

COLLABORATION LEADS TO CHANGE: A STUDENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIP & ITS  
WORK ON BOYS' LITERACY UNDERACHIEVEMENT

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

The dilemma of adolescent boys' literacy underachievement has been widely discussed and researched over the past several decades. Numerous studies have indicated that boys universally earn inferior grades, score lower on standardized tests, and develop less literacy skills as compared to their female counterparts, both in the U.S. and abroad (Berg & Klinger, 2009; Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Knell & Winer, 1979; NAEP, 2013; OECD, 2014; Skeleton & Francis, 2011; Watson, 2011). In a previous study I conducted on this topic, male students pointed to their teacher relationships as a key factor of their literacy performance. This study analyzed both this relationship and the gender gap through the formation of a student-teacher (ST) partnership, called the UBC.

The purpose of this instrumental case study was twofold. First, it was to create and examine a ST partnership so participants, which included a diverse group of male students and secondary English teachers, could share their experiences, better understand each other and possibly build a stronger relationship. The second purpose was for participants to work together to examine the cause of this gender phenomenon in our middle-class, suburban high school.

The UBC met several times over the course of a school year, during which time participants shared their thoughts and perspectives on numerous topics related to the gap. They analyzed classroom artifacts together and observed each other for an entire school day. Transcriptions of these meetings, as well as focus groups interviews and written observational field notes, were the main data sources.

The findings are organized into three sections which identify possible causes of boys' underachievement and illustrate what happens when students and teachers collaborate as equals. The main contributors of the gap include boys' disruptive behaviors, constrictive gender norms, poor classroom instruction, and a strained student-teacher relationship. Several vital elements of a ST partnership were discovered, with the most important being mutual respect, honesty and meaningful work. Lastly, UBC members were significantly impacted by the partnership, as they gained a deeper understanding of each other, developed camaraderie and empathy, and changed their actions in the classroom.

Dedicated to my son, and co-researcher,

Maximilian Enzo

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The academic underachievement of adolescent boys in literacy is a dilemma that has been widely discussed in both popular media and academia for the past several decades (Day, 2011; Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998; Logan & Johnston, 2009; Skeleton & Francis, 2011). Though it is capturing headlines in major publications, boys' underachievement in reading and writing, in comparison to female students' achievement, has been documented in the UK going as far back as the 1950's (Epstein, Elwood, Hay & Maw, 1998). It is now, however, a worldwide phenomenon, with countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East and North and South America reporting a literacy achievement gap between adolescent male and female students (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014).

The data on the gender gap shows adolescent boys universally earning lower classroom grades, scoring lower on standardized tests and developing fewer literacy skills than adolescent girls (Berg & Klinger, 2009; Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Knell & Winer, 1979; OECD, 2014; Skeleton & Francis, 2011; Watson, 2011). On a whole, boys are still outperforming girls in math, and there is no significance difference in achievement between the sexes in science (OECD, 2014). The gender difference in academic achievement that is most severe, and the one that will be analyzed in this study, is between teenage girls' and boys' success in literacy (OECD, 2014). Although teachers, parents and researchers recognize the "failing boys" (Epstein et al., 1998) phenomenon in literacy as a dire issue in education, and researchers are working to identify and address the cause behind the gap, the gap in English class persists (Foyer & Foyer, 2014; National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2013).

There are several theories as to why this gap exists, many of which will be explored in this study. One controversial theory about the achievement difference is due to biology. Some

researchers argue that boys and girls learn differently and are born with unique skills that could impact their performance in literacy classes (Gurian, 2011). Another reason could be the complex male relationship with reading. Boys often reject and devalue reading, and are less likely to read traditional texts outside of the classroom, as compared to girls (Clark, 2011; Francis & Skeleton, 2011; Guthrie, Ho, Klauda, 2013; Newkirk, 2002; OECD, 2010; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Instead, boys chose to read texts not recognized by schools, such as graphic novels, magazines, and other multimodal and digital texts (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Alloway et al., 2002; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Newkirk, 2002; Parkhurst, 2012; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Further complicating this issue is the belief that reading is an activity suited only for girls and gay men, and one that masculine boys do not engage in (Francis & Skeleton, 2011, p. 457; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Dutro, 2003). Masculinity is linked to boys' achievement in other ways as well, as the behaviors exhibited by high achieving students are often in direct opposition to those of masculine boys (Connell, 1996; Martino, 2000). These issues, biology, reading and masculinity, all could be contributing to boys' low achievement in literacy.

Another concept that could be impacting the literacy grades of teenage boys is the relationship they have with their teacher. The research on this topic is emerging, but a few assertions have already been made. First, some literacy teachers have been found to have different academic expectations for their students based on their sex (Sanford, 2005). Research indicates that boys are often disciplined at a disproportionately higher rate than girls, and are more likely to be considered learning disabled and become classified because of their classroom behaviors, which have clear implications in a core class like literacy (Buchmann et al., 2008; Noguera, 2003; Sanford, 2005). The attitudes, performance and self-efficacy of male students in

literacy is also related to their teacher (Johnston & Logan, 2009 & Hartley & Sutton, 2013).

Having a positive association with their teacher has been found as a possible way to both increase boys' achievement and belief in their literacy skills (Johnston & Logan, 2009 & Hartley & Sutton, 2013).

These findings suggest that the student-teacher (ST) relationship could be a unique lens through which one could begin to understand adolescent boys' underachievement, in comparison to their female peers, in literacy. A great deal of research into the gender gap has focused on students' standardized test scores, classroom assessments and other class statistics as the main source of data collected, with few being centered on the thoughts and experiences of male students and their teachers. If we are to understand why adolescent boys are largely not reaching the same level of success in literacy as adolescent girls, we must seek out and value the experiences, beliefs and thoughts of male students, as well as their literacy teachers (Smyth, 2006).

One way to value the voice of teachers and their students is through a student-teacher (ST) partnership where both groups work together as equals towards a common goal. This was the main purpose of this study: to create and implement a ST partnership to examine boys' underachievement in literacy. The ST partnership was founded on two concepts: community of practice (CoP) and student voice (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2008). CoP refers to a group of people who work together towards a common purpose, and is based on the belief that learning happens through social interactions (Kapucu, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 2011). For a group to be considered a true CoP, they must be committed to each member in the community, be mutually accountable for the groups' endeavors and develop a shared set of experiences and resources that help them with their work (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). This study attempted to merge two CoPs

within the school: the community of teen boys and the community of teachers.

Student voice was also the foundation on which the ST partnership was built. In this approach to school reform, students collaborate with educators to research and address significant problems in their schools (Mitra, 2008, Kennedy & Datnow, 2001). Young people are asked to share their experiences, opinions and thoughts with teachers and administrators, while taking on, in the case of this study, equal roles related to group's activities. The students' voice, which was once stifled and rejected, becomes a vehicle for meaningful change.

With student voice initiatives, students and teachers no longer subscribe to the traditional power hierarchies in schools. They act as peers and work closely together to examine a specific phenomenon. With most student voice research, the focus is on what the students' experiences. However, in this study the concept of student voice was applied to both students and teachers, with each participants' experiences being sought out and valued. Therefore, student-teacher voice was the strategy being used. Possible outcomes related to student voice research can be quite positive, with the data collected being richer and more authentic, resulting in a more effective study and a supportive school environment being created that fosters positive student outcomes (Cumings Mansfield, 2014; Mitra, 2008). This study also asserts that significant benefits can be experienced by teachers who are committed to working with students in an initiative that implements student-teacher voice.

### **Problem of Practice**

As a veteran high school English teacher, I have seen the prevalence and impact of boys' underachievement in the classroom. For the past nine years, I have taught sophomore and

juniors English at a very small district in Upper Mountain County<sup>1</sup>, New Jersey. The junior/senior high school educates roughly 600 students, grades 7-12, with approximately 80% of students being white, 8% being Asian, and 10% being Hispanic. The residents are predominately middle class, with around 4% of students receiving free or reduced lunch.

At the junior/senior high school level, there was an observable and pervasive gender achievement gap in English courses, with boys in every grade level earning more C's, D's and F's in English than girls. In fact, in the past several, only one girl has failed an English course in the high school, as compared to dozens of boys. Although there were male students in both honors and Advanced Placement (AP) English classes, they were outnumbered by girls and earned lower grades than females at their level. There was also a greater number of boys receiving disciplinary action and being classified for learning and behavioral disabilities, which is a trend observed in other American schools (Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Sanford, 2005).

In casual conversations and in department meetings, English teachers in my school have noted that there is a significant difference in the skills, behavior, motivation and achievement of male and female students. We have experienced that many boys in my school: do not complete their work regularly or on time, put forth their full effort to succeed in class, strongly dislike reading, and approach their school work, and academic career, with apathy. Because of this, numerous teachers in Upper Mountain High speak negatively of male students, and considering many of them nuisances and incapable, among other things.

### **UBC1 & The Student-Teacher Relationship**

Further adding to the problem of practice was the findings of a previous study I ran in the

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym

school. This study, which I will refer to as UBC1, was conducted during the 2014-2015 school year. Also founded on the student voice theory, the study was focused on a diverse group of boys who participated in an after-school, all-male focus group called the Underground Boys' Club (UBC). The purpose of the UBC, and the study, was to examine why males in our high school were underachieving in literacy classes. The participants and I met biweekly to examine a variety of topics related to boys' underachievement and share our perspectives and experiences related to this phenomenon. The meetings were audio recorded and transcribed, and, along with observations, they served as the main data collected in this study. One of the key findings of UBC1, which lead to the creation of this study, was the negative perceptions and relationships boys have with their teachers.

The findings from UBC1 illustrated the prevalence and complexity of adolescent boy's underachievement in literacy. The boys of the UBC were acutely aware of the gender gap that existed in their English classes, and in other subjects. In discussing and examining the issue, they identified several factors that they thought impact boys' performance. These themes included: teacher relationships, poor instruction, masculine stereotypes, and low self-efficacy. The most predominant theme, however, revolved around teachers. The boys felt that many of their teachers were sexist, and therefore excessively disciplined and had lower academic expectations for them. They also felt that the instruction, which they said was predominantly busy work and lectures, was disengaging and resulted in their lack of effort and achievement.

When reflecting on these findings, there was a thread that ran through most of the boys' stories, which was their poor relationship with and perception of their teachers. Throughout the study, the boys expressed frustration, anger and helplessness when describing their experiences in the classroom, and it became apparent that they felt that teachers were at the core of their poor

performance and behavior in English class. From my personal experience as a high school English teacher, it is not uncommon for teachers from all departments to express an aversion to male students. In casual settings, many teachers in our school will describe how difficult it is to teach boys, and how have less males in a class is ideal. They sometimes use derogatory and offensive language to describe challenging male students and describe instances where they dole out severe punishments to boys, such as kicking students out of the classroom or reducing their grades. I have observed that many teachers in my school do not like the underachieving male students in their class, and many boys, in return, do not like them. Such an adversarial and complex relationship must be examined and addressed for male students to become successful in our school. The best way to do this, I believe, was to design an opportunity for the boys and teachers to work together as partners, challenging traditional school hierarchy, with a shared purpose and goal.

**Overview and Purpose of Study.** With the issues of boys' underachievement and strained relationship with teachers in mind, I created a student-teacher partnership with the goal of examining the achievement gap in English, as well as having the two distinct groups – the teachers and the male students – build a strong rapport and understand each other better. The participants included new and old members of the UBC, who represented a range of achievement levels, behaviors and backgrounds. In addition, four English teachers – two females and two males – with varying levels of expertise, joined the once boys-only club. All the members shared their experiences and beliefs as they worked together in the UBC to study the issue of boys' underachievement in English.

It is important to note that this study assumes that the boys in my school are not inherently less skilled in literacy – or English, which is the term used by students and teachers in

Upper Mountain High to refer to literacy class – as female students. I believe that their underachievement is not a result of their inability; instead there are other factors, like those outlined in the introduction, that influence their performance. Additionally, this study is based on the belief that boys in schools are marginalized and experiencing a form of oppression.

Historically, young men have often been considered the more empowered and dominant group in American society, as compared to females. However, I suggest that given the current culture and structure of schools, boys are unable to achieve at the same rate as girls, and have become academically oppressed. Additionally, I define boys' underachievement as the performance of boys as compared to girls at their same grade level, therefore, the disparity in grades results in the gender gap. It is very possible that a male honors student can underachieve, if they earn lower scores than their female honors classmates. It is not to say that boys cannot perform at a high level, such as AP, but in analyzing the grades of students in our school, and per the participants' observations, many boys at the highest academic levels in literacy were underperforming as compared to their female peers. This underperformance led to the gap in achievement between the sexes.

To understand and improve the complex relationship between adolescent boys and English teachers and further understand the gender gap in my school, I designed a qualitative phenomenological case study that was focused on gathering the voices of teachers and students. I believe that if I am to discover why the pervasive gap exists in my school, I must first gather the insight, experience and thoughts of the male students and teachers (Smyth, 2006). This study continued the work of UBC1 and was built around the previous findings of the boys' poor relationship with and perception of teachers. However, it differed in the addition of teachers to the UBC, as well including as a larger, more diverse sample of male students. The purpose of



this study was to create and examine a student-teacher partnership so participants could understand each other better and possibly build a stronger relationship. An additional purpose of the study was for this partnership to work together to examine why boys are underachieving in literacy classes in our high school.

The research questions for this study were:

- What does a student-teacher partnership look like in action? What components are necessary for, or evident in, its function?
  - How do the participants describe their collaboration with the other group? What benefits and challenges do they identify?
  - How does the collaboration inform the boys' relationship with the teachers and impact them as students?
  - How does the collaboration inform the teachers' relationship with the boys and impact them as teachers?
- What does a partnership of adolescent boys and English teachers discover while examining the issue of boys' underachievement in English in their school?

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand why boys are underachieving in my school, and to examine how student voice and community of practice (CoP) might aid in understanding this issue, I read numerous articles and books from the body of research on boys' underachievement. The literature on this phenomenon is immense, thus I narrowed my focus to topics directly related to my study. This literature review is organized into five categories: gender gap data, boys and reading, educators' expectations and interactions, gender roles and stereotypes, and boys' self-efficacy. Subsequently, these five categories relate to the findings of my original study and acted as the foundation of the clubs' work. Lastly, I included literature on CoP and student voice theories, and explained how I wove the two concepts together to act as my theoretical framework.

### **Gender Gap in English**

Over the past ten years, it has become quite common to pick up a newspaper or academic journal and read headlines on “failing boys” and the highly-publicized gender gap in literacy that is plaguing nearly every developed nation (Epstein et al., 2009; Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Logan & Johnston, 2009; Francis & Skeleton, 2011; OECD, 2014; Van de gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme, & De Munter, 2006; Watson, 2011). In the United States, the most recent data on adolescent boys' literacy achievement shows adolescent girls outscoring adolescent boys, on average, by ten points on standardized reading exams (NAEP, 2013). Although several schools and educators have implemented an array of interventions and strategies to address this issue, the most recent results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national achievement test administered to nearly 50,000 twelfth grade students in 2013, show that literacy gap is at the same levels since 1992, with little to no improvement in boys' literacy achievement (NAEP, 2013). In that same test, only 33 percent of senior boys achieved proficiency or advanced

proficiency in English, as compared to 42 percent of girls (NAEP, 2013).

This issue is also affecting nations around the world. In 2012, 65 countries and over 500,000 teenagers took part in The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and a gender gap in literacy was documented in every single country (OECD, 2014). Girls, on average, outscored boys by 38 score points, which is roughly the equivalent of an academic school year (OECD, 2014). America's performance on PISA confirms NAEP's findings that there has been no improvement in the achievement gap (OECD, 2014). Further supporting the findings of the NAEP and PISA was a meta-analysis conducted by Foyer & Foyer (2014). The study demonstrated that in over 350 samples of studies conducted worldwide, girls significantly outperformed boys in school, with the widest gap being in literacy class. The findings of the three studies are necessary to cite when discussing the pervasiveness of the gender gap as they feature massive nationally and internationally representative samples.

### **Boys and Reading**

The ways in which boys and girls engage with texts are quite varied. Boys are more likely to say that they dislike reading as compared to girls and therefore read outside of school far less than females (Clark, 2011; Francis & Skeleton, 2011; Guthrie, Ho, Klauda, 2013; OECD, 2010). Boys are also more likely to call themselves "non-readers," devalue reading, and believe it serves no function in their lives (Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The implication of boys' poor relationship with reading is profound, as research points to an explicit relationship between enjoyment, and therefore frequency of reading and high achievement on literacy exams (NAEP, 2010). For instance, in America, it is hypothesized that 95% of the achievement gap could be closed if boys enjoyed reading as much as girls (OECD, 2010). The engagement and interest of boys reading thus could be the key to understanding the gender gap (OECD, 2010).

There has been a considerable inquiry into the types of texts boys enjoy to read. According to several studies, boys overwhelmingly prefer action or adventure stories, and inversely, dislike narratives that are too descriptive (Dutro, 2003; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Other desirable genres include sports, horror, young adult, non-fiction/informational, science fiction, and texts that pertain to their hobbies (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Dutro, 2003; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Visual texts, such as graphic novels and comic strips, and shorter texts with visuals, including magazines and newspaper, are favored by boys as well (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The work conducted by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and Newkirk (2002) support these findings, and point to the value boys' place on stories that are humorous. This can be seen in their choice of television shows and movies, as well as their books. Newkirk (2002) believes that boys use humor as a tool when they feel they are in a subordinate position, such as students are to teachers. He further states that comedic texts could be particularly useful to address boys' minimal reading, as they can engage disaffected youth and reluctant readers (Newkirk, 2002).

Another factor that may impact boys' literacy achievement is their diverse ways of connecting to literacy. Alloway and Gilbert (1997) posit that boys may underachieve in traditional, school-based literacy, but they may be skilled with other forms of literacy that are more socially valued and desirable. Boys read more unconventional texts, such as comic books and newspapers, for enjoyment, as compared to girls, who prefer novels and magazines (Clark, 2011; Johnston & Logan 2009; NAEP, 2010). Additionally, students' exposure to reading materials has grown to include visual texts that are multimodal and digital, and boys interact with these texts, such as television, movies, video games, websites, etc., far more than girls (Alloway

& Gilbert, 1997; Foehr et al., 2010; Sanford, 2005; Ertl & Helling, 2011). But, as Foehr et al (2010) discovered in their research, the increase in young people's media consumption coincided with a drop in reading traditional texts, such as novels and print magazines (Foehr et al., 2010). Boys appear to be reading more alternative texts and engaging in more media, which they likely prefer compared to reading books assigned in English class (Clark, 2011; Johnston & Logan 2009; NAEP, 2010). Some theorists believe that schools should broaden their thinking of what should be considered a valued text and include "low capital" material that represents boys' culture, such as their preferred reading genres, as well as video games, newspapers, webpages, and music (Newkirk, 2002; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, Alloway et al., 2002). This could be one way to address boys' disinterest in reading and subsequent poor literacy performance.

Boys may be reading multimodal texts more, but given that many English curriculums are currently built on traditional canonical texts, their literacy skills and interests may not translate to the classroom. The typical secondary English curriculum is still filled with the classics, such as *The Odyssey*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Lord of the Flies*. Though these texts were often written by men and feature male protagonists, many boys do not enjoy them. In fact, boys are not driven by their gender when selecting books and do not choose books on the premise that it was written by a man and has a male protagonist (Francis & Skeleton, 2011). These canonical books certainly have their merit, but it appears that boys might have a hard time relating to texts that are so disconnected from their lives. Research indicates that when choosing their own books to read, boys tend to choose more "authentic" texts, or books that are modern, represent their interests and have narrators and characters of similar age (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Parkhurst, 2012). Unfortunately, these books are not often found in traditional school curricula, and are supplemented by more classics (Fisher & Frey, 2012;

Parkhurst, 2012).

Further adding to the complicated relationship boys have with reading is the physical and social aspects of the activity. For many boys, reading is an isolating, antisocial, immobilizing, and unnatural activity (Newkirk, 2002, Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). This is likely because boys do not frequently participate in a community of readers where they can share their thoughts about specific books and seek recommendations. In their groundbreaking study on adolescent male literacy, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that friendship and socialization was imperative for literacy enjoyment and development. The young men in their study spoke at length about how important socializing was to them, and how reading was a solitary, and therefore worthless, pursuit. When the ability to socialize coincided with reading, the boys became intrinsically motivated to read (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The participants discussed their desire to collaborate with someone else while tackling hard texts, and how they were more eager to read a book if a friend recommended it (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Adding to their feeling of isolation and immobilization is boys' lack of reading enjoyment. It has been documented that boys struggle achieving the "sine qua non" state that so many avid readers reach (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Newkirk (2002) makes the same assertion in his book, and describes this state as meditative, and where one experiences a lack of self-consciousness, a loss of time awareness and deep, sustained pleasure. Boys are not reaching this state, he claims, because they do not read enough and therefore are not strong readers (Newkirk, 2002). It appears that many boys are caught in this circle. They do not read because the act simply is not enjoyable. However, because they do not read, they will never develop the skills necessary to reach sine qua non, where reading becomes deeply pleasurable.

Some scholars point to the classroom programs Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) and

Independent Reading (IR), where students read a book of their choice with little to no assessments, as ways to get students interested in reading in school (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Cuevas, Irving & Russell, 2014; Fisher, 2004; Little, McCoach & Reis, 2014; Wiesendanger & Birlem, 1984). In fact, the freedom to choose a book is something that boys strongly value (Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Giving male students the opportunity to choose the texts they read, particularly “real” texts that they can relate to, has been proven to be an effective way to boost literacy skills and engagement in both boys and girls (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Parkhurst, 2012). Though SSR and IR programs have been shown to improve the reading skills and achievements in students, very little research has been done on how they could impact the gender achievement gap (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Cuevas, Irving & Russell, 2014; Fisher, 2004; Little, McCoach & Reis, 2014; Wiesendanger & Birlem, 1984). This points to a possible gap in the literature of boys’ performance gap in English.

### **Masculinity and Gender Stereotypes**

To understand the gender gap, some researchers believe that one must examine the role masculinity plays in the lives of young men (Martino, 1995, 2000, 2007; Newkirk, 2002, Kehler & Greig, 2005). Before understanding its connection to the gender gap, the concept of masculinity should be discussed. Connell (1995), one of the foremost researchers on the subject, defines masculinity as “simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality and culture” (Connell, 1995, p. 71). He rejects the common beliefs that masculinity is a character type, a behavioral norm, or that it is produced by biology (Connell, 1996). Instead, he argues that masculinity is created through the actions that people take in their daily lives (Connell, 1995, 1996; Dutro, 2003; Pascoe, 2012). Pascoe (2012) builds on this

concept, and adds that masculinity is also configured through the discourse a person engages in. Individuals then practice their masculinity every day through the series of actions they take and conversations they have.

Researchers argue that masculinity is not monolithic. Instead there are multiple masculinities that can exist at one time, particularly as its intersection with race, class, and culture (Connell, 1995, 1996; Newkirk, 2002; Kehler & Greig, 2005; Pascoe, 2012). This is applicable to young men who struggle to make sense of the different version of masculinity that often compete with each other (Connell, 1996; Kehler & Greig, 2005). Connell (1995) identified four different types of masculinity. The first, hegemonic masculinity, is the most current form of masculinity where men are dominant, women are subordinate, and men have a successful claim to authority. Though it is at the top of the gender hierarchy, it is believed that the number of men that practice hegemony is quite small. The next is subordination, which describes men who are suppressed and ostracized by the current definition of hegemonic masculinity. The oppression of gay men is an example of this. Complicity refers to men who might not be hegemonic, but receive all the privilege from the domination of women. The last type of masculinity is marginalization, and occurs when men are in a position of power because of their sex, but might be subordinate due to their race or class. Connell (1995) argues that the relationship between these different versions of masculinity offers a framework that can be used to further understand specific masculinities.

