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The Hero within –

The Reading Practices of Boys in One Grade 11 South African English Home Language Classroom

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Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report (AC000)

Supervised by Dr Belinda Mendelowitz and Dr Navanthree Govender

Declaration

I declare that this thesis 'The Hero within –The Reading Practices of Boys in One Grade 11 South African English Home Language Classroom' is my own work and has never been submitted for degree purposes to any other institution.

Abstract

'When I think about reading, I think about school. *I wouldn't be the person I am today without reading' (FW/L).*

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the reading practices of learners in a Grade 11 classroom in a boys' school in South Africa in order to understand whether, and if so how, these practices influenced the constitution of their current and prospective identities. The study examined the boys' response to the texts used in the classroom and whether, and if so how, these texts shaped their reading practices outside the classroom. Findings from an analysis of data collected from the boys' free writing about reading, from a questionnaire and from focus group interviews are as follows: (i) the majority of boys who read out of school, identify with the 'do-good' heroes in fantasy novels or comic books; (ii) some boys claim to see no value in reading inside or outside the classroom, despite the fact that all read social media texts every day; (iii) for some boys, reading is associated with the feminine; (iv) for most boys, what counts as proficiency in reading is limited to an ability to read aloud fluently. These findings suggest that there is a need for teachers to reconsider the texts they choose and the pedagogies they use in order to encourage boys' interest in and commitment to reading for academic and other purposes.

Acknowledgements

The writing of this dissertation has been a long and sometimes difficult journey. There are so many variables that influence education in South Africa today and indeed, reading that it is impossible to have covered all of these factors. This is why I need to express gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Belinda Mendelowitz and Dr Navan Govender, for keeping me focused and motivated to continue with the aspects of my research that were really important to boys and reading in South Africa.

I also need to thank Dr Marion Joseph who kept me grounded during my research and gave me valuable advice and support.

Dedication

To Lia – my daughter – whose future was the guiding motivation for pursuing further studies; and whose patience with me in these growing years has been humbling.

To my mother – Cheryl Richter – whose support and wisdom was invaluable. Thank you for being there for me through this journey.

To Kobus – because I promised.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

'Reading is not the most important thing in my life,
but it sure does make my life better' (FW/F).

1.1 Aims of Study

As an English high school educator in an all-boys' school, I have been fascinated and concerned by my learners' perceptions about reading. I have come across learners who love reading and those who hate it, and I wanted to investigate why some boys enjoy reading, and why some boys do not. I thought that by researching reading practices in and out of school, I may start to understand their perceptions about reading better and, as a result, cater for their reading needs better within my classroom.

Furthermore, I subscribe to the idea that what one reads can have an impact on who one is and on who one would like to become. I also believe that it is precisely because of who we are that we choose certain texts and have preferential reading practices. I wanted to know what choices of reading texts the boys in my class preferred and why they preferred them to other texts based on how they see themselves. This would mean that I needed to establish how their ideas about reading influenced their ideas about their identities as young men. Thus, I wanted to discover if there were any links between ideas about reading, boys' identity as it shapes and reflects reading choices.

I have also observed the link between boys, and indeed girls also, who read regularly, and their academic success, compared to those who do not read and are prone to mediocre academic results and sometimes academic failure. There is a great deal of literature that suggests that this is so, but I wanted to see if this is true in the South African context also. If this is true, then it means that greater emphasis or advocacy on the links between reading and academic results will need to be strengthened. Parents will need to take more deliberate accountability for providing reading opportunities at home and encouraging reading practice, not in a prescriptive way, which could be damaging, but in a way that engenders a growing interest in reading more. Thus, a further aim of

this study was to gain better insight into reading practices among teenage boys that will inform choices in teaching strategies to develop an appreciation for life-long reading among boys.

Because reading is often thought of as a school-based practice, I have wondered about the role others (meaning not only the English educator) play in influencing attitudes about reading and reading practices. I aimed to get a clearer understanding of who the other people may be who influenced my research participants' ideas and attitudes about reading. Knowing who these people are could assist educators in making better inroads into effecting change in reading perceptions by using established relationships to promote better reading experiences for learners.

1.2 Rationale

As an English educator in an all-boys' school, I have been interested in what boys read and how their reading practices might possibly affect their academic success. I have noticed that very few boys read traditional (meaning canonical) texts outside of school. I began to question whether boys who routinely perform poorly on comprehension tests read at home. Hull and Schultz (2001) looked at settings outside of school to understand patterns of school success and school failure and I wanted to find out what exactly the boys' reading practices are to establish whether there is a link between reading and academic success, as findings from established research such as Hamilton (2000), Boltz (2006), and Ellis and Coddington (2013) have already discovered. However, I wanted to investigate if this was true in the South African context also.

Furthermore, if the boys were reading, I wanted to know if their reading and the choices they made influenced the way they thought about themselves, the world and their place in the world currently; and how they think their reading practices may impact on their future in the world outside the school environment, and in which ways. And just like Friere (1993), whose research focused on the ways in which education and literacy should support people in questioning and shaping their worlds (Hull & Schultz, 2001), I wanted to investigate how my participants created their own worlds and how they positioned themselves in

them. I have observed that boys who are educated in an all-boy school environment perceive themselves as being different to boys who are educated in co-educational institutions, and it occurred to me that perhaps they may also perceive reading differently to boys in co-educational environments. While I did not conduct a comparative study, I investigated the masculine identity within this environment and considered the gender influences and stereotypes on the identity of boys in relation to their reading practices.

Growing literature on boys and reading suggests that boys do not read for pleasure or entertainment such as Boltz's (2006) finding that not one boy in his study of 35 boys mentioned reading for enjoyment or entertainment. Boltz is not the only researcher to come to this conclusion. Ellis and Coddington (2013) found that only 54% of boys in their study of reading engagement read for enjoyment, meaning that a large percentage of boys (47%) do not read for enjoyment, and that boys were less likely than girls to enjoy reading. This is also in line with findings on boys' literacy presented by Brozo (2006). Love and Hamston state that 'research into boys' literacy suggests that teenage boys are less likely than teenage girls to engage in recreational and academic reading for pleasure or for a purpose that is not readily apparent' (2004: 337). Hodges (2016) notices the irony that in teaching literature, one very often ruins the notion that reading narratives can be pleasurable. If educators are making reading seem like a chore to get through rather than a pleasurable experience then it would follow that few would want to do it for enjoyment. Therefore, it was important that I investigate if this was true among the participants in my study because I hypothesised that if educators could tap into the texts that boys choose to read for entertainment purposes (if they in fact do so), then it would mean that perhaps a way forward could be found in engaging our boy learners more in the English classroom, and indeed cultivating a deeper love of reading.

1.3 Background to Research Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the reading practices of a group of South African boys in Grade 11 (aged 16–18) and to discover how these reading practices influence their ideas about their own identities as well as their futures. If what we are exposed to affects who we are, then it stands to reason that

everything we read, interpret and make meaning of has an effect on how we see ourselves and how we see ourselves in the world.

Literature that reports on investigations of boys' and girls' reading competencies reveals that boys tend to have different reading practices to girls. South Africa participates in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which has been conducted among Grade 4 and Grade 5 learners in our country in 2006, 2011 and 2016 by the Centre for Evaluation and Assessment at the University of Pretoria. A key finding from PIRLS (2011 and 2016) is that girls scored higher marks on reading and comprehension tests than their male counterparts. This finding, together with findings from a number of international studies – Boltz (2007), Brozo (2006), Ellis and Coddington (2013), Golding (2010), Harrison (2012), Love and Hamston (2004), Roswell and Kendrik (2013), Scholes (2015), Smith (2004) and Sullivan (2004) – influenced my choice to study boys only.

Smith and Wilhelm state: 'If boys are in trouble in the area of literacy because of gender, then our systems of belief both about literacy and about gender can be changed in ways to help them' (Hodges, 2016: 124). I believe this statement speaks to how boys appear to perceive what it means to be a 'man' in the South African society. If they are conflicted in creating an 'acceptable' identity, then I would suggest that different approaches to reading and careful text selection can assist them in not only becoming confident young men, but better readers too.

Lev Vygotsky (cited in Mahn, 2012) states that 'the child is a part of the social situation, and the relation of the child to the environment and the environment to the child occurs through the experience and activity of the child himself; the forces of the environment acquire a controlling significance because the child experiences them' (2012:112). Thus the very act of reading within the school environment, and outside school will have an impact on the identity of the child because of what he or she has been exposed to in text, and while the texts have been taught and talked about. It is on this basis that I foreground my research within a social cultural framework. I have also drawn on Alexander's ideas (Hodges, 2016) about the links between reading as a social practice and young

people's identities. Identity is not only affected by what we read, but it is also perhaps because of our identities that we choose what to read. Development is not limited to biology alone, but through social interaction and meaning making, children develop their identity and sense of worth. A further aim of the study was to look at the specific in and out-of-school reading practices to gain a better understanding of what these practices are. I hoped to find patterns in the practices in order to draw out possible useful strategies that could be integrated into the teaching of reading in the classroom context.

Bhabha's (1994) research was also useful to my study in that he examined the 'third' space' – the way in which literacy can be shaped in classrooms that recognise the home literacy practices of learners - because the classroom is often the space where different cultures meet and can either be a space for the creation of tension, or smooth coexistence. I wanted to see how this space has been used in particular to influence gendered identity when it comes to reading. Thus reading as a social practice is influenced by the historical, socio-economic and cultural stimuli that impact on each individual which makes the individual responses in my study intriguing.

Cultural attributes are elements that inform our identities and cannot be ignored in a study that has to do with diverse cultural backgrounds, within social settings and practices. As Bruner states 'It is through our own narratives that we principally construct a version of ourselves in the world, and it is through its narrative that a culture provides models of identity and agency to its members' (1996:xiv).Thus I framed my research within a socio-cultural framework that was also influenced by Hall's (2005) research that found that learner's beliefs, ideas and personal goals about themselves as readers and learners strongly influenced the ways in which those learners negotiated with texts.

The broad concept of literacy is also important for this research in that it 'acknowledges the role of print and other symbol systems as being central to literate practice, but recognises that the learning and use of symbols is mediated by and constituted in social systems and cultural practices' (Heath 1983:23). Moje and Lewis add to this definition by arguing that 'power, identities and agency play important roles in whose social and cultural practices are valued,

and thus, whose literacy practices are valued and whose are not' (2008:3). Power and disempowerment, conflicting emotions and thoughts in trying to discover one's authentic identity and agency are strong undercurrents that come to the fore in my research study when boys discuss their reading practices and genre selections.

Another key factor that I drew on was the New Literacy Studies approach that says it is important to study literacy out of school because the interplay between the meanings of local events and the structural analysis of broader cultural and political institutions and practices impact on the discourses we have, revealing understanding and addressing power relations. Gee (2000) said discourses are ways of being by specific groups of people and that people use discourses to affiliate and display their membership in particular social groups. As my study is grounded in a social cultural framework it will be important to note the discourses among the boys as they talk about their reading practices, behaviours, beliefs and activities and how these discourses ultimately shape their identities.

There is an opposing idea presented by Moll's (1992) research into bilingual classroom studies which found that drawing on the tacit knowledge of cultural forms found outside of school do not work in the South African context because the classroom is home to far too many diverse cultures. South Africa has a unique situation of being so multicultural in some instances, such as my site of research, that there is not enough time in the classroom to cater to each cultural community because there are simply too many. Given Moll's research, I needed to be aware of whether the diverse identities in my classroom meant that some boys were excluded from the texts studied because of their cultural diversity and if some boys are perhaps treated preferentially in terms of text selection because their cultural identity may be more akin to that of the teacher for instance. This could be in texts that teachers prefer to expose the learners to, but may also affect the choice of text outside the school environment because the exposure to certain texts in school may affect choices outside school.

The findings of Smith and Wilhelm (2002) show that boys do not comprehend narrative fiction as well as girls and are much less interested in leisure reading

than girls. They also found that when boys do read, they tend to read informational texts, newspapers, magazines and comics. Furthermore, their evidence showed boys prefer escapism and humour, some being particularly passionate about science fiction and fantasy rather than the canonical texts usually prescribed by schools, or crime and romance genres. Lastly, they found that boys tend to think they are bad readers. These findings corroborate those of Boltz and several other researchers such as Ellis and Coddington (2013), Love and Hamston (2004), Harrison (2012), and Rowsell and Kendrik (2013). Their work provides a departure point for my study as little research concerning these reading patterns have been conducted in the Further Education and Training Phase in an all-boys school in South Africa. Thus I wanted to see if boys in South Africa follow the same trends as those reported in global research. While my research does show some similarity to international studies, there are some notable differences, discussed in later chapters.

However, Ellis and Coddington acknowledge the non-fiction reading preference of boys but state that: 'Promoting such books may not produce a lasting and positive impact on reading and engagement or on attainment' (2013:233). While they are entitled to this view, I argue that it is better for boys to read something instead of nothing at all.

While conducting this study it is important to remember that I exercised no judgment of boys and what they read, or did not read. As Love and Hamston point out, 'it is important to avoid homogenising boys and risk an overemphasis on a deficit view of boys as readers and a narrow perspective on what constitutes reading' (2004: 338). My aim was to uncover how the boys' text choices could be accommodated in the South African curriculum and in educators' teaching practice.

Furthermore, I wanted to investigate how their reading practices influenced their identities; and conversely, how their identity influenced their reading practices. Kehler and Martino support this statement as they argue against essentialist thinking that has assumed masculinity is an unchanging, common experience or fixed essence for all boys that has gained particular currency in the field of boys' educational policy and practice (2007:94). This research therefore seeks

to move beyond these preconceptions in order to understand what boys read and their reasons for doing so.

1.4 Research questions

With reference to the literature and context, the following research questions underpinned this qualitative study:

1. How do the boys in this study think about their own reading practices?
2. Do the boys in this study see a relationship between reading and their own gendered identities, and if so, what is the relationship?
3. Do the boys in this study see a relationship between reading and success, and if so, what is the relationship?

It is expected that as a result of these research questions other sub-questions will need to be explored such as:

Do the choice of texts read inside school affect out-of-school reading practices, and if so, how?

Do these choices of texts, inside and outside of school, reflect and shape their identities, and if so, how?

It is hoped that by shedding light on some of these questions, particularly in the South African context, that curriculum planners and English educators can make better informed choices when it comes to reading texts and the teaching of reading in the classroom itself.

Furthermore, if we understand the identities that are shaped by reading and become more aware of how reading shapes identity, specifically in relation to teenage boys, then we can also make necessary adjustments in our pedagogical approaches and teaching methodologies.

1.5 Overview

This chapter has looked at the reasons I wanted to conduct research into reading practices among boys. I have framed my research with the understanding that reading is inextricably linked to social and cultural

discourses and I therefore position my research within a socio-cultural framework. Given the nature of my framework, it is necessary to investigate how in- and out-of-school reading practice impacts on the identities of my research participants, and how their identities shape their reading practices. I have also provided reasons why I have investigated the link between reading and academic performance.

In the chapter that follows, I provide additional information and greater depth of discourse in establishing my reasons for conducting my research. I present the literature that has informed my research, data analysis and subsequent argument within my specific research questions.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The PIRLS (2011) assessment indicates that 43% of Grade 5 learners in our South African schools have not developed the basic skills required for reading at an equivalent international Grade 4 level. Combined with the difficulties of language it can mean that there are different reading competencies of many learners within a classroom. In relation to my study, with learners in secondary schooling, it can be safe to assume that the problematic literacy levels identified from the PIRLS assessment would still be relevant. PIRLS (2016) shows the same result, which means that little has been done in the past five years to address the low level literacy results we continue to get. The reason that these results are important to my study is that they point to the fact that low literacy levels in the foundation and senior phases of the South African schooling system suggest that the literacy levels of learners in higher phases would still be proportionally low. This offers an important departure point for my study, as despite interventions such as the *Read to Lead* campaign to address the poor results from the PIRLS (2006, 2011 and 2016), there is very little evidence to show that such interventions are making an impact. Brozo (2006b) found that despite reading interventions and literacy reforms, learners' achievements on state tests such as PIRLS remained unchanged from previous years. This is significant to my study because it means that the same learners who wrote the tests in 2006, 2011 and indeed 2016, have moved through our educational system still struggling with reading comprehension.

If reading levels are below international standards in Grade 5, it is no wonder that by Grade 11 there are boys whose reading ability is still not up to the grade level standard. This is relevant to my study because some boys in my class had come from primary schools that had not attained high literacy levels; and these boys' academic results reflected a poor grounding in reading comprehension and understanding. Thus what it means to be literate in the schooling context, and out of school becomes an important research field because we, meaning educators and curriculum planners, need to understand where this gap is being

created within our schooling system, and in our society, in order to address these literacy levels in a meaningful manner.

It is with this in mind that the following chapter looks at what it means to be literate, and what I understand literacy to mean based on research by prominent scholars in the literacy field. Following the conceptualisation of literacy, I look at the link between in- and out-of-school literacy practices because I believe that they cannot be studied in isolation. Because reading cannot occur without the mind being engaged in the text, I include a brief discussion on literacy and the imagination.

I then look at how these elements of literacy link to identity, but specifically gendered identity, as I researched a group of boys only. I believe this particular focus will give valuable insight into why boys continue to perform badly in terms of reading in studies such as PIRLS. Howard, Adams-Budde, Myers and Jolliff (2017) build on research from academics such as Street (2001) and Moje (2008) to reiterate the fact that students learn with and from others because they bring with them personal experiences to their reading and writing practices. These personal experiences can influence the identity of students and how they react, respond, interact and learn in the classroom. Thus my research looked at how reading shapes, and is shaped by the boys' individual identities.

There is much research that has investigated whether there is a link between attaining academic success and reading. I wanted to establish whether these findings could be replicated in a South African context, but also whether the boys themselves were aware of any correlation between being regular readers and attaining better results in the academic environment. I therefore conclude this chapter by looking at motivation and success because I believe these concepts are interconnected to ideas about literacy and reading practice.

2.2 Conceptualising Literacy

What counts as literacy? Serafini states that 'as the concept of text expands beyond borders and boundaries of the printed book, so too must our definitions and conception of what it means to be a reader or a literate being' (2012:151). Literacy, then, involves engaging with the variety of texts available (both visual

and verbal, print-based and online), and is not limited to the list of canonical texts prescribed by schools. What this implies is that the definition of what it means to be a literate person must expand to include being able to 'read' multimodal texts.

Multimodality then becomes an essential part of literacy, and because of the very nature of multimodal practices, especially with technology, it becomes intertwined with identity. In acknowledging the need to re-look at multimodality in the classroom, I agree with Marsh (2010) who says that young people engaging in multimodal and multimedia practices, including the authoring and analysis of digital texts, is significant for identity work. Hull and Schultz state that 'multiliteracies create a different kind of pedagogy – one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes' (2002: 589). Thus the expansion of our definition of literacy to include a variety of 'texts'; what makes these texts meaningful and useful both in and out of school; what it means to be a good or bad reader (and writer); how these texts influence identity; and how texts are interpreted through existing identity are important to my study. Understanding that multimodality is essential to our concept of literacy, I looked at literacy in terms of literacy *practices* because my study aims to look at the reading *practices* of boys.

Street defines literacy as an 'ideological practice rather than a set of neutral or technical skills' (1993:22). Street investigated other literacies, those not in line with Western notions of literacy and discovered that despite not going to school, the subjects of his research were still successful. Street asked: 'When there are so many different types of literacy practices, why is it that school literacy has come to be seen as the defining form of reading and writing?' (Hull & Schultz, 2001:586). I believe there has to be a change in the way we see literacy in the classroom. It cannot be confined to limited definitions of 'reading' and 'writing' either. My research clearly shows that outside of school literacies, for instance, affect concepts of literacy, specifically reading practices and texts. Such findings are in line with Barton's (1993) view of literacy which states that an ecological approach is necessary when one considers what literacy means. Barton says that literacy 'is about the dynamic interaction of how people fit into

the environment, how they form it and are formed by it' (1993:51). This ties in to Prinsloo & Breier's (1996) research into literacy practices in South Africa of people who might be considered illiterate and found that there needs to be a reconceptualisation of literacy that takes it out of the context of school and into the context of local practices.

There are several ideas of what it means to be literate, but more importantly, Rasinski et al. (2005) cite research that found that the lack of reading fluency is the greatest barrier in reading. Fluency is automaticity in word recognition, and because readers spend cognitive energy on decoding words, they often do not have the mental energy to comprehend the text. Rasinski et al. (2005) conducted research among Grade 9 learners in a North American urban school environment and found that while there was a 95% word recognition accuracy, fluency was a different matter altogether. Because reading rate, which is considered a useful and valid measure of fluency, increases as students mature, Rasinski et al. (2005) found it necessary to compare learners' oral reading fluency performance against established norms. However, they could not find established norms for students in Grade 9 and above and therefore state: 'To the best of our knowledge, such norms do not currently exist and reflect the conventional wisdom that reading fluency is not an issue at secondary level' (2005:24). This is important for my research because it highlights the fact that the thinking about reading competency (decoding skills and fluency) in high school is already established in primary school and thus does not need further teaching and assessment. If participants in my study are struggling with reading fluency, then it may affect their reading practice both in and out of school, and their identities and their attitudes towards academic success.

