive the daily pedagogical structure of the classroom. In this way, Bristol’s framework follows the trends of other studies that prescribe a strategy or instructional method that works best for all boys (Carroll & Beman; 2015; Kent, 2004; Parkhurst, 2012; Sax, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The present study utilized focus group interviews to allow the voices of male students to explain their achievement, lack of engagement, and masculine identities.

**Multiple Masculinities**

Connell (2005) proposed the theory of multiple masculinities as way of analyzing the complex social construction of gender identity and to represent those masculinities that fall outside a culture’s idealized version of masculinity, which she calls hegemonic masculinity. Connell’s (2005) theory of multiple masculinities represents the masculinities that are excluded from hegemonic masculinity and are, essentially, antithetical to hegemonic masculinity. According to Bryan (2018), the theory of multiple
masculinities suggests “there are no set characteristics and descriptors which define men and boys” (p. 11) and that masculinity is a constantly negotiated social construction.

Although the theory of multiple masculinities “has become widely used in feminist and poststructural scholarship and accounts for the diverse ways males perform masculinity beyond normative and binary constructions of it” (Bryan, 2018, p. 11), it does so in a way that does not account for masculine expressions that may be both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. That is to say, Connell’s (2005) theory defines multiple masculinities in relationship to hegemonic masculinities and does not address masculine expressions that are representative of both hegemonic and multiple masculinities. Connell outlines and describes several distinct masculine expressions including a working-class masculinity, a feminist masculinity, a homosexual masculinity, and a professional, white-collar masculinity all of which are still defined by their relationship to hegemonic masculinity. Bryan (2018) further problematizes the way in which the theory of multiple masculinities is typically used to “explain and explore the experiences of White boys in schools” (p. 12) while excluding the experiences of Black boys. Building on Bryan’s assertion, Connell’s (2005) theory also excludes the varied masculine performances of Latino and bi-racial boys which are represented by some of the participants in the present study. Bryan’s critique exposes the rigid classification of multiple masculinities which demonstrates the need for a theory of masculine performances to include wider cultural representation.

The notion of multiple masculinities essentializes masculinities that are not hegemonic, thereby perpetuating a gender binary separated into the masculine and feminine. Furthermore, Connell’s (2005) theory is exclusively a White masculine theory
and does not represent varied masculine performances that are culturally diverse as well. This exclusivity elicits the need for a theory of masculinity that breaks this binary to accommodate masculinities that can both include hegemonic performances and counter-hegemonic practices and are not restricted by cultural norms of categorization.

Though multiple masculinities has been widely theorized (Bryan, 2018; Connell, 2005; Everitt-Penhale & Ratele, 2015; Paechter, 2012), there is no pedagogical framework to support multiple masculinities in the classroom. That is to say, though teachers may be able to acknowledge the presence of diverse masculine expressions, they likely do not know how to best represent and engage those masculinities in the classroom. The present study adds to the body of educational research on educating boys as the teacher-research proposes ‘hybrid masculinities,’ which leads to what she calls ‘pedagogy of hybrid masculinities.’

Towards a ‘Pedagogy of Hybrid Masculinities’ (PHM)

In this section, the teacher-researcher discusses her conception of ‘hybrid masculinities.’ This conception leads to what the teacher-researcher proposes as a conceptual framework for this study: ‘pedagogy of hybrid masculinity.’

‘Hybrid Masculinities’

The masculinities present in today’s classroom are infinitely diverse and cannot be represented by binary categories nor can they be represented by a single cultural norm. Though the present study builds on Bristol’s (2015) GRP, it further develops the concept to demonstrate the ways in which varied masculinities represented in the classroom require pedagogy with the capacity to represent the unique needs of each’s masculine performance.
As Connell’s (2005) hegemonic masculinity categorizes masculinities by their relationship to and distance from multiple masculinities and hegemonic masculinity, it is not inclusive masculine performances which do not predict or mandate behavior. Similarly, Connell’s (2005) theory defines masculine performance by the absence or presence of hegemonic and feminine behaviors. Schramm-Pate, Lussier, and Jeffries (2008) explain the notion of hybridity as “a new ‘third space’…that is so necessary for helping young people understand their increasingly diverse and interconnected world” (p. 3). Schramm-Pate et al. discuss hybridity in the context of individuals who reject binary categories as a way of moving toward social justice. Critiquing Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, as well as drawing on Schramm-Pate et. al.’s conception of hybridity, the teacher-researcher proposes the notion of ‘hybrid masculinities.’ ‘Hybrid masculinities’ refer to a gender construction that does not predict or mandate behavior. It does not define masculine performance by the absence or presence of hegemonic and feminine behaviors. ‘Hybrid masculinities’ are both produced by and pushing toward social justice. That is to say, boys in today’s middle-level classes are aware of the need for equity and inclusive practices that do not marginalize others; however, this is not to say that boys in today’s classrooms fully embrace all masculine performances. Instead, these ‘hybrid masculinities’ are visible in behaviors that may not only exercise power over others, but also reject the notion that certain behaviors are only for girls or only for boys.

This “hybrid space” (Chaddock & Schramm-Pate, 2008, p. 35) in which masculine performance resides in today’s classrooms creates the potential to break “apparent barriers between marginalized groups” (Jeffries, 2008, p. 137). Frank et al.
(2003) discuss the differences among boys and the multiple complexities and pluralities of masculinities” (p. 120) and argue that boys “intentionally define and redefine masculinities through various counter-hegemonic practices” (p. 124). At times, these behaviors can seem contradictory, as boys work through their socialized understanding of masculinity. Simultaneously, they seek to, “interrupt and destabilize a hegemonic masculinity” (p. 124) by, for example, allowing space for the boy who would rather read at lunch than socialize with a group of friends—although they admit an understanding of reading as a feminine activity. The counter-hegemonic practices of ‘hybrid masculinities’ may be subtle at times, but they help to reject marginalization thereby increasing the achievement and engagement for many who operate well outside the performance of hegemonic masculinity. Due to the nature of ‘hybrid masculinities,’ it is not possible to generalize pedagogy into a single set of strategies that work for all boys. The present study explores limitations to Bristol’s (2015) GRP thus leading to the teacher-researcher’s notion of ‘pedagogy of hybrid masculinity.’

‘Pedagogy of Hybrid Masculinities’

Pedagogy of hybrid masculinity’ (PHM, henceforth) addresses the gaps in Bristol’s (2015) GRP. PHM extends Bristol’s GRP to include masculine expressions which can include the characteristics of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2005) and to demonstrate the ways in which varied masculinities demand repeated validation and representation in the classroom through a highly individualized approach to literacy instruction.

Instead of creating opportunities which prioritize hegemonic ideals, PHM supports the representation of all masculinities in the classroom and provides
opportunities for boys to value others’ masculine expressions while problematizing the
notions of heteronormativity and hegemonic behaviors that marginalize others. PHM
does not overtly reject classroom materials and practices that portray hegemonic
performances but rather positions those performances in the context of other masculine
performances so that boys themselves are able to problematize masculinity that excludes
others thereby promoting counter-hegemonic practices. Implicit in the notion of PHM is
the inclusion of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices that must be addressed
in the classroom. Not only should the classroom create an environment that supports
varied masculine expressions, but it should also provide opportunities to challenge
hegemonic behaviors, promote counter-hegemonic practices, and help boys see the
intersection of both.

PHM recognizes the teacher as the skilled facilitator of instruction who can guide
boys toward learning that supports their ability levels; however, PHM insists on a
student-focused classroom where the needs and interests of all students, both achieving
and underachieving, are placed above the teacher’s pedagogical agenda. The focus shifts
from what the teacher should do to what boys should be doing as they engage in literacy
practice. PHM provides opportunities for boys to articulate their needs but also insists on
a skilled instructor who is able to match needs with interests and discern how to motivate
individual boys as they explore their preferences in the classroom. The contradicting,
constantly negotiating nature of ‘hybrid masculinities’ requires a facilitator who is skilled
in listening to the ways in which boys define their masculine performance, and he or she
must be able to push boys past their hegemonic ideals to reveal their counter-hegemonic
practices that promote achievement, particularly literacy achievement.
PHM does not suggest a single strategy, genre, or structure that works for all boys but rather insists on a student-centered approach to teaching boys. While Bristol’s (2015) GRP is mostly a teacher-focused theoretical perspective on teaching boys, PHM empowers boys to advocate for what best supports their learning and allows the boys themselves to choose the way in which their masculine expression is best supported in the classroom. PHM is unique to each classroom, as it must mirror the individual masculinities represented in the classroom. Although Bristol’s (2015) work insists on the representation of student interests in the classroom, it stops short of fully eliciting the voices of students to direct the way in which content is presented and structured in the classroom. PHM does not simply speak to topics and materials which are presented for instruction, but rather supports a fully-student driven classroom environment that empowers all boys to advocate for what motivates and promotes their learning.

**Summary**

PHM builds on Bristol’s (2015) GRP and Connell’s theory of multiple masculinities to teach the “hybrid space” (Chaddock & Schramm-Pate, 2008, p. 35), which breaks the boundaries of binary masculine categories in today’s classrooms. Frank et al. (2003) explore a culture of boys who exhibit counter-hegemonic practices in conjunction with normalized gender expectations. Their findings align with the present study and shape the teacher-researcher’s notion of PHM which rejects essentialized prescriptions for how to increase literacy achievement for middle-level males. The authors also acknowledge the ways in which “young men negotiate and make sense of competing and overlapping versions of masculinity” (p. 124) in the classroom.
CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Chapter Three serves as the review of related literature. The review of related literature provides an overview of the history of literacy instruction in the United States and current literacy expectations according to the South Carolina State Department of Education to provide context for the present study. It also highlights literature on male underachievement in ELA, the possibilities and challenges of providing relevant curriculum for boys, and gender relevant pedagogies to support them in schools.

The History of Literacy Education

For many, the beginning of schooling for a young person is synonymous with the opportunity to learn to read; however, shifts in cultural values have led to an overall decrease in literacy practice as students are spending less time reading and writing at home and more time engaging with electronic media (Jameson, 2007). The history of language arts education, and thus literacy practice, is varied and somewhat confusing.

During the 1950s and 1960s, progressive education led to literacy experiences that valued both inquiry and collaboration (Goodman, 2011). Teachers encouraged students to pursue topics of personal interest to them, and student opinions in response to reading was valued. Curriculum was student-focused, and students were active participants in the construction of the curriculum. During this time, there was an explosion of texts written especially for young people which allowed progressive teachers with a constructivist philosophy of student experience to “organize individualized self-selected reading programs and to involve children in selecting creative writing topics and learning through
community resources” (Goodman, 2011, p. 19). This time in American education brought about a call for social justice which allowed a place for the individualized concerns and interests of students within literacy practice (Jonsberg, 2004).

Social change, however, brought about a renewed interest in a back-to-basics approach to literacy instruction. Flesch’s (1955/1986) publication of, *Why Can’t Johnny Read* rejected progressive thinking and thus a constructivist approach to literacy claiming that reading was fundamentally a decoding process and placed little significance on meaning-making (Robinson, 1955). At the same time, American fears of losing global dominance increased pressure on the education system to focus on rote skills leading to a literacy model that emphasized the teaching of Standard English “behavioristically as a second language to speakers of non-or sub-standard dialects” (Goodman, 2011, p. 20).

The 1970s and 1980s opened the door to future constructivist thinking in the area of literacy instruction as new research valued students’ native dialects and experiences leading to the era of whole language instruction (Anderson, 1984; Watson, 1984). The whole language era energized teachers and fostered relationships between teachers and students as they learned to value what students brought to the classroom. Literacy instruction was conducted using literature, not basal texts (Goodman, 2011), and, in the early 1980s, prominent educational researchers like Wirt and Kirst (1982) predicted that the decade would see further development of the new strategies introduced in the 1970s. However, the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983) quickly changed the educational tide by describing the condition of education in American as nothing short of mediocre. The report inextricably connected education with economics and cited decline literacy and SAT scores as powerful
indicators of America’s failing future (Mehta, 2015). The report made schools and
teachers responsible for the failure or success of students and was the beginning of
standardization, school accountability, and a top-down approach to improving the
education system that Mehta (2015) argues both history and research have proven make
little impact on improving schools.

A Nation at Risk served as a precursor for further changes in the 1990s after the
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) released reports of even further
decline in literacy (Goodman, 2011). Shortly after, the No Child Left Behind Act
(NCLB) forced educators to see literacy as a socioeconomic practice. The Act placed
great pressure on educators to measure learning in a quantifiable way that, according to
Kozol (2005), one of the leading progressive thinkers and advocates for classrooms that
promoted social justice in the 1960s, actually stifles the psychological growth and
development of young readers (Goodman, 2011; Taylor, 2010).

As standardization started to shape how literacy performance was measured, so
did the practices of literacy teachers searching for ways to grow literacy skills in a newly
quantifiable environment. Cassidy and Ortlieb (2012) conducted an ethnographic study to
determine which topics and strategies were popular during the decade, and which faded
from the forefront of literacy education. Their study assembled a sample of educational
leaders including policy-makers, teachers, and university professors who were surveyed
each year for ten years either over the phone or in person. While they examined several
topics such as “guided reading” (p. 142) that became popular and quickly faded, others,
namely “new literacies” (p. 142), “informational/non-fiction texts” (p. 142), and the
response-to-intervention process began to emerge in the latter part of the decade. It is
these recent literacy trends, particularly informational/non-fiction text, which inform the context of the present study.

“Response to Intervention (RTI)” (Cassidy & Ortlieb, 2012, p. 143) emerged as a topic that had a profound impact on curriculum and policy makers in 2010. The RTI process identifies readers who perform below their grade level through an analysis of standardized text performance and teacher recommendation and places students in special education and other remediation programs to provide additional support, and continuous progress monitoring. According to Cassidy and Ortlieb, the RTI process has had an impact on the number of students identified for special education services. The participants included in the present study did not receive special education services, but some had participated in the previously mentioned three-tiered RTI process at DMS. Still, many performed below grade level according to South Carolina’s College and Career Readiness Standards (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017).

Additionally, a focus on reading informational text, as opposed to literary text, emerged in the latter part of the decade in response to the notion of college and career readiness. Cassidy and Ortlieb (2012) surmise that this focus is at least partly due to educators’ feeling strapped for time in trying to address new, rigorous standards. The present study looks specifically at how boys practice literacy skills in reading informational texts as this is a high-priority skill according to the South Carolina College and Career Readiness Standards (South Carolina Department of Education, 2007).

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards in many states across the United States forced states like South Carolina, which did not adopt the Common Core State Standards, to revise their current reading standards and demand greater rigor in the
ELA classroom. Cassidy and Ortlieb’s (2012) study indicates that these ambitious standards have made the concept of “struggling/striving readers…a hot topic” (p. 143) in the community of literacy educators. Cassidy and Ortlieb challenge educators to “discuss how planning and instruction can be modified to prepare students to meet these increased expectations” (p. 144), and the present study contributes the body of research concerned with supporting male readers to meet the new demands of college and career readiness.

**Literacy Education in South Carolina**

The problem of practice under investigation in the present study is situated in a South Carolina public middle school evaluated under an ever-changing accountability system that, during the 2016-2017 school year, tested all students in grades 6-8 in all four core academic areas. Students took the South Carolina College-and-Career-Ready Assessments (SC READY) for math, reading, and writing and the South Carolina Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (SCPASS) for science and social studies (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). Schools in South Carolina receive ratings based on student performance on these tests, and the state publishes these ratings in an annual report card (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). According to the Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s (2009) report, the information gleaned from the report card does little to demonstrate South Carolina schools’ performance compared to schools across the country because of “its ambitious proficiency standards” (p. 9). Still, districts in South Carolina are ranked and judged based on their report card scores, and South Carolina is regularly considered low performing when compared to other states’ educational systems.
Because of testing demands and state data that suggests that 50% of students in grades 3-8 in South Carolina do not meet expectations in English, the school district in which this study was conducted has developed a tight curriculum designed to prepare students for performance on SCPASS and SCREADY (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). A complex system of curriculum maps directing teachers toward standards-based instruction marries teachers to the instruction of skills that are assessed on end-of-the-year assessments. Anecdotal evidence collected by the teacher-researcher reveals that teachers fear wasting any time that does not directly contribute to performance on state tests, and they regret that they do not have time to incorporate student interest in their curricula.

Schools in South Carolina and across the country continue to be measured and evaluated by quantitative test data, suggesting that learning can be quantified based on the results of a single test. Qualitative measures to assess students’ reading ability, in particular, are omitted from achievement data that could elicit the voices of students to demonstrate alternative evidence for academic achievement. Kliebard (2013) considers this a “simplistic and vulgar scientism” (p. 77) and proposes classroom research as the ultimate way to measure and evaluate learning in a discipline like ELA. There is no foreseeable future in which standards and high-stakes testing do not drive literacy curriculum in the United States, so teachers must learn to operate within that system to support all learners, including boys. Quantitative test data can shed light on groups whose literacy performance does not meet grade-level expectations (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). The present study addresses quantitative, summative test data from the SC Ready assessment, as well as anecdotal evidence that suggests the male subgroup
consistently underperforms the female subgroup in reading. This study also considers the connection between literacy achievement and engagement and boys’ individual masculinities represented in the ELA classroom.

The Problem with Literacy Achievement

Analysis of the history of literacy achievement in the United States and the current conditions of literacy instruction and assessment in South Carolina only scratches the surface on problematizing the measurement of literacy achievement for the particular population under investigation in the present study. The following section highlights three major factors that serve as barriers to boys’ literacy achievement. These factors include unnecessary gender comparisons, standardized assessment measures, and a heavy emphasis on informational text.

