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Date July 17th, 2003
Abstract

Recent research has revealed a gender gap in reading attitudes and achievement. Broadly speaking, when compared with girls, boys display a more negative attitude towards reading and perform less well on measures of reading achievement. Yet, why boys appear to have such difficulties with reading and why girls appear to have fewer difficulties with it has yet to be fully explored. This thesis examines the talk of a group of grade five and six students at a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, mixed socio-economic urban elementary school, concerning their ideas of gender normative behaviour, gendered reading practices and the consequences of non-normative gender performances or gender crossing behaviour. Using Critical Socio-Cultural theories of literacy and learning and Feminist Post-Structuralist theories of gender and identity, this year long ethnographic study reveals that students' investments in their gender identities may help to create and maintain the gender gap in reading attitudes and achievement. In particular, boys' investment in maintaining a heteronormative masculine identity may interfere with their participation in school based print literacy. The implications of these findings for bridging the gender reading gap are discussed. In addition, this thesis raises questions about the simplicity of current conceptions of the gender reading gap that depict boys as victims and girls as victors in school. This thesis adds to research that calls for a more complex understanding of issues of gender, "race" and class in contemporary classrooms.
Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii

Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... iii

Preface: Reading Buddies ............................................................................................... v

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... viii

Dedication ........................................................................................................................ ix

Chapter I Introduction .................................................................................................... 1

1.1 The View From the Gap ......................................................................................... 2
1.2 The Impact of the Gender Gap in Reading ......................................................... 9

Chapter II Theoretical Framework: Boys and Girls in the Reading Club ............. 13

2.1 A Variety of Perspectives ....................................................................................... 16
2.2 A Critical Socio-Cultural Perspective of Learning and Literacy ..................... 18
2.3 From Gender Differences to Doing Gender ....................................................... 23

Chapter III Reading the World ..................................................................................... 36

3.1 Stony Creek School ............................................................................................... 38
3.2 Staff, Students and Parents .................................................................................. 41
3.3 Recent Challenges ................................................................................................. 44
3.4 Ms. Stevens and the Students of Room 17.......................................................... 49

Chapter IV Methodology ............................................................................................. 52

4.1 Reflections of a Teacher-Researcher ................................................................... 52
4.2 Working with Staff ............................................................................................... 54
4.3 Working with Students ......................................................................................... 56
4.4 Challenges in the Field ......................................................................................... 63

Chapter V Research Design .......................................................................................... 65

5.1 Observations .......................................................................................................... 68
5.2 Documents ............................................................................................................ 71
5.3 Interviews ............................................................................................................. 73
5.4 Analysis .................................................................................................................. 73
Reading Buddies

“Miss?” Says Sam, barely audible above the din of his class actively engaged in this, the first of weekly meetings of “Reading Buddies”. Ms. Stevens’ grade 5/6 class has been paired with Ms. Martin’s grade 2/3 class for the current academic year. The older students have each been assigned one or two younger “buddies” to read with. It is September and the younger students have brought pattern books and introductory novels from their classroom to share with their new buddies.

“Miss?” Sam repeats again without raising his voice or moving from his seat. The classroom is noisy and there is little chance that his teacher could hear him from where she is standing, assisting another student in the selection of a book. It is ten minutes into the half-hour Reading Buddies session. There are twenty-three students in the room from ages 6 to 10, whose reading levels range from kindergarten to adult. Aaron, a grade three student struggles with sound symbol relationships, while Tessa a grade six student has recently read a book by Neil Postman entitled How to Watch the TV News.

“Miss?” Sam says again and then without waiting for a sign that his teacher has heard him he asks aloud, “Can we read magazines too?” Sam, 11 and his reading buddy Jake, 7, have sped through the pattern book that Jake brought with him from his classroom. Or to be more precise, Sam has sped through the book. While some of the older students around the room read alternate pages with their younger buddies, listen to their younger buddies read or ask their younger buddies questions about the books they are reading, Sam has read Jake’s book to him at a breakneck speed, without any sign of engagement with the text, nor any sign of engagement with Jake about the text.
When Sam receives no sign from his teacher that she has heard him (and it is likely that she has not), he leaves his seat and moves to the back of the class, past a spinner rack of novels and three bins of books, to a bin of magazines. When Sam returns he has three issues of *Sports Illustrated for Kids* to share with Jake. He selects a magazine from the pile and begins to leaf through it slowly, laughing and gesturing at the photographs. Neither Sam nor Jake appear to engage with the printed text in the magazines they are reading. This is not surprising as the print in the magazine is small and appears in dense blocks on the page, while the photographs are eye catching and make up most of what could be called the text of the magazines. Jake is an emergent reader in grade two. Sam is a struggling reader in grade six.

And then there is Thea. Thea, is 8. But unlike Aaron, Jake or Sam, Thea has been an avid reader since early in grade one. Thea reads “well above grade level” and reads a variety of texts. As she told me one day in September: “Almost all of the books in the library are ‘reading books’ for me, not just ‘books for looking at’.”

Yet recently, Thea has developed a taste for a series of books called *The Babysitters’ Club*. Her father has asked me as the school teacher-librarian, if there is anything I can do about this recent development, as he questions what his daughter is learning from these books. He told me his first concern about this series came when he was driving Thea to her grandparents’ house one weekend. Thea sat in the backseat engrossed in her book. Yet, as they sped down the highway she piped up with, “Daddy, what’s a nose job?”

Field Notes, September 29.
Watching Sam\textsuperscript{1} and Jake work together during Reading Buddies, I cannot help but think it would be a miracle if either boy became a proficient reader with this choice of reading material. The magazines Sam has chosen provide none of the scaffolding or support that years of reading research has recommended.

Why then, would Sam choose this text from the approximately four hundred printed texts available in the room? What can we learn about boys and their “reading difficulties” by observing such moments in their everyday schooling experiences? And finally, what has Jake, as a reading apprentice learned from this moment in his life as a reader, and as a student with a specific social identity? What this text might mean to Sam, why he might have chosen it and how this text and his choices may affect both his own and Jake’s lives as readers and as boys, are the kind of questions I will attempt to explore in this thesis. And then there is Thea. What are we to make of Thea’s reading practices? While current reports of a gender gap in reading attitudes and achievement depict girls like Thea as victors and boys like Aaron, Jake and Sam as victims, how accurate is this portrait of issues of gender and reading in contemporary elementary schools? How well is Thea actually doing? Should we be just as concerned with her reading practices as we are with Jake’s and Sam’s? Questions like these form a quiet counter-narrative in this exploration of issues of gender and reading in an urban elementary school.

\textsuperscript{1} All names of students and staff in this thesis are pseudonyms. Most of the names were chosen by the individuals themselves.
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To the students, staff and parents of Stony Creek School,

my Mother, Lesley Mang and my Grandmothers,

Amy Mang and Betty Moffatt

for all they have taught me.
Introduction

Language and Culture are no longer scripts to be acquired, as much as they are conversations in which people can participate. The question of who is learning what and how much is essentially a question of what conversations they are a part of, and this question is a subset of the more powerful question of what conversations are around to be had in a given culture. (McDermott, 1993, p. 295)

Because language and literacy are salient markers of in-group identity an individual's language (and literacy) choices and actual language use in specific contexts become important indicators of social relationship with others. (Li, 2000, p. 10)

Insofar as societal members know that their conduct is accountable, they will frame their actions in relation to how they might be construed by others in the contexts in which they occur. And insofar as sex category is omnirelevant to social life, it serves as an ever available resource for the design and interpretation of social conduct. What this means is that an individual involved in virtually any course of action may be held accountable for his/her execution of that action as a man or a woman...what is more, virtually any pursuit can be evaluated in relation to its womanly or manly nature. (Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman, 2002b, p.29)
Willed “not-learning” is sometimes disastrously mistaken for failure to learn or the inability to learn. Learning how to “not-learn” is an intellectual and social challenge sometimes you have to work very hard at it. It consists of an often ingenious, willful rejection of even the most compassionate and well designed teaching. It subverts attempts at remediation as much as it rejects learning in the first place. (Kohl, 1991, p. 10)

Peace out

Look into my eyes

and tell me what you see

Y'all Boyz ain't

Hard Like We

(Graffiti, Vancouver 2002)

The View From the Gap

In recent years, issues of boys’ ”underachievement” in school has received substantial attention in the popular and academic presses. Persistent assertions that boys are not faring as well as girls in school can be found in newspapers, magazines and educational journals throughout Australia, North America and the United Kingdom. In some ways, these reports reflect a new focus in gender equity education. While most calls for gender equity in the last thirty years have focused on girls’ experiences of being ‘shortchanged’ in schools, the tide appears to have shifted. The dramatic increase in attention to boys’ achievement levels has led some researchers to name this fervor as a kind of moral panic. Headlines such as “Schools Conspire Against Boys” (Owens, 2002)
and "How Schools Wage War on Boys" (Wente, 2003) seem to make visible, deep fears about schools' abilities to provide students with the skills they will need as adults, as well as our fears for boys' well being.

While many reports on boys' 'underachievement' seem to nurture a perception that girls presently score higher than boys in all subject areas, at all ages, in reality the only area where girls consistently outperform boys is in language arts, particularly in reading assessments during the elementary years (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 1999; Francis, 2000). Broadly speaking, when compared with girls, boys display a more negative attitude towards reading (Millard, 1997; Moss, 1998; Swann, 1992) and perform less well on measures of reading achievement (AAUW, 1999; Francis, 2000: Head, 1999; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 1997).

In contemplating this problem, it has been suggested that understanding how students' attitudes towards reading are formed may be an important key to understanding how the gender gap in reading achievement is created, as students rarely experience success in subjects they do not like. Thus the primary research questions of this thesis are 1) Why do boys' and girls' attitudes towards reading differ so much? and 2) What might educators do to help bridge this gender gap in attitudes towards reading?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I spent an academic year collecting qualitative data in a typical co-educational, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, mixed socio-economic, urban elementary school. This thesis is the first written report to come from this data and focuses primarily on interviews conducted with all twenty-seven students in one split grade five/six class. At times, I draw on other data such as my field notes and
some of the students’ reading notebooks to help illustrate some of the issues of gender and reading that I am exploring. But for the most part, this thesis focuses on examining the students’ talk as a way of understanding why boys’ and girls’ attitudes towards reading may differ. I have chosen to focus on these interviews because I believe a more thorough understanding of how students’ attitudes towards reading are formed may be key to helping us to address the gender reading gap.

However, there is also a second focus to this project. The second focus of this project is to try to begin to place the gender reading gap in a larger social and historical context. For without this kind of framing, it may be impossible for us to truly understand how the gender reading gap is created and maintained, or how it may be bridged.

In particular, I am interested in exploring how Critical Socio-Cultural theories of learning and literacy and Feminist Post Structuralist ideas of gender and identity might help us to see students’ reading practices as reflections of their attempts to create cohesive social identities and affiliations, rather than as reflections of their biological sex or gender socialization. After countless hours of informal and formal observation of children in various contexts, I believe these perspectives have a great deal to offer to our understanding of how the gender reading gap is created and in turn, how it may be bridged or deconstructed.

Finally, in thinking about students like Sam, Jake and Thea in the context of recent research into issues of gender equity and literacy I cannot help but wonder if these issues are far more complicated than they first appear. While numerous reports on gender differences in student academic attainment have suggested that schools are failing boys
and that girls are doing remarkably well, from my observations and my experiences both of these conclusions seem far too simplistic.

After observing the reading practices of the students at my school informally as a teacher-librarian for four years and formally for almost a year as a teacher-researcher, I do not think boys are the passive victims that many recent reports have made them out to be. Similarly, after watching students closely, like Thea’s father, I have my doubts about what girls are learning from their books and whether their high reading achievement scores will actually benefit them in the social and economic world outside of elementary school. Thus the final question this thesis will address is how useful are current depictions of the gender reading gap.

Before exploring these questions, it is important to recognize that there are some significant problems with much of the literature on the gender reading gap. In particular, few studies of the gender reading gap have attempted to place this gap in a social or historical context. In addition, few researchers have looked at this gender gap within a critical framework.

For example, few current studies have discussed boys’ apparent disadvantage in language arts in a global context. Yet when viewed in a global context, it appears that boys’ “difficulties” with reading is primarily an Industrial and Post-Industrial world problem (Wagemaker, Taube, Munck, Kontogiannopoulou-Polydorides, & Martin, 1996). Elsewhere, those concerned with gender equity and literacy have significantly different issues on their minds (Mondo, 2002). It is worth remembering that from a global perspective, women and girls are more likely to be illiterate or have limited exposure to literacy than are men and boys (Hallman, 2000).
Similarly, much of the literature that documents the gender reading gap draws on very narrow definitions of reading/literacy and fails to recognize the changing nature of literacy in our current era (New London Group [NLG], 1996). When such shifts are taken into account, the shape of the gender reading gap seems to be less of a chasm and more of an aperture through which we can see issues of gender, identity and literacy at work. For example, when boys and girls' reading scores are broken down into different domains, the most significant gender difference appears to be in boys and girls' narrative literacy scores, or in their understandings of fictional stories. There appears to be little or no evidence of a gender difference in terms of students' document literacy achievement levels (those skills needed to read a pay stub or a phone bill) and there is a much smaller gender reading gap in terms of students' expository literacy scores (Wagemaker et al., 1996).

It is also worth noting that the gender reading gap would likely take on a very different shape if technological literacy were to be assessed in schools to the extent that traditional or print literacy is assessed. For as is commonly recognized, boys are frequently more technologically literate than are girls. (Barrs, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001).

Similarly, it is important to recognize that few studies have paid attention to the ways in which issues of “race” and class may work together with issues of gender to create and/or maintain the gender reading gap (Guzzetti, Peyton Young, Gritsavage, Fyfe, & Hardenbrook, 2002). Yet, as is becoming more and more clear to educational researchers around the world, gender cannot be divorced arbitrarily from issues of “race” and class or other forms of social identity (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Thorne, 1993). As
noted by Gilbert and Gilbert, there are important "race" and class dimensions to the
gender reading gap which are often obscured in reports that focus only on gender. In
other words, not all boys suffer from reading difficulties in Australia, North America or
the United Kingdom. Boys from working class backgrounds or marginalized cultures are
often most at risk of "reading difficulties", while middle class white boys are less likely
to suffer from such troubles with reading (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

Likewise, not all girls experience unmitigated success with reading. Working
class girls and girls from marginalized cultures often struggle with reading in ways that
middle class white girls do not. Yet, frequently these girls' struggles go unrecognized. It
is important to note that although significantly higher numbers of boys than girls are
identified as reading disabled, recent research has revealed gender bias in referral
practices (Stowe, Arnold, & Oritz, 2000; Young, Kim, & Gerber, 1999). As noted by
Stowe, Arnold and Oritz (2000) boys' higher rates of identification as learning disabled
may not actually be an accurate reflection of higher incidences of disability amongst
boys, or a lack of it amongst girls. It has been suggested that the higher numbers of boys
in special education classes may be the result of a frequent connection between boys' learning difficulties and behavioural problems. As Stowe, Arnold and Oritz point out
many boys tend to "act out" when they have difficulty learning something, while many
girls opt for trying to remain invisible. Thus teachers are more likely to recognize boys' distress and may well advocate for boys' identification and for their learning support as a way of maintaining classroom harmony. It is also possible that boys are more frequently identified as Learning Disabled partly because teachers assume that boys are more likely
to suffer from such disabilities than girls are.
Finally, it is important to recognize that for the most part, ideas of gender have been remarkably under-theorized in reading research and research into academic gender differences. Within traditional reading research and research into academic gender differences, gender has most commonly been seen as an unproblematic category, either as a simple reflection of a student’s biological sex or as the result of his/her gender socialization. Yet elsewhere, theories of gender have shifted significantly from either of these conceptions. Current sociological theories depict gender less and less as a static neutral category and more and more as a kind of ever changing performance, laden with messages about power (Fenstermaker, West, & Zimmerman, 2002b).

From this perspective, gender cannot be collapsed into biological sex and is not simply the result of gender socialization. Gender practices are seen as highly contextual and students are seen as agents who choose, to varying degrees, when, where and to what extent they participate in the discourses of gender. In addition, researchers working from this perspective have highlighted how gender cannot be studied as a neutral variable or in isolation from political and socio-historical realities.

In light of these recent perspectives, research into educational issues such as “the gender reading gap” appears to have been severely limited both in terms of its understanding of how the gap is created and reproduced and in how it might be bridged most effectively. While it is not possible to address all of these issues here, in the following pages I will attempt to explore the gender reading gap with a critical focus. In particular, I am interested in examining the gender reading gap within a wider understanding of literacy, learning and gender. I am also interested in how issues of
socio-historical contexts and power might relate to the creation and maintenance of the gender reading gap.

In conclusion, while it is important to keep these problems with current research in mind, the impact of the gender reading gap should not be underestimated. In fact, the impact of the gender reading gap can be seen as an issue that affects boys and girls, their teachers and their parents in their local and global communities.

**The Impact of the Gender Gap in Reading**

The gender reading gap can be seen as a problem that has wide implications both in terms of boys’ and girls’ school experiences and life experiences. Inside the classroom, boys’ “reading difficulties” often have an impact on their academic achievement in a variety of subjects and on their attitudes towards schooling generally. Outside the classroom, boys’ “reading difficulties” may have an impact on their employment opportunities and have been linked to higher rates of involvement in delinquency, crime and other anti-social behaviours (Maguin, 1993; OCED, 1997, 2000; Prior & Sanson, 1995; Tuijnman, 2001).

In addition, boys’ lack of engagement with printed text may contribute to the perpetuation of narrow ideas of “acceptable” gender activities and behaviours. For those of us concerned with gender equity and the impact of sexual/homophobic harassment in schools, it is important to recognize that boys’ “reading difficulties” may also be implicated in the perpetuation of narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity. Boys’ lack of engagement with traditional or print literacy may help to calcify more narrow ideas of gender identity for themselves and for others. For as is commonly recognized, all
media, including printed text, provide students not only with the opportunity to learn about the world as it is, but to construct their own identities (Davies, 1993).

If many boys, as it appears, do not engage much with printed text, or if they only engage with a narrow range of genres, then their experience of the range of identities available to them will be profoundly limited to those dominant in the non-print mass culture of television or to the people they know personally. This limited exposure may narrow the range of masculinites that boys feel comfortable with and may impede the cultivation and maintenance of a culture of tolerance. Thus boys' reading difficulties may have a widespread negative impact on their own lives as well as on those around them. However, there is also good reason to believe that boys' rejection of, or struggles with traditional literacy may have a profound impact on girls' schooling and life experiences as well.

Extensive research has been conducted on gender inequity in teacher-student interactions (AAUW, 1999; Brophy, 1985; Houston, 1996; Sadker & Sadker, 1995; Stanford, 1992; Stevenson, 1992; Stitt, 1988; Swann, 1992). Repeated studies have found that teachers give boys more positive and negative attention than they give girls. Boys generally receive more praise, more constructive feedback, are asked more complex and abstract questions, and are given more instruction on how to attempt a task by themselves than are girls.

