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BOYS WILL BE BOYS:
STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE THE ADOLESCENT MALE LEARNER

RENEE FLEDDERMAN
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Anne Whitney
Assistant Professor of Education
Thesis Supervisor

Jamie Myers
Associate Professor of Education
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

A major issue in the contemporary education system in American schools is the recurrent finding of lower-level English classes being primarily composed of male students. These students are often reluctant readers and have difficulty engaging with the English curriculum. There have been several studies focused on this topic of difficult to engage male learners and methods that can be implemented in the classroom to increase their interest and participation in the subject of English. During my student-teaching experience, I was presented with a lower-level English classroom composed primarily of young male students. In this paper, I explore the disengaged and often disruptive behavior of boys in lower-level English classes and how to actively engage these learners. By using student interest, learning styles, and varied instructional strategies suggested by the literature, we set up our male (and female) learners for success and were able to further engage our students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As an English teacher and an outdoor enthusiast, I spend a majority of my free time rock climbing. The exact reasons for my initial passion connected to this sport used to elude me. Maybe it was the challenge of trying something new or the exhilarating rush of pushing my body beyond my perceived physical limitations that initially pulled me to the sport. Whatever the reason for this passion, I am inexplicably drawn back to the surface of the rock time after time. Bouldering is the rock climbing practice of climbing boulders, typically 15 feet or less, without a backup safety device, like a rope or harness. We call bouldering routes problems. At our local bouldering spot, Hunter's Rocks, I was consistently unable to succeed in climbing a certain problem: Matt Hill Arête.

There were about six different movements needed to reach the top of the boulder. On the first try of Matt Hill Arête, I was able to get to the second move, but I was unable to reach the third move. After repetitive attempts at this problem, I gave up, and hiked back down the mountain to drive home. I was so close to getting that third hold, so I returned to Hunter's Rocks the following week. I was unable to complete the problem upon my return, but I did get to the third move. On my third visit to Hunter's Rocks, I finally felt my hand reach the last hold of the bouldering problem and hoisted my body on top of the rock. After three days of exhausting attempts, I successfully completed the Matt Hill Arête.

As I stared out over the tree line from the top of the boulder, I realized something: I loved rock climbing because of my successes. I was not an incredible climber. I could not master the most difficult problems. I did, however, experience small successes. Even though I was not able to master the problem the first time, I was able to successfully climb the problem after three attempts. It is the same way with any type of learning. We are invariably drawn to the areas of our lives where we experience the most success. This success may manifest itself in different forms; it might be academic or physical. It could come in the form of a specific skill. If an individual has not experienced success within the educational system in a specific area or as a whole, how can we expect them to be engaged? In several of my English classes, I have noticed this very trend of unmotivated students. These are students that can understand concepts, but can not read, or they can read, yet are unable to draw connections. Some of these students have experienced difficulty or even failure within the public school education system, specifically with reading and writing skills.

I would not have such a passion for rock climbing if I did not experience such success within the sport. If we can, as educators, set up students for success, even small successes, then we can build the foundations for confidence, achievement, and passion within our students. In my student-teaching placement, I was faced with a very alien situation: a group of male adolescent ninth graders that despise English, as a class and a subject. This was a new situation for me because first of all, I loved English in high school. Also, I'm a woman, so I have no basis for experience in the mind of an

adolescent male. Suddenly faced with this dilemma, I was initially uncertain of how to proceed with the rest of the year.

The First Day

I walked into the classroom during my second month of student teaching. My placement for one of my classes had just been changed, and I was more than ecstatic to meet the new class of students. I was surprised to see a classroom composed of mostly boys. Actually, there was only one female student. Another teacher had told me that this classroom had “very low” learners, but I did not expect a classroom with primarily male students. After the first day of class, I very quickly realized that this class had personality. The classroom was filled with boyish laughter, students hiding in and jumping out of the closet to scare my mentor teacher, and various disruptions during class. The students were learning, but they were almost squirming in their seats during the lesson. I was amazed at the amount of energy in the classroom, but it was not always guided toward learning the content being taught in the classroom. After the first day of class, I sat down with my mentor to discuss the nature of the students. My mentor teacher experienced an amount of frustration with the boys, but wanted to learn more about them and help them succeed in her classroom.

She had them do a survey on the first day. One of the questions asked the students, ‘What are some things you might need help with in school?’ A majority of them wrote down ‘English’ as their response. Another question asked, ‘What kind of books do you like the most?’ Many students replied that they did not really read books.

Some students did say they read sports, skating, or hunting magazines. During my student teaching, I was placed in a total of four lower level classrooms, mostly composed of male students. Although, I only worked primarily with one class, I was beginning to notice a trend. There had to be a reason for why more male students tended to end up in lower level classrooms.

I wondered not only why male students ended up in those classrooms, but also how I was supposed to relate to them, effectively engage them, and teach them when they do not like the subject. Jeff Wilhelm, a professor of English education at Boise State University states in *Going with the Flow* (2006), “If you have lots of boys in an English or language arts class, the conventional wisdom goes, you can expect to have lots of problems”(p. 2). It seemed that after reading *Going with the Flow: How to Engage Boys (and Girls) in Their Literacy Learning* (2006) that I was certainly not alone. Wilhelm goes on to say, “that research and those books don’t jibe with our experience of boys. In the first place, they don’t explain all boys. We’ve always had boys who were excellent students, highly engaged readers, and skilled writers” (p. 2).

Even though these boys might not experience success or interest in school, they still have passions in their own personal lives, according to Wilhelm (2006). If these boys, according to Wilhelm, could find success in their personal lives with certain activities, I questioned what exactly was holding them back in the classroom. While my classes with male students were riddled with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), I also had a plethora of academically capable students. In order to fully grasp the entirety of the situation, I delved further into Wilhelm’s literature on disengaged students, their

reasons for disinterest, and strategies to engage them. Not only did I immerse myself in the literature pertaining to this subject, but I also decided to engage in some research on adolescent learning motivation factors with one of my classes.