The Problem with Comparisons

Watson (2011) acknowledges that “boys are often presented as the new disadvantaged victims of the feminization of schooling” but argues that this simplification not only minimizes the successes of feminism but also further disadvantages boys and girls by lumping them into opposing and intrinsically different categories. All students, including males, experience disadvantage for a variety of reasons including racism, classism, and sexism. Specifically, in reference to literacy, students establish their literacy practices through their cultural and social experiences making literacy a social construction and practice (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Watson (2011) believes this “draws attention to the importance of a sense of belonging” (p. 782) for successful literacy practices to be established. Her research is grounded both in the belief
that it is not reasonable to generalize underachievement as a male problem, and that literacy is a highly social construction that is intrinsically different for each student.

Through a series of interviews with both teachers and male and female students in a ninth grade English classroom, Watson’s (2011) qualitative study examined the teacher’s strategies for reaching under-achieving students, the students’ in-school and out-of-school literacy practices, and the connections between both. When looking specifically at the students in the study, Watson found that stereotypical assumptions about what boys need and what girls need in the classroom alienate both genders. She discovered that “high-stakes tests and the curriculum...resulted in a divorce between the acquisition of literacy skills and content, rendering literacy instruction meaningless and irrelevant” (p. 785). Ultimately, she found that the problem of underachievement in the classroom she studied had little to do with traditionally accepted gender behaviors at all but rather a destructive and over-simplified understanding of ELA as a feminine discipline. The present study adds to Watson’s work by considering the ways in which the language arts classroom can help boys conceptualize literacy as a practice that fits within all gender performances.

Watson (2011) believes that the best way to increase literacy skills for both boys and girls is by “taking into account students’ backgrounds and social relationships...[to] create a learning environment that acknowledges and values out-of-school literacy practices” (p. 791). At the same time, Watson et al. (2010) caution that the ways in which boys are compared to girls academically turns school into a sporting event—a hegemonic practice—that inherently includes winners and losers, and that is not the kind of purposeful environment needed to create an educational experience for all students. This
misdirects teachers’ attention away from seeing students as individuals and “over-simplifies boys” (p. 358). This oversimplified approach to literacy education for boys utilizes stereotyping to feign an intrinsic juxtaposition between boys and girls and thereby assuming that policies that benefit girls in school naturally undermine the ability of boys to develop (Watson et al., 2010).

Martino and Berrill (2003) consider this issue of male underachievement a cry for social justice and reject that the idea that masculine behavior can be reduced to a measurement of testosterone. Instead, the social construction of masculinity must be considered. In response to pundits who say that feminists have incited a “war against boys” (p. 65), Kimmel (2006) argues that, the feminists have, in fact, been arguing “to expand the emotional and psychological repertoire of boys, enabling them to express a wider emotional and creative range” (p. 69) for many years. The present study contributes to the body of literature on literacy underachievement by examining pedagogy that can be applied to literacy practice for both boys and girls and not focusing on comparing one gender group to another.

The Problem with the Tests

A discussion on the problem with literacy achievement would be incomplete without challenging the assessments commonly used to measure and define literacy achievement. Kirkland and Jackson (2009) critique assessments by first defining literacy as a cultural and symbolic practice and highlight the subjectivity of the practice as “situated understanding of the consequences of symbolic tool use within a particular group” (p. 279). Thus, advocating for male-centered pedagogies problematizes the assessments used in literacy practice. Although the teacher-researcher used a district-
mandated assessment to measure literacy achievement, she also elicited the perspectives of the male participants to demonstrate the ways in which assessment of boys’ reading ability may require assessments that break the boundaries of traditional multiple-choice assessments that mimic state-mandated assessments like SC Ready (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017).

Required literacy assessments in the SSD are too numerous to count. Investigating this issue, Reed (2015) interviewed twelve middle-level teachers in a Texas school district to determine their perceptions of required interim assessments. Because “data-based decision-making practices have become more common with the increase in accountability policies regarding students’ reading performance” (p. 1), Reed sought teachers’ opinions on the validity of reading assessments and asked how teachers were actually using the data retrieved from these assessments. During these focus group interviews, Reed found that teachers repeatedly voiced a lack of confidence in the assessments, and their lack of confidence led to little use of the assessment data to drive instruction. At best, teachers were using summative data to separate students into high-achieving and low-achieving groups and “treating those within each broad group as homogenous” (p. 3).

Reed (2015) also points to over-assessment as a major factor contributing to assessments’ lack of relevance and validity according to teachers in the study. One teacher in Reed’s study commented, “Students are benchmarked to death” (p. 6), and as a
result, students are not willing to put forth their best effort. The present study seeks to elicit boys’ perspectives regarding these types of literacy assessments.

Kirkland (2011) studies the experience of African American males in the language arts classroom. The author problematizes literacy assessment methods, as they are intended only to measure students’ performance on a set of standards that “could be interpreted narrowly and theoretically loose as traditional print-based literacies that would, predictably, tread backwards to conventions of ‘standard spoken as well as written English’” (p. 373). Kirkland argues that the social practice of literacy can be neither taught nor assessed outside of its social and cultural context. For Kirkland, literacy is a highly reflective and therapeutic practice and standardized assessments lead to pedagogy that “limit[s] what teachers can do with students” (p. 378) to engage students in literacy practice that can “help and heal the socially wounded” (p. 378). Although the teacher-researcher used a standardized assessment to measure reading ability, she did so in the context of the participants’ perspectives on their literacy achievement that revealed the need for literacy practice and assessment that allows boys to negotiate their masculine identities through literacy practice.

The Problem with the Texts

Marks (2008) invites educators to consider how achievement gaps reflect “overall inequality in education” (p. 93) and insists that educational leaders must open their eyes to ways in which educational policies both advantage and disadvantage groups of students. Many researchers insist that simply singling out boys as a disadvantaged group actually blinds educators to issues that affect all students (Kimmel, 2006; Watson et al., 2010; Watson, 2011). For example, Topping, Samuels, and Paul (2008) conducted a
study that looked at overall reading performance of both boys and girls, and though they found pedagogical implications for boys, their findings address achievement implications for all students. Interested in the cause for literacy underachievement in America despite the fact that American schools devote “more hours per week on average to reading instruction than any other country” (p. 506), Topping et al. explored how literacy achievement is affected by the types of texts students use to practice literacy skills. The study analyzed 45,670 students’ literacy achievement scores across two different computerized programs: Accelerated Reader and STAR Reading. They compared students on a number of factors including gender which revealed that, in general, girls performed better on reading assessments than boys. However, the most relevant information came from the achievement comparison across the text genre, which aligns with the present research study. Topping et al. found that, when given the option to choose, the boys in the study tended to read less overall and were more likely to choose nonfiction texts. However, when the study controlled for volume and text type, they found no significant difference between males’ and females’ achievement levels.

In the era of focus on college and career readiness (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017), many districts like the one in which the present study takes place have implemented tight curriculum that places a heavy emphasis on the reading of non-fiction texts. Because of this constraint, the present study addresses engagement with nonfiction texts. However, when looking at achievement across both genders, Topping, et al (2008) found that “reading larger amounts of non-fiction might have deleterious effects on pupil reading achievement gain” (p. 515). The authors note that 17% of the students in the study chose “20% or more non-fiction; however, those 17% gained significantly less” (p.
over the course of the study when compared to those who read more fiction texts. The study revealed that boys and low-achieving students were far more likely to choose non-fiction texts over fiction texts, thereby creating or widening an achievement gap. Topping et al. suspect that this alarming effect could be due to the way in which reluctant readers tend to lack focus and that the structure of non-fiction text can both promote and support this type of reading.

The present study seeks to understand better the findings of Topping et al. by allowing boys to articulate the way in which they engage with informational/non-fiction texts that are required by the existing curriculum in the SSD. A heavy volume of non-fiction texts is common because of new college and career readiness standards like those in South Carolina. Thus, the present study examined the possibility that one mode of text selection might better engage boys in the reading of non-fiction, informational texts. The present study adds to the findings of Topping et al. to allow the voices of the participants to explain their experience reading of self-selected and teacher-selected informational texts and to discuss the ways in which masculine performance affects middle-level males’ choice process and literacy practice.

**Boys and Literacy Achievement**

The last twenty years were wrought with research endorsing or rejecting feminist theories on the “construction of gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability” (Frank et al., 2003, p. 119; Curry, 2017). After years of challenging male privilege and hailing the successes of females across the globe, the politically complicated issue of male underachievement exposes itself in secondary classrooms each day. It is easy to blame cultural issues such as “absent fathers, overprotective mothers, and contemporary views
of boyhood which limit boys’ masculine potential,” (p. 120) but the problem of male underachievement is much larger and more complex. According to Frank et al., perpetuating the notion of males as a singularly identified group misrepresents what is actually going on in the classroom for male students as individuals, and this does not provide a clear understanding of what to do to solve the issue of male underachievement. This section explores multiple factors that directly contribute to boys’ underachievement in literacy including essentializing boys, gender stereotype threat, the culture of hegemonic masculinity, and the damage of marginalization. While the present study does not argue that these factors directly influenced all boys, it does acknowledge the trend of male underachievement can be attributed to these factors.

**Essentializing Boys**

While considering the social construction of literacy and the negative consequences of lumping all male students into one category, it is important to discuss the multiple perspectives and arguments that attempt to explain the phenomenon of male underachievement. Guarian (2002), a leading voice for biological determinism of gender argues that much of boys’ behavior which contributes to underachievement can be traced back to the presence of testosterone which affects brain development. Guarian uses this argument to essentialize all boys’ behavior, arguing that boys, when developed properly, behave in a way that is not conducive to the school environment. Guarian makes claims about boys that marginalize those who do not conform to the standard set of behaviors outlined as typical boy behavior (i.e. horseplay, aggression, competition), making any male who, for example, craves physical touch or maintains high levels of empathy sub-standard. Sax (2007), a leading advocate for single-sex education highlights those same
stereotypical characteristics of adolescent males to promote a classroom in which students are “welcome to stand or sit or curl up under their desks or jump up and down if they like” (p. 41). However, he perpetuates the notion that girls are naturally better at school and advocates that genders should be separated so boys’ behavior does not influence girls’ learning.

Although the present study acknowledges biological differences between boys and girls, the poststructural perspective (Capper, 1992) of the present study rejects a binary gender definition and is more in line with researchers who look more closely at the differences among boys than the differences between boys and girls. White (2007) argues that referring to all boys, specifically in a conversation about achievement, does not serve an understanding of what helps boys learn. White’s (2007) qualitative study looked specifically at the performance of grade ten students taking the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). The study’s sample included only students who did not receive additional services in a gifted program or special education program. White’s initial goal was to determine if widespread gender gaps were a reality, or if gender differences were evident within subgroups; she hypothesized that there were far more differences that existed within the group of males rather than between males and females.

White (2007) used t-tests and descriptive statistics of OSSLT test data, specifically data on students’ performance on information, graphic, and narrative texts. She found that “results from the MANOVA indicated that gender accounted for less than one per cent of the reading achievement” (p. 564). White further divided the groups into two tracks of students—an academic track and an applied track. These tracks indicate goals after college and, when these subgroups were identified, more differences began to
emerge. For example, boys in the academic track far outperformed girls on analysis of graphic text while girls somewhat outperformed boys on the reading of informational text. Ultimately, White determined that “there appears to be little evidence that the observed gender differences in reading achievement have practical consequence” (p. 570) and warns that pedagogy designed to meet the developmental needs of boys is fundamentally useless. In fact, she argues that attacking the underachievement of all boys actually increases the risk that certain subgroups of boys will underachieve in literacy tasks. White rejects pedagogy that essentializes males and suggests that looking toward males who are achieving actually provides more information on how to educate all students who underachieving more effectively.

White’s (2007) study is in line with the present study which rejects a blanket approach for the instruction of all boys and argues for more individualized instruction for all students. White claims that the “generalization derived [from test data] can be oversimplified” (p. 558). Like White’s study, the present study looks specifically at males not being served with extended services within the school and applies a pedagogy within the group of males to determine how individual students engage with the reading process when they either receive a text from the teacher or choose a text themselves. White’s study does not discuss pedagogical differences that could inform the data regarding why certain boys exhibit higher achievement than others do.

Skelton and Francis (2011), however, examine the connection between socially accepted masculinities and literacy achievement. They argue a close relationship between masculinity performance and literacy performance and suggest that boys who perform well actually embody a kind of “renaissance masculinity” (p. 457) which rejects the
notion that boys should not be successful in or engaged with literacy practice. Skelton and Francis examine the identity of boys who are successful in literacy practice and offer a determination as to why they are successful. Skelton and Francis (2011) ground their study in rejecting “essentialist understandings of gender as physiologically and cognitively based” (p. 457) and specifically take issue with “boy-friendly texts” (p. 459) promoted by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) as the antithesis of “critical literacy” (Skelton & Francis, 2011, p. 459).

Skelton and Francis (2011) interviewed and observed 71 high-achieving eighth grade students, of which 35 were boys, to determine how some boys are able to “do well at literacy and maintain successful masculinities” (p. 461). Their study included interviews with high-achieving boys and observations of them in their English classes. Their study indicates that the boys’ teachers defined high-achievement, and the researchers acknowledge the subjectivity of the socially constructed label.

Skelton and Francis (2011) summarized their findings into two key categories. First, they discovered that pedagogical strategies designed to promote a boy-friendly classroom do not promote achievement for the majority of males. Second, they determined that the ways in which peers accept boys’ masculinities is actually a determining factor for literacy success. By observing both males and females, Skelton and Francis determined that gender was a determining factor in few events in the classroom and, in line with White (2007); differences among a group of male students are far greater than the differences between male and female students. Their study revealed that successfully literate boys show great interest in literacy activities thereby rejecting an essentialist understanding of gender behavior. They argue that curriculum that does not
problematize strategies and text choices that essentialize all boys actually further contributes to achievement gaps for some male students. The present research study operates within these findings and looks specifically at pedagogy that does not dictate interests for male students but rather represents and validates all masculinities represented in the ELA classroom to promote literacy achievement.

Although Skelton and Francis (2011) problematize curriculum that promotes stereotypes, they also expose how socialized gender expectations hinder achievement for some males. Skelton and Francis found that the ways in which boys perform their masculinities defines how they will participate in literacy practice. In their sample of boys, they found that the boys most accepted by their peers and who exemplified popularity were also the same boys who indicated they enjoyed their English class. They were also more likely to participate in class, express approval of class activities, and take on leadership roles in the classroom. Most importantly, these males demonstrated a willingness to perform roles perceived to be feminine, and the researchers assume this issued from confidence that their masculinity had already been accepted by peers. Isom’s (2012) research on gender supports these findings, which claim that adolescents who are confident in their gender expressions are more likely to play with non-conforming roles in social settings. Skelton and Francis (2011) maintain that educators, specifically literacy educators, must look at the ways in which “dominant modes of masculinity shape [boys’] engagement with literacy” (p. 473) suggesting that literacy educators are responsible for how their environment and curriculum allow masculinity to be performed.

The present study allows boys’ individual voices to highlight pedagogy that engages them and thereby maximizes literacy achievement. Kimmell (2009) maintains “it
would be a mistake to assume that each [boy] conforms fully to a regime of peer-influenced and enforced behaviors…or shares all traits and attitudes with everyone else” (p. 7). Likewise, it is a mistake to assume a small set of pedagogies or texts can meet the needs of such a varied population of students represented by the boys in a classroom.

**Gender Stereotype Threat**

Essentializing boys’ behavior leads to stereotyped expectations for boys’ performance in the classroom. Educators who endorse these ideas risk lowering their expectations of boys’ academic performance (Jones & Myhill, 2004). Hartley and Sutton (2013) draw on the work of Steele (1997) to reconceptualize stereotype threat, a racialized phenomenon, to explain how gender performance expectations influence student academic performance. They explain, “Stereotype threat occurs when individuals’ task performance suffers as a result of their awareness that the social group they belong to is not expected to do well” (Hartley & Sutton, 2013, p. 1716). In their quantitative study, they told an experimental group of 238 students that girls were expected to do better on a given test and then tested both boys and girls with the same test. In their study, “boys performed significantly worse” (p. 1724) than girls in the experimental group, and they found that girls showed no significant improvement based on the positive stereotyped performance suggestion. These results suggest that when teachers essentialize all boys into a singular group with a single set of behavior expectations, they perpetuate the culture of underachievement for boys.

*Teacher bias and hegemonic culture.* Hartley and Sutton’s (2013) findings account for some boys’ salient understanding that girls are better readers than boys, and Raag, Kusiak, Tumilty, Kelemen, Bernheimer, Bond (2011) claim that teachers’
expectation of how boys will perform in literacy activities actually has the most significant effect on their performance. In a mixed-methods study including 108 preschool children, Raag et al. collected demographic data including maternal education, gender, parents’ relationship status, race, socioeconomics, and home language. They interviewed parents, teachers, and students in the study, and administered multiple literacy assessments throughout the school year. Although they predicted there would be achievement differences along socioeconomic lines, results indicated that school literacy programs were closing gaps between students living in literacy-rich home environments and those who did not. The study revealed that gender had virtually no effect on literacy performance at the preschool level; however, interview data revealed why gender gaps in literacy performance may be forthcoming. Teachers interviewed in the study revealed significant differences in their perceptions of the student readers based on their gender. Raag et al. believe that combatting these perceptions could play a significant role in preventing the literacy gap between males and females from forming in the future.