Girls wait longer for their teachers' attention and when they do get it, teachers are more likely to respond to them neutrally or negatively (although this varies somewhat, depending on the girl's "race" and class). In a variety of studies, it has been found that when girls do get reinforcement, it is often for being passive or neat, not for having the
right answer (AAUW, 1999; Brophy, 1985; Houston, 1996; Sadker & Sadker, 1995; Stanford, 1992; Stevenson, 1992; Stitt, 1988; Swann, 1992). Researchers have found that female teachers are just as likely as male teachers to engage in these inequitable classroom practices.

While issues of gender equity are complex, boys' difficulties with reading and girls' apparent ease with it, could help explain some of the reasons why boys appear to be given more attention in elementary schools. As any elementary teacher could tell you, teachers are often forced to devote more time and attention to non-readers than to readers in the interest of maintaining classroom harmony. Non-readers often require more direction, more reinforcement and more "entertaining" than readers do. Thus, if boys fall more frequently into the category of non-readers or reluctant readers than do girls, teachers may often feel incapable of changing the inequitable way in which they divide their attention. In this way, if we attend to boys' difficulties with reading, we may contribute to creating a more enriching school experience for girls as well.

Yet, regardless of the recent explosion of interest in issues of boys and education in the popular and academic presses, and aside from the reasons why we should be concerned if boys don't engage with traditional literacy, why boys appear to have such "difficulties" with reading, and why girls appear to have fewer difficulties with it, seems to pose a significant problem for reading researchers, educators, and parents. That we experience confusion around this issue may in part be explained by how traditional educational research has approached the study of reading and academic gender differences.
In the following chapter, I explore some of the differences between traditional reading research and research conducted using a Critical Socio-cultural framework to examine issues of learning and literacy. I also outline some of the differences between traditional conceptions of gender in research into academic gender differences and Feminist Post-Structuralist ideas of gender and identity. In chapter three, I move on to discuss some of the features of the K-6 school where I teach and introduce the reader to Ms. Stevens and the students of Room 18, who became the focus of my study. In chapters four and five, I outline the methodology and the research design I employed during my year as a teacher-researcher. In chapter six, I explore the interviews I conducted with the students in Room 18. In particular, I examine the students’ responses to questions about gender normative activities, reading and the consequences of gender-crossing behaviour. In chapter seven, I discuss some of the possible implications of these findings and I consider what kind of interventions this data and analysis suggest. Finally, in chapter eight, I explore some of the questions that this data and analysis raise about current depictions of the gender reading gap.
Theoretical Framework: Boys and Girls in the Reading Club

It is time for “Reading Club” in Mr. Bailey's grade three class. While Mr. Bailey listens to a group of six children read aloud in turn, the remaining twenty-two children engage in Silent Reading. From the first few minutes of Reading Club, Christine, Nora and Lisa begin reading and appear to be engrossed in their novels. Meanwhile, Evan sits at his desk mostly hidden behind a large book about Rainforest Animals. Evan has set the book up on its end, making a kind of wall between himself and the rest of the class. As he sits he playfully bats the pages of his book back and forth.

Evan does not appear to be reading, in the traditional sense of making meaning from printed text. Five minutes into the half-hour Silent Reading period, Nicholas, another student in the class, asks Mr. Bailey if he may go to the school library. Mr. Bailey assents and Nicholas leaves the room. Nicholas returns several minutes later with two Sports magazines in hand. He spends the rest of the period showing those near him the photographs in his magazines and leafing through their action packed pages.

Early in the period, Emanuel, another student, has a comic-like book entitled Pyramids and Pharaohs on his desk. Initially, he appears to be reading the captions that accompany the illustrations. However, mid-way through the Silent Reading period Emanuel leaves his desk to peruse the bins of paperback picture books at the back of the class. Emanuel spends the rest of the period flipping slowly through each bin, pausing to look at the covers of the books. He is still at the bins when the bell sounds to signal morning recess and Reading Club ends.
As the bell rings, Emanuel leaves the bins and moves quickly to get ready to go outside. Christine, Nora and Lisa are still seated at their desks reading and it seems as if they haven’t heard the bell at all.

Field Notes, February 2002, Pilot Study, Vancouver.

During this period of Reading Club Evan, Nicholas and Emanuel exemplified some of the behaviours that would make many teachers name them “reluctant readers”. All of these students could read, but, for whatever reason, did not actually spend much of their silent reading period reading any print. At times, these students even appeared to be carefully avoiding reading. In contrast, Christine, Nora and Lisa appear to exhibit the behaviours of avid or engaged readers. How would traditional reading research make sense of these students’ reading practices? How would traditional research into academic gender differences account for the fact that these three reluctant readers are boys and these three avid readers are girls? If Evan, Nicholas and Emanuel’s reluctance to read was seen as a problem, how would traditional theories of reading engagement and traditional theories of academic gender differences suggest a teacher should address these students’ reluctance and draw them into reading? Finally, could there be another perspective of the well-documented gender gap in reading that might lend itself to a deeper understanding of how this gap is created and maintained, and thus, how it might be most effectively bridged or deconstructed?

When faced with Evan, Nicholas and Emanuel’s reluctance to read, and Christine, Nora and Lisa’s engagement with reading, researchers working with traditional ideas of learning and literacy might ask questions about these students’ self-efficacy beliefs or about their positive and negative associations with reading. Similarly, reading research
conducted from a traditional perspective might conceive of these students’ reading practices as reflections of their “intrinsic motivations” to read or not to read (Cole, 2002; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

When faced with evidence of a more generalized gender gap in reading, traditional research into gender differences in academic achievement might ask questions about biological or cognitive gender differences or differences in gender socialization to try and explain this phenomenon. While all of these these perspectives continue to hold sway in the popular press and in various academic journals, recent educational research using Critical Socio-Cultural ideas of learning and literacy and Feminist Post-Structuralist ideas of gender and identity has raised the possibility that it might be more useful to ask significantly different questions or to look at the gender reading gap from a very different angle.

When presented with these students’ reading practices, instead of asking questions about their self-efficacy beliefs or about their positive and negative associations with reading, researchers using Critical Socio-Cultural and/or Feminist Post-Structuralist perspectives might ask questions about the local and larger contexts in which these students live and learn. Research conducted from these perspectives might also ask questions about these students’ ideas of reading and of themselves as people with specific social identities. Instead of asking questions about these students' self-efficacy beliefs, we might ask if these students’ ideas of reading or of themselves as people with specific social identities in any way interfere with or reinforce their ideas of themselves as readers.
Similarly, instead of seeing these students’ reading practices as reflections of their “intrinsic motivations” to read, reading research conducted with Critical Socio-Cultural or Feminist Post-Structuralist perspectives might see these students’ reading practices as reflections of their investments in different forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2001). In noting the gendered patterns of these students’ investments (and lack of investment) in reading, we might also ask how issues of gender, reading and power are related in the culture in which these students live and learn.

For example, is there a connection between gender and reading, or gender and power, or reading and power in this culture? If so, how do these relationships map onto other relationships such as those between gender, “race” and socio-economic status in these students’ constructions of the world and in the popular imagination? Finally, if Evan, Nicholas and Emmanuel’s reading practices are considered to be a problem, research conducted with Critical Socio-Cultural or Feminist Post-Structuralist perspectives might ask what other forms of cultural capital these students are choosing to invest in instead of reading and why? Finally, research conducted from these perspectives might argue that without a thorough understanding of our students’ diverse investments, it will be very difficult to create effective interventions to address the gender reading gap.

A Variety of Perspectives

Traditionally, reading research has tended to focus on ideas such as motivation and self-efficacy to explain why some students become avid and fluent readers and others do not (Cole, 2002; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Similarly, traditional research into gender differences in academic achievement has tended to explain these differences either as a
result of differences in boys and girls' physiology/cognitive styles or as the result of
differences in their masculine and feminine socialization (Best, 1983; Gurian, 2001;
Head, 1996). However, recent educational research using Critical Socio-Cultural ideas of
learning and literacy and Feminist Post-Structuralist ideas of gender and identity has
begun to suggest that the gender reading gap may not be a simple consequence of a
student's individual motivations or self-efficacy beliefs, nor merely the reflection of
innate biological/cognitive gender differences or differences in gender socialization
(Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino,
1995; Mc Dermott, 1993; Renold, 2001).

Research conducted within Critical Socio-Cultural and Feminist Post-Structuralist
perspectives have opened up the possibility that the gender reading gap may be seen as a
reflection of students' understandings of what gender and reading mean in contemporary
Post-Industrial society and how power, reading and gender, amongst other social
identities, are related in the popular imagination. These perspectives open up the
possibility that the gender reading gap is not simply a matter of individual personality
traits and that it is by no means 'natural', inevitable or static. Instead, these perspectives
suggest that the gender reading gap has been created through a complex confluence of
social and historical events.

In addition, Feminist Post-Structuralist theory suggests that students are by no
means passive participants in the creation of this gap. From this perspective, students are
not merely expressing their individual inclinations, living out their biological destiny or
acting out their socialization when they choose to read or not to read. Instead, research
conducted from this perspective suggests that students are and have been active in
creating, maintaining and widening the gender reading gap and given the opportunity they could be instrumental in bridging it (Martino, 1995).

In the following pages, I will outline some of the features of Critical Socio-Cultural ideas of literacy and learning and Feminist Post-Structuralist ideas of identity and gender. I will then examine how this moment in “Reading Club” might look from these new perspectives.

**A Critical Socio-Cultural Perspective of Learning and Literacy**

Recent research into literacy and learning has argued that the process of learning to read is far more complex than was previously thought. Recent research has suggested that learning to read is not a simple procedure of transferring cognitive skills to a child but that it is a complex process, intimately entwined with issues of socio-cultural context, the child’s ideas of him/herself and his/her desires for affiliation (Dyson, 1993; Heath, 1983; Li, 2000; Mc Dermott, 1993; Purcell-Gates, 1995).

Researchers, using this perspective, have suggested that how literacy is used or not used within a student’s home and school environment has a profound impact on how and whether s/he learns to read print. Similarly, research conducted from this perspective suggests that the socio-cultural context in which a child learns to read has a significant relationship to when and how a child uses this skill. In this way, a child who is brought up in a family where print literacy is part of the daily routine and where reading is seen as a pleasurable experience is far more likely to take to reading easily than a child who is brought up in a family that does not use print literacy on a regular basis or does not have positive connections with reading (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Li, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1995).
From this perspective reading is conceived of as a social practice, not as an isolated skill set and reading acquisition is seen as part of a process of becoming a member of a literate community. This view rejects the deficit model for students who exhibit "difficulties" with reading in school and recognizes reading as a socially constructed behaviour. This research draws our attention to the importance of understanding children's "communities of practice" (the communities that they are a part of) and their "imagined communities" (the communities that they wish to be a part of) in order to understand how and why they engage or do not engage in particular literacy practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Norton, 2000; Wenger, 1998). From this perspective, if, as it appears, boys do not engage with school literacies in the same way that girls do, we may need to investigate how their communities of practice differ, or how their imagined communities differ, not just how their self-efficacy beliefs differ.

Recent Critical examinations of literacy learning have also recognized the importance of socio-cultural context. However, Critical Socio-Cultural examinations differ from other Socio-Cultural investigations as they attempt to place local socio-cultural contexts in larger political and historical contexts. In particular, Critical literacy theorists have argued for a recognition of the changing nature of literacy in contemporary Post-Industrial society (de Castell & Luke, 1983; Luke, 1997; NLG, 1996). From this perspective, it is important to recognize that what "counts" as reading is historically, as well as socio-culturally and politically determined and unstable (de Castell & Luke, 1983; Luke, 1997; NLG, 1996).

In this way, while "reading" may primarily mean making sense of fictional narratives (picture books, "chapter books", novels, short stories, etc.) in contemporary
Post-industrial elementary schools, reading has had, continues to have and likely will have other definitions in different historical periods and in different socio-cultural and political contexts. When one begins to examine ideas of literacy across time and in different cultural contexts, this instability becomes more and more clear. In some contexts, reading includes the consumption/perusal of catalogs, manuals, comic books, product instructions, recipes and informational texts. In other contexts, such as contemporary Post-industrial elementary schools, “reading” may be used primarily to signify making sense of fictional narratives. Critical Socio-Cultural examinations of literacy learning have also asserted the importance of recognizing students’ multiple literacies or multiliteracies and the role of social and cultural capital in literacy learning (Bourdieu, 2001; Falk, 2001).

From this perspective, students come to school with diverse talents and numerous ways of making meaning, yet only some of these literacies are recognized or valued. For example, a child may possess countless talents and may be perfectly capable of learning but may be deemed learning disabled at the age of eight because s/he does not engage in traditional literacy practices, or does not engage in them to the same extent as his/her peers. From this perspective, it is not seen as useful to place one of these forms of literacy above another nor to rank one form of literacy as more valuable out of the context of the lives of the groups and individuals in focus. Instead, this perspective encourages us to look at what are commonly named as “reading” and “reading difficulties” in school within a larger Socio-historical context.

This perspective is supported by a wide range of sociological, anthropological and ethnographic research that has suggested that issues of context, cultural capital and social
capital as well as identity, should not be underestimated when we attempt to understand students’ participation and non-participation in any academic discourses (Archer et al., 2001; Falk, 2001; Gallas, 1998; Harklau, 2000; McKay & Wong, 1996; Solomon, 1992; Willis, 1977). Research from a diverse range of educational settings suggests that how you are positioned and how you position yourself in school, for example as a hardworker/high achiever or as a poor student/reluctant reader, is closely connected to the knowledge that you bring to school, who you see yourself as, as well as how your teachers and fellow classmates see you (Falk, 2001; Harklau, 2000).

Thus students who enter school with literacies that are valued in school, such as a knowledge of the alphabet sound-symbol system are quickly named ‘capable students’ while students who possess vernacular literacies, such as how to play half a dozen different computer games may never be recognized for their talents and in fact may be deemed ‘learning disabled’ early in their academic careers.

Critical Socio-cultural theorists suggest there is more to our work than just documenting the ways that literacy practices differ between different socio-cultural groups. These theorists also ask, how as educators, we might work both to validate students’ vernacular literacies and yet to also provide them with a bridge to literacies that are considered to be more traditional or hegemonic (Cameron, 2000; Falk, 2001).

Finally, in recognizing the importance of socio-historical factors in students’ participation in various academic discourses, Critical Socio-Cultural theorists would argue that it is important to consider students’ participation and non-participation as reflections of their *investments* in these discourses rather than as reflections of their personal motivations. Borrowing from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Norton Pierce (1995)
argues that the term “motivation” implies a fixed personality trait whereas the term “investment” attempts to recognize that students have complex social identities and multiple desires. Norton Pierce and others have argued convincingly that the term investment is useful for helping us to understand the relationship between a student, his/her participation in academic discourses and the changing social world (McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton Pierce, 1995). The term investment recognizes that there are often fluctuations in the ways that students’ participate in school. It recognizes that participation and non-participation both come with their own rewards or returns. This term attempts to capture the notion that students choose to participate in particular discourses of literacy because on some level, they expect a return for their efforts. Using the term “investment” rather than “motivation” reminds us that our students are agents and that their choices, literacy practices and learnings are entwined with issues of power or how they might secure social or cultural capital for themselves.

If we look at these six students, Christine, Lisa, Nora, Emmanuel, Evan and Nicholas, and their reading practices with a Critical Socio-Cultural perspective, we can begin to ask questions about the context in which these students are reading and not reading. We can start to see these students’ reading practices as socially constructed behaviours and we can reject the idea that Emanuel, Evan, and Nicholas and come from a place of deficit because they are not participating in print literacy in the same way that Christine, Lisa and Nora are. That is, we can assume that Christine’s, Lisa’s and Nora’s reading practices are just as socially constructed as Emanuel’s, Evan’s and Nicholas’ and that their engagement with books reflects their communities of practice and/or the communities they imagine they will belong to in the future. Thus, we can begin to see
these students' difficulties and successes with traditional literacy as more than just reflections of their natural aptitudes for making meaning out of printed text. In recognizing the gender breakdown of different literacy practices, a Critical Socio-cultural perspective would suggest that within these students' communities of practice, boys might not be expected to participate in traditional literacy in the same way that girls are and thus they do not.

In addition, if we look at these students' reading practices from a Critical Socio-cultural perspective, we can begin to ask questions about the role of social capital or cultural capital in these students' reading choices. For example, what kind of social capital might be associated with these students' choices of reading material and their conduct during reading club? How might their choices of what they read and their level of engagement with printed text be viewed by their fellow classmates and their teacher? What kind of returns might these students expect for their investments?

Yet, before we address these questions, we may want to consider how realistic it is to think of these students' behaviours as informed by some degree of choice. In the following section, I will outline three different approaches to the study of gender differences in academic achievement and will explore how the most recent of these may be useful for understanding these six students' reading practices and the issue of choice.

**From Gender Differences to Doing Gender**

Research into gender differences in academic achievement can be divided into three distinct bodies based on their assumptions and conceptions of gender (Goetz & Grant, 1988). The first conceives of gender as a matter of natural essences, deeply rooted in male and female physiology. From this perspective, if boys and girls perform
differently on different academic assessments or display different attitudes towards
different academic subjects, we can assume there are significant gender differences in
their physiology or cognitive processing and that these differences are static across time
and across cultures.

Researchers working from this perspective frequently argue that boys’ and girls’
bodies, brains and learning styles are so markedly different that that they require different
teaching methods and learning materials. In this view, it is seen as “natural” and
inevitable that boys and girls do not learn the same way or have the same interests. Thus,
teachers are frequently encouraged to teach boys and girls “differently” and to use
different learning materials for each gender. For example, in light of boys’ lower reading
achievement scores, teachers are often encouraged to make reading and school more
“boy-friendly”. One popular writer on this topic, working with common, although
controversial, ideas of boys being less verbal, suggests that teachers should de-emphasize
verbal instructions and use more charts, graphs and manipulatives in order to reach boys
(Gurian, 2001; Tanz, 1987). Other researchers suggest teachers need to seek out more
“boy books” or reading material that “boys will find interesting” in order to encourage
boys to read. The assumption underlying such suggestions being that there are topics that
are “naturally” more interesting to boys and other topics that are “naturally” more
interesting to girls (Scieszka, 2003).

Yet in the last twenty years, research into the nature of gender in society has
challenged the idea of biological essences and has conceived of gender as a social
construction, something that is created and reproduced through social interaction (Caplan
& Caplan, 1999; Fenstermaker et al., 2002b; Goetz & Grant, 1988; Goffman, 1979;
Head, 1999). This research has profound implications for the study of gender differences in academic achievement.

Sociological and socio-linguistic research on gender has uncovered a myriad of ways in which children are constructed as boys and girls from their very first hours of life (Eisenmann, 1997; Leaper, Anderson, & Sanders, 1998). Examinations of the role of gender in children’s lives has revealed that there are significant gender differences in terms of how much an infant is held, how far a child is allowed to crawl before s/he is retrieved, and how long s/he is left to cry before being picked up. This research has also uncovered significant gender differences in whether a child is subjected to physical discipline and how s/he is played with (Leaper & Gleason, 1996; Lindsey & Mize, 2001; Lindsey, Mize, & Pettit, 1997; Meyenn, Parker, & Maher, 1998; Raviv, Raviv, Shimoni, Fox, & Leavitt, 1999; Wauchope & Straus, 1987). Gender has also been seen to have an impact on how much a child is spoken to and what a parent talks to him/her about (Cervantes & Callanan, 1998; Chance & Fiese, 1999; Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994; Eisenmann, 1997; Fivush, 1989; Leaper et al., 1998; Tanz, 1987).