Furthermore, when Rasinski et al. (2005) decided to use the Grade 8 norms to continue with their research, they applied the norms to the Grade 9 learners and found that the Grade 9s read at a fluency level that was about 80% of what might be considered the norm. They also found that 12% of their sample of 303 learners read below the 100 wcpm rate for Grades 2–3. What this means is that one in eight learners require 150% more time to complete a reading assignment than the teacher may expect. Rasinski et al. (2005) then ran a correlation

between fluency rate scores and the learners' scores on the state high school graduation test, which is a reading comprehension test. They found that '28% of the variation in student achievement on the high school graduation test could be accounted for by variation in students' reading fluency' (2005:25). These findings are relevant to my research because English teachers in South African high schools may not be aware of the fact that more time may need to be given to learners in their classrooms to grapple with a comprehension text, and that given Rasinski et al.'s research was conducted among Grade 9 learners, there is a very real possibility that learners in high school in South Africa, and certainly in Grade 11, are still struggling to be fluent readers. I believe this also links to how well the participants in my study may perceive their ability to read (decode) as opposed to how well they actually read (fluency).

In layman's terms, reading generally means the reading of books. Other texts, multimodal texts for instance, that form part of a comprehensive understanding of literacy, are not seen as part of what makes a person 'literate'. Davidovitch, Yavich and Druckman (2015) say that when referring to traditional reading habits what is understood is that it refers to the reading of print books, whereas modern reading habits refer to reading on a screen. Barton (1993) says that in public discussions about literacy, it means reading and writing skills. 'Briefly, when applied to reading, it is an autonomous view of literacy, that reading is a set of skills which can be broken into parts and taught and tested' (Barton, 1993:162). I agree with Barton that this is the world view of literacy, and because it is such a limiting point of view, as it focuses on the mechanics of learning to read, it means that there is a skewed emphasis on the methods used to teach reading in school. This misaligned definition of what literacy means to the layman affects not only the value we place on what it means to be literate, but certainly affects assessment practice of reading aloud in foundation-phase schooling. It also excludes digital literacy from the equation. Because we are reading on a screen does not mean that we are not involved in the act of reading, but the conscious inclusion of digital literacies into literacy will take time. Givens continues the argument when she says that 'there are multiple, valid literacies that we practice throughout our lives across different situations, and that academic reading and writing is just one of those multiple literacies'

(2010:10). While Givens is focused on academic reading and writing, her point is that until students realise that there are multiliteracies, they will not be able to make the transition that they need in order to be academically literate. It is not only students who need to realise the value of multiliteracies, but what this means is that if more acknowledgement and value were given to the teaching of multimodal texts in the classroom, the layman's perception of what reading entails could change.

The importance ascribed to reading a book as opposed to these other texts, may in fact be one of the limiting factors in our definition of reading in education and society. Goldman (2012) asserts that 'to be literate today means being able to use reading and writing to acquire knowledge, solve problems and make decisions in academic, personal and professional arenas' (2012:90). Nonetheless, throughout this study, the boys' understanding of reading, and what it means to be a reader, is in relation to a book as a text because, as Barton points out, 'book literacy is afforded higher status that other forms of print literacy' (1993:169), and thus it is little wonder that the participants in my study chose to refer to books and not digital devices when talking about reading.

2.3 In- and out-of-school literacy

Hull and Schultz (2001) ask how research on literacy and out-of-school learning can help us think afresh about literacy teaching and learning across a range of contexts, including schools. I have been interested to find out how these out-of-school reading practices influence not only in-school reading practices, but how they shape identity and link to academic performance. According to Hull and Schultz (2001), to understand why learners from low-income households and minority groups in the USA were failing school in the late 1960s researchers were tasked with finding out why this was so. The findings from consequent studies showed that differences in language, social class and cultural capital between learners' homes and those of school communities created discontinuities. 'Children who have been socialised in diverse contexts come to school differentially prepared and positioned to respond to the demands of school' (Hull and Schultz, 2001:579). What this means is that each child responds to school differently: some succeed; others fail. This was relevant to

my research study because South Africa's classroom context is one of substantial diversity. Learners come from different racial, cultural, socio-economic and language backgrounds. They are then positioned in a classroom context that confines all of them to a particular curriculum, which as much as it espouses the virtues of diversity, does not provide educators with actual methods of teaching the curriculum in a diverse manner, especially when, in some instances, the classroom sizes are over 50 learners per class.

Hull & Schultz (2001), in their own research, question the relationship between the literacies taught at school and the literacies practised in other contexts and suggest re-thinking school-based literacy to cater to the expectations of a working world where one is required to excel at a variety of literate activities and develop a working identity that involves a sense of oneself as a proficient user of multiple semiotic systems. Certainly, if we are to equip our learners with skills to cope and find employment in an expanding world, we need to ensure that they are exposed to literacy activities that give them meaningful skills. Perhaps given the findings in my research study, the notion that education curriculum planners and educators need to understand is an overhaul of current methodology to give value to a range of texts, literacy practices and indeed how literacy is taught in schools. Marsh (2010) says that educators need to extend their knowledge of the range of literacy practices undertaken by learners in out-of-school contexts in order to develop curricula and pedagogy that builds on a deep and respectful knowledge of those learners' experiences. Brozo states that: 'To narrow the reading achievement gap for boys, we need to look at their existing competencies, interests, and personal needs and experiences as resources rather than as impediments' (2006b:74).

To take literacy further, and not to ignore the looming advent of technology and digital factors that influence learning and teaching on a global scale, I refer to Appadurai's (1996) work that focuses on 'scapes' such as *ideoscapes* and *mediascapes*. His work was relevant in the context of my study because he showed how global flows of information through different resources permeate home literacy practices and that these do not always translate into the classroom. Therefore, the use of different texts used in out-of-school reading

practices and spaces, especially those found on digital sources could have an impact on literacy education.

Just like Heath, whose research into reading practices in working and middle-class communities led to other studies that investigated the functions and uses of literacy in diverse environments in order to inform classroom practice (Hull & Schultz, 2001), I hope that my research reinvigorates classroom practice, especially when it comes to reading literacies and specifically, male learners.

2.4 Literacy and the Imagination

Lastly, there is, in my opinion, a need to look at literacy and its link to imagination. Imagination seems to be one of the basic concepts in education that we perhaps forget about and side-line. Dart (2010) is of the opinion that developing the imagination is no longer seen as a central pedagogical concern and suggests re-examining the tradition of English (as a subject) teaching but incorporating new understandings for developing imagination in the classroom.

Vygotsky (1995) was a great proponent of using the imagination for learning, especially in using texts such as fairly-tales, because he believed that in doing so, educators helped the learner develop his or her intellect work and his or her perception of reality (Lindqvist, 2003). Vygotsky (1995) said that all human beings are creative. Having creative ability is what Vygotsky calls 'imagination' (1995:13) and he says that imagination manifests itself in all aspects of our lives. Imagination, according to Vygotsky (1995) is a form of consciousness which is connected to reality and because of this, creative activity is directly dependent on the individual's experiences, and the extent and degree of these variations. 'Imagination is both emotional and intellectual, and this is why, Vygotsky explained, it develops creativity' (Lindqvist, 2003:249). When one reads, one creates a picture in one's mind, spurred on by not only the descriptive words in the text, but by using other, experiential references that we draw on to make meaning from what we read. The boys in my study used imagination to put themselves 'into' the characters they read about; but they also talk about how there is not a need to read anymore because other people have done all the imagining for us, especially in the context of making movies out of books.

Because education deals with multi-layered texts that are contextualised, the narrative is an important way of educating human beings. Bruner (1996) says that learning is a matter of creating meaning, and through narratives, one creates his or her own world. Judson and Egan (2013) also promote the idea that stories are a distinctive form that uniquely orientates our emotional factors to the elements that make them up. They believe that no other narrative form can do this. This links to my research when boys talked about their choices of fictional stories in an important way because meaning was being created and their identities were being shaped precisely by the emotions they were experiencing when reading the texts.

Judson and Egan state that 'imagination is rarely acknowledged as one of the main workhorses of learning' (2013:343). They believe that educators think of imagination as something of an education extra – something that is done after the hard work of learning has occurred. Thus, the incorporation of imagination is crucial to understanding reading practice because it plays such a vital role when one reads that it is impossible to be divorced from reading in any environment. Judson and Egan (2013) have a 'theory of imaginative education', which is a conception of education that sees the aim of schooling as maximising an array of cognitive tools we pick up as we engage with the cultural world around us. This theory of imagination again ties in with the socio-cultural framework in which I grounded my research, emphasising the fact that there cannot be a separation of reading and concepts and frameworks that informed it. Jerome Bruner (1996) speaks about the culture of education and says that consciousness develops in the social and cultural context through symbolic tools and that the world takes on meaning through dialogue with people. The use of imagination in texts that we prescribe can do so much more for our learners than we realise, especially when we take into account the participants' in my research preferences of genres and their thoughts on imagination, their visualisation of what they read, and how they talked about what they read with others. Brozo affirms ideas on reading and the imagination when he states that 'We can start by taking the literary behaviour and attitudes of male students more seriously and designing language curriculums that honour their unique imaginations' (2006b:71).

2.5 Gendered Identity

Howard et al. find that literacy and identity are intertwined, but that identity is a 'self-understanding' or a way in which people 'tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are' (2017:1). I agree with research by Moje (2008) who says that while identities are enacted by the individual, they are socially constructed. Belonging to groups and interacting socially with others in different contexts shape the identities people take on. Furthermore, identity is not fixed. 'Identities are multiple and varied across time and context and are constantly in flux' (Howard et al., 2017:2). From this point of view, it is understandable that the young men in my study, who were already trying to forge their own identities were influenced by so many factors in their sphere of being. It was my aim to discover just how reading shapes these identities and how the identities of the boys in my research study affected their reading practices.

There is extensive literature that supports the notion that girls are better readers than boys overall, and that they tend to read more than boys do. All the PIRLS assessments in 2006, 2011 and 2016 showed that girls attained higher benchmark scores in reading than boys. This is not only true in the South African context but is also a global trend.

Hall (2005) conducted a year-long case study with three girls who were identified as struggling readers. What Hall found was that each student's ideas, beliefs, and personal goals about themselves as a reader and as a student influenced the ways they transacted with the text. Regardless of the fact that Hall's study was conducted with girls, I believe this to be true of boys also. Barton suggests that 'A useful concept when thinking about texts is that in any text the reader is constructed' (1993:60). What Barton reaffirms is that the reader interacts with a text in such a way that values and beliefs of the reader are assumed and perhaps even reconstructed because of the positioning the text has placed on the reader and conversely, the position that the reader has taken prior to reading the text. Barton says: 'Being positioned by texts is clearly bound with how one sees oneself; one's identity.' (1993:61). This is why it is crucial that my research looks at boys' identities when considering their reading

practices because it is impossible to look at a concept of reading without taking into account the identity of the reader and how exposure to texts shapes that identity and conversely, how the interpretation of such texts is shaped by the identity of the reader. Gee says that, 'the ways students decide to transact with the reading task demands of their classroom can also be influenced by their socially situated identity' (1993:3). What this means is that the ways in which learners choose to approach their tasks with texts, and how they choose to transact with their teachers and peers in relation to this, is very possibly influenced by how they see themselves and how they want to be seen by others. Hall found that two of the girls in her case study admitted that they were not good readers but explained that it was important to them that they presented themselves to others in a way that made it seem as if they were good readers.

Boltz (2007) found that most school-age boys score lower than girls at every level on standardised tests of reading comprehension in almost every country where they are tested. According to Harrison "Much of the statistical data to emerge suggests that boys are underperforming against girls in many of the critical areas of reading and literacy" (2012:41).

2.5.1 Feminised reading

The perception of reading as being a female activity may also present its challenges. Harrison (2012) cites Alloway and Gilbert (1997) as well as Martino (2003) and Millard (1997) when he argues that: 'For many boys, literacy is associated with feminine or "girly" subject matter, while other subjects like mathematics and science are acceptably "male"' (2012:42). Kehler and Martino (2007) found that boys had an awareness of gendered subject matter such as English, identifying it as against heterogeneous masculine identity. As my study focused solely on boys within a boys' school, it would be interesting to discover if the gendered separation of subject areas, and possibly even reading practices holds true in this context. However, given the number of distinctions achieved in Mathematics and Science by male learners compared to those in English at the site of this study (the evidence of which can easily be procured), I can believe that these statements are credible. More broadly, this reflects a gendered way of thinking about education and knowledge. It is the recurring

idea that the arts are feminine, while the sciences (the more 'difficult' subjects) are masculine. It also speaks to the notion of what is valued in education; and which subjects one needs to excel in to show to others that one is clever, and consequently, powerful. An underlying sense of power is attributed to those who excel in subjects like Mathematics and Science, because these are the subjects perceived as requiring more intelligence, while other less valued subjects, and those who choose to study them, are seen as 'inferior'. What this means in the context of my research is that in a highly competitive male-dominated environment, excelling in the 'male' subjects gives status and power. My research suggests that this entrenched way of thinking needs to change if we are to address boys' literacy needs and change attitudes to the identities they forge for themselves; and those society ascribes to them.

According to Sullivan (2004) boys identify with the men in their lives, and because men, in general, do not read as many books as women tend to, they are not provided with language-rich reading experiences that they need to become more mature readers. This normative ideology stems from the gendering of subjects. The stereotype persists because generations of people as well as institutions like schools have reproduced these behaviours because of how society talks about education in the country, and internationally. It would appear that this would affect boys' perception of reading, not only as a feminine domain but as perhaps a lifestyle habit that is not accessible to them because it puts their masculinity into question. If reading is perceived as feminised, boys will go to great lengths to avoid it (Boltz, 2007). Because of the feminised view of reading, a boy who openly admits to enjoying reading may be perceived to be less manly, and there may be very real consequences to this.

2.5.2 Institutional culture

There is school culture – meaning general education that happens at school from Grade 1. Then there is a school culture that is particularly exclusive to the institution at which one attends school. The school at which this research was conducted is steeped in tradition. This 'tradition' has to do with events that are commemorated annually, ways of orientating or inducting new boys to the school, and indeed to any first or second sports team. These traditions also

dictate certain behaviour like greeting all strangers politely and wearing the school blazer at all times. The school offers a bursary programme to boys leaving the school to study teaching. As a result, 13 of the male staff members are ‘Old Boys’. Given their historical and sentimental ties to the school, these ‘traditions’ of gentlemanly behaviour are upheld and advocated regardless of any psychological impact they may engender. This kind of environment also contributes to the social position the boys situate themselves in. As the report on Gender Differences in Education Outcomes suggests, school climate, meaning the relationships between pupils, teachers and pupils, constitutes an important part of the unspoken curriculum and plays a role in shaping gender relations and the opportunities of girls and boys.

Hull and Schultz (2001) speak of the continuity-discontinuity theory where schools are cultures in themselves, organised around a set of values and beliefs that frequently are not shared by the students and the surrounding communities. How boys in my study assimilate the cultural values they are exposed to at school and those practised out of school may be interesting insofar as these values shape literacy practice and identity.

Furthermore, the school is known for its academic achievement in subjects such as Mathematics and Science. These subjects are perceived to be ‘more valuable’ than other subjects. There is much research that suggests that these subjects are valued over others. Indeed, the South African Department of Basic Education appears to value programmes that focus on improving our mathematics scores. This is especially evident when the Department makes comparisons to the Trends in Mathematics and Science report and other studies over studies that are conducted in other subjects such as history or art.

2.5.3 Gender stereotyping

Nnachi & Okpube (2015) have studied what factors contribute or determine under-representation of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). They cite research on gender stereotyping which talks about the common belief that by birth, males are naturally inclined to record greater achievement in the fields of STEM, which is what accounts for the low representation of women in those same fields. The also cite research that found

that in society today, most people link science and technology fields with males, and women with humanities and the arts fields. 'Implicit bias is common even among individuals who actively reject these stereotypes' (Nnachi & Okpube, 2015:190). They also state that there is much literature that states that besides likening these subjects to males, generally speaking, society often holds a negative opinion of women in the science and technology fields. In research conducted by the US Department of Education in 2015 (Cunningham, 2015) among high school students, it was found that there was significant difference in both scoring and attitude towards maths and science. Boys on average showed far more interest in maths and science, and scored better in these subjects than girls. Furthermore, parents who were interviewed in Cunningham's study showed a preference along gender lines towards the stereotyped subjects being gendered. Parents who made up this part of Cunningham's research were from those who did not graduate high school to those who have college degrees. Thus these views of gendered subjects are cyclical in attitude, and are being perpetuated, even by those who are 'educated'.

What this meant for my research in particular was that within a mind-set that values certain subjects over others, and an institution that has a long-standing tradition about what is 'important' it becomes difficult to separate reading from the subject, English, and to give it value. Research suggests that literacy is feminised, and that boys are aware of gendered subjects such as English (Harrison, 2012; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Martino, 2003; Millard, 1997 and Kehler & Martino, 2007). Thus how they identify the subject is important towards their attitude for reading, and for choosing what to read. My data reveals that feminising English takes place in this school, and that this mind-set is not only evident in the boys, but in some of the teachers too. Thus equating literacy, and therefore reading, with a subject that is already feminised, presents a challenge.

According to UNESCO (2004) the term 'gender' refers to 'the socially and culturally constructed meanings and roles assigned to persons of different biological sexes: males and females. The concept also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and behaviours of both women and men'. Feminised reading contributes to the boys' identity in ways in

which we do not always consider. Shefer et al. found that ‘to be a true man a boy has to watch the way he acts which primarily involves resisting feminised practices’ (2007:117). Mothers read bedtime stories to the boys, their teachers who taught them to read were female, and to a large extent, their English teachers have been female, or, as is true in the site of research, gay men, or men perceived to have effeminate qualities. Not one English teacher is a sports coach, for example. The male English teachers coach drama and public speaking. The female English teachers also do not involve themselves in the sporting activities of the school, and instead participate in cultural extra-mural pursuits. The point is that the institutional environment already places the subject, English, at a disadvantage, and thus reading; and the perception of English and reading being feminised is reinforced by the school’s practices.

In research conducted in Latin America and in the Caribbean by Jha, Bakshi and Faria (2012), they found that boys’ underachievement in education is associated with the construction and application of negative masculine identities that in turn promote the development of ‘anti-feminine’ and ‘anti-school’ attitudes. Furthermore, they found that boys, from particular low-income groups, perceived schooling as a ‘feminine’ activity that is only appropriate for girls and ‘sisis’. While their research is not situated in South Africa, nor is specifically to do with attitudes to reading, it does present a glimpse into how certain activities like school can be feminised. It does not take much to imagine that the learning and thus reading that takes place in school would also be feminised. What is important to note is also how the masculine identity comes out in stark contrast to those ‘sisis’ who, by their choice in receiving an education are automatically labelled as less masculine, and indeed, somehow lower in status, holding a demeaned position in society on the same level as women. This attitude furthermore speaks to the fact that women, in many cultures, are seen as ‘below’ the man, with connotations of being ‘weak’.

Furthermore, and perhaps on a more psychological level, case study research conducted by Messerschmidt (2017) into adolescent boys, embodied heteromasculinities and sexual violence, found that those boys who were called ‘wimps’ at school, and even ridiculed for their weight, engaged in various forms of sexual violence. Messerschmidt looked at the interrelationship among in-

school bullying, reflexivity, embodied structured action, and the social construction of heteromasculinities in the commission of sexual violence by subordinated boys. ‘Reflexivity is based on the situational socially structured practices, discourses and interactions that we confront’ (Messerschmidt, 2017:115). The reason I include Messerschmidt’s findings is because his case studies revealed that the boys were constantly labelled as ‘wimps’, and were feminised through these abusive comments made by the popular and more dominant boys. These boys mocked Messerschmidts’ subjects about their inability to fight back when teased, their chubbiness and their complete lack of participation in sports. Messerschmidt posits that the subjects of his research decided to engage in sexual violence to solve their masculine dilemma. Messerschmidt’s subjects attempted to practice complicity with the in-school dominant masculine hegemonic masculinities by trying to embody strength and invulnerability in their violent practices. In doing so, his subjects attempted to align themselves with what they reflexively perceived as the ‘cool guys’ and their accompanying and hegemonic masculinities. They saw their violence as permissible ways to ‘do’ heteromasculinity. I am not saying that any of the boys in my study are this extreme, but what I do want to point out is the psychological factors that exist in schools and among boys who do not conform to the dominant views of masculinity. If English as a subject is feminised, and reading is feminised, I can imagine how difficult it must be for some boys to forge an authentic identity for themselves and cultivate a love for reading at the same time.