Raag et al. (2011) suggests that classroom cultures that support gender stereotypes typically exacerbate support for only heteronormative expressions and thus further contribute to underachievement for some boys. Their findings suggest that young boys who choose to read for pleasure are often discouraged from literacy practice by their peers who perceive reading to be a violation of hegemonic expressions of masculinity. Their study suggests that the cause of underachievement for some males has little to do with ability but rather that gender stereotypes and heteronormativity create underachievement. Although this socialization begins early in elementary school (Bristol, 2015), the teacher-researcher’s anecdotal evidence prior to the present study indicates
that policing strategies that perpetuate heteronormative expectations are common and directly affect boys’ willingness to participate in literacy practice. Middle-level boys frequently police each other’s behavior to match gender expectations, and often this policing directly marginalizes those willing to participate in literacy practice (Barnes, 2012; Martino; 2000; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). The present study extends the work of Raag et al. (2011) to determine whether literacy practice that incorporates teacher-selected texts or student-selected texts best serves to support boys’ literacy achievement and engagement through the validation of diverse masculinities in the middle-level language arts classroom.

Teacher bias and student self-concept. Similarly, Retelsdorf, Schwartz, & Asbrock (2015) conducted a longitudinal study that looked closely at the effect of gender stereotypes on teacher’s expectations of boys’ performance in reading. Through a survey administered to 1,508 fifth graders in rural Germany, Retelsdorf et al. asked students questions about their self-concept related to reading achievement and then re-administered the survey during the middle of those same students’ sixth-grade year. Shortly after the second survey was given to students, a survey assessing teachers’ gender stereotypes was given to the 54 teachers who were reading instructors for the students included in the study. The study compared survey data of the students with the survey data from the teachers to see the relationship “of teachers’ gender stereotypes to students’ reading self-concept” (p. 188). In addition, reading achievement test data was compared to both students’ self-concept and teachers’ gender stereotypes. Their hypothesis was confirmed as boys whose teachers reported the highest scores for gender stereotypes also reported the lowest self-concept in reading; there appeared to be no effect on girls in the
study. Unfortunately, boys’ self-concept in reading is further compounded when they show previous poor reading performance. Thus, Retelsdorf et al. asserts that teachers have a profound impact on students’, especially boys’, reading self-concept, and they argue that because teachers have no control over past performance, they can reverse poor self-concept by controlling for gender stereotypes in the classroom. They advocate for extensive professional development designed to demonstrate to teachers how to “become aware of and resistant to stereotypes” (p. 192). The present study contributes to the body of literature concerning the connection between social expectations and underachievement by positioning the teacher as the facilitator of masculinity validation, literacy achievement, and literacy engagement, for this reason, the action plan for the present study includes extensive professional development designed to inform teachers’ pedagogy when working with middle-level male readers.

**Underachievement and Hegemonic Masculinity**

Bristol (2015) argues that the beginning of male underachievement occurs as part of boys’ socialization process at school as they become acquainted with the notion that, according to hegemonic expectations, there are certain things that boys are allowed to do and certain things that boys should not do. Insisting that male underperformance in school is related to the social construction of hegemonic masculinity, Martino and Berrill (2003) argue that heteronormative masculinity permeates the social interactions of males throughout their school experience and that this, in fact, contributes significantly to their disengagement with learning as schools continue to ignore the varied diverse masculinities represented in today’s schools. For example, some males’ heteronormative response to failure significantly limits their willingness to pursue academic success; their
need to appear masculine excludes many academic activities (Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Ward, 2014).

Poteat, Kimmel, and Wilchins (2011) studied the connection between the expressions of hegemonic masculinity, the occurrence of homophobia as evidenced by student behavior, body language, and general attitude. Their purpose was to determine how boys’ understanding of masculinity inhibits their growth in the classroom and how teachers can acknowledge and value a new kind of masculinity that does not necessarily insist that all boys be “aggressive, competitive, and rambunctious little devils” (Kimmel, 2006, p. 67). The study conducted by Poteat et al. (2011) included 248 students between the ages of 11 and 18 from a rural Illinois school who were given a survey measuring students’ perceptions of bullying, fighting, aggression, homophobic language, violence, and masculine and feminine activities. The researchers used descriptive statistics of survey data, to determine that boys who regularly participate in normative masculine activities are more likely to engage in homophobic and aggressive behaviors towards others. Poteat et al. assert that when boys exhibit aggressive behavior towards others, their desire is often to shield themselves from other boys who express the same hegemonic masculinities, and those behaviors alone can create a tumultuous experience for male students and teachers inside the classroom. Through this explanation, Poteat et al. actually see poor performance in class not only as a way of supporting hegemonic behaviors but also as means of camaraderie with other students. Even more disturbing is the tendency for these aggressive expressions of hegemonic masculinity in adolescence to lead to violence and aggression toward others, often women, in adulthood. With this in mind, teachers of any content area have a responsibility not only to learn what works for
individual male students, but also to teach a new language of masculinity in the classroom. According to these researchers, the cause of male underachievement in the classroom can be attributed to how well the underachievement supports hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, they expose how dangerous it is for a teacher to support notions of hegemonic masculinity that often lead to violence and aggression toward others in adulthood. According to their findings, instead of tolerating hegemonic behaviors, teachers should seek ways of helping boys to rewrite masculine performance so that learning can occur.

Poteat et al. (2011) also note that some males were represented in the study who both engaged in normative masculine behavior absent of homophobic behaviors toward other suggesting that these males practiced masculinities that occupy a space that encompasses behaviors represented by both hegemonic and multiple masculinities (Connell, 2005). The present study extends the work of Poteat et al. to include an examination of how literacy achievement and engagement are tied to the performance of these varied masculinities while also discussing the ways in which the teacher plays a significant role in mitigating hegemonic behaviors that are counterproductive to student learning and meaningful collaboration.

**The Damage of Marginalization**

As Poteat et al. (2011) point out, boys who practice hegemonic masculinity in the classroom exercise their power over others through diverse means and these behaviors can have a profound effect on student achievement. Through masculinity policing (Barnes, 2012; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016), boys receive constant messages about how boys should perform their masculinity, and, in the classroom, the behaviors are often
directly related to academic achievement and engagement. Barnes (2012) argues that there are three significant roles in policing practices in the classroom. The “comedian and …the group leader” (p. 242) use humor and overt disruption to both lighten the mood if it is perceived to be too serious and to directly ridicule others when their behavior does not match hegemonic expectations. Others play the role of the “henchman” (p. 242) whose behaviors are in line with Connell’s (2005) notion of “complicity” (p. 79) and support the initiatives of the “group leader” (p. 242) while others choose to neither engage nor subvert policing. Connell (2005) addresses this complicity to include individuals who “have some connection with the hegemonic project but do not embody hegemonic masculinity” (p. 79). The third role is that of the individual who is directly targeted for behaviors that are outside the set of behaviors considered acceptable by those in power. While the present study reveals these roles are limited and do not represent all masculinities present in the classroom, the ramifications of marginalized masculinities must be discussed in connection with boys and underachievement. The teacher-researcher argues that validation of one’s masculine expression links closely to one’s willingness to participate in classroom activities; several studies argue that when one’s masculinity is invalidated to the point of marginalization, many obstacles prevent engagement and practice in the classroom (Kent, 2004; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011).

The language arts classroom is certainly not the only schooling experience which marginalizes gender non-conformity. Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) initially looked at socially accepted forms of masculinity in the physical education classroom but quickly shifted their focus to males who overtly expressed masculinities that were unacceptable to those “with authority and social power” (p. 38). Although their research focuses on the
physical education classroom, their findings apply directly to the ELA classroom, where some boys tend to avoid participation in literacy practice; both the ELA classroom and the physical education classroom are rich with often-stereotyped gender performances. Tischler and McCaughty describe “boys’ bodies as objects of and agents in social practice” (p. 38) and thus observed the ways in which boys’ bodies were used to reject activities in the physical education classroom. Their qualitative study was conducted in two suburban middle schools. Over a period of 13 weeks, they observed boys in physical education classes and identified three boys who overtly withdrew from activities in class. Once their subjects were identified, they met during 19 group sessions during which the boys wrote, drew, and discussed their feelings and attitudes toward physical education activities. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to unwrap the boys’ perceptions of their physical education classes.

Their findings revealed that they had identified a group of boys who understood that they were “not doing boy right” (Tischler & McCaughty, 2011, p. 41) and interpreted that message repeated by both classmates and teachers during the physical education classroom. They exercised masculinities that were marginalized in the classroom because they did not perform to expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Their lack of coordination and non-aggressive behaviors caused others to reject their masculinity altogether; as a result, these boys used their bodies to shrink from others. One boy was able to articulate his own behavior: “If you look like you don’t care of if you look like you’re not trying very hard, they can’t yell at you or make fun of you for doing it wrong” (p. 43). During observations of class, the researchers noted both teasing and blatant ignoring from peers, but most disturbingly, they observed that the majority of
interactions between the subjects and their teachers was negative, even mocking in some instances.

Although the boys appeared to reject all physical activities in class, during the small group sessions, the boys expressed desire to participate in some of the same activities. Despite directly communicating to the researchers that they disliked all sport and physical play, they willingly engaged in activities like throwing the Frisbee, dribbling a basketball, and even throwing a football. The researchers found that “supporting their ways of doing boy” (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011, p. 44) created a safe environment in which the boys were willing to engage in and learn from activities they would reject in environments that made them feel marginalized.

Like Raag et al. (2011) who points to teachers’ stereotyped gender expectations as a source of underachievement, Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) suggest that teachers who maintain environments that support all expressions of masculinity actually encourage students’ willingness to engage in activities that they reject in other environments. The boys in their study were more than willing to engage in play through physical activity when they were with friends and adults who supported their masculinities. In the context of the physical education classroom, Tischler and McCaughtry encourage teachers to widen their range of physical activities to include more than traditional sports and engage in the process of understanding the varied masculinities that students bring to the classroom. These findings translate directly to the language arts classroom, as teachers must be willing to widen their curriculum and pedagogy to embrace a wider audience. At the same time, they must be willing to represent the interests of the many, vastly different boys they teach. Just as Tischler and
McCaughtry saw increased engagement in focus groups when boys felt their masculinities were validated, the present study asked how to represent masculinities in literacy practice thereby creating an environment similar to the inclusive space created by Tischler and McCaughtry.

The following section discusses pedagogical considerations utilized in the present study to create “conditions that can increase engagement and learning” (Bristol, 2015, p. 62) and explains how the reading workshop model can facilitate such conditions using both teacher-selected and student selected texts while representing boys’ interests and masculine performances.

**Gender Relevant Literacy Practices**

The present study is situated within the larger body of research that examines the connection between boys’ literacy achievement and engagement and boys’ masculine performance. The reading workshop model was utilized for both the teacher-selected text group and the student-selected text group in the present study. This model allows for interaction between the teacher and students as they engage in literacy practice, which can serve as a way of reifying boys’ worldview, allowing for the representation of students’ identities in the instructional context (Bristol, 2015). The following section discusses the pedagogical model of reading workshop utilized in the present study and the ways in which the model supports literacy achievement and builds a reading community. In addition to the explanation of the reading workshop model, this section concludes with a collection of studies that discuss student text choice as a way to represent students’ interests in literacy practice followed by the way in which the present
study problematizes the notion of text choice as a strategy that essentializes what boys need in the classroom.

**The Reading Workshop Model**

Miller and Higgins (2008) describe the reading workshop model as a way in which teachers can engage students that “not only provide[s] authentic learning experiences, but also prepare[s] students to pass state tests” (p. 124). The present study is situated within a curriculum that is explicitly designed to provide students with experiences to help them succeed on the SC Ready assessment (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). The reading workshop model provided the teacher-researcher with the ability to teach required standards and utilize provided curriculum content while also providing the opportunity to immerse students fully in independent and shared reading. Miller and Higgins explain that the reading workshop model allows students time to “independently at their own level and pace or in a whole class or small group setting” (p. 126). In this approach, they also read for extended periods, respond to their reading in a variety of formats, share their reading with others, and engage in some kind of literacy instruction with the teacher. All these components were included in the present study for both the teacher-selected and student-selected text groups.

**Text selection and teacher control.** In an action research study set in an urban middle school, Roessing (2007) used the reading workshop model to give control back to her students who she explains exhibited behaviors similar to those observed by the teacher-researcher, but she acknowledges that the control issue is a major barrier for teachers as they begin to implement reading workshop. At the onset of her study, Roessing implemented the workshop in a way that closely resembled the teacher-selected
group in the present study. She selected texts that all students read and responded to using teacher-made response journals and peer-to-peer discussions. She eventually graduated students to the selection of their own texts while embedding teacher-selected texts on occasion. Roessing emphasizes the importance of the reading community that was created during reading workshop and explains that community, as the catalyst, allowed for more successful independent student-selected reading much later in the school year. As students were eventually assessed on their reading performance through analysis of student responses, Roessing implemented student interviews similar to those used in the present study to allow the voices of students in the class to explain the individual effectiveness of the reading workshop. Roessing found that students improved their ability to respond critically to their reading over the course of the study. Students also cultivated personal confidence in their reading ability and appreciated the way in which reading workshop allowed “everyone [to] read at their own pace and not worry about it” (p. 51). This outcome demonstrates a hegemonic practice that resists the potential for marginalizing students by their performance or engagement. The present study mirrors Roessing’s text selection modes to include the reality of implementing a reading workshop in the context of prescriptive curriculum in the era of high-stakes accountability to examine the results of each text-selection practice: teacher text selection and student text selection.

**The reading workshop and boys’ engagement.** Looking specifically at how reading workshops support the expression of masculinities in the language arts classroom, Dunn’s (2016) qualitative study included a series of interviews with teachers who were willing to shift their literacy instruction to a workshop model. The three-step
interview process explored teachers’ previous experience with boys’ literacy practice and their current experiences with the reading circle model. Dunn details the teachers’ perception of the reading workshop and the ways in which teachers believed the literacy circle model impacted boys’ literacy practice. Many of the teachers expressed preconceived stereotypes about boys’ reading ability and had previous experiences in traditional school settings that valued isolated skill practice and prescribed curriculum over student engagement and interests.

Following the shifting of their pedagogy to a reading workshop model, Dunn (2016) found a common trend among all participating teachers. These teachers noted the ways in which the reading workshop allowed them to participate in the reading practice with the students, thereby building relationships which inherently support the ways in which those boys choose to perform their masculinities. These teachers were convinced that the reading workshop model significantly influenced boys’ engagement in literacy practice—even those who were initially the most reluctant readers.

The teachers in Dunn’s (2016) study believed that the reading workshop model also supports students’ ownership of their learning—a twenty-first century college-readiness skill (Conley & French, 2014). In the workshop model, “accountability [was] not teacher-driven, but became something that the students identified themselves” (p. 90). Achievement then becomes an activity of self-growth and not comparison to others in the class which Watson et al. (2010) warn further widens achievement gaps.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in Dunn’s (2016) study was the teachers’ discussion of the ways in which the reading workshop model supports masculinities by providing a safe environment for discussing the importance of valuing those
masculinities. One teacher engaged students in a discussion about why some texts are more appealing than others are, and the conversation quickly turned to commentary about fairy tales. The boys quickly identified fairy tales and texts for girls, but through the reading workshop, the teacher was able to guide the boys toward and understanding of the ways in which all genres and texts can share commonalities with everyone. As a result, boys began choosing to read fairy tales since their interest in them was supported by both the group and the teacher. This is in line with Tischler and McCaughtry’s (2011) observation of boys’ willingness to participate in physical play in an environment that supported varied expressions of masculinity rather than defining a single expression of masculinity. Literacy practice for boys is most engaging when all are convinced that both teachers and peers accept their masculine performance, and the reading workshop model is ripe with such opportunities.

**Student Text Choice-An Option for Some**

Also exploring the role of choice in the language arts classroom, Carroll and Beman’s (2015) study included a group of middle-level males in an Australian private school to address an observed lack of enthusiasm and self-satisfaction in the language arts classroom. The study included a process whereby students selected texts to answer an essential thematic question: “What can we learn about living in peace by reading the art of war?” (p. 6). The study centered upon choice as a mode of student agency which is “one’s capacity to act in and on the world to demonstrate power, to be in action…to act independently and to make their own choices” (p. 7). The study is grounded in the work of Smith and Wilhelm (2002) who claim that boys frequently and independently engage in literacy activities outside of school and are successful in those pursuits. The curriculum
represented in the study was prescriptive in terms of student outcomes, but the study allowed for student text choice as often as possible. The goal of the unit under study was “to provide opportunities for students to develop their thinking, enrich their understanding and eventually write with insight” (p. 11). Students were essentially asked to find their own texts that met the instructional objectives of the course; they were asked to bring in their own World War I poems and images that answered the essential question. This inquiry unit invited students to answer the question on their own terms with their own data.

Although the study does not reveal quantitative data to support academic success, the researchers reveal a significant outcome for the thematic choice approach. They observed a “willingness of the boys to extend their own learning, engage with authentic tasks, direct their own inquiry, and develop, use and consolidate reflective and metacognitive skills” (p. 15). The present study acknowledges the potential of choice to engage boys in authentic literacy practice, but the present study does not support the notion that such choice opportunities are viable for all boys but rather that choice can serve as powerful vehicle for supporting diverse masculinities for some boys.

**Student Ownership- The Goal for All**

Although text and pedagogical choices have a profound impact on increasing literacy achievement for boys (Daniels, 2002; Dunn, 2016; Hudson & Williams, 2015), a common thread through all the literature on pedagogies that increase achievement for boys is the need for students to own their learning process and drive the design of literary practice themselves. Through a lunchtime literacy group with five to eight young adolescent boys, Allen (2006) observed boys using literacy as a way of expressing their
masculinities and ultimately accepting the masculinities of others. One day a week, Allen had a small group of boys meet in her classroom to engage in an unstructured writing workshop. Not only were these boys willing to participate in her literacy lunches, but they also chose to continue them even into the next school year. As she observed, she found that the boys used literacy as a way of “experiencing success and a sense of belonging” (p. 70).