Yet, for the most part, research conducted with this conception of gender has focused more on how children are in a sense “imprinted” or socialized with appropriate gender behaviours, mannerisms and ways of speech. Research conducted from this perspective has not had much success in explaining why some children and adults do not seem to adhere to their socialization in the same way that others do. Similarly, this view of how gender differences are created and reproduced has not provided any understanding of why, in certain contexts, an individual may adhere to strict ideas of gender appropriate behaviour and in other contexts, s/he may resist them.
According to this second perspective, adult assumptions about appropriate and inappropriate gender behaviour and a lack of male role models work to make boys reluctant readers and make girls avid readers (Merrett & Mottram, 1997; Pidgeon, 1994). Some researchers have also posited that the pressures of masculinization make it difficult for boys to learn to read in elementary school (Best, 1983). From the socialization perspective, it would be argued, that in order to narrow the gender reading gap, we should work with teachers and parents to counter stereotypical ideas of gender appropriate behaviour and bring more male role models into schools. More recently, those who have recognized the difficulty of making reading seem like a masculine activity in elementary schools that primarily employ women, have suggested creating special sections or shelves for boys in school libraries (Brozo, 2002; Scieszka, 2003).

While researchers using these perspectives have found what they feel is significant evidence for their views, and while there are good arguments for diversifying teaching strategies and materials, for challenging stereotypical ideas of gender and for bringing more men into the school system, neither of these perspectives have taken into account a number of significant developments in recent research and theory on gender.

The third and most recent conceptualization of gender has conceived of it not as a reflection of a person's physiology nor as the end result of his/her socialization but as a kind of performance that people enact everyday in numerous ways and perform differently at different times. From this perspective, being a boy or a girl is not something that is accomplished once and for all at a young age. Using evidence from a range of cultures and eras, sociologists, anthropologists and historians of gender have argued convincingly that gender is not something one has in any given culture, but it is
something that one does (Butler, 1990; Fenstermaker & West, 2002a; Fenstermaker et al., 2002b; Goffman, 1979; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Feminist Post-Structuralist conceptions of gender remind us that who we think we are and who other people think we are depends greatly on who is around us and what events we are a part of and thus gender is never simply a reflection of our physiology or our socialization.

In addition, from this perspective, gender is not seen as a simple binary ("M" or "F") but as a kind of continuum. Central to this notion of gender is the idea that there are multiple ways in which adults and children “do gender” in different contexts, at different times of their lives and in different eras. In other words, there are a wide range of masculinities and femininities that children and adults act out everyday in a variety of ways. Working within a Feminist Post-Structuralist framework it is more common to use these plural versions of masculinity and femininity to remind us of this diversity. For in Butler’s (1990) words, “the presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it”. (7)

That there is a wide range of ways in which a person can do his/her gender becomes increasingly clear when one examines ideas of gender appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in cross-cultural settings. For example, in one community or culture, it may be considered inappropriate for male friends to embrace on meeting, or to hold hands, while in another, it may be considered common practice. Similarly, in one community or culture, it may be considered inappropriate for a woman to read more than her husband while in another community or culture, this difference may go without notice or may be seen as typical (Mondo, 2002).
In addition, from a Feminist Post-Structuralist perspective, gender is not seen as the end result of a person’s socialization. From this perspective, to write of gender as if it is merely transmitted to a child at an early age ignores the on-going often intensive work that goes into students’ and adults’ performances of their gender identities. Unlike a Feminist perspective that sees socialization as the process through which sex roles are reproduced, a Feminist Post-Structuralist perspective recognizes that children are not passive in the way they take up the gender identities that are suggested to them. In this view, adults and children are seen as agents who make choices about how they perform their gender identities and when and how much they invest in the discourses of gender.

This perspective also recognizes that at times, children and adults will resist the dominant forms of gender performance. From this view, how children and adults enact their gender depends less on their biological characteristics or on the relative success of their gender socialization than it does on the ways that they see masculinity and femininity played out in the world around them and on their relative safety to experiment with, and participate in, these discourses.

In this view, since a person’s gender identity, or his/her masculinity or femininity, like all of his/her social identities, depends on context, it becomes very difficult to make broad generalizations about “boys” or “girls”. As noted by Cameron (1998), research conducted with this conceptualization of gender shifts focus away from cataloguing differences between men and women and boys and girls and instead looks at how people use various linguistic and cultural resources to produce gender differentiation or support their gender performances. In other words, research conducted from this perspective asks
us to see people as agents who choose within a range of possible ways to signify their gender using whatever props are handy.

Similar to a Critical Socio-Cultural view of literacy, a Feminist Post-Structuralist view of gender also recognizes that identities/subjectivities change over time. From this view, because identities are linked to issues of culture, power and social structure, as these things change within a lifetime, over a generation or throughout a millennium, the discourses, patterns of desire, practices and identities that are available to people/subjects also change. For example, what is recognizable as a symbol of masculinity or femininity in one era is not always recognizable as such in another. The variety of masculinities and femininities available for an adult or a child to engage with are ever changing.

In addition, in recognizing the multiple nature of subjectivity, Feminist Post-Structuralist ideas of gender remind us that a person is never only “one thing”. A person is never just a “boy” or “girl”, s/he is also a son/daughter, a member of an ethnic community, a member of a socio-economic class, a citizen of particular place, a member of a linguistic group, not to mention a student, a child/adolescent/preteen who may have various other sub-group identities.

In recognizing that identity or subjectivity is a site of struggle, Feminist Post-Structuralist ideas of gender remind us that the discourses and practices through which we are constituted as subjects are often in tension with one another and that identities are often experienced in fragmentary and contradictory ways. This perspective recognizes that when we are placed in different contexts, we may feel different aspects of our

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1 Although Davies (1992) contrasts the terms identity and subjectivity, linking “identity” to humanist notions of a semi-fixed essence and “subjectivity” as something that is constantly being called into being through relations with others, I do not draw these distinctions between these terms. Following Weedon (1987), Hall (1996) and Norton Pierce (1995), I see social identity as a synonym of subjectivity.
identities or different combinations of our identities more keenly. For example, in some contexts, we may feel very feminine and in other contexts, we may feel particularly masculine depending on what is going on around us. In further contexts, we may be more conscious of our class or cultural identity and in some contexts, we may feel equally attached to a variety of our social identities. In this way the metaphor of investment can also be useful for conceptualizing students' relationships towards their own subjectivities. It appears that at different times and in different contexts, students may choose to invest more in one aspect of their identity over another.

For not only do students have multiple identities/subjectivities but they also experience these subjectivities in multiple ways throughout time and in different contexts. Thus, a student may at one point feel like a “girl” or a “boy” and at another point s/he may feel like “a Black student”, “a hard worker”, “an ESL student”, or “a grade six student”, depending on the context or situation. In one context, a student may feel more attachment to one of these identities or may read that the “exchange value” is higher for the “social capital” of that identity than it is for another. In such an instance, s/he may invest more energy and time into signifying his/her membership with that group (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 2001).

At other times, as Thorne (1993) suggests, multiple identities may also compound one another. At times, a student may feel equally attached to a combination of his/her identities. A student may invest energy and time in signifying that he is a “Black Boy” or that she is a “Middle Class Asian Girl”, using the markers of speech, dress and gestures that are recognizable to his/her peers.
However, research conducted from a Feminist Post-Structuralist perspective recognizes that within contemporary culture, gender as a category is “omni-relevant”. In other words, although at times a person’s gender identity may not be the most important aspect of his/her identity either to him/herself or to the others around him/her, that a person is either masculine or feminine is an unspoken assumption in most cultures, with a few exceptions (Fenstermaker & West, 2002a). For example, as noted by Pavlenko and Piller (2002), within certain First Nations’ languages, there are words for people who are considered to be neither male nor female. In these communities, such people are known as ‘two spirited’ or ‘berdache’. However, in all Post-Industrial cultures, children are classified from birth as either male or female. When children are born with ambiguous genitalia, they are surgically “fixed” to fit one or the other of these categories.

Finally, a Feminist Post-Structuralist understanding of gender also recognizes that power is not evenly distributed throughout society and that it is implicated in the kinds of life choices available to boys and girls and men and women. In other words, gender cannot be understood as a category that is ‘neutral’ or outside of political realities (Davies, 1993).

While recognizing that power is complex, a Feminist Post-Structuralist perspective argues that the maintenance of gender differences and the importance of signifying one’s gender “correctly” in social situations is intimately connected to issues of power and that there are some versions of masculinity and femininity that can be considered hegemonic or more powerful. Thus, the kinds of masculinity and/or femininity one enacts has an impact on where one falls in the local and larger social...
hierarchy. Those who do not signify their gender "correctly" or who enact non-hegemonic versions of masculinity and/or femininity run the risk of marginalization.

So how would this session of Reading Club look from a Feminist Post-Structuralist perspective? To begin with, we might start to look at these students not merely as "boys" and "girls" but as subjects actively engaged in performances of masculinity and femininity. In addition, we might begin to see these students' actions and reading practices, as to some extent, guided by choice. Granted, there are not unlimited choices in reading material nor unlimited behaviours that are tolerated in a classroom. Yet, at the same time, it is worth recognizing that students do have a range of choices in terms of what they read and whether they read during silent reading period. Using the insights of Feminist Post-Structuralist ideas of gender, we might also recognize that within this classroom, there would likely exist a wide range of masculinities and femininities and that some of these would be more hegemonic than others.

When we begin to see these students as actively engaged in gender performances and as agents choosing from a range of literacy practices (from avidly reading to avoiding reading), that there seems to be a clear gender breakdown in the kinds of reading behaviours exhibit, raises the question of whether these students' reading practices might be somehow entwined with their gender performances. The answer to this question may have a significant impact on how we attempt to bridge the gender reading gap.

For example, if we discover that girls and boys invest in reading or in 'not reading' as a way of maintaining the borders of their gender identities, then our attempts to remedy the gender reading gap with different forms of teaching and reading materials for boys and girls may not actually bridge this gap but may reinforce it. These kind of
initiatives may suggest to students that boys and girls are more different than they are similar, which may in turn lead students to ante up their investments in what is considered to be gender appropriate reading behaviour. In other words, if we choose to reify the idea that boys and girls are fundamentally different, our students may respond by investing even more deeply in gender-typed reading practices. Boys may decide to read less and girls may decide to read more, depending on how important the discourse of gender normativity is in their local culture.

Similarly, if we do not fully understand who our students think they are, what their values are and what communities they want to be a part of, we may never fully understand the reasons they choose to participate in school based literacy the way they do, nor how to create the space for them to reach beyond narrow ideas of gender and reading. In particular, in the face of many assertions that boys are 'naturally' less adept in language arts, it is important for us to consider how students' identities and investments are organized lest we inadvertently reinforce the worst kind of stereotyping – one that leads us to expect less from an entire population.

It is worth noting that during this period of Reading Club, all of the students chose what would be considered to be “gender appropriate” reading materials (Coles & Hall, 2002; Dorion, 2003). Evan chose a “science” book about rainforest animals; Nicholas chose a magazine about sports; Emanuel initially chose a comic-like book about pharaohs and pyramids. Both comics and ancient history of this kind are considered to be gender appropriate reading material for boys. Similarly, Nora, Christine and Lisa chose novels or fictional narratives. All of these choices reflect contemporary ideas of what boys and girls are “normally” supposed to like to read. In other words, these reading choices could be
considered to be part of "gender normative" or hegemonic gender behaviour rather than as examples of marginal gender behaviour.\(^2\)

It is also worth noting that in terms of their engagement or lack of engagement with reading, all six students exhibited what would be considered to be normative "gendered reading behaviour" in contemporary, Post-industrial society (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Kelly, 1986; Millard, 1997; Pidgeon, 1994; Shapiro, 1990). The boys chose not to read much print, opting instead to look at photographs or peruse book covers or to chat with their classmates. The girls chose to sit quietly and on all accounts appeared to be reading. As many students in contemporary, Post-industrial society conceive of reading as a feminine behaviour and see "not-reading" as a masculine behaviour, these students’ conduct during reading club can be seen as gender normative behaviour both in terms of their choices of reading material and their levels of engagement with printed text (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Barrs, 2000; Barrs, 1994; Cherland, 1994; Martino, 1995; Maynard, 2002; Millard, 1997).

Thus from a Feminist Post-Structuralist perspective these students could be seen as choosing to enact normative or hegemonic gender performances, or to be invested in normative discourses of gender and reading. Plainly, these kinds of investments do not hinder girls’ engagement with reading. However, these kinds of investments may well inhibit boys’ participation in traditional reading practices. Why boys might choose to invest in normative/hegemonic performances of masculinity over reading and what

\(^2\) To ascertain whether these students’ enactments of their gender were hegemonic or non-hegemonic gender performances in their local and wider cultures, we might ask if these students were likely to be marginalized by their peers, families or teachers for their reading choices or gender performances. While there are many versions of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Post-Industrial society and determining which version is hegemonic depends greatley on context; that boys are supposed to be interested in science, sports and "great men" (pharoahs) appears common in many socio-cultural contexts. That girls are supposed to be interested mainly in fictional narratives is also common to many contexts.
teachers can do to encourage boys to shift their investments are two of the central questions that I will be exploring in the remaining chapters of this thesis. In the following chapter, I will outline some of the features of the K-6 school where I teach and I will introduce the reader to the students of Room 18 who eventually became the focus of this project. In chapters that follow I will outline the methodology and research design I used for this project.
Reading the World

It is the last week of August and I am returning to my school after a year's leave of absence. A few blocks from the school, I am greeted by a small white girl of about three years old. She is wearing a pale coloured skirt, a tank top and white sandals. She has pierced ears and holds a large baby doll tucked under her arm. A woman, that I assume is her mother, is a few yards away, washing down the sidewalk with a hose. The young girl looks up at me quizzically as I approach and I hear the woman tell her to "mind the water". Without missing a beat, the little girl stomps emphatically in the puddle by her feet and smiles up at me.

As I continue my walk I pass a young black girl of about 13. She is pushing a double stroller with two white toddlers in it. We smile and say hello to each other. Following close behind is a student from my school, Courtney. I have known Courtney since she was in grade one. Courtney, a white working class girl, is carrying another toddler on her hip with some effort as the toddler is fairly large and Courtney is a small soon-to-be-grade-five-student.

As I jot down my observations in my notebook, I am hailed by a thin white man who looks to be in his late fifties. He asks me from across the street if I am writing a novel. I tell him "no", that I am doing research. He laughs and apologizes for being nosy. I tell him not to worry – that I'm nosy too. He crosses the street and introduces himself. We chat as I walk the final block to the school. He is charming and on hearing that I am a teacher he tells me that he only completed grade 11 but that he went on to manage several companies and travel the world selling art supplies. The man tells me he left school because he was "bored out of his mind" and that if I really want to teach kids,
I should leave the public school system and set up my own school. I tell him I can see his point but that I have certain philosophical commitments to public education that prevent me from considering such a venture. He cites several examples of famous scientists and inventors who had little or no formal schooling as further evidence that school is unnecessary. I am aware of some of these people and I tell him so, nodding in agreement. “But”, I say, “I don’t know if that kind of success without school is still possible these days”. He assures me that it is. I am not convinced. We arrive at my school and he bids me farewell. As he leaves, he tells me that he lives around the corner at a residence for schizophrenics (although he assures me that he is not schizophrenic). He tells me if I ever want to have coffee and continue our conversation, that I should drop by. I thank him for the invitation and tell him it was nice chatting with him.

As I enter the school, I am greeted by the two administrative assistants (both white women) and by the new Kindergarten teacher (also a white woman) who has her three year old son in tow. We speak briefly and set to our tasks. We are all busy getting ready for the new school year that starts the following week. I wonder for a moment if I should not have spoken with the stranger I have just met outside. We have had two incidents of female staff members being stalked by men in the neighbourhood. I am usually careful not to be “too friendly” with strangers lest they decide to come and try to visit me at school. I remind myself that returning to school after a year away means I need to think about the students’ safety as well as my own.

Field Diary, August 30.
Recent research into issues of literacy, learning and gender has emphasized the need to examine these issues within local and larger socio-cultural contexts (Guzzetti et al., 2002; Solomon, 1992; Thorne, 1986; Willis, 1977). In this chapter, I work to give the reader a glimpse of the school that I work at within its local municipal context and within a larger socio-historical context. I begin with a description of the school and community and then pull focus to look at some of the broader challenges that Stony Creek, as an Ontario school, has faced in recent years. I conclude with an introduction to Ms. Stevens and the students of Room 18.

Stony Creek School

Stony Creek is a school like many others in post-industrial, urban centres around the world. It is a co-educational, multicultural, multilingual public elementary school made up of students from mixed socio-economic circumstances. The school itself is located in Toronto, Ontario and has ten classrooms that currently accommodate approximately 260 students from Junior Kindergarten to grade Six. Stony Creek has ten classrooms, a large double sized gym, a music room, a school library, and two rooms designated as “learning centres”. Two full time special education teachers work in these learning centres with students from grades one to six who experience learning difficulties and have been officially designated as “Learning Disabled”.

Stony Creek houses a daycare centre for toddlers, preschool and school age children and a “Parenting Centre” where parents and caregivers can bring pre-schoolers and babies on a casual basis. However, the future of this drop in centre is uncertain. After a twenty-year commitment to family programming, there are well-founded rumors that the local board of education will soon cease to fund or host such drop-in centres. Stony
Creek also houses an "MID Program" for students in grades four to six who are considered to have "Mild Intellectual Disabilities". Most of the students in this program are bussed to the school from nearby neighbourhoods.

Stony Creek School is designated as an inner city school and thus receives a budget for a free snack program. Students are given a snack of fresh fruits and vegetables before morning recess and the noon hour lunch program is subsidized. While most of the students' parents are employed, the majority work at jobs that do not provide them with adequate incomes. From a close examination of a survey I conducted with the students in Room 18, it appeared that based on parental employment, 63% of the students in that class came from families that would be considered to be working class, 30% of the students came from families that would be considered to be lower middle class and only 7% came from families that would be considered to be solidly middle class.  

From my four years at the school, I believe these estimations may well hold for the rest of the student body. The majority of our students are the children of cleaners, construction workers, factory workers, secretaries and service sector workers. Some of our students are the children of single income professionals or have parents who run their own small businesses and a very small minority of our students live with two parents who are both professionals.

These estimations are also supported when one examines the community in which the school is set. The catchment area for Stony Creek school includes a few dozen blocks of a lower income residential and commercial streets to the West and four blocks of more expensive Victorian houses that border a large park on the East. To the immediate South, there is a fairly run down stretch of a major traffic artery, a large mental hospital and a
“geared to income” low rent apartment building. Four blocks to the North, there is another semi-developed large traffic artery lined with a few residential buildings, old restaurants and small shops. For the most part, the houses in the neighbourhood are small and medium sized single family dwellings, built around the turn of the century to house the families that worked in the local factories. There are also a few apartment buildings and a number of more modest townhouses that have been built in the last ten to twenty years. Finally, there are a few large multi-bedroom Victorian houses in the neighbourhood. Some of these have been divided into multiple apartments and others are single family dwellings.

However, there are also some recent additions to the neighbourhood which may have a significant influence on the school and the community in the coming years. In the past three years, a number of successful small alternative art galleries have located along the South border of the school catchment area. In addition, several former factories have been, or are in the process of being, transformed into expensive, “loft-style” condominiums.