Chapter 2

On Adolescent Male Learners

Reading Don't Fix No Chevys

In *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm (2002) explore the attitudes towards literacy in the male adolescent culture. In their literature they state that there is significant evidence proving there is a gap in the academic achievements between girls and boys in literacy. They write, "The Educational Testing Service, for example, reports that the gap in writing between eighth-grade males and females is more than six times greater than the differences in mathematical reasoning" and that "in the 1996 National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEPs), females outperformed males on literacy measures by 25 points on a 500-point scale." This gap usually continues to grow throughout the secondary school years. Wilhelm and Smith's (2002) research confirmed the same phenomenon I was observing in my classrooms.

There is an acknowledged issue within the educational system, that boys are not achieving the same success level in their literacy as girls are. Wilhelm and Smith (2002) look at the root of this behavior from two viewpoints: biological determinism and social

constructionism. Biological determinism argues that males are driven by their biological makeup. This viewpoint states that the high levels of testosterone in a male's body drive them more toward physical activity, and that schools are actually harmful to a boy's development and opposes their biological makeup. While this is a popular view, Wilhelm and Smith contest that social constructionism also plays a major role in influencing male literacy performance and attitude. Many people see gender as a social construct, so not all behaviors are determined by biology. Masculinity is defined in different ways in different cultures. In this view, a male's gender role is influenced by social and cultural expectations of how a man should behave. Expressing thoughts and feelings through writing and discussion does not always mesh with our expectations of how men should behave. From the social constructionist viewpoint, argues Smith and Wilhelm (2002), teachers are more able to help their male (and female) students succeed within the formalized educational system.

While Smith and Wilhelm (2002) agree that "overgeneralizing" (only seeing male learners as one entity and not individual learners) can be harmful towards students, they looked at research findings in the areas of achievement, attitude, choice and response and found the following (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002, p. 11):

ACHIEVEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Boys take longer to learn to read than girls do. ▪ Boys read less than girls read. ▪ Girls tend to comprehend narrative texts and most expository texts significantly better than boys do. ▪ Boys tend to be better at information retrieval and work-related literacy tasks than girls are.
ATTITUDE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Boys generally provide lower estimations of their reading abilities than girls do. ▪ Boys value reading as an activity less than girls do. ▪ Boys have much less interest in leisure reading and are far more likely to

	<p>read for utilitarian purposes than girls are.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Significantly more boys than girls declare themselves “nonreaders.” ▪ Boys spend less time reading and express less enthusiasm for reading than girls do. ▪ Boys increasingly consider themselves to be “nonreaders” as they get older; very few designate themselves as such early in their schooling, but nearly 50 percent make that designation by high school.
CHOICE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Boys and girls express interest in reading different things, and they do read different things. ▪ Boys are more inclined to read informational texts ▪ Boys are more inclined to read graphic novels and comic books. ▪ Boys tend to resist reading stories about girls, where as girls do not tend to resist reading stories about boys. ▪ Boys are more enthusiastic about reading electronic texts than girls are. ▪ Boys like to read about hobbies, sports, and things they might do or be interested in doing. ▪ Boys like to collect things and tend to like to collect series of books. ▪ Poetry is less popular with boys than with girls. ▪ Girls read more fiction. ▪ Boys tend to enjoy escapism and humor some groups of boys are passionate about science fiction or fantasy.
RESPONSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The appearance of a book and its cover is important to boys. ▪ Boys are less likely to talk about or overtly respond to their reading than girls are. ▪ Boys prefer active responses to reading in which they physically act out responses, do, or make something. ▪ Boys tend to receive more open and direct criticism for weaknesses in their reading and writing performances. ▪ Boys require more teacher time in coed settings (Smith and Wilhelm, p. 10-13).

Wilhelm and Smith (2002) point out that Martino, an Australian scholar, determined that our present-day concept of “being literate” does not coincide with the cultural concept of what it means to be a man (p. 11). Boys do not enjoy the same amount of confidence with their gender that girls exhibit at school, according to research studies cited by Smith and Wilhelm (2002, p. 12). Because of this, boys purposefully enact behaviors that are perceived as masculine. “Being literate” does not coincide with this idea of masculinity, so many boys as a result do not engage in the language arts classroom.

Methods for helping the boys in our classroom

According to the findings cited in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, if teachers help boys to understand their own interests and their ideas about gender, then teachers may be able to better assist their students on their path to becoming successful and engaged with reading and writing. If teachers can help boys change their concept of what literacy means (i.e. not necessarily “feminine), then boys will be more receptive to participating and excelling within the realm of literature.

In their research, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) created profiles for each of the boys they studied so they were able to have clear view of where their students found success and what their interests were in their personal lives. Students are more receptive to teachers who view them as unique individuals than just numbers in a classroom. Smith and Wilhelm discuss a concept called “flow experience,” a concept developed by psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi; this experience involves “joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life” (p. 28). According to Csikzentmihalyi, people set goals for themselves in their lives or aim to achieve certain prestige or material goods all in the pursuit of happiness. When people experiencing flow, they become completely immersed in the activity, putting all of their effort and concentration into that activity.