Masculinity, in many ways, is considered the opposite of femininity. Therefore, it is not surprising that many men reject whatever is deemed feminine (Pascoe, 2012; Dutro, 2003). This heteronormative thinking is linked with the pervasive homophobic language and beliefs that often accompany masculinity and the discourse of teenagers (Pascoe, 2012; Connell, 1995, 1996;



Martino, 2000). Adolescent boys often use homophobic slurs, such as fag, to exert dominance over and marginalize other boys (Martino, 2000; Connell, 1995, 1996; Pascoe 2012). Pascoe (2012) wrote extensively about this in an ethnography based in a suburban, working class high school. He found that homophobia was rampant and was the “central mechanism in the making of contemporary American adolescent masculinity” (p.53). His participants considered homophobia synonymous with “being a guy” (p. 55). Pascoe analyzed the boys’ use of the term “fag,” and found that the word was hurled at boys that somehow failed at being masculine, which was the result of a boy acting feminine, stupid, or expressing interest, even non-sexual, in another guy. The slur was used to exert dominance over each other, discipline each other, create an opportunity to laugh and joke with each other, and more importantly, prove that a student was not, in fact, gay. In the boys’ obsession with hyper-masculinity, “fag” became a symbol around which they could compete for the title of most masculine. However, as Connell (1995) points out, they did this at the expense of individuals who are subordinate and marginalized in relation to those who subscribe to hegemonic masculinity.

It is in this toxic battleground of masculinity where boys go to school and are expected to learn. Martino (2000) found that boys’ masculinity “is in opposition to the demeanor of a hard-working student” (p.105). To be considered masculine, students must reject the value of education, be disruptive and rebellious in class, break the school rules, cut class, joke around, verbally abuse other students, and as Pascoe (2012) suggests, use derogatory terms (Connell, 1996; Martino, 2000; Willis, 1977). Willis (1977) examined the phenomenon of boys’ underachievement in an ethnography with working class boys. He found that boys were a part of a counter school culture and rejected the formal structure of school. By doing so, they opposed their teachers, school work, and engaged in numerous rebellious acts (Willis, 1977). These

behaviors, however, make it difficult for boys to be successful in school. In fact, Willis (1977) found that the ways in which working class boy acted perpetuated their economic status. Even more disheartening is the environment this creates for non-hegemonic students. The boys who fit Connell's (1995) definition of marginalization or subordination often have a low social status and feel a sense of fear and vulnerability at the hands of those who are more dominant (Kehler & Greig, 2005). So, regardless of if a student is at the top of the masculinity hierarchy or at the bottom, they still receive profound negative effects from the gendered expectations placed on them.

This hyper-masculine, hegemonic culture that surrounds young men could be at the center of boys' reading interests and achievement. As boys mature and move through middle and high school, where the biggest drop in enjoyment and frequency of reading takes place, they are exposed to gender stereotypes that are detrimental to young male readers (Clark, 2011). Reading, some argue, is believed to be a feminine activity, therefore those who engage in the activity are "at risk of not being seen as a 'real boy'" or even worse, gay (Francis & Skeleton, 2011, p. 457; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Dutro, 2003). At a young age, boys learn that reading conflict with the dominant constructions of masculinity and they must make the distinction between their reading practices and femininities explicitly clear (Francis & Skeleton, 2011; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Dutro, 2003). Because of the precarious position boys are in, they often openly devalue and avoid reading and other literate activities, lest they be ostracized by peers, lose social status and sacrifice their friendships (Francis & Skeleton, 2011; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Dutro, 2003). This also ties in with the lack of a reading social network Smith and Wilhelm (2002) wrote about, given that boys run the risk of being considered feminine if they discuss

reading with peers. Some argue that this is a key reason for boys' lack of reading motivation (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

This gendered perception of reading has led some schools to design programs where gender stereotypes are embraced. In the UK and Australia, this theory was tested when schools developed and implemented curricula designed around male stereotypes and featured short texts with male characters, stereotypically male topics, and action driven storylines. This approach failed to have any impact on boys' achievement, which researchers attribute to an intellectually unstimulating curriculum and limited ability to engage in critical discourse on masculinity (Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2010; Francis & Skeleton, 2011; Gorard & Smith, 2004; Martino & Kehler, 2007). Hartley and Sutton's (2013) work supports these findings, and identifies that when teachers support gender stereotypes in the classroom, either through personal beliefs or curriculum, boys experience negative academic consequences. As a result of this literature, we know that stereotypes play a role in the phenomenon of achievement, and using gendered beliefs in instruction and curriculum can have harmful effects on boys.

The masculine stereotypes boys face can be equally detrimental. Studies in popular media show that males are often depicted as powerful, more competent and educated than females, aggressive, tough, angry, unruly, physically dominant, athletic, obsessed with sex, cool, undisciplined, and less conscientious with academics (Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Ter Bogt, Engles, Bogers & Kloosterman, 2010; Beyer, 1999; Bruckmuller, Hegart & Abele, 2012; Oswald & Lindstedt, 2006). As a result, young men are taught that to be considered manly, they must objectify women, be aggressive, play contact sports, and be indifferent toward their academic studies (Bruckmuller et al., 2012; Evans & Davies, 2000; Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Oswald &

Lindstedt, 2006; Ter Bogt et al., 2010). To compound this issue, boys are consuming these gendered messages at a much higher rate than girls. Teen boys spend a large amount of time each day – nearly 12 hours total – engaging with popular media and technology (Foehr et al., 2010). And oftentimes, the traditional texts read in school, which are the cornerstone of any literacy course, perpetuate these rigid and harmful gender stereotypes (Evans & Davies, 2000; Knell & Winer, 1979; Taylor, 2003).

Adolescent boys may feel extraordinary pressure to fit their gender stereotypes, but more specifically, prove their masculinity to their peers. Acting out in the classroom, refusing to do work, being defiant with faculty members, getting aggressive with other students and judging their peer's manhood are all actions that prove their masculinity (Connell, 1996; Martino, 2000; Pascoe, 2012). This desire to be perceived a certain way often results in boys receiving disciplinary actions at school, suffering from depression and engaging in acts of violence at disproportionately higher rate than girls (Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel, 2008); Noguera, 2003; Sanford, 2005). In addition to boys being overly disciplined, they also are more likely than girls to become classified with learning disabilities because of their behaviors (Buchmann et al., 2008; Noguera, 2003; Sanford, 2005). The stereotypical actions that boys engage in might increase peer acceptance, but it also hinders their academic achievement. Inversely, if boys quietly or openly subvert their gender stereotype, the outcome can be just as bleak. Boys who are not stereotypically masculine, or are perceived as effeminate, are more likely to experience devastating effects to their academic performance, self-esteem and overall well-being, while being marginalized and ostracized by both male and female peers (Evans & Davies, 2000; Sanford, 2005 & Watson, 2011). This paradigm results in boys being doomed: the perpetuated stereotype prevents boys from being diligent students and those who challenge the norm often

become social pariahs.

### **Educators' Expectations and Interactions.**

Boys' attitude, performance and self-esteem is explicitly linked to interactions with their teachers (Johnston & Logan, 2009 & Hartley & Sutton, 2013). A positive association between a child and their teacher often yields strong academic achievement (Logan & Johnston, 2009). Unfortunately, some language arts teachers could have gendered expectations for students, which are often derived from boys' rambunctious behavior in the classroom (Sanford, 2005). Through observing two female teachers in a suburban middle school classroom setting, Sanford (2005) found that it was common for both teachers to have different expectations for students based on their gender, with boys receiving different assignments and lower expectations. Sanford also found that the teacher's support of gender stereotypes had a direct impact on the teacher's individual expectations for students, and subsequently students' achievement (Sanford, 2005). This supports the work done by Hartley and Sutton (2013), who found that literacy teachers' support of gender stereotypes directly affected boys' literacy achievement. Though this case study only uses two teachers, which is a clear limitation of the study, the rich, descriptive data collected by the researcher offers an in depth look at a relevant issue. It is possible that these findings are representative of a teaching trend that exists in many schools in our country (Sanford, 2005).

In addition to having different academic expectations for students, educators may treat boys differently in regard to discipline. Research indicates that, because of several biological and neurological differences between the sexes, boys are naturally more physical and aggressive than girls, and benefit from hands on activities that involve spatial skills (Gurian, 2011). One might suggest that it is biologically easier for a girl to sit and listen to a lecture or take notes for hours

as compared to boys. Thus, it is more commonplace for boys to fidget in their seat, chat during class and become recalcitrant or disengaged, all behaviors that will result in punishment (Gurian, 2011). This concept was supported by the findings of UBC1. Teachers of adolescent boys may complain about how difficult it is to teach boys, which could lead to teachers addressing every improper action they make and the student shutting himself off from learning.

Educators have also been found to encourage gender norms in a recent ethnography. Pascoe (2012) found that administrators can perpetuate gender stereotypes by allowing certain entrenched activities to take place. In her ethnography of a diverse, working class high school, she found that a male student pageant called “Mr. Cougar”, where boys engage in similar activities found at beauty pageants but with a more masculine focus, strongly supported the restrictive and harmful male stereotype outlined above. Administrators allowed this activity to take place, but also turned a blind eye to many of the gender related issues in the school, such as their students’ sexual exploits (Pascoe, 2012). Teachers in the school also supported and perpetuated these stereotypes, sometimes without being aware of it. Many male teachers would openly joke about a student’s “masculinity,” or lack thereof, and make homophobic comments around students (Pascoe, 2012). As aforementioned, the effects of a gender restrictive school culture can be profound. Students’ achievement is directly related to school-related attitudes, which means that if students feel forced to accept their gender stereotypes, they can experience a drop in academic achievement and social well-being (Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Sanford, 2005; Van de gaer, et al., 2006).

### **Boys’ Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy, or the belief a person has in their abilities, also plays a role in boys’ achievement in English. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found, in their research on high school boys

and reading, that boys' confidence in their competency had a strong impact on how they navigated school and extracurricular activities. Boys tended to gravitate towards activities in which they were confident, and did not often try new things that put them at risk for failure (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). These preferred activities were varied, and including rapping, sports, mechanical work and video games. This desire to be confident in one's skills also has limitations. The boys in the study admitted to giving up quickly, and completely avoiding activities in which they lack competency and confidence (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). It was not the challenge that discouraged them, but instead their lack of confidence in their ability to improve or succeed (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). If given the proper support and guidance, the boys said they were more willing to engage in demanding tasks (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). It seems that the boys were driven by a fear of failure and would simply not put themselves in a position where they lacked the confidence or ability to succeed.

Three important aspects of self-efficacy could help understand boys' literacy underachievement are ability, control and motivation. Bandura (1993), a leading researcher on the topic of masculinity, discovered that an individual's perceptions on ability affected how they viewed their own efficacy. Those who believed that ability was innate and not learned over time had much lower self-efficacy than those who viewed ability as an acquired skill (Bandura, 1993). Their self-efficacy dropped significantly when they faced an obstacle, whereas those with high self-efficacy thrived under challenging circumstances (Bandura, 1993). A similar relationship was found in relation to control. Individuals with low self-efficacy believed they had little control over their environment and were unable to make changes to their lives. However, those with high self-efficacy could exercise some control over their environment, even though they faced limitations (Bandura, 1993).

Self-efficacy is also linked with motivation, as it determines the goals people set, how much effort they put forth, and how they respond to challenges. Individuals with low self-efficacy are less motivated and therefore give up on a demanding task quickly (Bandura, 1993; Lee & Jonson-Reid, 2016). This supports Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) findings about boys and their persistence and commitment to tasks deemed too challenging. This phenomenon has an explicit connection to boys' underachievement in the traditional English classroom. Boys have been found to have lower self-efficacy and lower aspirations than girls, and may believe English to be an innate skill, feel they have no control over their schooling and be less motivated to succeed (Bandura, 1993; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996)

Beyond lack of motivation and control, low self-efficacy has a marked impact on students who lack confidence in their abilities. Bandura (1993) identified that students with low self-efficacy are more likely to experience depression and anxiety, both in general and in relation to their achievement, and have low aspirations (Bandura, 1993; Bandura et al., 1996). Students with low self-efficacy are also more likely to engage in harmful and rebellious behavior that conflict with academic pursuits, and are slower to rebuild their self-efficacy after a failure or setback (Bandura, 1993; Bandura et al., 1996). Inversely, those students with high self-efficacy had reduced bad behavior, emotional problems and despondency and had higher levels of prosocialness, peer acceptance, and academic achievement (Bandura, 1993). Perhaps most significant is the link between self-efficacy and performance. Students with the same skills will achieve differently on assessments based on their self-efficacy, with those with higher levels of confidence performing better (Bandura, 1993).

There has been a considerable amount of research into self-efficacy in the English classroom, and the findings mirror what Bandura (1993, 1996) discovered. Several studies have



found that students with high self-efficacy perform better on English assessments, and their performance is not entirely linked to skill (Johnston & Logan, 2009; Solheim, 2011; Lee & Jonson-Reid, 2016; Choo, Roberts, Capin, Roberts, Miciak & Vaughn 2015; Bandura, 1993; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Researchers also discovered that the higher the self-efficacy, the more likely boys were to put effort into reading and attempt to read a more difficult text (Choo et al., 2015; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Solheim, 2011).

It is known that boys are more likely to avoid and devalue reading, which negatively affect their skills and literacy scores (Francis & Skeleton, 2011; Guthrie et al., 2013, Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). However, it is possible that boys enjoy reading, but do not believe they are good at it. Individuals with low self-efficacy were more likely avoid reading entirely (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Solheim, 2011). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) posit that boys avoided reading because they would rather be considered lazy or defiant than appear stupid while completing classwork. In fact, male students who had a stronger believe in their reading skills were more likely to state that reading was fun. The boys in Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) study stated that they wanted to read books, and were not averse to reading books they found challenging. However, they needed a support system to engage in such work, citing strong literacy instruction and peer reading groups as two examples (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Two studies further add to the knowledge on self-efficacy and boys' achievement in English. In a quantitative study conducted by Johnston and Logan (2009), strong links were found to exist between a boy's attitude towards reading and his literacy skills. Over 200 sixth and seventh grade students participated in this study and were asked to complete reading comprehension tests and surveys on reading habits and beliefs. The researchers found a strong correlation between boys' perceived competency in reading and their ability; therefore, the

students who performed poorly on the tests had the lowest belief in their ability (Johnston & Logan, 2009). The inverse was also discovered: the higher the boys scored on the reading exam, the more likely they were to report that they were good at reading (Johnston & Logan, 2009). This correlation, however, only existed in male students. The researchers suggest that their work speaks to the importance and benefits of using positive reinforcement in the classroom. Johnston and Logan (2009) posit that positive interactions and praise can be used by teachers to help improve boys' reading self-efficacy, which in turn will result in stronger reading skills. The connection discovered by Johnston and Logan (2009) speaks to the work done by Bandura (1993), who found that students with high self-efficacy were more academically successful, and those with low self-efficacy had reduced aspirations, grit and motivation (Bandura et al., 1996).

A second study in the United Kingdom confirms Johnston and Logan's (2009) study and found that boys' reading scores improved when teachers offer positive reinforcement to boys (Hartley & Sutton, 2013). The researchers, who conducted a three-phase mixed methods study that included group discussions, interviews, and reading comprehension exams, found that boys have little belief in their literacy skills, as compared to girls (Hartley & Sutton, 2013). Boys entering kindergarten believe they are just as capable and bright as their female counterparts. However, this changes by third grade, when male students have mixed responses to their academic abilities (Hartley & Sutton, 2013). As students advance in their schooling, boys believe it to be an undisputed truth that girls are more academically capable and intelligent than boys (Hartley & Sutton, 2013). However, when teachers began to use positive reinforcement and state that they believed boys were just as capable as girls, the boys' achievement in reading comprehension significantly improved (Hartley & Sutton, 2013). The study suggests that confidence is a large factor in achievement, and once boys begin to believe in their skills, they

can become stronger students. These studies suggest that boys' low self-efficacy plays a large role in their achievement, and can be a key factor in understanding the achievement gap (Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Johnston & Logan, 2009).

The body of literature on boys' underachievement relates to this study in a multitude of ways. As previously mentioned, certain sections of the literature review became topics of UBC focus group meetings. One topic we discussed is boys' reading interests and attitudes, and possible links to underachievement. Discussing their interests and experiences in English class yielded data that was vital in understanding the school's performance gap. Another key topic identified in the literature review was gender stereotypes. Given the conservative culture of the school community and the boys' previous discussion on the topic, masculinity was a crucial element of this study. Provided that many community members reinforce gender norms, I anticipated that this would be a challenging topic to discuss and the biggest hurdle in addressing the gap. Though the boys spoke about this topic with relative ease, they were at an impasse when trying to identify ways to address the hegemonic and complicit masculinities that plagued the school.

The boys in this study articulated their belief that teachers are at the heart of the gender gap in English. The lowered expectations for boys, harsh discipline, and possible misandry of the teachers resulted in boys developing a frustration, and sometimes disdain towards teachers. I was particularly interested in examining the teachers' response to this issue, and to the surprise of many of the students, they were aware of their colleagues, even themselves, engaging in these inappropriate behaviors. Research suggests that teachers have the power to either reduce or expand the gender gap based on how they interact with students, so, it was important that I gathered the both the boys' and teachers' thoughts on this subject. The research on the various

aspects on boys' performance in English class discussed in this chapter provided a necessary framework through which we could understand the great divide between the literacy achievement of boys and girls.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To inform my study, I wove together Wenger's (2008) communities of practice theory and student voice theory (Mitra, 2008) as my theoretical framework. Since the study is focused on the collaboration of two distinct groups within the school- the English teachers and the male students, this framework acted as a lens through which I analyzed the data on the achievement gap and the student-teacher partnership. The two theories frame my studies in different ways. Community of Practice (CoP) helped me examine and analyze the two groups of participants and their interactions. Student voice helped structure the methodology and aide in addressing the power issues that are inherent when students and teachers collaborate. Together, these two theories bolstered my understanding of the phenomenon of boys' underachievement at my school, which is the intent of a theoretical framework (Anfara & Mertz, 2006).

### **Communities of Practice**

CoP is defined as "a set of relations among persons, activities and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice." (Lave & Wenger, 2011, p. 98). At the heart of CoP are the people who participate in the community and the work they complete together. The concept of CoP was born from social learning theory, which stems from the belief social interactions with others is essential for learning. The learning can appear somewhat subconscious, but it is as legitimate and substantial as traditional approaches to learning where information is disseminated by experts (Kapucu, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 2011). In this lens, social interactions are paramount, but so is practice, since it both drives the learning

and is the result of it (Wenger, 2008). With this theory being the foundation of CoP, learning is at the forefront of all participation in such groups.

In relation to this study, there are several key components of CoP that helped frame my research. The first is the three dimensions of practice within a community: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, which is the foundation for the CoP theory. Mutual engagement refers to the deep relationship and commitment between members based on the work they do together and the roles they have within the group (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). Joint enterprise is the development and negotiation of groups' endeavors and responsibilities in which everyone is mutually accountable (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). The last, shared repertoire, is collection of resources and processes that help members negotiate meaning, which include stories, language, routines and symbols (Wenger, 2008). When all three elements are present, a community is considered coherent and effective (Wenger, 2008). As part of my theoretical framework, these ideas helped me understand the two CoPs participating in the study and guided my examination of both the work done by the group and the relationships between participants.

It is important to note that this study did not aim to have the student-teacher partnership turn into a new CoP. If this happened, it would be a fortuitous outcome. Therefore, in using CoP to frame my study, it was necessary to utilize concepts that helped to examine the interconnectedness of the two preexisting CoPs within our school- the community of teachers and the community of boys (Cobb et al., 2003). It is important to note that the UBC1 boys might have exhibited some elements of CoP during the study, but when I speak of the two CoPs in this study, I am referring the two broader groups the participants belong to within the school. The first concept is boundary encounter, and according to Wenger (2008), a boundary encounter

occurs when members of two different CoPs meet and engage in activities. The ideal boundary encounters happen when one group visits another's practice (Wenger, 2008). This study was considered a boundary encounter because the two distinct CoPs interacted and worked with each other towards a purpose. The encounter occurred in both CoPs' place of practice, which likely resulted in the collaboration being more effective. The next interconnectedness concept is boundary object, which refers to objects that carry transparent meaning within a CoP (Cobb et al., 2003; Wenger, 2008). However, the same object can have different meanings in different CoPs, so when two communities work together over the same object, neither group has complete control over how it is interpreted (Cobb et al. 2003; Wenger, 2008). Lessons/activities, handouts, tests, quizzes and books were the boundary objects that participants interpreted for this study.

The last concept of interconnectedness is brokering, which is when an individual connects two CoPs and coordinates activities between the two groups (Wenger, 2008). Brokers have the complex task of translating, coordinating and aligning the diverse perspectives of both groups, while managing their membership in one or both communities (Wenger, 2008). Because I was a member of the UBC and a member of the English department, I acted as the broker between the two communities. In reflecting on this concept, it was important to question the role of leadership in relation to being a broker. Kapucu (2012) argues that a key element of CoP is facilitative leadership. This type of leader does not teach the communities the skills needed for practice; instead their main goal is to encourage and support the work and relationships between the members (Kapucu, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 2011). So, I had the tricky task of navigating between being a broker, member of two CoPs, and facilitative leader of the student-teacher partnership.

**Power & the CoP.** Though it is rarely discussed, power is an idea that is inherent in CoP theory (Mitra, 2007). Power is connected to a member's participation and role in a community (Lave and Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008). Since there was a clear hierarchy of power between teachers and students, understanding how power impacted their work and relationships was vital to both the success of the study and the ability to analyze the data. Mitra (2007), who is a leader in student voice theory, studied power within CoPs, confirms this belief and argues that examining power imbalances within educational reform is vital, since reform often creates a shift in power relations. To understand power dynamics, one must look at a member's access, participation and negotiability. Access refers to an individual's ability to become a legitimate member of a CoP and reap the benefits of their membership (Lave & Wenger, 2011). When someone is rejected access to even part of the community, they are considered less powerful than someone who is fully entrenched. In relation to the study, access was limited to boys or teachers who did not fully immerse themselves into the study. This will be described in a subsequent chapter. Within the school CoP, students had limited access, because the administration rarely involved students in any meaningful change, particularly the boys participating in this study.

Along the same lines, participation is related to power. The level to which someone actively engages in the work of the community dictates the level of power they have (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). Legitimate peripheral participation is a term coined by Lave & Wenger (2011) which describes how novice members of a community receive mentorship from veterans to gain full membership. Novices, due to their lack of skills and experiences, are on the periphery of the group but are working towards full participation, and therefore more power (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). They have some power, because they have access to

and are participating in the CoP, but their level of work is not as central to the group as the veterans. Another example of members on the outskirts of CoP and are not as powerful is those who are marginalized. Marginality refers to a participant on the edge of the community who either chooses to or are forced to not participate (Wenger, 2008). Members who are marginalized are consequently powerless, as compared to those who are on the periphery who have some power. It is participation that makes the distinction between the two positions and their level of power (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008). The concept of peripherality and marginality was vital in understanding a participant's participation in the group and their power.