At the onset of her study, she intended to conduct mini-lessons, but she quickly realized that her agenda would actually have a negative effect on the conversation and community that the boys were creating on their own. Although they demonstrated a wide variety of interests, they were all committed to supporting each’s individual interests and literacies. In Allen’s (2006) study, the teacher merely served as a facilitator who provided space and time for authentic literacy to occur. Although Allen’s study suggests schools should provide more opportunities for literacy engagement outside the classroom, the present research study seeks to determine how to create literacy community that celebrates diverse masculinities inside the language arts classroom. The following section discusses the way in which ‘hybrid masculinities’ and, thus, varied personal literacies negotiate literacy practice and can actually serve to promote social justice.

‘Hybrid Masculinities’ in the Classroom

The present study builds on Bristol’s (2015) GRP and Connell’s (2005) theories of hegemonic and multiple masculinities leading the teacher-researcher to propose the notion of ‘hybrid masculinities.’ These performances require a unique pedagogy designed to support unique and fluid identities to engage boys in the social practice of literacy. The present study serves to add to the body of literature concerning how to best engage boys
in supportive literacy practice by representing and supporting widely diverse and contradicting masculinities and, thus, equally diverse personal literacies.

Hinchman, Payne-Bourcy, Thomas, & Olcott (2002) explored these varied masculinities through case studies of three white males. This ethnographic study included participant observation, interviews, and artifacts to explore the often over-simplification boys as a group. They insist, “Adolescents develop out-of-school literacies…to suit particular situations” (p. 230) and suggest that masculinity is likewise an act designed to suit social situations. That is to say, a boy’s social environment largely determines what masculinity looks like for him. As a result, boys who are defined by an essentialized understanding of masculinity are disadvantaged by others’ expectations of their performance and behavior.

Hinchman et al. (2002) selected boys for their study who represented various socioeconomic, racial, and social groups. These researchers began with a research question that asked what the boys’ literacy lives looked like. They discovered that, although all three regularly engaged in vastly different literacy activities on their own, they shared a frustration toward literacy practice in the classroom setting largely created by socialized expectations of masculine behavior. For example, one student’s classmates regularly expected him to perform poorly based on his Russian heritage and accent. “His use of language in general did not exhibit the traits typically associated with masculinity that were exhibited by most other boys” (p. 236) in his class. The researchers observed behavior that reflected disengagement although the boy valued school and made good grades.
A second student in the study, the son of a working-class family with low income, composed large amounts of independent writing, but indicated that he found many literacy activities within the school setting to be a waste of his time. Through interviews, the researchers determined that this student did not identify with forms of masculinity that expressed power or dominance over others, but rather, he felt marginalized and rejected by others. As a result, he created a “jester-like” (p. 238) persona for himself with his peers and used his prolific language and literacy skills to perform an artificial masculinity tolerated by others. Although equipped with literacies beyond those of his peers, he struggled to use his literacy skills in the classroom in a way that accurately expressed his own masculinity.

The third student included in the study operated with more privilege than the others did as a white, middle-class male who enacted hegemonic expressions of masculinity. He found little value in school-based literacies, as he did not believe they applied to activities beyond his school experience. However, the third used his literacy skills to explore topics that did deviate from those accepted by his peers. For example, he researched the murder of Matthew Shephard, a teen from a small town, beaten to death for identifying as gay, and wrote extensively about hate crimes. These interests suggested to the researchers that he was willing to use his literacies “to deviate from the expected white male dominant story” (p. 242).

Hinchman et al. (2002) not only reject essentializing boys as a homogenous group, but also reject a narrow view of multiple masculinities insisting that classrooms seeking to define boys in such simplified ways reject their individual literacies and limit their success outside the classroom as well. They contend:
The complexities in their identity construction suggest that considering
individuals in terms of such usually essentialized constructs as gender, race, and
class is overly simple, and not reflective of the identity fluidity that must be
developed to survive in the postmodern world. (p. 242)

In short, each male’s understanding of his own masculinity led to certain literacy
practices, and the educational experiences each received in school often did not speak to
each male’s unique identity in the classroom. The present study further contributes to the
body of literature by examining how middle-level boys perceive their diverse
masculinities to be at play in their literacy practice.

Research conducted by Frank et al. (2003) “engage[s] in the messiness of the real
lives of boys” (p. 121) instead of grappling with the over-generalized quick management
efforts so often found regarding the education of boys and support for single-gender
programs (Sax, 2007). Data for their research came from a series of interviews with four
white, middle-class boys from different social groups who were asked questions designed
to help researchers understand the boys’ concept of masculinity. They found that these
boys’ understanding of masculinity in their school actually “promot[ed] gender equity
and social justice” (p. 124) in ways that even teachers were not aware. The purpose of the
present study to examine the ways in which the representation of boys’ interests and the
validation of varied masculine expressions can unlock students’ capacity for social justice
while serving to foster students’ individual literacies in the ELA classroom.

Summary

Chapter Three applies an historical foundation to the present PoP and reviews
literature related to literacy achievement for adolescent males. Additionally, this chapter
explores the relationship between masculine expression and literacy practice and describes the way in which masculinities are acted upon by a variety of socialized gender expectations. A long history of educational reforms, and a set of conditions which make literacy achievement for any student a complicated and difficult process. Multiple studies reveal the ways in which an essentialized understanding of boys in the classroom directly contributes to a cycle of underachievement for some (Skelton & Francis, 2011; White, 2007). Others discuss how accommodating hegemonic masculinity in the classroom is not a solution that supports the individualized growth and development of the masculine identities represented in the classroom (Frank et al., 2003; Kimmel, 2006, Poteat et al., 2011). At the same time, Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) and Hinchman et al. (2002) point to the ways in which the marginalization of masculinity directly minimizes a boy’s willingness to participate in classroom activities. The chapter concludes with a discussion of gender-relevant literacy practices and considerations for teaching ‘hybrid masculinities.’
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three focused on the review of literature for the present study. Chapter Four highlights the methodology of the study, beginning with the Problem of Practice (PoP) and the research questions. The chapter discusses the action researcher design, the setting and time frame of the study, and ethical considerations. A detailed description of the participants and the data collection methods is included, followed by an outline of the procedures used to collect and analyze the data. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the teacher-researcher’s positionality and the process of reflecting with participants and developing an action plan.

The identified PoP for the present study was born from the teacher-researcher’s anecdotal observations and state-mandated test data which suggested that adolescent males reflect lower literacy achievement and more consistent disengagement with literacy practice than females in language arts classes. The present study examined the following questions:

1. Does teacher-selected information text or student-selected informational text best contribute to literacy performance and engagement for middle-level males?

2. How do middle-level males perceive the relationship between masculine performance and literacy achievement?

The present study explored the difference in literacy achievement in two separate reading workshops groups to determine the effect of each text selection mode for middle-level
boys. Research was conducted at DMS, a high-performing middle school in coastal South Carolina in the context of weekly teacher-facilitated literacy groups thus making the action research methodology the most appropriate for this study.

**Action Research Design**

Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) explain that action research allows practicing teachers the best means for “confront[ing] dilemmas” (p. 37) they face in the classroom. Most importantly, the cycle of action research allows the opportunity to try new techniques, reflect on the process, make changes, and try again. Action research is a systematic way to improve pedagogy that “allows teachers to study their own classrooms...and [focus] on the unique characteristics of the population with whom a practice is employed” (Mertler, 2014, p. 4). There is much literature available concerning the underachievement of adolescent boys in literacy (Frank et al., 2003; Jameson, 2007; Kimmel, 2006; Watson, 2011; White, 2007) as well as the function of reading workshop models in the language arts classroom (Carroll & Beman, 2015; Dunn, 2008; Miller & Higgins, 2008; Roessing, 2007). However, little research reviews the ways in which boys’ masculine performance is affected by teachers’ curricular decisions and even less research utilizing the voices of middle-level male students to explain the way in which masculinity performance is negotiated in literacy practice. Yet another, albeit more complex, gap that exists in the current literature is a discussion of the ways in which literacy instruction that specifically addresses the underachievement of males can exist in the context of curricular constraints like those at DMS which emphasize a heavy focus on reading non-fiction, informational texts. The action research cycle allowed the teacher-researcher to articulate research questions born from classroom concerns within the context of tight curriculum.
The first step in the planning process began with what Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) call a “felt difficulty” (p. 36) in a general education ELA class. The teacher-researcher’s anecdotal evidence of some boys’ consistent disengagement with prescribed reading content as well as test scores indicating a regression in performance of boys from sixth grade to eighth grade (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017) prompted the teacher-researcher to determine alternative strategies for boys’ literacy success. After articulating the PoP, the teacher-researcher began an extensive review of literature concerning the phenomenon of male underachievement, the history of literacy instruction nationally (Cassidy & Ortlieb, 2012) and locally (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017), hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Everitt-Penhale, 2015; Frank et al., 2003; Govender, 2011), essentialized gender performance (Kimmel, 2006, Scholes, 2010), and multiple masculinities (Connell, 2005). Bristol’s (2015) concept of GRP and Connell’s (2005) theories of hegemonic and multiple masculinities provided a theoretical framework for the study which explores whether student-selected texts or teacher-selected texts best serve as a function of GRP that allows for the representation and validation of masculine expression in the classroom.

Throughout the planning stage, the research questions evolved as the teacher-researcher found studies and theories about why boys report high levels of disengagement and why test scores indicate, at the very least, stagnant literacy growth (Parkhurst, 2012; Reichert & Hawley, 2013; Sax, 2007; Wilhelm & Smith, 2004). Work by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) was particularly influential in the teacher-researcher’s decision to explore the best way to represent masculine expression in the language arts classroom, though their arguments concerning the importance of text choice are critiqued through the
findings of the present study. They claim that many of the boys in their study were more than capable of engaging in activities in which their attention was completely immersed because of a genuine investment in the content of the activity. Unfortunately, their study revealed that this rarely happened at school for the boys in their study. The boys they interviewed “wanted to do reading that fed preexisting interests” (p. 108) and felt that “school denied them choice and control and therefore a sense of personal agency or competence” (p. 109). Other researchers support this notion that choice, control, and interest have a profound impact on boys’ literacy engagement and, therefore, literacy success (Bristol, 2015; Hillocks, 2002; Watson, 2011; Wilhelm & Smith, 2004).

Although Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) work provided the impetus for choice as a way to engage boys through relevance and interest, Bristol’s (2015) GRP further informed the teacher-researcher’s focus on problematizing curriculum that essentializes all boys as members of a singular group defined by biological gender. Bristol is in line with other researchers (Scholes, 2010; Watson, 2011) who reject the notion that a singular set of strategies that works for all boys. Rather, students’ cultural and social contexts must direct pedagogical decisions. Finally, Connell’s (2005) theories of hegemonic and multiple masculinities urged the teacher-researcher to look closely at the ways in which boys perform masculinity in the classroom. This study approaches the notion of supported masculine expression as a factor for boys’ literacy success (Skelton & Francis, 2011; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Further, this study extends Bristol’s theory of GRP to include not only culturally and socially relevant curriculum and instruction, but also pedagogy that creates an environment that allows for the expression
of what the present study calls ‘hybrid masculinities’—masculinities that include both
hegemonic and counter-hegemonic behavior.

After defining the research questions, the next step in the action research process
was determining the data collection method (Mertler, 2014). The present study employed
a mixed methods approach that utilized both quantitative and qualitative data to answer
the research questions. The independent variable chosen for the present study was the
manner in which informational texts for literacy practice were selected—by student
choice or teacher choice. The dependent variable was student achievement on analysis
questions that measured students’ ability to determine the central idea of informational
texts. Quantitative data for the present study was gathered from a group of students who
were allowed to choose their own informational texts in a reading workshop model and
another group who were provided texts chosen by the teacher-researcher in an identical
reading workshop model. To control for effects related to the classroom environment and
student-teacher relationships, the teacher-researcher chose to conduct the present study
with participants whom she did not teach in a neutral classroom that none of the
participants used for their regular academic classes.

In the present study, literacy achievement was measured through (a) student
performance on two assessments measuring students’ ability to identify the central idea
of a non-fiction text and (b) students’ responses on Reading Workshop Guides (see
Appendix A and Appendix B) provided by the teacher-researcher. Engagement was
measured using (a) the teacher-researcher’s observations of literacy engagement during
literacy practice as recorded in field notes (see Appendix D), and (b) students’ responses
to semi-structured interview questions in focus groups (see Appendix E). Finally, boys’
perception of the relationship between masculine performances and literacy achievement was documented in (a) the teacher-researchers observational field notes and (b) students’ responses in focus group interviews, the last of which provided the richest data addressing masculine performances.

**Setting and Time Frame of the Study**

The present action research study took place in a middle school in the coastal region of South Carolina. Over the last three years, the school received many distinguished awards including the Palmetto’s Finest Award, an award given to a South Carolina middle school for making a difference in the lives of students. The school also received the National Blue Ribbon Award given by the Department of Education to outstanding schools for closing the achievement gap (South Carolina Association of School Administrators, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2017). At the time of the study, DMS maintained a faculty of 53 teachers, including two African-American teachers and 51 White teachers. School administration included one White female principal, one White female assistant principal, and one African-American male assistant principal. The guidance department at DMS included two African-American females and one White female. DMS maintained a student population of 842 students. Sixty-four percent of students were White, 8.3% were African-American, 18.9% were Hispanic, and 7.4% were multi-racial or other races. Fifty-two percent of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Table 4.1 summarizes the demographics of the DMS student population.
Table 4.1 DMS Student Population Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>% of Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-racial</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRL</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The SSD is the third largest in the state of South Carolina and includes 51 schools from preschool to 12th grade. According to report card data provided by the South Carolina State Department of Education (2017), students in the SSD perform better in reading compared to students statewide and students in districts similar to the SSD as measured by scores on the SCReady Assessment administered at the end of the 2016-2017 school year.

DMS, however, outperforms other schools in the district and other similar schools in the state. According to the 2015 school report card (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017), 50.7% of students were in the “exceeding and ready” categories in reading on the ACT Aspire compared with only 37.2% of students statewide. Subgroup data were not provided on the 2015 school report card due to changes in the state test; however, 2014 report card data clearly indicate a drop in performance in reading in the male category. Using scores from the 2014 administration of the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS), the school report card indicates that 82% of sixth grade males were considered “exemplary or met,” but only 68% of boys in eighth grade boys were

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4 A student identified as “exceeding” on the ACT Aspire assessment is performing above grade-level expectations according to a particular state's set of college and career readiness standards. A student identified as “meets” on the ACT Aspire assessment is performing at grade-level expectations.
considered “exemplary or met.” This action research study is a reaction to the declining reading performance of male students during the middle grades at DMS (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017).

The present action research study was conducted during the first nine-week academic quarter of the school year during which language arts teachers were also covering standards related to the analysis of informational text. Students met weekly with the teacher-researcher in two separate groups for a nine-week period. During the first session, students completed a pre-test. The six subsequent weekly meetings included the close reading of one to two non-fiction texts. During the eighth session, students completed a post-test, and participants gathered during the ninth session to answer semi-structured interview questions in student focus groups.

**Participant Selection**

Because the teacher-researcher is serving as an instructional coach and does not have classes of her own, the teacher-researcher utilized convenience sampling “in which individuals who fit the criteria of a study are identified” (Emerson, 2015, p. 166). The teacher-researcher worked with a guidance counselor to create a sample of male students that mirrored the demographics of the school. The teacher-researcher also informed the guidance counselor that participants should not be identified as either special education or gifted, since students identified as such were already receiving additional support services outside of the general education curriculum. For the purposes of this study, students were identified as male by PowerSchool, the student data system used by DMS which houses demographic information gathered from parents. There was a two-hour window during

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5 Students who fall in the “exemplary or met” category perform at or above grade-level expectations according to South Carolina’s standards at the time of the test.
which the study could take place, so students also had to be enrolled in a course that would allow for their participation. Students enrolled in high school credit classes, for example, were not able to participate. A sample of 13 boys was identified for the study and included three Latino students, nine white students, and one African-American student—a close reflection of the DMS student population.

**Ethical Considerations**

The school district in which the research was conducted provided clear guidelines for teacher research. Expectations for parent and student consent and the right to refuse participation were clearly outlined. The district requires researchers to provide an option on a consent form that states, “I do not wish my child to participate” (Sheehan, personal communication, October 16, 2015), and he or she must notify parents that the “school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research” (Sheehan, personal communication, October 16, 2015). The district also requires all documentation from the ethics committee of the university or organization through which the researcher operates. Most importantly, the district requires a clear statement of purpose that must be “aligned to the district initiatives and goals” (Sheehan, personal communication, October 16, 2015). The school does not permit research that does not support the vision established by district leaders.

The teacher-researcher adhered to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) by checking with and requesting approval from district officials regarding policies related to classroom research (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The teacher-researcher requested parental permission through a parent letter similar to the one provided by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey which fully informs parents of purpose, extent,
and ramifications of the research process (p. 153) (see Appendix C for the Consent Form). Parents and student participants were aware that their participation in the classroom research would not affect grades in any way and that they could choose not to participate at any time (Abed, 2014; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 153). Abed (2014) says this “informed consent” (p. 2) in educational research provides participants with sufficient information regarding what is involved in the research and how much time is required for participation. In addition, to ensure the privacy of all participants, pseudonyms were used in the communication of the results of the study.

No students who participated in the present study held an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 plan; however, two students were identified as English Learners (ELs) and were provided the accommodations outlined in an Individual Language Plan (ILP). In line with the SSD’s restriction on research that does not support the goals established by district leaders, the research plan did not harm or restrict any student from learning. Both the control and the experimental groups participated in activities designed to engage students in the practice of literacy skills. To protect the identity of the participants, the school, and the school district represented in this study, pseudonyms were used throughout communication of the results of the study (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

**Participants in the Study**

In line with White (2007), a sample of participants who accurately reflected the goals of the present study was chosen to include participants who met the following requirements. These criteria included: (1) students who identified as male, (2) students who did not hold an IEP, (3) students who were not identified as gifted, (4) students in
the seventh grade, and (5) students whose schedule accommodated participation in the study. Students participated in the study during their exploratory class so that their time in core academic classes was not interrupted. Participants were randomly separated into two groups: (1) a teacher-selected text group and (2) a student-selected text group. The 13 student-participants are identified with pseudonyms and described below.