Our students, similarly to ones in Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) study, found meaning with activities in their personal lives. In a flow experience, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) developed four major categories that are vital:

- “A sense of control and competence
- A challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill

- Clear goals and feedback
- A focus on the immediate experience” (p. 29)

When individuals feel that they have control over a situation and that they understand what is taking place, they are more likely to be engaged. No one wants to feel inadequate. As a whole, students cannot complete tasks above their ability. Students should be challenged, but the challenge should not be unmanageable. When individuals are able to have this control over a reasonable challenge, they experience less frustration and are able to actually enjoy the experience. Responding to individual performance in a constructive manner and setting appropriate objectives will give individuals the ability to reach the next level of success on their own. This is why I am able to enjoy rock climbing individually. I am able to experience success and enjoyment on a personal level, while still able to challenge myself. With advice from fellow climbers and certain readings, I am able to reach the next level of success. I also personally experience this success in the area of English. Our students, however, discussed a particular aversion for or difficulty with the subject of English. They were certainly not experiencing flow when they first entered our classroom.

Teachers also need to recognize the importance of looking at their students as individuals. They all have their own personal strengths, personalities, tastes, and aversions. We also do not often realize how important a social life is to our students. Smith and Wilhelm discuss the student need for social interactions and the high levels of stress that correspond with male adolescence. If students view learning in the classroom as not social or stressful, they are less likely to engage.

The level of energy that comes to the classroom with male students is elevated, to say the least. Learning in the classroom can often be stressful for male students when they are not offered an outlet for this energy. It is crucial to have a certain amount of active learning for these students to utilize their energy in an effective way in the classroom. Incorporating active learning in the classroom which helps keep the classroom in an engaging flow. Wilhelm and Smith stress “avoiding routine” in the classroom (p. 46). Male students are more likely to engage when lessons and activities in the classroom are exciting and new.

The most intriguing piece of information from *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* was that the boys in Smith and Wilhelm's research experienced significant amounts of success with activities outside of the classroom, just like the boys in my classes. In Smith and Wilhelm's book, researchers Brown, Collins, and DuGuid “argue that people learn more successfully outside of school than they do in school” (p.84). Students learn more successfully for the following four reasons, according to Smith and Wilhelm: “It is personally purposeful,” “takes place in a real context,” has assistance “provided by others within that context to meet a shared goal,” and “will be immediately applied in the real context” (p. 84). Basically, students want to learn about situations or participate in activities that they feel will be personally useful in their own lives and have access to help in order to achieve that learning.

Smith and Wilhelm discuss “sequencing assignments,” so that students are able to comprehend assignments and accomplish goals at a reasonable pace. Scaffolding the progress of student learning in manageable steps allows students to understand the

material and gives them some control over their own learning. When students feel like they have some choice and control over the material they are learning in class, they are more likely to engage with and understand the material. This also helps them meet those “shared goals” with a certain amount of guidance.

A plethora of educational research “oversimplifies” and make large generalizations in the practice of teaching, according to Purves in Smith and Wilhelm’s book (2002, p. 184). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) attempted to avoid that practice of making generalizations and wanted to create useful research. By further diving into the reasons for which educators teach, they strove to use methods of inquiry to derive authentic value for their research. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) state: “We’ve devoted much of our professional lives to thinking and writing about way to make academic literacies more accessible to more kids. We have tended not to question the primacy of literature in English/Language Arts curricula” (p. 185).

Teachers usually do not question the literature we are given to teach our students during the school year. What makes Shakespeare of more value than an operating manual for a motor vehicle? Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) research demonstrates that there is value for students being able to explore other types of literature than the traditional canon. While they do not undermine classical literature, they say, “our data also provide evidence of the value of being willing and able to read an instruction manual, of being able to ascertain what’s worth reading by thumbing through the pictures in a magazine, of being able to figure out a whodunit when watching a suspense movie” (p.185). According to Smith and Wilhelm (2002), creating a new definition of what

constitutes being literate “will help us offer more choices and explore the meaning of different kinds of texts with particular powers to engage and express” (p. 186). By including various forms of multimedia and pop culture, we may be better able to develop curriculum that our boys can find accessible, relevant, and useful.

Smith and Wilhelm go on to discuss their interactions with pre-service teachers, much like myself. In their book, they say that pre-service teachers “tend to construct their role as teachers in one of two ways:

- I teach English (or literature or reading).
- I teach kids” (p. 186).

Some teachers feel completely dedicated to their subject matter, while others feel that emotionally connecting with students is needed to effectively teach subject matters.

However, students want both. They want a teacher that cares about them, but they want challenging material and desire to learn useful information that can be applied in a real world context.

Giving students a manageable challenge also includes preparing them for inquiry units, where students are asking questions about the material and learning with purpose. According to Smith and Wilhelm (2002), this means that students need to have activities that “activate our students’ background knowledge and help them build procedural knowledge of how to recognize and meet the expectations the particular text type requires” (p. 198). Student-interest in a topic initiates a student’s curiosity and leads the student to asking more questions about the topic. This gives students the prerequisite skills to develop their own inquiries and meet the challenges presented by the material; it

also gives them some understanding and control of their comprehension of the text. If student-interest is involved with the text, then students feel they already have a basis for comparison and understanding. They are then able to build upon that understanding by asking more questions about the material. We must also remember how much students value their social interactions and use this knowledge to our benefit. Many of the boys in Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) research stressed how frequently they engage when working in a group. If we can make learning social in the classroom, then we are more likely to get our students to engage in learning in the classroom. "Literacy grows out of relationship," as Smith and Wilhelm state (2002, p. 198). While we can use the relationship between teacher and student to foster literacy, the social power of a peer-to-peer relationship can have the same (or more powerful) impact on literacy.