The last concept related to power is negotiability. This refers to one's ability to contribute, take responsibility for and shape the meanings that matter within a CoP (Wenger, 2008). This can relate to one's voice within the community, and the ability to have one's ideas heard and considered. I was aware that this could have become a point of contention during this study, as different ideas and objects could have different meanings depending on the CoP. The ability to make meaning of the issue at hand needed to be shared between the boys and the teachers for this study to be even remotely effective. Supporting this assertion is Mitra's (2007) study, which found that when one member lacked negotiability, the CoP was not effective or coherent. Mitra's study also included a partnership between students and teachers, which makes her findings on the concept of power and CoP exceedingly valuable to my own research.

### **Student Voice**

The concept of student voice was first coined by Mitra (2008) and was born out of the desire to involve students in the creation and implementation of school reform, which research indicates was a rare occurrence (Kennedy & Datnow, 2010; Mansfield, 2014). At the most basic levels, student voice involves students sharing their thoughts about school with teachers and



administrators (Mitra, 2008). With more complex student voice initiatives, students collaborate with educators to address school problems and assume leadership roles (Mitra, 2008, Fielding, 2001). This theory was particularly germane to my study, as it informed the methodology, allowed for the gathering of rich, descriptive data, and resulted in a deeper understanding of boys' underachievement and the student-teacher partnership. (Fielding, 2001).

Within the student voice body of literature, two typologies emerge that were most prevalent to this study. The first is Mitra's (2006) Pyramid of Student Voice, which describes the three levels of involvement available to students related to school reform. At the base of the pyramid is being heard (Mitra, 2006). In this level, which is the most common type of student voice, students are given the opportunity to share their school experiences with educators (Mitra, 2006). Collaborating with adults is the second level of involvement and requires students and teachers to work together to examine problems and create change. The most ideal and least common type of student voice is building capacity for leadership, which was the type of student voice initiation this study was built on. At this level, which is where the UBC was situated, there is a direct focus on sharing leadership responsibilities with the students, which results in the strongest levels of positive outcomes for participating students (Mitra, 2006, Mitra & Gross, 2009). At each level, students' voices are sought-out, valued and seen as the key to understanding school problems and designing initiatives.

The second typology that relates to my study is featured in the seminal work by Fielding (2001) who identified four levels of student involvement. Like Mitra's (2006) Pyramid of Student Voice, Fielding identifies a hierarchy of student engagement in school reform. But, unlike Mitra (2006) who suggests that one level is better and more effective than others, Fielding (2001) argues that initiatives and practices often moves between the four levels, with one level

being more appropriate given the task and context. The four levels Fielding identifies are: students as data source, students as active respondents, students as co-researchers, and students as researchers.

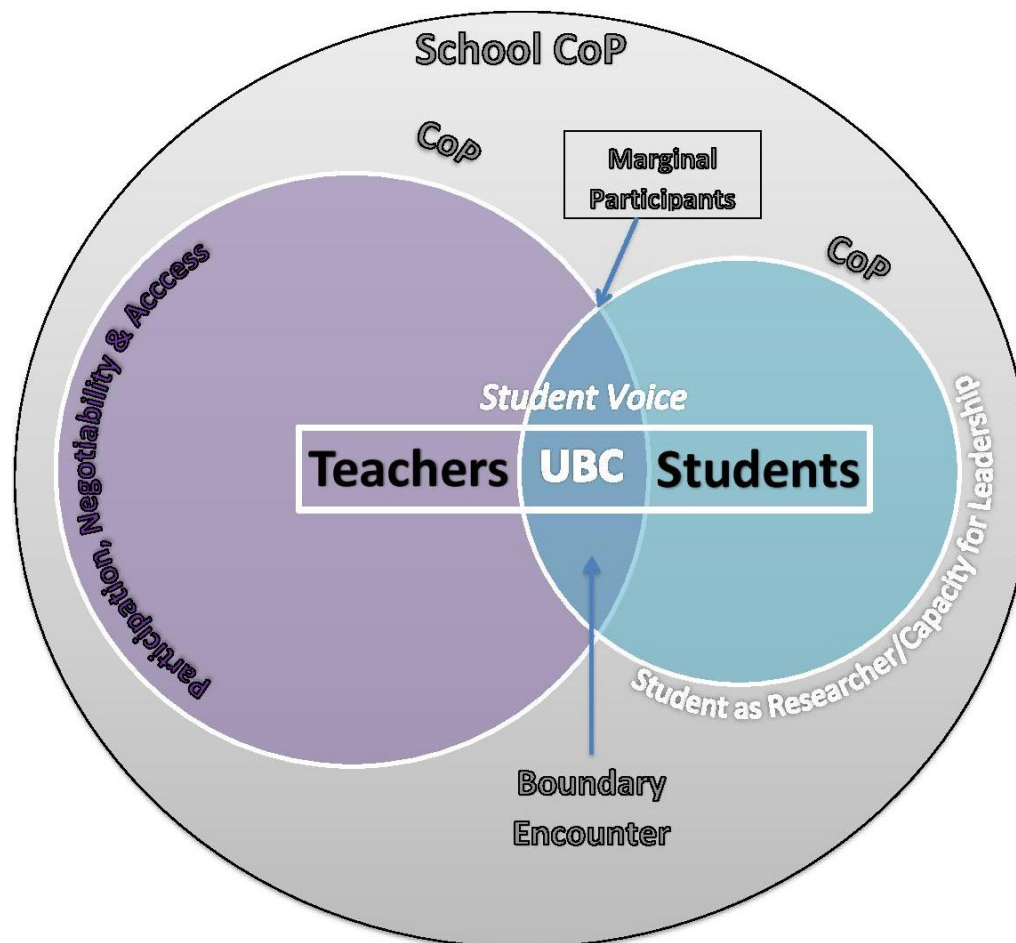
The first level, student as data source, is quite common in schools and can be seen when educators examine students' test scores or survey students (Fielding, 2001). Students are not actively sharing their thoughts, but they contribute to school reform through their academic work. In the next level, students as active respondents, students engage in discussion with educators to enhance learning and teaching (Fielding, 2001). Students who are categorized in the third level, student as co-researchers, work as researchers with the teacher to gather information and examine an issue. The final level, student as researcher, deviates from the co-researcher model as the students take on leadership roles within the research. The focus here is that the teacher becomes a participant not the sole leader of the research (Fielding, 2001). Fielding (2001) suggests that all student voice initiative, including this study, will move between the four levels of student involvement, depending on the goals and purpose of each reform activity.

### **Two Interwoven Theories**

Interlacing the two theories offered a unique framework through which I could both understand the phenomenon of boys' underachievement and examine the student-teacher partnership. Figure 1, Communities of Practice and Student Voice Interwoven, visually represents the merging of the two theories, which are separated by the font color. The diagram features three circles representing the CoPs (written in black) within the site of the study. The size of the circles represents the group's power, with the school (which includes the board of education and administration) being the most powerful and the students being the weakest. The reason why teachers have more power is because they have greater access, are more able to

participate in the school community and have a greater ability to negotiate meaning within the school. The place where the two CoPs come together is called a boundary encounter, and this is where the UBC is situated.

**Figure 1: Communities of Practice and Student Voice Interwoven**



Visually, the power dynamic between the two groups involved in the study is apparent. However, student voice, written in white, addresses this issue. By incorporating this theory into my methodology, students and teachers were given an equal voice, and opportunity to participate in the partnership. This is represented by the rectangle that encloses teachers and students. Within this shape, teachers and students are equally sized, and therefore have equal power. The

part where the two circles meet, which happens to be inside the rectangle, is where the UBC is situated. Its place inside the rectangle is meant to signify the equal partnership between the two groups. Just outside the UBC is the marginal participants. Some participants of the study purposely marginalized themselves from the study. As previously described, when a participant is marginalized, they are on the outskirts of the community and therefore have limited power. Lastly, encircling the student CoP are two elements from Mitra (2006) and Fielding's (2001) typologies that increase both student power and the effectiveness of school reform. Student as researcher and building a capacity for leadership ensured that students were considered true equals in the study, and that the leadership within the student-teacher partnership was shared. They are situated on the outside of the circle because they add heft, and therefore power, to the boys' CoP.

By merging both CoP and student voice to form my theoretical framework, I believe I was well equipped to examine the formation, function and work of the student-teacher partnership and understand the gender achievement phenomenon in our school. I used student-teacher voice, building on student voice initiatives, to create a methodology that sought out and respected the voice of both sets of participants. CoP was vital in understanding the interactions of participants and their ability to collaborate with other UBC members in meaningful ways and influence the partnership's work. Additionally, both theories aided me in addressing the inherent power dynamics that exist between the two groups.

My study adds to the growing list of educational research that uses CoP and student voice as a theoretical framework (Mitra, 2007). One study that is closely aligned to this framework is one completed by Mitra (2007), which used CoP as a lens through which to understand student voice initiatives and power in San Francisco area schools. She found that CoP helped her

understand why certain partnerships thrived while some failed. Mitra's (2007) study suggests that my framework would help me understand the ways in which my participants learned from each other as well as how they developed new forms of knowledge in thinking about the problem at hand, which are both linked to the purpose of my study.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

To thoroughly investigate the issue of underachieving boys in my high school and build a stronger rapport between boys and educators, I designed a study where both groups worked together in a student-teacher partnership. This qualitative study used phenomenological strategies to identify the “essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009). In this philosophy and method, the realities the participants describe, which is captured by the researcher, are their perceptions of reality, and experiences with the phenomenon and the world (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). In using this type of qualitative research, I examined my participants’ everyday lives and experiences, which enabled me to analyze and understand the function and impact of the UBC as well as the complexities perpetuating the achievement gap. I also wrote an epoche, as seen in an upcoming section, to reflect on my own personal prejudices and assumptions (Merriam, 2009). This is a common tool used by researchers for phenomenological studies.

Following this strategy of inquiry, 18 participants in total worked closely together and developed relationships of meaning (Creswell, 2009). Even though I participated in the work with the group, this study is not considered heuristic, because it was not focused on my experience alone (Patton, 2002). Instead, I acted as a participant observer, who was fully engaged in the setting of the study while observing and speaking with other participants about the topic of the study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). In this form of observation, my role as a participant was more important than my role as an observer (Merriam, 2009). As an observer, I took notes to describe in detail what I saw while I participated in the activities of the group. Because I was a member of the school community in which this study is set, I was likely more equipped to fully comprehend the complexities of this phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

The core of this study was the student-teacher partnership, which included 14 male students and four high school English teachers, one of which dropped out mid-study due to schedule conflict. The boys were recruited using a list of criteria, which will be explained in the sample section. Nine of the boys were former members of the UBC who took part in previous research, and five were new participants. The teachers were recruited by both the boys and me based on expertise and affability. As previously mentioned, the study incorporated student voice (Mitra, 2008) as a part of my theoretical framework, which ensured both that there was equality of leadership and voice among participants and that I answered the research questions. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the study, I utilized several data collection methods, including transcripts from UBC meetings, focus group interviews and observational field notes, to capture the boys' and teachers' stories and the work completed by the partnership.

### **Research Site/Setting**

This study was situated in the public junior-senior high school of a small, predominantly white, upper-middle-class suburban town in New Jersey. The school, which will be called Upper Mountain High, educated roughly 600 students, grades 7-12, with 80% of students being white, 8% Asian, and 10% Hispanic. Only 4% of students received free or reduced lunch. Though families had high incomes, the most adults in town worked one or more blue collar jobs and did not have a college degree. Thus, many families placed a large emphasis on education, and encouraged their children to achieve well in school. Class sizes were small, with an 11:1 student to teacher ratio. Students and faculty had access to several resources at the high school. Each teacher had their own laptop and last year the high school moved to a 1:1 format, with every student getting his/her own laptop. Most classrooms featured SmartBoards or modern projectors. Students, on a whole, performed well on middle school and high school assessments, with over

63% of high school students meeting or exceeding expectations on the English section of the PARCC in 2016.

## **UBC**

Within the school setting was the UBC, which acted as the organization through which this study, and my previous research, took place. The club was comprised of 14 students, who were attending my high school, and four English teachers. All the meetings took place in my classroom, which was situated in the English and history wing of the school. The room was large and amply furnished. There were two oversized bulletin boards decorated with student work, posters on writing, vocabulary, and literary devices, and artworks related to class texts. On one side of the room sat a couch with decorative pillows and two arm chairs. The desks during UBC meetings were arranged into a circle, unless the work required a different configuration.

At each meeting, I offered a variety of food and drinks arranged on a table in the center of the room that served as the “watering hole”, or location where the many casual, friendly conversations took place. Members of the UBC often came in promptly at 2:30pm with a great deal of energy, and took the first five to ten minutes of every meeting to socialize with members of the group at the watering hole about things not necessarily pertaining to the study. When the meeting commenced, the participants would settle into their seats and listen patiently to the directions for the activity. The boys and teachers were very respectful to me and their fellow members during meetings, and would speak one at a time to ensure everyone’s voices were heard. There were times, however, when someone would say something profound or controversial and the group erupt in chatter and movement.

All the participants knew each other, given the diminutive size of the school, and there was a clear rapport and shared repertoire present (Wanger, 2008). However, it did take some



time for the rapport to develop beyond the traditional student teacher relationship. As a participant of this group, I engaged in the discussions and casual chatter as well, and was cognizant of not overpowering the discussion. Meetings took place every Wednesday after school at 2:30pm for an hour. Members were encouraged to attend all meetings, though given the participants' very active extracurricular schedule and family responsibilities, it was not uncommon for participants to miss two or so meetings.

### **Sample**

In selecting the sample for this study, which included 14 boys and four high school English teachers, I wanted to include a range of students from different grade levels, ability levels and backgrounds, as well as a variety of English teachers. I used purposeful sampling to ensure I recruited the right participants for this study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). The strategies for recruiting and selecting students and teachers were quite similar, as I was looking for the specific qualities for both groups. See table 1 for information on the criteria used to select participants and table 2 for detailed information about the participants.

I used purposeful sampling to ensure that the young men in the UBC represented the population of male students in my school (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). In considering the success of the study, I could not employ maximum variation sampling because I had a list of specific criteria the boys needed to meet (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). This is called criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). The first criterion used in selecting the boys was their grade level: boys had to be between their sophomore and senior year in the school. I believed it was necessary for the boys to be entrenched in the school's culture for them to be able to examine the issue. Additionally, I wanted the boys to have a level of metacognition and maturity that the older students were more likely to have. Two other criteria that was utilized was sociability and

openness. It was imperative that the boys felt comfortable sharing their opinions with their peers and teachers to participate fully in this study. I was cognizant of selecting boys along the spectrum of gregariousness, but out of the sample, only one or two of the boys could be categorized as taciturn or shy. Though the young men in this study were not required to talk at each meeting, they were required to listen to other UBC members and be open to what they had to say. I also looked for boys who had a good rapport with me and other teachers, to ensure that the boys would be open with their comments and not stifle the teachers' voices.

**Table 1: Criteria for Purposeful Sampling of Participants**

<b>Students</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Good rapport with teachers	Good rapport with students
Grade levels 9-12	Teaches English
Sociability	Sociability
Openness	Openness
Large range of achievements	

Lastly, to represent a larger cross-section of boys in our school, I invited boys to join the UBC who had a range of achievement levels, including boys who had a history of poor performance, boys with Individual Education Plans (IEP) as well as boys who were in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Some of the boys were also removed from honors classes and placed into college track level courses in years prior. Most of the boys were considered “underachieving” because I defined underachievement in comparison to how girls perform at the same level. These criteria were used in selecting the boys, both new members and those from UBC1, to ensure the effectiveness and success of the UBC, and to represent the different demographics – including social status within the school and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds – and academic backgrounds of students. Additionally, because the purpose of the study was to understand why this phenomenon was taking place, this sampling ensured that I

could gather an authentic and complete picture of the young men's perspectives as members of the school. 14 boys fit these criteria and committed to participating in the study, when roughly 20 boys were invited to join.

The student participants in this study were recruited in person. The former UBC members were told when the club was resuming for the start of the school year. However, the new members received a black business card with a date and location inviting them to join the UBC. When students were recruited for UBC1, they were informed that the study was likely going to have two parts, and were given the ability to participate in both. When many of the UBC1 boys expressed interest in continuing the group's work, I anticipated that many students in this study would be original members. However, I made a considerable effort to include new male students to my sample, in part to include a wider range of boys, such as those who were high achievers and not stereotypically masculine. I invited approximately 10 new students to join the study, however, only five accepted my offer. Of the UBC1 boys, four decided not to continue with this study. In total, nine of the participants were UBC1 members and five were new to the club. All the students remained active participants throughout the study.

Including a mix of "new" and "old" students did affect the study initially. Given that the UBC1 boys had already spent a considerable amount of time working together in the former study, and trusted each other enough to share sensitive aspects of their lives, a strong rapport already existed among the group. In the first meeting this was apparent, as the UBC1 members sat together and the new members, including the teachers, sat in a different part of the room. However, as the study progressed, the new UBC members developed a camaraderie with the UBC1 members, so much so that the seating segregation did not exist and identifying the newer members from old was impossible.

This integration did take some time for this to happen. At first, a few of the new members were quiet during the whole group discussions, but participated more enthusiastically during small group activities. When I asked Tyrion, a new UBC member, how things were going during the first month of the study, he said well, but that he did not speak as much because he wanted to observe the UBC for a while. Ms. Angela, one of the teachers, shared a similar sentiment. I made a point to seek out the voices of these individuals, and create space within meetings where more quiet participants could speak. As the meeting came to a close, I would ask if anyone wanted to add a new concept or experience to the discussion. With the group being smaller, as members left early when necessary, and ample time given to observe, the more reticent individuals were more likely to speak then. This did mean, however, that some new individuals did not engage in the livelier debates in the beginning of the study. And though I tried to engage all members, it was possible that some did not speak at all.

This issue was remedied, however, as members began to know and trust each other. This happened around four meetings into the study, during which time, all the UBC members participated freely and at their discretion. It must also be noted the dynamic between new and old members had no effect on some members. Floyd, Roger, and Mr. Hodor, for instance, participated right away and seemed unfazed by the preexisting relationships.

Designing the sampling for teachers was a bit more arduous. Because I had a smaller pool of candidates to choose from – there were only seven members of the English department, including myself – I had to be mindful of which members of the department would fit the requirements of the study and be willing to participate. As with the boys, I used purposeful, criterion sampling, and many of the criterion were similar (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). The first and most important criterion I used in designing this sample was how the boys felt about the

teacher. Given that a strong dynamic already existed between the boys and I, which allowed the students to be forthright about their lives, it was essential that any teachers who joined the study did not alter that. With the student-teacher relationship sometimes being a contentious one for boys, it was equally as imperative that the UBC1 boys had a say in who joined the UBC.

**Table 2: Overview of Sample**

Names	Student/Teacher	UBC1 Member	English Track
Jimmy	Student-12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Yes	Honors/AP
Ari	Student-12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Yes	Honors/AP
Elijah	Student-12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Yes	College Track
Oliver	Student-11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Yes	College Track
Harry	Student-11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Yes	College Track
Sergio	Student-11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Yes	College Track
Ellen	Student-11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Yes	Honors/AP
Tyrion	Student-11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	No	College Track
Jeremy	Student-11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Yes	Honors/AP
Alex	Student-11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Yes	College Track
Leo	Student-10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	No	College Track
Floyd	Student-10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	No	Honors/AP
Eddard	Student-10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	No	Honors/AP
Roger	Student-10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	No	Honors/AP
Ms. Angela	Teacher- 11 <sup>th</sup> & 12 <sup>th</sup> Grades		
Mr. Hodor	Teacher- 7 <sup>th</sup> & 11 <sup>th</sup> Grades		
Mr. Rocco	Teacher- 9 <sup>th</sup> & 10 <sup>th</sup> Grades		
Ms. Minerva	Teacher- 8 <sup>th</sup> & 11 <sup>th</sup> Grades		

Two additional criteria I applied to recruit teachers was their sociability and openness. Just like the students, it was important that the teachers were willing to discuss the topics in this study and did not hesitate in talking with the other club members. Lastly, because many of the topics discussed were controversial and negative towards teachers, it was necessary for adult participants to be open to hearing what the boys had to say, even if it was hurtful. These criteria resulted in the selection of four English teachers, all of who valued professional development

and already had an adequate rapport with students. One of the male teachers unfortunately dropped out of the study midway. He expressed an interest in staying in the UBC, but was unable to make the meetings due to a conflict with his spring coaching schedule.

Given both the small size of the school and that both students and teachers were asked to participate in this study, it was impossible to select students and teachers who were not in class together during the study. The four teachers in this study covered all four grade levels, therefore it was a probability that students would not only have had one UBC teacher in previous class, but they could also be in the UBC with their current teacher. The possible issues related to this aspect of the sample will be addressed in the researcher role and ethical issues sections of this study.

### **Data Collection Plan**

With the intent of increasing the trustworthiness of this study, I collected data through three methods: UBC meetings, focus group interviews and observations. I gathered much of the data through UBC meetings, which took place weekly from November to May of the 2015/2016 school year, with a brief hiatus in January and February. During the meetings, participants collaborated with each other as they examined and discussed several topics related to boys' underachievement. To collect data on how the participants experienced working with each other, I conducted three focus group interviews with the teachers and boys separately. The participants also had the opportunity to observe each other, during which time they took notes and completed an observation protocol they designed. Their notes and written protocol were collected and analyzed. All meetings and focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The last method of data collection I employed was detailed observational field notes during both the UBC meetings and interviews. As described in table 4, these data collection

procedures resulted in the collection of data that addressed the research questions.

### **UBC meetings**

The UBC met 12 times during the study, with meetings running roughly an hour long. Each meeting took place after school in my classroom, which was restricted to only UBC members. Ample food and drinks were served at the beginning of every meeting. During the year, the club focused their efforts on various concepts related to the problem of practice. The diverse topics of each meeting were organized into three themes: English Classroom, Teachers & the English Gender Gap, Students & the English Gender Gap. These themes related to the topics discussed in the previous study as well as the themes in the literature review. A description of the activities completed during the UBC meetings can be found in table 3.

The first two meetings of the UBC were designed to recap what was discovered during UBC1, discuss initial thoughts on topic and to build rapport among members. The first UBC meeting, which took place in mid-November, was focused on the creation of group norms, which promoted group cohesion and made sure participants felt comfortable engaging in the work of the study (Silberman & Auerbach 2006). The norms were the ground rules for how we interacted with one another and what we considered acceptable behavior. Students and teachers were broken into four heterogeneous groups and asked to come up with a list of norms the they thought were necessary for the club to function. Afterwards, each group shared their list and we narrowed it down to seven mutually agreed upon rules. These rules were written down on a large poster and displayed at every meeting (Appendix B).

We also reviewed the other ground rules of the study at the first meeting, which were that no one could act poorly to another based on what was discussed during our gatherings and that the teachers could not let their participation affect their students' grades. I reminded everyone

that as per their signed consent forms, they were not to share any details about what we discussed during the study to anyone outside of the UBC. However, this was one of the seven norms the participants came up with on their own. They used the phrase “What happens in the UBC, stays in the UBC”, as a catchy way to remind everyone of this vital rule. After creating group norms, the UBC had a discussion as to their initial thoughts on the topic of boys’ underachievement. I also answered any questions that the participants had in relation to the club and the study.