These projects appear to have spurred the establishment of a number of chic clothing stores and expensive bars and cafes. Whether these new homeowners will have children to send to the school or whether they will choose to send them to a public school remains to be seen. It is well known in the community that many of the families that can afford to, send their children out of the neighbourhood to private schools.

Stony Creek has a large grassy playing field to the South that holds two baseball pitches. To the East of the school, there is an asphalt play area with one basketball hoop.

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3 For details on this survey see the introduction to Room 18 later in this chapter.
and to the North of the school there is another asphalt play area where there is one large, and one small, climber. The play area to the North is designated as the Kindergarten play area during school hours and thus is off limits to the older children until after school. Until three years ago, there was a large wooden climbing structure with a slide in the North yard and this was the primary and junior play area. However, like most school yard climbers in the city, this one was removed in the year 2000 when it was deemed unsafe by local authorities. Since that time, the primary and junior students have used the southern field and the eastern tarmac for their recesses.

In the last year, there has been an attempt to establish a community garden/teaching garden at the school. A number of parents and teachers have planted and tended seeds in a small area of dirt on the East side of the building. Unfortunately, many of the teachers have noted that the demands of the current Ontario curriculum make it difficult to devote time to such projects no matter how meaningful they could be.

**Staff, Students and Parents**

The staff at Stony Creek is made up of ten classroom Teachers, two Learning Centre Teachers, five Educational Assistants, two Caretakers, two Administrative Assistants, a Principal, a Gym Teacher, a half time Music Teacher, a half time French/Computer Teacher and myself, a half time Teacher-Librarian.

Like many other elementary schools in Canada, the majority of the twenty-four people on staff are White and Canadian born. However, like many other Toronto schools, a number of the staff are People of Colour and a number have immigrated to Canada as teenagers or as adults. For example, Ms. Lee, a primary teacher who identifies as Chinese Canadian was born in Vietnam but immigrated to Canada as a young adult via France and
is fluent in English, French, Mandarin and Cantonese. Ms. Andrews, another primary teacher who identifies as African-Canadian, immigrated to Canada as a teenager from South Africa in the early 1980’s. Similarly, both of the administrative assistants are relative newcomers to this country, Ms. Riberio came from Portugal as a young adult and Ms. Galdone came from Macedonia as a teenager. As well, three of the educational assistants immigrated to Canada as adults. Ms. Aidoo was born in Sudan, Ms. De Freitas came from Brazil and Ms. Rennick immigrated from the former Soviet Union. In addition, one of the caretakers, Ms. Olmos came from Peru as a young adult.

Yet, like many other schools, this diversity reflects only a fraction of the diversity of the student body. According to estimates on the Toronto District School Board website, 54% of the students at Stony Creek speak languages other than English as their primary language at home and 15% of the students have lived in Canada for less than 5 years.

While historically Stony Creek was known as a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon Working Class school, in the past forty years the school demographics have changed considerably. The first major wave of change dates to the 1960s when large numbers of Portuguese families moved into the neighbourhood. Most of these families appear to have immigrated from small communities in the Azores. There are many grocery stores, fish markets, clothing stores and bakeries in the neighbourhood which identify themselves as Portuguese by the products they sell and by their bi-lingual signs. Many of the local banks, dental offices and medical centres also identify themselves with bi-lingual signs that tell customers and patients that they have Portuguese speakers on staff.
The next wave of immigration appears to date from the mid 1970s and early 1980s. This wave consisted of families from Vietnam and is reflected in the number of Vietnamese restaurants and bars present on one of the closest commercial thoroughfares. There are Vietnamese cafes, video stores and social service agencies at intervals along this street.

The most recent wave of immigration, which began about five years ago, has been comprised of families from mainland China and Hong Kong. The children from these families currently make up the majority of the ESL students at the school. However, there have also been a few new families arriving from Eastern Europe, Ethiopia, Portugal, Somalia, and Sri Lanka in the past few years.

In glancing over class photos kept in the school archives, it appears that at least for the past three decades there have always been a few Black students at the school, as there are currently. However, it is difficult to know the exact origin of these families from such photos. Some of these families may have been part of the 1970's wave of Caribbean immigration to Toronto (Solomon, 1992). Others may have been long standing African-Canadian families. Of the four Black families currently at the school, one came from Grenada, two from Ethiopia and one family came to Canada from West Africa via Portugal.

Like many other elementary schools, of the twenty-four people on staff, all but three, (the Gym teacher, the French/Computer teacher, and one of the Caretakers) are women. Again, in this respect, the staff does not reflect the student body as roughly half of the students at this co-educational school are boys and half are girls.
Recent Challenges

Three of the largest boards of education in the province are embroiled in a standoff with the ministry of education. The trustees of all three boards have voted to pass “deficit budgets”, refusing to cut any more from their programs in order to reach the province’s “fiscal goals”. Although most of the trustees and directors are not making any comment about the political nature of their actions, a few trustees have spoken of their votes as a refusal to assist the province in the destruction of public education.

Field Diary, August 16.

‘Tent City’ was closed down last week. The make-shift community of shelters, which housed 110 homeless people in the east end of the city, was ironically on land owned by ‘Home Depot’, a popular home renovations chain. The land was known to have high levels of toxic chemicals such as mercury and lead and public health officials say the two children born in the community may face serious health risks. Private security guards were hired by Home Depot to evict the residents and municipal police were on the site to oversee their eviction.

Field Diary, September 30.

Ms. Stevens has brought her class down to the library for a book talk. I have created a book display highlighting a variety of genres. On each table there are a dozen or so fiction or non-fiction titles. My hope is to give the students a sampling of diverse reading material. I make the assertion that it is useful to read from a wide variety of genres as it increases your global knowledge and helps you to become a stronger reader.
When I am finished, Ms. Stevens addresses the class and adds that reading from diverse genres also helps prepare them for the grade six test that they will write later this year. Ms. Stevens tells the students that getting into the habit of reading from a variety of genres will also help them to prepare for the grade ten test, that they will eventually have to write. As Ms. Stevens reminds them, all students must now pass the grade ten test in order to graduate from high school.

At this reminder, Wallace, seated in the back row beside Hardy, calls out, “You can always drop out!” Wallace and Hardy laugh. I think about how poorly I would respond to Ms. Stevens’ incentive. When I discuss this comment with the two boys a little later, Wallace asserts that high school is unnecessary as his father dropped out and is “doing fine”. When I ask the boys why it might be a good idea to stay in high school, Hardy tells me with some annoyance that if you don’t stay in high school, “you could end up homeless”.

Field Diary, October 27.

Like many other schools in Ontario, and elsewhere in the world, Stony Creek has had to weather considerable fiscal, curricular and administrative restructuring in recent years. Many of these challenges have been the result of dramatic changes in provincial educational policy. These shifts have in turn influenced the policies of the local board of education and have thus had an impact on our school. For those unfamiliar with the recent history of education in Ontario, the election of a Conservative government under Premier Mike Harris in 1995, signaled a dramatic era of change and restructuring in the province, particularly in terms of education and social services (Gidney, 1999). In the three years following their election, it is estimated that the Conservative government cut
and reallocated $525 million dollars from education (MacKenzie, 1998). These cuts have been felt keenly by local school boards and have in turn affected local schools.

For example, although there has been a school on the site where Stony Creek stands for well over 100 years, in 1999 the local board of education moved to close several community schools, ours being one of them. At that time, the school consisted of two buildings, a large 1912 ‘Junior’ building which housed the K-6 program and a smaller 1954 ‘Senior’ building which housed the grade 7 and 8’s. The local board of education found that the spacious hallways of the 1912 building rendered the school ‘under-enrolled’ according to the new provincial “pupil per square foot” funding formula. Thus, it was ruled that the school should close and the students should be redistributed amongst a number of neighbouring schools. Once the school buildings were closed to the students, the school board would lease out the premises as a way of creating revenue.

However, in that year, a small group of dedicated parents, led by a stay-at-home dad, managed to convince the board to reconsider. In particular, the parents were concerned about the safety of many young students who would have to cross major roads and walk extended blocks to get to any of the other neighbourhood schools. After lengthy negotiations and considerable media attention, the board was convinced to compromise, opting to close the 1912 building, disperse the grade 7 and 8 program, and renovate the 1954 building to accommodate the K-6 program. This plan was followed and the school now occupies the renovated 1954 building. The 1912 building lies vacant and is occasionally used as a film location. Other schools on the closing list were not so lucky.

As an Ontario school, Stony Creek, like many others, has also been forced to grapple with the fall out of dramatic curriculum reforms initiated by the provincial
government. The implementation of a rigid “outcomes” based curriculum, new reporting procedures and the introduction of province wide standardized testing has significantly altered how the teachers at Stony Creek do their work. Teachers no longer have the freedom to create curricula that reflects the needs of the communities in which they teach, as they are now required to teach and assess a standardized provincial curriculum.

Reporting procedures have also changed as each local board has adopted a standardized computer report card based on the ministry of education’s curriculum. Teachers are asked to assess approximately 750 performance criteria per student per year. Numerous teachers have commented on the difficulty of teaching to these ends without any support documents, such as books written on curriculum topics at the appropriate reading level, or clear rationales. In this way, teachers are often put in the position of scrambling for resources as they struggle to infuse a sterile curriculum with meaning (Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998).

Provincial restructuring has also had an impact on social services, health care and housing in the province, which in turn has had an impact on the city of Toronto and on the local community. In particular, the reduction of welfare payments and the removal of rent control have had a significant impact on the city and the neighbourhood of Stony Creek. The reduction of welfare payments by 21% in 1995 and the removal of rent controls in 1998, have been directly linked to an increase in the number of homeless people in the local community prompting students, parents and teachers to participate in annual food drives and other charitable projects (Ontario Social Safety Network [OSSN], 1996; Shapcott, 2003).
Yet, despite these challenges, the staff at Stony Creek has continued to provide their students with a stimulating and caring environment. For like many other schools, Stony Creek is blessed with a staff, that is for the most part, dedicated, compassionate and thoughtful. What is perhaps unique to this school is the fact that a number of the people on staff come to their work with an awareness of issues of social justice and gender equity. Several of the staff members have articulated a commitment to “making a difference” in the lives of their students. A number of the teachers routinely request library materials that reflect the diversity of the families in our community and engage their students in discussions of equity, community building and social justice throughout the year, when they can.

The new principal, Ms. Dalton, has supported the staff in this philosophy and has paved the way for a number of whole school community building activities such as a whole school fall hike, a community pot luck dinner, a whole school theatre project and a whole school environmental art mural. Ms. Dalton has attended several elective in-services on issues of equity in her years as a teacher and as a principal. She has also been very supportive of this current research project from its inception.

That being said, the challenges of maintaining such a commitment to creating community and equity are daunting. For example, early in the year of my data collection, Ms. Stevens was engaged in teaching a unit on “Canada and its Trading Partners”, as outlined by the Ontario social studies curriculum. However, during this unit, she told me that she felt far too pressed for time to even begin a discussion about the impact of globalization on either Canada or its trading partners. As she told me, “there just isn’t
enough time.” In the following section I will introduce Ms. Stevens and the students of Room 18.

**Ms. Stevens and the Students in Room 18**

Room 18 is located on the second floor of Stony Creek school and overlooks a small fenced courtyard. Ms. Stevens, the homeroom teacher in Room 18, is a white woman in her late 40s of Anglo-Saxon decent. Ms. Stevens is the mother of three children, two teenaged boys and a pre-teen daughter. Ms. Stevens has been teaching at Stony Creek for five years and has been a teacher with the board for sixteen years. Ms. Stevens is our union steward and shares with me a concern for social justice in the classroom and an interest in Canadian history. Ms. Stevens has been known to take her classes on field trips to the municipal archives and local theatres in order to enrich their school experiences. Ms. Stevens also shares with me an interest in issues of gender equity.

There are twenty-seven students in Room 18. Like all of the other classes in this school, the students are from a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds. Eighteen of the twenty-seven students speak a language other than English at home either with parents, grandparents, siblings or friends. Two of the students are considered to be ESL students as they have been in Canada for less than three years.

Four of the students in the class are designated as Learning Disabled and receive additional academic support. These students, two boys and two girls, spend every morning in a withdrawal program in “the Learning Centre”. In this program they work in small groups with other students who have been similarly identified as Learning
Disabled. The program is taught by a specialist teacher and a teacher’s assistant, who is also a mother at the school.

Of the twenty-seven students in Room 18, eight are Portuguese-Canadian, six are Chinese-Canadian, five are White/Anglo-Canadian, three are Vietnamese-Canadian and one student is Japanese-Canadian. Two of the students are Black: one, a boy, is African-Portuguese-Canadian and the other, a girl, was unsure of her family’s exact history but took great pride in being Black-Canadian. The remaining four students reported far more complicated cultural heritages. For example, one student told me he was French-Portuguese-Irish-American-Canadian.

While socio-economic class is often difficult to define, in this classroom it is particularly difficult to do so as a number of the students’ families are recent immigrants to Canada. Thus, many of them have likely experienced a certain amount of downward mobility. That being said, based on parental employment, seventeen of the twenty-seven students in this class would likely be considered to be working class. These students’ parents work in low paying jobs that garner little social status. For the most part, they work in the service sector. These students’ parents work driving tow trucks, waitressing, driving taxis, sewing in factories, cooking in fast food chains, doing construction or at other similar jobs.

Eight of the twenty-seven students in this class would likely be considered to be lower-middle class. These students’ parents’ work requires some specialized training and may have higher remuneration or status than the work of the parents described earlier. These students’ parents work as teachers’ assistants, as chefs, and as contractors. Some of them work at local community centres. Others run small hair dressing salons or small
delivery companies. A few of them are sole support mothers. Out of the twenty-seven students in this class, two, Chris, a boy, and Tessa, a girl, are likely the only students who would be considered to be middle class. These students live with two employed parents, at least one of whom is a professional.

The class attendance list notes that fourteen of the students are male and thirteen are female. I have attempted to interview the students on their own ideas of their gender identities but this data is yet to be analyzed. A few of the girls have identified themselves as tomboys and a few of the boys have identified themselves as 'less masculine' than some of their classmates. Some of the students in Room 18 define themselves as committed readers and some do not. In the following chapter I outline the methodology I used during my year of data collection and analysis.
Methodology

For this study, I have used an ethnographic research methodology. My choice of this methodology was based primarily on my understanding of what ethnography can offer educational researchers and by my initial questions concerning the creation of the gender reading gap (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Norton Pierce, 1996). I chose to use an ethnographic methodology because I was interested in the process by which girls and boys in elementary school develop positive and negative attitudes towards reading. As I was interested in a process, rather than in capturing students' attitudes at a given moment in time, qualitative research methods seemed to be the most appropriate choice for this project.

In addition, because I was interested in learning about students' reading practices within the context of their socio-cultural communities, a qualitative methodology appeared to be the most effective way for me to gather this kind of data. In the following section, I explore some of the issues I faced as a teacher-researcher conducting research in my own school. I then outline the research design I employed during my year of data collection and analysis.

Reflections of a Teacher-Researcher

The field worker typically arrives at the place of study without much of an introduction and knowing few people, if any. (Van Maanen, 1988 p. 2)

The fieldwork for this project took place during the academic year 2002-2003 and consisted of participant observations, document collection and interviews with the students and teachers from two of the classes at the school where I work as a teacher-librarian. Like many field workers, I accumulated hundreds of pages of field notes,
dozens of formal and informal observations, as well as documents and video data from the field. However, as a teacher-researcher at my own school, in many ways I did not really resemble the typical field worker (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988).

For example, when I began my formal study, instead of knowing very few people, I knew most of the staff and the students at the school. I knew many of them quite well as I had worked at the school for three years before I began my research. That I had worked as the teacher-librarian for those three years also set me apart from many other teacher-researchers. In this capacity, I had the opportunity to work closely with all of the classroom teachers and most of the students in the years prior to the collection of this data. Thus, when I began my fieldwork, I knew eighteen of the twenty-four staff members fairly well and I knew about 85% of the 260 students by name.

Unlike the typical educational field worker, I also knew some of the students’ older brothers and sisters and some of their parents. I knew which students were siblings and that a few of the students were cousins. I also knew that a few of the students’ parents and grandparents had gone to the school and I was aware of some of the students’ friendship alliances. Finally, I was also quite familiar with the school neighbourhood as I had lived across the street from the school during the first two years that I worked there.

As I had been away from the school for a year before beginning my study, I did not know the kindergarten students who had started at the school the previous year. Nor did I know the junior kindergarten students or the dozen or so recent arrivals in the older grades. In addition, I did not know the five new staff members who had come to the school during my absence. I did not know the half time kindergarten teacher, the half-
time music teacher, the afternoon custodian, the new principal or the two new educational assistants. Yet, within the first few weeks, I became acquainted with these students and staff as well. Thus, in contrast to the typical field worker, when I entered the field, it was really more like a re-entry into the field. Unlike the typical fieldworker, on beginning my formal study, I was greeted warmly and was told that I had been missed. I believe this familiarity with the staff and the students both enriched my research and created some challenges during my year of data collection.

Working with the Staff

I believe my familiarity with the staff at the school prior to beginning my research enriched my data collection particularly in terms of the access I was given to observe in the school. As a familiar face and a colleague, I was well placed to gain access to any classroom that I wanted to observe. From the projects’ inception, I was assured by all of the classroom teachers that I could observe their classes any time I liked. A number of the staff specifically invited me to come and spend time with their students and to see the work that they were doing. My relationship with the staff made it easy for me to observe their classes at a moment’s notice.

However, I believe this familiarity with the staff also provided some challenges for me in my fieldwork. The first challenge that this familiarity presented was when I attempted to choose a classroom to observe for the year. As I had worked for three years at the school, I had made friends with a number of the staff. I had spent many lunch hours with two of the teachers in particular, Ms. Mitchell, a split grade 3/4 teacher and Ms. Colucci, a split grade 5/6 teacher. I had also spent a fair amount of time with Ms. Henderson, one of the two kindergarten teachers. When I returned to the school, I knew
that I did not want to observe in these teachers' classrooms as I felt my relationship to
them might interfere with my relationship to my data. I felt it was important to choose
classrooms in which I could observe the teachers critically without feeling like I was
compromising my relationship with them. Thus my familiarity with these teachers
quickly reduced the number of classes that I had to choose from as I began my
observations.

In addition, I believe the staff's familiarity with some of my personal opinions
about issues of gender may have at times hindered my research. Long before I began this
project, I had engaged in conversations with some of the staff about issues of gender.
Several of the staff knew that I was apt to be critical of traditional assumptions about the
biological nature of gender differences. That my opinions were known about this issue
provided me with strong allies in a number of the staff. For example, I believe Ms.
Martin was all the more welcoming to me in her classroom as she shared my opinions
about the social construction of gender. Ms. Martin frequently stopped me in the hallway
to pass on an observation that she had made about her students and earmarked pieces of
the students’ writing that she thought I would find interesting.