2.5.4 Masculinity

South Africa is home to a wide variety of cultural and social groupings. These groupings ascribe a certain degree of identity to each person belonging to that group. What this means is that each boy has an idea of who he is in relation to his cultural and language identity. This is relevant because within certain cultures, ideas of the role of the man are entrenched. As a man, there are certain expectations of responsibilities and roles that the ‘man’ has to perform. This would imply that the ‘man’ has to think in a certain way. This prescribed way of thinking would affect attitudes to many things, including women, and reading. In Shefer et al. (2006) the study conducted with teenage boys in the

same age range as my research and among South African boys, albeit in Cape Town, revealed that peer pressure to resist female practices was further entrenched in boys' identities because they are otherwise labelled a 'moffie'. This label is not an identifier of sexuality or sexual practices, 'but rather as a consequence of what he wears and does, which mirrors too closely to the feminine' (2006:119). Being labelled as something they are not, is a form of bullying because it forces one to either defend or embrace the accusation. The school environment in which the boys of my study find themselves does not have an open attitude towards effeminate or homosexual men. Thus the option to embrace this kind of label, even if that is the sexual preference of a boy would mean, on a social level, ostracism and more negative attention. One can imagine that for some boys who identified reading certain genres as 'gay' the school climate in which these boys function continues to apply pressure to conform to traditional roles and identities of men. This aligns with Bhabha's (1994) research that found that the third space of the classroom, where different cultures meet, often creates more tension than smooth coexistence. And there are tensions within this classroom of diverse boys because each boy has his own ideas about what is right or wrong in society, and these ideas have been shaped by both in-school and out-of-school reading and literacy practices.

The idea of what it means to be a man and what masculine activities are appears to be entrenched, especially in an all-boy school steeped in tradition with constant reminders of gentlemanly behaviour. There is little doubt that peer pressure exists in all facets of a teenagers' life, especially with regard to activities that are stereotypically perceived as unmanly. Because of the feminised view of reading, a boy who openly admits to enjoying reading may be perceived to be less manly, and there may be very real consequences to this.

2.5.5 Shaping identity

Lloyd (2006) states that gender is not a monolithic aspect of identity. Lloyd says that that it is 'highly contextual and constantly negotiated, particularly as it intersects with other important cultural, economic and social factors' (2006:31). Thus, in shaping their identities, there are a variety of factors that affect the formation of the individual; but these factors are ever-changing because they

are fluid and exposed to multiple contextual factors. However, I believe reading to be a vital contributing element to shaping one's identity because, I would suggest, thinking happens while one reads; and that thought process creates opinions which in turn become internalised ideas and beliefs. Furthermore, as one reads, one sees representations or constructions of oneself in the text as a boy or as a girl or a member of the LGBT community. These constructions reinforce identity positions. We, as humans, are constantly exposed to views about a myriad range of sometimes controversial topics. Deciding on an informed position on those topics requires reading. It is no different for boys, who have to decide on why they are the way they are; why they believe what they do; and where they wish to position themselves in the future in terms of their lives. Being able to read critically, with understanding, is one of the essential skills in getting where you want to be and living in a progressive society.

In her research into the complexities inherent in the social processes that influence student's engagement in reading, Scholes (2015) found that there were tensions associated with anti-reading peer group cultures, and that many learners, of both genders, had to conceal the fact that they enjoyed reading. In opposition to Scoles' findings, Smith (2004) found that through reading, particularly non-fiction texts, boys were able to become experts in certain fields which earned them the respect of their peers, and a high status, with hegemonic masculine identity in the classroom. In other words, boys who were perceived to be good readers, and thus knowledgeable, were automatically given a position of power and authority in the classroom. This conclusion corroborates Smith's findings on masculine identity pertaining to reading, stating that it is a favoured activity.

Harrison (2012), in her research in an all-boys' integrated secondary school in New Zealand, challenged the idea of reading being more appropriate for girls, as was found in other studies. 'The lack of importance attached to gender may be influenced by the context of a boys' school which has no easily accessed point of comparison in reading habits. It may also be because newspapers and online reading in which the boys engage most frequently have a more masculine image than fiction reading' (2012:44). Again, given the context in which I

intended to conduct my study, I thought it would be interesting to discover the power dynamics that are evident as a result of boys' perception about reading.

2.6 Motivation and Success

There may be many reasons why boys, generally, do not read as much as they grow older. If their reading becomes less prolific, it becomes important to consider whether these reasons emerge because they do not enjoy reading, or because do not see any benefit in doing so.

Boltz (2007) cites Jon Scieszka when he states that the cause of boys' reluctance to read is motivation. That would be a natural occurrence in any activity. Perhaps the idea that reading is seen as a hobby or pastime and not necessarily vital to success and learning, gives rise to the idea that it is a choice that some just do not want to do, like hiking or pottery. The separation of school literacies from out-of-school literacies allows learners to distinguish between them rather than seeing a relationship between them. Framed as a hobby, reading outside of the school environment may seem justifiably unnecessary.

After reviewing many research studies and theories, Boltz (2007) agreed that one of the reasons boys read less is because the kind of text they are given to read in school does not connect to their interests. Naturally, if one is not interested in reading about something, one is more disinclined to do so. Religious texts would be a prime example of this notion – if one is not interested in religion, one is less likely to read the Bible for instance. Boltz contends that boys notice the difference between school and out of school, what is left out and what counts as valuable literature. This suggests that books that are funny, action-packed or scary are not valuable, or acceptable in educational contexts. 'In other words, boys are attracted to substandard materials, and, therefore, reading isn't for them' (Boltz, 2007:3). If you are going to feel judged about what you read by authority figures, educators and peers, it would follow that you are less likely to do so, especially in public. Moje (2008) also found that while young people read and write, they do not necessarily read and write the types of texts that adults value. These findings highlight the question of what counts as literature, and what kinds of knowledge are valued in the classroom.

However, motivation may not be the only reason why boys do not read for pleasure, even if they enjoy doing so. Perhaps they lack the time to do this outside of class time. Schools are not limited to academic engagement, but also often require that learners participate in sports or other cultural activities. These are time-consuming and may make it difficult for boys to read for pleasure outside of the prescribed schooling hours. Horton's (2005) research into boys and reading found that while many boys read, their busy lives or sport, social and academic pursuits make it difficult for them to regard reading as a main activity in their lives. Harrison (2012) supports this finding.

A further perception about reading that Boltz (2007) discovered is that boys equate reading with work. 'Work' in this context has a negative connotation, so it follows that reading would be perceived negatively. If this is so, then it would be interesting to analyse why boys have such a perception.

I wanted to explore how boys see themselves in the world – not only in terms of identity but also in relation to what they think makes them successful social players and citizens. I want to find out if reading is seen to contribute to that attainment of success. Serafini states that 'Successful readers should be described in terms of the civil, socio-cultural and job demands and expectations that any particular culture places on its members in terms of the degree to which and the ways in which they deal with written form as individuals' (2012:151). Love and Hanson (2004) found that those boys who are committed readers experienced academic success. Golding (2010) shares the arguments of researchers, Jha and Kelleher, who state that boys' achievement, measured as either participation or performance, is the result of a complex interplay of forces and is not the creation of school processes alone. Gearon, Kostogriz and Miller argue that 'clearly, students need to be competent in their first language use, and also in the dominant language of their country or region, which allows access to academic success, social power, further education, and work' (2009:4). Heath's (1983) study showed that only middle-class students whose language use was the same as that of the teachers were successful, which is interesting given the levels of language used by English teachers in South Africa at present – both in the home language and first additional language domains. Golding concludes that, 'the solutions have to include challenging established

gender notions of gender roles, relations and stereotypes using all possible interventions inside and outside the school' (2010:63).

As with other research, this study anticipated that there would not be much recognition of traditional reading sources in terms of boys' reading practices, but rather reading of social media, gaming platforms and the internet. This would mean that educators, curriculum developers and parents should expand their idea of what reading is and incorporate other texts under the reading umbrella. Harrison's (2012) study indicated that boys read a significant amount online but that this is not acknowledged in the school environment. Love and Hanson conclude their research by stating that 'if parents and educators do not seek genuine ways to connect to boys' interests, they may extinguish any forms of reading relationships with teenage boys who profess not to read' (2004:371). I hope that the insights gained in this study will assist teachers and curriculum designers to be more flexible in determining what counts as reading and how to engage boys in reading at school.

For the most part, in the South African context, it is expected that anyone with a matric certificate is literate. In a forum on public policy in Namibia, it was revealed that in Grades 10 and 12, in 2012, girls received higher grades than boys across the 13 regions, and in Grade 6, outperform boys in reading. Furthermore, it was found this consistent with data from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) that revealed that in Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Zambia now have a higher proportion of young women in tertiary education; and that Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa and Swaziland have 50% or more young women than men in secondary school (Zimba, 2013). Reasons for this underachievement among boys in Namibia are ascribed to sociological and cultural explanations which pertain to the influence of socialisation, social economic status, location, the construction of masculine social identity, the perceived 'feminisation' of education and peer pressure. While Zimba is referring specifically to possible factors in Namibia, these factors may certainly play a role among our young men in South Africa. Zimba (2013) states that in general, the nature of boy's underachievement in education is in the form of under-participation and under-performance. Zimba argues that a reason for this poor performance and

participation is that boys tend to be ill-disciplined and naughty which may just be an excuse for poor teaching and classroom management. Some boys (and girls) who reach Grade 12 are not literate in the sense that they are only able to decode words and display limited fluency as is evident in their work. It appears, based on matric results, that some learners are ill-equipped to read the world around them in a meaningful way because of limited exposure to a variety of texts.

2.7 Summary

This chapter has provided the reader with a range of existing literature on the topics that I believe address my research questions. Firstly, I looked at the definition of literacy, placing it within a socio-cultural framework, but also expanding on ideas about literacy by looking at what it means in the school environment and in out-of-school contexts. I extended my concept of literacy to include a definition of imagination because it relates so intricately with reading and identity formation.

I delved into identity, focusing particularly on gendered identity because of the fact that my research participants are male, and I wanted to see how their reading practices in and out of school shaped their identities. I looked specifically at the feminisation of reading, and the attitudes towards feminised subjects. I expounded on gender stereotypes, how external factors like the school environment shape identity and masculinity in the South African context.

Finally, I discussed motivation for reading and links to academic success in an attempt to highlight the discussions regarding the importance of reading, not only in school, but also in out-of-school environments.

The next chapter will elaborate on the research methodology I used in order to obtain my data, and offer explanations as to why I chose specific data analysis strategies to collate my findings. I also discuss the limitations to my research and ethical compliance.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

'Reading can open you up to a whole new dimension' (FW/Q).

3.1 Overview

This chapter looks at the manner in which I approached my research in terms of data collection and analysis. I begin by providing a contextual basis of my methodology choices and then describe the research site and research participants in order for the reader to understand the context in which this research was done. Following these contextual factors, I explain my research design with reference to the qualitative approach used to analyse data. I include a brief explanation of my data analysis methods and discuss the limitations experienced during the course of my research collection and analysis. Finally, I explain the ethical compliance processes that were necessary in the undertaking of this research.

Determining which data capturing and analysis methods to use in research can prove challenging because of the uncertainty of the substance of the data which will be collected. Providing answers to my research questions tended to elicit more questions than I had answers for. Noor (2008) argues that the suitability of a research method derives from the social phenomenon (in this case reading practice) to be explored. Because this research methodology is grounded in Vygotsky's (1993) construct that reading is essentially socio-cultural, my approach tended to 'appreciate the different constructions and meanings that people place upon their experience' (Noor, 2008:1602). Noor (2008) states that in order to understand the subjectivity of social phenomena, one requires a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research implies that the data is not subject to rigorous measurement but is instead focused on obtaining insight about a certain topic through systematic analysis. In conducting this qualitative study, I first used a questionnaire and free-writing exercise among 23 boys, followed by two focus group discussions that focused specifically on the responses of 10 specific

boys. Each focus group consisted of five boys. I approached my data collection in this manner in order 'to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence' (Noor, 2006:1602). Furthermore, an important part of case study research, to me, is the fact that generally, case studies often follow a replication logic. What this means is that by looking at a variety of cases, I could look at which factors produced similar results. What this does for research is provide a more confident result precisely because the findings are replicated in various in-depth studies (as opposed to random sampling techniques). This also helps in producing consistent findings, which gives more credence to what the researcher produces at the end of the study. Thus, even though holistic results are produced, they are valid and reliable within the context of this research, although not generalisable in a definitive way.

The forerunners of qualitative case study methodology, Robert Stake and Robert Yin approached case studies from a constructivist paradigm which means that 'truth is relative and that it is dependent on one's perspective' (Baxter & Jack, 2008:545). Constructivism is built on a social construction of reality. Reading is a social construction, and as such, I found it prudent to use this paradigm when tracking the responses of boys I thought would provide rich, but different data. I particularly used a multiple case study approach because I tracked more than one individual, and used more than one source to collect my data. Each participant was unique and offered individual answers to a range of data collection tools, but the data gathered allowed me to examine similarities and differences between each participant.

Case studies have been used frequently in qualitative research in the field of education. 'This type of research has illuminated educational practice for nearly thirty years' (Merriam, 2001:26). Merriam cites various authors on case study research (Wolcott, 1992; Smith, 1978; and Stake, 1995) when she defines a case study as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context' (2001:27). Thus using a case study is aligned to academic practice in this field and it made sense to use this method in order to interrogate the data.

Although I have not used the data in a stand-alone data analysis chapter, the methodology is still sound as it conforms to the definition of what a case study entails. Instead I chose to integrate the data from the case study research in the bigger data analysis discussion because the responses from the participants provided specific insight into the thematic trends revealed in the data analysis.

3.1.1 Research site

This case study was located at an ex-model-C all-boys' high school (Quintile 4) in Johannesburg, South Africa. One Grade 11 English Home Language class of 23 boys, whose ages ranged between 16 and 18, were my data participants. These boys come from diverse racial, cultural, religious, socio-economic backgrounds and have variable English language proficiency. I have discussed the research site in the previous chapter (pages 25–26) with some depth so that the reader can gather an institutional picture of the school context also.

3.1.2 Research participants

While this research focuses on an English Home Language class, not all participants come from an English Home Language background. English is often a second, third or fourth language in some homes, particularly of Zulu and Afrikaans boys. Furthermore, this particular group of boys' academic percentages for English, according to their marks, range from 25% to 80%. The reason for including this information, specifically in tracking certain participants over the course of the data collection was so that the data can speak to the research question that looks at the relationship between reading and success; specifically as I wanted to determine a link, if any, between being an avid reader and academic success.

The initial 23 boys who filled in the questionnaire and participated in the free-writing exercise were boys who were in my class. Thus their participation in the study was by virtue of the fact that I was their English teacher, and I wanted to sample a class of boys that would be similarly found in other ex-model C monastic high schools around the country.

The 10 boys I chose for the focus group discussions were made up of boys whose specific responses in the questionnaire and free writing made me hope

would provide more in-depth responses to the research questions. Their initial responses were interesting and covered a diverse range of opinions. I hoped that I could draw the participants into further elaboration on some of the topics they had raised there.

The boys I selected from the very beginning of my research for the case study were boys who presented very different attitudes to reading – as I had already observed, because of being their English teacher. I also wanted to track boys from different racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, thus my selection was somewhat specific. A further criterion for choosing the specific boys was their academic history to which I had access. I wanted to be able to track correlations between their academic performance and their reading practices in order to answer my one research question that dealt with the link between reading and academic success.

3.2 Research Design – Data Collection Techniques

Given the diversity of participants in the study and factors that could influence their responses such as peer judgment, poor writing skills or misunderstanding of questions, I used a variety of research tools in order to collect data that I hoped would give me a comprehensive picture of how boys think about reading, and how it relates to their gendered identities. The following tools were used in order to address the research questions:

1. Questionnaire (all 23 boys)

2. A free-writing exercise (all 23 boys)

3. Focus group interviews (10 boys divided into two groups of five) made up of selected participants whom I had tracked specifically following their responses from the questionnaire and free-writing exercises; and based on their academic performance in English.

I built on questions posed by Love and Hamston (2004), Boltz (2007) and Harrison (2012) to formulate a questionnaire (Appendix A) that I hoped would

shed light on the reading practices of all the boys in the class. The purpose was also to provide information about general trends in reading practice that I could then follow up on later in the focus groups. Using a questionnaire established a base-line from which I could discover certain patterns and trends in the participant's reading attitudes and practices. However, it was only once I collated the questionnaires that I realised that I would have wanted more information on how what they read acted as a conduit for creating their identities. I would have also asked how much of their out-of-school reading is reading homework and the set texts prescribed in school. The reason for this is that despite being told to only include information on their out-of-school reading habits, I realised that some boys, perhaps in efforts to hide the fact that they do not read out of school, were only reading homework and school set work books and labelling that as their out-of-school reading practices. This was especially evident when discussing the frequency of reading a variety of texts.

Furthermore, because I refrained from asking 'leading' questions, it was difficult, in the questionnaire, to determine attitudes towards gendered reading and how their identities influence reading practices; and indeed, how reading practice influences identity. But what I was able to establish was preference of text in school and preference of genre. This was helpful in terms of analysing the rest of the data later because I could see recurrent ideas about the kinds of text boys enjoy reading. I was also able to establish basic reasons for why boys do not read. This assisted in creating a foundation for questioning in the focus groups. I believe this method of data collection to be beneficial in establishing trends, but not as the only source of data collection. The reason for this is the volatile nature and power dynamics at play in a focus group, especially made up of young men, a holistic picture of reading practice in the context of identity research would be limited.

Following the questionnaire, I used a free-writing exercise (Appendix B) to garner further responses about the boys' perceptions of reading. Boltz (2007) used a free-writing exercise in his research with 29 boys and 16 girls to establish their ideas about reading, what they were reading and any gender-specific responses. In using such an activity, I wanted the participants to express freely

what they thought without fear of editing or judgment my peers and myself as the teacher/researcher.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data was analysed from 23 questionnaires, a free-writing exercise and two focus groups, each consisting of five boys whose comments I had tracked from the questionnaire and free-writing data. I also had access to the participants' academic histories.

As the participants' English teacher, I had access to the participants' school work over a period of a year. I am aware that there may have been certain limitations in the data collection because of my role as the participants' educator. However, let me acknowledge that I agree with O'Sullivan (2015) who says that interpretation of data flows from personal, cultural and historical experiences and cannot be separated from researcher background, context, prior understandings, assumptions, beliefs, biases and closeness to the research topic. He continues to assert that generally, in both quantitatively and qualitatively orientated research undertakings, researcher integrity is critical to the quality of research data and to the soundness of ethical decision-making. I believe that in my analysis of the data and the proceeding discussion, that I have tried to be aware of these limitations and while remaining true to the participants' voices, have expressed the findings in my own voice. This resonates with O'Sullivan's argument that 'implicit in discussions of how a researcher listens to an interviewee's voice – both during the actual interview and at the interpretive stage – is the issue of the researcher's voice. In constructing, interpreting and representing others' voices and realities, researchers develop their own voices' (2015:212).

Furthermore, data was analysed qualitatively in the questionnaire using pattern-making data analysis techniques (Knobel, 1999) to establish how my research relates to existing literature and existing ideas regarding boys and reading. Pattern-making looks at specific recurrent ideas that have been highlighted by previous researchers. By making headings and recording how often the same,

or different, trends were evident in my data, I was able to pinpoint recurring information that would present a set of data from which to base my analysis.

I also draw on simple quantitative methods such as coding (Knobel, 1999) to assist in categorising the data. Each boy was given a pseudonym and a letter of the alphabet in order to track his varied responses. Thus annotations throughout the research report will point to specific codes which will allow the reader to understand where the information for the discussion was obtained. This is presented in the research report as follows:

- Q4/S means that the individual with the alphabetical letter 'S' answered the fourth question of the questionnaire.
- FW/P means the individual with the alphabetical letter 'P' gave the quoted response in the free-writing exercise.
- FG/AF means that the individual was in the A focus group and had the letter 'F' assigned to him.

The free-writing data collection was surprisingly fruitful. Respondents were very candid with their thoughts, and from their responses it appeared that they enjoyed the opportunity to express their opinions. The fact that I had conducted several free-writing exercises with this particular class on other occasions gave participants the confidence to express themselves in ways that are sometimes frowned upon in language classrooms (swearing and sentence construction in particular). Peter Elbow (2007) says that 'the main thing about freewriting is that it is *nonediting*. It is an exercise in bringing together the process of producing words and putting them down on the page'. Having established a reasonable relationship of trust in such exercises previously meant that some participants, who usually found it difficult to write one page of an essay, wrote as many as eight pages in their free-writing responses.

The fact that each participant could express his individual voice was illuminating. Elbow has the following to say on voice:

> The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes and hesitations between the consciousness and

> the page. In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm—a voice—which is the main source of power in your writing. I don't know how it works, but this voice is the force that will make a reader listen to you. Maybe you don't like your voice; maybe people have made fun of it. But it's the only voice you've got. It's your only source of power (Elbow, 2007:4).

In the classroom context and certainly later on in the focus groups, some voices were silenced for a variety of reasons. In addition, the exercise showed parts of the individual boys' personalities that were not evident in the classroom. Thus for me as the teacher and researcher, I learned more about my students.