During the second meeting, the boys were given an opportunity to present their findings from the previous study. Prior to the meeting, each UBC1 boy selected, via email, one finding they wanted to discuss. They then described, in detail, the findings of UBC1 and any related thoughts they had. During this time, the teachers and new UBC boys were directed to write down any questions they had in response to the presentation. The new UBC members, both the boys and teachers, were given an opportunity to share their initial thoughts on the findings and ask follow up questions. The new UBC boys took that time to corroborate the findings of the initial study, and share their own experiences. A brief discussion took place on general topics related to the gap. The meeting ended with participants having an opportunity to suggest any ideas they wanted to explore in relation to the phenomenon.

To ensure balance, the third meeting was led by the teachers. Again, the participants sat in homogenous groups. Teachers were asked to collaborate on a brief presentation in which they shared their experiences with male students, particularly in the English classroom. At the same time, the boys were asked to brainstorm possible guidelines that would be used during observations. After ample time was given, the club regrouped and the adults shared their thoughts on teaching male students, which were primarily focused on behavior. A discussion took place afterwards, with boys responding to and acquiescing with the teachers. Afterwards,



the boys offered their list of observations rules, which the teachers added to.

The fourth gathering built upon the previous discussion on the observations. I gave an overview of the student-teacher observations and answered participants' questions. Then, while working in heterogeneous groups, the UBC designed a protocol (Appendix C), which included a list of questions and topics pertaining to the teachers, students, and classrooms being observed. The protocol would be used by each member during their observations. We also discussed the goal of observations, what a proper observation looked like, and finalized the list of observer rules created last meeting (Appendix C).

The next two meetings focused on the theme of the "English Classroom." During this segment of the study, the club began their examination of boys' literacy underperformance. The fifth and sixth meetings included activities where students and teachers shared their experiences as members of an English classroom. During the fifth meeting, participants sat in heterogeneous groups and chatted about their experience in their current English course(s). Then, each group unpacked and debated over four English classroom artifacts that were pulled from current English classes in the high school. The artifacts were two quizzes, one open-ended and the other multiple choice, and two homeworks, one with basic reading comprehension questions and the other with literary analysis questions. The last 15 minutes of the meeting were spent in a whole group discussion where each group summarized their comments on the artifacts and further debated the strength of the certain assessments. The sixth meeting was focused on one question: what does the ideal English classroom look like? The participants sat in a circle and exchanged thoughts on a variety of topics, including physical layout, assigned seating, rules, instruction, teaching style, texts, student teacher relationships and other related ideas.

At this point of the study, the student-teacher observations were well underway. The

teachers observed the students first. Each teacher selected one boy to observe for the day, with the caveat being they could not observe a student currently in their class. They shadowed the boy through all their classes and free periods, and were directed to primarily observe the student and their daily life. The boys were second to observe. They too had the chance to choose their teacher, with the caveat that they could not observe a current instructor. In designing the rules for observations, the teachers required that the boys followed all the rules of teachers, including the dress code, report time, and classroom behavior. The students, dressed in shirts and ties, began their day by first reporting to me to receive the protocol and review the guidelines for the day. Afterwards they met with their teacher and observed them for the entire day. Both students and teachers were given release time from the school day to partake in the observations. Each member had to complete the UBC designed protocol, which was collected and analyzed.

The seventh meeting, and last under the theme of the English classroom, was on reading. Given that reading is the foundation of all literacy classes, an entire meeting was dedicated to the topic. The club members sat in a circle and shared their thoughts about boys' reading, including engagement, academic versus social reading, interests, motivation, skills, classroom instruction and the link to masculinity. The participants tried to get at the root of why boys disliked and refrained from reading and how that translated to the English classroom. Time was also spent critiquing a variety of reading engagement strategies, either that they experienced or implemented. The participants attempted to come up with the best approach to getting male students to read more, both recreationally and for school.

The next meetings transitioned from the English classroom to the English teacher. The first topic of this theme was the most divisive of the study: teacher sexism. After everyone took their place on the circle, the teachers were asked to share their thoughts, specifically if they have

any experience or knowledge of its existence in the school. The teachers were candid in their comments and engaged in a discussion with the boys as to why it might happen and how their perception could color the reality of the situation. Much of the conversation was focused on excessive discipline, but having reduced expectation for boys and an overall preference towards girls was also discussed. I gave the group control over the conversation, and the topic eventually switched to student-teacher relationships and boys' behavior and engagement in English class.

At the ninth meeting, participants walked into the room with one question written on the board: how can teachers and students build strong professional relationships? The entire meeting was dedicated to answering that question. Again, members sat in the circle while speaking about the topic. Participants examined aspects of both real and hypothetical relationships. The importance of having a strong relationship was described, and the members identified what happens when teachers and students did not have a good rapport. Towards the end of the meeting, the group collaborated on a list of requirements for an amicable, productive and professional relationship.

The last theme the club examined was boys and the gap, with the first meeting focused on students' behavior and the last on students' self-efficacy. Members sat in heterogenous table arrangements and identified what they thought was the typical behavior of boys in our school, referencing examples. Then the groups shared their findings with the whole club and together we debated the impact of boys' behavior in the classroom and the implications it had for their underachievement. The club also discussed the connection between boys' behavior and masculinity. At the eleventh meeting, the group sat in a circle and initially discussed boys' self-efficacy in the English classroom. Then a triangle was drawn on the board with one of the following words written at each corner: self-efficacy, engagement, masculinity. The group

spent the next 40 minutes trying to unpack the relationship between each pair. We finished the meeting by brainstorming ways to boost engagement and self-efficacy.

The final UBC meeting was focused on summarizing and reflecting on our work. The club came up with a list of all our findings and assertions, as well as things that stuck out as memorable or jarring. We then reflected on our work, the future of UBC and possible implications for our school and for the related body of research.

It is necessary to note that all club meetings were semi-structured in nature, and did not follow a predetermined protocol (Mitra, 2008). The intent of semi-structured interviews is for the participants to tell their stories in the way that best describes their experiences, and that of their peers (Mitra, 2008). During discussions, I often asked follow up questions based on my observations and the participants' comments, and permitted participants to go off script when necessary. Though the activities and topics were organized ahead of time, I allowed for some alteration of my design based on the suggestions of the participants and initial findings.

UBC meetings followed the structure of student voice initiatives, in that the thoughts, experiences and contributions of students were sought out and valued (Mitra, 2008). However, this study employed student-teacher voice, and the addition of the teachers' voice and the interaction between the two groups only added to the rich, authentic data gathered in the meetings. The voice of both groups of participants were needed to understand this phenomenon as well as the student-teacher partnership. The data collected during the UBC meetings directly supported the purpose of the study and helped answer the research questions outlined above.

### **Focus group interviews**

The purpose of a focus group interview is to gather information on a topic from individuals who have knowledge specific to the topic (Fitzpatrick, Sanders & Worthen, 2011;

Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). The focus group interview differs from the UBC meetings because they were strictly interviews, where I asked questions and participants responded (Patton, 2002). But, because this was a focus group interview, the discussion was between a group of participants and me, not just the interviewer and interviewee (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Given the small sample size, the goal of these interviews was to gather in depth information, not to represent a large population (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011). During focus group interviews, my role switched from participant observer to researcher, and my responsibility was to moderate the group discussion to ensure everyone had an opportunity to speak and the discussion remained focused on the topic at hand (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Patton, 2002).

The focus group interviews took place at the beginning, middle and end of the study at the normal UBC time and location. Each interview ran approximately one hour, however, given the small size of the group of teachers, their interviews were shorter than the boys' interviews. To address the three research questions pertaining to the collaboration between the groups and gather honest, unadulterated data from my participants, it was necessary to interview the groups separately. Though the homogeneous focus group interviews happened separately, the meetings were held at approximately the same location in the study to ensure the data aligns. Like the UBC meetings, these interviews also followed a semi-structured format. The main goal of the interviews was to gather data on how the participants described their perspective and experience of the student-teacher partnership, and examine how this partnership might inform their thinking on a variety of topics related to boys' literacy underachievement. The data collected through the focus group interviews were germane to this study, given that the comments and interactions between members were socially constructed and represented "the truths" of each participant (Merriam, 2009).

During the first interview, I asked both groups of participants to communicate their thoughts about boys' literacy underachievement and describe their perceptions of the other group and what it might be like to work with them. They also were asked to anticipate some challenges and benefits of partnering with each other. The second interview was based on their experience collaborating with the other group through the work done in the UBC and through student-teacher observations. They were asked to describe their experiences, and how the collaboration aligned with or differed from their perceptions. Time was also dedicated to the observations, with each member given an opportunity to share their experience. Each group was also asked about any challenges they faced in this study and was given an opportunity to make suggestions or give general feedback.

The last set of interviews also allotted time for participants to describe their partnership, but more specifically asked to describe how their participation informed their relationship with and perceptions of each other. The participants were also asked to describe their experience with the observations, and discuss any takeaways or things they learned by shadowing each other. Questions were also geared towards each group specifically. Teachers were asked to describe the impact, if any, the study had on themselves as teachers, as well as their classroom procedures, management and instruction. Conversely, the boys were asked to describe any possible impacts of the study and identify any changes to their behavior and performance in school and in the English classroom. Because of these interviews, I could measure the successes and failures of the partnership and gather authentic and honest data.

### **Observational field notes**

During each UBC meeting and focus group interview, I collected observational data to describe what occurred during the group meetings. There are numerous purposes of the

observations, but the primary one is to describe what is taking place during the observation

**Table 3: Overview of Data Collection Procedures and UBC Meetings**

<b>Overview of Data Collection Procedures &amp; UBC Meetings</b>			
<b>November &amp; December *Interviews (November)</b>		<b>April (Teachers &amp; the Gap)</b>	
Meeting 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduced purpose of group &amp; goals</li> <li>Created group norms/rules</li> <li>Participants shared thoughts and initial reactions to the topic of boys' underachievement</li> </ul>	M 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussed ways to boost boys' reading, IR</li> <li>Discussed boys' perceived teacher sexism. Boys shared experience/frustrations</li> <li>Teachers shared reactions</li> </ul>
M 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boys introduced and discussed findings and experience from first UBC study</li> <li>Teachers will respond to findings</li> <li>Discussion of next steps, topics to investigate</li> </ul>	M 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examined relationship between male students and teachers</li> <li>Discussed how to build a strong, professional relationship</li> <li>Boys identified implications               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boosts engagement/achievement</li> </ul> </li> <li>Seek validation from teachers</li> </ul>
<b>December</b>		<b>April &amp; May (Boys &amp; the Gap)</b>	
M 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers worked in a separate group to discuss, prepare and present presented the challenges of teaching boys in English</li> <li>Students brainstormed possible guidelines for observations.</li> <li>Participants discussed reactions to presentations</li> </ul>	M 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Described typical behavior of boys in English class</li> <li>Discussed boys' behavior in classroom               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acting out</li> <li>Defiance</li> <li>Shutting down</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teachers identified impact on classroom</li> <li>Discussion of masculinity, and the role it plays in behavior</li> </ul>
M 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduction of student-teacher observations</li> <li>Discussed the goal of observations and what a proper observation looked like</li> <li>Creation of observation protocol and observation guidelines.</li> </ul>	M 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussed boys' self-efficacy and impact on achievement</li> <li>Examined boys' lack of engagement in the classroom, teachers discussed impact on classroom</li> <li>Brainstormed how to boost engagement and efficacy</li> </ul>
<b>March &amp; April (English Classroom) *Interviews (beginning of April)</b>		<b>May *interviews (mid May)</b>	
M 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student-teacher observations began, and ran through January</li> <li>Discussed experiences/challenges of the English classroom</li> <li>Examined teachers' approach to English instruction and classroom artifacts (from each participant)</li> </ul>	M 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Broke into mixed groups, summarized work done together</li> <li>Reflection, discussion on findings and implications</li> </ul>
M 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Answered and discussed the question: What would the ideal English classroom and instruction look like?</li> </ul>	<b>Small Group Interviews took place at the beginning, middle and end of the study.</b> <b>Topics included:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General reactions/thoughts on partnership</li> <li>Experience observing each other</li> <li>Benefits and drawbacks of partnership</li> <li>Personal/professional impacts of the partnership</li> </ul>	
M 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examined topics related to reading:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boys' reading interests and habits</li> <li>Masculinity and reading</li> <li>Boys' reading skills and engagement/motivation</li> <li>Reading instruction</li> </ul> </li> </ul>		



with as much detail as possible, so as to bring other readers into the setting (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2009). Other reasons to use observations in research is to understand the context and complexities of the phenomenon, see things that might not be frequently recognized by people in the setting, gather information on concepts participants might not be willing to discuss, and in regard to this study, triangulate emerging findings from other data (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2009).

**Table 4: Alignment of Research Questions to Data Collection**

<b>Alignment of Research Questions to Data Collection</b>	
What does a student-teacher partnership look like in action? What components are necessary for or evident in its function?	UBC Meetings Student/Teacher Observations Observational Field Notes Focus Group Interview
How do the participants describe their collaboration with the other group? What benefits and challenges do they identify?	Focus Group Interviews Observational Field Notes
How does the collaboration inform the boys' relationship with the teachers and impact them as students?	UBC Meetings Observational Field Notes Student/Teacher Observations Focus Group Interview
How does the collaboration inform the teachers' relationship with the boys and impact them as teachers?	UBC Meetings Observational Field Notes Student/Teacher Observations Focus Group Interview
What does a partnership of adolescent boys and English teachers discover while examining the issue of boys' underachievement in English in their school?	UBC Meetings Student/Teacher Observations Observational Field Notes Focus Group Interview

Some researchers use protocols to guide and focus their observations, but I used unstructured observations to note a variety of critical elements of the study, such as member interactions, and gather information on what participants were experiencing (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). All my notes were organized in an online document by date of the meeting. It was imperative that my observations have both depth and detail (Patton, 2002). I described what I saw as a participant observer, and gathered factual and accurate information without any analysis or inferences (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). To do this, I took notes on the actions that took place during the meeting, including participants' body gestures, movements, tone of voice, eye contact, and interactions between participants. I also took notes on where participants sat and with whom. Additionally, I made observer comments, which included insights into what I observed and questions I had. As a participant observer (Merriam, 2009, Patton, 2002), I both participated in club meetings and took observational notes. But, as previously noted, my priority was to participate in activities and take notes when possible. This means that there were times when I was engaged in a hands-on activity and my note-taking was limited. However, I made a concerted effort to take notes when possible.

These observations were a vital element of my research design for many reasons. There were several meetings where the club broke into groups to work. I audio recorded each grouping, however the observations gave me the ability to collect data immediately and use it during the meeting. Additionally, much of the interactions between students and teachers happened discretely. During the meetings, I observed both groups interact with each other via body gestures, handshakes, written notes, eye contact, side conversations and inside jokes. Since I had observed the boys for a year prior and worked alongside the teachers for several years, I was especially accustomed to their idiosyncrasies and modes of interaction. It was vital that I wrote

notes on all forms of communication, given that it could include information that participants did not want to discuss in person. Whenever I saw these forms of communication taking place during UBC meetings or small group interviews, I took observational notes.

### **Researcher Role**

As a teacher in the location where this study takes place, I understood that my researcher role might have been a convoluted one for the participants. Given the small size of the school, I taught every single participant, and five of the boys were enrolled in my English class that year. Additionally, with the English department being so small, I had a longstanding relationship with each of the teachers involved in this study. I often ate lunch and socialized with them outside of school, and even shared a classroom and co-taught with one of the teachers. However, based on my observations, my dual role as researcher and peer was quickly accepted by the UBC teachers and, to my knowledge, caused little confusion or conflict.

To address my role with the students, I began the study by making it clear to the boys that during UBC related meetings I was their colleague. I explained to them that anything they said or did would not affect their grades or how I treated them outside of the club. I also clarified that during meetings, I would act as a “participant observer” (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) and my role would be to observe their interactions and participate in the discussion. To delineate their encounters in the UBC and during the school day, I encouraged them to not censor themselves, either by their language or content and to call me by my first name. However, some of the participants might have felt the need to please me and possibly altered their beliefs based on what they thought I want to hear. I have no evidence to prove that this happened, but it could have occurred without my knowledge. I also made it clear to the boys that I, as well as the other teachers, would not let their participation affect their grades or treatment in the classroom. All

teachers agreed to this statement in their consent forms and were reminded of it throughout the study.

Another element of researcher role that was addressed was the power dynamic that exists between students and teachers. There was a clear hierarchy in our school, and students were at the bottom. They were rarely given the opportunity to share their opinions with the school leadership, let alone create meaningful change in the school and participate in empirical research. Teachers were accustomed to having all the power in their classroom, as administrators rarely interfered with their work and students were required to obey. This posed a unique problem that had to be addressed in this study.

There were several ways I attempted to mitigate the power issues that existed between participants. In my previous research, I told the boys to call me by my first name and consider me their peer, as to encourage the boys to use their authentic voice. But this was something I could not require of the teachers. However, this issue was remediated when everyone chose pseudonyms and the boys called the teachers by their chosen names. I did impose the structure that comes with student voice, with the biggest one being that teachers and students are equally valued, and therefore have equal say and participation in their work. The teachers were so dedicated to the work of the group that this was a non-issue. Also, during the first month, all participants created a set of group norms that guided the interactions of the group and ensured everyone's voices were valued and heard. All members had the duty of following and implementing those norms.

Additionally, as Merriam (2009) points out, it was important to go through an epoche to reflect upon my biases, assumptions and viewpoints so that I could better interpret the participants' experiences and the readers could further understand the study and how I came to

my conclusions. Furthermore, this was important since I based this study on phenomenology and was trying to capture the essences of a shared experience (Patton, 2002). As a practitioner who has vast experience with the problem of practice, I certainly had biases and beliefs that could have impacted the study and how the data was analyzed. Though I did not have one guiding theory for why the literacy underachievement was taking place in my school, I had observed and been frustrated by the strong, divisive gender stereotypes placed on the boys and strictly enforced by peers and adults in town. I came into this study believing that these constrictive gender roles, in the form of masculinity, might play a role in why boys underachieved. This was one of my biases. Being smart was no longer considered cool or masculine, and I had long seen boys with great potential not succeed in school because they did not want to subvert their gender stereotype. I saw boys constantly struggling to wear their masculinity masks with the hope of gaining acceptance from the “brotherhood.” I believed that boys’ underachievement was undoubtedly linked to this issue.

Additionally, I am a feminist, and therefore strongly believe in gender equality for both sexes. Moreover, I believe, to an extent, that boys were not treated equally in my school as compared to girls. This was mostly the result of my work with UBC1. I had observed the pain, frustration and apathy the boys felt in relation to their school experiences, and it changed me as a person and a teacher. I saw how some teachers talked about boys, and observed the alarmingly high rates boys were disciplined as compared to girls. Boys, in general, might misbehave in class more than girls, but my school simply accepted this as typical boy behavior and did not seek to prevent it or understand why it was happening. In many ways, I considered myself an advocate for the boys in this study and in my school, and I wished for them to have a more equitable and engaging experience in school. However, given my unique position as student advocate and

teacher, I was certain to remind myself to focus on gathering and analyzing data and not on my opinions and beliefs.

It is important to note that through interactions, class' curriculum and coursework, all the participants had been made aware of my feminist beliefs, which could have affected the boys' responses during our meetings. Additionally, my peers were aware of my feminist principles and desire to improve boys' literacy underachievement. Many of them had even participated in workshops I taught on boys' classroom performance. This could have colored their participation in the study as well. I was sure to make it clear to the participants that my personal beliefs had little bearing on this study, and that the objective was to capture their authentic and situated experiences. Lastly, I also felt that during UBC1, the boys either were unable or unwilling to take some ownership of their underachievement and behavior. They seemed to be deflecting the blame to the teachers, primarily, who I believed were only partially responsible. One of my hopes was that by working with teachers they would see the role they play in boys' poor performance in English class.

### **Ethical Issues**

There were a few ethical issues pertaining to this study that must be explained and addressed. Given the small nature of the school, several boys took classes with a UBC teacher while the study took place. This posed several issues, given the sometimes intense, personal and controversial nature of UBC's work. It was possible that teachers could alter a grade or treat a child poorly because they did not like the comments a child made during a meeting. To address this issue, I included a clause in the participants IRB consent form stating that teachers must agree to not let the boys' participation in the study positively or negatively impact their class grade, or negatively impact how they treated the boys. Inversely, students also agreed by

signing their assent form that they would not treat a teacher poorly based on their participation in the study. It was also possible that a teacher and a child could leave the study not liking each other because of their work together, which was something I could not control. I could only make sure the participants agreed to not act upon any negative feelings that arise because of the study. Fortunately, no issues related to these topics were reported.

Additionally, the boys were a part of the teacher selection process for this study, which increased the likelihood that a good relationship already existed between the two groups. The boys initially stated that they trusted the UBC teachers, and these teachers were known throughout the school for having a respectful relationship with students. Additionally, I had worked closely with these teachers and knew them to be incredibly trustworthy and professional. Nevertheless, to protect the children and adults in the study, teachers had to agree to not let the study impact their students' grades and the boys agreed to not let it change their behavior towards their teacher.

Another issue that had to be addressed was anonymity. Given that participants were asked to talk about their experiences as it pertains to the issue of boys' underachievement, it was very likely that the participants would mention or reference specific students and teachers. Even though the participants omitted names, it was likely, given the small size of the school, that they could deduce the no-named figure being discussed. Because of this, and to ensure the participants' comments could not be used against them, I added a section to the consent and assent forms of both the teachers and students clearly stipulating that they could not speak about any matters pertaining to this study, including participants' comments, group activities and the findings of the group, with individuals outside of the UBC. The rule "what happens in the UBC, stays in the UBC", along with the other group norms, was posted at every meeting to remind

participants of what they agreed to. This rule was in place to protect the participants of this study from purposefully or unintentionally harming someone and to avoid the dissemination of rumors or slanderous comments throughout the school, which was not uncommon in such a small community.

### **Trustworthiness**

To boost the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, I used several strategies to ensure the study was sound (Creswell, 2009). First, I collected and analyze data from several sources and methods, including 12 UBC meetings, six focus group interviews, 13 observation protocols and detailed observational field notes, which allowed me to identify themes and findings based on a convergence of sources and ensured triangulation (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, when identifying themes in my data, I also made sure that the theme was present in multiple pieces of data sources and over the course of study. The triangulation of this study was also seen in my theoretical framework, as I used two theories to ground my research and aide in my interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2009).

Triangulation was just one of several methods I used to ensure this study was trustworthy, reliable and had internal validity. Present in this study were the four factors LeCompte and Preissle (1993) state support the claim of high internal validity. I was a member of the school community where the study took place and data was collected over a relatively long period of time. I also relied heavily on concrete interviews and observations, with both taking place in the participants' natural settings. Lastly, I continually reflected on my role as researcher, as seen in the previous section, and on the research, as seen in the numerous memos I wrote while collecting, coding and analyzing the data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Also, because the study took place over a long period, with both field notes and audio recordings of the focus



groups gathered, the data I collected was rich, descriptive and comprehensive, which is the hallmark of qualitative validity (Creswell, 2009). Lastly, the data and findings of this study were peer reviewed by members of my dissertation committee, who have vast scholarly and practitioner experience that relate to the topic of this study.