Teachers should always remember the power of asking questions, according to Smith and Wilhelm (2002). They state, "One reason reading literature is so compelling, both to us and to the committed readers in our study, is that we use it as a form of inquiry. Through literature, we think about issues that matter to us while we are engaged with characters whom we come to know and care about" (p. 187). Using curiosity and questioning to frame units provide a manageable challenge for students and allows them to apply material learned in the classroom immediately to their own lives. When using this method of questioning students, they are able to receive constructive advice from the teacher on the nature of their understanding in the classroom. Students are also able to actively engage in the process of learning during the present. Inquiry-based units cause learning to be an active process for the student and initiate critical thinking (Smith and

Wilhelm, 2002, p. 191). When students have their own interest in material, they begin to ask questions about the material and try to apply the material in various ways within their own thinking or within their personal lives.

Going with the Flow

In Smith and Wilhelm's (2006) following book, *Going with the Flow: How to Engage Boys (and Girls) in Their Literacy Learning*, they explore the idea of flow experience further. They use the conclusions from their previous book to delve further into the idea of flow and develop effective teaching strategies for creating flow in the English classroom. Csikzentmihalyi, a psychologist who was often referenced in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevies*, is referred to again when Smith and Wilhelm discuss when students feel in charge of their own learning and understand material. In *Going with the Flow*, Smith and Wilhelm (2006) talk about this psychologist's finding that "when people describe flow experiences, they typically talk about the fulfillment they feel from having developed sufficient skills to achieve their goals" (p. 4). I can even see this reflected in my personal life from my skills gained from rock climbing; with every skill I gain, the further I am able to develop and succeed as a climber. If students are unable to feel this sense of success and control over their learning in school, they will repudiate the material.

Creating units that engage students in social interactions with their peers are extremely effective for classroom engagement. Students can lead discussions and interact in small groups for comprehension of literature (Wilhelm and Smith, 2006, p.

92). Students care about their social interactions with their peers, a finding that teachers can use in the classroom to their benefit. The learning becomes significant to the student when it is useful and enjoyable.

When students spoke of English class, Smith and Wilhelm (2006) found that they were more or less likely to engage in class, depending on the type of teacher they have. Smith and Wilhelm (2006) found that the boys generally wanted the following out of a teacher:

- “My teacher will try to get to know me as an individual
- My teacher will care about me.
- My teacher will address my interests in some way (either outside or inside the classroom).
- My teacher will help me learn and will work hard to make sure I have learned.
- My teacher will be passionate about the subject and about teaching (As one boy put it: ‘She’ll bring her game to school’)” (p. 15).

In the age of standardized testing, it can be challenging to remember that teaching is art of passion, not only a profession of subject matter. According to Smith and Wilhelm (2006), personal connections with students is lacking in many classrooms, even though our students have been telling us how critical it is for their success in the English classroom and formal education in general (Smith and Wilhelm, 2006).

The Year Ahead

So tell me about what you do like...

Wilhelm articulated the point that many of the male learners in his studies engaged passionately in activities outside of the English classroom. He also pointed out that the first step to helping students engage in literature is to discover where students experience success and personal satisfaction. I definitely knew what these students did not enjoy: English. I decided to find out what they did enjoy. I wanted to know what their areas of personal engagement were outside of the classroom and why they found those activities or hobbies particularly interesting. While they did share some of their interests with us in an online survey, the answer did not portray genuine interest. We could not see the students experiencing success within their areas of interest. We did not get to see or hear them describe their aptitude within a certain area of interest. My mentor teacher and I wanted to discover more about our students in accordance with Smith and Wilhelm's findings, but we desired to find a way to fit this into the curriculum.

When I entered the classroom, the students were reading *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by Richard Bach. The book explores the life of a seagull and tracks his progress towards enlightenment through the process of learning to fly. The unit was centered around the idea of personal passions and how we push ourselves to unimaginable limits to succeed. While the students were not particularly engaged with the literature, they were incredibly invested in the culminating project. We had students create podcasts that explored their own passions in a detailed way; their podcasts needed to include images

that portray the subject of their podcasts. They also needed to relate their achievements and exploration of their passions to sections and themes in *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. During the composition of their podcasts and their presentations, we watched our students come alive.

These students found relevance to their lives within the podcast project. Because they found the project of personal interest, I barely needed to redirect them to task. They were so completely engaged with the project in class. Since we had students share their podcasts with the class, we formed more of a community. Our class became more than just an English classroom; it became a supportive learning community. Students found use in the project, because they were able to socially share their project with their peers and further explore their own interests in an academic setting. Our students were extremely open with my mentor teacher and myself once they began their projects. We begin collecting data for our students' interests and strengths in order to develop curriculum. Using Jeff and Wilhelm's (2002) ideas of discovering and using student interest in our classroom demonstrated incredible success with the project for our *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* unit; however, the boys did not actually enjoy reading the literature. When asking one student why he did not like the book, I received the reply,

“It's about a seagull that learns to fly. Why do I need to read about this? It's boring. I don't need to know about it.” My student was feeling a lack of usefulness and relevance in the literature we were reading in class. While our activities were having success, the literature was not enjoying the same success. This finding brings me to the next topic: choosing relevant literature.

Chapter 3

Choosing Relevant Literature

When attempting to choose what literature to teach our boys, we had to take a few circumstances into consideration. My mentor teacher and myself wanted to pick a book that was relevant, useful, and engaging for our students. Our students needed to have a text that would appeal to their interests and address their personal needs as learners. We needed a book that appealed to boys, so that we could avoid the stereotype of literacy as only a “girl” quality. We also had to keep in mind that we were somewhat restricted in our choices with required curriculum. When we looked at the curriculum and saw the title, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, we knew we had a match.