After analysing the questionnaire and free-writing exercise, I hoped to use data gained from these two collection methods for further interrogation in focus group interviews (Appendix C). Ten boys were selected for focus group discussions, divided into two groups of five. I thought that the focus group interviews would allow for more in-depth responses to my research questions. I selected the two groups made up of three boys who I knew read frequently, and two boys who did not enjoy reading. Hodges, in her research into reading as a social practice, conducted semi-structured group interviews because they can 'generate data which illuminate what being a reader and experiencing readership mean' (2016:103). While this was true to some extent, I did not perceive, except on the issue of heterosexuality, the information gained in the focus groups as very different to that which I had already obtained in the free-writing exercise.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI), in its research tool kit, says that 'the strength of focus group discussions relies on allowing the participants to agree or disagree with each other so that it provides an insight into how a group thinks about an issue, about the range of opinion and ideas, and the inconsistencies and variation that exists in a particular community in terms of beliefs and their experiences and practices'. This was evident in the focus groups, particularly when the participants were asked about reading the romance genre in relation to gendered identity. There were vehement responses in this regard excepting one boy who did not mind expressing his opinion. And, in doing so, he appeared to sway the minds of some of the other boys in the group, although not all, as I

observed the shaking or nodding of heads based on what was being said. However, this kind of debate or disagreement did not happen as much as I would have liked it to. Very often one of the more dominant boys in the group would answer a question and despite being asked what they thought, the response was that they agreed with the opinion of their peer (even though I was aware, from the free-writing exercise that they did not agree).

This kind of focus group dynamic is in itself telling. The fact that as (anonymous) individuals they had a voice, yet felt silenced in the focus groups says something about how the boys want to be perceived. In terms of identity as readers, within a masculine circle of peers, what was shown to others was more important than expressing frank views and ideas. This power-play is interwoven in the analysis of the data that speaks to the theme of empowerment and disempowerment, as male readers navigating a path in a traditional (meaning a physically strong, heterosexual gentleman) masculine environment.

The focus group discussions were illuminating to a certain extent as they offered the opportunity to get clarity on responses from both the questionnaire and the free-writing activity. But these responses were limited because of the group dynamics. I believe that it would be more beneficial to conduct individual interviews with the selected boys because I am sure that such interview would have resulted in richer data as each boy would have a voice and an opinion not affected by peer dynamics. Thus the free-writing activity gave me much more data with which I could work.

There is growing literature on the benefits of conducting focus groups especially as ‘focus groups have started to gain popularity in research relating to different social groups and in cross-cultural and development research’ (Liamputtong, 2011:2). However, based on my research, I would recommend individual interviews after a free-writing exercise in order to obtain richer data, specifically when conducting focus group interviews with teenage boys who appear to have to show an outward self that is in conflict with an inner identity. Hodges states that ‘it is the immediate social nature of the group interviews that appears to bring into sharp relief a particular matter of cultural value, namely the image of young people as readers. One facet of the issue is how they perceive and

represent themselves; another is how they think they are perceived and represented by others in society' (2016:118). This was clear in the group dynamics. The fact that they were answering questions to an audience, albeit a small one, meant that there was a certain amount of acting or masking identity as opposed to owning and exhibiting their true identity. This is what makes collecting data in a focus group challenging.

3.4 Limitations

Perhaps a limitation of free writing is that some of the participants would on occasion digress. However, these digressions were useful in analysing perspectives on reading, because the digressions spoke to those things that keep the participants away from reading such as interest in girls and sport. Thus, I believe the free-writing method of data collection to be the richest source of information for my study.

I was aware of the possible pitfalls of collecting data within a focus group discussion, such as learners policing each other, the facilitator favouring a particular respondent over another, disagreements and irrelevant discussions. I therefore followed the ODI suggestion that evaluating and summarising the sessions afterwards to reflect opinions accurately and fairly is important. I transcribed the focus group discussions as soon as I could do so in order to incorporate my observations of body language and other non-verbal cues.

Marczak and Sewell (2016) say that one disadvantage of focus group interviews is that the relatively small number of participants make it difficult to generalise the analysed results to larger population groups. While I am aware that such broad generalisations cannot be made after analysing the data, I believe that the results of the research will give me a better understanding of reading and identity as it pertains to some boys in a South African context.

I was aware of O'Sullivan's (2015) statement throughout my data analysis:

> In stressing the inescapable and necessary personal dimension to qualitative research, it furnishes evidence of the indissoluble interrelationship between the researcher and the research process;

> between the interpreter and interpretation. A reflexive consideration of this interrelationship foregrounds issues pertaining to researcher identity and authorial stance, in addition to a range of complex issues pertaining to narrative voice, representation and interpretive authority (O'Sullivan, 2015:219).

I have striven to interpret the data in a meaningful way that I believe has bearing on what is occurring in the South African boys' minds when it comes to reading and attitudes towards identity when linked to being a reader.

Perhaps a further limitation, one which I only considered after writing my findings, is that I could have conducted a reading rate and fluency test to give real data that would have possibly shown the incongruency between the ability to decode words when reading and the actual ability to comprehend the words in a text. This may have added a more meaningful discussion on respondents' perceptions of how they see themselves as readers and their attitudes to reading as a whole.

3.5 Ethical Compliance

Before the study was conducted, I obtained permission from the Department of Basic Education to conduct research in a government school. I also obtained permission from the headmaster of the school to conduct research using my Grade 11 English class. The parents and the participants of the study gave written consent to be part of my research. The participation in the study was voluntary and this fact was made clear to all the stakeholders. Thus, having obtained permission from the school, the parents and the research participants I was able to conduct my research in good time without disturbing the academic curriculum of the school. In order to protect the identity of the participants and ensure confidentiality, each boy was given a pseudonym; and individual responses to the data collection processes remain safely stored. Therefore, all ethical requirements were complied with.

Chapter 4 - Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Overview

In this chapter I aim to present my data and a discussion on the main discoveries emanating from my analysis. I will provide a brief overview to this chapter followed by a thematic discussion of the trends that shed light on answering my research questions.

The areas of discussion arising from my study that answer the specific research questions will be discussed as follows:

4.1 Overview

4.2 Text Selection and Identity

4.2.1 The in-school experience

4.2.2 The out-of-school reading choices

4.2.3 Influences on the boy reader's identity

4.2.4 The perception of the boy reader – masculinity and sexuality

4.2.5 Fluency and assessment – the hallmarks of a good reader?

4.3 Justifications for not reading

4.4 Reading and the link to academic success

Shefer et al. finds particularly in South Africa, that 'there remains a lack of data of stories and narratives of boys and men' (2007:3). I hope to shed some light on this gap by providing insight into the minds of some young men in South Africa who have a semblance of an idea about who they are in the environments in which they find themselves situated. While this identity is shaped by many factors, I specifically try to explore how their reading practices and attitudes towards reading shape the formation and ownership of a male identity. My discussion is in reference to the research question that seeks to look at the relationship between reading and boys' gendered identities. This data chapter is interspersed with reference to comments by various participants in my

research who offer insight on their own reading practices in and out of school and how these reading practices influence their ideas about who they are within society and how they experience success in the academic sphere as a result of reading, or not reading.

My approach in presenting the data is to pinpoint firstly a broader thematic trend as evidenced in the data collection gained from the questionnaire analysis. Secondly, I look at more in-depth responses to these trends raised in the questionnaire from the focus group discussions and the free-writing exercise. The reason for intertwining the data analysis this way is to avoid repetition in having to re-discuss the thematic trends later, but also because I realised that my research questions presented thematically linked responses. For instance, I cannot discuss a reading practice that is common among boys, such as a preference for science fiction and fantasy without linking this practice to aspects of their masculine identity. Thus the very nature of the data collected has dictated that I combine a data presentation that deals with essential elements of information that otherwise would appear somewhat fragmented. O'Sullivan (2015), in his research into the educator as a researcher explains that he focused on data analysis at all stages of his study in trying to establish pattern-matching whereby collected evidence is deductively matched against a theoretical or conceptual pattern which has progressively taken shape from the outset of the study. I aim to present my data and discussion using a similar conceptual structure.

I have therefore structured this chapter in a way that first discusses the boys' text preferences inside of school. I cannot ignore aspects of attitudes to reading in and out of school without considering the linkages to participants' identities. It is for this reason that the second section of this chapter focuses on looking at the boys' identities as readers, in other words, where they position themselves in relation to reading. I then look at how assessment practice in school has shaped their identities as readers. The reason for including assessment practice in this section is because I wanted to remind readers of my research that by the time learners reach high school, they have had many years in primary school being assessed on their reading ability. Barton (1993) argues that the skills view of reading (mentioned on page 12 in Chapter 2) is closely tied with the need to

assess. ‘Reading grades are defined in terms of the needs of testing. The levels are not measuring the narrow view of reading they purport to, but the practices of schooling, including vocabulary, general knowledge and ways of meaning’ (Barton, 1993:164). I believe that it is possible that, from an early age, identities as readers are already shaped and influenced by the feedback learners receive both from their teachers and their peers when reading.

There are other social influences on boys’ identities as readers such as the school environment, parents and communities. I delve into what the data says about these influences on boys, but particularly how parents, and indeed role models, influence attitudes towards reading and identity creation. I then present the participants’ ideas of masculinity and sexuality and how this perception of themselves and others affects their reading practices.

I have devoted a portion of this chapter to understanding the participants’ justifications for not reading precisely because this justification links with all three main research questions. I think it is important to note that the fact that the participants make excuses for not reading also tells us more about who they are. If we understand their reasoning better, as educators and parents, perhaps we can develop better strategies to encourage reading.

Lastly, I look at ideas about academic success and the way boys see themselves being successful once they have left school. Sullivan and Brown found that ‘children’s leisure reading is important for educational attainment and social mobility’ (Hodges, 2016:25). Thus I wanted to understand whether the participants in my research believed in this correlation between reading and academic success and if that opinion affects the ways they approach reading. Furthermore, being successful has other linkages to identity such as status; thus it is important that I include my findings in this regard in this chapter.

4.2 Text Selection and Identity

The focus of this research study was to determine boys’ out-of-school reading practices with the understanding that these practices were very likely shaped by in-school reading experiences and environmental, socio-cultural and linguistic factors. The fact that they have no choice in terms of their in-school

reading practices, because of the prescriptive nature of these texts following a curriculum prescribed by the Department of Basic Education, I would argue influences their choice of reading text outside of school, because of the limited exposure to certain kinds of texts and genres, and their experiences of how these texts were taught in the classroom.

What is evident in the data is that most findings are interlinked with all the research questions. This means that the reasons for why boys read or choose not to, what they read, and what they choose not to read informs their reading practices. These choices are a result of the identity each participant is creating for himself. Because this study is conducted among boys, the research reflects a gendered discussion about reading and reading practice. Furthermore, as evidenced in similar research, academic success has definitive links to the skill of reading with comprehension and reading regularly for pleasure, not simply the act of decoding texts. Davidovitch, Yavich and Druckman (2016) cite research establishing that reading habits accompany individuals as they progress in age, and that these habits also affect their academic life. All these factors link with what boys tend to choose to read and how they talk about what they read with others. Thus, in the discussion that ensues, there may be overlapping points that contribute to answering the research questions.

4.2.1 The In-School Experience

As a departure point, it was important to establish what kinds of texts the boys were exposed to in school.

I had to determine which books the boys enjoyed reading in school, and which texts they disliked the most. This data was garnered from the questionnaire which asked each candidate to list their two favourite texts and two of their least favourite texts. The brackets (parenthesis) indicate the number of boys who indicated their particular preference; thus the tallies may indicate more than 23 – the number of boys who completed the questionnaire. Their favourite books that they had been exposed to in school included *Spud* (15) and *Lord of the Flies* (8) *Hunger Games* (4) and *Harry Potter* (4) were the third choices. When asked to identify their least favourite texts, they listed a variety of Shakespearean dramas (27) and *District 6* (4). The Shakespearean texts

included *Much Ado about Nothing* which they studied in Grade 9, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Grade 10) and *Macbeth* (Grade 11). One boy wrote that his least favourite book was every Shakespeare book he had ever come across.

The questionnaire gave room for the participants to explain their reasons for their likes and dislikes of the texts they chose. When I analysed their responses in relation to the Shakespeare texts, participants' answers ranged between finding his texts boring, difficult to relate to, predictable, irrelevant and not adding any meaning to their lives. Comments in the questionnaire about Shakespeare specifically included:

- I hate Shakespeare books. *(Q9/B)*
- Give books that are modern and in tune with the minds of boys. (Not Shakespeare!) (*Q9/E*)
- Stop giving us Shakespeare and give us nice books. *(Q9/I)*
- Shakespeare is a good writer, but old English is hard to understand, and this makes it boring*. (Q9/W)*

These reasons were also expanded on in the free-writing exercise by some of the participants who repeated the sentiments contained in the quotes above, but with perhaps more vehemence:

- Well anyway Scotland is cold and *Macbeth* is scum. You know who else is scum? Shakespeare! He needs to know how not to be sad and boring. (*FW/O)*.
- In school all the Shakespeare stuff is fucked up. The old English language is confusing – it's not like we're gonna speak that nowadays. *(FW/D)*.

One could question the manner in which the Shakespearean texts are taught – the possible negative or unexciting manner in which his texts are presented to the boys. But the fact that they have been exposed to Shakespeare over at least three years of their high school education, by at least three different English teachers, makes it difficult to believe that their negativity towards Shakespeare is based solely on teacher presentation.

What is also evidenced in the participants' responses about Shakespeare is that they find him outdated and perhaps feminised, given that *Much Ado about Nothing* is considered by five of the boys to be nothing more than a fairy tale that does not appeal to the minds of boys. I am also aware that for at least half the participants in the focus groups, they are of the opinion that Shakespeare is 'gay'. The reasons given for this perception is that he wrote 'love' poems to a man. So not only do the boys reject the content; they reject the writer because they do not want to align themselves to an author whose sexual identity may somehow define their own. The disassociation with Shakespeare because of the possibility of him being gay is warranted in the boys' minds perhaps because of an embedded way of thinking about masculinity and patriarchy. The boys may think that because of Shakespeare's possible choice of sexuality, they are entitled to position him in a lesser position to themselves as heterosexual men, and he therefore becomes worthy of their disdain. Rich (1980) calls this 'the tyranny of patriarchy' when discussing lesbian feminism, but perhaps young boys also experience and participate in this tyranny in ways that they are not always aware of precisely because their thinking stems from a dominant patriarchal way of thinking about masculinity.

Jose and Raja (2011) say that is a difficult to make students engage with texts. They cite Malin who states that 'non-engaged readers are often unable to reflect on their reading as a result of a lack of interest, poor reading skills, limited comprehension strategies, or lack of personal experiences to use to construct meaning' (Jose and Raja, 2011:7). Given the responses from the participants in my study, I think that the lack of interest in the texts studied at school, particularly Shakespeare, combined with the lack of personal experiences the boys would need to construct meaning from the texts, such as romantic relationships, may be the reasons for why some boys do not engage in reading for pleasure out of school. This is because they may associate reading with the negative views they have developed because of their exposure to Shakespeare's writings. 'The Shakespeare shit makes me think that all books are like that' *(FW/D).* This is in line with what Boltz (2007) also found in his research.

Furthermore, I would suggest that language has a part to play in their resistance to the text. Given that English is not the home language of many of the boys, it is plausible to consider that perhaps Elizabethan English is difficult to grasp. Of relevance to note is that the South African curriculum is being reviewed by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), with a particular focus on the texts prescribed in English according to *The New Age* newspaper (16/02/2017), and more specifically the debate about the many Shakespearean texts that are prescribed. It seems that in efforts to decolonise the curriculum, there is a call to move away from Shakespeare. Decolonisation of the education curriculum in South Africa loosely means having an Afrocentric focus instead of a Eurocentric one where African thought and knowledge are recognised and valued over entrenched ways of Eurocentric thinking and knowledge. It also entails promoting African writers and texts as opposed to texts introduced to the country through European colonisation in the past. 'The question is whether or not Shakespeare needs to be "representative" of English, as in British, literature when there are hundreds of other accessible authors to choose from' (Thurman, 2017:20). In the article, Chris Thurman, associate professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, is quoted as saying: 'It may be preferable for high school pupils not to experience "studying" Shakespeare as a form of torture but to encounter him in other ways. This may be through performance.' Thurman's comments hint at the need for a shift in pedagogy, not just text selection, and as the curriculum is reviewed in the country, a balance between content and pedagogy will be important in the decolonisation debate. However, what is evident is that academics, and certainly curriculum developers, have noticed the need to review the studying of Shakespeare in the South African English classroom given the strong dislike and frequent resistance to his work, as evidenced in this study. Perhaps by reviewing the texts prescribed in the South African English language curriculum developers and educators could start changing the way in which boys perceive reading by making it something enjoyable, relatable and meaningful.

Juxtaposed to the participants' dislike of Shakespeare, was their enjoyment of *Spud*. Twenty-two boys out of the 23 said they disliked Shakespeare. Fifteen boys said that *Spud* was one of their favourite books in school. This is in line

with Boltz's (2006) findings that boys prefer reading texts that offer escapism and humour. While Spud is a realistic text, and thus not necessarily escapist, it offers many humorous moments. There is a marked contrast in responses to *Spud* as opposed to those of Shakespeare:

- *Spud* was about high school and Grade 8, so it was very relevant. *(Q9/F)*
- *Spud* has a good and interesting story and a lot of humour which we kids can relate to. *(Q9/H)*
- *Spud* talks about a typical boys school and I can relate to it. *(Q9/L)*
- *Spud* is funny and entertaining*. (Q9/Q)*
- *Spud* helps you to survive in a boys' school*. (Q9/R)*

The participants are highlighting reasons why they enjoyed the novel, but the fact that it helped them cope with what they were experiencing in school at the time they were reading it, makes the text more meaningful to them, and I would argue that this is one of the reasons why the participants enjoyed it. Ideas of relevancy and relatability to text are evident throughout my research, and in established literature.

Jose and Raja (2011) believe that interest serves as an internal motivation and that if a student is interested in what he is reading, then he will be more inclined to make reading a habitual practice. Lloyd (2006) says that the lack of progress in boys' literacy skills is because of the texts used in formal education settings. 'Research shows that these texts are not always consistent with boys' preferences' (Lloyd, 2006:31). What is evident in the boys' responses about *Spud* is that they found it enjoyable because they felt they could relate to it. In other words, it spoke to their current experience (when they were in Grade 8) of being Grade 8 boys in an all-boys' school. The kinds of activities experienced by the protagonist and his friends in the book – the making of new friends, the exposure to different socio-economic backgrounds of peers, and the entrenched traditions of a boys' school would have been just some of the things relevant to what participants were experiencing. The comment that *Spud* helps one to survive in a boys' school is in itself very telling of the kinds of things that perhaps happen in a monastic environment that teachers such as I am unaware of. Something further to consider is the fact that *Spud* reinforces the gender and

power dynamics of an all-boy school environment. It does not challenge oppressive discourses and practices in relation to gender and may serve the unconscious purpose of embedding traditional ideas about gender in the minds of an unsuspecting audience. Nonetheless, the text appeals to the boys. Perhaps the linkage between the humour and a sense of fun in the text (and in reality), combined with the sometimes harsh traditions of the environment in the text (and in reality) create a sentimental bridge for the boys who display a fierce sense of ownership of the school and its ethos long after they have left the physical space of the school. Judson and Egan (2013) state that humour is yet another one of those elements along with imagination that is often neglected by teachers. They believe that humour is based on incongruity. 'An ability to deal easily and pleasurably with incongruity contributes to the flexibility of mind, which is an important component of an educated person' (2013:349). Thus, despite the element of humour being important in the classroom, its distinctive contribution to education is the fact that it also creates flexible, imaginative and creative thinking.

Thus the books we choose to read in the classroom need to be carefully thought through when considering the type of young person in our care. Lloyd states that 'as educators it is our responsibility to find texts and practices that can motivate and cultivate the skills of all our students' (2006:31). I believe that if teachers sought to prescribe texts that are relatable to their students' experiences and spoke to their interests, as advocated by Love and Hamston (2004) and Hodges (2016), educators would probably be more successful in promoting reading for pleasure.

Of course, there is the counterargument that states that if we only pander to boys' interests in texts, they will not be exposed to other worlds and wider societal issues. Lloyd (2006) commented that if boys choose to read texts which resemble themselves in terms of both gender and race (as was evident in her research) the space for critical analysis of social constructs will be limited. Lloyd also says that it is reasonable to expect students to read outside of their own subjectivities. 'Narratives from alternative gender or racial positions might access such a critical perspective more readily' (2006:51).