### **Challenges**

After reflecting on the implementation and success of the ST partnership, three challenges became apparent: lack of school support, time and the teacher's mask. This study faced significant hurdles as it was conducted in Upper Mountain High. Before the study began, I was called into the office of both the principal and the superintendent and asked to explain my research. At both meetings, I explained the purpose and design of the study in detail, and gave copies of my proposal to each administrator. After a discussion with the board, my study was approved. However, these were not the hurdles I had to overcome, they were an anticipated part of the process.

As the study progressed and the observations began, my principal became increasingly uncomfortable with the work of the UBC. In the third month, after three teachers did their observations, I was instructed by my principal, who does not have a background in empirical research, to halt the study. He then called me into a meeting where he questioned the validity of my study, the strength of my research questions, and the effectiveness of my data collection procedures. After I defended my study, he required that I change the observation protocol, and went line by line through the club-generated document to give his edits. Mr. Rocco was scheduled to observe the following week, but we had to cancel his observation because of the principal's additional demands. He also asked that I delete the data collected by the previous

teachers during the observations, but I legally did not have to comply to that request.

My principal's reservations, I gathered, stemmed from complaints one teacher had about being observed by her peers. Though the data would be confidential and the observation were focused more on the students' experience than the teacher's instruction, my principal still had concerns about this portion of the study. I believe the teacher's complaints were likely the result of the closed classroom culture in Upper Mountain High. Teachers were not encouraged to, and therefore rarely, observed each other for professional development purposes. Many teachers even refused to share lesson plans and class materials with other teachers who sought help. Given this environment, it was not surprising that a teacher would not want to be observed. Even though I initially had the support of my principal going into the observations, and he was made aware of the observation schedule, he became concerned likely when a staff member expressed concern.

Though it was not necessary to have the support of the administration, it certainly posed a challenge. I had to try to calm the nerves of my principal, defend my research and ensure that the integrity of the study remained intact. This has clear implications for other teacher researchers, as a lack of administrators' support could make it difficult to successfully conduct research in their place of work. Even though I was the principal researcher, I was also a subordinate in my school, and had to obey the demands of my principal. However, I also felt it was imperative to preserve the observation feature of this study. After analyzing the data, it was clear that the observations were one of the most important parts of the study and were a vital component of the learning and empathy experienced by the participants.

Time was also a challenge in this study. Nearly every individual struggled to make the time to participate. For teachers, the growing demands of their job, coupled with family responsibilities and extra-curricular activities, often made it impossible for them to attend. Ms.

Minerva, being a first-time teacher in her 20's, often joked that time was not an issue because she had no responsibilities outside of her job. The boys also had a hard time fitting the club in amidst their growing list of extracurricular activities. Every boy in this study participated in either sports or performing arts, both of which require students attend practice every day. As will be described in a subsequent chapter, the time a participant dedicated to the study had a significant impact on their perception of the participants and their growth as it pertained to the UBC.

In doing my best to minimize issues with time, I sent out reminders a few days before every meeting and asked for participants to RSVP. If more than half of the club could not make it, I would move the date to one that was more convenient. I also had to be ok with members coming late and leaving early, and trust that everyone was doing their best to participate in the study. Knowing time would be a problem, I asked my principal at the start of the study for release time so participants could meet during the school day. He initially agreed to an afternoon in April, but then changed his mind the day before. This study did not require release time for participants, but it would have made contributing to the study much easier.

I believe that if more time was allotted to conduct this study, we would have had more opportunities to examine the achievement gap and I could have collected more data. Release time to conduct this study during school hours would also have been greatly beneficial. I posit that the results of the ST partnership would have been amplified, and even more learning, camaraderie and empathy would have been created if the study took place over a longer period or if participants could have made it to every meeting. In fact, time and commitment were significant factors in the ST partnership, as the more the participant was dedicated, the more likely they were to experience positive outcomes because of this study.

The last challenge was one that I will discuss further in the findings, which was the removal of the “teacher’s mask.” Though Mr. Hodor and Ms. Minerva were excited to take off the mask and be themselves with the students, Ms. Angela and Mr. Rocco had reservations. Mr. Rocco said it was “weird” to be on the same level as the boys, but as the study progressed, he grew comfortable with the arrangement and could be more himself. Ms. Angela chose to keep her teacher mask on throughout the study. The teachers spoke about how hard it was for them to interact with the boys in their uncensored state. It was not necessarily that they found the boys’ comments to be inappropriate, it was that they had the urge to correct them, as they would in the classroom. This urge came out of their attempt to keep the student-teacher relationship a traditional one. However, once they grew accustomed to the new dynamic, Mr. Hodor, Ms. Minerva and Mr. Rocco each started to be their authentic selves. They cursed, joked around, and sparred with the students.

I understand why the teachers felt apprehensive about their participation in the study. There was a clear hierarchy that was enforced in Upper Mountain High. Teachers were in control, and the students were subservient. This structure, in a way, ensured that teachers maintained control of their classroom. Removing that structure then made it possible for the boys to become increasingly disrespectful and subversive. Ms. Minerva, a first-year teacher, was particularly worried about this because of her age. Yet, as the study progressed, the boys improved their behavior with the teachers. They gained respect for them instead of growing impertinent. However, this finding could vary in different applications of this study. The teachers certainly took a risk participating in this study, one that could have made their job more challenging. As lead researcher, my job was to ensure that this did not happen and try to minimize its effect on the teachers’ participation.

### **Data Analysis**

This study utilized inductive analysis, specifically the thematic analysis method, to make sense out of the data gathered (Creswell, 2009; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). Thematic analysis, one of the most common approaches to analyzing data, requires researchers to engage with and ultimately interpret the data in a way that is transparent and trustworthy. (Guest et al., 2012). According to Guest et al. (2012), “thematic analyses move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes” (p. 10). This approach to data analysis includes aspects from other theoretical methods of data analysis, including phenomenology, which aligns with the methodology of this study (Guest et al., 2011). Thematic analysis focuses on coding, which is a necessary part of qualitative analysis through which the researcher identifies themes within the data and labels the data with a code name (Creswell, 2009, Patton, 2002; Guest et al., 2011). Thematic analysis is considered a “transparent, efficient, and ethical” way to capture the complexities of meaning within data (Guest et al., 2011, p. 18).

Data analysis is an ongoing process that starts during the data collection and requires the data to be read several times, as well as organized, written into memos, coded, analyzed and recoded (Creswell, 2009; Guest et al., 2011). The data analysis process for this study entailed sorting and organizing of all the raw data I received during the study to make sense of it (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). The three main sources of my data were the transcription of the UBC meetings, the transcription of the small group interviews, and my observation notes. Other data sources included student-teacher observations and other work completed during UBC meetings. The UBC recordings were transcribed professionally, after which I listened to each recording while reading the transcriptions to ensure total accuracy.

Nearly every portion of the meetings were transcribed, but there were a few caveats. I did not transcribe the beginning of each meeting when I introduced the activities of the day, as I already had that information written down on another document. I also used my discretion when transcribing conversations that took place before or after the UBC meetings. Discussions that were either not picked up in its entirety by the voice recorder, and therefore unusable, or were on topics that had no direct or indirect connection to the study, were not transcribed. Examples included information about upcoming athletic practices or games or thoughts about the food spread offered at the current meeting. If I was unsure of if the data would be useful for the study, I erred on the side of caution and had it transcribed. The transcriptions and the observation notes were both organized and stored in a password protected Google Drive account.

### **Coding**

After all the data was transcribed and organized, I began the thorough reading of the data. This step required that I reread the data several times to notice trends and reoccurring themes (Creswell, 2009; Saldana, 2013). During this time, I wrote memos that summarized the data, identified possible patterns and themes and pre-coded the data when appropriate (Creswell, 2009; Saldana, 2013). Once I felt that I had a strong grasp of the data, I began coding, which is the process of organizing the data into chunks to understand the information further (Creswell, 2009). Saldana (2013) describes coding as grouping data into families, which shows the beginning of a pattern. During this part of my data analysis, I applied several strategies and coded over two cycles (Saldana, 2013). I used the online program Dedoose to complete both cycles of coding and to write all the memos.

After studying different methods, I decided to use two codes, emotion coding and descriptive coding, simultaneously for the first round of coding (Saldana, 2012). Emotion coding

labels the emotions experienced or described by the participant, while descriptive coding summarizes the basic topic of a passage (Saldana, 2012). Using both methods enabled me to organize the data and identify trends and themes. When the first cycle was completed, I went through all the data to check that each code was applied appropriately and recode when necessary.

Second cycle coding is more complex in that it requires researchers to synthesize, conceptualized and build theories pertaining to your study (Saldana, 2012). Because utilizing in vivo codes were so useful in my previous study, I decided to use it during the second cycle. This coding method directly connects to the study's foundation in student voice and prioritizes and honors the participant's voice (Saldana, 2012; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). While coding during both cycles, I renamed some codes, or organize them into subcategories, which is called axial coding (Merriam, 2009). In addition to renaming codes, I also merged and deleted codes as I saw fit. Merriam (2009) suggests that codes should be: responsible to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive and capture the meaning of the phenomenon. I attempted to have codes that meet each criterion.

### **Interpretation & Writing**

Once I had an updated codebook, with all the codes in order, I reread the data to interpret the information and identify patterns that existed (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). If necessary, I renamed or reorganized the codes. To begin to interpret the data, I read through all data organized by code and wrote analytical memos for each code based on what I was thinking and any phenomenon I observed. I also wrote about how I related to the elements of the study, any theories I developed, and different emerging themes from the data (Saldana, 2012). Once extensive memos were written for each code, I read over each memo numerous times to look for

reoccurring ideas or themes.

Identifying themes was the last step I took before starting the writing process. DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) state that a theme is an abstract idea that captures and gives meaning to a reoccurring experience. I began “theming the data” by reading the memos I wrote for each code numerous times (Saldana, 2002). While doing this, I took notes as to possible themes I saw. Once I had a list of themes written down, I looked to see if any of them related to each other, in an attempt to find over-arching themes (Saldana, 2002). Once I believed I had concrete set of major themes from the data, I began to write additional memos on each theme, which were organized more like an informal outline of ideas and codes. Memoing was a critical tool I used as I organized and interpreted the meaning of the themes, which was the final step of data analysis (Creswell, 2009).

With a set of themes identified and organized, I could see how larger patterns connected to each other and a narrative began to emerge that described the boys’ and teachers’ experiences as it related to boys’ underachievement and student-teacher relationships. I then wrote a detailed outline, where I synthesized my analysis and developed clear assertions from the data that answered my research questions. The outline was my guide as I wrote my findings and implication chapters.

To address the research questions and represent the data, which was quite substantial, in the strongest way possible, the findings of this study are organized into three chapters. The fourth chapter of this study, *The Four Main Contributors to Boys’ Literacy Underachievement*, addresses the second research question about what the UBC unearthed in their work on boys’ underachievement, and lays out four key conclusions and assertions members made as it pertains to the gender gap in English. *The Necessary Elements of a Student-Teacher Partnership*



describes the UBC in more detail and identifies nine components of the partnership that are necessary for its function, which responds to the first question. The sixth chapter, titled *The Transformational Partnership and Its Effect on Participants* focuses on the outcomes of students and teachers working together, and answers the three sub-questions in relation to the partnership. It draws from the focus group interviews to illustrate the participants' experiences and the ways in which they evolved as it relates to their participation in this study.

## CHAPTER 4: THE FOUR MAIN CONTRIBUTORS TO BOYS' LITERACY UNDERACHIEVEMENT

This study asserts that the gender achievement gap in literacy is the result of numerous factors that impact boys' ability to earn high marks in English, and not simply caused by their innate incapacity. In examining this phenomenon in the UBC and analyzing the related data, four themes emerged that pointed to the ways in which students, teachers and society in general, perpetuated the literacy achievement gap. The findings in this chapter are organized into four distinct sections, which directly answer the research question on what the UBC discovered while examining the gap.

The first, *Boys' Rejection of Reading and Academics*, describes how boys' behaviors and beliefs related to school impeded their ability to succeed in English class. The second section, *Ineffective, Passive Instruction Resulting in Disengaged Boys*, focuses on the rote and ineffective instruction often experienced by the boys and their subsequent self-destructive responses. The last two sections, *Compulsory Masculinity & the Prevention of Scholarly Boys* and *The Respect & the Male Student-Teacher Relationship* add to the narrative on boys' underachievement, and illustrate how masculinity and lack of respect between teachers and students can have a long-lasting and detrimental impact on boys' academic pursuits. Together, these four sections, which are the result of the UBC's joint enterprise, paint a detailed picture as to why boys in our school, and possibly across the country, underperformed in their literacy classes (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008).

### **Boys' Rejection of Reading & Academics**

One theme that emerged from the findings of this study was the numerous ways in which adolescent boys openly and subconsciously rejected academics. Throughout the study, the

participants discussed the common demeanor and actions of numerous boys in our school that demonstrated a disregard for the expectations educators have for English students. Of them, I identified three as the most prevalent in Upper Mountain High and the most connected to boys' underachievement. The first way boys rejected school was through their disruptive classroom behaviors, which had significant effect on their achievement. The young men in our school, including every student in the study, rejected academic reading, and openly devalued and avoided the activity. Lastly, many boys rejected any notion of pursuing academic success, particularly in the English classroom, which was seen through their empathy and low academic expectations. These findings suggest that the qualities displayed by some boys – disruptive behaviors, a rejecting of school reading and academic lethargy – prevented them from engaging and succeeding in English class and could be a reason why underachievement in English was a prevalent issue in our school.

### **Rejection of Respectful Schoolboy Behavior**

The disruptive behaviors of boys in Upper Mountain High, and the effect on their achievement, was one of the most passionately discussed topics of the UBC. Boys frequently acted out, disrupted the class and challenged teachers' classroom management skills. During the UBC discussions, teachers described, with a fair amount of frustration, how students' misbehaviors could cause a ripple effect in class and make it challenging to properly instruct students. The boys were jocular in their initial responses, but eventually acknowledged their frequent classroom transgressions and the effect it had on their grades. When analyzing these exchanges, it became apparent that boys' misbehaviors were not born out of boredom or lack of willpower, but was rooted in their outright rejection of the submissive role they were expected to play.

The participants, both the students and the teachers, identified what amounted to be a long list of misbehaviors that they either witnessed or committed in the classroom. The most common were talking out of turn, cracking jokes and socializing with other boys, all of which were valued as it related to boys' strong desire to be social (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). From there the list diverged to include throwing things, moving around the classroom without permission, purposefully inciting teachers, getting teachers off topic, creating an outburst to disrupt the class, falling asleep, leaving the room, being physical with each other, and making noises, often of the bodily kind. Per the UBC students, boys acted this way due to: innate impulses, such as to socialize, move, and laugh; masculine norms; lack of self-awareness; and ineffective teaching. These unruly acts were considered by the members to be disruptive, immature, humorous, distracting, and self- destructive, but they also illustrated the disregard boys had for academic achievement.

Misbehavior demonstrating boys' rejection of academics can be seen in an exchange between me and Ari, a senior boy.

- Ari: I can't stand talking to Nancy during psych class, because if I say something, she'll whisper back to me in the lowest possible volume, and I'm like, "Nancy what did you say?" She's like, "Shh, you're speaking too loud. She's trying to teach." I'm like, "Nancy she's not going to stop class just because I say one thing, like, speak!" You just can't talk to some girls during class, there's like...
- Antoinette: She's being respectful. She doesn't want to ...
- Ari: Yeah, but there's a fine line between being respectful and just like unnecessarily respectful. If you say like ...
- Antoinette: Unnecessarily? They're respecting her a little too much? (boys laughing)
- Ari: No, no, that's not what I'm saying. You can be respectful, but you can still have a tiny little conversation that no one else ... No one will really be able to hear it if I talk like, "Nancy blah blah blah." No one else is going to hear that but me, Nancy and Ginny and Elysa who are sitting right next to us. That's not going to be a problem."

Ari continued this conversation later in the meeting and added, “yeah, all the girls at my table in psych are party poopers. I can’t talk in that table.” In this exchange, Ari rejected the expectations placed on students and showed a disregard for his teacher and his classmates. This supports the work of Willis (1977), who found that boys rejected the structure of school through their unruly, often socially driven, behaviors. Nancy, and likely the other girls at his table, cared about earning a good grade in their class and subsequently followed the class rule of not talking out of turn. However, Ari painted her respectful schoolgirl demeanor as unnecessary, referring her to as both a killjoy and excessively flattering to the teacher. The expectation placed on students to be respectful and studious was one that Ari scoffed at, likely because it was in opposition to his desire to engage in a casual conversation. Like Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found in their ethnography, socializing with friends was a highly-treasured aspect of boys’ lives. However, this trait must be suppressed in schools if a boy wants to be a diligent student. Ari refused to give that aspect of his school life up, and accepted that being rude to his teachers and classmates and missing part of a lesson were the consequences of his actions. In this example, as in the many others described by the participants, the boys in Upper Mountain High engaged in acts that undermined their academic success.

Another example of boys’ rejection of the dutiful schoolboy demeanor can be seen in a conversation between Ms. Angela, Ms. Minerva, Oliver, a junior, and Ari. The UBC members spoke about how certain material can perpetuate boys’ immature behaviors.

Ms. Angela: I used to teach the book *The Color Purple* and the word “pussy” is on the first page. So, in order to deal with that, I used to make everybody read the first page in class just to get it over with silently, but inevitably it was always the boys who just lost it and couldn’t ... I didn’t know how they were going to continue reading the book. (boys laughing)

Ms. Minerva: Everything is not as obvious as that. We were saying, something that is on page sixty-nine. It’s like automatically, it could be something as subtle as

that. Boys have a harder time dealing with it. (boys laughing)

Oliver: I agree completely with everything they said. Considering I am that kid in class that laughs when there is a bad word on the page or if it is on page sixty-nine. Yeah, I agree completely, we definitely take longer to mature.

Ari: Yeah I pretty much agree basically with everything they said. Although I'm a senior, I still laugh when Ms. Angela said that pussy was on the first page of the book, I still laughed. I would laugh. In a school environment, it's just funny.

The provocative language used in the text, and in unintended allusions to sex, according to the participants, often resulted in a classroom being derailed. Laughing and joking around, like chatting with peers, was another value boys had (Newkirk, 2002; Willis, 1977). Willis (1977) posits that boys used laughing as a way to deal with boredom, fear and a difficult situation. Therefore, laughing could be a way for boys to defuse an uncomfortable or tense environment created by sexual references. In a later discussion, Ari justified this type of behavior, by stating “guys will be dudes. We like to mess around and stuff... there's really no stopping us from just messing around.” These comments by Ari and Oliver show not only boys’ misbehavior, but how unapologetic they feel about their immature inclinations. The blasé attitude displayed by the boys, coupled with their immaturity and proclivity for joking around, illustrated how the boys rejected the expectations to behave appropriately.

Ms. Angela and Ms. Minerva were understandable frustrated at their male students’ penchant to make jokes and its effect on their classrooms. The boys’ tendency to laugh and joke around was not accepted by teachers, instead, as the teachers pointed out, were significant instructional obstacles. Ms. Angela even stopped teaching *The Color Purple* because a single provocative word in the text impeded the boys’ learning. As with socialization, humor was another desirable trait that competed with and prevented the boys’ ability to learn be

academically successful. In making jokes and acting out, the boys challenged their teachers' guidelines and likely stifled their own achievement.

The participants identified a variety of reasons why they misbehaved, including the urge to socialize and laugh. Additionally, they recognized how their behaviors impacted their grades and their class. Jeremy, a junior, stated at one point that his behaviors “distracts not only me, but the teacher and the other people in my class.” Ellen, also a junior, added that disrupting the whole class “could piss the teacher off and hurt your grade even more and your learning.” The boys were sincere in their discussions on this topic, and though they recognized their behavior and its consequences, they showed no interest in improving their actions. Instead, many of the boys referenced the “boys will be dudes” argument as a way to explain or justify their behavior. Throughout the study, boys gave examples of their unruly behaviors, and in each example, the boys were not simply following their urges. They were purposefully rejecting the predefined expectations of dutiful, hard-working students.

### **Rejection of Academic Reading**

One reason why boys do not perform well in English class was due to their outright rejection of academic reading. Most boys in the study spoke proudly of their refusal to read the assigned class text. A comment Alex, a junior, made best summarized their sentiments on the subject. He said: “school is like a competition to do the best without reading the book.” Just like Smith & Wilhelm (2002) found in their study, Alex and other UBC boys were quick to devalue reading. But Alex's comment also shows another element with boys and books: pride in not reading.

Per the findings, there are several likely reasons for boys' rejection of reading. First, reading instruction lacked interesting texts and autonomy, which in turn, affected boys'

motivation to read. Reading identities and lack of skills were two other reason for why boys did not read. The last reason was related to the gendered beliefs surrounding reading, which the boys asserted began at a young age. They stated that reading was perceived to be feminine or gay, which was a main reason why they so fervently and openly rejected the act. This concept will be explored in a subsequent section on masculinity. In one way or another, these statements became the boys' justification for why they did not read. Given that reading is the cornerstone of every literacy class, boys' rejection of reading, the findings indicated, was a significant factor in boys' poor literacy grades.

**The boys' reading identities.** The boys in this study were quick to assume the identity of reluctant readers. Rejecting academic texts, as seen in Alex's quote, was at the heart of their experience as English students. The boys frequently spoke at length about how they did not read, especially if it was assigned to them in class. Sergio, a junior, was not just reluctant to read, he identified as a non-reader, a concept which supports the work of Smith and Wilhelm (2002). He explained, "even as a young kid I've never liked reading. Still don't like reading. Don't read at all actually. It's not an identity crisis or whatever. I just think that, once I found my one identity it's kind of weird to change. I don't feel like it's going to change. I don't want to be [a reader], it's just not who I am." Sergio's comments demonstrated his rejection of reading and his identity as a non-reader. He said he did not read, even as a young child, and that being a reader simply was not who he was. There were clear implications for Sergio being a non-reader. Reading is the cornerstone of every literacy class, so not reading would make it virtually impossible to achieve good marks in the subject. But, as with the other boys in the study explained, Sergio was not concerned about his grades, and even admitted to not applying himself in class saying, "it's not like I really care about being a nerd or anything." Sergio equated being a reader with being a nerd, which appeared to be equally undesirable.



When asked to describe his identity, Sergio said he identified as an athlete first. This was also the opinion shared by other UBC boys. However, as Ari described, being an athlete meant he could not be a reader.

I certainly don't read as much because now sports are a bigger part of my life than it used to be. I used to be a short chubby kid. That's funny! Anyway, I used to be short and chubby, wasn't very good at sports. I used to read a lot more. I read all the Harry Potter books, I read Hunger Games and that kind of stuff. I haven't read for fun in two, two and a half, three years. It's not really my thing anymore, I just focus more on sports and watching TV and stuff. It's just kind of different now.

In this passage, Ari implied a struggle between reading and playing sports, which in our school was an activity in which nearly every boy participated. Ari described two versions of himself, one who was physically inferior but an avid reader, and another who was a capable athlete who did not read. The two boys, with their divergent identities, were at odds with each other. Chubby Ari might not have had many friends, but he found pleasure in escaping to *Hunger Game's* District 13 and *Harry Potter's* Hogwarts School. Athlete Ari lived in the real world, and spent his time on a sports field with his peers and not at home reading a book. These two versions of himself, Ari argued, could not coexist. He could be a social athlete or a flabby bookworm. Like many boys in this study, Ari chose to be the athlete, and subsequently rejected his love of reading.