Yet, at times, the staff's familiarity with my opinions about gender presented
some obstacles to my research. For example, Ms. Randall did not share my opinions
about the social construction of gender and I believe this affected my reception in her
classroom. When I first came to observe in Ms. Randall’s primary classroom, she was
friendly but appeared somewhat uncomfortable with my presence. While I was very
interested in the construction of primary students as gendered readers, my sense was that
Ms. Randall might not be entirely comfortable with some of the assessments I made, nor
with my presence in her classroom on an ongoing basis. As a colleague, I felt it was unfair to choose Ms. Randall’s class for this study no matter how much I might have learned about how teachers construct students as gendered beings. On reflection, I felt the job of teaching was difficult enough without being observed by a potentially critical eye and so I opted not to observe in Ms. Randall’s classroom for this study.

Like my familiarity with the staff, I believe my familiarity with the students had a paradoxical impact on my research. At times, I believe my familiarity with the students greatly enriched my data collection and at other times it may have hindered it. At times, I think the fact that I was the students’ teacher-librarian instead of their classroom teacher also enriched my data collection. Yet, at times, this dual role of teacher-researcher/teacher-librarian also created a few challenges.

**Working with the Students**

When I began this study, many of the students at the school, particularly the older students, knew me as the teacher on staff most likely to talk directly about issues of classism, homophobia, racism and sexism. In the three years before I began the study, I had engaged in some way with every class on these issues either through research projects, story telling activities, class discussions or through guest speakers. The students in the older grades knew that when it came to these issues, I was far more likely to challenge status quo ideas than to support them. For the most part, I have always been impressed by how the students engaged with these issues. Many of the students seemed to have a strong sense of social justice and responded positively to ideas of equity and inclusion.
During the year in which I conducted this research, I continued to engage in discussions of this kind with the students, as it was impossible for me to separate out talking about equity from my day to day teaching practices. On reflection, I also realized that I had no real desire to do so. However, my sense from a few of the interviews I conducted with the students was that their awareness of how I felt about issues of equity frequently had an impact on what they told me and how they interpreted my questions.

For the most part, I believe that the fact that the students knew my opinions about issues of equity and that I was not their classroom teacher, helped to create a space in which they could tell me about some of the truth of their lives. Many of the questions I asked concerned issues of teasing and gender crossing behaviour. If they had not known me quite so well, I doubt that many of the students would have trusted me so easily with their stories of what many other adults would consider to be “bad behaviour” - teasing and/or gender crossing. I believe that, because I was not their classroom teacher, these students were also more candid with me as they knew I was not responsible for their academic assessment.

In addition, when I explained the project to the students, I told them that I wanted to learn more about kids and their ideas about reading, in part so that I could be a better teacher and a better teacher-librarian. I believe the fact that I was already their teacher-librarian added authenticity to my role as an interviewer and I believe this authenticity contributed to the students’ willingness to answer my questions.

However, there were also moments in which the students’ familiarity with my opinions about issues of equity and my tendency to question gender norms seemed to have a less positive impact on my data collection. The impact of this familiarity with my
opinions seemed particularly salient when a student appeared uncomfortable with my tendency to question accepted gender norms. For example when interviewed, Jackie, a grade five boy, in contrast to the majority of his classmates, repeatedly told me that he “didn’t know” about ideas of gender appropriate behaviour. When I asked Jackie if there were some things that girls liked to do more than boys and vice versa, Jackie repeatedly told me, “I don’t know.”

These questions were an attempt to ascertain Jackie’s ideas of gender appropriate behaviour and to set up my next questions. I wanted to ask Jackie if he had ever seen a boy do a girl thing or a girl do a boy thing. I also wanted to ask him what usually happens when a student crossed gender lines. In asking for Jackie’s opinion about whether there were things that boys liked to do more than girls and vice versa, I was attempting to avoid any projection of the idea that certain activities were more typical of boys or girls or what these activities might be. I wanted to learn from the students how they saw the world. Yet, in contrast to the rest of his classmates, Jackie did not seem to even try to think of an answer to these questions. Instead, he quickly replied, “I don’t know” to most of these kinds of questions.

After some probing, Jackie conceded that there were some things that girls liked to do more than boys. Then he quickly added some comments that did not make sense to me at first. On reflection, however, these comments seemed to indicate that Jackie was uncomfortable with my tendency to question ideas of gender normalcy and that he was attempting to curb our conversation.

LM: Are there some things that girls like to do more than boys like to do?

Jackie: I don’t know about that(...)I don’t know, girls like to have nail polish on their nails
At first I was confused by what Jackie was trying to say. It seemed odd that he would be so adamant that he did not want to see nail polish on girls. Yet, in reviewing the videotape of the interview, I got the sense that Jackie’s response revealed that he anticipated my next question - whether he had ever seen a girl do a boy thing or a boy do a girl thing. My sense is that in anticipation of this kind of a question, Jackie wanted to shut the conversation down as quickly as possible. I think, based on his prior knowledge of me, Jackie assumed I was interested in his level of tolerance for gender crossing behavior. Hence his sudden interjection that “they can do whatever they want to!” I think the “they” Jackie had in mind were boys who might want to wear nail polish, not girls. Jackie knew me well enough to know that I might want to engage in a discussion about tolerance if he told me it was ‘sick’ or ‘nasty’ for boys to wear nail polish. Thus, he gave me what he thought I wanted to hear as quickly as possible so that I could not begin any such discussion.

Similarly, when I asked Jackie what would happen if a boy or girl did something that other people thought of as inappropriate for their gender, he first answered, “I don’t know”. He then conceded that boys and girls might get teased if they crossed gender lines
but for the most part he avoided answering my questions about either normative gender activities, gender crossing, the consequences of gender crossing or gendered reading practices. Jackie seemed much more comfortable answering my questions about sports and his own likes and dislikes.

In other instances, I have found students who were not familiar with my tendency to question gender norms to be far more candid about their experiences and their thoughts on these issues. In further interviews, I discovered that Jackie was thought of as a student in the classroom particularly likely to tease others for gender crossing behaviour. My guess is that Jackie was conscious of the fact that his opinions, and/or those of his family or community, did not mirror my own, and that he was concerned with making sure I did not expose this difference. Although I was not his classroom teacher and had no part in his academic assessment, the fact that I was a teacher at his school and an adult may well have created some anxiety for Jackie. Twice during the interview, he asked me if I was going to show the videotape to either the other kids or his parents. I assured him both times that the only people who would see the videotapes were myself and my professors at the university. My sense from my interview with Jackie was that his familiarity with me and the fact that I was a teacher at his school prevented him from being entirely candid about his opinions and reduced the amount of information he was willing to share.

In addition, at times I think the students' familiarity with my opinions concerning gender norms and my role as their teacher complicated my data collection. At times, I felt that my students' prior knowledge of me made it difficult for them to hear the questions I was actually asking in the interviews. On several occasions, I found I had to repeat questions or rephrase them as students responded to questions that they may have
anticipated but that I had not actually asked. For example, when I tried to ask Chiara about what happens when a girl does something others think of as a ‘boy thing’, she answered by giving me her opinion of gender crossing behaviour.

_LM:_ What do you think would happen if a girl wanted to read something that other people might think of as a boy thing?

_Chiera:_ I think that would be perfectly fine because they’re interested in the genre so they could read whatever they like to read.

This kind of “mis-hearing” happened with a number of the students.

In one instance, I felt a student’s familiarity with my opinions and the fact that I was her teacher caused her to fabricate a story in order to give me what she thought I wanted to hear. When I asked Ariel if she had ever heard a girl being teased for doing something that others thought was a ‘boy thing’, she responded in such a way that I felt she was creating a story for my benefit.

_LM:_ Have you ever heard someone say “don’t act like a boy” to a girl or have you ever heard of a girl being teased for doing something that other people think as a boy thing?

_Ariel:_ Yes, one time this girl was reading all these Road magazines and Yu Gi Oh magazines, which made the boys sort of, and tools, tool magazines, because she wanted to be a carpenter.

_LM:_ Do you remember who was teasing her? Boys? Girls? Both?

_Ariel:_ I don’t remember but I wouldn’t do that to other people because I know it hurts their feelings.

It is possible that Ariel really witnessed the moment of teasing that she describes. However, there are a number of reasons why I think she may have fabricated this story. First, numerous times during the interview Ariel made a point of asserting how open minded she was about gender crossing behaviour, regardless if I had asked for her opinion and this narrative seemed created as a vehicle to help her do so again. Second,
just prior to the interview, Ariel and I had a discussion about what boys and girls liked to read. I had brought along a collection of magazines and books as things for the students to look at when they were thinking about what boys and girls liked to read and why they liked them. During that discussion, Ariel had named the *Road and Track* magazine and the *Yu Gi Oh* magazine I had brought as things that she thought boys would like to read. It seemed somehow too much of a coincidence that the girl in Ariel’s memory was reading both of these magazines at the time that she was being teased.

Third, that the girl in question was also reading a “tool magazine because she wanted to be a carpenter” seemed a bit of a stretch. In my four years at the school, I have yet to meet a girl who publicly voices such aspirations, as much as I would like to hear about them. My sense is that Ariel knew me well enough to know that I would like to hear about a girl having just such aspirations and thus she, in a sense, wrote it into her narrative.

Finally, when I asked Ariel who had done the teasing, she told me that she didn’t remember but she hastened to add that she wouldn’t have participated as she knew that doing so “hurt people’s feelings”. My sense from the interviews with the other students was that they usually remembered exactly who had been responsible for this kind of teasing. That they remembered who had been responsible was often plain either in their awkward attempts to avoid naming names or in their willingness to divulge such names regardless of whether I was asking for them.

In this way, I felt that Ariel had constructed the story to give me what she thought I wanted to hear – a story about a girl as a victim of sexist teasing and then her own testimony that she would not participate in such behaviour. In this instance, I believe that
Ariel’s familiarity with me and her ideas of my opinions concerning sexism and gender crossing behaviour complicated my ability to assess how prevalent gender normative teasing was for girls.

However, for the most part, I believe the students were honest in their dealings with me and in their descriptions of the teasing they saw around them. I believe many of the students were particularly honest because they saw me as an ally in creating a more just world, which, incidentally, is how I have always seen them. However, beyond issues of interviewer effects, there were also other challenges to being a teacher-researcher at the school in which I worked.

**Challenges in the Field**

A significant challenge of being a teacher-researcher at my own school arose from the amount of data I collected during the year of my research. Being on-site everyday as the part-time teacher-librarian meant that there was no time of the day that I was not on some level engaged in thinking about issues pertaining to my research. Although I tried to limit the number of hours I spent at the school, as is often the case with teachers who work “part-time”, there were many, many afternoons that I did not leave at noon, but stayed right through until afternoon recess or afternoon dismissal. This immersion in the field was beneficial as I was often on hand to overhear snippets of conversation or to make informal observations of students and teachers that contributed to my thinking.

However, this immersion in the field also meant that I acquired a tremendous amount of data, far more than I could reasonably transcribe or analyze in the time I allowed myself for this thesis. In this way, although I now have hundreds of pages of field notes, hundreds of documents from the field, as well as approximately 20 hours of
video footage, for the purposes of this thesis I have chosen to focus my analysis mainly on the interviews conducted with the 27 students in Ms. Stevens’ grade 5/6 class. At times I use my field notes and other data to provide a deeper understanding of the context. However, for the most part I examine what these students can tell us about how the gender gap in reading may be being created in elementary schools.

Finally, being both a teacher-researcher studying reading and a half-time teacher-librarian at the school presented a problem in that I could not be in two places at once. For example, although my schedule allowed me to occasionally close the library during the morning, when I was working as teacher-librarian, so that I could observe silent reading in Ms. Stevens’ room, I could not be both upstairs observing and downstairs in the library at the same time. Thus if students were interested in going down to the library during silent reading and I was upstairs observing their class, they knew they could not go. In this way the students’ choices and reading practices were affected by my presence as a teacher-researcher-teacher-librarian. When I turned to the data analysis, I kept this effect in mind. In the following chapter, I will outline the research design and how it evolved over my year of data collection.
Research Design

I began the school year making a number of informal observations of all of the classes at the school. During the first few weeks of September as the teacher-librarian at the school, I met with all of the classes to welcome them back and to set them up with library cards. In addition, as part of my duties as the school teacher-librarian, I began my twice weekly meetings with the kindergarten classes and I launched into a unit on media literacy with Ms. Stevens’ grade 5/6 class. In the first few weeks of September, I also took time to visit a number of classrooms. In those early weeks, I observed Ms. Randall’s grade one class, Ms. Andrew’s split grade 1/2 class, Ms. Martin’s split grade 2/3 class and Ms. Stevens’ split grade 5/6 class.

Through these initial observations, it appeared that there was ample evidence of students using various literacy practices to signify their gender. For example, in one class I observed a grade one girl painstakingly decorate her name tag with butterflies and flowers – symbols commonly associated with girls of this age. Through these informal observations, I also overheard a number of students commenting on issues of gender appropriate behaviour and I saw ample evidence of gendered clothing. Many of the primary girls were seen to wear shirts and dresses with floral patterns or with the words ‘princess’ or ‘friends’ or ‘love’ on them. Many of the primary boys were seen to wear shirts with either sports logos or with words like ‘army’ or ‘navy’ on them. Thus, in many ways, I could have chosen any of the classes in the school to observe for the year.

However, towards the end of September, I decided to focus on Ms. Martin’s split grade 2/3 class and Ms. Stevens’ split grade 5/6 class. I began by observing one primary and one junior class as I was interested to see how different or similar these age groups
might be in terms of their understandings of issues of gender and literacy. Ms. Martin’s and Ms. Stevens’ classes became the focus of my study after a fairly complex process of elimination. As noted earlier, three of the ten classroom teachers on staff were friends of mine and were thus quickly eliminated from the pool of possible classes to observe. In addition, as noted earlier, one of the primary teachers did not seem comfortable with my presence in her room and thus her class was also removed from my list of classes to observe.

One of the junior classroom teachers was the teacher for the MID (Mild Intellectual Disability) class. This class did not seem like an appropriate choice for this project as I wanted to observe when students who could read, chose to read or not to read. Many of the students in the MID program struggled profoundly with print. In addition, in contemplating this class for the project, I found the population was too homogeneous. All of the students were considered to be LD. Thus I was concerned that my data would be less generalizable if I chose to observe this class.

The remaining kindergarten teacher worked part-time in the mornings, as I did, and thus our schedules made it impossible for me to observe her class. This class also seemed inappropriate for this study as so few of the students in kindergarten could read.

Finally, two of the remaining three primary teachers, Ms. Andrews and Ms. Lee are women of colour. As a colleague, I have learned a great deal about teaching from these women and I believe we have worked well together whenever we have co-taught units in the library. One of these teachers has been particularly supportive in terms of the equity work that I have done with her students. However, as I debated which of the classes to observe, I was conscious that taking on the role of researcher in these women’s
classrooms would change our relationships. As a white woman, I felt uncomfortable with
taking on the position of observer in these classrooms and of positioning these women as
the observed. In this way, the remaining primary class Room 11, and the remaining
Junior class Room 18, became the focus of my study.

My decision to observe these classes was reinforced by the fact that these two
classes were also paired for weekly “Reading Buddies” sessions. I was interested in
observing such sessions as I felt it would be informative to watch how the older students
interacted with the younger students around reading. I also felt it would be interesting to
keep the younger students in mind when I was observing the older students and vice
versa. In the end, I found I spent more time observing Ms. Stevens’ class. This was
mainly due to the way Ms. Stevens’ schedule worked with mine as a half time teacher-
librarian. However, I did also spend time with Ms. Martin’s Grade 2/3 class.

Approval to conduct my research was secured from all agencies concerned prior
to the beginning of the school year. In September, consent forms were sent home with the
students in both of these classes and were returned with parental permission. In addition,
although it might be considered to be unnecessary from a legal standpoint, out of respect
for my students, I also created a permission form for them to sign. I felt it was important
to include them in the process and to recognize their personhood regardless of the fact
that they were minors. Two students in Ms. Martin’s class indicated that they would
rather I did not observe them and I did my best to avoid doing so. One student in Ms.
Stevens class and one student in Ms. Martin’s class did not return their parental consent
form and thus I did not interview them. Both Ms. Stevens and Ms. Martin similarly
signed consent forms before the formal research began.
Observations

As the part-time teacher-librarian at the school, I had some flexibility in terms of when and where I observed the students. I began by watching Ms. Martin’s and Ms. Stevens’ students when they met for reading buddies one afternoon a week. Each session, approximately half of Ms. Martin’s class and half of Ms. Stevens’ class would meet in Ms. Martin’s room and the other halves would meet in Ms. Stevens’ room. These halves switched rooms part way through the year and I spent time alternating between Ms. Martin’s room and Ms. Stevens’ room to gain as wide an understanding as possible. I also spent time observing these students during other classes and other activities. For example, I observed Ms. Martin’s class during an art class, a few free writing periods and a gym class. I observed Ms. Stevens’ students during a social studies lesson, a math lesson and during an overnight trip to a Natural Science school.

During the weekly sessions of reading buddies, I frequently used a video camera to record the students’ interactions as the high level of activity in the room was difficult to fully describe through field notes. This videotape has yielded some rich observations as I have been able to review the data again and again in close detail. However, I also attempted to make use of traditional jot notes during these times as I often felt the video camera kept me from being able to observe unobtrusively. At times when I did use the video camera, I would turn it on and walk away from it or look away so that the students would be less conscious of my gaze.

As I was particularly interested in issues of identity, investment and reading I was careful to observe moments when the students had choices about their reading
practices. In Ms. Stevens’ grade 5/6 class, student choice was exercised most during times in which they had scheduled silent reading.

**Reading in Room 18**

Approximately four out of five mornings a week, Ms. Steven’s class spent the first 10 to 20 minutes of the day engaged in silent reading. At this time, students were allowed to read anything they liked and they often brought books and magazines from home. The students were also welcome to choose things to read from the classroom library, which consisted of approximately 400 books and magazines, many of them bought with Ms. Stevens’ personal money. This first period of the day was also a time when students were given permission to visit the school library in order to borrow books and they frequently did so. Approximately once a month, I observed one of these morning sessions of silent reading. It should be noted that the four students who had been identified as LD were never present for these silent-reading periods as they spent their mornings in the Learning Centre.

Ms. Stevens’ class was also given some time for silent reading during the afternoons. Twice a week, half the class went to the library for a half-hour computer class while the other half of the class stayed in the classroom and read quietly. I observed these times of silent reading and occasionally visited the computer class as well. Initially, the students in the computer class were engaged in learning a typing program. Eventually, some of the students were given permission to type up some creative writing stories. However, by March of that year, the majority had moved back to using the typing program during their computer time.
Reading in Room 11

In Ms. Martin’s grade 2/3 class, the students’ choices of reading material in the classroom were somewhat limited by her carefully constructed guided reading program. Ms. Martin had small baskets of books organized by reading level sitting along a window ledge in the classroom, easily accessible to all of the students. Each of these baskets had four or five short books in it and on the basket was a list of the students who were at that reading level. The reading level was not indicated on the basket. As the students progressed, their names were transferred to different baskets. In this way the students’ choices of independent reading material in the classroom was limited to what Ms. Martin had put in their baskets.

The students usually engaged in independent reading a few times a week in the morning. As this was during the hours that I was working, and as Ms. Martin employed a somewhat more flexible schedule, it was often difficult for me to observe these periods. However, I did manage to observe a few. Instead of focusing on these periods in order to get a sense of these students’ reading practices, I took time to observe their class during their weekly library visits. I kept track of the books they signed out and observed them as they looked for books. However, as I was in my role as teacher-librarian at this time, my observations were far more informal than those of Ms. Stevens’ class.