With this thought in mind, I asked the focus group participants if they enjoyed reading *Tsotsi* (they had not completed reading the book when I undertook the other two methods of data collection). Given the South African setting and male gangster culture that was integral to the story, I thought that participants would enjoy the story, and perhaps relate to it more. I was wrong. The responses were generally ambivalent. One boy, Onaledi, said that while the story was South African, he did not relate to the apartheid setting in which it occurred and thus could not understand the motivation of the protagonist in the story which made Tsotsi an irritating character to him *(FG/BK*). Ronny, one of the only two white boys in the class, said that he did not enjoy the book. He said it was 'an okay story' *(FG/AG)* but he could not relate to any of it. Ronny elaborated on his reasoning saying that it was a time and a setting he could not relate to. Furthermore, he would never behave in such a criminal way. Ronny's response gained agreement from the other boys in the focus group. Perhaps there needs to be a balance between what we choose to expose our learners to in the classroom context – choosing texts to which they can relate, but also choosing texts that are perhaps set in a time that is more akin to their personal experiences in order for them to comprehend the societal issues we wish to highlight and engage in critical discourse about these topics.

However, if I draw on Moje et al.'s (2008) idea that exposure to different texts creates new, hybrid and challenging discourses and that knowledge is recontextualised, I think that Ronny's response, while gaining new knowledge, showed little acceptance of cultural differences in this 'third space'. I would suggest that while the *Tsotsi* text was culturally challenging, Ronny's resistance to it reinforces his cultural beliefs without making space for others'. His, and other boys', constant reference to wanting texts to be relevant to 'me' (the individual) means that boys like Ronny are not open to looking at what is possibly relevant to others precisely because their focus is inward.

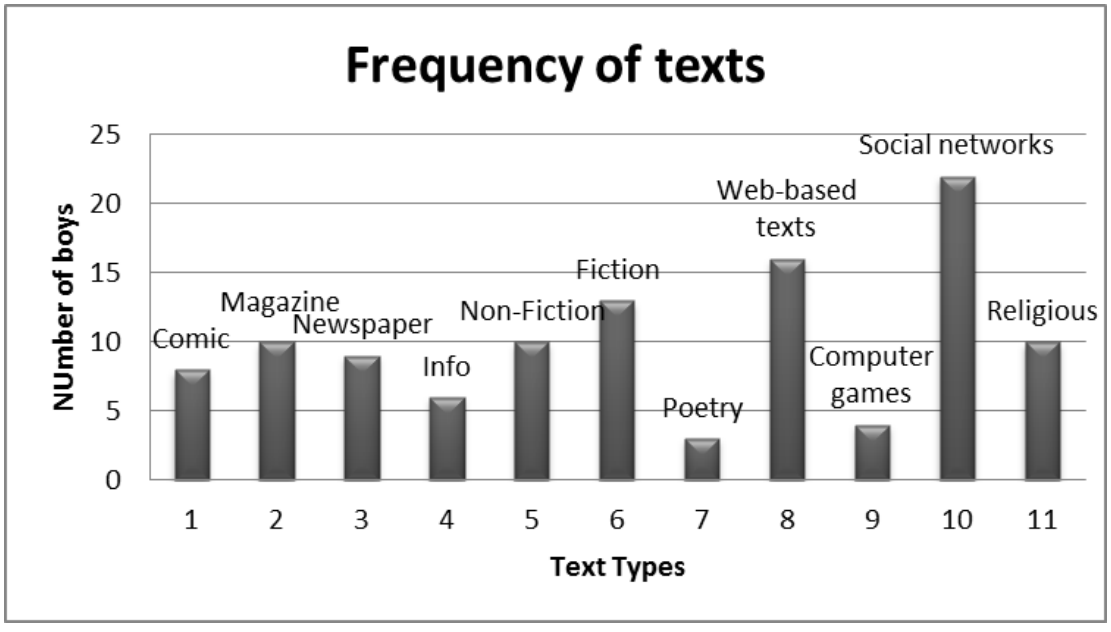
The 2011 National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) makes specific reference to dealing uniquely with the diversity of individuals in our classrooms. As a policy of the national education system in South Africa, such provision is made to adapt the curriculum to cater for the needs of the learners in our classrooms. The practical implementation of such choices,

however, becomes complicated, and indeed contradictory, when common or national examination papers on the government-prescribed literature set works means that everyone has to read the same texts. Little choice is then given to the educator to choose texts that will pique the interests of his or her learners and make learning, and indeed reading enjoyable. The aim of creating a 'life-long' reader is thus made void by the very system that promotes individual learning when this system enforces common assessments.

4.2.2 The Out-Of-School Reading Choices

What is apparent from the boys' in-school preferences of texts as evidenced in the questionnaires, is that they are highly unlikely to read Shakespeare at home. In order to establish if boys are reading at home, I had to discover what it is that they choose to read in the home environment. Figure 4.1 reflects the frequency of the text types that indicate what participants are more likely to read.

Figure 4.1: Frequency of Texts



Data from the questionnaire shows that each of the 23 participants said he read social media on a daily basis. During the course of the focus group discussion, I asked for clarity on about which social media platforms they read. These included Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. Participants also use WhatsApp as a means of communicating with friends and family. This is in line with Harrison's (2012) findings that boys tend to read online texts on a regular

basis, yet this routine reading practice is something that Harrison and I agree is not acknowledged within the school environment. Perhaps it is understandable that we do not want our learners to be focusing on their mobile devices instead of on what is being taught, as the devices are seen as being a distraction to learning. Many schools ban the devices and/or confiscate them, or have put measures in place to hand the mobile devices in at a central point in the mornings and then fetch them after school.

However, there may be a way in which we can embrace this emergent technology in our classrooms and use it meaningfully towards learning and the encouragement of reading and writing. Fundza (www.live.fundza.mobi) stories could be one such way in which mobile devices can be used to not only encourage reading, but writing too. There are other reasons that switching to a digital screen may encourage learning more. Davidovitch, Yavich and Druckman (2016) found that there are several reasons to support the transition to digital technology such as the availability and convenience of devices and the possibility to increase font sizes which cater to those who may have sight impairments. Furthermore, 82% of the respondents in their study noted that the ability to download files to their personal devices as one of the most important reasons for using digital resources.

The use of social media applications provides further access to other web-based texts. As indicated in Figure 4.1, web-based texts are the second most-read text of choice among the participants. Texts on the internet include articles that boys read once they have clicked on a link that piques their interest while browsing on social media platforms. I sought clarification of their choices in the focus group discussions. Friends' recommendations of articles and sponsored or advertised articles which appear on their newsfeeds are what they choose to read. During the focus group discussions it was revealed that if a big sporting match (mostly soccer/football) occurred during the evening while they are sleeping, they will search the internet to read about the game in the morning, and sometimes this will make them click on further links that offer information about specific players. What follows were some specific responses from the focus groups:

> Nick says: I love my sleep, so if I miss a game I just go onto the sports app on my phone in the morning when I wake up and I get the results of the match and I can go watch the highlights. *(FG/AB)*
>
> Amu: Yes, it's easy to access sport matches and information from your phone. And if you want to know more about transfers of players between clubs, or new managers or owners of clubs, you can click on a link and the article will just be on your phone. *(FG/BL)*

What was also clarified in the discussions is that most, if not all, boys use their mobile phones to read and access these articles. Thus their reading choices are very focused on a specific topic that interests them. Hewgley (2015) argues that if teachers are to use technology, they need to match how students feel about technology with the parts of technology that suit their dispositions. He cites Conradi who says that 'students must find value in the technology usage if they are to use it as a motivating force behind learning to become better readers' (2015:44). Again, there is scope to incorporate web-based texts in our classroom practice in order to not only equip our learners with technological skills but also to assimilate reading and research as a literary practice. What this may also point to is that reading is predominantly seen as technicist – they relate to reading as a set of acquired skills – no words are evident that describe reading as a past-time or pleasurable activity – yet evidence points to the fact that they do read about sport and sports people for interest, and they do not seem to make the connection. I would suggest that this is probably because the boys are still equating 'reading' with the traditional notion of reading books, even though ironically, they are using a modern resource to read about sports.

In stark contrast to previous research (Harrison, 2012; Ellis and Coddington, 2013) in which it was suggested that boys have an aversion to reading fiction, it is the third most read text type in this study, above that of non-fiction (note Figure 4.1). This finding challenges the dominant perception about gendered reading. Of the 23 boys participating in this study, 13 admitted to reading fiction. I use the word 'admitted' in relation to research by Ellis and Coddington (2013) that says that boys do not often admit to reading, and to reading of fiction

because of the associated perceived stigma of reading being a feminised activity – a point which I will elaborate on later in this chapter.

However, my data as evidenced in Figure 4.1 suggests that boys are reading fiction. I thought it prudent to establish which genre of fiction they prefer reading, as Boltz (2006) found that some boys were particularly passionate about reading the science fiction and fantasy genres. I found this trend to be true from all three methods of my data gathering. Firstly, the questionnaire allowed boys to list their favourite in-school reading texts. Besides the discussion on *Spud*, the next favourite texts were *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*. Both these texts fall into the fantasy genre. In the free-writing exercise *Harry Potter*, *Marvel* comics, the *Eragon* series and *Game of Thrones* were referred to frequently as texts they enjoy reading. In the focus group, Onaledi asked, 'Why can't we just carry on reading the Harry Potter series throughout high school? I mean there are what? Like seven or eight books in the series? We could finish them by the time we leave matric.' *(FG/AN)*

The science fiction and fantasy genre does not appear to have a particular 'literary value'. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that high school students expressed profound joy and zeal in reading marginalised and 'worry-inducing' texts such as romances, vampire stories, horrors, dystopian fantasy fiction and fantasy. They found this particularly prevalent in the out-of-school reading practices. Furthermore, Smith and Wilhelm's research found that these genres brought four distinct types of pleasure to their readers: 'the pleasure of play, intellectual pleasure, social pleasure and pleasure of work, both functional work and psychological inner work' (Hodges, 2016:25). They continue to point out that reading for pleasure is not foregrounded in schools in a way that would develop student reading and help them to grow as readers and human beings. They cite research that found that popular culture texts are comforting and sustaining to their readers. 'This comfort is not highly regarded as a goal of reading. Instead the charge so often levied as mass produced literature is not that it is bad or worthless, but that it is capable of degrading, indeed of corrupting those who enjoy it' (Hodges, 2016:26). Perhaps more research in considering why canonical texts are taught in schools – their literary value – as opposed to other texts, is an option for further study. Barton (1993) suggests that there is a

dominant ‘literary’ view of literacy that contains the notion that for one to be ‘cultured’ one should have read a certain amount of the canon which means that some people are included in the elite cultural club that somehow also means that members of such a club display more ‘intelligence’ than others which means that there are people who are excluded from this club because they are not *literary* literate. Thus perhaps the motivation for the inclusion of canonical texts in schools was initially to make such texts accessible to everyone fortunate enough to have an education, and speaks to the issues of decolonisation that I have already spoken about; but this cannot be our thinking as we try to equip our learners with skills they will need for their futures. Because the South African curriculum aims to approach education more inclusively, our motivation for teaching the canon needs to be re-evaluated.

However, what is heartening is the fact that at least the boys are reading, and there is no definitive way of measuring which of the four pleasure ‘results’ are their motivation for doing so. In Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) research, they found that female readers who frequently read romance novels used the narratives in these stories in transformative ways. This means that they were able to take lessons from the texts they had read; and even though these texts were fictional, they were able to apply these lessons to real-life situations. Thus, there is no way to say that reading *Harry Potter* or *The Game of Thrones* cannot affect readers in a psychological or pragmatic way. In fact, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found readers of the Harry Potter series do profound inner work saying that the novels provide an imaginative rehearsal for negotiating difficult situations. Yet despite this research critics continue to argue that ‘the reading experience of such books, critics contend, is characterised by its passivity, by its complacency, and its ability to promote the illusion that all is well in the best of all possible worlds’ (Hodges, 2016:26).

A further argument for considering the science fiction and fantasy genre as a source of possible texts is that such a genre stimulates imagination, something that is increasingly uncultivated in our learners because ‘imagination’ tends to be left to those creating the visual stimuli abundant on many screens. Indeed, in research conducted by Mark West on Mark Twain and Walt Disney, he says that ‘Twain and Disney knew that children often treat their favourite stories as

playgrounds for their imaginations' (West, 2010:430). West further says that children often gravitate to stories that are set in self-contained worlds. I would suggest that there is a strong attraction to these types of stories that are set in such worlds. One has only to consider the box office hits in terms of Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* or Hollywood's adaptation of *Lord of the Rings* to realise that there is, even among adults, a strong pull to these kinds of storyline. However, if one recognises the trend to consider the 'visual' learner in education, it would seem that perhaps we are sending out contradictory expectations of what we want from our learners. Dart (2010) examined English teacher's understanding of the imagination and how they think it is developed in the classroom. She found that teachers thought that imagination was vital, yet they did nothing to develop the imagination pedagogically. Educators want our learners to read, but perhaps we enable them to get fed the imagination of others instead of encouraging them to create it for themselves. Consider the following comments:

- Why bother reading when you can visually watch the book? *(FW/P)*
- Sure, reading broadens your imagination but why would you want to imagine things if someone has already done it for you? (FW/L)
- Why would I waste my time on that shit when there is a movie on that book? The 500 pages could be covered in a two-hour movie instead of reading for days. *(FW/D)*

The comments reveal that not only do they not want to read the book, because of the time it takes to read the text, but someone has created the story for them in a digital/movie format that they believe is far more accessible and easier.

Jose and Raja (2011) say that 'the educational and aesthetic value of a particular digital video reading aid can help students engage in reading literature' (2011:7). They suggest that this is a way to engage learners in a text and help them to comprehend, critically analyse and enjoy the reading experience as a whole. Given the boys' comments, I am not entirely convinced that showing the digital adaptation of a text is a way to engage learners to read it. I would suggest that it works to allow the learners to sit back and relax, and be entertained. However, in relation to imagination, Jose and Raja believe that

those who cannot imagine, cannot read. They cite Encisco who says that 'mental imagery or visualisation of a story has many powerful positive effects for readers and is vital for comprehension, engagement, and response' (2011:7). Again, it is striking a balance between offering our learners visual, and often digital adaptations of texts, and encouraging them to read the text and create the visuals for themselves in their own minds.

Within the social literacy framework, the boys' points on watching movies instead of reading books has bearing on the way in which large parts of the Western population have embraced visual re-workings of *The Game of Thrones*, *The Lord of the Rings, Twilight* and even the *Hunger Games* trilogy. Besides, *Twilight,* a book and movie franchise that is seen as appealing to female audiences, the participants of my study all watched *Game of Thrones*. Only one boy in my study indicated that he read the books, and was irritated when his classmates talk about what they have seen when he has not read that far into the story. Amu had the following to say [sic]:

> "Books getting turned into movies making us all to be lazy asses and rather than experiencing a 10-hour book we watch it in like two hours. Stanley Yelnots the main character of Holes. In the books is described as a chubby boy who got teased for his weight, and his weight would help him dig holes as he would stand on the shovel and the shovel would go in the ground. But in the movie, a skinny Shia Labeouf acts the role of Stanley. That is changing the whole book, feeding us wrong images, and I bet millions of kids never knew Stanley was a chubby boy because all they do is watch TV ..." *(FW/L).*

Amu is expressing not only his displeasure in the way the book is being portrayed on screen, almost indignant at the lie the movie producers are feeding viewers; but he is also making a value judgment when he refers to himself and peers as becoming lazy to read. The age of the screen has certainly contributed to the decline in reading books outside the classroom, making the task of encouraging reading perhaps even more difficult.

It is evident that there is a great following for the science fiction and fantasy genres on screen, but there appears to be little evidence of promoting this genre

in schools even though Judson and Egan found that they could readily observe that young people's interest is 'commonly and energetically engaged by the exotic, the strange, the wonderful, by the limits of reality and the extremes of experience' (2013:352).

Besides the four pleasure motivations as described by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) earlier in this chapter, which I mentioned is perhaps difficult to measure, I wanted to gain a better understanding of why boys enjoy reading fantasy books. Given that the type of fantasy usually involves swords and acts of bravery and chivalry I would suggest that further investigation is required to discover the reason for the fantasy genre's allure, especially to young men. A possible notion for consideration, as two respondents mentioned in the free-writing exercise, is that they see themselves as the characters of the stories they read.

> Raj says: When I read, I am transported to a land of mystery and magic full of new people to meet and fight. This last month, I was in Mordor fighting Sauron for the ring of power and saving Eragon from a flesh-eating dog. Last year I was mostly stuck on a boat as an Indian boy and a Bengal tiger. *(FW/E)*

> Able says: When I think of reading I think of Harry Potter and how I read it over and over again because it took me to a world where I felt like I could be free and do anything I wish I could do and the fact that the book series ended I didn't want to finish the book, sometimes I felt like I could erase my mind and read it all over again because I could be Harry all over again. *(FW/S)*

It would seem that to be fully engaged with the text, boys, and perhaps female readers too, have to immerse themselves in the character and story that provide them with a sense of adventure, yet help them navigate their real-life situations also. Raj mentions 'meeting' and 'fighting'. Able speaks about being 'free' and 'doing what he wants'. These boys are seeking characteristics and behaviours found in the fictional characters that they are possibly wishing to emulate. Being strong and able to fight, being free and being empowered are things these boys want in their lives, as voiced in several free-writing responses, yet it would

appear that they are only able to experience these concepts in the pages of a book. This finding resonates with Judson and Egan (2013) who suggest that an important toolkit in literacy is associating with the heroic. ‘Associations are formed with embodiments of those human qualities that transcend the everyday constraining and threatening world’ (2013:352).

I asked for clarification in the focus groups on what kinds of newspapers, religious texts, non-fiction books and magazines the boys read as per Figure 4.1, as these texts were the next popular choices. The reading of the Quran and the Bible account for the religious books represented in the graph. Non-fiction texts were often biographical or autobiographical texts of sport heroes and business tycoons like Richard Branson. Two boys said they would read non-fiction books if it helped them become successful people, like *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Participants said, in both the questionnaire and in the focus groups, that they would read the sports section of the newspaper. The only time they would read the front page of a newspaper is if it caught their attention. Jose and Raja (2011) suggest that because newspapers report real-life events, this will arouse students’ curiosity and if classroom activities are designed using newspapers, then it will encourage students to read further. Jose and Raja also state that because newspapers are authentic texts, it creates interest among students which in turns motivates them to read. I did not find this to be true in the responses I gained from both questionnaires and the free-writing activity. Onaledi, said that he blames newspapers for ‘ruining’ his desire to read:

> Reading means nothing to me because of newspapers. Newspapers ruined it for me, every damn page is about people complaining about how crap their lives are. They exaggerate their stories to make you feel even worse cause you can't do anything to help them. Like in my entire life I've never felt so powerless. It's like newspapers were made to suck the joy out of your day, actually suck the joy out of your life. The constant lies also make me sick even though I also lie – but only to get myself out of trouble. But a newspaper really raises the bar high when it comes to

> lying. I think if it wasn't for the tragic articles and the journalists who seek tragedy I would like reading *(FW/N).*

Onaledi expresses a similar comment to Amu in relation to being lied to, but he is taking his indignance a step further by using it as a justification for not reading. He feels powerless in his ability to not help those whose stories are in the paper. He is also making a comment about the tragic themes that seem to make up the bulk of news stories. But he also says that journalists are lying, yet his distrust must be based on some perception he has of what is considered 'real news'. Given how few boys said that they actually read the news, however, I doubt that Onaledi can lay the blame for not reading at all the journalists' feet.

In terms of magazines, the questionnaire revealed that those who did read magazines said they read car magazines or sporting magazines. This aligns with previous research of Boltz (2006) but also aligns to the fact that boys will look on their cellphones for news of a previous sports match if they missed it. What emerges from the choices that the boys are making in terms of the text selection, is that it is very specific to their interests.

The word 'relate' is identifiable in a range of the responses. In other words, the boys want to read texts that share the realities of what it means to be a young man in South Africa at the moment despite seemingly contradictory data that shows, in the light of *Tsotsi*, that there may not be much appeal there either. Thus the challenge for curriculum planners and teachers is to prescribe books that boys can relate to. This becomes increasingly difficult in multi-diverse classrooms with differing interests and cultural backgrounds. One boy's comment was:

> Make us read books that we can relate to and enjoy like action and comedy books. The reason most people enjoyed *Spud, Watership Down* and *Hunger Games* was because they could see themselves in these situations*. (Q13/O)*

Boltz (2006) also found that a reason for why boys do not read is the kinds of texts that are taught in school do not connect with their interests. Hodges (2016) says that in teaching literature, we, as educators, often ruin the notion that

reading narratives can be pleasurable. Thus our challenge is selecting texts that not only speak to boys' interests and what they can relate to, but also showcase a certain literary standard. The debate about a literary standard is not part of this research, and is perhaps a point for further study especially if we think about who decides what this standard is. It becomes important in terms of re-thinking what it is we hope to teach learners when we expose them to literature in the English classroom. If our aim is to teach an appreciation of texts and reading, then what this research is suggesting is that we need to be more flexible in choosing what those texts are. Three boys mentioned that they enjoyed reading *A Fault in our Stars* by John Green. As an English educator I need to take cognisance of what the boys are telling me by not only reading the text myself, but considering the text as a viable option in terms of prescribing it, or recommending it to other boys who struggle choosing something to read. On Blog.ed.ted.com/2017, *A Fault in our Stars* was ranked by teenage bloggers in second position to SE Hilton's *The Outsiders* in terms of books that teenagers love to read. I would like to suggest that it is this kind of feedback from learners and young people that should inform our choice of texts in the English classroom.