The Outsiders

The Outsiders is a coming of age novel that follows the story of Ponyboy, a 14-year old member of the greaser gang. We chose to read this book, following Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) ideas of giving students useful and relevant material. The students in our classes are primarily male and around Ponyboy’s age. Ponyboy faces several difficulties with his social status, his young age compare to his two older brothers, and with fitting in with society. The majority of the characters in *The Outsiders* prescribe to the traditional idea of masculinity. They wear leather, do not often demonstrate emotions, chase after girls, love cars and motorcycles, and exhibit traits of a gang culture. However, Ponyboy is slightly more sentimental than the other male characters. He loves to watch sunsets and read classic literature, like *Gone With the Wind*.

Ponyboy's unique identity within a "masculine" culture allows the readers to examine the definition of masculinity and gender. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) discussed the issue with male students dislike of English because of their insecurity with their gender and the view that English is feminine as explored previously. Ponyboy's character allowed our students to see a different type of boy than the typical masculine stereotype. It allows the individual reading to comfortably explore the generally accepted definition of gender and identity.

After reading several chapters of *The Outsiders*, we asked our students to write about the definition identity and its relation to the novel. We asked students the following journal questions on SCoodle, the high school's online course management system:

Consider this guiding question: Can we choose our identities? Remember that identity means, "Who we are." First, choose one specific character from The Outsiders and write about the ways in which they choose who they are, and the ways that they are not able to choose. Use specific examples from the book to support your ideas. Next, write about yourself. What choices have you made that have shaped who you are, and what are some ways in which your identity is not under your control? Finally, make a general statement about whether or not you believe that a person can choose their identity.

In response to this prompt, one student says of Ponyboy, "The things the Greasers want him to do is most of the time something Ponyboy doesn't approve of. Most Greasers are slackers, but Ponyboy... that's a different story. He actually tries to do well in school and isn't that much of a 'revenge seeker'" (See Appendix A.) The student was able to recognize the difference between Ponyboy and the Greaser gang, how Ponyboy chooses to be different from his social class in several ways. When speaking about

deciding what to do in school and life, the same student said, “Choices are apart of daily life and without choices you wouldn't be where you are today” (See Appendix A.)

Some male students also made the conclusion that they did not have as much control or choice when it came to their identity. One student discusses an inability to make all choices with individual identity. He says, “In some ways your identity is already put on you. I think now this is mainly about what you do and don't have. Anymore people say that it doesn't matter how much money you have, (which is true in some situations) but in the world today the people with more money are treated with more respect, and the people with less money are still treated not well. People say this issue is not around anymore, but it still is” (See Appendix A). However, regardless of situation, this student said that personal actions are still a choice and that individuals have the power to make decisions and take certain actions: “I believe you can change your identity. Maybe for some people you can't, probably because you are not trying. You have to try to change your identity. It is not a thing you can just say you are someone different. You will always be the same person on the inside. It is your actions and decisions, and the things you do that will decide your true identity” (See Appendix A). Several members of the class shared this “have and have not's” opinion. These students recognized that they had no choice over their beginnings in life, their material possessions, and the circumstances in which they lived. However, these students did recognize the freedom they have over their decisions and personal actions. To an extent, they felt they had control over the choices they could make to express their identity. As my one student said, he felt the choices he makes in life would affect the kind of person he becomes.

This examining of choices and identity relates back to Smith and Wilhelm's ideas that teachers should think about what boys consider to be accepted gender norms and how that effects their engagement in the English classroom. Students were willing to recognize that Ponyboy certainly belonged to the male gender; however, he did not fit their idea of the typical male, as stated previously. These boys were also able to articulate their own personal concepts of identity. Each student had a very clear idea of what he believed effected his personality and identity. The resounding answer of my students' feelings, though, that they felt choice was an important aspect of identity had some interesting implications. Students felt that they have some control over their lives; this supports Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) idea that students should have partial control over their learning. This also demonstrated that my students were willing and able to examine and answer the question of identity. While their answers did not explore the ideas of accepted gender norms, their answers did provide a willingness to discuss the notion of choice in their lives and their actions.

Having students discuss these ideas of choice and identity in class creates a sense of useful material and relevance for most students. They are able to relate back to their own life experiences outside of the classroom. *The Outsiders* possesses many characters that our young male students were able to relate to: Darry, Dally, Ponyboy, Sodapop, Randy, etc. The boys in the book all had different personalities and interests, different ways of expressing themselves. The themes within this book allowed us the platform to openly discuss matters like violence, friend choice with our students. We found our male students very reluctant in the beginning about having classroom discussion. While we cannot pinpoint the exact reason; Smith and Wilhelm's findings that males view literacy

activities as “feminine” could have something to do with their reluctance to discuss personal stories or feelings about a piece of literature in class.

Having our students post answers on SCoodle provided students a way to discuss and share their sentiments with the teachers and with other students without verbally expressing themselves. One student commented how posting his answers on SCoodle made him feel less anxious about sharing his opinion with the class. He did not have to see the facial reactions or hear the verbal reactions of the rest of the class. Following some of these SCoodle posts, we were able to have verbal in class discussions. While usually slow to start, the students were more comfortable speaking and articulate with their ideas after having put them into writing online; after seeing their peers did not judge them, the students opened up. We had discovered a way to use the importance of social interaction to our benefit in the classroom by allowing students to first discuss their opinions with each other online. After making our students more comfortable in the classroom, giving them the ability to speak openly with their peers, the real learning in the classroom could begin.

Chapter 4

Coping with Required Curriculum

Teachers within the public school system are required to teach a specific curriculum to their pupils. This section is not an argument on whether or not teachers should teach Shakespeare in all English classrooms; it is merely a recognition that some classes are more reluctant than others to actively engage in learning about Shakespeare. When I learnt I was going to teach *Romeo and Juliet* as my unit for student teaching, I was slightly terrified. The prospect of teaching this play, traditionally viewed as a love story, to a class of primarily adolescent male learners felt as if I were looking at the hardest possible rock climb: 5.15c. Students groaned when we mentioned we would be moving into this play. “Isn’t that a love story?” One boy asked. My task was not impossible, but it would be difficult.