Ari's candor highlighted a phenomenon that appeared to be common in adolescence, the shift in identify from being an avid reader to being, in the very least, a reluctant reader. Many boys described how they used to love reading when they were young, but by middle school their fondness had faded and they began to avoid reading. This could be a significant factor in why adolescent boys underachieve in English. Jeremy, a junior, described his experience on this phenomenon.

When I was younger I used to read, my mom at least, she would encourage me to read

every night before I went to bed and I used to love reading. I had bookshelves on bookshelves full of books and I could never put them down. I don't know if it's from sports or just friends and everything, getting tired after sports. My focuses have just shifted and I'll read some of the books that we have assigned in class but not all of them. I just don't enjoy reading as much as I used to.

Jeremy spoke of his old reading days with fondness and a sense of confusion. He would happily and ferociously read every night. But, like Ari, his interest in reading slowly disappeared, and with it, his identity as an avid reader. He attributed this shift to becoming more social and athletic, which demonstrated the value he placed on socializing and friendships (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Newkirk, 2002). Many of the boys in this study identified as a reluctant reader. For some, they disliked reading from childhood. But, more disheartening are the stories of Ari and Jeremy, where boys once loved reading but stopped reading in adolescence. In either case, their unwillingness to read became a part of their identity and affected their ability to be strong English students.

**Classroom texts & instruction.** A topic that was passionately debated during UBC meetings was the way in which reading was taught in schools. Lackluster texts, no student autonomy, and analytical reading instruction were three vexations that had a profound impact on the boys' motivation to read. In regard to their assigned books, the students' comments rested on one single iteration: the class texts were simply terrible. Many boys described their books with disdain, or in the best case, indifference, and used such descriptions like "boring," "stupid," "annoying," "hard to understand," "hard to get into," "too descriptive," and "too slow." In this way, it was easy for the boys to reject reading if their class texts were boring, inauthentic, and did not represent their interests, such as sports, horror and science fiction (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Dutro, 2003; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Newkirk, 2002; Parkhurst, 2012; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Lack of reading autonomy was another issue. Male students greatly valued reading autonomy but often were assigned the texts to read in class (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Parkhurst, 2012; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). This could be the reason why students in Upper Mountain High frequently exhibited at least some resistance to class texts. Oliver explained this concept in more detail.

For people that like to read recreationally, that's up to them. Then in school, when you are getting assigned a book, I don't know if it's just me but I hear from a lot of people, boys and girls, but mostly boys, that you don't like it as much because you are forced to read it. Anything forced upon you at this age, you don't really want to do it. It's the fact that you are being forced to read a book that you may like, or you may not like, but it's the fact you are being forced to do it for school...it's a waste of time.

Lack of autonomy seemed to be a bone of contention for students. Without the ability to choose, Oliver argued, boys' reading motivation and enjoyment were severely reduced. His belief of it being a waste of time is something many adolescent boys express (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Oliver either did not understand or did not care about the numerous benefits that came from reading. It did not matter if he liked the text or if his grades would suffer, either way he would reject his English book. This comment, when examined further, has wide reaching implications for boys' academic pursuits. Oliver asserted that students, including girls, reject and devalue academic work that was forced on them. Therefore, boys who strongly desire autonomy would possibly do poorly in other subjects without autonomy.

Ellen and Ned had a different reason for why they thought boys did not read the class texts. They both asserted that it was due to instruction where boys were asked to thoroughly analyze a text. Ned, a sophomore explained, "I'm more of a logical person. I like it a lot better when the facts are just out in front of me. It's easier for me to work with it. I can analyze things but it's much harder for me to do it than for, let's say, my sister." Ellen expounded upon this idea.

I don't like having to analyze books in English class. That's the thing that I dread. Girls, they get all those little post-its and the colored pens and stuff and they love taking those little notes inside the margins, I'm not about that. If I could just read twenty pages a night ... You give me a book, even *Cat in the Hat* or something, and just said read twenty pages. I'll like *Cat in the Hat*. If you said go home and read *Cat in the Hat*, I'd be like okay cool, I like that book. If you told me, go home read *Cat in the Hat* and then annotate it and pick out three themes and analyze the themes. I'd be like this fucking sucks. I don't like *Cat in the Hat* anymore. That's the part that I think really, for me, reading itself is fine, but I don't like the rest of it.

Ned and Ellen were frustrated by their English instruction. It was not the mere act of reading that turned off boys, they argued, it was the cerebral, and perhaps abstruse way reading was taught in the classrooms. The two boys, who are both incidentally honors students, strongly disliked making the complex interpretations teachers often asked of students. Ellen argued that it stripped away any joy boys might have felt and reduced their motivation to read and likely their literacy achievement. Girls, both boys believed, naturally enjoyed annotating books, analyzing themes and engaging in the type of analytical discourse expected of an English student, a statement which supports the claims about learning styles being different based on gender (Gurian, 2011).

Upper Mountain High boys, per Ellen's and Ned's comments, found annotating a book and finding themes to be both frustrating and tedious, and it likely reduced their motivation and resulted in their refusal to read. Though, why the boys disliked the activity was unclear. Again, it could be that they did not see the intrinsic value in literary analysis or it took away the freedom to just sit down and read a book unencumbered. But a more likely reason relates to the boys' abilities. They might not have the necessary skills needed to annotate the book and analyze the subtext, which was why Ned said it was hard for him. Therefore, when Ellen rejected *The Cat in the Hat* at the end of his passage, he was really saying that he could not read the book in the ways he was expected. In this way, boys were not rejecting reading, but felt rejected and

alienated by reading and their teacher's expectations of them. This concept, lack of boys' reading skills, points to a possible cause of the literacy gender gap, and will be expounded upon in a subsequent section.

The findings of this study indicate that the boys often found academics texts, and all that was required in reading them for the classroom, quite discouraging. Many UBC boy, including those who were classified high-achievers, stated that their motivation to read classroom texts was nonexistent. Compounding the issue was the numerous activities the boys identified that lured them away from books. They listed 14 activities – including hanging out with friends, playing video games, working on their hobbies, and, like Ari and Jeremy pointed out, athletics – all of which stifled their drive to read. These activities, in one form or another, each required boys to socialize with their peers. Reading a book, on the other hand, was considered a solitary, isolating activity, which the boys likely found demotivating (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Newkirk, 2002). Boring, inauthentic assigned texts, and the ways in which they were taught, had a significant effect on boys' motivation to read, and together, resulted not only in Upper Mountain High boys' rejection of reading, but of their poor English grades as well.

**Reading without proficiency or confidence.** Throughout the study, students lamented their lack of reading skills. When the students spoke about reading, they often used the phrase “I can’t.” “I can’t read.” “I can’t understand those long words.” “I can’t read Shakespeare.” “I can’t get into the book.” “I can’t focus while reading.” These phrases that boys echoed during the study not only support the previous assertions about boys' reading identities, but also highlighted the UBC students' low reading self-efficacy and proficiency. This was a discouraging finding, considering how reduced efficacy is correlated with limited skills, motivation, and achievement (Johnston & Logan, 2009; Solheim, 2011; Lee & Jonson-Reid, 2016; Choo, Roberts, Capin,

Roberts, Miciak & Vaughn 2015; Bandura, 1993; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The findings of this study suggest that lack of skills and self-confidence were likely reasons why boys rejected read and were not successful in English class.

In an exchange with Ms. Minerva, the boys spoke about how they struggled with reading and had little confidence in their literacy skills.

Alex: Ms. Minerva, you don't understand how my brain works. Once I start reading something and it gets too descriptive, my brain ... I just start thinking about what I ate for lunch. I get lost.

Ned: That does happen to me sometimes.

Elijah: Sometimes I feel like I have such a lack of reading skills that it makes me think I have a learning disability.

Alex: I feel like that.

Elijah: Like I have to go to a doctor, like I have dyslexia. Like I can't actually read this

Ned: That happens a lot to me.

Ms. Minerva: Like you, when you're reading, you get to the bottom of the page and you don't know what you just read?

Ned: Yeah.

Alex: You can't commit when you don't know half the words on the page.

Elijah: That thing about committing to the page and then I'm like, "Dammit, I just forgot again," so it's like...

Alex: Come on! I can't read complicated books.

Ned: There are times when I'm reading a paragraph and then I'm like, "Okay, I understand that. I'll keep going." Then I make it to the next page. I'm like, "Whoa, when did this happen? What just ... what?" Then I have to go back and I read it again. Then when I try focusing more on the paper, it just gets worse. It makes it unenjoyable.

Alex: I'm like on a 4th grade reading level.

This excerpt illustrated the boys' low self-efficacy, limited skill set and use of the phrase "I can't." They revealed their numerous struggles with reading, including focus, stamina, comprehension and vocabulary. Elijah, a senior, became so frustrated while reading that he even thought he could have a reading disability, like dyslexia. Alex believed he was seven reading levels below where he should be. There was a level of understanding among the students, as they all, even honors and AP students, had similar struggles with reading. The tone they used in this vignette is a mix of dejection and frustration. Ms. Minerva, like the other teachers in the study, was empathetic, but that did little to bolster the boys' self-efficacy. This excerpt also illustrated the possible shortfalls in the literacy instruction in Upper Mountain High, which will be described in another chapter. As the young men in this passage suggested, one of the likely reasons why boys rejected reading, and underachieved in English, was due to their limited skill set and low self-efficacy.

The students' low self-efficacy was also demonstrated in their belief that reading was an inherent skill – and one they did not have – rather than one to be honed through practice. The boys spoke at length about how girls were simply better at reading, which was the reason why they outperformed boys in English. Ned, who was the top student in the sophomore class, was baffled when describing his twin sister's reading. He stated, "just the other day my sister and a couple of her friends, they're all reading the same books, and they get together and they talk about it. My sister just finished a three-hundred-page book in two or three days. I couldn't do that! I just don't understand how it happens." Even though Ned was a high achieving student, and even outscored his sister my English class, he felt that he did not have the same reading abilities as his twin sister. Her insatiable reading and strong skills, in his eyes, were the result of her gender. Bandura's (1993) work on self-efficacy showed how this can be a dangerous belief.

He found that individuals who thought ability was innate had reduced self-efficacy, and had lower motivation, grit and ability to improve their situation (Bandura, 1993). UBC boys did in fact have reduced motivation and self-efficacy in regard to reading. For Ned, this belief significantly impacted how he thought about reading and English class. If he were to achieve at the same level as his sister, he would need to work harder, which put him at a disadvantage. This disadvantage, according to boys in the study, resulted in boys' rejection of reading.

The young men in UBC expressed frustration and sadness while describing their reading experience, and these emotions were often the result of their limited proficiency and self-efficacy. They knew they should read, but it was so challenging that any enjoyment they might have felt was stripped away. Alex's exchange with Ms. Minerva, his English teacher at the time, illustrated this well.

Ms. Minerva: Hey, what about *Of Mice and Men*, though, which is very simple language?

Alex: No, that's so descriptive, though, too. I don't know, just say a brush. Don't say the colors. Once you throw in colors, time of day, and characters, I'm lost, like no thank you.

Ms. Minerva: I just think you don't have, your work ethic is a part of that.

Alex: Honestly Minerva, I wanted to read *Of Mice and Men* so bad. I wanted to read it and understand it, because it sounded like a great story!

Ms. Minerva: *Catcher* wasn't too descriptive.

Alex: *Catcher* was the worst out of all of them!

Ms. Minerva: I know you guys hated that.

Alex: I read the most out of *Catcher* and that one was the worst, for me. I read maybe 4 chapters and I was like, "I can't do this." Sorry Minerva.

Like many English teachers, Ms. Minerva wanted to explain Alex's lack of engagement as having no work ethic, not the result of poor instruction, limited skills or divergent learning styles.



This has long reaching implications for boys' literacy underachievement. If every time a teacher came across a struggling male reader and explained their underachievement as being the boys' fault, they would be unable to help their students improve. Furthermore, the boys, who already disliked English class and had limited skills and confidence in reading, would likely become more frustrated and further reject reading as a worthwhile activity. It was possible that Alex experienced this oversimplification of his reading difficulties in the past. Though Alex initially challenged her, in both a passionate and respectful way, he eventually accepted her interpretation of the events and apologized for his lack reading.

This exchange is significant for another reason as well. Though Alex, and the other boys, openly rejected academic reading throughout the study, it might be possible to alter the boys' opinions. The storyline of *Of Mice and Men* intrigued Alex and he genuinely wanted to read the book. But he lacked the skills, and, like Bandura (1993) claimed, the grit needed to persevere despite his challenges. His defeated tone demonstrated the sadness at his failure. However, if Alex were to gain the skills and stamina required of an analytical reader, his rejection of reading might be reversed. This points to the exciting possibility of improving boys' literacy skills and achievement and shifting their reactions to reading from rejection to enthusiasm.

As this section illustrated, boys often rejected reading and disregarded it as a joyless, laborious activity. They spoke about their frustration with classroom texts and instruction, and described their inabilities to read well. Though the young men in this study initially appeared as if they disdained reading, when examining the issue further, several obstacles appeared to be standing in the way of boys' capacity to reading with ease and pleasure. The boys, at least at one point, enjoyed reading, but eventually succumbed to the numerous obstacles they faced when attempting to read. Some of these challenges, like poor book choice and grueling instruction,

appeared insurmountable. Reading was simply too complicated and arduous a task to take on willingly. Thus, a majority of adolescent boys in this study struggled to find success in English class and did not perform as well as their female counterparts.

**Rejection of the Pursuit of Academic Excellence.** Another significant finding in relation to boys' literacy underachievement was their rejection of the belief that they all should strive for academic success. Though teachers and administrators in the school often touted the importance of academic excellence, the boys instead demonstrated pronounced feelings of apathy – which I define in the regards to this study as lack of interest and concern – towards school. Instead of pursuing academic merits, the boys often put forth minimal effort in class and had low academic expectations for themselves. Apathy was an ever-present theme during UBC discussions, as seen in the boys' repeated use of the phrase “don't care” to describe their feelings towards school and learning.

One instance of apathy being displayed was when the boys spoke about their friend Marc, a very gifted and popular junior in the school and former UBC1 member. Ari and Leo, a sophomore, celebrated his perceived apathy when discussing how he managed to get such good grades.

Ari:            Marc doesn't give a shit about anything, he's just really smart.

Leo:           Yeah, he really doesn't give a shit [about school].

Ari:           So funny.

This brief exchange illustrated how the boys valued an apathetic approach to school. Marc was respected, maybe even admired, for rejecting the pursuit of high grades. Though he likely was not indifferent about his work, the boys' saw his achievement as an unintended effect of his inherent skill, not something he strived for. Based on Leo and Ari's short remarks, being

indifferent about school was a desirable attitude to have.

This apathetic student mindset was on display during Jeremy's observations of a UBC teacher. Jeremy stated, "the boys in the class cared less. They either did not pay attention in class and if they didn't do the homework, they had pride in not doing it. They would be telling each other "oh I didn't do this, I'm not going to do that, blah blah blah"". Jeremy captured the cool, disconnected mindset that students often demonstrated in class, in this case, in a middle school English class. Not only were numerous boys inattentive in class, they boasted about their lack of effort with a sense of pride. Doing the absolute minimum and avoiding work was a way for boys, like the ones Jeremy observed, to reject their schooling and the expectations placed on them (Willis, 1977). And just like Ari and Leo demonstrated, being apathetic about and rejecting school was a mindset to be proud of and often resulted in their peers' respect. The quote also demonstrated how young men's lack of academic drive directly affected their achievement in English. They did not do their homework or pay attention in class, which likely resulted in low grades.

However, pride in apathy might not be as straightforward as the boys described. Ms. Angela attributed the students' mentality to embarrassment. She said, "one of the sources I've used for Psychology points out that boys would much rather be perceived as lazy than stupid. On the lower end, they would prefer everyone to think, oh well he could've passed but he's too lazy, than he tried and failed. Or he tried and got a D. Because then they feel stupid. It may be more of a protective thing as well." Ms. Angela's argument was the same one made by Smith and Wilhelm (2002). Young men in our school might say that they do not care about school but they could actually be afraid of failing and being considered "stupid." This concept posits that boys would rather be considered by peers and teachers as lazy than incapable of doing the work. In

this way, the boys would not be rejecting academic excellence, as they would be avoiding it out of fear of failure. Ms. Angela believed this mentality was more common with boys who were low performers, and could be one explanation for why boys underperform in English.

***Reduced academic expectation.*** Another way students rejected the pursuit of academic success was through the reduced academic expectations they had for themselves. This concept was illustrated by Alex's previous assertion about purposefully not reading in school. After making the bold statement, Alex attempted to explain his logic to the UBC members.

Alex: School is like a competition to do the best without doing any work, like doing the least work possible

Ned: What if you do work, and you do better than people who don't do work, and just do mediocre? Then, wouldn't you want to do work and then do well?

Alex: Yeah, but it's possible for me. For me, it's possible to outdo other people by doing less work.

Ms. Minerva: But think about what you could do if you actually did work!

Alex: It's kind of like a pride thing. I got you and I didn't even work.

Ms. Minerva: In theory and then you say you worked hard for like 10 days?

Alex: I was failing a class?

Ms. Minerva: Yeah, like for a day, remember?

Alex: No.

Ms. Minerva: Then you worked hard for like two weeks.

Alex: Then I did

Ms. Minerva: Then you got...

Alex: After assembly, about like college and stuff, I was like, "Alright, 4.0 this year," and then like a week later, I was like, "Never mind."

Alex's comments illustrated not only his apathy, but the drastically low bar he set for himself. He

was certainly a capable young man, but he did not exert himself in class. Instead, he strove to do as good as he could without actually trying. Willis (1977) found that the “lads,” or boys who rejected school, felt superior to the boys who were academically driven and applied themselves in school. Alex demonstrated this belief in his quote. There was pride, he said, in passing without applying himself, and outdoing students that worked hard in class. This idea was supported by previous comments by Leo, Ari and Jeremy. Though Alex was capable of earning high scores in English, he appeared happy to assume the role of an underachiever.

The other boys shared this mindset. Harry, a junior, explained how his low expectations manifested itself in class.

Antoinette: So if you don't read, some of the things we have you do is nearly impossible?

Harry: Yeah, pretty much. Most of the time when we were asked to pull quotes in class, I'm just sitting there and talking, and then you say like, “Guys, stop talking and get to work.” I stay quiet for a couple of seconds and then I keep talking again. then it's just one big cycle.

Harry: You like pick up stuff though. I didn't read any of Gatsby and I picked all that stuff up in class.

Alex: The same here, I got a 66 on the test.

Harry: I got a 65 and I haven't read a single page.

Antoinette: You got D's on those tests though.

Harry: Better than an F

Harry not only displayed a lack of effort, but also low academic goals. He avoided doing his classwork by socializing with friends, and his academic goal, it appeared, was to pass the tests, not excel on them. Harry was pleased with his 65, despite it being the lowest possible passing grade. Students in Upper Mountain High, like Harry and Alex, demonstrated reduced expectations for themselves, which, as seen by their grades, was a contributing factor to their

underperformance. This finding has direct implications to the gender gap, as the young men appear to be working only towards their reduced goals.

Even high achieving boys in this study had limited academic aspirations and exerted minimal effort. Leo explained his thought process in completing his English work.

If you just said, at the beginning, if you just said “just annotate your book” I wouldn’t care. I would just be like, “Why would I want to waste my time?” Also, because you used annotations as a grade. For me that’s a big thing. Not that I don’t care about my grade...If I’m above an 82 or something like that I’m okay with that, but I don’t want to get below that. If I’m below an 82 or something, that gets me mad. Like if a teacher says, it’s an assignment is an easy grade I think, “Okay I’ll do it,” but as long it’s not huge assignment, but it’s something that will help me and counts as a grade, I’d be 100% good with that.

Even though Leo set goals for himself in school, the bar was considerably low given the grades he earned. He did express some desire to do well, but it was limited. For Leo, earning a B- was sufficient. Leo also described his low expectations, and subsequent rejection of academic excellence, when he spoke the option he was given to move up into honors English.

I feel I’m pretty good in English, so my freshman teacher is like, “Do you want to go into honors?” I was like, “Not really because that’s just not who I am ... because I’m so focused on sports already and school is just not my thing. Thinking about this year though, I’d rather be in honors, but at the same time it’s like, I’d rather be in CP because being in honors is just like, not who I am, I feel like I wouldn’t want to be an honor student, I wouldn’t want to put in the work.

In this passage, Leo was quick to identify himself as a college track student and not one that belonged in honors. He also did not want to complete the strenuous work that came with the higher-level class, which played into the rejection of academic excellence. Just like with reading, Leo assumed an identity that ran counter to being a strong student and harmed his ability to earn high marks in class. He did not aspire to earn high marks in an honors or AP level literacy class; being an average student was fine for him. However, like Ms. Angela argued, Leo could be afraid of doing poorly in honors and would rather be perceived as lazy than uncappable.

These assertions illustrated how Leo, and other boys in Upper Mountain High, were half

invested in school and only did the bare minimum to get by. For some boys, like Harry and Alex, a D was sufficient. For stronger students, a B- was acceptable. No student expressed a desire to earn an A, even the students in AP and honors classes. Many young men lacked the drive and motivation needed to be highly successful students, similar to previous research on the topic (Bandura et al.,1996).

The male students Upper Mountain High engaged in activities and held certain beliefs that resulted in their underachievement in English. They rejected the behavioral expectations placed on them. They rejected the relevance of reading both in their social and academic lives. And lastly, they did not strive for academic success and expressed profound apathy and reduced expectations. Though not all boys in school acted this way, the participants argued that these actions were the norm. The result of male students being non-readers who were rowdy, unmotivated and totally disengaged from the academic community was simple: they earned low grades in English. There was, however, an alternate interpretation of boys' poor behavior and attitude. The findings suggested that it was possible that boys' rejection of school was the result of lack of skills and fear of failure, which point to two promising ways to address boys' literacy underachievement.

### **Ineffective, Passive Instruction Resulting in Disengaged Boys**

Probably the most significant way English teachers contributed to the gender gap in their classroom was through their instruction. In Upper Mountain High, the UBC boys argued, much of the instruction they experienced was boring, rote, inactive and ineffective. And as seen in the previous section, the literacy education left many boys reading without proficiency or self-confidence. After analyzing the data related to this topic, a simple correlation pertaining to the success of a teacher's instruction emerged. Instruction that was passive, lacked teacher support,

and did not actively involve students was wholly ineffective and resulted in the boys' disengagement and inability to learn. This type of poor instruction had substantial effects on boys' achievement – resulting in boys acting out, losing motivation and expressing apathy – and likely contributed to the gender gap in Upper Mountain High.

Passive, teacher-led lessons, particularly those that restricted students' movement and interactions, were considered by the students to be both boring and ineffective. Harry expounded on this point by describing, in the students' perspective, the simple dichotomy between student-led and teacher-led instruction. "In English, if we're just going to be sitting there and listening, and not having to answer a question or anything, it makes class pretty boring," he told me. "But if we were actually moving and doing stuff and answering questions, it's really not that bad. The hour goes by pretty fast." Harry did not find English, as a subject, to be dull. Instead, his disinterest and frustration stemmed from his teacher's passive pedagogy. Harry likely struggled with sitting in stillness and silence, which was often an expectation of students during passive instruction. An easy way to boost boys' engagement in literacy, Harry argued was by simply including more activities and discussions in classroom.