The six students in the teacher-selected text group are identified with pseudonyms and described as follows:

- Morty is 12-year-old White male. He plays on the school football team and makes mostly As and Bs in his classes. He is taller than most of his peers and appears much older; he socializes with others in class as little as possible. Morty is interested in sports, history, cooking, and automobiles, and, though he performs behaviors outside hegemonic expectations, he is unwilling to acknowledge them or to voice his opinion when others say things with which he disagrees. Morty is very quiet, and even when directly asked a question, sometimes he does not answer.

- John is a 12-year-old White male. He does not participate in any school clubs or sports, and he is smaller than his peers are. He is the center of attention when grouped with others, regularly makes jokes and comments to entertain his peers, and has a reputation as a class clown. John regularly polices others’ behavior and performs the hegemonic role of “group leader” (Barnes, 2011, p. 242) by making fun of others—even for things he does himself. John makes average grades in his classes, is interested in basketball, soccer, and rap, and wants to be liked by his peers and his teachers. He is very critical of his teachers’ pedagogical decisions, and, though he sees himself as
an average reader, he suggested many things his teachers could do to help him read better.

- Cristiano is a 12-year-old Latino male. He does not participate in any school clubs or sports, and he is an average size for a seventh-grade student. Cristiano is very quiet, but extremely polite. Cristiano is a low-performing student who was called out of literacy group sessions twice for disciplinary reasons. Cristiano advocates for what he needs in literacy practice and willingly contradicts his peers when they voice an interest different from his own. Cristiano has a poor self-concept as a reader.

- Eddie is a 12-year-old White male. He does not participate in any school clubs or sports, and he makes As and Bs in his classes. Eddie often followed John by laughing at his jokes and doing whatever John suggested, performing the role of the “complicit henchman” (Barnes, 2011, p. 242; Connell, 2005). Eddie even mirrored his interests after John’s by indicating an interest in basketball, soccer, and rap. Eddie voices value in literacy practice and insists that he needs to be a better reader in order to get a good job one day. He even sees literacy as a part of current, every-day life in ways that many of his peers do not.

- Bart is a 12-year-old Latino male. He does not participate in any school clubs or sports, and he makes nearly failing grades in all his classes. Bart is friendly with other students, and quietly does what he is asked to do in class. When probed about the importance of literacy skills, however, Bart recalls great detail about his previous literacy experiences in school and maintains a specific understanding that girls are better readers than boys—and even called the name the teacher who told him that. Bart
also engaged in counter-hegemonic practice by regularly challenging his peer’s
gendered expectations and classification of activities as inherently male or female.

- King is a 12-year-old Latino male who holds an ILP. His English proficiency is intermediate, but he makes high grades in all of his classes except language arts. King reads very slowly and meticulously, and often his writing was illegible. King directly connects reading ability to reading interests and indicated that he was both not good and reading and not interested in doing it.

A list of participants in the teacher-selected text group appear in table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Participants in Teacher-selected Text Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morty</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristiano</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bart</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The seven students in the student-selected text group are identified with pseudonyms and described as follows:

- James is a 13-year-old White male. Although the oldest student in the study, compared to the other boys in the study, he is the smallest, the least mature in his interactions and the least reflective on his literacy practice. James participates in the science club and makes low grades in his classes. James repeatedly made hegemonic, gendered comments that were rejected by the others in the group, and he often made distracting noises that bothered his peers during the study. Although few opted to work with James, he was never openly ridiculed or overtly marginalized by his peers.
• Duck is a 12-year-old White male. Duck nearly failed the previous academic year but maintains average grades in seventh grade. A member of the school football team, duck is infatuated with sports and rarely chose to read or talk about anything else during the study. Conversations with Duck revealed out-of-school literacies that included biographical and historical reading inspired by his mother, a middle-school history teacher. Duck regularly expressed an aversion to reading in the presence of his peers but articulated an interest in reading that did not mirror his behavior or performance during the reading workshop. Duck is challenged by the literacy practices of both his mother and his sister, which both support and challenge his notion that reading is a masculine activity.

• Kyle is an 11-year-old White male. Smaller than his peers, Kyle is very social and inquisitive and enjoys reading. Kyle cares about style and appearance and is polite and respectful to teachers and peers. His parents are restaurant owners, so Kyle maintains a strong connection between literacy and the ability to own a business. He maintains As and Bs in all his classes and is interested in technology and animals. He often chose articles that sparked interest in others, as he was skilled at articulating what he read to his peers.

• Jimmy is a 12-year-old White male. Jimmy maintains average grades; however, he regularly exhibited off-task behaviors. Often, Jimmy played video games instead of reading or completing his reading guide. Jimmy’s interests include video games and technology. Jimmy performed one of the most inclusive, counter-hegemonic masculinities of all the boys represented in the study. Jimmy passionately disagreed
with gendered texts and maintained that his literacy practices were never constrained by gender expectations.

- Jeff is a 13-year old White male. Jeff maintains low grades in his classes but enjoys reading for information. Jeff is interested in animals, technology, and sports, and enjoys talking about his interests with others. Jeff is friendly, mature, and articulate for his age and brings his family’s lack of educational experiences to his literacy practice. Jeff acknowledged that rejecting literacy could have negative impacts on his future, but he also indicated that his father did not graduate from high school but maintains a career in the construction industry.

- Travis is a 12-year-old bi-racial male. Travis maintains As and Bs in his classes, is very small compared to his peers, wears glasses, and is very quiet. Travis rarely talked to his peers during the study, even when discussion was part of the activity; however, when asked his personal opinions about literacy, he was quick to contribute. Travis verbally reified his own opinion, especially when they were in contradiction to those around him. Travis connects his reading difficulties with his difficult sitting still in class and not playing around—behaviors that were never observed during the study. Travis is interested in adventure and mystery texts.

- Paul is a 12-year old White male. Paul is interested in science and technology and eagerly reads articles about topics that interest him; however, Paul read and completed activities very slowly, often having to finish his work outside of the scheduled time. Paul is failing his language arts class, but he regularly expressed that he enjoyed participating in the literacy groups. Paul speaks very slowly and rarely engages in conversation with his peers. While he was never ridiculed or policed, other
participants separated themselves from him as if they perceived he did not want them around.

A list of participants in the student-selected text group appear in table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Participants in Student-selected Text Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travis</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Methods

A mixed-methods design was chosen for the present study including the use of a pre-test and post-test to measure students’ ability to determine the central idea and analyze the supporting details of informational text. Students were selected and pretested. This was followed by six weeks of reading workshop meetings in two separate groups: (1) a teacher-selected text group and (2) a student-selected text group. Students were post-tested after the sixth reading workshop and participated in semi-structured focus group interviews after taking the post-test. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to determine whether teacher-selected or student-selected texts had the greatest impact on boys’ literacy achievement. Inductive analysis was used to code data from the teacher-researcher’s observational field notes and data collected during the focus group interviews.
Data Collection

The teacher-researcher collected data from four sources: (1) the pre-test and post-test, (2) observational field notes, (3) reading workshop guide (Appendix A and Appendix B), and (3) focus group interviews (Appendix E). A description of each data collection source is included.

**Pre-test and post-test.** A pretest determined baseline data for students’ ability to analyze the central idea of informational text. The teacher-researcher used a test generated by USATestPrep, a tool used in the SSD to prepare students for state-mandated tests (USATestPrep, 2016). The teacher-researcher received written permission from USATestPrep to use the test in the present study. The test included a set of 20 questions that assessed students’ ability to determine the central idea in a piece of informational text and to identify supporting evidence. Students read five passages. All boys in both the teacher-selected text group and the student-selected text group took the same pretest. Participants completed an identical post-test to determine the improvement or regression of ability to analyze informational text following literacy practice in each group. Mean performance on the posttest was compared to the mean baseline scores from the pretest, and a paired t-test was used to determine the statistical significance of each text-selection method.

**Observational field notes.** While students participated in literacy groups, the teacher-researcher used the observational field notes form contained in Appendix D to document observations of the participants’ behavior, levels of engagement, and comments during literacy practice. This informed the teacher-researcher of participants’ attitudes, provided insight on the level of students’ engagement in each group, and
allowed for anecdotal data concerning masculine performance and policing. The data
collection tool also allowed for post-observation comments where the teacher-researcher
reflected on students’ comments and behavior.

**Reading workshop guide.** As students participated in reading workshop
meetings, they completed the Reading Workshop Guide. There was a separate document
for the teacher-selected text group (see Appendix A) and the student-selected text group
(see Appendix B). The teacher-researcher collected anecdotal data from these documents
to triangulate with data collected from the field notes, post-test, and semi-structured focus
group interviews

**Focus group interview data.** Following the administration of the post-test, data
was collected from focus group interviews. These interviews were recorded and
transcribed. The teacher-researcher used inductive analysis to code for themes that
emerged in focus group interviews (Mertler, 2014).

**Procedure**

Once student samples were identified and participant consent forms were
returned, the teacher-researcher gathered participants in separate groups for the pre-test.
The two groups of students were randomly designated as part of either the teacher-
selected text group or the student-selected text group.

**Reading Workshop Meetings**

Although two groups of students met separately with the teacher-researcher
weekly, the teacher-researcher made every effort to ensure that the text selection process
and the activities directly resulting from that process were the only differences between
the two groups. Each week, the teacher-researcher planned a set of conversation prompts
and cooperative learning structures (Kagan, 1990) that would be used in both groups to ensure uniformity between the two groups.

**Initial literacy reading workshop meeting.** During the initial reading workshop meeting, participants completed the pre-test, which all participants finished in less than 30 minutes. After completion, the teacher-researcher met with each student in both groups to discuss what would occur during each reading workshop and how to complete the Reading Workshop Guide (Appendix A and Appendix B). Participants in the student-selected text group were also shown the process of selecting a quality text for their next reading workshop meeting. This demonstration included instructions on navigating the database, selecting grade-level appropriate texts, and downloading the text so that students could annotate and highlight while reading. During the present study, both participants and the teacher-researcher chose articles from one of two online student news sites: (1) Newsela, and (2) Smithsonian TeenTribune. These two sites were used for both the student-selected text group and the teacher-selected text group because they feature a Lexile selector which allowed the article complexity for both groups to remain constant. Participants in the student-selected text group were allowed to select a text outside of the group meeting, but they were given time during each session to choose an article.

During the initial meeting with each group, the teacher-researcher invited participants to share their interests through conversation and cooperative learning structures, a practice required throughout the SSD and thus utilized in the present study (Kagan, 1990). Throughout the initial meeting, the teacher-researcher took observational field notes, recording students’ interests, behaviors, interactions, and engagement.
**Teacher-selected text literacy meetings.** During the second and subsequent reading workshop meetings, participants in the teacher-selected text group read, discussed, and analyzed an informational article that the teacher-researcher chose based on the expressed interests of the participants. That is, all students were required to read the same article, but each time the teacher-researcher chose an article for the group, she gave voice to the expressed interest that inspired that article’s section. All articles selected by the teacher-researcher were chosen from the same student news sites used by the student-selected text group participants, Newsela and Smithsonian TeenTribune. Each week, a digital copy of the article was downloaded from the news site and shared with the participants using Google Classroom, a digital classroom management tool, so that students could annotate and highlight on their digital copy of the document. The teacher-researcher chose texts at a seventh-grade reading level as indicated by the student news sites.

During the first meeting, participants only read one article, but during all subsequent meetings, participants read two articles at each meeting. The first meeting began with a one-minute paired discussion during which students told a partner about something they had read before that they enjoyed. During subsequent sessions, these one-minute paired discussions included a summary of the article read the previous week. As participants read the first article chosen for the meeting, the teacher-researcher had students read for two minutes, stop, and summarize what they read to a partner. This continued until everyone was finished with the first article. When everyone finished the article, each student had an opportunity to participate in a structured group discussion during which the group came to consensus on the central idea of the article, which they
recorded on the Reading Workshop Guide. Students were responsible for completing the remaining pieces of the reading guide on their own.

Participants’ reading of the second text was completed more independently as the teacher-researcher did not stop students to discuss during the reading. Participants were allowed to partner only to discuss what they were reading to maintain consistency between both groups. Students rarely took this opportunity.

At the end of each meeting, participants reflected on their participation through another structured conversation (Kagan, 1990). The teacher-researcher prompted students to reflect on their process, participation, or interest in the article topics chosen for the day. The teacher-researcher recorded these responses in the observational field notes.

**Student-selected text reading workshop meetings.** The teacher-researcher ensured that all components of the previously discussed teacher-selected group meetings were included in the student-selected text group as well. The student-selected text group was given five minutes at the beginning of each meeting to choose an article at a seventh-grade reading level as indicted by the student news sites, and if they finished all activities they could spend time looking for their next article before the end of the meeting. Like participants in the teacher-selected text group, the student-selected text group also used structured, paired conversation to share what they were reading and why they chose their articles. During the reading of the first article, participants stopped at intervals to summarize their reading with partners and completed the reading guide independently. During the reading of the second article, participants were allowed to pair to share summaries and central ideas just as they were in the teacher-selected text group, but few chose to do so.
At the end of each meeting, participants engaged in structured conversation to summarize and share central ideas from the articles they chose. In the student-selected text group, this activity led other participants to read the articles their peers had chosen. Participants completed their reading guides and reflected on their process and engagement in the same way the teacher-selected text group did each week.

**The role of the teacher-researcher.** During both group meetings, the teacher-researcher served the role of facilitator for group discussion and met with students independently to provide feedback on participants’ responses on the reading guide and to talk to participants about their interests and article choices. The teacher-researcher circled the room observing students, writing down observations as field notes, and asking students questions about their process and engagement. Notable conversation among students was also recorded in the observational field notes. After each set of meetings, the teacher-researcher reflected on the observational field notes, added further anecdotes, and made plans for the next set of meetings.

**Final literacy circle meeting.** After six reading workshop meetings, students completed the post-test and reflected on their literacy practice with the teacher-researcher. The teacher-researcher recorded student responses and reactions in the observational field notes.

**Focus group interviews.** The final set of data included in the present study came from focus group interviews with both the teacher-selected text group and the student-selected text group. The semi-structured interview questions, included in Appendix E, prompted the participants to reflect on the connection between reading and masculine performance, social expectations of literacy practice, and personal identities as masculine
readers. Each focus group interview was approximately 30 minutes long. The focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed by the teacher-researcher, and coded for themes related to literacy achievement and masculine performance.

**Data Analysis**

The present study utilized descriptive and inferential statistics to determine the effectiveness of teacher-selected and student-selected texts on literacy achievement for the middle-level participants. The data provided by the pretest and posttest was analyzed by calculating the mean of the group to determine central tendency. Descriptive statistics were applicable to the study as they are used “when trying to describe the collective level of performance...of a group of study participants...following the implementation of an instruction innovation” (Mertler, 2014 p. 169). Inferential statistics were also used to determine the size of the achievement between the pre-test and the post-test for both groups. A paired t-test was used to compare the mean scores for both groups’ pre-test and post-test “to see if the difference was statistically significant” (p. 176).

In addition to the quantitative data collected, analysis of trends collected in the teacher-researcher’s observational field notes and focus group interviews supplemented the findings of the achievement data on the pre-test and post-test. The field notes captured conversation among participants and participant behavior as well as conversations between the participants and the teacher-researcher that further explained the results revealed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The focus group interviews elicited the student voices necessary to explain the results collected from the pre-test and post-test data. In an effort to “reduce the volume of information collected” (Mertler, 2014, p. 163), the teacher-researcher used inductive analysis to “identify and
organize the data into important patterns and themes…to present the key findings” (p. 163). This three-step process involved organizing and reducing data through a coding scheme indicated by specific colors that represented themes that emerged in the data. After organizing the data, the teacher-researcher described the themes that emerged from the data and interpreted those findings as they answered the research questions for the present study (Mertler, 2014). This type of supplemental data allowed the teacher-researcher to gather a completed picture of participants’ achievement instead of a single indicator of performance. This type of data analysis is unique to the action research process utilized in the present study (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Mertler, 2014).

**Teacher Researcher’s Positionality**

The teacher-researcher is a White female who previously taught middle-level language arts and is now an instructional coach working with language arts teachers at DMS. Since the beginning of her teaching career, she has been fascinated by the performance of boys in the middle-level language arts classroom and, in particular, the ways in which boys react to and often reject the practice of literacy. Guilty of essentializing boys’ behavior and attempting only to accommodate hegemonic behaviors for many years, the teacher-researcher began to consider the complexity of boys’ masculine performances when she met her husband, an individual who refused a strict set of rules for anything—including masculine performance. As the teacher-researcher began to observe his varied masculine performances, she began to connect her observations to wanderings about classroom practice and to analyze the rigid expectations of masculine performance imposed upon young males. The teacher-researcher’s husband, a 32-year-old male, engages in fluid masculine performances that include both hegemonic and
counter-hegemonic behaviors. He cooks, hunts with a bow and arrow, shares in household duties, empathizes with others, and takes care of everyone around him. He is a feminist. He is a leader. He fully occupies the “hybrid space” (Chaddock & Schramm-Pate, 2008, p. 35), negotiating his masculine performances daily. However, as a student, he struggled to find relevance and connection in the classroom. Using his experiences as a lens for understanding the experience of middle-level males, the teacher researcher sought to understand better the way in which boys’ varied masculine performances are misunderstood and to find ways of supporting and validating each boy as he engages in literacy practice.