I remembered Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) advice: to make learning manageable, useful, and relevant for students. The challenge within *Romeo and Juliet* was finding an angle at which I could successfully teach “a love story” to primarily boys. They thought the story line would be “stupid” and the language was “old.” They did not feel like they could relate to *Romeo and Juliet* from the very start. I needed to make Shakespeare accessible for my classes; I needed a way to make *Romeo and Juliet* engaging for them. A romance, according to several of my students, was definitely not interesting.

According to my mentor teacher, I needed to start planning backwards. She asked me how I wanted the students to view *Romeo and Juliet*. I needed to know before I started planning what I wanted them to learn and how I wanted them to view the play. While *Romeo and Juliet* is often viewed as a love story, it can also ultimately be a story about violence and conflict, a story about immature decision-making, and parental control. If I could make my students view Shakespeare through such varied lenses, I had a chance at make the language and the story engaging and accessible to them.

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) discuss looking at *Romeo and Juliet* through a different lens than the traditional “love story” view (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002). I decided that I wanted students to focus more on the ongoing conflict between the Montagues and Capulets in the play and the stress that conflict placed on the general relationships between characters. I framed the unit around the following three questions:

- What is a good relationship?
- When tragedy strikes, who is responsible?
- What are the effects of revenge?

Framing the unit around these general questions gave students a broad set of ideas to focus on. All of my students could find relevant experiences within their own lives to relate to these questions. If I learned anything from *The Outsiders*, it was that my students needed to feel like that had something to relate to within the story in order to be engaged. Our students were so distraught by the possibility of deciphering Shakespearean language, that we used the translated-text (contains both the original text and translated version in modern-day English). This strategy created a manageable

challenge for our students who needed steps of success in smaller increments. We interspersed using the original and translated text in class. We also always offered students the challenge of reading *Romeo and Juliet* in the original language.

After making it very clear to the students that we would be using the translated text (which received a positive response), I knew they were still missing experience with Shakespeare's language. I also needed to incorporate what I had learned from the literature and our experiences with *The Outsiders*. The boys in our class needed social ways to learn as well as kinesthetic learning (activities that demanded they move around physically).

Our students had not yet experience the Shakespearean sonnet. I related Shakespeare's language to a puzzle to start the lesson. Our classroom was split into groups of three or four. On each person's desk, I placed on each desk an envelope with fourteen slips of paper. Without letting students know what a sonnet was, I asked them to attempt to put the slips in the order the sonnet was written with whatever prior knowledge that had about poetry. Students were able to construct the sonnet together, using active learning style and also incorporating social interactions in their learning, just as Smith and Wilhelm suggested. The groups started to compete with each other; the activity turned into a sort of game, harnessing their energy and need for social interaction. We then went on to discuss the real form of the sonnet, and the students were intrigued to hear how the puzzle actually needed to be solved, since it had become a type game for them.

There was little to no disruptive behavior during the activity; students were engrossed with the work they were completing at their desks within their small groups. I also taught the class how William Shakespeare wrote all of his verse in iambic pentameter and had them work as a class to write the proper stresses on the board. The effects of this activity were beneficial throughout the unit, as some of my students would actually get excited to read the text in its original form. We were scheduled to read the text in the translated version a couple days, but so many of our students asked to read the original version of the text, that we ended up changing our activities for the day.

In order to give students a different lens through which to view *Romeo and Juliet*, I had them read the prologue with the following assignment:

Directions: Read through the prologue with your group. Underline all words having to do with love and circle all of the words having to do with fighting. What do you notice? After you are finished, take time *individually* to write on the back of this paper what you predict *Romeo and Juliet* will be about.

[Enter] CHORUS.

Chorus

1 Two households, both alike in dignity,
 2 In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
 3 From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
 4 Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
 5 From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
 6 A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
 7 Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
 8 Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
 9 The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
 10 And the continuance of their parents' rage,
 11 Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
 12 Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
 13 The which if you with patient ears attend,
 14 What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

[Exit.]

I wanted students to realize that there were other underlying motifs in *Romeo and Juliet* beside the idea that it was just “some love story.” After students wrote out their predictions for the play on the back of the paper, I had them discuss it as a class. Students predicted that there would be some type of large fight or conflict within the play or that the play would include a substantial amount of violence. They were overall surprised to find that there were more words synonymous with conflict and violence as compared to words about love. Since I had given a new perspective on the play, I was ready to actually move into the teaching of this difficult text.

Teaching the Text

Teaching *Romeo* from the angle of a misguided teenager as opposed to a hopeless romantic had a positive impact on our classroom discussion. The students were more able to relate to a *Romeo* who had difficulties making good choices or a *Juliet* that had parental troubles than a pair of star-crossed lovers. The more we chose prompts that our students could relate to, the more receptive they became to reading and discussing the literature. Some of the prompts we posted on SCoodle were:

Lord Capulet threatens to throw Juliet out of the house and never speak to her again if she refuse to marry Paris. This may seem too harsh a punishment.

- 1) What effect do you think this punishment will have on Juliet? Why do you think Capulet's attitude towards Juliet marrying Paris has changed?
- 2) Describe a time when you were in the most trouble with your parents. What was the problem? The punishment?

Do *Romeo* and *Juliet* have a healthy r relationship? Which parts are healthy or unhealthy? How is their relationship similar to many teen relationships today and are teen relationships today healthy or unhealthy?