Teachers witnessed the type of instruction Harry described first hand during the student observations. Many of the teachers commented on how passive instruction, such as lecturing, was utilized a great deal in the school. Ms. Angela observed a sophomore boy, and though she felt the instruction was adequate, she did comment on how physically restrictive it was. She stated that by the end of day, she was exhausted from sitting and listening all day, and she imagined students felt the same way. Ms. Minerva, who teaches both junior and senior high, was also surprised about how inactive lessons were in the high school, in comparison to the middle school. After observing Ellen, a junior boy, for the day, she reflected, "I didn't see a lot of room



for the boys to be boys. There's not a lot of opportunities, here, especially in the high school, for students to move around and do hands on activities. I didn't see a lot of teachers really trying to pull that into their instruction.” Ms. Minerva made a clear assertion in her comment. By not offering hands on activities, the high school teachers, she argued, did not recognize or address boys’ learning needs. Ms. Minerva was not using the “boys will be boys” statement, which, as seen in Ari’s former comment, was often used to explain away boys’ bad behavior, in the traditional sense. She was more referring lessons restricting boys’ innate skills. Both Ms. Minerva and Ms. Angela saw how boys struggled to learn in classes where the instruction was not engaging or active.

The results of the passive, teacher-led instruction identified by the participants were significant. Boys simply became disengaged when sitting in a passive classroom. This manifested itself in two ways. First, students began to act out and shut down because of the poor instruction. And second, the boys became unable or unwilling to master the course’s skills and content. Leo’s vexation with his Math teacher illustrated these very concepts.

For some classes, like math, I go on a daily 15-minute walk. Like for 15 minutes I actually walk around the school. My teacher is part of the problem... so our class goes: we do a do now for 20 minutes and she doesn't talk. We sit there and do it, then we go over the do now and then we go over homework, so we’re not even getting a lesson taught throughout the day. It is sitting there the whole time with two lights off, it’s either between noon and 2:30 pm, I really fall asleep almost every day then I get yelled at. Then one day I was just really pissed off that day, and she was like, “Wake up,” I’m like, “Can you teach something entertaining?” She’s like, “It’s math, what do you want me to do?” I’m like, “Can we do an activity?” She’s like, “No.”

Leo’s comments pointed to an important finding of the study: boys were more likely to engage in negative, disruptive behaviors when the instruction was passive or ineffective. Leo displayed this concept through roaming the halls, taking naps and challenging the teacher, which were behaviors boys engaged in to reject school and preserve their freedom (Willis, 1977). Just like

Harry, Leo's problem with the course was not in the content, but in the instruction. These actions, however, were markedly self-destructive. He was not present, either mentally or physically, for most of the class and was likely unable to focus and master the material, resulting in reduced marks in this course. His actions might have also resulted in excessive and repeated discipline, which, as a future section indicates, often caused boys to give up on the course. Leo's reaction to the teacher-led instruction in his math class was just one example of the boys' assertion that young men cannot succeed in English class, and other subjects, unless they were consistently exposed to strong, student-led lessons.

Tyrion, a junior, and Alex described how their English classes were equally as ineffective and disengaging because they lacked the proper scaffolding from teachers.

Tyrion: For English class, we're supposed to do the teaching for ourselves. In other classes we've had, we read together and it actually helped me, because it keeps me on track to understand what we're talking about or reading about. But in her class, it's that she gives us what she wants us to do and our groups talk it out. And then we don't reconvene.

Alex: For me, for teachers, a lot of them will assess you and won't go over what you did wrong and wouldn't teach you in general. If you don't go over what the students did not know how are they going to get it on the final or if they're assessed on the same thing again, they're never going to learn.

The two boys expressed frustration at having to learn material without the guidance of their teacher. In both cases, the lack of support made it hard for them to succeed. This supports a previous assertion made in the Rejection of Reading section, where students alluded to poor English instruction causing their rejection of reading and lack of skills. Tyrion and Alex might not be acting out in the same self-destructive ways as Leo, but they are equally unable to engage in learning and master the skills because of the ineffective instruction they experienced.

Alex and Tyrion alluded to the possible detrimental effect a lack of teacher support could have on students' achievement. Ellen, supported this claim, and articulated the specific way he

believed boys were affected.

I feel like with the teacher's approach to teaching reading, it's not about how they're reading. I feel like that's a big part of me lacking engagement. There should be a more structured way. I mean, wish I was taught how I should read, more reading skills and how I could pick things up easier and stuff. I feel like I never really learned that until last year and that's been a big factor in me not being engaged because, I think I can speak for all of us here, motivation in a lot of cases, especially in school, is not really a big issue because you want to read, or at least pay attention to Spark Notes, so you don't end up doing poor on other assessments. But I feel when I try to read, even if I'm motivated, I'm not engaged with it because I don't really know how to, if that makes sense.

Ellen's argument in this conversation was evident: a lack of effective instruction and teacher support resulted in him being disengaged and unmotivated when it came to reading. Though he intended to do well in English class, he lacked skills and did not receive the instruction necessary to achieve. This has specific implications for the gender gap. Teachers cannot explain boys' underachievement simply in terms of effort and apathy. Both do play a part, but what the UBC boys illustrated was how limited guidance from teachers could either be a direct cause of their apathy and poor work ethic or result in a lack of skills which perpetuated their low self-efficacy. Either way, many participants described a concrete link between a not receiving support from their teachers and their underachievement in English. Scaffolded instruction would then be an effective way to boost boys' engagement, motivation, and likely their reading performance.

The last example of passive and disengaging instruction was in the use of monotonous lesson. This was the case in Ellen's English and history classes. With the Upper Mountain High recently becoming a Google school, the teachers were instructed to incorporate Chromebooks and technology into their lessons. Thus, Ellen's teachers had their classes do the same activity on their computers several times a week. He explained how repetitive lessons impacted his engagement. "That's like Martin's and Napier's class, even though it's an AP, there will be days, especially since we got the Chromebooks, we'll all be like "I know what we're going to do," and

before the class even starts I'll check out," Ellen stated. "I won't really be there, I'll just be doing my own thing. That's what happens with lessons that are the same and that stuff." Regardless of Ellen being a high achiever and the class being an AP, he reacted the same way as Leo and shut down when the same activity was frequently assigned. His reaction to redundant lessons was almost emotional. It could be that he felt insulted by his teachers' lack of effort and therefore responded in kind. Or, it could be adolescent immaturity and inability to foresee the consequences of his actions. Unlike Leo who disconnected from the class a few minutes at a time, Ellen was disengaged the entire class, and therefore missed out on a complete lesson. And he alluded to this being a reoccurring event, which meant his mental absences from class lessons were compounded over time. His reactions to boring lessons, this passage indicated, was a direct impediment to his learning and academic achievement.

Jeremy identified another effect of tedious activities. He described how his classmates became apathetic and cheated after being assigned the same, poorly-designed history homework. Jeremy asserted, "in history class, she gives us outlines every night for homework. There's a website that has all the outlines posted. Literally, I don't know one person in that room who doesn't copy off of that. And that's an AP class." He then continued, "I only find myself cheating ... The only situation I cheat is if I don't care about the class. Like that class, I feel like she knows nothing, so I can't get excited about that." Jeremy's apathy and disengagement were the result of a tedious and ineffective assessment, and like the other passages in this chapter indicate, were not because he did not like the subject. The teacher's redundant use of prefabricated homework assignments, with the answers readily available online, resulted in the students being uninterested in the class and cheating repeatedly. Jeremy implied that this assignment reflected the lack of knowledge and effort she put into the job, which in turn caused

him to demonstrate the same, reduced level of effort in completing it. Ineffective instruction could be perceived as teachers' laziness, and therefore students disengage from the classroom activities. Just like with the other instances described by the boys, the ineffective instruction Jeremy experienced was correlated with him being defiant and cheating on his daily homework.

**Examples of active instruction.** Though this study outlines numerous examples of ineffective instruction and their effects, it is important to note that UBC members also spent a great deal of time examining what types of instruction were effective and would likely improve boys' engagement, motivation, learning and achievement. The findings were essentially the inverse of what was previously described; lessons that were active, student-led, varied and were scaffolded were marked highly effective. Participants spoke about the importance of social, active classroom activities. Jimmy, a senior, proclaimed, "I feel like boys they need to be engaged with the teacher and they need to be engaged with their other classmates to more succeed." Being social, he argued, was vital for boys' engagement in the class. Jimmy then suggested that teachers who used PowerPoint simply imbed mini classroom discussions after slides to improve their passive instruction. Ms. Angela and Elijah gave additional examples of how group work can be effective at engaging male students. In talking about a group of boys, Ms. Angela gushed about their achievement and said, "the things they analyze through their work, it's phenomenal." Elijah expressed similar levels of success in participating in a group assignment with his friends. He said, "boys love group work because we always talk to each other. I just had a government class and I worked really well with my friends actually." These two examples demonstrated how boys could be successful in literacy-based classes if given the opportunity. The simply addition of a discussion could be all that is needed to improve a tedious lesson.

In addition to social, group assignments, Ms. Minerva described an instance where she got her class of mostly unruly junior boys to be engaged. She designed an activity for *Of Mice and Men*, where the students were part of a trial for Curly's wife's death, with each person arguing defense or prosecution. Like Ms. Angela, she described the activity's success with glee, by saying, "I think they all felt really good about it. They were all talking about it after, how good of a job they did. When we look back on the class, they're all like '*Of Mice and Men* is our favorite book.' The trial was probably the only time this year that I felt all of them were really engaged." Ms. Minerva's active, creative assignment resulted in an entire class of engaged, enthusiastic students and readers. Her active lesson was likely successful because it addressed the boys' inherent urges to move and interact with each other. It also demonstrated a strong commitment to the students' and to her job that redundant and rote lessons did not, which ties back to the concept that boys often put in the same level of effort demonstrated by their teachers. These examples illustrated a major finding of this study: active instruction was a vital way to engage and teach boys, and could be one way to reduce the gender gap and improve boys' reading skills.

The findings of this study documented how ineffective lessons could be detrimental to students. Lessons that are teacher-led, passive, redundant and lack support were considered ineffective by both the boys and the teachers of the UBC. When experiencing such instruction, male students had distinct reactions. They acted out, becoming unruly and self-destructive. They lost engagement in the class and motivation to do their work. And lastly, they became apathetic and stopped putting forth effort. However, lessons that were student-led, hands-on, and collaborative, were correlated with increased engagement and achievement. Though I do suggest that active instruction can be an ideal way to teach boys, like UBC1 asserted, this approach can

be equally effective when teaching girls. Designing hands on, interactive activities around learning key concepts and skills is simply good pedagogy. Though there are many causes of boys' underachievement in English, instruction is likely a vital component in understanding why boys earn lower grades and identifying ways to address the gap.

### **Compulsory Masculinity & the Prevention of Scholarly Boys**

One theme that emerged organically while trying to understand boys' underachievement in school was masculinity. This topic is complex, pervasive and was a sensitive topic for the UBC boys. Though we unpacked numerous angles of this theme, only the concepts directly related to the boys' underachievement will be discussed. The overall finding on this topic was that masculinity in Upper Mountain High, specifically heteronormative masculinity, was a compulsory and pervasive aspect of young men's lives. It affected how they behaved in class, their desires to read, their academic aspirations, how they interacted with each other, and their self-confidence. As Ari put it in one meeting, "there's a connection to masculinity with everything we do." The boys were constantly worried that they were being perceived as gay or not masculine, which was a common issue boys faced (Pascoe, 2012, Martino, 2000; Connell, 1996).

There were two major findings in regard to masculinity and the gender gap that will be discussed in this section, in addition to a brief overview on masculinity in our school. The first was that reading, which is the cornerstone of every English classroom, was considered a feminine and gay activity that any respectable young man should reject. The second was that being an academically driven and successful student was in complete opposition to being a masculine, socially-accepted student at Upper Mountain High. These two findings, coupled with the social benefits of being macho and the intense pressure boys felt to be considered masculine,

had severe and long-reaching effects on boys' behaviors and achievement. It can be posited that without addressing the masculine norms in our school, it would be highly unlikely for the gender achievement gap to be successfully addressed.

### **Masculinity in Upper Mountain High & the UBC**

The UBC members demonstrated the numerous actions a young man must take to be perceived as masculine. One of the most common ways was to joke around about sex. The UBC boys would joke about the size of each other's penises, make hand gestures that simulate oral sex and masturbating, and referred to each other as "pussies." Pascoe (2012) found sexual jokes, as well as boys joking and boasting about their sexual prowess, to be common in a high school setting. During one UBC meeting, Oliver and Alex even placed wagers on who would be able to "get with more girls" during one weekend. Other masculine acts include being an academic underachiever, acting out and joking in class, playing sports, and judging and disparaging others, particularly those who are not masculine, which support current research on the subject (Connell, 1996; Martino, 2000; Pascoe, 2012). If the young men in our school wanted to be considered masculine, they needed to frequently engage in these acts.

There were many benefits to acting masculine as a teenager, most of which related to social status and relationships (Connell, 1995, Pascoe, 2012; Kehler & Greig, 2005). Masculinity served as a main mode of communication among boys, and provided the foundation for camaraderie to exist among masculine boys (Pascoe, 2012). The students identified a strong friendship with classmates as the most lauded benefit, which supported previous research on boys valuing peer camaraderie (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). There were numerous instances where the young men demonstrated their solidarity through acting masculine, and in most cases, making fun of others. In one instance, the boys made fun of a friend who was tricked into



masturbating on school grounds. Even two UBC boys who were not stereotypically masculine were briefly teased during the study for displaying non-masculine traits. These examples demonstrated how male friendship was often built by mocking and deriding other individuals (Pascoe, 2012). Boys frequently made fun of each other, and at times, the mocking turned cruel. No one wanted to be the butt of the jokes, so the UBC members worked tirelessly to dodge peer criticism.

The boys in this study also described the intense pressure they felt to act masculine in school. Like the boys in Pascoe's (2012) ethnography, the UBC boys were compelled to act a certain way for fear of being perceived as gay or not masculine enough. Their masculinity was constantly called into question, so they acted a certain way to avoid being persecuted and marginalized. Leo, Ari and Alex described this.

Leo:            Yeah. we're all very competitive.

Ari:            Yeah, if someone's masculine, you got to be just as masculine. You got to work to be masculine.

Ari later explained how a friend would respond if he did not engage in disruptive behaviors in class.

Ari:            Yeah, that wouldn't happen. He would say "Shut up queer"

Alex:          Angelo would be like, "You a bitch."

These two brief excerpts illustrated the pressure boys felt to be masculine. Ari and Leo felt they had to be as masculine as their peers, even if it was not a natural state of being. Ari and Alex gave a concrete example of how peer pressure operated in Upper Mountain High. If they acted in a way that was deemed "girly," they were openly admonished. This drove much of their actions in school and had apparent effects on their academic pursuits, which will be later described. The use of "queer" as an insult and pressure tool was used frequently by boys. And it was often

effective, as being called any variation of gay was arguably the worst thing a boy could be labeled (Pascoe, 2012).

This peer pressure was a driving force of the boys' actions, and it also prevented them from being their true selves in school. Upper Mountain High boys, even UBC boys, consistently acted masculine, but in the "safe space" of the UBC, a coin termed by one of the participants, the boys could shed the masculine masks they lived in, if only for a brief moment. Ari and Elijah were two examples of this. Both boys engaged in masculine banter throughout the study. Ari made numerous sexual jokes, including pretending to have sexual intercourse with another boy and simulating oral sex while eating a lollipop. He also admonished other boys for appearing gay, or in the very least not masculine enough. Elijah also acted hyper-masculine. He was quick to call a UBC boy a "faggot" if they described a thought or action that was not many. Elijah leveled some of the harshest teacher criticism of the boys, and even boasted about how he often misbehaved in class to gain his peers' acceptance.

However, at certain times in the UBC, both boys shed their masculine armor and acted more like their true selves. Ari spoke about his love of reading, and shared his favorite books with the UBC teachers. He also described the frustration and confusion he felt at being frequently admonished for his natural physical stance – he stood with his hands on his hips – by his soccer teammates. Elijah also appeared vulnerable at times, and expressed his love and commitment to his girlfriend and profound sadness at having such a hostile relationship with one teacher. He was not afraid to show his "geekiness" around other UBC boys, and openly spoke about his love of Star Wars, Star Trek and other fantasy/science fiction franchises. Both boys also seemed sad when describing their academic achievements and shared their struggles with low self-efficacy. Each of these acts could have resulted in intense ridicule by other UBC boys,

but Ari and Elijah felt comfortable enough to be themselves and temporarily suspend the masculine act they put on in school. The UBC was not an elixir for the peer pressure they faced, but it did provide the boys with a non-judgmental place where they could admit things without fear of being ostracized or losing their friendships.

The components of masculinity in Upper Mountain High – the list of masculine acts, the significant social benefits of masculinity, the frequency in which boys made fun of others and the intense pressure boys feel to act masculine – all have a profound impact on boys' achievement and wellbeing in school. Although the boys were able reject some of aspects of manliness in the UBC, they were not immune to these effects outside of the confines of the club. Masculinity affected boys in numerous ways, but in relation to the gap, the two most profound ways was through their perceptions of reading and ability to be diligent students.

### **Reading & Masculinity**

One reason why UBC boys and their male peers might reject reading was due to the ubiquitously belief that reading was gay and feminine. The male participants in this study, including the teachers, stated that this belief was ingrained in them from a young age. Men were not supposed to read, the participants asserted, because it directly clashed with being masculine. This supported the work of other researchers who argued that reading was considered a feminine activity and not one in which “real boys” would partake (Francis & Skeleton, 2011; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Dutro, 2003). Furthermore, boys who read, per UBC participants, were openly persecuted, and called “fags”, “weird” and “losers.” The students in this study identified fear of being harassed and shunned as a reason why they did not read.

There were numerous examples the participants gave that illustrated this concept. I will

only reference the most profound. Through the course of the study, Ms. Minerva described how one of her students was forced to give up reading because of its perception of being gay. She said, “I have an eighth grader who’s reading *Gone with the Wind* right now, but he’s starting to get made fun of by the boys. So instead of reading in class, he takes the book home every night, but he won’t take it in his backpack after class because the boys see it. So, he’ll like toss it back on the bookshelf and he comes at 2:30 and he picks it up.” Later in the study, she recounted how his persecution amplified and stated, “he just finished reading *Gone with The Wind*, which is a huge feat for an eighth-grade boy. It's like a 1,000-page novel. He got absolutely reamed out for reading it. It was the worst. I almost felt bad for giving it to him to read. The boys just completely destroyed him in class.’ The perception of reading being unmanly, and the audacity of this young man to read in public, resulted in the intense ridicule of Ms. Minerva’s student. As a result, he felt forced to hide his love of reading from his peers. By the end of the study Ms. Minerva described how the boy was transformed by the bullying and now refused to read in front of his peers or at home. A female friend even commented to Ms. Minerva about how he did not read anymore. The ridicule for engaging in a feminine act was so severe that it altered this young man, or as Ms. Minerva put it “completely destroyed him.” By the end of the year, he ended up being afraid of engage in the very activity which once brought him great joy. He likely went from one of the top English students, given his proficiency in reading, to underachieving, given his refusal to read.

Both male teachers in the study spoke about how, like Ms. Minerva’s student, they hid their love of reading as teenagers. After asserting that negative labels were the main reading deterrent for young men, Mr. Rocco, a special education English teacher, stated: “I read a lot, but in high school I wouldn’t admit to liking reading. I wouldn’t tell a guy “hey, I like poetry!”

because they're going to kick my ass." Mr. Rocco was an avid reader in high school, but never shared interest in books out of fear of being ostracized or even assaulted. Upper Mountain High students, Mr. Rocco later argued, refused to read for class because they feared they would suffer those same consequences.

Mr. Hodor added to Mr. Rocco's assertion by describing the profound feeling of shame he felt as a teenager at others knowing he was a reader.

I remember when my mother constantly was pushing reading on me. You got to read, you got to read, you got to read! I would constantly push back and finally one time she got me to read Harry Potter. I loved it! And she took a picture of me reading; I was a junior in high school at the time. I remember feeling so embarrassed to have a picture of me reading because I knew if people that I knew saw me reading Harry Potter, I don't know what it was about it, but I knew I'd be embarrassed about it.

I often think about the difference between boys and girls when it comes to reading. If your (male) friends called you up to hang out and you were in the middle of a really good book and you wanted to read the book, and you really did. They called you to hang out and you're like, "You know what, I'm actually, I want to finish this book. I'm not going to hang out guys." What kind of response do you think you're going to get from that? It's going to be mostly negative, mostly making fun of you.

Mr. Hodor's feeling of shame, both at loving a young adult book and having it documented and displayed in a photo, was something other UBC boys related to. As a teenager, Mr. Hodor had an intrinsic understanding of how reading was perceived. He must hide his love of it, lest he receive the social persecution described by Mr. Rocco. This finding is a key reason for boys' previously described rejection of reading. Mr. Hodor spoke about his shame, and like Mr. Rocco, described the ridicule that was eminent if he verbalized his affection for reading. Upper Mountain High boys simply could not read without facing the same consequences, both men asserted. They would be ridiculed and ostracized by their peers, both in and outside of school, for being readers. That simple fact, Mr. Hodor and Mr. Rocco agreed, deterred most boys from reading.

Mr. Hodor's comments about shame cuts to the heart of the problem teachers face in the

English classroom. Like Mr. Hodor's mother, teachers see their students reading as wonderful, and worthy of display. But their male students are ashamed to read, and like the teachers argued, might denounce the act out of fear of persecution, both physical and social. The data suggested boys viewing reading as a reprehensible act was likely a major reason why they underachieved in English. Students cannot succeed in an English classroom without reading. But, as Mr. Rocco and Mr. Hodor point out, reading was not just an academic act for boys, it was an embolden defiance of gender norms, and one that would cause social repercussions.

Several boys in the study also spoke about their fear of being ostracized for reading, with Ari being the first to open up about the subject.

Ari: When it comes to school books that are assigned to me, I really don't have any motivation at all to read it. But over spring break I went to see a college in Maryland and it's a four-hour drive. So, on the four-hour drive, I read a half of a book, and on the way back I read the rest of the book. It was a really good book. You know what I'm saying? I enjoyed it, but I'm only admitting to that because it helps with this study. I would never tell anyone that.

Ellen: Yeah, you're a loser.

Ari: Yes, exactly!

Antoinette: You would never tell anyone?

Ari: I wouldn't. I wouldn't. Like "You read a book, you're a fag." I don't really feel like talking about that. I got enough for people to roast me about lately.

Elijah: That was Ari being a faggot, that was Ari being a faggot. He reads! He reads! He's a queer!

This exchange provided insight into boys' honest thoughts about reading. Ari refused to tell anyone about his new favorite book because it would elicit the exact response Ellen and Elijah had, one of masculine ridicule. They proved that reading, or at least admitting reading recreationally, was universally considered a "gay" and unpopular act. As previously described,

ridiculing others for engaging in feminine acts was a common aspect of masculinity. Therefore, as Mr. Rocco and Mr. Hodor illustrated, unless a boy wanted to be publicly scorned, they were forced to keep their love of reading to themselves, even if that meant it affected their ability to earn good grades. These examples suggested that masculinity was a clear impediment for boys' reading, and their ability to succeed in English class.