It would appear that both out-of-school reading experiences and in-school experiences have shaped and established identities for the boys as readers. What has affected their perception of themselves shapes their choice of text outside of school, and gives insight to their preference of book inside of school and vice versa. However, this classification of themselves as readers, and then a judgment call on whether they are good or bad readers, is possibly a result of the assessment practice used in reading throughout their schooling as well as influences on them when looking at the various school reading practices as a whole. It also speaks to thoughts they have about what it means to be a male reader.

4.2.3 Social Influences on the boy reader's identity

The attitudes the boys display to reading, and what reading means to them determines how they look at themselves and at each other. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) cite psychologist Erik Erikson who argues that adolescents have to make

a place for themselves in the worlds they inhabit. Erikson claims that to do so would depend on ‘a confidence in one’s sameness and continuity that is matched by a sameness and continuity in one’s meaning for others’ (Hodges, 2016:28). It is widely acknowledged that reading is a social process as documented in research by Heath (1983); Moje & Lewis (2008); Serafini (2012), and identity work has a social dimension.

As language forms part of cultural identity, I explored the language use that the participants of my study use when reading. All the boys in the study said that they read English texts. While, Arabic, Afrikaans and Zulu were read by some boys, English is the preferred language in which to read. This can be attributed to the fact that some of the only reading boys take part in is at school where the language of instruction is English, and thus all the texts are in English; or because what they read outside the classroom is accessible on their digital devices which is generally in English. This is relevant in terms of the fact that the home language of half the participants is not English. Gearon, Kostogriz and Miller (2009) state that competency in a home or first language is crucial for academic success. The fact that this is not the case for some of these boys means that they are already at a disadvantage, academically speaking. Why these boys then choose to read English texts speaks to a larger concern. Is it because they think that by doing so, they will become academically stronger? Or is it an access issue (meaning the only texts they have access to are in English)? Or is it because they are only reading in school, where they are only exposed to English texts? I am uncertain of the answers to such questions, but I believe they could be researched further.

What is also apparent is that there is peer group pressure, perhaps even more so in the focus group discussions because the persona of the boys in front of their classmates is not always in sync with the one presented in the questionnaire and free-writing activity. The pressure that boys may feel to talk about their reading preferences is certainly extensive when they feel that they may be ostracised for their choice of reading matter if they are labelled in terms of their sexuality as has been displayed in relation to their judgments about Shakespeare earlier in this chapter. And there is certainly judgment of the others. This is Raj in his free-writing activity:

> I'm probably one of the most well-read kids in the whole goddamned class ... I bet more than half of these *mofos* read two books a year, namely the two that school makes us read for English literature. I've read countless books. Like probably 2,000 books. *(FW/E)*

Raj is placing himself in a superior position to all his classmates based on the fact that he has read more books than they have. He is making an assumption on this point, unless, of course he has openly boasted of this feat in front of his peers which I would say is unlikely. He also refers to his classmates as 'mofos' a derogatory term that he would not use to their face. His disdain and labelling of his peers in terms of their reading is indicative perhaps of other judgments, thought of, but not expressed by other boys towards their peers' reading choices. Raj may be taking the opportunity presented by the free-writing activity to lash out at his classmates for perhaps seeing him as a 'bookworm' of sorts, or for other reasons that are not clear in the data.

Nick says: 'Reading is like looking at a person through shattered glass, you don't know how the pieces fit but you make up your own way of fixing the pieces ...' *(FW/B).* Nick is talking about the person who is reflected in glass, but the wholeness of that person is broken. He is saying that reading tries to fix that image of a whole being, but that somehow the pieces do not fit together, so a reader creates an image of that person that is far from perfect. Using the imagination to create this person is to Nick akin to being untrue or 'fake' because this 'mended' person is not true to the original likeness. Thus the way these boys see themselves and others in relation to reading shows a grappling with identity positioning.

Raj rates himself as an excellent reader because 'I have been reading since I was six. I can read up to eight well-sized novels a month.' (*Q3.2/E*). He also talks about what he reads with his mom, 'or friends at bookstores' (*Q4/E).* I was fascinated with the idea that Raj has friends at bookstores. 'I've met other readers and many hot girls in book stores. Especially Readers' Warehouse in Norwood' (*FW/E*). I asked him in the focus group discussions to elaborate on his statement and he replied that he often goes to book stores after school, and he has made a few friends by doing so, particularly girls (*FG/AE*). He was proud

to share with the group that his last girlfriend he had, in fact, met in a book store. The rest of the boys in the group laughed and one boy joked that if they want a clever girlfriend, that is where they will go and look for one (*FG/AN*). This may have been an attempt by Raj to let the rest of the group know that he had had a girlfriend, perhaps hoping to gain some social capital in doing so. But this also points to the fact that reading is a social practice. But the boys' response that if they were looking for a 'clever' girlfriend they would go to a book store shows the stereotyped idea that those people who read a lot, must be clever.

Interestingly, Ron rates himself only as a 'good' reader (*Q3/G*). He says that the reason for this is because 'I don't read enough to be excellent, but I can read well compared to many others.' (*Q3.2/G*). Compared to Nick and Raj, this perception of his ability is modest. My experience with Ronny's ability to read out loud is different. In my professional opinion, I think he is an excellent reader. What Ronny says in this statement however, is that he is placing a value judgment on reading based on how he believes others read. Thus he hears others reading aloud, and he speaks to others about what they have read. 'My sister often sends me links or tags me in Facebook in things I should read about' (*Q4/G*). Ronny also states that 'the majority of people I know don't read, but my circle of friends do' *(Q7/G*).

As stated in Cunningham's (2015) report earlier on in this chapter, parental influence has a definite impact on the role of reading and its perceived importance. Harrison (2012) reported that all the mothers in his study returned their questionnaires whereas only 75% of the fathers did so.

But even when parents see value in something, some boys may choose not to see that value for whatever reason, perhaps adolescent rebellion, they choose.

Pete's father sees the value of reading, but Pete says:

> My dad once told me that reading in the car is a good way to kill time by doing something that will have an impact on my life. That's utter nonsense there. I can go on my phone and chat. What a good way to kill time LOL. *(FW/P)*

The irony expressed in Pete's comment is that he is reading when he is on the phone. He may not realise it as such but he is following his father's advice even though he may be unwilling to admit it. Raj's free-writing was illuminating in terms of establishing a connection with people over reading. Raj states, in his free-writing exercise, the following:

> My dad, however, had a negative impact [on my reading] as he refused to buy me books. I mean most parents are happy to buy their kids books, but no, my dad decided to be a mega-prick and not buy me books. *(FW/E)*

Raj seems hostile towards his father based on his father's unwillingness to give him something he wanted … books. I probed Raj on his relationship with his father during the focus group discussions, and he said that he no longer has a relationship with his father and does not want one. Raj says that his father had a negative impact on his reading. However, the fact that Raj relates his father's refusal to buy books in this resentful manner points to another reason for the breakdown in their relationship, not the only reason. What is interesting to note is the converse relationship he has with his mother.

> Another impact reading has had on my life is that it has brought me closer to my mom … like I'll get a book, read it and then she reads it to the end like two days later and yeah, like we can discuss the book in some extreme detail ... *(FW/E)*

Thus while he has no relationship with his father, he has a very close one with his mother, and reading has formed part of this strong bond that exists between the two of them. Reading gives them something to talk about. The fact that Raj's mother reads the books her son gives her to read shows that she is willing to pursue a connection, and interest that her son has in books and reading, in order to further cement their relationship. As a tool for adolescent relationships, taking an interest in what a teenager is reading and having a consequent discussion about it can be beneficial for the relationship. This can certainly be extended to classroom practice. If teachers took more interest in what their students were reading outside the classroom, I believe it would foster better

teacher-student relationships, and certainly create a better space to talk about reading more openly.

What Harrison's (2012) research and my own shows is that both parents have an impact on perceptions towards reading. Raj is not equating reading with being feminised, but rather as a medium through which connections can be made. While Raj's case may be unique, the role of reading within the family environment cannot be minimised. Gottfried et al. (2017) found that when the link between parents and school is strong, academic outcomes improve; and that parental influence has a much greater and stronger impact on students' educational choices than we possibly realise. Specifically in relation to course-taking, Gottfried et al. found that 'for boys, there is evidence that shows the contributions of both the father and the mother's perceived expectations carries greater weight in terms of course-taking' (2017:12). What this says to my research is that young men value the input and influence they gain from their parents, and what they take from their parent's beliefs and expectations is very often manifested in their own attitudes and behaviour patterns. Thus Raj's experiences with both parents in terms of reading is better understood against Gottfried et al.'s findings.

What becomes evident from this research is that the strains of identity and gender cannot be unravelled into clear reasons for choices in reading, and for not reading. As much as my research has tried to tackle each thread, they are so interwoven that the complexity of this subject matter will need far more research. I do, however, believe that some strands are worth more discussion.

4.2.4 The Perception of the Boy Reader – Masculinity and Sexuality

If reading forms part of the boys' daily activity, or they value it, it would be a natural or given that they would talk about what they have read with others. However, from the questionnaire data, only eight boys said that they would talk about what they read with others, and/or they would occasionally read what their friends or family members recommended. What became evident in the focus group discussions is that most of the boys are apprehensive to admit is that they feel that some genres are 'gay'. This is particularly true when discussing the drama and romance genres. Shefer et al. (2007) say that being heterosexual

and ‘othering’ gay identity is a key factor in the construction of successful masculinity. As mentioned earlier, three boys said they read *A Fault in Our Stars*, a text that is classified as a drama. When I mentioned this text in the focus groups, suddenly there was silence, and only one of the three boys said, he thinks it is a great book, even if his classmates think he is gay (which they do). The other two boys remained quiet on the subject. The fact they were not going to get caught up in the discussion about this book could mean that they wanted to escape the sexual classification, or possibly thought the discussion was not worth their time. I did not pursue the question with them because I did not want to put them in a position where they would feel vulnerable. Shefer et al. (2007) found that in South Africa, traditional versions of masculinity reflect international findings in that masculinity is seen as being active, dominant, controlling and with (heterosexual) prowess as a key component of achievement. What is evident is the fact that even though they do not believe that reading such books is an identifier of sexuality, they were not willing to stand by such a belief for fear of the peer group repercussions. This is evidently a limitation of focus group discussions when collecting data.

What this further implies that while there are boys who read, some choose not to discuss what they read with others. Scholes (2015) presented the idea of an anti-reading peer group culture which means that for many boys, the pervasive attitude towards reading is such that they feel pressured to hide the fact that they like to read. This is not something that was clearly evident in my research. In fact, the opposite trend seemed evident. Those boys who liked to read said so, and those boys who disliked reading had no qualms in admitting that also. Admitting to reading or not reading does not seem to be the issue here. What seems difficult for most boys to do is discuss reading that may label them in a way that conflicts with how they would like to be seen by others. Thus the reasons for not discussing what they read with others could be ascribed to gender stereotyping, but there could be other possible explanations such as not having anyone to discuss their specific reading with, or that they do not perceive anyone will be interested in what it is that they have read.

Another explanation could be that they are embarrassed or perhaps aware of perceptions about the subject matter, or genre that they are reading, and do not

want to be judged for it. As stated earlier, Boltz (2007) and Moje et al. (2008) found that boys' reading was not valued, and that their reading and writing texts are not valued by adults. Thus the concept of valuing what they read may create an opportunity to grow their reading repertoire. It may also be an opportunity to strengthen identity and relationship bonds. For instance, if we are to value what someone reads, and they share it with us, and our response is one of encouragement and interest, it would seem that the individual would start to feel valued too.

Perception of self by the other is particularly prevalent in teenagers. Boys have a perception of themselves and what it takes to be a man (Shefer et al., 2006). Thus, perhaps to conform to perceived expectation of the roles they should play as men, boys look to men who they think embody the very definition of the characteristics of what a 'man' may be. I think Able expressed sentiments that so many people feel when he wrote the following in his free-writing activity:

> By saying this thing about the poem 'Not waving but Drowning' ... You're considered a joke and people don't really know what you feel like and how you want people to hear opinions about how you feel. But you still live under people's shadows. It actually sad that among us people are hiding themselves because they want to live under someone's shadow and not be the person they really are ... *(FW/S)*

Able is expressing the fact that people mask an identity for a variety of reasons, but it appears that hiding one's true self means escaping the dread of being labelled as something perceived as derogatory, which translates to being shunned in social and peer groups.

Perhaps this is evident in their choice of science fiction and fantasy books. Each boy, even those who claimed to dislike reading, mentioned *Harry Potter* as a book they liked. As a character, Harry Potter comes from a family who do not love him, but he perseveres in spite of being bullied at home and at school. Despite this, Potter finds friendship, has honourable qualities, is loyal and is extremely powerful unbeknownst to himself. He also makes mistakes, but is able to redeem himself. And in the end Potter triumphs over evil and also finds love. If we are to explore why the boys enjoyed the story, according to their

identifiers of being ‘relatable’ and ‘seeing themselves in the story’ then the character they are identifying with is Harry Potter, not Voldemort. The boys see themselves relating to this character. They want to see themselves as being able to come back from their failings, but have the same friendships and honourable intentions as much as Potter does. These boys want to be the hero. Raj says,

> When I think about reading I sort of get images that flash in my head. Like now is a dragon flying overhead, armoured knights with pikes, a flower garden, Harry Potter and quite a few other things. *(FW/E)*

Despite the fantasy genre not being real, boys see themselves in these heroic roles, and heart-warmingly, as good men. I am still baffled by the question that then arises … What is it about their real-life identities that prevent them from being the ‘heroes’ they imagine themselves to be? Judson and Egan (2013) believe that associating with the heroic is a vital component of literacy. They say that in dealing with reality, there are also threats, but that dealing with a problematic reality can be exciting. ‘The threats can be significantly relieved when associating with someone or something that seems best able to overcome them’ (2013:352). Perhaps Mo’s comment can provide some insight:

> I like fiction-based stories the most because it makes your mind wonder about certain things and whether these things can actually be possible like when you’re reading books like *Harry Potter* and it makes you believe that certain things are possible but for now all you can do is imagine and create these scenarios in your head as it makes life much more vibrant and creative and gives you a sense of purpose. The books that are non-fiction allow you to relate to their situations and scenarios. (*FW/J).*

Mo wonders about the possibility of making things possible, and even while he knows it may not be, he says that reading such books gives one a sense of purpose, as well as the ability to imagine and create. The mere fact that Mo is ascribing the answer to works of impossible fiction is strange, but if he is ‘relating’ to the perceived nobility of character in the pages, he is finding for himself a sense of purpose and identity to which he aspires.

Harry Potter is not the only science fiction/fantasy genre that appeals to the boys. Olwethu says:

> Just for interest, my favourite series of books is the *Civil War* crisis in Marvel comics 616. The thought of two of the greatest superpowers Captain America and Iron man in a head-to-head battle was just amazing and also it was when Peter Parker announced or particularly showed himself to be Spiderman. It was also cool to see so many super heroes in an all-out battle in the middle of the city and also see that Thor was back (he died in previous events but they brought him back as a clone) destroying everything. Also a cool factor was that there were no bad guys in this series and I think that was a good twist to the story ... There are also comic heroes that are amazing. My top three would be Deadpool, Spiderman and Iron Man. *(FW/H).*

Olwethu has obviously followed the series for some time. He has a keen idea of the various storylines. Interestingly he commented on the fact that there were no 'bad guys'. If my argument is correct, these boys want to see themselves as modern-day heroes – men who are good as opposed to villains and 'bad guys'. They want to be 'good', but they also want the attributes of power and noble character that will shape them into these heroes. I would suggest that this is perhaps another reason for why role models are so important, particularly in a young man's life. Shefer et al. suggest that 'there are undeniable pressures on young males, in a wide variety of contexts, to be like other, older males … and to conform to the prevailing dominant mode of masculinity' (2007:3). I would suggest that boys seek to emulate heroism and alternate versions of masculinity that they do not perhaps find in real life, yet find them instead in the pages of a book or on a screen.

I am not sure how many educators would be familiar with the Marvel Comic 616, or have an interest in these 'superheroes', but the prevalence of reading about a 'hero' is certainly appealing. Even in the non-fiction genre, boys tend to read books that are autobiographical – sports stars or inspiring leaders. Generally, they are stories of how someone rose from hardship to achieve success. These are the role models the boys seem to want to emulate, and it is important that

we consider their need to be ‘successful’ and identify with characters who succeed when faced with difficult odds. In line with Shefer et al.’s assertions that hegemonic masculinity means that men have to ‘prove’ their masculinity – something that does not come naturally and is rather, ‘fought for through performances of idealised and normative versions of masculinity, including being macho, hypersexual, and so on’ (2007:3), the boys in my study may be imagining this identity through the characters on the page, because there may be no other way to ‘prove’ their masculinity to themselves and others. In other words, by imagining themselves as the character who for them embodies the traits of masculinity, they somehow, through reading, shift those traits onto themselves.

I have suggested that perhaps the boys in my study have looked towards a very masculine, almost super-hero role model from which to forge an identity. Semali and Shakespeare (2014) have conducted research into the symbols of masculinity as socially produced, and contributing to stereotypes. They discuss the way in which the media plays a role in explicitly reifying masculinity. They quote Forbes magazine in which, at that time, Iron Man 3 was the top grosser of the summer in bringing in $1.2 billion at the global box office. Semali and Shakespeare cite Baker and Raney who say that there is a trend towards defining ‘superheroics’ in strictly masculine terms. Movies such as *Iron Man 3, Man of Steel* and *Wolverin*e ‘all represent images of the male super-hero in which the protagonist demonstrates super-hero characteristics through stereotypical masculine behaviour’ (Semali & Shakespeare, 2014:44). So while I have suggested that boys are looking to possibly emulate these characteristics, it is also because they are being fed these ideas of masculinity on their screens, of which they are so fond.

Lloyd (2006) cites Davies who found that among a group of young boys she studied, heroic storylines seemed to be the central feature of exploring masculine subjunctives. ‘One of the main features of this heroic storyline is the centrality of physical mastery, seen as necessary to gain social acceptance as a male’ (Lloyd, 2006:45). Citing Newkirk, Lloyd says that these types of fiction allow boys to assume or mock power through the coded, genre-based use of violence. I cannot say how prone the participants in my study are to behaving

in a violent manner, but I can say, based on my observations, is that the regular readers among the group do not seem inclined to violence and do not get into trouble at school for aggressive or antagonistic behaviour. I am, however, unable to make factual comment on the behaviour at home. Furthermore, what seems evident is that the boys seem to identify with positive superheroes who use physical strength to do good. In some way, they may think that the use of physical strength for a good outcome justifies the use of it. To a casual observer, we may not understand the motivation behind such action; and it may very well contribute to the notion that men choose to use violence to solve conflict.

What I found interesting was also that those boys who consider themselves as being regular readers are not sporty. They enjoy watching sport, but rarely participate in it. They do, however, tend to take part in cultural activities like drama, chess and Scrabble. Perhaps this is yet another reason for choosing what to read. It also feeds into the idea of being a hero, as the only other place to be a hero is on the sports-field – where every other non-reader is, or generally imagines themselves to be.

There is a disjuncture in reasoning here … the incongruency between reality and imagination, yet the wished-for assimilation of fantasy into reality. What I found particularly interesting is that Onaledi and Amu's responses showed a strong dislike to being lied to or fooled by presenting stories which are not real or true, which is a natural response for anyone, yet the science fiction and fantasy genre can hardly be real and true. However, if we consider that this genre does not pretend to be anything else other than what it is, the appeal for it becomes stronger. Interestingly, Shefer et al. found that in notions of masculinity expressed by young men, they are aware of "the culture of deception" in their positioning in relation to hegemonic masculinity (2007:9). Thus boys are experiencing deception everywhere, and are aware of it, and possibly trying to resist it, yet the pressures they must feel to conform are very real.

4.2.5 Fluency and Assessment – the Hallmarks of a Good Reader?

Rasinski et al. (2005) argue that perceived peer pressure when reading aloud, especially by those learners who read at a low level can be detrimental to the

learners' ideas about reading and their identities. 'Such levels of reading performance can easily lead to frustration, avoidance of reading, and ultimately, school failure' (Rasinski et al., 2005:26). This aspect is important in relation to understanding the individual definitions of reading participants in my research have forged for themselves. This is significantly so when one looks at reading as being a limited 'fluency' skill. Assessment or reading aloud, being fluent readers and identity are interwoven in the section to highlight motivations and attitudes towards reading practices, as well as the impact these factors have on academic success.