Kinesthetic and Social Learning

I desired to incorporate Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) findings that male students are more successful in the classroom when learning is active and social. During Act III, scene i, Romeo, Mercutio, and Tybalt get into a physical altercation with their swords. Mercutio and Tybalt end up meeting their demise, and Romeo is left to deal with the consequences of the conflict. I assigned students the task of acting out the scene with choreographed fights, voice changes, and body movements. They needed to read the scene on their own in small groups (the class was split in half), and they had an entire class period to prepare for the performance. I handed them a worksheet beforehand to let them know what I would be looking for in their performances: various voices changes, body movements, a choreographed swordfight, and that they remained in character. Students were given the following to help them understand their character in more depth:

Directions: There are various actions that need to be taken into consideration when playing a part. What body movements should actors use to express their mood? How can certain voice changes express the thoughts or emotions of a character? Take time to consider how you want each specific role to be acted out. **Act III, Scene i. You need at least 5 body movements and 5 voice changes.**

Character and Lines	Body Movement	Voice Change

The effect of this activity was complete engagement in the activity, students redirecting each other on task, and successful comprehension of the material. Never before had the classroom been so noisy, but their performances the next day during class demonstrating an in depth understanding of the characters. They were able to answer in length questions about characters and plot details. We also had an active classroom discussion afterwards, where students discussed in great detail their opinions on the effects of vengeance. A student said, “I really understand Tybalt’s anger” and was able to articulate how he expressed this anger through his acting. Students also discussed the impact vengeance had in the play and how certain unrestrained emotions, like Tybalt’s anger, only escalated the issues in the play.

Chapter 5

“I Used to Hate English”

My unit was completed about two-thirds through the completion of the school year. I desired to know whether or not my student’s opinions on literacy and the English classroom had altered throughout the course of the year because I implemented manageable challenges, student interest, social interactions, and kinesthetic learning in my classroom. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) offered invaluable advice on motivating male learners, but asking our students about their experiences in our classroom would be the only way we could evaluate the success of the Smith and Wilhelm’s methods. I asked my students about their past and present experiences with English and literacy using the following questions:

What did you feel about English class at the beginning of this year? Has your opinion changed over the course of the school year?

What did you think about *Romeo and Juliet* before you read the book? Has your opinion changed at all?

Do you like reading? What kind of stories do you like to read the most?

What was your favorite text you read this year and why?

What character do you find yourself relating to the most in the stories that we’ve read?

What sorts of qualities does your favorite class have?

A Manageable Challenge

When students told me about their sentiments toward the subject of English, I received similar responses from my students. At first, they had a dislike of English, but over the course of the year, they felt more comfortable with the class and their English skills. One student said, “At the beginning of the year, I hated it, because of eighth grade writing and stuff. My teacher wouldn’t give me a second chance. But it’s really growing on me.” The student felt like they were unable to meet the expectations of the teacher, and because of that fact, felt unsuccessful in the classroom and disliked the subject.

Relevance and Purpose

In asking students whether or not they liked to read, we received answers across the board. One finding that our students had in common, along with Smith and Wilhelm’s findings, was that our students really only found enjoyment reading when the subject matter was of personal interest to our students: “Yeah. I like reading. I like anything that’s interesting, about what I like, that’s not boring.”

All of our male students stated that *The Outsiders* was their favorite book; they liked the action in the story, the plot, and found they were able to relate to the characters. When asked if he could relate to any of the characters we read about this year, a student said, “Probably just Ponyboy. He lost his father and I lost mine.” The student found common ground with the character because of a similar experience he shared with Ponyboy.

Our students had a multitude of opinions on *Romeo and Juliet*. While many of them were able to find aspects of *Romeo and Juliet* that they were interested in and could

relate to, some still had difficulty. Students said the following: “I didn’t really care about it. It hasn’t changed.” “I didn’t really think about it, because I never read it. It’s all right. Some parts were better than others.” “Some of it was alright, like the fight scenes and the sword fighting. I liked the acting part, because it was fun.”

Social and Active Learning

Students stated that having a good teacher was one of the more important qualities of an interesting classroom. They wanted a teacher who cared about their interest, but also a teacher with “a sense of humor” who “can take a joke.” I actually had three students who told me they want to be in a class and learn in a class when “it’s fun to be there.” They enjoy talking with their classmates, having a teacher who will laugh and their jokes, and being able to move around. So many students loved the acting and the sword fighting in the classroom, because they *enjoyed* what they were doing. They expressed a positive experience from being able to move around and speak out loud.

The Effects of a Relevant and Engaging Curriculum

I have watched my students make progress over the year, observed stoic face break in expressions of comprehension and laughter within my classroom. Wandering back to Smith and Wilhelm’s ideas about education, the experiences during my yearlong student teaching have solidified the reasons why I teach. It is all about teaching these adolescents English, setting them up to be successful for the challenges and years ahead of them, and helping them develop critical thinking skills to make

intelligent decisions through their response to *The Outsiders* prompts on SCoodle. My one student stated:

I believe you can change your identity. Maybe for some people you can't, probably because you are not trying. You have to try to change your identity. It is not a thing you can just say you are someone different. You will always be the same person on the inside. It is your actions and decisions, and the things you do that will decide your true identity.

Students should be able to use the skills they are taught in the classroom and apply them in a real world context, and this student was able to accomplish just that, along with many of my other students.

Once the students in my classes felt they were learning useful material that was relevant to their personal life, they became more engaged in classroom activities and in class discussions. Learning does not have to be a dry recitation of facts; learning should be an exciting, engaging, and interesting process. Students want a teacher that really cares about what they are teaching and cares to get to know his/her students. I really listened to what my students wanted out of their classroom experience for the year. The classroom should be a place where students learn about what they need to be successful and what they are interested in. Giving our boys manageable challenges, relevant material, and activities involving kinesthetic learning and social interactions combined to engage our students in the learning process.