Observations in one of these locations, Ms. Stevens’ class, Ms. Martin’s class or the library were conducted at least once a week. At times I would conduct two observations in one week or would skip a week depending on my own work schedule. These observations yielded approximately 20 hrs of videotape and hundreds of pages of field notes.
Documents

Numerous documents were gathered from the field. I found the most useful documents for attempting to understand the reading practices of the students in Ms. Stevens' class were the students' "reader-writer" logs. In these notebooks, the students were asked to write reflections on something they were reading. The guidelines were fairly open for this exercise. Ms. Stevens had given the students some suggestions of things they might like to do as part of their reader-writer log. For example, one of the things Ms. Stevens suggested was that the students could write to me about a book that they liked or about a book they wanted me to get for the library. I was the recipient of a number of such letters throughout the year. In reading these logs, I often learned what the students thought about the books they were reading during silent reading. In addition, as the instructions for completing their reader-writer logs were somewhat open ended, I also learned about what the students thought Ms. Stevens wanted them to do.

In Ms. Martin's class, I found the most useful documents were the students' "Free Writing" books. Ms. Martin provided one approximately 25-minute period a week for free writing. During this time, Ms. Martin sat down at a table with some of the students and as far as I could see, also engaged in free writing. Students were not allowed to talk to each other or to Ms. Martin during free writing but they were invited to share what they had written when the timed activity was over. In these notebooks, I was able to examine some of the texts that the children wrote when they were allowed to write about anything at all. Often the students wrote re-tellings of books they had read. Other times they wrote lists of things that they liked or reflections on class discussions. Sometimes the student entries were fictional narratives and other times they were more non-fictional.
or factual explorations. These documents were supplemented by surveys that I used with the students either as part of my regular teaching or as ways to learn more about them for this project.

**Surveys**

The first survey I administered was designed for Ms. Stevens' class in conjunction with a Media Literacy unit that I piloted at the beginning of the year. The survey concerned media that the students engaged with as a way of getting in touch with how immersed in media they were and what kinds of media they used. I was also interested in seeing if the class had any favourite TV shows, websites, computer games or radio stations, as I thought it would be important for me to tune into these and know what they were watching or listening to. As it turned out, I learned that the students were very engaged in a wide variety of media but that there were few common "favourites". The Simpsons rated as the highest television show and Eminem rated as the most popular singer, but beyond these, the students seemed to have very individual tastes in magazines, websites and books.

The second survey I administered concerned issues of reading and identity. I asked the students in Room 18 and Room 11 what they liked to read and who read most in their families. I also asked them about the languages they spoke at home, family immigration history, their parents' occupations and what work they thought they might like to do when they grew up. I administrated this survey to both Ms. Stevens and Ms. Martin's class in an effort to understand the larger context of the students' reading practices. Working on a hunch that gender was not the only determinant of whether a student engaged with reading or not, I was interested in finding out about the students...
socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, as well as some of their family history. This survey taught me a great deal about the students’ home lives and I believe it made me both a better teacher for them and a better researcher. This survey helped me to know the students better and most of them seemed happy to share this information about themselves. This survey also helped to establish rapport during the interviews as I was able to refer to it at times during our discussions.

**Interviews**

After seven months of observing these classes, I began interviewing the students of Room 18. A twenty-minute interview was administered individually to all of the 26 students in the grade 5/6 class who had returned their permission forms. These interviews took place in a quiet seminar room at the back of the library and were videotaped on a digital camera. The interview questions addressed a variety of issues concerning gender, identity and reading (Appendix I.). The remaining sections of this thesis focus specifically on the grade 5/6 students’ responses to questions concerning their constructions of gender normative behaviour, gendered reading practices and the consequences of gender crossing behaviour.

**Analysis**

Digital videotapes of interviews with the students of Room 18 were compressed and burned to CD and then transcribed, coded and analyzed using the video data analysis program *V Prism* on a lap top computer. This program allows the researcher to code directly on the video data rather than on paper transcriptions of the video data. Using this program in this way, a researcher can easily navigate a large body of data. The program also allows for quick location and transcription of portions of the data. For example,
although during the interviews I asked the students about the sports they liked to play, using Vprism I was able to fast forward past the students’ responses to these questions and locate their answers to my questions about reading and gender. Parts of the interview could then be transcribed in detail and other parts could be transcribed briefly. After the interviews were transcribed and coded, the laptop computer was then passed on to a research assistant, a graduate student familiar with Feminist Post-Structuralist ideas of gender and identity for inter-rating. Any discrepancy between the initial coding and the inter-rater’s analysis were then examined, discussed and assessed. In the following pages, I will examine the students from Room 18’s responses to the interview questions as outlined above.
Conversations about Gender and Reading

Language and Culture are no longer scripts to be acquired, as much as they are conversations in which people can participate.

The question of who is learning what and how much is essentially a question of what conversations they are a part of, and this question is a subset of the more powerful question of what conversations are around to be had in a given culture.

(McDermott, 1993, p.295)

An examination of the students from Room 18's responses to questions concerning issues of gender, reading and the consequences of gender crossing behaviour presents us with a window into how the gender reading gap may be being reproduced in elementary school. An examination of these students' talk allows us, in a sense, to eavesdrop on what conversations they are a part of and what conversations "are around to be had" in their local culture (McDermott, 1993).

These students' words also give us the opportunity to view some of their patterns of investment in a larger social and political context. When we examine what these students have to say about gender and reading collectively, their ideas appear to be more than just reflections of their individual opinions and desires. When looked at collectively, their words seem to reflect larger narratives of what it is to be a boy or a girl and what it is to be a reader in Post-industrial society. In addition, when we examine these students'
talk using Critical Socio-cultural ideas of learning and literacy and Feminist Post-Structuralist ideas of gender and identity, we can begin to see some of the ways that issues of gender, reading and power are related in the culture in which these students live and learn. These students’ words can also help us to see what kinds of social and cultural capital boys may be investing in when they choose not to invest in reading.

The students in Room 18’s talk suggests a discourse of gender normative behaviour is common in their social world. The students appear to be frequently involved in conversations of a literal or symbolic nature, concerning what constitutes gender normative behaviour. In addition, the students’ responses indicate that reading practices have become part of this discourse of gender normativity. Whether a student reads much, or is interested in reading appears to be connected in these students’ minds to whether that student is a girl or a boy. The students told me repeatedly that girls read more than boys and that girls liked to read more than boys.

Similarly, the students’ testimonies reveal that there are severe social consequences for certain students’ gender crossing behaviour or non-normative performances of gender. The students informed me that when a boy crosses gender lines, it is a serious social taboo within their local culture. By listening to these students we can hear that boys’ gender crossing behaviour is also frequently associated with homosexuality in their local culture and that when a boy crosses gender lines, he opens himself up to homophobic harassment.

In the following pages, I will examine in detail the students’ responses to questions concerning gender, reading and the consequences of gender crossing behaviour. In conclusion, I will discuss the implications of these responses. In particular, I will
explore what the students’ responses suggest in terms of how we might most effectively bridge the gender reading gap.

The Discourse of Gender Normative Behaviour

Yesterday Ms. Stevens stopped me briefly in the hallway to ask if I might have a good book for Jackie, a grade five student who reads at about a grade three level. She told me he likes books about animals and then said maybe he might like a “technological” book. I am unsure what animals and technology have in common - except perhaps that they are both considered to be “gender appropriate” topics for boys.

Field Diary, September 26.

While shopping for the school library at an annual publishers’ display today, I overheard a female Teacher-Librarian talking with great assurance to her male colleague. As she examined one of the thousands of titles on display she said “These are just the kind of thing grade one boys like - they want lots of pictures and little writing.” I thought about my students. I thought about Eddie, Matthew and David and about how all three boys were avid readers of ‘chapter books’ in grade one. I thought about James who clamoured for dense non-fiction texts at the same age.

Field Diary, November 6.

In the hallway today I overheard Charlotte, a grade one student, say to her classmate Julian “You don’t like girls’ toys Julian!” in a tone that sounded like an admonishment or a directive. I saw Julian stop as he reached towards Charlotte’s “Little Mermaid” figurine. I addressed the issue with the two of them, asking Charlotte why
Evidence of a discourse of gender normative behaviour, or the idea that there are normal versus unusual behaviours for each gender was found throughout the data collected. For example, during the interviews with the students, when I asked if there were some things that girls like to do more than boys like to do and vice versa, the majority of the students answered positively. A positive response to this question was taken as evidence of a discourse of gender normative behaviour, as the question contains an implied reference to what girls and boys normally or generally like to do. In addition, when I asked Jackie, a grade five student, what would happen if a boy did a girl thing, for example what would happen if a boy wore nail polish, Jackie exclaimed “that’s just crazy!” indicating that such gender crossing behaviour was outside the realm of normalcy. Similarly, when I asked Jackie why people might have a problem with a boy who did a “girl thing” he told me that people might have a problem with such gender crossing because it is “not normal”.

Evidence of a discourse of gender normative behaviour also echoed through a wide variety of the informal observations I made throughout the year. Like Best (1983), Davies (1993) and Thorne (1993), I witnessed numerous discussions concerning what constituted gender appropriate activities, behaviour, and clothing at different times of the year. I witnessed these discussions during observations of the students in their
classrooms, in the hallways, in the library and in the yard. In addition, some of the adults at the school made similar remarks, leading me to see that this discourse was widespread and common.

Evidence of this discourse was also found when I asked the students if they had ever heard someone say to a boy, “don’t act like a girl/don’t be such a girl” or if they had ever heard someone say to a girl, “don’t act like a boy/don’t be such a boy”. The vast majority of the students answered positively to at least one of these questions. A positive response to one or both of these questions was taken as further evidence of a common discourse of gender normativity, as the phrase “don’t be such a girl” or “don’t act like a boy” implies there are certain way of behaving that are typical of girls or ‘normal’ for girls and other ways of behaving that are typical of boys or ‘normal’ for boys.

When asked how often the students had heard such remarks, many of the students told me they had heard them “a lot” or “lots of times”. When asked where they had heard words like these, the students told me they had heard these remarks at school, at home and in their neighbourhoods.

LM: Have you ever heard someone say “don’t be such a girl” or “don’t act like a girl” to a boy?

Jackie: I heard it in the (school) yard

Caroline: My Mom said that to my little brother

Wallace: Yeah, oh yeah, all the time…My Coach says that

Chuck: I’ve heard it a lot of times, (I heard it) in the park

Some students also relayed stories about this kind of remark that they had heard from relatives at other schools, indicating their awareness that this discourse was both widespread and common.
LM: Have you ever heard someone say “don’t be such a girl” or “don’t act like a girl” to a boy?

Justin: Yeah, my cousin (at another school) told me about that ...a lot of my cousins who are boys get teased like that

From these students’ responses, we can see that the discourse of gender normative behaviour is a popular discourse in their lives, at school, at home and in their neighbourhoods.

However, a few of the students conveyed a resistance to the idea that there might be gender normative activities. When asked whether there were some things that girls liked to do more than boys and vice versa, at times Anna, Justin, Tessa and Wallace asserted that boys and girls participated in such a wide range of activities that it was difficult to name certain activities as particularly feminine or particularly masculine.

Similarly, when asked if there were some things that boys liked to read more than girls liked to read and vice versa, Tessa stated plainly that she could not make such a generalization about either boys’ or girls’ reading habits. Yet at the same time, Tessa acknowledged that other people frequently did make such generalizations. Thus it appears that the discourse of gender normative behaviour is common in the social world of these students even though a few of them seem to resist it or are not interested in participating in it.

When the students’ responses to these questions were looked at more closely it became apparent that there were some particularly noteworthy aspects to this discourse of gender normativity. On close examination, it appeared that the students named fewer activities as normative masculine activities than as normative feminine activities. In
addition, a few of the students, without probing, identified reading as a particularly feminine activity.

**Normative Masculinity Vs. Normative Femininity**

Shane is five. Today is the first day his Senior Kindergarten class has visited the school library this year. After a mini-lesson on the letter B and a story, I invite the students to choose a book to bring back to their classroom. As the students file out of the library, I notice that Shane does not have a book. I ask Ms. Henderson if I may keep Shane behind to help him choose a book and she assents. As we descend the stairs to the library, Shane announces to me: “I only like scary books” and then he pauses as if considering his options. “Scary books” he reiterates “and books about sports”.

Field Diary, September 11.

When asked about what boys like to do, the majority of the students told me without hesitation that boys like to play sports. In fact, “Sports” was the first answer for a great number of the students when they were asked “what do boys like to do?” A number of the students also named playing outside, playing video games and playing with Yu Gi oh cards as typical masculine activities. However, “Sports” was the most common answer given to this question from all of the twenty-six students interviewed.

**LM:** Are there some things that boys like to do more than girls?

**Justin:** From what I’ve seen and what I know, I think boys like to play sports a lot more than girls

**Carolene:** (Boys like to) play around outside or something

**Hardy:** Sports

**Kevin:** (Boys) like to go down and play sports and sometimes go to the arcade
Allen: I think sports

Jenny: Guys like sports a lot... and Yu Gi oh cards

Donny: Boys like to do more sports than girls... riding bikes

Melody: Boys like to play more video games and baseball and those Things

Marcella: Probably play sports

Chiara: I think boys like to play more sports and things

Kate: Yeah, maybe play with bugs

Ariel: (Boys) like to race, duel and compete a lot

Cindy: Boys like to play sports

Yami: (Boys) play with cards

In contrast, the students seemed to hold more diverse ideas of typical feminine activities. There was no single activity that was seen as typically feminine in the way that “sports” were seen as typically masculine. Some of the students told me that girls like to dress up, put on make up or wear nail polish. Some of the students identified volleyball, swimming and badminton as feminine activities. A few of the students stated that girls like to “stay home”, a few of the students told me girls like to hang out and talk and a few told me that girls like to shop. One of the students told me that girls like to collect toys and another told me girls like to do art.

LM: Are there some things that girls like to do more than boys?

Jackie: They like to dress up and put on nail polish

Melody: Girls like swimming and not like running around and kicking things

Wallace: Girls like to play badminton, some girls like that sport
Chiara: I think girls like to hang out and talk more

Yami: Put on make up, boys would only do that if they were in a play

Justin: I usually see more girls playing volleyball and tennis than boys

Cindy: Girls like to go shopping

Marcella: (Girls) Fix their hair

Ariel: (Girls) paint their nails...I find girls like to dress up more in tight itchy Clothing

Kevin: Girls like to stay home...girls like to collect toys, not play with them, just collect them

Allen: Maybe art, they like drawing

Of interest to this study, a number of the students, without probing, connected girls with literacy practices and the tools of literacy.

LM: Are there some things that girls like to do more than boys like to do?

Courtney: Girls like to play boys catch girls and write notes

Donny: (Girls) like to play with gel pens ... and write notes to each other

In addition, two of the students particularly identified reading as a normative feminine activity. Wallace and Hardy told me, without probing, that girls like to read more than boys.

LM: Are there some things that girls like to do more than boys like to do?

Wallace: They read

Hardy: Read

This finding was echoed in the students’ responses to questions concerning their constructions of reading as a gendered behaviour. When students were asked about who they considered to be ‘readers’ and whether girls and boys read as much as each other,
the majority of them constructed reading as a feminine activity, rather than as a gender neutral activity or as a masculine activity.

Reading Practices and Gender Performances: Reading as a “Girl Thing”

When the students were asked if they had heard the term ‘reader’ before, as in “that person is a reader” or “that person is a real reader”, most of them said they had. When asked to define what a reader was, those who had heard the term and even those who had not, told me “a reader is someone who reads a lot” or “a reader is someone who likes to read a lot”. When asked if there were equal numbers of boy readers and girl readers, the majority of the students said they thought there were more girl readers.

LM: Do you think there are as many boy readers as girl readers?

Hardy: No. Girl readers. There’s way more… a boy reader can read half a book and then he just gives up, if it’s on his own free time he won’t read

Ariel: I think there’s more girl readers than boy readers

Courtney: No, (there’s more) girls

Tessa: No, it’s considered uncool for a boy to read and spend his time on homework and things

Donny: I think there’s like more girl readers than boy readers because boys aren’t that much into books, they’re more like into sports, games, stuff like that

Chiara I think there’s more girl readers than boy readers ‘cause they’re just always more interested in reading

A few of the students were more ambiguous about the relationship between gender and reading.

LM: Do you think there are as many boy readers as girl readers?

Wallace: I think there’s the same generally but in our class there’s more
Girls (who are readers)

LM: Do you think there are as many boy readers as girl readers?

Jenny: Mostly boys just like to look at magazines but some girls don't like reading

However, when asked whether they thought boys and girls read as much as each other, many of the students said they thought girls read more.

LM: Do you think girls and boys read as much as each other?

Carolene: I think girls like reading the most than boys because boys don't really get into their books more than girls do

Hardy: (Most boys) don't do much reading

Kevin: No, I think girls stay at home and read and boys go outside and play

Melody: Not really, because boys like to play more sports than girls and maybe some girls like to spend more time at home

It is interesting to note that, unlike many teachers I have spoken to, when asked whether they thought girls were better readers than boys, the majority of the students did not think so. The majority of the students thought both boys and girls could read as well as each other, particularly if they practiced.

LM: Do you think boys and girls read as well as each other?

Hardy: Yeah, if they (boys) try hard enough they can read as well

Tessa: I know some boys who read better than girls, I think if people tried, yeah of course, but some boys are like 'only wussies do that' so they leave it to girls

Only one student told me he thought girls read better than boys.

LM: Do you think boys and girls read as well as each other?
Kevin: I think girls read better because they're smarter than boys at school

Also interesting to note, one student told me clearly that the idea that boys didn’t read as much as girls was a stereotype. Yami stated plainly that he felt it was a stereotype that girls read more than boys even if some boys seemed to buy into that stereotype.

LM: Do you think there are as many boy readers as girl readers? Do you think boys and girls read as much as each other?

Yami: Neither...

LM: Sorry?

Yami: That’s just a stereotype... Hardy thinks he doesn’t like to read but I gave him a book and he read it

Similarly, Anna with a budding sense of multi-literacies told me that there were as many boy readers as girl readers if you broadened the definition of reading.

LM: Do you think there are as many boy readers as girl readers? Do you think boys and girls read as much as each other?

Anna: They’re equal, it’s just that people are into different things, even though it’s not a book it could be a magazine

However, in terms of trying to understand how the gender reading gap is created and maintained in elementary school, the most important finding for me was that in these students’ social world, not only is reading seen as a feminine activity but that there are severe social consequences for boys who step outside of the boundaries of normative masculinity. These students told me plainly that boys’ gender performances are closely policed and that the consequences of enacting a non-normative version of masculinity were ridicule and marginalization.
Policing the Gender Border

I am working with a small group of Kindergartners on an art project. Out of nowhere Ryan exclaims: “I like Spiderman”. Liam and Sebastian agree that they too like Spiderman. In an apparent response, Brittany pipes up with “I like Snow White”. At this Liam responds happily: “I like Snow White too”. “Ewww.” Says Brittany, “Boys don’t like Snow White. Boys don’t like Snow White or Barbie.”

Field Diary, December 12.