Despite only five boys admitting to being regular readers and three boys saying that they did not read, all 23 boys in the study see themselves as fairly able readers as per the questionnaire. Two boys said they were excellent readers, nine boys ranked themselves as 'very good' readers. Six boys said they were 'good' readers while the remaining five boys said they were 'average' readers. This finding contradicts Boltz's (2006) findings that boys tend to think of themselves as bad readers. I found that regardless of how their academic performance measures up to their reading ability – in their own perception of themselves, they saw themselves as being competent, and even excellent readers. How have these boys arrived at this perception of their abilities?

Perhaps this is due to criteria that we, as educators, parents and society have promoted, even unconsciously, since these boys have been able to decipher the alphabet. Thus even though most boys admitted to disliking reading, they still imagined themselves as being able to do the activity fairly well. I would suggest that this may be because for many boys, they can read the words reflected on the page before them (decode and pronounce), even though they may not comprehend the meaning behind those words. It would then seem that the ability to pronounce the words fluently is an important identifier of what constitutes a good reader, according to the boys. Freebody and Luke (1990) have written extensively on the four roles of a reader that explores how much more goes into being a reader than just a superficial definition of being able to decode the words. Certainly, code-breaking is one of the roles, where word recognition and phonics are important skills of the reader. Nick, for instance, defines being a good reader as one who has a good vocabulary. The third role

of being a text user, having the ability to respond to the text, and the fourth role of being a text analyser; someone who can understand the author's intention behind the text, and also understand the position in which the text places a reader, are roles that appear to be somewhat lacking among the participants of my research. They have yet to understand that reading is a social practice and not limited to being able to read a sentence fluently, pausing at the pause and stopping at the full-stop.

Serafini (2012) is of the view that we need to identify what makes a reader because of the different text types that need to be 'read'. The implication is that reading involves a lot more, specifically interpretation of what is being viewed, and not merely 'pronouncing' a word on a page. The deciphering of the message behind the word or a visual text is what makes one literate and a good reader. Only one boy in my study mentioned that the ability to do exactly this is what makes one a *good* reader. One boy in my study, Tumi, said he was a good reader. While he could read the words on the page with relative accuracy and speed when reading out loud, he could not grasp the meaning of what he was reading. Thus I am not convinced of Malin's argument that reading aloud and creating read-aloud stories can help create a positive feeling about literature (Hewgley, 2015:47). Tumi's ability to decode what he reads is very basic and as a result he has not passed English for two years. Tumi shows similarities with Hall's case study in that he puts on a mask of being a good reader, and may be oblivious to his inability to understand what is required of him. Hall states: 'Struggling readers who do not recognise that they have comprehension difficulties may not understand and/or believe that they need to apply specific strategies to help them understand text' (2005:15). I believe that Tumi is emblematic of a growing disjuncture between reading fluency, and reading for meaning. Tumi is unable to navigate his way around reading a text for meaning and tries to find ways to learn content he is unable to comprehend. I believe that because there appears to be a growing gap (according to the PIRLS reports) between reading for meaning and fluent reading, there are many learners in South Africa who are trying to cope with their inability to make meaning based on what they read, and so try to find ways around understanding content-rich subject areas, or who just give up.

As stated earlier, the participants of my study seem to associate fluency of reading, being able to read aloud without making errors, knowledge of a wide vocabulary and spelling as indicators of ability in reading. However, academics and some teachers know that 'reading is more than just saying the words' (Hewgley, 2015:45). When labelling themselves as 'good' or 'bad' readers, the boys were making a judgment on their ability to pronounce the words correctly, or pause at the punctuation, or even read at a certain pace. These are the indicators they use.

Rasinski et al. say that 'reading fluency deals with mastery of the surface level of text – learning to recognise (decode) words in a passage automatically as well as accurately and to express or interpret those words in a meaningful manner when reading orally' (2005:22). Rasinski et al. refer to a theory of automaticity in reading. What this theory puts forward is that readers who do not achieve automaticity in word recognition (fluency) have to apply significant amounts of cognitive energy to consciously decode the words they encounter while reading – this means that the cognitive energy is used up in low level decoding in order to comprehend the text. The implication here is that comprehension is negatively affected by the reader's lack of fluency. This is relevant to my findings because there is a mismatch in ideas about reading fluency and reading as a decoding mechanism; and it explains in a large part why boys have such trouble in reading for meaning, and why some boys have limited interest in reading books outside of the school environment.

Nick, one of the boys who claims to hate reading because he feels that by doing so he will be brainwashed by other peoples' ideas, says that there is no reason to read. He is of the opinion that once someone can read – the words that appear on a page – then that is all one needs to be able to do, because 'I have mastered the skills I will need and so reading books is not going to improve that much'. When I asked that he elaborate on what skills he means, Nick responded that he can read fluently and fast, and can read punctuation. Here again, Nick is making the assumption that reading means only one thing, that of being a code-breaker, as defined by Freebody and Luke (1990). While his definition is limited, Nick is not realising that he is limiting himself in a world that could be expanded if only he would embrace reading.

Boys like Nick, and indeed several boys who concurred with his statements in the focus group, seem to rank themselves in terms of their ability to read, probably because of English (teacher) assessment strategies. These could include teacher feedback, such as 'good' when someone reads out loud well. Susannah Givens (2010) conducted research on what types of educational experiences had led some of her students to develop such a strong dislike for reading and low self-efficacy. The boys' experiences in school in relation to reading and reading aloud in front of peers may have influenced their attitudes towards reading positively or negatively.

The assessment rubrics used to give learners marks based on their reading proficiency would also suggest that these code-breaking skills are seen as the identifiers of ability to read. What we in education have done is establish criteria for reading to our learners which are essentially only measuring reading ability on one or two roles of the reader. We have yet to make provision for the holistic four-role model of reading as advocated by Freebody and Luke (1990) in our assessment criteria. Janks (2013) says:

> Literacy as a social rather than school practice is quintessentially about using literacy for reasons that matter to the reader/writer. School literacy is decontextualized, repetitive and often serves as a demonstration of what skills one has learned. Too often literacy performance in school is only a form of 'display' (2013:238).

Tan (2010) says that often teachers rely on a narrow perspective of media literacy as skills only and by doing so fail to understand how young people participate in reading, viewing and producing media texts in their literacy practices.

This ill-conceived perception of what makes a good reader could be further entrenched by learners' own impatience with someone who reads particularly slowly or inaccurately when reading out loud in class. What this means is that from an early age, our culture of assessment, teaching practice and lack of empathy with our peers when reading to an audience could be to blame for this misconception of what makes a good reader. Consider Jabu's free-writing response:

> Maybe I don't like reading coz of the teachers, some teachers read badly and can't pronounce very well, it's fucked up coz they fucken teachers they should know how to read perfectly. The books we learn about at school makes me hate reading. *(FW/K*)

Jabu is blaming his dislike for reading on the fact that adults/teachers do not read properly, according to him, when they read out loud. Perhaps it is the tone they use, or the pronunciation of certain words that irks him. In a teaching environment, one would expect the teachers to be the 'experts', but Brian's comment about the manner in which teachers read is disconcerting as it is acting negatively on his perception of reading. Greg's comment from his questionnaire, after rating himself as a 'good reader', shows that there is an awareness of 'ability' in reading of peers: 'I don't read enough to be excellent, but I can read well compared to many others' (*Q3.2/C).*

Able says: 'I have been complimented on my reading and my spelling is good' *(Q3.2/S).*

If Able is being complimented on his reading, that means that someone, or many people, have heard him reading out loud and have made a value judgment on his decoding skill of his reading. Able has then internalised the praise and has interpreted it to mean that he is a great reader. Greg's comment shows that while a peer is reading out loud in class, the rest of the class are sitting there making judgments on the ability of their peer in terms of decoding. This is Mo's comment:

> I read daily and don't get confused by the words. I do not say excellent because I read softly and therefore I am unclear about whether I read with expression or not. *(Q3.2/J)*

Mo reads on a daily basis, far more frequently than Greg and Able, and is unable to rate himself as being an excellent reader because he is not being given the feedback he needs in order to make a judgment on his reading. Where he is doubtful of his ability based on the fact that he reads softly, Able and Greg are confident and perhaps even content with their reading ability. I found that the

best readers in the class rated themselves as average, while poor readers inflated their reading ability.

Perhaps more research needs to be conducted on the effects of reading out loud and their effects on peers in order to understand the possible attitudes towards reading that develop from a young age in the classroom when learners are asked to read out loud and when being assessed on their reading.

These boys are not alone in their misunderstanding of what it takes to be a good reader, but the fact that they, and many like them, do not read with comprehension means that we need to re-educate teachers, parents and learners with better, more comprehensive definitions of reading – ones that are not limited to defining a 'good reader' as one who can understand comprehensions and read fast. Jose and Raja (2011) say that teachers are the prime source for learners in terms of cultivating a reading habit, and that their advice and encouragement help learners move a step further in developing their attitude towards reading. Thus if teachers devalue certain texts, or award low marks for their reading ability, it is very likely that they are influencing their learners' attitudes and approaches to reading. It also implies that the types of feedback teachers given after a learner has read out loud, needs to be studied carefully to ensure that teachers are building up their learners and creating a positive attitude towards reading.

Gibbs (1998) says assessment plays an important strategic role, particularly in the context of larger class sizes and larger ratios of out-of-class to in-class time. He says that when learners spend about the same amount of time in as out of class, what they do in class influences – to a large extent – what they do out of the class. Thus if they spend a small amount of time inside the class reading, for example, the influence on what they do outside the class is also smaller. In other words, because the exposure to reading has been narrow in the class, the out-of-class practice will be similar. Gibbs also states that learners have to make decisions about what to read and study, and how much of it they should do, thus they become more strategic in allocating their out-of-class time to what they believe will count: in other words, 'to what is assessed' (1998:42). Once learners reach high school – they are no longer being assessed on their

reading-aloud ability. However, with the introduction of longer literary texts and poetry, the idea is that reading will still happen but in an informal way because one needs to read in order to understand the work. But learners are not seeing the 'act of reading' as an important component to academic performance because there is a prevailing attitude that if something is not for a mark, it is not important. This means that some learners will not read because they fail to see that there is a correlation between reading regularly for meaning and ultimate academic results in all subjects. And certainly, learners are reading when they study for an exam, but reading to remember information for regurgitation purposes in an exam, and reading for understanding are two different things.

Givens promotes the idea of affective assessment, which 'focuses on characteristics such as an individual's motivation, attitude towards learning, and feelings of self-efficacy' (2010:6). Givens says that affective assessment could be used in the area of developmental reading precisely because success rates are low for students who take developmental reading courses; that reading is a necessary foundation for accessing any college course; and that if educators do not understand the dispositions of their students, there will be no way to inculcate an appreciation of reading. I have included Givens' research because for many boys in South African schools, reading is developmental. They have content-rich subjects that they have to master, but because of their associations with reading as being simply phonetic, a skill of decoding and pronouncing, they have yet to acquire the developmental skills needed to grow their reading practices into something worthwhile, that will also assist them in attaining better academic results.

4.3 Justifications for Not Reading

Regardless of the fact that three of the 20 boys were adamant that they did read, 15 other boys said they did not read books or other printed text (excluding social media) regularly. There were many reasons for why they said they did not read. What was interesting to note, however, was that for some boys, they felt it necessary to make an excuse, almost as if they were doing something wrong by not reading. In other words, they seemed aware that somehow, it is an expectation. Able, in his free-writing activity, says:

> Sometimes when I hear the word 'read' I feel like I am being forced to actually do something educational which in fact I don't want to do because it's out of my comfort zone and I hated seeing books but after being convinced by a friend to read I loved reading at that point in time but now reading to me is like something you do when you don't want to expose yourself to the outside world.

It was also evident that when they perceive themselves as failing in some way some boys make justifications for why they choose not to read.

Reading was dismissed by 50% of respondents as a *boring* and *time-consuming* activity. This is also in line with Davidovitch, Yavich and Druckman's (2016) research. In order to establish whether the respondents had answered the questions about why they did not read, I re-phrased the question in the focus group and asked them if anything prevented them from reading. Again, the most prevalent responses were that of time, homework and sports or other extra-curricular activities. Two boys took accountability for the fact that they themselves prevent themselves from reading, and four others stated that they were lazy and just enjoy watching stories on television instead of reading stories. The length of time it takes to read a book and the time it takes to watch the same story on television was voiced as a reason not to read by several respondents. Olwethu says,

> 'When I think of reading, I think of silence. I don't like silence, it puts me under pressure. Sure, reading broadens your imagination but why would you want to imagine things if someone has already done it for you? When I think about reading, I think about school. That is definitely not what I want to be doing in my spare time.'

What makes something *boring* is the fact that there is no interest in it. This speaks to the fact that boys find some reading material irrelevant. The focus is on how the reading material applies to them on an individual level. This may perhaps be a selfish way to read, but what it may also be showing is the lack of critical literacy skills needed to read texts. Janks defines critical literacy in terms of Freire's study, as 'enabling young people to read both the word and the world in relation to power, identity, difference and access to knowledge, skills, tools

and resources' (2013:227). She draws on the works of Paulo Friere who advocates the idea that the cognitive dimension of the literary process must include the relationships of people with their worlds. Janks cites another research study of a Mexican American class at a high school in the US which provided Janks with valuable insight in terms of the kinds of texts studied. Students were observed being highly engaged and articulate because 'they could identify with the literature they were studying and their contributions to the discussion were mature and interesting' (2013:229). The point is that the boys in my study have made several references to wanting to engage with texts that they can identify with – that these kinds of texts are what they favour. These may not be texts that challenge their world views, however, and we would be remiss in our education of them not to expose them to texts that promote discussion around power and differences; thus critical literacy is important. The issue is also striking the balance between such texts and texts that they identify with. Givens (2010) found that textbook reading in particular was seen by her students as 'boring' and that because of the small type and lack of visual features, it becomes easy to understand why students with little motivation and confidence find this type of reading daunting. While textbook reading is certainly not the only scope of my research, I can understand that if college students find such reading difficult, boys, who tend to be visual learners, could be discouraged with studying at school and reading. It can be seen as just too overwhelming. Brian says:

> Boring is the first word that comes to mind. Books are boring. I don't like reading, especially books without pictures. Trying to imagine something you're reading is kinda hard, unless it's something you like, like a 'Super Strikers' comic. It's interesting to me because of all the pictures. (*FW/L)*

Janks (2013) makes the point that the curriculum made space for the discourses that these students inhabited, which meant that school was no longer an alienating experience for them. I would hope that in the future, South African curriculum developers would see the opportunity that exists to provide our diverse learners with texts that they can identify with.

This is Jabu's comment:

> When I think of reading, I think so boring. Fucken hobby not make any sense to me and it's boring. There is better thing in my life that I can do when I wanna just go to the beach be with all the hot Latina woman and smoke some weed until the days go by. Because reading makes you think about things that are never going to happen in your life which to me is not doing every enjoyable things like partying or playing sports. *(FW/K)*

Jabu does not read at all in his free time – because he is in the gym or playing sport. His attitudes towards reading is not favourable and even though I tried to elicit responses from him in the focus group discussions, he was not interested in voicing an opinion. His silence on the matter just could mean a variety of things, but I believe it is because of his poor academic performance, that he chooses to focus on the things he excels in, and reading is not one of them.

The fact that reading is *time-consuming* is true to a certain extent. Sport, socialising with girls and friends, and homework tends to take most of their time. Both Horton (2005) and Harrison (2012) found that boys' busy lives make it difficult for them to regard reading as an important activity in their daily routines. This sentiment was echoed very strongly in the all the data collection methods used in this investigation.

Nick says that 'reading is a killer of one's social life... If you don't have anyone who loves you, you find love in another story and become friends with pages, not with knowledge necessary for survival, but knowledge to create artificial friends on your planet' (FG/AB). When Nick refers to a planet, he is meaning the fictional planet a reader constructs for him/herself when they read. He is being judgmental about the fact that readers use their imaginations when reading because he seems to think that this is 'wrong' in the sense that it is not giving a truthful picture of reality. Also, he is confining those who choose to read to being social outcasts. Nick condemns readers who choose to read a book instead of possibly interacting with others on a social level. Thus, not only has Nick determined that reading is not for him on an intellectual level, but socially, reading intrudes too. (Perhaps Nick has wanted attention from people in the past who were too busy reading to give him what he wanted.) Nick cannot comprehend that reading in itself is social.

Another justification for not reading is the unfortunate link boys make between reading and schoolwork. The perception seems to be that if they read they are working. Pete says:

> When I think about reading I think of Oh no! Not this! I think of books, learning and I automatically become lazy. I do not like reading because I feel as though I can be doing better things than reading. I know reading is good as it improves English and that ... I just do not like reading. *(FW/P)*

Pete's first thoughts about reading are that books mean learning, and that just makes him lazy about even trying to read. Furthermore, even though he knows it is beneficial to read, he chooses not to.

Nick says that he does not read because all the 'information or knowledge I require has been summarised and contains what I need' (Q10/B). The fact that he still needs to read a summary escapes him, but the point I believe he is trying to make is that he does not need to read more deeply into anything, because someone has already done the research or the reading and has provided a summarised version of what he needs to know. I asked Nick to elaborate on this statement in the focus group and he said that there is no point in studying a text at school and having to 'slog' through it because all one needs to do is go on the internet and there are many sites where the chapters have been summarised; thus he sees no reason for 'wasting time' and reading the actual text. 'Everything you want is on the internet.'

4.4 Reading and the Link to Academic Success

Linked to the justifications for not reading, are the perceptions the boys have towards reading as contributing to not only their academic success, but their future success. It is with this thought in mind that I questioned whether reading should be a priority task in one's daily life. The importance of reading has been entrenched in our collective psyche for years. Brozo states that 'this long, well-documented history of underachievement has helped to contribute to an entrenched perception – indeed an expectation – that many boys simply will not become thoughtful, accomplished readers' (2006b:71). However, if we are to agree with Love and Hanson's (2004) notion that boys who are committed

readers experience greater academic success, then we have to consider that those boys who want to perform at a higher academic level, read more frequently than those who do not. Hewgley (2015) cites Ya-Ting, Yung-Hsin and Cowan who found that learners showed great improvement in their English skills when they received both direct and indirect instruction through reading. Thus, perhaps deliberately or not, those boys who make reading a daily activity, tend to see the benefit of doing so in the results of their academic performance. I found that those boys whose time is not taken up by sports tend to read more often than those boys who participate in sporting commitments after school. It could be because the non-sporting boys have more time to read, or they are motivated to do so because they are following a strict academic programme.

This may reproduce the 'dumb-jock' stereotype – a stereotype that perhaps threatens the masculinity of the sporty boys. There is scant research of boys (and girls) in schools who excel at sport to the detriment of their academic achievement, but much research has been done, particularly in the USA, among their college sports students. Much of this literature speaks to the Knight Report (2001) that revealed that there was a clear negative link between elite athletes and their academic achievement. Georgakis, Wilson and Ferguson (2014) conducted research at Australian universities of elite sports athletes and their academic performance. They cited other research which finds that elite athletes occupy socially prominent positions. They also confirm that there is much literature and growing public stereotypes that were perpetuated and labelled as 'dumb jocks' by the media, who reported on specific high-profile examples. Furthermore, they cite extensive research that finds that athlete's academic achievement is low relative to their peers, but more interestingly, that 'when gender and ethnicity are controlled for, the correlation becomes even more pronounced' (2014:121). They also state that research shows that when heavily commercialised sports (such as American football and basketball) are examined, the correlation becomes even more pronounced. Georgakis, Wilson and Ferguson (2014) proceed to refer to literature that has challenged this negative correlation – but they only managed to dispute the dumb-jock stereotype for female athletes because it was found that unlike their male counterparts, female athletes are highly engaged and perform better

academically. Their research found that the American research was inapplicable in Australia, as many of their elite athletes performed even better than their peers. Despite their findings, Georgakis, Wilson and Ferguson (2014) also found that the stereotype was most often associated with athletes who played rugby and Australian football.

Very often the attitude that is expressed towards reading is not only reflective of boys' attitudes to mostly books, but also of their attitudes to education and learning.

Respondents in my study generally saw reading as important to academic success at school, but this trend is mostly due to the contribution they think reading plays to their vocabulary, spelling and English marks. They do not seem to be able to expand their thoughts about reading to apply it to other academic subjects, or in fact any other aspect of their 'reading' lives. In other words, they are not able to see the correlation between reading in English, and the fact that what they have learned in that particular subject, like the ability to read a word, or infer meaning in a visual text, is what they are applying in order to navigate their way around their academic, sporting and social lives. Tan (2010) also found that her students thought that good English learners were those who were good at reading comprehension, writing and grammar. Olwethu had the following to say:

> I think about success and my future ahead of me. I think that I am smart and will end up becoming an English genius. I think about the time I am wasting on just looking at a page full of written words. At the end, reading is a waste of my time although I believe it could have a positive impact in my life as ... my future and my dreams such as having fast cars, a mansion and multiple spouses. *(FW/F)*

Olwethu spends time thinking about his future, and what he would like to have in it. He has not realised that in order to achieve the things he wants, he will have to do a lot of reading, admitting it could have a positive impact on his life. His confusion, and perhaps ideas of grandeur are indicative of the confidence most boys in my study showed towards being successful human beings once leaving school. Obviously Olwethu is misguided in thinking he will become an

English genius if he is not going to read English, and he is further naturally misguided if he thinks just being smart will get him the cars, houses and women he thinks he will surround himself with. However, Olwethu, and others like him, have obtained this idea somewhere. Again this perhaps evident of the fact that boys equate the skill of being able to read words with real meaning-making (and money-making) abilities. Hall (2005) cites research by Brozo whose study of high school struggling readers says that rather that actively trying to make changes in their academic life, struggling readers may try to find ways to 'lay low' and get by, or even create diversions intended to distract others from noticing their reading difficulties. I would suggest that boys like Olwethu embrace this strategy. Instead of making a change to his approach in reading, he avoids having to deal with the fact that he struggles to read altogether.