Reflecting with Participants

Mertler (2014) reminds that the action research process is cyclical and that there is no clearly defined end. Following data analysis, the teacher-researcher met with study participants to discuss the findings of the study participants and ask follow-up questions of the participants. This reflection process allowed the teacher-researcher to clarify any inconsistencies in the data analysis and inform the action plan. During this meeting, students completed a survey that asked questions about reading preferences. In addition, the teacher-researcher gave participants the opportunity to discuss behaviors that may have affected the results of the study.

Devising an Action Plan

Following data analysis and reflection with the participants, the teacher-researcher developed an action plan to communicate the results of the study with both teachers at DMS and district curriculum coordinators in the SSD. The teacher-researcher designed a series of professional development sessions to share the theoretical frameworks for the
present study and to discuss the findings. These sessions also included lesson-planning strategies that incorporated the findings of the present study. It was important for teachers at DMS to understand the present study’s theoretical frameworks and, most importantly to have an opportunity to shift their perspective on boys from an essentialized understanding to one that sees each individual boy as a unique masculine performance with unique and varied needs (Bristol, 2014; Connell, 2005). The teacher-researcher considered the ways in which the notion of socialized gender construction had not been addressed in the SSD and presented the findings of the study in a way that met the needs of the audience. The teacher-researcher was careful to contextualize the results of the study and to explain that the results of an action research study should not be generalized to a wider audience but rather used to inform classroom practice and invite others to conduct their own classroom action research (Mertler, 2014). The teacher-researcher also developed a list of subsequent studies that are necessary to further address the PoP included in the present study more thoroughly.

The difficulties experienced by the teacher-researcher in the process of engaging male students in literacy practice were not solved with one cycle of this action research study; however, the results of the present study open a wide path to further research to determine ways in which teachers can best address boys’ diverse masculinities in ways that increase literacy achievement. The findings of the present study and a thorough analysis of the data are included in Chapter Five. A final discussion and summary of the present action research study as well as a clearly defined action plan are included in Chapter Six.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Chapter Four outlined the methodology used in the present study, and Chapter Five outlines the findings of the present study as well as a discussion of the findings. The chapter reintroduces the research questions and the Problem of Practice (PoP) before providing a through description of the data collected from the pre-tests, post-tests, observational field notes, and semi-structured focus group interviews. Chapter Five concludes with discussion of the findings of the present study.

The teacher-researcher conducted the study over a nine-week period, meeting with students once per week. Using a t-test and other descriptive statistics gathered from the pre-tests and post-tests, the teacher-researcher determined the significance of the text selection method on students’ literacy performance while inductive analysis of the semi-structure focus group interviews allowed the teacher-researcher to understand how middle-level boys perceive the relationship between masculine performance and literacy achievement.

**Reintroduction of the Research Questions**

1. Does teacher-selected informational text or student-selected informational text best contribute to literacy achievement and engagement and masculine identities for middle-level males?

2. How do middle-level males perceive the relationship between masculine performance and literacy achievement?
Reintroduction of the Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of the present study was to determine whether teacher-selected or student-selected text best contributed to literacy achievement and engagement and to determine how middle-level males perceived the relationship between literacy achievement and masculine performance. A secondary purpose was to devise an action plan to increase literacy engagement and achievement for middle-level males while cultivating an environment that supports varied masculine performances at DMS.

Findings of the Study

Overall Results of Pre-Test and Post-Test Data

Students completed a pre-test during the first reading workshop meeting at the beginning of the nine-week period. Results from the pre-test indicated that the two groups of students represented a wide variety of performances. Pre-test and post-test scores for each student in the teacher-selected text group appear in Table 5.1. Pre-test and post-test data for each student in the student selected-text group appear in Table 5.2.

Table 5.1 Teacher-selected Text Group Pre-test and Post-test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pre-test Score</th>
<th>Post-test Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morty</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristiano</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bart</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>30%</strong></td>
<td><strong>40.83%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2 Student-selected Text Group Pre-test and Post-test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pre-test Score</th>
<th>Post-test Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travis</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>45.71%</td>
<td>41.43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of paired t-tests indicate no statistical significance for either the teacher-selected or student-selected text group. The results of a paired t-test with a p-value of .1635 demonstrate that the data from the pre-test and post-test do not differ significantly in the teacher-selected text group. Likewise, the results of a paired t-test with a p-value of .4963 indicate no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test for the student-selected text group. Results for the paired t-tests appear in tables 5.3 and 5.4.

Table 5.3 Paired T-test Results for Teacher-selected Text Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>T-Stat</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Test Overall Score - Post-Test Overall Score</td>
<td>-10.833333</td>
<td>6.6353431</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-1.6326712</td>
<td>0.1635</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.4 Paired T-test Results for Student-selected Text Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>T-Stat</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Test Overall Score - Post-Test Overall Score</td>
<td>4.2857143</td>
<td>5.9189538</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.72406619</td>
<td>0.4963</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teacher-researcher concluded that no single text selection method best supports the literacy achievement for diverse masculinities. Some participants increased their score from the pre-test; some decreased their score from the pre-test. This
demonstrates that some boys needed teacher-selected texts to support their masculine performances while some boys needed self-selected text opportunities to explore and support their masculine performances. Diverse masculinities like those represented in the present study can be supported with either teacher-selected or student-selected texts, but the boys themselves must be allowed to advocate for what they need. The teacher-researcher elicited the voices of student-participants to explain their literacy performance and engagement during the reading workshops and to answer the second research question: How do middle-level males perceive the relationship between masculine performance and literacy achievement?

Analysis of Focus Group Interviews

Students were asked to reflect on their participation and effort in the reading workshops, to explain how their performance on the assessments reflected their reading ability, and to explain how they negotiated their masculine performances in the context of literacy practice (see Appendix E). The following section discusses four major themes that emerged from the focus group interviews: the importance of interest in literacy practice, the connection between reading ability and reading interest, the perceived lack of assessment relevance, the negotiation of gender expectations, and the role of literacy in future success.

The importance of interest in literacy practice. Data reveal that the way in which texts were selected was of far less concern to the participants than having their interests represented in literacy practice. These interests, however, were as varied and nuanced as their masculine expressions and demonstrated conflicting ideas that
complicated the boys’ engagement in literacy practice. These conflicts are detailed in the following section.

**Conflicting interests.** Participants regularly asserted the importance of having their interests represented in the materials selected for literacy practice. In the absence of having their interests represented, they predicted not only scant engagement but also an outright rejection of the activity. The boys in the teacher-selected text group all agreed that they liked having their texts selected for them but only because the teacher-researcher chose texts based on their interests. The following conversation reveals the way in which choice and masculine performance were intertwined but also varied for each boy:

Teacher-researcher: Did you like having your articles picked for you?

John: Yeah because we gave you, like, in the beginning we gave you choices like we wrote down what we liked and you picked articles from that.

Teacher-researcher: So if I had given you guys articles on running and classical music you wouldn’t have liked that?

John: …no like if you gave us articles on like girls doing their nails…

Teacher-researcher: What happens when you read articles that you feel like are about girl topics?

John: I don’t read at all.

Bart: If it’s good…then I don’t care.
John: I would only read a girl topic if it’s about drama…because girls’ drama are insane!

John and Bart performed masculinities that not only contradicted each other but were also contradicted within themselves. John’s behaviors during the reading workshop meetings included many hegemonic behaviors including disrupting others, policing others’ masculine behavior, and even making fun of another participant’s interest in cooking, but his comments revealed literacy behavior that was layered and complicated. John craved space for his interests in literacy practice and even critiqued his teachers for not providing enough opportunities to read. At the same time, he verbally rejected reading about topics perceived to be feminine unless they were about “drama” insinuating that he took pleasure in the voyeuristic practice of observing girls disagree, gossip, or even fight—behavior grounded in hegemonic masculinity. Bart regularly asserted his interests in reading sports-related articles and maintained hegemonic definitions of masculine behavior including the belief that reading is a feminine activity, but he maintained his willingness to read about things considered topics for girls “if it’s good.” Earlier in the conversation, Bart even affirmed that he would not mind reading a book of fairy tales, despite their feminine association.

Both Bart’s and John’s masculine performances fluidly rejected and gave way to reading behaviors that could not be essentialized, and both characterized their interest in a text using contradicting factors. Their conversation revealed masculine performances, which, on the surface, appeared hegemonic and could tempt a teacher to adopt a set of sports related texts for classroom instruction, but these boys revealed varied ways in which their interests could be represented. Their conversation demonstrated hegemonic
and counter-hegemonic behavior that led to a set of interests that would be stifled by an essentialized approach to accommodating boys’ needs.

At the same time, both John’s and Bart’s masculinities created confusion even for themselves regarding what interested them thereby problematizing these students selecting their own texts. These boys’ interests varied but were clouded by socialized gender expectations at times. Therefore, when given opportunities to select texts, they admitted to gravitating toward sports topics despite their self-admitted interest in other topics. All the boys in the teacher-selected group agreed that they had many opportunities to choose their own texts to read but that they rarely took those opportunities citing their own insecurity in choosing something they would like. These two participants in the teacher-selected text group appreciated having their texts chosen for them but only because it was clear the teacher-researcher had made an effort at representing their interests in the texts selected. John and Bart vocalized their need for teacher-selected texts and were clear about the criteria their teacher should use in selecting texts for them.

They were also not selfish about interests being represented in the classroom; their conversation revealed a desire for everyone’s interests to be represented—not just their own. When discussing ways in which teachers could better engage them in literacy practice, the boys reflected on things their teachers did to engage them in class. John talked about a teacher who allowed him to shoot a paper basketball in a makeshift hoop; Eddie talked about in-class competitions that motivated him to achieve. They all, however, unanimously asserted that teachers should use variety in their engagement strategies because not everyone likes the same things.
Teacher-researcher: And the thing that would help you be motivated more would be?

John: More activities because girls…some of them don’t like sports.

John recognized that not everyone thought the same way he did, and though his interests often reflected hegemonic values, his masculinity could not be essentialized to a strict set of expectations. He empathized with his peers who might not benefit from the same strategies he did. John and Bart appreciated having their interests represented in the texts they read, and they were open to choosing their own texts, but they found value in having their teacher support them in the text-selection process.

Conflicting literacy wants and needs. Most of the boys in the teacher-selected text group were satisfied with the ways in which their interests were represented by the teacher-researcher’s text selections. The boys in the student-selected text group, however, represented more inconsistency in their focus group responses regarding the opportunity to choose their own texts. Descriptive statistics revealed a decline in performance in the student-selected group, and though the participants enjoyed being able to pick whatever they wanted to read, they reluctantly acknowledged their inability to engage in meaningful literacy practice. Because these participants were not reading the same texts, they could not engage in conversation with peers about what they were reading, and many admitted to skimming the text and spending more time looking at pictures than actually reading. At the same time, they vociferously supported the independence they received during their reading workshops. When asked what would help them become better readers, several said “let us pick our own stuff.” However, as the teacher-
researcher continued to probe this issue, some participants began to conflict their original
statements:

Teacher-researcher: If you could tell your teachers anything that you think
would help you be a better reader…what would be your
advice?

Jimmy: They could bring the small groups back where you could
read sometimes

Jeff: …like plan out a schedule for the whole week, and say
he gives you what you need to do that week, but you
plan it out each day what you need to do…if you’re
stuck on something, you could just raise your hand to
ask the teacher what you need to do there.

Jimmy and Jeff asserted and retracted their need for independence throughout the
focus group interviews. They, like the others in the group, appreciated independence, but
recognized that structure helped them engage. Jimmy’s reference to reading in small
groups suggests that he depended on the interaction with other readers to help him make
sense of what he read while Jeff recognized the teacher’s input and support as an integral
part of his literacy success.

Duck, another member of the student-selected text group, represented the same
conflicting position on what he needed to be a better reader. During the reading
workshops, Duck always chose an article about football. In fact, the only article he read
that was not about football was about baseball. Like Eddie and John would have done on
their own, if given the opportunity, Duck choose articles that represented hegemonic
topics, but focus group interviews revealed a masculine performance that included an interest in history and a deep respect for the literacy practices of his mother, who taught history, and his teenaged sister. Throughout the focus groups, Duck maintained the importance of choosing his own texts although he was disappointed with his performance on both the pre-test and the post-test. As the group dissembled following the focus group interviews, the teacher-researcher asked Duck a follow-up question regarding his performance in reading workshops and on the post-test. His response exposed what he truly needed to engage and grow as a reader:

Teacher-researcher: How do you think you would have done if I had picked your articles for you but they were topics you really liked?

Duck: Well that would have been OK. Maybe it would have been better. It wouldn’t have been all random and crap.

Duck’s comments reflect a sense of chaos choosing his own texts—much like Bart suggested. The notion that the process of choosing his own texts was “random” for him reflected his confusion with the process of selecting his own text. An underachieving reader, Duck wanted to be a great reader like his mother and his sister, and his masculine performance accommodated both a serious interest in sports and an interest in intellectual study and conversation. Duck, however, did not have the literacy skills or personal maturity necessary to pursue the parts of his masculinity that were clouded by his socialized understanding of masculine performance. For this reason, he hid some parts of his masculinity, only allowing the hegemonic characteristics to be visible for others. It was not because he valued sports over academics but rather because his school
experience had not provided opportunities to support the ways in which Duck wanted to perform his masculinity. The participants in the present study repeated how important it was for them to have their interests represented in their literacy practice that could be implemented through both teacher-selected texts for some and student-selected texts for others. Further, they articulated a strong connection between being interested in reading with being able to read at all.

**The connection between reading interest and reading ability.** Throughout the focus groups, a trend emerged that demonstrated that the participants in the present study equated reading interest with reading ability. Their conversation suggested that they would enjoy reading more if they felt like they were better at it, and they felt they would be better at it if they were motivated to practice. Both the teacher-selected text group and the student-selected text group unanimously agreed that the literacy practice in which they were asked to engage in their classes did not motivate them. Eddie reluctantly referenced one of his teachers as a perfect example of how unengaging literacy practice was in his classes:

Eddie: He’s [the teacher is] kinda…
John: (laughing) yeah him
Eddie: Yeah he just gives us the paper
John and Eddie: (laughing)
Eddie: Sometimes he explains but I don’t understand sometimes
John: He expects us to write.
Teacher-researcher: So what would make that experience better?
John: Some, uh, explaining

Eddie: Examples!

John and Eddie craved interaction, structure, and support in their literacy practice, and they felt their ELA teacher was not providing that. As a result, they engaged in a cycle of disinterest, lack of engagement, and poor performance. They were willing to articulate their individual needs and to advocate for themselves, although it appeared as if they had few teachers willing to adapt their pedagogies to accommodate those needs.

Several boys in both groups continually referenced a lack of engagement in their literacy practice and cited the need for “activities” to pique their interest. These same boys defined themselves as bad or slow readers. Some, however, had no previous experiences with literacy that even allowed them to think of a way in which they could be more interested in the practice. Cristiano labeled himself as a “bad” reader and described himself as “slow” and even said “guys…just don’t like reading.” It became clear that Cristiano’s literacy experiences in school directly contributed to his ideas about his and his male peers’ reading ability. Cristiano could think of nothing he read in school beyond articles his teacher selected for him in which he found no interest. He could not even think of the last time he read something other than an article; he also could not think of an assessment his teachers used other than a test or a quiz. For him, literacy was an activity he was not good at, and his perception of failure was steeped in his and “other guys’” inability to find any interest in the practice.

Similarly, James, the small somewhat marginalized boy in the student-selected text group repeatedly said reading was “bad” and “boring” throughout the focus group interviews. When asked why he thought he was bad, James said reading was “too much
work and [took] a lot of time.” James reiterated the notion that reading was not interesting and in the same breath reiterated that he was not good at it. On the contrary, Morty, a member of the teacher-selected text group who said very little during both the reading workshops and the focus group interviews advocated for much different considerations in his literacy practice. Morty had experienced success in his literacy practice and indicated that being able to read gave him access to information, particularly historical information. Morty shared that he was interested in a diverse list of topics including cooking, history, sports, and music. Although Morty participated in reading teacher-selected texts without argument, he maintained he needed to choose his own texts. For Morty, one of the more successful readers included in the study, being able to choose texts allowed him to explore parts of his masculine performance with which he was already comfortable and confident. Teacher-selected texts restricted Morty who was already engaging in counter-hegemonic practice by rejecting gendered ideas and validating the interests of others.

The interconnectedness of interest and ability was repeated throughout the focus groups, both by boys who agreed with James and boys who voiced things they were interested in reading while also communicating a sense of confidence in their reading ability. Most importantly, not one boy deviated from this pattern. That is to say, there was no instance of a boy saying he found interest in reading but was not good at it, nor did anyone say they were good at reading but did not like it. For the participants in the present study, reading ability and reading interest were nearly synonymous, which problematizes the way in which tight teacher-directed curricula stifle literacy performance for some boys. It is impossible to meet the literacy demands of all the varied
masculinities represented in the classroom with a single strategy lest the pedagogy stifle the interests of some boys, further contributing to the cycle of literacy failure. This concern is not limited to the texts and methods used for literacy practice but also the ways in which boys’ literacy skills are assessed (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009).

**A perceived lack of assessment relevance.** Kirkland and Jackson (2009) argue that commonly used literacy assessments lack cultural and symbolic relevance for accurate representation of boys’ reading ability, and the participants in the present study shared this perception. Just as a single text selection method cannot be utilized to meet the needs of all boys, neither can a single assessment method be utilized to demonstrate the literacy performance of all boys. The present study utilized an assessment method common in the SSD because of its alignment with state-mandated tests that are used to determine students’ performance at the end of each school year. Data from the focus group interviews revealed how test results may have been affected by the ways in which the participants in the study connected reading interest with reading ability.