Ms. Martin and Ms. Stevens have organized all of the students (with the exception of Daniel and Chiara) into same sex pairs. As Ms. Martin calls out the names of the pairs, a few of the older boys express approval or disapproval of the younger boys that they have been matched with. For example, Wallace let out a “Yes!” when Ms. Martin reads out that he is matched with Gus, while Hardy shows no sign of welcome when it is announced that he is to work with Timothy. Similarly, Sam let out a small groan when Ms. Martin announces that he will work with Jake. The girls say nothing when their pairs are announced. The teachers do not address this behaviour.

First Meeting of Reading Buddies, September 27.

On a wordless sign prohibiting dogs from the playground someone has written in magic marker, “No Transsexual Dogs”.

Field Diary, September 9.

When the students’ responses to questions concerning phrases like “don’t be such a girl” or “you’re acting like a boy” were examined in close detail, it appeared the
majority of the class said they had heard someone say “don’t be such a girl” or “you’re acting like a girl” to a boy. However, only four of the twenty-six students, Anna, Ariel Courtney and Chuck reported having heard someone chastise a girl for “acting like a boy/being a boy”.

That the students had heard more of the former kind of gender policing (“don’t be such a girl”) suggests that in their social world, normative masculinity is more overtly policed than is normative femininity. This kind of asymmetry in terms of overt gender policing has been found in several other studies of gender in elementary school (Best, 1983; Thorne, 1993). In addition, a few of the students told me plainly that there was little to no negative consequence if a girl stepped outside of the bounds of normative feminine behaviour.

*LM:* What would happen if a girl did a boy thing?

*Kate:* I don’t think anything would happen

*LM:* Have you ever heard someone say “you’re acting like a boy” or “don’t be such a boy” to a girl?

*Justin:* I have never heard of a girl getting teased (for doing a boy thing) because actually when a girl does a boy thing people start cheering if they’re the only one and they’re pretty good, they’ll start cheering because she’s brave enough to play with all the boys...that’s what I don’t get about that, it’s way different

Like Justin, Anna told me that at times girls’ gender crossing is actually welcomed by their classmates and that the consequences of gender crossing are much more negative for a boy than they are for a girl.

*LM:* Have you ever heard someone say “you’re acting like a boy” or “don’t be such a boy” to a girl?

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4 As noted in chapter 4, I have reason to believe Ariel may have fabricated her story for my benefit.
Anna: The thing I don’t like about that...it’s okay if a girl acts like a boy but it’s like it’s not okay if a boy acts like a girl

LM: So have you ever heard someone say “you’re acting like a boy” or “don’t be such a boy” to a girl?

Anna: No, actually they (the boys) are happy when they (the girls) play with them...

LM: So you think people don’t have as much of a problem when a girl does a boy thing?

Anna: Yeah

LM: is there another word they use (when a girl acts like a boy)?

Anna: Tomboy

LM: Have you heard people say that before?

Anna: Well, when a girl dresses in comfortable clothing and stuff, some people just say tomboy, she acts like a tomboy, but that isn’t an offense to them... it isn’t offensive

LM: Have you heard that at school?

Anna: Yeah, ‘cause they like say, I usually like to play football and stuff like that and sometimes I could but that isn’t an offense, at least not to me

Similarly, Kate told me that she felt a boy who crossed gender lines would get teased more than a girl who crossed gender lines.

LM: Who do you think would get teased more, a girl who did a ‘boy thing’ or a boy who did a ‘girl thing’?

Kate: A boy

Whether girls are truly given more free reign in terms of the activities and behaviours that are considered to be gender normative for them and whether they are actually less carefully policed, is an issue up for speculation. However, it appears that at
least in these students’ minds, the consequences of enacting non-normative versions of masculinity are much harsher than for enacting non-normative versions of femininity.

While Justin, Anna and Kate were clear that there few reprisals for girls who crossed gender lines, the majority of the twenty-six students told me without hesitation that the consequences of non-normative masculinity were ridicule, isolation and marginalization.

The Consequences of Non-Normative Performances of Masculinity

When asked what would happen if a boy did a ‘girl thing’ the vast majority of the students told me that a boy who crossed gender lines would be laughed at or would be teased.

*LM:* What would happen in your classroom if a boy did a girl thing?  What would people say?

*Wallace:* He would get teased

*Jackie:* People would make fun of him (laughs) … like “Ewww you’re a girl”

*Justin:* If there was someone who liked to tease people, they’d probably tease him… they’d probably say “oh you’re a girl”

*Carolene:* Maybe kids would laugh at him…they’d say “are you trying to be a girl or something?”

*Zeelia:* He would probably get badly teased

*Kevin:* They would say “you look like a boy but you’re really a girl”

*Ariel:* He’d probably get teased… the boys would sort of tease him… some people would mock him… “you’re a girl, you’re a girl, ha ha ha ha ha”

*Courtney:* (they would say) “look at that boy, Ewww” and they’d look at him and point, they’d make fun of him

*Jenny:* Probably people would tease him, (they’d say) “Are you a girl or a boy?”
I think they'd make fun of him... I think they'd laugh at him very hard

Their buddies would laugh at them

That boy would be called a girl

Weird. People would think it was queer... Jackie and Chris would say something. Jackie especially. Maybe Justin... People would think it's kind of weird or something -- if they hadn't seen it before

People would make fun of him and stuff, call him names and stuff, say he's a girl... like ha ha you're a girl

One of the most poignant responses to this question came from Tommy, who was an ESL student, recently arrived from Hong Kong. Tommy had only been in Canada since August and had arrived knowing very little English. However, he knew very well what would happen in his classroom if a boy did "a girl thing". He answered my question with little hesitation.

LM: What would happen in your classroom if a boy did a girl thing? What would people say?

Tommy: They (the other boys) would laugh

Some of the students also told me that if a boy did a "girl thing" he would be isolated or marginalized.

LM: What would happen in your classroom if a boy did a girl thing? What would people say?

Melody: They'd make fun of him ... one of that group would say "oh you shouldn't be in our group"

LM: So they wouldn't be friends with him if he was doing girl stuff?

Melody: Yeah, they'd make fun of him

LM: Why do you think people have a problem when a boy does something that they think is a girl thing?
Courtney: When other people hang out with the cool people, they think ‘oh that boys shouldn’t act like a girl’, they thought he was cool but then he started to (do girl things) then they don’t hang out with him no more

LM: What would happen if a boy did a girl thing, for instance if he joined the synchronized swimming team?

Tessa: The girls would probably laugh and if anyone found out from his school he’d probably be dead socially... no body would ever, you’d be laughed at, if the most popular boy here (at this school) did that he’d be laughed out (of school)

Of interest in terms of this study, one student particularly linked the fact that another boy was often teased for “acting like a girl” to the fact that the boy in question spent a great amount of time reading.

LM: Have you ever seen a boy get teased for acting like a girl?

Justin: I’ve seen it at this school when people bug Danny

LM: What do they say when they bug Danny?

Justin: ‘cause he doesn’t play as many sports he usually reads and that, they usually call him a girl because he doesn’t play sports

Finally, a few of the students drew my attention to the close relationship such gender policing/transphobia has to homophobia/ homophobic harassment.

LM: What would happen in your classroom if a boy did a girl thing? What would people say?

Donny: (They’d say) he’s a girl and some other bad words

LM: Sorry, what would they say?

Donny: He’s gay and stuff like that

LM: What would happen in your classroom if a boy did a girl thing? What would people say?

Anna: I don’t want to use bad language but they would usually call you a faggit or gay or something or stop being so girly-ish, words like that
LM: What do you think people think when they see a boy do a girl thing?

Chuck: They think that other person is weird or something, because like boys usually do different things than a girl.

LM: So if they saw a boy do a girl thing they might think that that boy -

Chuck: was like gay or something

LM: Why do you think people have a problem when a boy does a girl thing?

Carolene: Maybe because when he’ll grow up he’ll be like gay or something

However, one student denied that his classmates connected gender crossing behaviour to being or becoming gay.

LM: Do you think people think boys who do girl things, or what they think of as girl things, are gay?

Hardy: No, no they don’t

Hardy’s assertion draws our attention to the possibility that ‘transphobic’ may be a more accurate term for students’ harassment of their classmates when they cross gender lines. Some students may connect gender crossing with homosexuality but others may simply be reacting to the gender crossing itself. Interestingly, although Chris, one of the most committed boy readers acknowledged that boys got teased for doing girl things and yet he also seemed to downplay the likelihood of this happening. Chris also told me there had been times when he was younger that he got teased for reading ‘too much’. It could be speculated that this teasing was a part of Chris’ world but that his allegiance to his peers was greater than it was to me as an adult researcher and thus he sought to protect them.

LM: What would happen if a boy wanted to read a book like The Babysitters Club in your class? How do you think people would
Chris: I don’t know, they shouldn’t have a right to say anything but they might say “you’re a boy you shouldn’t be reading this book it’s for girls” I’m not sure what they would say, I don’t think a lot of people would, like maybe some kid that thinks it’s funny… like a popular guy in the class would say “look he’s reading the Babysitters’ Club”…

LM: So do you think a boy who read one of these books would get teased?

Chris: Not a lot, like there’s a possibility they would, but not a lot

However, Chris also affirmed that boys were more likely to get teased for reading a ‘girly book’ than girls were for reading something considered to be a ‘boys’ book’.

Chris: It’s more on boys, they get teased more if they read a girly book than girls if they read something that’s (thought of as a boys’ book)

LM: So if a boy does a ‘girl thing’ will he get teased as much or more than a girl who does a boy thing?

Chris: Yeah, the boys will get teased more if they do a girl thing, that’s for sure

These students’ words allow us to see some of the ways in which their world is organized. Their words tell us that there is a discourse of gender normativity that is common and widespread in their local culture. Their words also tell us that there is a wide range of activities that are considered to be normative feminine activities and that there is a narrower scope of activities that are considered to be normative masculine activities. These students tell us that within their social world reading is considered to be a normative feminine behaviour but it is not considered to be a normative masculine behaviour.

Finally, these students tell us that there are severe social consequences for non-normative performances of masculinity. From these students’ words, we can hear that the consequences for boys who cross gender lines are ridicule, isolation and
marginalization. These students also tell us that when boys do “girl things”, there is a
good chance that they will be perceived as gay or that they will be subjected to
homophobic or transphobic harassment. In the following chapter, I will discuss the
implications of these findings. In particular, I will examine what these findings suggest in
terms of how we might most effectively bridge the gender reading gap.
I am attending a session at one of the largest annual reading conferences for teachers in Canada. During the two day conference, almost four thousand practicing and pre-service teachers will attend up to eight sessions on topics such as “Developing Oral Language in Young Children”, “Connecting Literature and Mathematics”, and “Assessing Reading Comprehension”. At the podium, a white middle aged man in a suit, the author of dozens of young adult novels, is telling us what makes a “Guy Book” and what makes a “Girl Book”.

The audience, made up primarily of well-dressed white women nods in agreement and dutifully writes down the characteristics of these books as summarized by the speaker’s power point presentation. This session which focuses on “The Boy Reading Problem” has been a popular one. The speaker has presented his talk three times in two days to approximately 430 teachers. I have attended this session twice as I am curious about the author’s approach and the response from the audience. In both sessions I have heard murmurs of agreement and laughter in response to the speaker’s jokes about what men and boys “are like” and why they don’t read.

After a few anecdotes, the speaker tells us that in order to encourage boys in language arts we must be sensitive to their reading and writing needs. Boys, he tells us, “need continuing action” and “limited reflection or introspection”. In addition, he tells us boys “need violence, danger, rebellion, and conflict”. Finally, the speaker informs us that boys “need bombs, barf, fights and jokes”. In order to address the “boy reading problem”, the speaker recommends that we ask boys and girls different questions in our
language arts programs. He suggests “What would you do?” is a better question for boys than “How would you feel?” as “Boys are uncomfortable with feelings”.

The speaker tells us that we cannot change many things that may have an impact on boys’ low literacy rates. For example, he tells us we cannot change the fact that there are not enough male primary teachers nor that “some socio-economic groups don’t value boy literacy”. The speaker concludes with a suggestion that we experiment with separate literature circles for boys and girls as this separation “might benefit both genders”. I am struck by how willing the audience appears to be to accept and embrace the author’s recommendations. The session ends ten minutes ahead of schedule but neither the speaker nor the audience make any move to use the remaining time for questions or discussion of the implications of his suggestions.

Field Diary, February 7.

The students’ in Ms. Steven’s grade 5/6 class raise important questions about the current gender gap in reading attitudes and their achievement levels. By listening carefully to these students, we can identify a number of key issues that may be relevant to how the gender reading gap is created and maintained in elementary schools. In particular, these students’ words can help us to understand why many boys may not invest highly in reading and reading culture. In addition, by listening to these students we may come to understand how the gender reading gap might be most effectively bridged. Yet, when we listen to these students, their words may tell us something that we were not expecting to hear.

When we listen to the students of Room 18, we can hear that there is a discourse of gender normativity that runs throughout their lives. These students tell us that this
discourse is heard at home, at school and in their neighbourhoods. When we listen to these students, we can also hear that in their social world, there is a wide variety of activities that are considered to be normative for girls and a much smaller range of activities that are considered to be normative for boys. Significantly, when we listen carefully to these students we can hear that 'reading' and 'not-reading' have become part of the discourse of gender normativity. The students in Room 18, like many other students in the Post-Industrial world, by and large identify being interested in reading as gender normative for girls and appear to identify being less interested in reading or not being interested in reading as gender normative for boys (Martino, 1995; Millard, 1997; Shapiro, 1990).

These students also testify that masculine to feminine gender crossing behaviour is far less likely to be tolerated than feminine to masculine gender crossing behaviour in their local culture. The students of Room 18 bear witness to the fact that the social consequences for performing a non-normative version of masculinity in elementary school are severe. Boys who do not conform to current ideas of normative masculine behaviour run the risk of ridicule, isolation and marginalization.

Finally, from listening to these students' ideas of what happens to boys who perform non-normative versions of masculinity, we can also hear that issues of gender policing, transphobia and homophobia may be wound around boys' constructions as readers and as non-readers. While Hardy maintained that students did not think boys who did "girl things" were gay, a number of the students in Room 18 bore witness to the

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5 While transphobia is most frequently used to describe fear or hatred of transgendered or transexual people in this instance I use it to refer to students' anxiety concerning what they perceive to be gender crossing behaviour. In this way any kind of gender policing can be seen as transphobic.
idea that boys who did ‘girl things’ were often called “faggit” or were perceived to be gay, or potentially gay.\(^6\)

So what are we to make of these students’ words? How do these students’ words suggest the gender reading gap is created and in turn, how do these students’ words suggest this gap might be bridged? While earlier conceptions of the gender reading gap have suggested that differences in boys’ and girls’ physiology/cognitive styles or differences in their socialization are at the root of the gender reading gap, these students’ words suggest the story may be much more complicated. In particular, these students’ words suggest that their investments in their gender identities may play a significant role in the creation and maintenance of the gender reading gap.

From listening to the students in Room 18, it appears that within current constructions of reading as a “feminine activity”, there is little space for a boy to be both “masculine” and “a reader” at the same time. In addition, from listening to these students it appears that by late elementary school, for a boy to position himself as a reader, or to invest in reading is to open the door to homophobic/transphobic harassment or to being perceived of as gay. Thus it appears that at this moment in time, elementary aged boys are put in the position of having to choose between reading and being accepted as a ‘normal’, straight or heterosexual boy.\(^7\) The students’ words suggest that one of the

\(^6\) In support of this connection between gender crossing and queerness, during my pilot study, Emanuel, a grade three boy told me clearly that when a boy acts like a girl “it means they’re gay”. It is also worth noting that other researchers have found that boys who invest in academic discourses such as reading often suffer from intense homophobic harassment (Martino, 1995; Renold, 2001).

\(^7\) It is worth noting that several other researchers have also found that boys and men’s lack of engagement with reading, as part of a range of academic discourses has been linked to their conceptions of normative/hegemonic masculinity and their understandings of what happens to those who perform non-normative/non-hegemonic versions of masculinity (Martino, 1995; Epstien, 1998; Archer, Pratt et al.2001; Renold, 2001).
reasons why boys may not be investing in reading is that they feel such an investment might run counter to their attempt to maintain a heteronormative masculine identity.

Knowing what we do of the way queer students, and those who are perceived to be queer, are subjected to daily verbal and physical harassment, it should come as no surprise that many boys would choose not to read rather than to open the door to such taunts (Askew & Ross 1988; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000; Renold, 2001; Ries, 1997). From listening to the students of Room 18, we can hear that it is not safe for boys to experiment with feminine activities in their local culture. These students make it plain that to do so is to run the risk of ridicule, isolation and marginalization.

Thus the students of Room 18 open up the possibility that some of the ways that we might bridge the gender reading gap would be to address issues of gender normativity, transphobia and homophobia in elementary schools. If boys perceive that it is unsafe to invest in reading as a “girl thing”, we could choose to try to deconstruct the idea that reading is a “girl thing”. However we could also choose to try and make their world less transphobic and less homophobic. These students’ words also suggest that some of the current attempts to bridge the gender reading gap may not actually be very effective.

When we listen carefully to these students’ words, it appears that some of the current initiatives to bridge the gender reading gap may actually do more harm than good. As these students spoke to me, I began to understand that if we really want to address the current gender gap in reading attitudes and achievement, we are going to have to do more than just “buy books that boys are interested in”, as suggested by a popular speaker on this topic. In fact, the assumption and propagation of the idea that there are such things
as "Boy Books" or "Girl Books" may be a significant part of the problem. For delineating the world into masculine and feminine interests/activities perpetuates and reinforces the discourse of gender normativity. Initiatives such as having different questions, different reading materials or different teaching methods for boys and girls may suggest to students that boys and girls are far more different than they are similar. This suggestion may in turn lead students to "up the ante" of their investments in what is considered to be gender normative behaviour, including what is considered to be gender normative reading behaviour. Thus boys may choose to read less and girls may choose to read more as a way of signifying their gender.

Similarly, although some researchers and writers (Brozo, 2002; Scieszka, 2003) have suggested creating a section of "Guy Books" separate from the rest of the library collection or putting up posters that tell us that "Guys Read", from listening to my students, I feel these strategies may work against our best efforts to bridge the gender reading gap. From listening to my students, I believe these kinds of self-conscious moves to encourage boys to read may achieve the opposite result as they may suggest that it is unusual for boys to read.

Similar criticisms have been made of the "famous few" approach of encouraging girls to participate in math and science. As noted by Berrill and De Bell (1997), highlighting the few famous women mathematicians and scientists may give boys and girls the impression that being involved in math or science is unusual for a girl. Creating special sections for boys in the library or putting up posters to try and convince boys to read may have a similar effect. Yet, this does not mean there is nothing we can do to bridge the gender reading gap.
In her exploration of students’ understandings of adult attempts to introduce ideas of gender equity, Davies (1993) asserts that when adults introduce a discourse of gender equity, it often only serves to affect the minor details of children’s’ understandings of gender differences. Davies argues further, that the introduction, or layering on, of such a discourse will have no impact on the students if the details in question have become key signifiers of masculinity or femininity. From listening to these students, I believe “reading” and “not-reading” have become just such key signifiers of gender in elementary school. In many of these students’ minds, it appears that girls are girls in part because they read and boys are boys in part because they do not read or because they read less. Thus if we hope to bridge the gender reading gap, we are going to have to do more than just layer on a new discourse that tells students that “boys read”.