Every classroom and each school year will vary from the previous year. Listening to my students and addressing their learning needs helped my classroom become a positive and successful learning environment. I will continue listen to my students to look for ways to further engage them in their own unique ways of learning. When

students guide the shape of the curriculum throughout the year, there is less work for the teacher and more engagement from the students; I watched students who said they despised English transition into fully capable and insightful individuals in the classroom, and that was my goal from the very beginning.

Appendix A

Student Examples from *The Outsiders*

Consider this guiding question: Can we choose our identities? Remember that identity means, "Who we are." First, choose one specific character from The Outsiders and write about the ways in which they choose who they are, and the ways that they are not able to choose. Use specific examples from the book to support your ideas. Next, write about yourself. What choices have you made that have shaped who you are, and what are some ways in which your identity is not under your control? Finally, make a general statement about whether or not you believe that a person can choose their identity.

Student Example #1

In the book *The Outsiders*, Ponyboy is the youngest and he has the a lot of expectations from the Greasers. The things the Greasers want him to do i most of the time something Ponyboy doesn't approve of. Most Greasers are slackers, but Ponyboy... that's a different story. He actually tries to do well in school and isn't that much of a 'revenge seeker'. Pony is also a little too optimistic because he was walking home from the movies and thinking everything will be fine instead of getting in reality and realizing it's not a walk through Candy Land. Socs could come and gang up on him, so it's probably best to be cautious. There are expectations in the group that mostly everyone must follow but other than that, all you have is your reputation put forth taking responsibility for your own actions.

I have many choices even though there are still limits. I chose who I hang out with. What i'm going to do with the rest of my life starting with Highschool, and just any other thing that doesn't require parental guidance (like driving), and what I do in my daily

life. Like using certain necessities when I want and when I eat food as suppose to what I eat too. A lot of choices are done by just by using your commom sense. The things I don't have control over are things like only doing what is expected of you. If I got in trouble in school that was out of the orinary my parents wouldn't be so thrilled. They would probably think of some kind of puishment so I don't do it again. Dignity can be masked but you will always have some parts of yourself that cannot be changed like yor personality. Choices are apart of daily life and without choices you wouldn't be where you are today.

Student Example #2

I think we can choose some of our identities like what we do or like to do but we can't control our personalities we are giving at birth. In the book Darry was the most popular kid at school he was the on the football team and knew a lot of people this he could control. He could control who were his friends and was the best on the football team. One thing he couldn't control was the death of both his parents after their death he had to give all that up to get jobs and to support he two other brother Sodapop and Ponyboy, and this was hard on Darry.

I think I can only choose certain things for my identity, some are that I choose to do the right things most of the time and I take pride in what ever I do and I think school is a priority I my not like it but I go any way. Some of the things I can't choose for my identity is that I am the oldest of 3 and I have to be a person that they can look up to and ask for advice. another thing I can't control is my social status as a middle class person and who doesn't have the nicest things.

So in conclusion I think you can't control your identity because I think you are who you are at birth and you can't control that.

Student Example #3

In the book Ponyboy chooses to defend the two Socs girls because Darry was being rude and disrespectful. So Ponyboy basically chose how he was going to act in front of them. Something that Ponyboy wasn't able to do was choose what gang he could join. I think that someone can choose who they are. They might not be able to choose where they belong but they can choose how they act and who to be with or who to talk to.

I can choose how I'm going to act towards certain people like adults or my friends compared to strangers. Being respectful to adults is one thing that makes them think of me being nice, What I can't choose is my eye color or hair color. Everyone can choose who they are, people can change.

Student Example #4

Darry, in "The Outsiders" has only been able to choose his identity very little. It has kind of been placed on his shoulders. The main way I think Darry has been able to choose his identity, is through himself as a person, and a little bit through his jobs. He could've been forced to work those jobs, but it seems as if he might've chosen them himself. He most likely would've been able to find other work if he didn't like his current job. I also feel he has been able to choose who he is at home. This might not necessarily be his identity, but it's who he is. Darry also has not been able to choose his identity

completely. His parents being killed in a car crash, changed his identity. He used to be a brother figure, and now is looked upon as a father figure. This he really has no choice whether or not he would like to be in this position.

Some choices I have made that have shaped who I am, is who my friends are, what decisions I make, but I think one of the major factors is what activities or things you do for fun. Just because you have a certain group of friends, doesn't mean that is who you are. Say you hang out with the skater group, but you really aren't a skater. This could be put on you as being a skater, even if say your passion or identity was drawing. I think it is what you do that decides your identity. In some ways your identity is already put on you. I think now this is mainly about what you do and don't have. Anymore people say that it doesn't matter how much money you have,(which is true in some situations) but in the world today the people with more money are treated with more respect, and the people with less money are still treated not well. People say this issue is not around anymore, but it still is.

I believe you can change your identity. Maybe for some people you can't, probably because you are not trying. You have to try to change your identity. It is not a thing you can just say you are someone different. You will always be the same person on the inside. It is your actions and decisions, and the things you do that will decide your true identity.

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VITA

Renee S. Fledderman**Permanent Address**

319 Crum Creek Lane
Newtown Square, PA 19073

Mailing Address

111 N. Barnard Street
State College, PA 16801

Education

B.S., Secondary Education English/Communications, May 2010, Penn State University, State College, PA

Assigned Duties*Professional Development School (PDS) Intern*

- Year long student teaching program focused on creating collaborative curriculum with other teachers

Courses Taught

- Advanced English 9
- English 9 CTI (Collaborative Teaching Initiative)
- Environmental Science 12 CTI

Professional Qualifications*Professional Development*

- National Conference of Teachers of English

Professional Memberships/Activities

- Literacy Corps Certified
- NCTE Member

Awards

- Dean's List

Presentations

- Professional Development School Inquiry Conference