Lastly, 22 boys said that they would need to know how to read in order to be efficient and successful in university or in the workplace. The one boy who said that reading was not going to be important, Nick, motivated it as follows:

> There is no use in improving your vocabulary after you have gone through 12 years of just reading. *(Q10/B)*

Nick's statement points to the idea that reading is often associated with vocabulary, spelling, fluency and mostly, the subject, English. Despite his position, the rest of the respondents appear to agree with Serafini's (2012) stance that successful readers need to be identified in terms of the civil, socio-cultural and job demands and expectations that a particular culture places on its members.

4.5 Summary

This chapter has dealt with the analysis of the data collected that serves to answer the research question of boys' reading practices in- and out-of-school with a specific focus on the texts they choose to read and the texts they wish to avoid. I have integrated concepts such as imagination into my discussion because imagination is intricately linked to reading and boys' views on their ability to imagine themselves as part of a text, their thoughts on how reading

relates to imagination, and how underdeveloped this concept is in the classroom.

I have also included a discussion on the social influences on reading practice, such as the school environment in which boys find themselves as readers, and the pressures these environments place on boys as men and readers.

I have looked at masculinity and sexuality and how these concepts shape the identities of young men with particular reference to what it is boys choose to read and how they want to be perceived by others. There is pressure on young men to conform to certain ways of thinking about themselves as men, and because of these pressures boys struggle with positioning themselves in society and school. What they read and choose not to read or choose to hide from others relates to how they think they will be perceived at school by others including their peers, educators and other authority figures.

A portion of this chapter was devoted to specific ideas about fluency and assessment especially because early childhood experiences of reading aloud in the classroom, I believe, not only influence identity formation as readers, but also shape attitudes towards reading as children mature and develop.

I also looked at reasons for why boys choose not to read. Issues of time, perceiving texts as being boring or irrelevant to them and just general lack of interest in reading are all justifications for not reading.

Finally, I analysed data that informs the link between reading and academic success and exposed some of the research participants' thoughts about how they perceive reading to impact on their future.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

5.1 Key Findings

What is immediately evident is that all boys read; they just do not necessarily read books. My research aligns with international research by Boltz (2007) and Harrison (2012) that shows that boys read social media and the internet on a daily basis, whereas they are less inclined to read books, unless they are required to read them in school. Reasons for this behaviour could lie in the choice of text, an aspect which I examined closely in relation to in- and out-of-school reading practices, parental or peer influence and socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This is also influenced by how reading informs and shapes the identities of the boys in question, particularly the way in which they perceive themselves as readers. Based on my findings, and those of researchers such as Brozo (2006; 2009) those boys who read regularly out of school perform better academically.

What is also evident in my research is that regardless of home language, the preferred language of texts to read is English. This may be attributed to the fact that much of the social media platforms are in English. But it may also speak to access. What I mean is that learners may not have access to material that is written in other languages as easily as English. This ranges in texts from those available in the school library, to the advertising billboards along our roads. English is the dominant language around us, and so it may become naturalised for boys to think that when they read, they should read in English. As mentioned, social media platforms and web-based texts are published in English – it is only when commenting on articles or posts on social media that there are instances of using a language other than English. Thus even though we aim to teach and value inclusivity and diversity, by the very fact that English is apparently commonly preferred, it becomes the language of choice when reading.

Regardless of the language the respondents in my study choose to read, what is evident is that that every boy reads social media on daily basis. This is in line with Harrison's (2012) research that found that boys tend to read online texts on a regular basis. This reading routine is not widely acknowledged within the

school environment. Regardless, what this means for education is that there is an opportunity to use social media platforms for learning purposes and to encourage reading. Brozo's (2006b) research found that when an educator engaged with boy learners using technology, the participants in his study displayed a greater interest in reading. However, in South Africa there are some real limitations in doing so such as fear of technology or the inability to use it by teachers, high crime, unreliable access to electricity for charging devices or the cost of data.

A further finding is that a text that is considered a 'reading' text, is a book (novel). Thus the value attributed to other texts is not an automatic given. This impacts on identity in terms of identifying oneself as a reader because while the participants of my study may read other texts, many do not read books, unless it is in school. This means our definition of what it means to read and be a reader needs to expand to include multimodalities and digital literacies.

An important finding of my research is the fact that subjects such as English, and the concept of 'reading' needs to be spoken about and approached in a manner that does not feminise them. It would appear that reading is linked to the subject of English in schools, which is seen often perceived as a 'lesser' subject, particularly in an all-boy school environment because it is feminised in favour of subjects such as mathematics or science which are associated with being 'intelligent' subjects and dominated by males. This thinking and appreciation for different school subjects needs to change in order to value all learners within our education system, ensuring that diverse learning styles and preferences of subject choice do not categorise a person in terms of intellectual ability creating an idea of someone being 'lesser' in stature than others.

A further finding is that boys do not read (books) because they find reading time consuming, the content is not relatable and/or is boring and the boys believe that they are fluent readers anyway, and therefore see no need to read outside of the school context. It is understandable that boys in Grade 11 have a full academic schedule and have lots of homework. They also have sport commitments, especially because they are in an all-boys' school where the pressure to excel at sport in competition with other all-boy schools is high. Thus

it is understandable that they find it difficult to find the time to read. However, there are boys in my study who find time to read despite being strong academically and being involved in many extra-curricular activities. The means that it would seem as if using time constraints may be an excuse that boys use because it has become an acceptable explanation for why they do not actually want to engage in reading for pleasure. The fact that boys do not enjoy the content of some books because they believe it to be boring and cannot relate to it can be addressed by finding a text that suits their interests.

What takes time is finding that book that appeals to their interests and to which they can relate. Perhaps more can be done in the classroom to expose learners to the world of differing texts, genres and authors. This finding implies that teachers need to read across a range of genres and interests in order to engage their students, especially those ones who struggle with literacy. Related to this finding is the idea that there is no reason to read once one has 'mastered' the skill of reading. This reveals to us that many boys view reading as technicist. In possible redefinitions of reading in the future, boys' perceptions of themselves as being competent readers and 'masters' of the skill could change.

I found that those boys who enjoy reading (books) out of school display confidence about who they are, possibly due to their good academic status. But these boys are also culturally inclined as opposed to being good sportsmen. On the other hand, boys who do not read out of school are generally not as strong academically, but are very sporty. There is a danger of boys being stereotyped as 'confident nerds' or 'dumb jocks' and I would guard against doing so because each boy is unique and academic strengths or sporting prowess should not be a label that identifies that person. The reality is, however, that stereotypes exist and boys will label each other based on these criteria. Until this cycle of 'othering' is broken, there is little hope that this pattern of behaviour will change.

I found, however, that only one boy openly admitted to reading love stories and dramas. The rest of the boys identified the enjoyment of this genre as 'gay'. Labelling and identifying certain reading choices along with the boys who choose to read those genres in a way that is not inclusive is still a problematic issue because it speaks to intolerance and masking of true identity in South

African society. Adding to this negative behavioural pattern is that reading as an activity is often feminised, which makes it something some boys do not want to be seen to be doing. What others think of them is very important to some boys this age, and they will behave in ways that will create an identity for themselves in order to fit into who they think others expect them to be.

An important finding of my research is that the genre of books boys choose to read is mostly science fiction and fantasy. Reasons for this could be linked to ideas of strong masculine characters presented in texts and the need for boys to find relatable 'heroes' with whom to identify that embody all the characteristics to which they aspire. I suggest that boys seek to immerse themselves in a narrative and deliberately identify with the characters who display strength, both physically and in character, because they themselves want to be seen as heroes. This is also why strong male role models are necessary, because boys seek to emulate behaviour and thinking of male characters whom they respect. Zirkel (2002) states that gender-matched role models have the most positive effect on academic outcomes. This is also useful in terms of reading because if there are role models who read, it is very likely that boys will also want to read. This means the role of the father and other male figures in a boy's life and especially in an all-boy school environment have a great responsibility to provide boys with positive ideas about reading, thinking and identity.

A further finding in my research is that there is a strong dislike for studying Shakespearean texts in school. While this may not be surprising, what is surprising is our insistence on subjecting and examining learners to his work year after year. We have also failed to take into account that their attitude towards Shakespeare's work may have a negative effect on their view of reading as a whole. Most boys enjoyed reading *Spud* in school because they enjoyed the fact that it was relatable and offered escapism of their own Grade 8 real-life experiences and humour. Perhaps the converse will be true in that if we offer books in school that boys enjoy reading, their attitude towards reading may be a positive one.

A study of the CAPS curriculum does not show teachers exactly how to develop the imagination of learners. It alludes to the fact that teachers should create

opportunities for creativity but how to achieve this is not clearly directed. It may seem an obvious skill for some teachers, but we cannot make the assumption that all teachers know how to cultivate or stimulate the imagination. Both Vygotsky and Piaget were great proponents of the idea that in order to learn and to develop cognitively, children need to play. While it is evident that participants in my study who read are able to use their imaginations well, as is evidenced in the way they talk about their favourite characters and what they can imagine, those boys who do not appear to enjoy reading for pleasure appear to rely on visual representation of movies of books to feed their ability to create within their minds. I agree with Dart who states that 'a school culture conducive to imaginative work together with a clear pedagogy, are now imperative' (2010:74).

5.2 Insights and possible implications

If literacy is feminised (Harrison, 2012; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Martino, 2003; Millard, 1997; and Kehler & Martino, 2007) and boys are aware of gendered subjects such as English, then the association that is created towards this subject is anti-masculine. Furthermore, English as a subject is perhaps not valued as much as other subjects such as mathematics or science. As reading forms part of the English subject curriculum, it could explain why some boys distance themselves from reading more frequently. What this means is that we need to start talking about the subjects offered at school differently. Our narrative needs to give value to all subjects within the curriculum, especially in an all-male environment where more value is ascribed to 'male' subjects.

It is important as English teachers to be reflective in our teaching of reading. We need to ask ourselves whether we read material that relates to our students. It cannot be assumed that English teachers read material that appeals to their students; but in future, a conscious effort must be made to do so in order to keep abreast of the material that students like reading and the kind of texts they feel they can relate to. Flynt and Brozo (2009) are adamant that the most important element in the content literacy classroom is the teacher. They believe that those who effectively engage with their learners, make connections across content areas, adapt instruction based on their learner needs, and who are

indeed aware of their own learners' out-of-school literacy interests are the most successful.

On the whole, educators and parents, and society at large need to rethink our idea of what 'reading' means. This means embracing other texts and genres that are not necessarily the ones we were raised on, which may mean that we ascribe value or sentimentality to an era of reading that is not relevant to the generations of today. Furthermore, older generations of parents and teachers are used to reading novels or books. Acknowledging the graphic novel or comic is important to engender a more enthusiastic attitude towards reading. The collective definition of what it means to be a 'reader' needs to be expanded. This must include social media and web-based texts.

If we are to move forward into the twenty-first century, and provide our learners with twenty-first century skills, we need to embrace technology use in our classrooms more. Educators need to look at how to incorporate what is relevant to our learners into our teaching to encourage not only reading, but learning.

Brozo's (2006b) study refers to a teacher (Mr Martin) who used song lyrics of artists his (male) students listened to in order to prepare lessons on word families. This engagement with his learners increased participation in class and expanded literacy ability in his students. It is this kind of teacher and teaching that needs to be cultivated in the South African context if we hope to make a difference to attitudes on reading and affect changes to test scoring.

Educators and policy makers need to ponder the possibility of including more 'masculine' texts in the English classroom. However, what makes a text 'masculine' will need to be researched further. Such research will also need to look at which learners would feel excluded by specific genderised text choices.

I believe that we need to look at how reading is taught in the foundation phase of schooling in South Africa. There are many ways to teach reading, and perhaps focusing on only one method limits the learning opportunities for a range of learners who learn in more diverse ways. It is essential that our teachers need to be trained to teach reading in a way that does not subscribe to the conventional wisdom that says that if a teacher can read, then a teacher

can teach reading. I agree with Rasinski et al. who state that: 'If fluency is a concern among middle and high school students, it needs to be taught' (2005:26).

Our attitudes towards reading are not just formulated in school. I would suggest that more research be conducted in how the books and visual texts we have been exposed to in our childhood affect our identity creation and influence some of our choices and social constructs in adulthood.

5.3 Recommendations

Firstly, perhaps a solution to at least consider in incorporating in our classrooms are the reading strategies advocated by Hewgley. He says, 'Reading casts, dramatic readings, digital book talks, and video feedforwarding are just one of the many ways to use video to help students with their reading comprehension' (2015:50). While none of these strategies would be an answer in themselves, as part of an integrated curriculum, they may very well help in terms of motivation and improvement of attitudes towards reading and overcoming reading barriers.

A second option, as Enokida (2016) suggests, is to combine digital story-telling and extensive reading. This could have several benefits such as making the analysis of literary texts more approachable to learners. As an example, there is a free app that learners can download onto their phones – it is called *Videolicious* and assists learners in creating digital stories of one minute long. As a starting point, this combination between the digital and the traditional text may work to encourage boys to perceive reading in a positive way and perhaps even pursue it in their leisure time.

Thirdly, intervention strategies to increase high school learners' reading fluency are essential. The assumption that one can read well just because one has undergone several years of schooling, especially in the South African context where learners are pushed through the phases and progressed, cannot be made any longer. Rasinski et al (2005) suggest that reading practices such as repeated or practised reading can be incorporated into the English classroom especially when learners have to perform for others. Poetry, scripts and song

lyrics are all texts that encourage performance, and these can be more widely used in order to assist in bridging the gap in reading fluency.

What curriculum planners and educators also need to look at is the proper, strategic inclusion of multimodal texts in the classroom. It is detrimental to rely solely on a textbook and a reading text such as a novel for teaching in the English subject. And, as the DBE wants English to be taught 'across the curriculum' then it becomes essential that all teachers understand and embrace the value of using multimodal texts in their classrooms. The South African curriculum has to move towards ensuring a variety of texts are used in all subjects to not only assist in increasing our literacy levels, but also to cater to the diversity in our classrooms better. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work (as is evidenced in the PIRLS 2016 results). This includes the approach to assessment – more options – not just tests and reading out loud need to feature in our curriculum if the South African education system wants to see improved results/performance. 'If our goal is to improve student performance across content areas, then improvements in general reading ability must be a goal' (Rasinski et al., 2005:26).

A further recommendation aligns with that of Hall (2005) who suggests that research needs to be conducted into how teachers' understandings of learners' identities affect the ways in which they work with students as well as the impact that such understandings can produce in teacher/learner interactions around text and reading instruction. I would concur with her sentiments in this regard, as I have found that the glimpse I have attained into the complicated and often confused lives of young men makes me want to be more empathetic to their needs and wants as readers, and human beings.

I would also suggest the inclusion of affective assessment practices. Givens (2010) promotes giving surveys and reflections to her students because by 'merely considering the questions posed by affective assessments forces them to think about the roles that reading and, more generally, literacy and language play in their lives. For many students, this can lead to an expanded understanding of language and literacy within the many realms of their lives – not just in terms of academics' (2010:13). Furthermore, I would suggest that

assessment of reading, particularly in the Intermediate and Senior Phases of our curriculum be changed to value all four reading roles as advocated by Freebody and Luke (1990). In doing so, the judgments which learners, teachers and parents make on what constitutes a 'good reader' can be more holistically defined.

Furthermore, we very often make the mistake as educators of thinking we are encouraging learners to read when all we are doing is making them think that 'reading' is associated with work and 'English', and if they do not like the subject they are going to be less inclined to be positive about reading. Also, they associate themselves as being good readers based on their ability to read aloud well – this is not makes a good reader and for this reason, a new approach to assessing reading out loud, and establishing what makes a person a 'good reader' will have to be taught.

Tapping into their imaginations as characters of the worlds they inhabit may also provide an outlet for personal writing that can be cathartic and serve as motivation to read more, especially if boys who enjoy a certain genre swop their writing among themselves. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) say that as educators, we have to encourage the imaginary worlds, recognising that we need to avoid teaching that devalues play by only focusing on the technical issues of reading and writing. 'Reading pleasure has enormous power. We need to make it more central to our practice' (Hodges, 2016:30).

We need to encourage parents to be more involved in reading development and progress. This is especially true of the boy reader who looks towards strong fathers and male role models who need to be seen to be reading and importantly, who need to talk about what they read. While there are many male English teacher and language educators, there are not enough to set a 'culture of reading' example among young men. Brozo (2006b) suggests that caring adults who serve as mentors and role models help make connections for young men between their personal experiences and their literary development. It is easy to set aside some time in school to 'read' as the South African schooling system aims to do with campaigns such as 'Read Aloud', but if male teachers

and role models are not seen to be reading and enjoying the activity, such campaigns can become a futile exercise.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

It would be safe to say that all boys read. What they read is in some respects a given, but in others, they are different.

Knowledge is power, and that knowledge is only come by reading. If we want to empower our learners, and ensure their success, then we need them to equip them properly with the tools to do so. One way is exposing them to the vast amounts of knowledge at their fingertips if only they would read.

It is no good pretending, and living in the fantasy world that boys seem to create for themselves. We need practical curriculum changes that meet the needs of boys in our schools. These are young men who are going to inform and lead the generations to come, and we need to make sure that we are providing them with the best opportunities to be the heroes they so desperately want to be.

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APPENDIX A: BOYS AND READING QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. This questionnaire should take about 20 minutes to complete.

I am interested in your home and school reading practices and I would like to learn about different kinds of texts you read (not just books and print-based texts). Any texts you read are relevant to this questionnaire.

Age:_____ Race:_____ Where do you live? _____

Please try to answer all the questions as close to reality as truthfully possible. If you do not wish to answer a question, you may leave it blank.

1. What follows is a list of the types of text you might read in your spare time. Write the number 1 in the box beside the text you most enjoy reading. Write a 2 beside the text type you enjoy reading next and so on. Please write a number next to every letter, except if you do not read the type of text. Also include how often you read the type of text. (Frequency). Indicate if what you read is in any language other than English.

Type of text
Comic
Magazine
Newspaper
Books that give info
Non-fiction
Fiction
Poetry
Web-based texts
Text-based computer games
Social networks
Religious books

2. List three words that you associate with reading and then explain why you have chosen them.

_____

_____

_____

3.1 How do you think of yourself as a reader? (Tick one box)

Poor Average Good Very Good Excellent

3.2 Why do you think this?

_____

_____

_____

4. Is there a person who influences your choice of reading material? If so, who? And how does that person influence your reading choices?

_____

_____

5. Do you enjoy reading, or reading for entertainment/fun/pleasure?

_____

6. If you don't read, or don't read often, please explain why not.

_____

_____

7. Would you say that reading, as a hobby, is something many young people, your age, do? Explain why you think so?

_____

_____

_____

8. Do you think that reading will be important once you leave school? Please explain your answer.

_____

_____

_____

9. What are the two favourite books and the two books you have liked least of those you have read in school? Please explain/elaborate on your answer.

Favourites:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Least favourites:

_____

_____

_____

10. How do you think reading could affect your academic performance and future success?

_____

_____

_____

11. Does anything prevent you from reading? If so, please explain.

_____

_____

_____

12. If you could give your English teacher some advice about helping boys, not just you, but other boys as well, to read more or better, what advice would you give?

_____

_____

_____

13. Please tell me if there is anything else about your reading that you have not mentioned. Please write it here.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

If you would like to include your name, you may do so:

_____

APPENDIX B: FREE-WRITING PROMPTS

The following suggestions could be used for the free-writing activity:

- The impact that reading has had on my life so far…
- When I think about reading, I think of…
- What reading means to me…

APPENDIX C: BOYS' FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

(These may be adapted given feedback from questionnaires and the free-writing response. It is understood that the anonymity of the boys is guaranteed when writing the final proposal. Boys will be given pseudonyms in the discussion, and these will be changed again when I write the report.)

1. Tell me about three texts you have read recently that you have enjoyed reading, and why?

2. How are your reading choices similar or different to the girls that you know?

3. Do you discuss any of the texts you read with friends? Tell me more about this?

4. What are the first five words you think of when you think of the word, 'man'? How do you think these perceptions of what it means to be a male shape/influence your reading practices?

5. Is there pressure to read well? From whom? And why do think that is so?

6. What kind of reading do you think could help you be successful in the future? Is it the same or different from the kind of reading you have to do at school?