Following Davies’ (1993) assertion, if we want to bridge the gender reading gap we are going to have to engage our students in unpacking the discourse of gender normative behaviour not just issue another adult dictum. Like Davies (1993), I do not believe we need to re-educate our students or re-socialize them for gender equity. Nor do I think we need to tell them that boys read in order to bridge the gender reading gap. Instead, like Davies, I believe we need to create spaces for our students to talk about these issues. We need to provide a forum for them to raise questions about how things are and how they could be. If we are interested in bridging the gender reading gap, we are going to have to begin a new conversation with our students, one that raises questions about how the discourse of gender normative behaviour is created, who benefits from it and how it can be dismantled. Boys and girls need to be engaged in conversations about
the idea that activities such as reading could be designated as either a “girl thing” or a “boy thing”. They do not need to be told that reading is a boy a thing.

Through my work with my students over the past several years, I find even very young children can be receptive to these kinds of questions. Through my observations of my students, I believe we need to give them the opportunity to expand their basic gut level passionate ideas about justice and fairness to broader ideas of gender equity, homophobia and social justice. We need to support them in their attempts to read critically all the cruel and unjust notions of ability, class, gender, queerness and “race” that they are bombarded with every day. To choose not do so, is to leave them without the tools for negotiating safe passage through the sadly ablist, classist, homophobic, racist, sexist, and transphobic world that we live in.

Yet, to do this work is often a challenge. As a practicing teacher, I have seen that under the constraints of current class sizes, standardized curriculum, provincial testing and reporting demands, few classroom teachers take the time to actually address these kinds of issues. In this way, I believe local school boards, ministries of education and faculties of education all have a role to play in bridging the gender gap in reading attitudes and achievements. All of these agencies must look at how they can support practicing and pre-service teachers in their efforts to open up dialogue about issues of gender equity, homophobia and social justice. If they do not, then there is every reason to believe the gender reading gap will not be bridged and that it may actually deepen and widen.

Finally, through my observations, I believe there are significant problems with current conceptions of the gender reading gap. In particular, it appears that current
conceptions of this gap that separate gender from other social identities are of limited use in contemporary classrooms. In addition, current conceptions of this gap that suggest schools are failing boys while girls enjoy unmitigated success appear remarkably limited in their understandings of gender and reading in elementary schools and beyond. In the final chapter of this thesis I will address some of the problems with current conceptions of the gender reading gap as a note to future researchers.
Future Directions: Class, Gender and "Race" in the Reading Club

At recess this morning three grade one boys came to tell me that there were a group of girls who wouldn’t let them play with them. They told me the girls were having a club of “just girls and Julian” when I followed the boys to where the girls were, I found Maggie, Anneke, Jessie, Charlotte and Eva gathered in a circle under the back steps to the Gym.

When I asked the girls if the boys’ allegations were true, Maggie said “I didn’t say no boys, Anneke said it” Anneke said she didn’t say ‘no boys’, but that Jessie had, Jessie also denied having turned the boys away, but said Charlotte had said “no boys allowed”. Charlotte did not deny this accusation. Thinking of Vivian Paley’s “You Can’t Say You Can’t Play” I told them it wasn’t okay for them to exclude the boys and that we didn’t have clubs like that at our school.

Five minutes later, two other primary students, Ashley and Kristen approached me as the bell rang to tell me that the same group of girls had told them they were not allowed to play on the landing above the girls’ meeting place. Apparently this group of girls had told Ashley and Kristen that they were “too noisy” and that they “stomped too much”. Ashley was indignant and she told me all that she and Kristen had been doing was playing a hand clapping game.

Maggie, Anneke, Jessie, Charlotte, Eva and Julian are all various Northern European extractions. Their parents are architects, filmmakers, lawyers and writers. Charlotte is somehow related to a former Prime Minister. Ashley and Kristen are from working class Portuguese and Greek families. Ashley’s mother works in the school
In watching some of the girls' reading choices I often wonder what they are learning from their books and how it will benefit them as they move into high school, or if it actually will. In particular, I worry about the overemphasis on getting or keeping a boyfriend in the magazines and novels they read. Recently, Ms. Colucci told me of a grade five girl in her class who had gushed “I can’t wait to be in a Relationship”. The more I think about girls like Christina and Courtney who don’t really read, the more I think about what the girls read when they do read, the less comfortable I feel with current conceptions of the gender reading gap that sees boys as the victims and girls as the victors.

Field Diary, November 25.

While riding the streetcar to school this morning, I noticed a young woman reading a romance novel beside me. “Dying to Please” was the title of the book. A few minutes later I overheard two teenage girls chatting about their homework. “I feel really proud of myself” said one to the other “I wrote a ten page essay in twenty-four hours.” “That’s good” said her friend, “But is the essay good or bad?” “I think it’s good” replied the first girl, “It expresses all of my inner feelings.”

Field Diary, October 7.
Current conceptions of the gender reading gap depict a world in which boys do not read and girls do. Current portraits of this gap tell us that boys are failing terribly on reading assessments and that they have profoundly negative attitudes towards reading. Many reports on this issue suggest schools are failing boys while girls are enjoying unmitigated academic and social success (Hoff-Somers, 2000; Owens, 2002; Wente, 2003). Certainly, when one looks at some of the evidence, these portraits of the gender reading gap seem to ring true. However, through my observations, I believe many of our current conceptions of the gender reading gap are of limited use in contemporary classrooms.

In particular, current conceptions of this reading gap that separate gender from other social identities fail to recognize significant variations in how this gap is experienced by students from diverse backgrounds. In addition, these depictions which conceive of the gender reading gap as one that de facto disadvantages boys while it advantages girls, fails to grasp the complexity of gender relations both in and out of school. In the following section, I will outline some of the questions that were raised by my year of studying the gender reading gap in a multilingual, multicultural, mixed socio-economic school with a Critical Socio-cultural and Feminist Post-Structuralist framework.

After observing the students at Stony Creek informally for three years and formally for a year, I have come to feel it is important to stress that there are significant variations in how the gender reading gap is experienced by boys and girls from various cultures and socio-economic classes. Through watching the students carefully, I have come to the conclusion that the gender reading gap must also be studied with an eye to
how class and "race" combine with gender in the construction of students as readers and as non-readers. Throughout my year of data collection, I have made an effort to collect data concerning my students' cultural and socio-economic status and their own gender identifications. In doing so, I believe all of these factors are highly significant in how the gender reading gap plays out.

That all of these factors are relevant to the creation of the gender reading gap became particularly clear to me when I observed four students in Ms. Stevens' class. When I watched Christina, Courtney, Chris and Bo during periods of silent reading, I found their behaviour directly contradicted current depictions of gendered reading practices. Christina, a grade five girl, spent most of every silent reading period moving around the classroom, picking up texts and discarding them. She also spent a fair amount of time chatting with her friends or signing herself out to go to the washroom. Courtney, another grade five girl was much the same. I almost never saw Courtney reading during silent reading periods. Most of the time, Courtney appeared to be trying to talk to her friend Jenny, fixing her hair or trying on lip gloss. Meanwhile Chris and Bo, both grade five boys, spent almost every silent reading period sitting quietly at their desks reading. Both boys appeared to be committed readers and finished several novels over the course of the school year.

When I asked Courtney if she liked to read, she told me that given a choice, she'd rather play with her niece. Similarly, Christina told me that she loved drawing and painting but she did not love reading. Courtney comes from a working class Portuguese-Canadian family. Christina is a working class black girl. Chris is a middle class White/Anglo boy and Bo is a lower middle class Chinese-Canadian boy. In watching
these students, I became acutely aware that gender was likely not the only factor that might be influencing their construction as readers and as non-readers. These students reading practices greatly complicated my understanding of the gender reading gap.

In addition, during my interview with Tessa, I became highly aware of the fact that our students have multiple social identities that cannot be arbitrarily separated from one another. My interview with Tessa reminded me that gender is not experienced as a simple binary even in the world of elementary school. Tessa is a white middle class girl in grade six. She is probably the most committed reader in her class and is possibly the most committed reader in the school. Tessa often reads from a book barely concealed in her desk, while her teacher conducts a lesson. Tessa comes to the school library almost every morning to see if I have anything new and engages me in discussions about books whenever she possibly can. When I asked the students of Room 18 who they thought was ‘a reader’ in their class, almost every single student instantly named Tessa. That Tessa is a reader may be seen as the result of the fact that she is a girl in a culture where girls are thought to read more than boys. However, in talking to Tessa, I found the story could easily be much more complicated.

In our interview, I learned that Tessa understood that reading is currently conceived of as a feminine activity. However, I also learned that Tessa knew that in many people’s minds, reading print and being “into books” was something that was connected to middle class culture, as opposed to working class culture. In addition, during our discussion I learned that Tessa saw herself to be a bit of a tomboy, or that she thought of herself as less feminine than some of her classmates. When asked who she thought was particularly feminine, Tessa named a few of the working class girls in Room 18. In this
way, Tessa reminded me that our students are never ‘just one thing’ but that they have multiple identities. Talking with Tessa made me wonder if she might have become a reader, not simply through her investment in her gender identity but through her investment in her *middle class gender identity*. From my reading of other studies concerning “race”, identity, investment and schooling, I believe there is every possibility that Tessa also chose to invest in reading as part of her investment in her identity as a “white” or Anglo-Saxon girl as well (Ibrahim, 1999; Solomon, 1992). In this way it seems important that future research investigate how students’ gender class and “race” all work together to construct some of them as readers and some of them as non-readers.

Finally, through my observations over the past year, I have come to question current conceptions of the gender reading gap that depict boys as victims and girls as victors. In particular, I find this conception fails to recognize how success or lack of it in school based literacy assessments do not necessarily translate into social status in elementary school, or into academic, economic or social success once students have left elementary school (Barra, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001; Hallman, 2000).

While many contemporary portraits of the gender reading gap see boys as the unproblematic victims of this gap, observations of my students’ throughout this school year make me question this assessment. For example, time and time again I observed that the girls who were accomplished readers in Room 18 did not appear to enjoy any signs of social status. Tessa, as the most accomplished reader in the class, worked desperately to create friendship alliances throughout the year, while other students simply had friends. In addition, I observed that Wallace, Hardy and Jackie often controlled classroom discussions by blurtling out answers or causing distractions while the majority of the girls
and the other boys in the class sat by silently. When I asked some of the girls why they
didn’t participate in class discussions, they told me that they “didn’t have anything to
say.” In observing these students in numerous settings, it appeared that little had changed
in terms of unequal gender relations and classroom interactions. On numerous occasions,
I observed teachers and students interacting in gender typed ways, regardless of the
abundant research into gender inequity conducted in the past thirty years.

Similarly, I learned in passing, that although Tessa is an accomplished reader, she
is not at all interested in Math or Science and that her marks in these subjects do not
reflect her ‘well above grade level’ reading scores. Tessa’s lack of interest in these
subjects made me question current depictions of the gender reading gap and the
suggestion that girls are experiencing unmitigated success in school. While many reports
on the gender reading gap assume that girls’ higher reading scores automatically translate
into academic, economic and social success, there are good reasons to believe the story is
not so straightforward.

For example, many reports on gender and education assert that young women are
now entering university at a higher rate than young men. Yet, the actual rate of young
womens’ university enrollment is not significantly higher than that of their brothers.
Young women account for 57% of all undergraduate students. In addition, young women
continue to be under-represented in fields such as math and science, which are often
connected to occupations with higher remuneration. Women currently account for only
33% of economics students, 30% of mathematics and science students and 23% of
engineering students (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2003;
Statistics Canada [STATCAN], 2003).
In addition, while girls may be scoring higher on school based literacy tests, this success does not necessarily mean they will enjoy unmitigated social or economic success once they leave school. As noted by Hallman (2000), despite more than thirty years of struggle for gender equity, women participating full year, full time in the labour force still earn only approximately 72 cents for every that men earn. Women continue to be concentrated in low paying service sector jobs with little or no benefits (Townson, 2000).

As Hallman (2000) writes:

One in five Canadian women lives in poverty. More than half the single parent families headed by women live below the poverty line. Single women, disabled women and Aboriginal women are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Restructuring and downsizing disproportionately affect women workers, and the erosion of health, education and social services has returned many women to the home to pick up the slack as the state reneges on its responsibilities. And women continue to experience violence and abuse at the hands of men, often those who claim to love them, to a degree that belies public abhorrence of these crimes. (p.64)

When I reflected on some of what the girls were reading during this year of data collection, I found I had more questions about how their high investments in reading would help them in the academic, economic and social world outside of elementary school, or if it would. For example, when I read some of the students' of Room 18's reader-writer logs I noticed that the girls read fiction almost exclusively and that some of
this fiction seemed to leave them with questionable ideas of gender and gender relations.

In leafing through Chiara’s notebook, I encountered the following passage:

In the next two chapters of Just Ella, Ella tries to figure out how she is going to tell the Prince that she is not going to marry him because she doesn’t love him. When she finally tells him, he insists that she has to. The prince handled it badly by pushing, screaming and grabbing Ella until he ripped her petticoat. She was in shock and so was I. I thought he would have said sorry for ripping her petticoat but instead he ripped more and tied her wrists up, bound her ankles together and covered her mouth then left and locked the door behind him. This chapter made me feel confused because I didn’t expect the Prince to act that way.

Chiara

In this passage, Chiara relays what could easily be read as a scene of sexual violence. The Prince not only pushes and screams at Ella but he grabs her and rips her petticoat. He then uses this garment to bind her hands and feet. It is difficult to know what Chiara took away from her reading of this interaction. However, that Ella was subjected to this violence when she refused to marry the Prince seems highly relevant. Chiara may well have learned that when women deny men sexual access (i.e. getting married) then men may react by “insisting” or with violence. These reactions may be part of contemporary gender relations or even realistic in some relationships. However, it appears that Chiara’s novel did more to normalize these kinds of gender relations than to
question them. It is worth noting that women who are involved in abusive relationships often use fairy tale narratives in order to make sense of their experiences (Wood, 2001). In this way we need to ask how such narratives may function to normalize these kinds of dysfunctional gender relations. In reading this passage in Chiara’s notebook, I found myself questioning how useful her strong reading skills would be when she grew up and began to negotiate her relationships as a teenager and as a young woman, particularly if these were the kinds of things she was reading. For example, how comfortable would she feel denying a boyfriend sexual access if she had already absorbed the idea that it was common for men to insist?

Similarly, in reading Cindy’s reader-writer log, I found evidence of questionable ideas of gender normative behaviour in the books that she was reading. Cindy is an ESL student who arrived from China in the summer before school began. This entry is one of the first in her reader-writer log.

This book is about Jenny Sawyer she had a new student in her class

name Elsie. Elsie was so fat and gross. Nobody liked her. (Jenny needed a tutor and Elsie became her tutor.) Jenny and Elsie became good friends. Elsie was looking at her shoes. “I can see my shoes”

“So, everybody can see their shoe” “Not me, I couldn’t for two years”

“You was so fat.” “I wasn’t just fat” Said Elsie, “I was gross.”

Cindy

In light of current research concerning girls’ eating disorders and body anxiety, this passage stands out as particularly worrisome (Bennett, Rodin, Jones, Olmstead, & Lawson, 2001). Again, we cannot know exactly what Cindy has taken away from her
reading of this novel. However, there is a good chance that she has learned that it is acceptable to judge girls based on their appearance and that being “fat” is “gross”.

Finally, during my year of data collection, I also took some time to examine some of the books that I saw the students reading. When I noticed that a number of the girls in Room 18 were reading a series of books called *The Babysitter’s Club*, I took the time to pick up a few of the titles from this series and read a few pages. The first one I picked up began thus:

> I am Karen Brewer. I am seven years old. And guess what.
> I am married. My husband is Ricky Torres. He is seven too,
> but he is a few months older than me. (Of course, we are just pretend married.)

(Martin, 1993)

That girls should be interested in heterosexual romantic relationships as early as seven seems to be a given in this series. In looking at other “girls’ books” I found the overarching theme of romantic love to be a common thread in their reading. In February, Ariel gave me the opportunity to peruse another ‘girls’ book’ that furthered my questions about what the girls were learning from their reading.

One afternoon just before recess, Ariel came to show me a book she had just bought through a mail order student book club. She left me with the book as she went out for recess and I read the first chapter. The narrative of this novel concerned two teenaged sisters, Cam and Alex, who were twins and witches. Regardless of any plot lines concerning the sisters’ supernatural powers that might present themselves later in the
book, within the first few pages the narrator established that there was certain to be a romantic plot complete with erotic descriptions of the masculine lead. The following is a description of Jason, Cam’s love interest in the novel as it appears on page two:

*The star of the high school basketball team, he was a head taller than Cam, rippled and sinewy with broad shoulders, thick black hair, and dark brown eyes ringed with long black lashes that should have been illegal on boys. The only thing not dark about the seventeen year old high school senior was his personality. Jason was usually sunny side up boy. Which, today, was underscored by the bicep-blaring, pec-stretched, yellow tennis shirt he was wearing.*

(Gilmour & Reisfeld, 2003)

Reading this passage of Ariel’s book I found myself wondering again what the girls were reading and what lessons they were absorbing about gender relations through their books. Looking at the girls’ reader writer logs and at some of the fiction they seemed to engage with, raised questions for me about how their high investments in reading would serve them in the academic, economic and social world outside of elementary school, or if these investments actually would.

My awareness of girls’ and young women’s tendency to value romantic relationships over and above all other investments, even to the point of remaining in abusive relationships, makes me question how girls are benefiting from their high reading scores if these are the materials that they are reading. Similarly, my awareness of girls and young women’s continued lack of investment in academic subjects that are linked to
high paying jobs and the rise in female poverty, makes me question current depictions of
the gender reading gap that portray girls as victors and boys as victims (Eyre, 1991;

In this way, I believe future researchers have a responsibility to look beyond the
surface depictions of the gender reading gap. Future researchers would do well to
examine the gender reading gap with an eye to how class, gender and “race” all work
together to construct some students as readers and some students as ‘non-readers’. In
addition, future researchers would do well to examine whether girls are really benefiting
from their higher reading scores.
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Appendix

*Grade 5/6 Interview*

1. Who is your favourite grown up or older kid?
2. What do you like to do with him/her?
3. Do you like sports?
4. What kind of sports do you like?
5. Do you have any favourite teams?
6. Do you play on any teams?
7. When do you have practices?
8. When do you have games?
9. Are there boys and girls on your teams?
10. Do you like to read?
11. What do you like to read?
12. Have you ever heard someone use the term “reader” as in “that person is a reader” or “that person is a real reader”?
13. Who would you consider to be a reader?
14. What do readers like to read?
15. Do you think there are as many girl readers as boy readers?
16. Do you think boys and girls read as much as each other?
17. Do you think boys and girls read as well as each other?
18. Are there some things that girls like to do more than boys?
19. Are there some things that boys like to do more than girls?
20. Have you ever heard someone say “don’t be such a girl” or “stop acting like a girl” to a boy?
21. Have you ever heard someone say “don’t be such a boy” or “stop acting like a boy” to a girl?
22. Why do you think some people have a problem when they see a boy doing what they think is a girl thing?
23. Why do you think some people have a problem when they see a girl doing what they think is a boy thing?
24. Where are your parents from?
25. What do they do for work?
26. What do you think you want to do when you grow up?