Teacher-researcher: Think back to the test that you guys took. What did you think about it?

Eddie: It was long.

John: (laughter)

Eddie: Yeah he got me a 5% [blaming John for distracting him]

Teacher-researcher: You feel like you gave 100 percent on it?

Bart: Yes. No I gave like 80.

John: I gave like 5.

Cristiano: I gave like 70.
Morty: I did my best.

Their responses revealed varying levels of engagement with the assessment and suggest that given the amount of testing in which these participants are asked to engage to assess their literacy performance, validity is a major concern (Reed, 2015). Eddie went on to discuss the length of the passages he was given on the assessment, making note of how much he disliked the content of the passages and suggesting that he would do better on assessments if he was asked to read articles like they did in the reading workshops.

Although the participants had little prior experience with other assessment methods, they desperately craved opportunities for teachers to see the other side of their reading ability. Some offered ideas like reading in front of the class while others, like Morty, outright rejected this method because it would make him nervous in front of his classmates. These responses reflect the varied ways in which the participants felt their masculine performances fit in the context of literacy practice and call for highly individualized methods for allowing students to represent their reading ability in the classroom. Although they offered few alternatives, they were confident that they were better readers than their tests suggested. True or not, they deserved opportunities that allowed them to feel confident about the way in which others perceived them as readers.

**Negotiating gender expectations.** Perhaps the most interesting area in which participants in the present study negotiated their masculine performance in literacy practice and displayed a need for highly individualized pedagogy was through conversation regarding socialized gender expectations for literacy performance. Like many previously mentioned conversations, the participants reflected fluid and
contradicting ideas that would be detrimentally minimized by an essentialized understanding of boys’ literacy practices.

*Stereotyped expectations.* The participants revealed that many of their negative expectations of boys’ reading ability ultimately came from their teachers. The teacher-researcher asked both focus groups whether boys or girls were better readers, and both groups vehemently affirmed girls as better readers than boys. The following conversation occurred in the teacher-selected text group:

Teacher-researcher: Are girls or boys better readers?

All: Girls!

Teacher-researcher: Who told you that?

Bart: Miss Smith (pseudonym) told me that the other day.

A nearly identical conversation occurred in the student-selected text group. Bart further explained that Miss Smith had gone on to argue that girls were more mature than boys were and, therefore, better able to engage in reading. Unfortunately, this had become a salient rule for several of the participants in the present study. However, their discussion of the connection between masculinity and literacy practice demonstrated layers of contradicting ideas including ways in which they wanted to prove that such gendered expectations were not always true. For example, a member of both groups started a conversation about a male peer who they perceived to be a prolific reader—as if to argue that boys are readers too. The participants not only revealed how they constantly negotiated gender appropriateness for the topics they read but also how they gendered the practice of literacy itself.
**Girl topic or boy topic?** The teacher-researcher asked both groups if there were certain topics they would avoid reading because of what someone might think.

Teacher-researcher: Are there certain topics that you would avoid reading about because of what people would think if you picked it?

All: No

Teacher-researcher: So you don’t care what anybody thinks about what you choose to read?

All: No!

Teacher-researcher: Would any of you choose to read a fairytale story?

All except King: Yeah

This conversation suggests that they, at the very least, found value in confronting stereotypical gender performances. There is no way of knowing whether these boys would behave in the same manner if the opportunity to read a fairy tale presented itself, but these boys at least expressed value in accepting fluid masculine behaviors among each other.

**Confronting gender expectations.** Later in the interview, while the participants were discussing “activities” that would better engage them in literacy practice, they began to dismantle some of their social gender expectations on their own. John, discussing the importance of sports in his literacy practice, began talking about how much more he would be engaged if he was allowed to incorporate basketball into his reading more often. Although it was not clear exactly how he imagined this happening, the boys began to discuss how important it was for them to read topics that were
perceived to be masculine, but later they started to question just what qualified as a masculine topic.

Teacher-researcher: OK. So cooking. Boy topic or girl topic?
Cristiano: Boy
Eddie and John: Girl
Teacher-researcher: Sports
Bart: Both
John: Both for [cooking and sports]

This conversation was conflicting for all the participants. Their faces reflected their internal conflict, but they wanted to find a way to validate the interests and performances of others. A similar conversation about sports happened in the student-selected text group when Duck said “boys are usually, like athletic, or like, sports…but then again…I’m not saying girls can’t do it either”. Then, Kyle said “more boys play sports than…well boys like to be dangerous…well I wouldn’t consider that true, because there’s plenty of girls out there, like in the Olympics and stuff.” While the boys articulated a socialized notion of gender performance, they quickly corrected themselves to accommodate for a more fluid set of performances, as if their lived experiences contradicted some message they heard all their lives. They were just beginning to see the conflicting ideas that contributed to their masculine performance. Since each boy’s level of capacity for accepting fluid masculine behaviors was entirely different from his peers, each required personalized pedagogy designed to build his capacity to engage in literacy practice in ways that challenged those socialized gender expectations.
**Literacy is for boys.** A similar conversation occurred in the student-selected text group interview after Kyle answered the question about topics he would avoid.

Teacher-researcher: Are there ever topics that you would avoid reading because of what people would think?

Kyle: My Little Pony…No boys would like My Little Pony

Paul: My baby brother does.

In contrast to the conversation in the teacher-selected text group, these boys seemed far less concerned about reading topics that were perceived to be feminine than they were about others’ perceptions of their maturity. They cited incidents of others making fun of students for reading “baby books” and discussed the importance of being perceived as serious and smart—a stark contrast to cool, effortless hegemonic behavior that views academic effort as a feminine activity (Govender, 2011). Duck rejected the notion of reading as a feminine activity and even suggested that boys were more likely to engage in an intellectual activity like reading when “girls would rather shop.” Duck’s masculinity included gender expectations that were fluid and entirely based on his lived experiences, and, though Duck’s grades reflected that he was not performing well in his ELA class, his responses during the focus groups reflected the value he placed on the ability to read well. The boys resisted giving way to the notion that reading was a feminine activity, but each’s level of confrontation was unique. This further supports the notion that boys’ varied masculine performances require an individualized approach to engaging them in literacy practice.

**A resistance to marginalization.** As the boys in both groups worked through their ideas about gendered expectations and the ways in which literacy practice reflected their
masculine performance, they provided interesting commentary on two boys in the school who they perceived to be prolific, accomplished readers. Eddie brought up a boy in his grade who he said was “always bringing a book everywhere” and Jimmy mentioned one of his peers who “reads all the time” and “likes reading so much he wouldn’t even do his actual school work.” As the teacher-researcher probed the boys regarding their perception of these classmates, instead of responding with ridicule, they reflected a kind of admiration for them. When the teacher-researcher asked Eddie if people made fun of the classmate he mentioned, he said “oh no no no” as if that was a preposterous question. Jimmy said the classmate he mentioned was “pretty funny, too…always messing around in math” indicating an appreciation for the way in which his masculinity accommodated varied masculine performances. Kyle admired the way in which his classmate weaved his literacy practice throughout his day by even “having his phone or something and read[ing] books, like, online or something.” Jeff even mocked the notion of his classmate being made fun of for reading so much since “that means [he has] a better future in [his] life.” The boys in the present study voiced value in literacy practice, but most demonstrated a lack of guidance on how to make literacy practice a part of their own lives. The essentialized notion that boys do not like reading was simply not reflected in the conversations among the boys in the present study; however, each’s comments of admiration for his peer indicated widely different reasons for valuing his peer’s literacy practice. Each needed direction toward meaningful literacy practice, which would require vastly different means. Only one thing was true for all participants: they had been provided with few literacy experiences that accommodated their varied interests and masculine expressions leading them to confuse their underachievement with lack of
interest and engagement. What each individual needed could be accomplished with the use of either teacher-selected or student-selected texts in literacy practice, but what they lacked was pedagogy that valued their individual needs over what texts were included in the curriculum.

**Reading for the future.** The participants in the present study agreed on a connection between their literacy ability and their future career and social stability; however, each saw that connection through a lens of varied lived experiences and varied plans. Boys in both groups participated in a vast array of literacy experiences outside of school and recognized activities like reading song lyrics and product labels as part of their literacy lives; they discussed how terrible it would be to go to the store and not be able to get the things they needed because they could not read the labels. They discussed specific careers that would require advanced literacy skills, recognizing that news reporters “have this thing where you have to try to read fast” and Uber drivers have to read signs and maps to take their passengers where they need to go. The student-selected text group discussed at length, the ways in which literacy skills lead to “better jobs, better money” and that people who can read are also “good with financial stuff.” Jeff even provided an anecdote about his father’s illiterate friend and discussed the ways in which his father had to help him with day-to-day tasks like reading his mail. The participants’ masculine identities craved future independence, and the boys recognized the role of literacy in bettering their futures. Yet, as young adolescent readers, some reflected no sense of urgency in bettering their literacy skills in order to prepare for that future. Their varied masculine performances not only anticipated unique futures but also reflected a mosaic of lived experiences that each brought to literacy practice. Just as no one literacy
strategy, text type, or text selection method can be utilized to bring all boys toward literacy success, no one career path or future career goal can be expected to motivate all boys. In line with Kirkland (2011), this problematizes the way in which all students are pushed toward the rigid set of expectations associated college and career readiness upon which the curriculum at DMS is centered.

**Interpretation and Discussion**

The results from the data gathered from the pre-test and post-test for both groups suggest that neither teacher-selected nor student-selected text has a statistically significant impact on boys’ literacy achievement. Text-selection modes cannot be essentialized for all boys as data reveal that both teacher-selected and student-selected texts can be utilized to meet the needs of boys when the boys themselves are able to advocate for their own needs. Some boys achieve when they are allowed to choose their own texts—just as some achieve when having a teacher choose texts for them. The results of the present study indicate that there is no way to essentialize one text-selection method over the other as boys represent diverse needs and masculine identities that are infinitely varied. The participants’ masculine performances represented myriad combinations of interests, beliefs, and behaviors that were constantly working together and conflicting each other. One minute, Duck would insist he only wanted to read sports articles and the next he was talking about a biography he read that he found at home. Bart would openly accept reading a fairy tale story then reify the notion that sports were for boys. Their masculinities were a product of their lived experiences, and they lived in a world of mixed messages about the relationship between literacy and masculinity. Their
conversations revealed a desire for a classroom that validated every boy’s way of doing boy, but even they were confused about their own masculine performances.

Rather than settling on choosing texts for students, or allowing them to choose their own, the teacher should focus on creating an environment that represents ‘hybrid masculinities’ in every aspect of the curriculum. This approach would allow boys themselves to advocate personally for the literacy texts and strategies that work for them, discover the ways in which literacy practice can be accommodated by their masculine performances, and challenge notions of incongruence. Examining the results of this study through the lens of the teacher-researcher’s notion of PHM reveals following components that are necessary to support and validate ‘hybrid masculinities’ represented in the ELA classroom: the individualized perception of success, the capacity for fluid masculine performances, and the visibility of counter-hegemonic practices.

**The Individualized Perception of Success**

The results of the present study indicate that PHM must include an individualized perception of literacy success. Many of the participants in the present study indicated a lifetime of negative experiences with literacy practice; few could recount an experience during which they felt they had experienced literacy achievement. Instead, they felt that most assessments did not reflect their literacy abilities and that their teachers stereotyped their literacy ability. Retelsdorf et al. (2015) speak directly to the ways in which this type of stereotyping fosters a negative self-concept that results in fulfillment of the performance expectations. An environment that promotes PHM, provides opportunities for boys to be successful in literacy practice, but there is no uniform way to provide these opportunities. Instead, boys’ individual interests and masculine identities must be
represented in the materials and assessments with which they are provided. This requires a teacher who is committed to facilitating student-led curriculum and is aware of the unique ways in which boys negotiate their masculine identities in literacy practice.

Results of the present study indicate that boys’ socialization process in school contributes to their cycle of underachievement (Bristol, 2015), but it is likely that this socialization begins even before they enter school (Bryan, 2018). As they matured from children to adolescents, they found their interests less often represented in school curriculum. This is not to say that their teachers should have adopted more boy-friendly texts and accommodated hegemonic behaviors. Much the opposite is true. The thirteen participants in the present study represented a set of infinitely varied interests, and while they found it important that their personal interests were represented in the classroom, they were also sensitive to seeing the interests of others represented as well.

Students in both groups equated literacy success with reading interest, suggesting that one could not be present in the absence of the other. When they were interested, they were engaged; when they were engaged, there was potential for success. Bristol (2015) argues that the classroom is a socialized arena in which the cultural experiences of both teachers and students play out in a kind of performance, and he claims that GRP “requires teachers to use observed interests from both male and female students to create and implement curricula that can facilitate engagement and further content goals” (p. 61). PHM, which builds on Bristol’s GRP, insists that these interests cannot be found on a list, and they are certainly not limited to video games and sports, interests that represent hegemonic ideals. PHM is an investment in showing boys how to discover their own interests, inviting them to advocate for their interests and needs, and beginning a new
cycle of interest and success. As the participants in the present study indicated, sometimes boys themselves do not know how to articulate exactly what will pique their interest, but PHM insists on providing opportunities for boys’ interests and lived experiences to be represented, validated, and even challenged in literacy practice.

**Capacity for Fluid Masculine Performances**

The participants in the present study indicated burgeoning fluid ideas that allowed them to see the ways in which literacy practice had a place, if not in their own lives, but clearly in the lives of others. They claimed admiration for boys who had found a way to be readers and athletes, for boys who could be funny but also be readers. The findings of the present study suggest the participants’ admiration for the way in which others had found a place for literacy in their lives was an expression of their ‘hybrid masculinities’ and a move toward acceptance of fluid masculine performances. This is not to say that the participants in the present study had arrived at an understanding of the ways in which they could accommodate this masculinity themselves. PHM must include the teacher’s commitment to building the capacity for underachieving readers to see themselves as readers and to see how their identities can be reflected through their literacy practice—not in spite of it. “The failure to recognize the interplay of masculinities with literate identities neglects opportunities to learn from those boys who are successfully masculine and successfully literate” (Skelton & Francis, 2011, p. 473), and this is the challenge of the literacy classroom committed to PHM. The teacher must create a community that validates boys’ ‘hybrid masculinities’ and highlights the behaviors of successfully literate boys. Skelton and Francis maintain that “social success is pivotal” (p. 473), and while the teacher can only control the social environment in his or her own classroom, PHM insists
that the teacher be committed to that social environment being the one place where all boys safely perform their masculinities and value literacy success.

**Visibility of Counter-hegemonic Practices**

Though the boys in the present study indicated a willingness to engage in counter-hegemonic practices, their capacity to do so was limited by their lived experiences. This was seen in the boys’ wavering responses to whether certain activities were for boys or for girls and their understanding of typical boy behavior as disruptive, wild, and therefore not conducive to the classroom. Their heteronormative worldview created a classification system for behavior, though the boys in the present study appeared to be fighting it in some ways. To build this capacity, a classroom focused on PHM should regularly display counter-hegemonic practice to redefine boys’ view of normativity. Frank et al. (2003) reference these counter-hegemonic practices to show how boys can be taught to position themselves “as social allies supporting progressive gender politics” (p. 124). Frank et al. insist that “honest and open conversations in particular [are] a powerful vehicle for resisting heteronormative masculinity” (p. 126). Like the boys in the study by Frank et al., the participants in the present study recognized the strict rules of hegemonic performance to include an interest in sports and classroom disengagement, but the way in which they challenged those notions in front of their peers led to many counter-hegemonic conversations. Bart, for example, was the quickest to offer his willingness to participate in counter-hegemonic behaviors. He questioned his peers when they said they would not want to read fairy tales, and he chastised John for making fun of Eddie’s performance on the pre-test. PHM in the middle-level classroom must build capacity for boys “to operate as social allies [thereby]…interrogating the cultural scripts of normative
masculinity” (Frank et al., 2003, p. 128). Not only did the participants’ ‘hybrid masculinities’ indicate the possibility for this kind of social practice, they also necessitated the continued visibility of counter-hegemonic practices in the literacy classroom.

**Conclusion**

Using PHM as a conceptual framework, the results of the present study indicate no statistical significance in literacy achievement when boys choose their own texts versus when their texts are selected for them by the teacher. However, focus group data indicate several factors that are essential in PHM and that reject essentialized approaches said to work for all boys. Instead, the teacher as the facilitator of PHM, must be intimately aware of the individualized interests and masculine performances of each male represented in the language arts classroom. Without this sort of personalized approach, the underachieving boys in the present study rarely engaged in meaningful literacy practice. Negative experiences during which boys felt their interests and masculine performances were not represented in the classroom contributed to a cycle of underachievement--not an outright rejection of literacy as a feminine activity. The results of the present study led to the teacher-researcher’s notion of PHM which must include the individualized perception of success, the capacity for fluid masculine performances, and the visibility of counter-hegemonic practices for literacy success.
CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In chapter Six, the teacher-researcher shares the implications and recommendations for the present study. It includes an overview of the PoP, the research questions, and a summary of data collection methods. This is followed by a discussion of the findings for the present study and a summary of ‘pedagogy of hybrid masculinities’ (PHM) which is proposed by the teacher-researcher. Next, an action plan details plans for sharing results and implications with student-participants and shareholders in the SSD. Suggestions for future research follow the action plan.

**Focus of the Study**

The identified problem of practice (PoP) concerns the disengagement and underachievement of middle-level boys in the teacher-researcher’s ELA class. The primary purpose of the study was to determine whether teacher-selected texts or student-selected texts had a significant impact on literacy achievement and to determine how boys perceived their masculine performances to play a role in their literacy achievement. The secondary purpose was to create an action plan for increasing the literacy achievement of middle-level males in the teacher-researcher’s school. The following two research questions were addressed in the present study:

1. Does teacher-selected informational text or student-selected informational text best contribute to literacy achievement and engagement and masculine identities for middle-level males?
2. How do middle-level males perceive the relationship between masculine performance and literacy achievement?

**Overview of the Study**

The teacher-researcher was confounded by male students’ lack of engagement in literacy practice and developed an action research methodology that explored the cycle of boys’ disinterest and underachievement in literacy practice. The teacher-researcher collected data for nine weeks which included the administration of the pre-test and post-test, the collection of observational field notes during the instructional period, and participation in semi-structured focus group interviews.

The sample of students were identified to reflect the overall population of students at DMS, a large middle school in coastal South Carolina. Participants were neither identified as gifted nor received special education services. According to the results of the pre-test, all but one student performed below grade-level expectations, so the results of the present study are specific to pedagogical concerns for underperforming students.

The assessment used as both pre-test and post-test for the present study examined students’ ability to identify the central idea of an informational text, a South Carolina Career Readiness Standard indicator (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). This indicator was chosen because of the current curricular trend within the SSD to expose students to a high volume of informational texts due to their prevalence on state-mandated tests. The students did not earn a grade for either the pre-test or the post-test.

The participants chose to participate in the study with signed-permission from a guardian (see Appendix C) and, after administration of the pre-test, spent one hour working with the teacher-researcher weekly. During the hour-long reading workshops,
participants in both groups read two informational texts. During the first reading, participants with prompted to discuss their reading with peers, but, during the second reading, students were able to read independently. Observational field notes captured student conversation and behaviors, as well as reflections during the instructional activities. Following each session, students submitted a Reading Workshop Guide (see Appendix A and Appendix B), which documented students’ ability to articulate the central idea and supporting evidence during the reading workshops. The Reading Workshop Guides were also used as a point of conversation and feedback between the teacher-researcher and the student, and students were often asked questions about their responses and asked to revise their work on the reading guides following feedback.

Following the instructional period, participants completed a post-test identical to the pre-test. Next, participants gathered with the teacher-researcher for semi-structured focus group interviews to discuss their participation in literacy practice and to explain the ways in which their masculine performances affected their participation in literacy practice.

Summary of the Study

Given the results of the analysis of these multiple data points, the teacher-researcher was able to address the research questions for the present study to determine that the text selection method had no significant impact on middle-level males’ literacy achievement. Adding to the quantitative data and using PHM, inductive analysis of qualitative data gathered from the teacher-researcher’s observational field notes and semi-structured focus group interviews revealed a complex relationship between boys’ masculine performances and their literacy practice.
Using PHM as a conceptual framework, the findings were used to determine three distinct characteristics of literacy practice that best support boys’ ‘hybrid masculinities’ in the ELA classroom: (1) the individual perception of success (2) capacity for fluid masculine performances, and (3) the visibility of counter-hegemonic practices. Data from all sources suggest that essentializing one text-selection mode to meet the needs of all boys ensures that some boys will be lost in the cycle of disinterest and underachievement.

**Action Plan**

The results of the present study indicate that for middle-level males’, literacy practices must be highly individualized and teachers must intimately aware of the unique needs of each boy represented in the ELA classroom. While some boys may benefit from the freedom of choosing their own informational texts for literacy practice, some may experience “deleterious effects” (Topping et al., 2008, p. 515) when given the opportunity to choose informational texts for independent reading. In the SSD, this is a common practice as students independently choose and read an informational text at least twice per week as per district curriculum guidelines. While some teachers at DMS do vary text-selection modes, few tailor that experience to each individual student. Most simply require that students complete a correlating activity for accountability purposes and invite little to no collaboration or interaction among students with their reading. Rarely are students invited to communicate their individual needs or asked to share their ideas and preferences for literacy practice as part of the teacher’s decision-making process. For this reason, it is important that the results of this study be communicated to stakeholders within the SSD as Mertler (2014) outlines in his action research process so curriculum guidelines can be amended to increase literacy engagement for all male
students, especially those who demonstrate a lack of engagement and achievement in literacy practice. While the teacher-researcher plans to communicate results with stakeholders at the school and district level, the teacher-researcher will communicate specific recommendations to all language arts teachers who are most directly responsible for the literacy success of male students and thus the teachers whose practice can best be informed by PHM. Later, the teacher-researcher will conduct further research to investigate relevant topics that connect to the findings of the present study. These include boys’ masculinity policing behaviors, girls’ perception of the relationship between identity and literacy practice, and the practices of teachers who promote literacy success for boys.

The first step of the action plan is to outline the results of the study and provide specific strategies to be implemented at DMS based on the findings of the study. This professional development will include a series of sessions beginning at the start of the 2018-2019 school year and continuing through three other sessions throughout the school year. The teacher-researcher will specifically outline lesson plans that can be used to meet the district requirement that each student read of two informational texts weekly and to provide PHM to help middle-level males negotiate their masculinities in way that allows for successful literacy practice. It is important for teachers to see how the findings of the present study can be used within the existing curriculum—not as an additional component.

The most important component of teacher professional development builds on Bristol’s (2015) suggestion that teachers be equipped with the tools necessary to elicit students’ contextual and cultural needs as well as expressed interests as they facilitate
instruction in the classroom. Teachers must learn how to engage students in conversation that reveals interests that may be hidden by students’ perception of gendered expectations. In addition, an exploration of ‘hybrid masculinities’ and the ways in which those masculinities contributed to students’ performance in the context of the present study will be discussed so that teachers are able to move beyond an essentialized understanding of boys as a homogenous group with singular needs. Clary, Styslinger, and Oglan (2012) address the need for teachers to revise their “harbored perceptions of their students’ reading grounded in unconstructive attitudes toward their students” (p. 34). They explain that well-crafted professional development can help teachers see their “role in helping students become literate citizens in today’s world” (p. 34), which is the goal of the professional development sessions included in this study’s action plan. Teachers need experiences which demonstrate Connell’s (2005) notion that the classroom is the primary area for forming “capacities for practice” (p. 239). In the classroom, boys must learn to see achievement and engagement with literacy practice as a prized expression of masculinity and to develop the skills of counter-hegemonic practice (Frank et al., 2003).

The teacher-researcher will also encourage teachers within the SSD to conduct similar action research studies in their own classrooms. As each teacher conducts literacy practice in nuanced ways, each can contribute to the body of literature related to literacy achievement, the underachievement of adolescent males, and the masculine performances of middle-level males. The teacher-researcher plans to instruct teachers on the ways in which engaging in the practice of action research is actually the best way to “generate pressure that will cumulate towards a transformation of the whole structure” (Connell,
As suggested by Mertler (2014), it is also the best way for teachers to find new ways of assessing students’ true literacy ability.

Although empowering teachers to implement PHM is a priority, the results of the present study suggest that curriculum modifications are necessary to maximize literacy achievement for adolescent males in the SSD. As a member of the district curriculum team for middle-level language arts in the SSD, the teacher-researcher plans to outline several specific changes to district curriculum guidelines. First, curriculum should include a balance of informational and literary texts and many opportunities for students to select and suggest texts for literacy practice. Research included in the literature review suggests that students who consume copious amounts of informational text actually experience “deleterious effects” (Topping et al., 2008, p. 515) related to literacy achievement. Currently, the language arts curriculum in the SSD is primarily composed of informational texts, which Topping et al. suggest can be consumed with a “dip in and out” (p. 517) approach that does not support critical reading skills. Instead of mandating a collection of informational texts, the curriculum should be revised to support teachers in their pedagogies. Teachers should be trained on how to conference with students in a way that exposes their unique interests and ‘hybrid masculinities’ and how to choose appropriate texts that speak to students’ interests, validate those ‘hybrid masculinities’, and provide appropriate levels of complexity.

Reichert and Hawley (2013) suggests that “relationship is the very medium through which successful teaching and learning occurs” (p. 51), and the results of the present study suggest that essentialized, traditional approaches to literacy instruction that take a one-size-fits-all approach do not support literacy achievement for underachieving
males. The SSD’s curriculum guidelines should reflect these findings and provide a means through which teachers can build relationships both between themselves and the boys they teach and among all gender performances represented in the classroom.

In addition to sharing the results of the present study within the SSD, the teacher-researcher plans to publish the notion of PHM in peer-reviewed academic journals so a wider audience can explore the concept and promote further research. The teacher-researcher also plans to present at academic conferences including the Gender and Education Association Conference, the Literacy Research Association Conference, the Association for Middle Level Education Conference, and the South Carolina Council of Teachers of English Conference. Through publication and conference presentations, the notion of PHM can also be shared in undergraduate programs which prepare pre-service teachers. By understanding the notion of ‘hybrid masculinities’ even before entering the classroom, new teachers can approach disengaged, underachieving male learners with a transformational perspective and resist socialized expectations that serve to further disengage some boys.

The final component of the action plan includes the teacher-researcher’s plan to engage in a larger mixed-methods study with a random sample of students using the same PoP and research questions. This would allow the results to be generalized to a wider audience. This larger-scale study, would also include a variety of assessment methods to determine literacy achievement instead of relying only on the multiple-choice assessments that are problematized in the present study (Kirkland, 2011; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Reed, 2015). This is among a larger set of suggested research studies inspired by the present study. These studies are outlined in the following section.
Suggestions for Future Research

The present action research study raises questions that should be explored through future research in a variety of contexts. Action research questions arise from a problem in a specific environment for a specific population of students and do not generalize to larger audiences (Mertler, 2014). The small number of participants limited the present study, so a mixed-methods study with a larger sample size is necessary to explore the research questions included in this study. A larger sample would allow the researcher to generalize the results to other populations and inform a wider audience of the unique pedagogical needs of boys who perform ‘hybrid masculinities.’

It is also necessary to address the research questions used in the present study to address marginalized populations. For example, Black boys’ literacy practice and masculine performances, given the cultural and social nature of both, are different than practices of the participants in this study which did not include any Black males. According to Bryan (2018), “Black masculinity is not the extension of hegemonic White masculinity because it does not receive similar patriarchal rewards and privileges” (p. 5). This necessitates applying PHM as a framework to examine Black boys’ perception of the relationship between masculine performance and literacy achievement.

As the present study looks specifically at the ways in which masculine performance is connected to literacy practice, a wider look at academic achievement in relationship to gender performance opens a wide door for future research. Raag, et al. (2011) raise an important question that is relevant to future research in connection with the present study: “Are the gaps across…gender necessary?” (p. 692). They argue that at the pre-k level, “gender had minimal effects on reading outcomes” (p. 697) suggesting
that the gap that grows between boys and girls at the middle and secondary levels is based on environmental and social factors. One of the factors that the teacher-researcher observed throughout the study was the practice of masculinity policing among the participants in the study (Barnes, 2012; Coles, 2009; Paechter, 2012; Rigeluth & Addis, 2016). Understanding gender as a social construction, the teacher-researcher witnessed boys directly and indirectly communicating what was acceptable masculine performance and what was not. Masculinity policing is not only prevalent throughout the classroom but can have powerful effects on boys’ willingness to participate in classroom activities (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016; Tischler & McLaughtry, 2011). North American hegemonic masculinity, the widely accepted standard for masculinity within a particular culture, values a lack of effort in academic tasks suggesting that masculine performance should include natural, effortless ability (Ward, 2014; Govender, 2011). This leads to policing among boys, which marginalizes those who put effort toward academic achievement.

Though the participants in the present study engaged in both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices, this policing behavior was still observed by the teacher-researcher. The findings of the present study suggest a need for further research on policing mechanisms that are used in the classroom, which may contribute the gender gap between boys and girls at the middle and secondary levels.

The present study is specifically concerned with boys because of the teacher-researcher’s difficulty engaging boys in the language arts classroom, but the same type of study is necessary to understand better girls’ engagement with literacy practice. The results of the present study suggest that boys’ masculine expressions require individual pedagogical considerations and reject a set of strategies that contribute to all boys’
success. Gilligan (2002) characterizes girls as beings who center their identities on their relation to others; the methodology of the present study could be used to determine girls’ perception of the relationship between gendered identities and literacy practice. There is a need for research that determines how girls best engage with literacy practice and how their identities are shaped and validated through that practice.

Lastly, a large body of research which confirms boys’ literacy underachievement. Recently, there has been an influx of studies that look at boys who are doing well, citing most commonly the importance of masculinity validation as a contributing factor for boys who achieve (Skelton & Francis, 2001; White, 2007). As students, both male and female, come to understand their gender identity through socialized messages about accurate performance, teachers certainly contribute to the validation and marginalization of certain identities. With respect to boys who perform well, studies are necessary that specifically outline what those teachers do that contribute to their achievement.

**Conclusion**

The literacy underachievement of males is a multi-layered, complex, sociological, and even political issue that cannot be solved in a single study. However, it is an issue of importance, as it speaks to the ways in which society establishes expectations for students, based on factors that have little to do with their actual abilities or interests. It is the intent of the teacher-researcher to, at the very least, expose the ways in which pedagogy must not ignore the individual needs of all students, not just boys. PHM, then, serves as a framework for instruction that is brought to life by the needs and interests of the students who are a part of that instruction. It cannot be a static, prescribed practice.
The findings of this study reveal that neither teacher-selected texts nor student-selected texts can be utilized to benefit all boys but rather that both text selection modes can have positive impacts for individual boys as their ‘hybrid masculinities’ demand individualized, unique instructional methods. The present study highlights the need for pedagogy that goes beyond essentializing a set of boy-friendly strategies to emphasize the role of the teacher as the facilitator of student success. The teacher must shine a light on each individual boy who is represented in every classroom, as each represents a set of needs and values that cannot be generalized to all boys. Scholes (2010) explains that “negotiations of individual and group identity during the pursuit and expression of being a boy contributes enabling and constraining reading experiences” (p. 446), and Kirkland and Jackson (2009) argue that it is the teacher who determines how these experiences will shape boys’ literacy achievement. PHM acknowledges the way in which an individual’s performance of boy shapes his reading experiences and empowers literacy teachers, in particular, to serve as a living component of the curriculum they teach regardless of what is mandated at the state or district level. The teacher must determine that the curriculum he or she will provide serves the individual needs of each boy.
REFERENCES

Abed, M. (2014). A consideration to two main ethical issues in educational research, and how may these be addressed. *Journal on Educational Psychology, 8*(3), 1-14.


Falter Thomas, A. (2014). An action research study involving motivating middle school students' learning through online literature circles. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research, 9*(1), 44-54


doi:10.1080/03004279.2014.926133


APPENDIX A: TEACHER-SELECTED TEXT READING WORKSHOP GUIDE

Name: _________________________________________________

Date of Circle Meeting: _________________________________

What is the name of the article you are reading today?

_____________________________________________________

What did you read last week?

_____________________________________________________

Provide three short summaries that support your central idea (these are the ones you or your classmates provide your group):

1. 

2. 

3. 

What is the central idea of the article you have read? You should write at least two sentences here.

What did you think about this article? Did you like it? Why or why not? Would you have picked this article to read yourself? Why or why not? Write at least two sentences.
APPENDIX B: STUDENT-SELECTED TEXT READING WORKSHOP GUIDE

Name: __________________________________________________

Date of Circle Meeting: __________________________________

What is the name of the article you are reading today?
____________________________________________________________________

What did you read last week?
____________________________________________________________________

Provide three short summaries that support your central idea (these are the ones you share with your classmates):

1. 

2. 

3. 

What is the central idea of the article you have read? You should write at least two sentences here using the information you have written above.

Why did you choose this article? Did you like it? Why or why not? Would you recommend it to a friend? Write at least two sentences.
APPENDIX C: PARENT CONSENT FORM

Dear Parent,

My name is Elizabeth Coen Welch. I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and I would like to invite your child to participate. The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research.

I am studying how boys’ literacy performance is affected by choice regarding the texts they read in class. If you would like for your child to participate, he will be asked to participate in reading groups with other boys in the class and to take a test before the study and a test after the study is completed. The study will take approximately six weeks. All activities will take place during class, and no additional requirements outside of class will be required.

Participation is confidential. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your child’s identity will not be revealed.

Allowing your child to take part in the study is your decision. You do not have to involve your child in this study if you do not want to. You may also ask for your child to quit the study at any time without any penalty. Participation, non-participation or withdrawal will not affect your child’s grades in any way.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 843-907-3110 or by email at coen@email.sc.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Nathaniel Bryan, by email at bryann@email.sc.edu if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like for your child to participate, please check the appropriate response, sign, and return this form with your child.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth C. Welch

________________ I do NOT wish for my child to participate in this study.
I DO wish for my child to participate in this study.

(Parent Signature)
APPENDIX D: OBSERVATIONAL FIELD NOTES

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<tr>
<th>Observation Date and Time Group A/Group B</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Post-observation Comments</th>
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APPENDIX E: SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What kind of a reader do you think you are?
   a. What kinds of things do you read?

2. How did you feel about having your articles chosen for you?
   a. Do you have a specific example?
   b. Why do you think you feel that way?

3. When you pick articles for yourself, how do you choose what to read?
   a. Do you ever pick things because of what people will think about your choice?
   b. Do you avoid topics because of what people will think?

4. Are you a good reader?
   a. Why or why not?

5. Do you think being a good reader is important?
   a. What kinds of things do you think it might help you do in the future?
   b. How is it important for careers?

6. Are boys or girls better readers?
   a. Where did those ideas come from?

7. Is reading a masculine activity?
   a. What does it mean to be masculine?
   b. Do you ever avoid reading? Why?

8. What did you think about the test?
a. Is USA Test Prep an accurate test of your reading ability?

b. What is like to take that test?

9. What would be a better way to measure your reading ability?
   a. Are any of your classes or teachers using assessments like that?

10. What do you think would help you be a better reader?

11. What do you think would help you enjoy reading more?