Similar to Ms. Minerva's student, Harry described how his older brother slowly moved away from reading because of the social pressure that Mr. Rocco, Mr. Hodor and Ari described.

Harry:        My brother Juan, when he was growing up, he always read books all the time and never really did anything else. Then he started to hanging out with his friends and stuff, he never really read at home or wanted any of his friends to know that he was reading. We'd go on vacation for a week and he'd bring a book or two so he could read. I definitely think that that changed him, meeting friends and being scared to say ... Not know what they would think about it. Once he wasn't near his friends at all he went right back to wanting to read everything again.

Ari:            Just like coming out of the closet.

Harry witnessed firsthand how the gendered beliefs related to reading could alter someone. Juan, an avid reader, felt that he had to quell his desires to read if he wanted to build and maintain friendships. However, unlike Ms. Minerva's student, he successfully hid his reading from his friends and only read when no one could see him. As mentioned in the previous section, being masculine provided boys with the opportunity to build strong friendships. Reading, as seen in previous excerpts, was considered a socially unacceptable act for boys, and one that would result in persistent ridicule. Juan, having a strong desire to be accepted by his peers, likely knew that he would be ostracized if he read openly and was not willing to risk the friendships he held so dear. This supports previous research on boys and reading (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Therefore, he read "in the closet" only allowing his family to witness it. Ari likened Juan's reading to being a closeted gay person, afraid to show his true self to the world for fear of being rejected, or even

worse, persecuted.

This analogy of closeted gay person seems quite apropos given the stories shared by Ms. Minerva, Mr. Rocco, Mr. Hodor, Ari and Harry. In many ways, reading can be an isolating activity for boys, not only because it was done alone, but it often resulted in boys being rejected and persecuted by their peers (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). The robust reading communities that girls often experienced simply did not exist for their male counterparts (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). As Mr. Hodor highlighted, boys would feel shame when they read and fear at the thought of sharing their reading interests with peers. And, as Ari's and Ms. Minerva's examples illustrated, they would be insulted persistently if they were avid readers. This issue was only compounded by the intense pressure boys felt to be considered masculine. Because of these issues, every time teachers asked boys to read, they were asking them to risk their social status, friendships, and possible even their physical well-being. The male participants in this study proclaimed, citing numerous examples as evidence, that the beloved act of picking up a book and losing oneself in its words was absolute social suicide for adolescent boys. The boys, however, were quite willing to risk their academic success if it meant avoiding such a fate.

### **Masculinity vs. Academic success**

Masculinity, the findings suggest, not only stood in the way of boys' reading, but their ability to be scholarly, high achieving students in general. This supports Martino's (2000) previous argument that being masculine stood in direct opposition to being a hard-working student. Boys who were considered masculine, the data suggested, engaged in acts that stifled their ability to be academically driven, such as openly devaluing school, disrupting classrooms, refusing to do work, and breaking the rules (Martino, 2000; Connell, 1996).

Alex expounded upon this idea by explaining the conundrum most boys in Upper Mountain



High faced.

Masculinity and class engagement are inversely proportionally, because if you want to engage in the class and raise your hand and answer questions, that's like lowering your masculinity meter, because people are like, oh, this kid is like answering these questions, he must have a vagina or something. And then in class if you're talking to your friends and you're like, oh, this weekend I'm macking, getting laid, grabbing onto titties, then your masculinity will go up but your class engagement is going down.

Exhibiting traits of a strong student, such as focusing in class and answering questions, completely contrasted with those of a masculine boy. And given how boys frequently ridiculed those who were not masculine, boys who try in school would be called a “*vagina*,” which was severe insult (Pascoe, 2012; Dutro, 2003). But, Alex stated by not focusing on the lesson and talking out of turn, particularly about sexual activity, a boy could experience a spike on his “*masculinity meter*.” Alex offered no middle ground. Either a student was hyper-masculine and doing poorly in class, or was smart and effeminate. Given the pressure boys felt to be macho, and the effects of rejecting that label, many boys would likely choose the latter option.

Elijah added to the discourse on disruptive behavior and masculinity by saying, “if I want to be funny in class, I make a small joke. Yeah, I want people to see I'm funny. I would act out because I wanted to keep, I wanted them to see how cool I am, like whatever, like I've got the juice, you know.” Elijah was not just trying to pass the time by joking, he was trying to gain validation and respect from his peers (Pascoe, 2012; Connell, 1996). He wanted to look like he had “the juice”, which was a term boys in Upper Mountain High used to reference their masculine prowess. However, in his attempts to look masculine, Elijah was unfocused in class and likely missed a key component of the lesson. Though his behavior likely resulted in his friends thinking highly of him, like Alex asserted, it also negatively impacted his academic achievement.

This dichotomy between academics and masculinity was discussed over and over in the UBC. When I asked the boys to comment on how their friends would respond if they got an A in English, one boy instantly responded with “you fag!” Other epithets to describe academically driven boys included “queer”, “bitch” and “party pooper.” Given what research on masculinity suggests, including the findings of this study, the conclusion that could be drawn from this finding were profound. Young men benefit greatly from being macho, and were quick to ridicule others who did not fit into the gender norm. As a result, boys felt intense pressure to act and be perceived masculine. So, if boys want to be academically successful, they were risking not only public and consistent derision, but the potential loss of friendships. The UBC members touched on this topic when discussing masculinity impacted boys’ achievement, during which Ari described the lengths to which he would go to avoid such a fate.

Ms. Minerva: Then, it's like if you don't act hyper-masculine, it affects your entire life. I think boys are just more willing to sit in the back of a classroom than in front of every student.

Ari: Way more willing to have a point or two off a grade at the end of the marking period rather than not hang out with my friends.

Ms. Minerva: I think that's just the nature of the beast.

Ari’s statement demonstrated the value boys place on masculinity and how it could possibly stand in the way of boys’ achievement. He argued that his grades were not as important to him as his friendships. Just like Alex, Ari described a black and white scenario. If he wanted to earn the highest grades he could, he would have to act in a way that would make him look effeminate and sacrifice his social life in the process. For Ari, the choice was clear. No academic grade was more important than the camaraderie with his peers. Not only did this support the argument that boys place great value on their friendships, but that masculinity can prevent boys from being strong students in school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Pascoe, 2012).

**Academic Success without Ridicule**

The data collected in this study suggest that masculinity was a compulsory component of young men's lives. They needed it to have friends, be accepted by peers and avoid ridicule.

However, subscribing to the gender norm often meant they could not be academically successful and were forced to continually prove their masculinity. The UBC members, however, suggested that there was one way for young men to be high achieving students without being persecuted by their classmates. Jeremy argued that it began with students having strong self-efficacy in school and being modest about their academic abilities.

Jeremy: I think that I'm a good student, but I don't want to show that as much. Like I almost want to hide that. Like if somebody's talking about something, you don't want to sound like a know it all, so you kind of keep it to yourself a little bit more. Nobody likes those kids.

Ellen then added to the formula.

Ellen: I think there's a direct correlation between self-efficacy, masculinity and achievement. Because like in this school, someone can have high self-efficacy, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're going to be viewed as any less masculine. I think a big factor in that is if other people, especially like boys, if ... Say I'm talking about Jeremy, I wouldn't view him as less masculine, because I know what he has achieved in the classroom and I just look at him as smart, I don't look at it as he's a know it all.

Ms. Minerva then explained this concept further.

Ms. Minerva: I agree. I agree with that. Because that's his thing then.

Ellen: Yeah, exactly.

Ms. Minerva: Masculinity doesn't have to be his thing. I know what you're saying. But someone like Jeremy who is confident in his self-efficacy, he's not a try-hard, I feel.

Ellen: Yeah.

Ms. Minerva: He's not ... and that's such a fine balance that boys have to find and why it's so hard. But he's not the one like jumping out of his chair, raising his

hand, because he's confident in his self-efficacy and so no one challenges his masculinity.

The participants collaborated on an arduous topic and came to unified conclusion. It was possible for non-masculine boys to be shielded from ridicule if they had strong self-efficacy in academics, had achievements to back up their efficacy, and were humble about their success. The formula was therefore: *Self Efficacy + Modesty + Related Achievements = No Gendered Ridicule*

Each element of this formula needed to be in place, the participants argued, for boys to avoid ridicule. Having self-efficacy was vital, however it was important for young men to not boast about their achievements. Jeremy described how he tried to hide his self-efficacy because everyone, including girls, despised the kid who demonstrated their self-confidence. In a culture where being studious equated to having the worst possible labels for boys, boys would be remiss to display their academic prowess. Ellen stated that having achievements was also a necessary component in avoiding ridicule, and simply boasting about a skill without having actual accomplishments was not enough. With these three things in place – self-efficacy, related achievements, humility – students who achieved high grades would not be criticized for their masculinity because they were first and foremost good students. As Ms. Minerva pointed out, it was understood that masculinity was not their thing, therefore there was no need to judge their level of masculinity. By having these three things, the participants argued, young men could be academically driven without being ridiculed by their peers. Goddamn

There were three important caveats to call attention to with this formula. First, Ellen pointed out later in the discussion that this formula did not apply to having self-efficacy in other things, such as art or videogames. He believed that boys who express confidence in other skills, particularly those that were not masculine, would still be made fun of. Secondly, this formula offered immunity from the persecution that often came with being academically driven, but it did

not provide individuals with entrance to the “brotherhood”, a phrase used by the students to describe the camaraderie that existed between young men. Students who fit this formula, such as the school’s valedictorian who was referenced during the discussion, were often still marginalized. Lastly, though this formula is a promising way to shield boys from ridicule, it was by no means a panacea for restrictive masculine norms or for their literacy underachievement. Both concepts, this study suggests, are too complex for a single solution.

Masculinity in Upper Mountain High, and likely other schools in the country, made it very difficult for students to be both academically successful and strong readers. Boys felt a great deal of pressure to be considered masculine, and acted in ways that made it hard for them to earn good grades. In addition to being unruly in class, they also refused to read, as it was considered both a gay and feminine act. Society had taught the boys that they were not meant to read, so instead they used study guides or cheated to get by in English class. When young men stepped outside of their gender boundaries, as with reading, they were considered “pussies” and “fags,” and ran the risk of losing both their peer acceptance and their friendships, which was an aspect of their lives that was very valuable to them. Though the UBC members devised a formula that could shield some students from ridicule, it was only partially effective. Students who were quiet and smart were not made fun of, but all other boys were fair game. This complex phenomenon was likely a cause for why boys in our school underachieved, particularly in English.

### **Respect & the Male Student-Teacher Relationship**

When examining the importance and effects of a strong student-teacher (ST) relationship, it was apparent that the thing everyone wanted – and that motivated, frustrated, incited, and pacified them – was respect. Respect, the data suggested, was the root of most problems

between students and teachers and at the forefront of every successful relationship. Students and teachers sometimes acted in a way that was perceived by the other as disrespectful, and impeded boys' learning. When respect was not present, the two groups frequently engaged in these acts in an attempt to increase their power in the relationship. This battle for control was the biggest source of frustration for both groups, and often amplified an already tense situation. However, when respect was present in a relationship, a sense of camaraderie was created that aided in student learning and engagement. Through examining the UBC members' experiences and beliefs, it was apparent that respect was the most important aspect of any ST relationship and had direct implications for the boys' achievement.

### **Respect in the ST Relationship**

The participants of this study identified numerous aspects that were required for a strong ST relationship to exist, as well as the benefits of having such a strong rapport. Mutual respect was widely considered the most vital. The boys felt this was the most important, as they felt forced to respect their teachers without getting the sentiment returned. The phrase "to gain respect, respect must be given" was often reiterated by students when describing poor ST relationships. The boys were adamant that they would not respect a teacher who they believed was disrespectful. Ned stated, "one thing that definitely has to exist between a teacher and a student is mutual respect. I mean I'm not saying like as equals, but I'm saying don't talk down to the students and the students will show you respect. That's definitely something that needs to be there for there to be a strong relationship between the student and the teachers." His comments were echoed by other members of the UBC. Ned understood that asking for respect from teachers could be precarious. They were the adult, he was the child. But he argued that teachers could show respect without tipping the balance of power. He simply asked for teachers not to be

condescending.

Other components of a strong, respectful relationship included the desire to learn about each other, respecting boundaries, respecting each other's interests, expressing empathy, and caring about each other. Ms. Angela discussed how some of her male students show that they cared. She said, "if class ends early, inevitably if somebody comes up to strike up a friendly conversation with me at the end of class, it's going to be a male student. It's just, "Oh, how was your weekend," or, "I read this thing the other day." Maybe they're more willing to build that conversation with an adult whereas the girls are usually just off talking to themselves." Ms. Angela enjoyed the fact that some of her male students were eager to converse with her about things not exactly related to class. By the boys going out of their way to talk to her at the end of the period, instead of chatting with their peers, they were illustrating how they cared about her and were interested in getting to know her better. This example highlighted a key finding in relation to the ST relationship, which was the boys' need to like and be liked by their teacher. The young men in Upper Mountain High deeply wanted an authentic, supportive relationship with their teacher, even more so, it appeared, than their female peers.

The outcomes of having the strong, respectful ST relationship the boys desired were quite significant for them. The students stated how one of the biggest motivators in their academic lives was the relationship with their teachers. They stated that they would behave and perform better for the teachers they liked. Ms. Minerva's experience supported this finding. Throughout the study, she detailed the ways she attempted to build a strong rapport with her male students. She designed lessons that respected their interests and learning styles, used a great deal of positive reinforcement and was mindful of how she disciplined the boys. The outcomes of her efforts were quite positive for boys.

I really went the extra mile this year establishing relationships with my male students, and I think that kind of changed my classroom everything. Environment, all of it, night and day, especially my tougher boys. If you came to observe one of my eighth-grade classes, it'd be like ... you know. Now, I get emails from those parents all the time, from those boys' moms, like, you know, "Michael was talking about you at the dinner table today.", and I think it's really because how I kind of applied some of those strategies.

Ms. Minerva attributed the success of her male students to the respectful relationship she helped to create. This instance illustrated the importance of student-teacher rapport. Ms. Minerva's eighth grade class was filled with boys who were considered impossible to teach. They were known for being unruly, disrespectful, and totally disengaged from learning, with some even earning suspensions throughout the year. However, Ms. Minerva's strong relationship with these young men altered their behavior in such a way that she was their comrade and not their enemy. Because of this strong connection, many of her students earned strong grades, even when they failed in other subjects. The outcomes of this class were so significant that the school principal rearranged the schedules of the other ninth grade English teachers just so Ms. Minerva could teach the "impossible" boys for the following year. Ms. Minerva's experience corroborated previous research that found a positive, reassuring relationship with teachers had a significant positive effect on boys' reading skills and achievement (Johnston & Logan, 2009; Hartley & Sutton, 2013). Teachers who can understand this concept and apply it in the classroom, as Ms. Minerva did, would likely have positive, fruitful relationships with their male students.

### **Disrespectful Behaviors and an Ensuing Power Struggle**

When mutual respect did not exist among students and teachers, the results were troublesome. Students and teachers would disrespect each other in numerous ways. Upon further analysis, it became apparent that disrespectful behaviors were used as a way to gain power over or take power back from the opposing group. In this situation, students and teachers were not partners in the supportive, reverent relationship previously described. Instead, they were



adversaries, vying for control over each other and operation of the classroom. Though both groups had an emotional response to being mistreated, which sometimes fueled their actions, the findings suggest that this was not the main cause of these actions. Instead, individuals disrespected others to gain power and legitimacy within the classroom.

This assertion can be explained through the community of practice (CoP) theoretical framework of the study. The classroom is a CoP where members participate, interact, and learn (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). The level to which they can participate equates to the power they have in the CoP (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008). When individuals are marginalized, they cannot contribute in a meaningful way to the community (or the classroom, in this case), and are therefore rendered powerless and can no longer benefit from participating in the group (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). Given the current power dynamics in the school, which will be explained in this section, boys begin at a disadvantage and must act out in more frequent and diverse ways to gain legitimacy (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008).

The data suggested that the numerous disrespectful acts described in this study could limit a community member's participation and their power (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). Therefore, the actions students and teachers took when they felt disrespected were not mere acts of retaliation, but an attempt to regain the power they felt they lost. However, the results of this power struggle were only detrimental to boys, as their acts were markedly self-destructive. The students argued that they misbehaved more, earned lower grades and gave up when they had a class with a disrespectful teacher. This has distinct implications for boys' literacy underachievement.

**Disrespectful teachers & their struggle for power.** Teachers disrespected their male

students in numerous ways. They expected very little of them academically as compared to girls. They were condescending and used mockery instead of encouragement in the classroom. And lastly, they responded to each misstep a boy made by excessively disciplining them. When analyzing the numerous instances of these behaviors described by the UBC members, one theme became apparent. Behind most harsh, disrespectful acts made by a teacher was an intrinsic bias against boys. This was so widespread, the boys argued, that most negative interactions with teachers was perceived as proof of their sexist beliefs. It is through these sexist acts that teachers exerted their dominance and reduced the boys' legitimacy in the classroom (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008).

The first way teachers disrespected students and tried to increase their power and legitimacy in the classroom was by favoring girls in regard to students' academic performance (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008). The young men in the study identified the ways in which girls received preferential treatment, many of which resulted in them getting better grades than the boys. Roger recounted a particularly frustrating example of this.

Roger: I know from one of the classes this year, we all had to take the quiz that day for history. One of the girls, she didn't know anything on the quiz. She got out of taking the quiz by crying and the teacher let her take it the next day.

Ari: That's gross.

Roger: The guys in that class didn't know some of the stuff either and they said out loud, "Yeah, we don't know some of this information." But only the girl who cried got out of taking the quiz and was able to take it the next day.

Ari: That's bullshit.

Ned: It's not the first time she's done it either. She did that with either our midterm and final last year.

This was just one of the many examples shared during UBC meetings where teachers gained

power over the boys by being biased. In this case, a girl was given the ability to retake a quiz because she was unprepared, while boys in the same situation were not given the same option. The teacher sent a clear message to the boys through this act: they were not valued members of the CoP. Furthermore, it was clear based on this exchange that the teacher cared less about the boys' achievement than the girls. The likely intent was to marginalize the boys and therefore limit their legitimacy in the group, which were two ways to reduce an individual's power (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). Based on the boys' tone of anger and frustration in this exchange, it appeared that the teacher succeeded.

The boys continued their discussion on teacher sexism by describing an instance where a teacher was condescending and mocked the boys.

Roger: In chemistry, some of us didn't bring in our science articles that we have to bring in every marking period. A couple of girls in a row didn't bring it in and it came to this one guy. He's not the smartest of kids but he always tries. He said 'I don't have them Mr. K.' The teacher said 'it looks like I'm emailing your mother and telling her you have a 0 in the class'. He never said that for any of the girls, he was only directing it towards that guy. He constantly says stuff like that to him and he says it to me sometimes too. I hate going to that class everyday because I don't like his character or attitude, like the way he is every day, I don't like that. I don't enjoy going to that class...He says he's sexist, that he favors the females.

Leo: The other day we were doing like an equation it was like  $2.11$  something. I was like, oh, you have to put the point there. He said "I have to put the point there?" and then he starts drawing the points on the board all over. I'm like, why is that necessary, you know what I'm talking about. Like he's so full of himself to the point we're like he thinks ...like once he does something wrong, he's not wrong, he can't be wrong.

Roger and Leo were frustrated and angered by their teacher's disrespectful behavior. The teacher not only exhibited sexist beliefs, he directly confirmed the boys' perception of him. By belittling the students in front of the class, the teacher was reinforcing the school's power dynamics. He was the one in charge, not the boys. The results of his consistent mockery and sexism was

Roger's hatred of the class, a sentiment which likely affected his motivation and achievement. Roger, as a result, marginalized himself from the class, which reduced his power in the CoP (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008).

Teachers also stripped boys of their power through their low academic expectation. Ellen believed the following was a result of sexism. "Boys feel, in many cases, that teachers have low expectations for them," he told me. "Teachers devote more of their energy and time into teaching the females, which results in higher grades and stuff for them. Boys are just judged and taught, I guess in some cases, even graded, on a different level from the females, which isn't fair." By assuming the boys are inherently less capable, the teacher created an environment in which the boys could not succeed, and therefore were less valued. The frustration in his voice was visible. The inequitable environment in which boys were expected to perform not only stripped them of their legitimacy, but reduced their motivation to participate and succeed (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008).

Ellen's assertion was reinforced by the UBC teachers through their observations. Both Ms. Minerva and Mr. Hodor identified a difference in how teachers taught boys and girls. Classroom conversations with the girls tended to be friendlier, longer, and were more academically focused, unlike the boys' conversations, which lacked encouragement and academic rigor. Teachers would sit with the girls to help them through a problem, while they would stand over the boys when answering the same question. Teachers also rarely praised the boys or offered positive feedback, both of which have been proven to boost students' self-efficacy and performance (Johnston & Logan, 2009; Hartley & Sutton, 2013). However, girls' achievements were frequently celebrated, which was seen through one teacher only high-fiving girls who contributed to the class and not boys.

These small actions described by numerous UBC members had implicit effects both on boys' achievement and the power they held in the CoP. By teachers having sexist beliefs, as seen in the boys' two exchanges, girls are given an unfair advantage which more than likely results in higher grades. In this way, the gap would not just be a direct reflection of boys' attitude or skills, but also of institutional barriers they have no control over. Secondly, the boys' attitudes, motivation and self-efficacy was likely impacted as they tried to participate in a class where girls were encouraged to be academic scholars and boys were treated as a nuisance. As previously discussed, boys often had low self-efficacy in literacy, and this finding points to teachers likely playing a role in this occurrence.

Also, the relationship the boys had with their teacher was likely damaged by this act, which, as the findings suggest, had negative effects on their achievement. When teachers failed to belief in their boys' potential, they were in turn, stifling their ability to succeed. Furthermore, these gender biases stripped the boys of any power they might have had in the classroom. It reduced their desire to participate and sent a message to boys that they were not valued or capable members of the CoP. As a result, the boys were powerless, illegitimate, marginalized members of their class (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008). Favoring girls academically, it appeared, was a surefire way to stifle boys' ability and desire to succeed.

The other way that teachers disrespected boys to gain power was through excessive discipline. Research indicates that boys often receive a disproportionate amount of the discipline in school (Noguera, 2003). The findings of the study supported this claim. Much of the ST interactions described by participants were punitive in nature. Teachers were seen yelling at students, threatening them with extra work and phone calls to parents, making fun of students, and reducing students' grades for dubious reasons. Mr. Hodor even observed a teacher writing a

cut slip for two male students who showed up to class less than a minute late. The penalty for cutting class was discipline points, a detention, and parent contact, which seemed excessive, given the students were mere seconds tardy.

Sexist discipline was seen firsthand during teachers' observations. One such instance happened in Ellen's class. Ms. Minerva documented how numerous girls misbehaved in class and openly defied rules without any penalty. One girl even ignored their teacher's request to put food away without consequence. However, when Ellen engaged in a casual conversation with a student after finishing his work early, he was swiftly disciplined, and told to stay focused. Ellen, however, had already figured out the correct answer, which he pointed out to his teacher. Ellen's teacher assumed he was avoiding his work, a teacher assumption seen in previously cited excerpts. Still, his teacher did not seem to apply this same belief to his female classmates. Her sexism was not only displayed in the belief he did not care about class, but in her reprimanding only boys. In her classroom, the behaviors were not good or bad, the students, depending on their gender, were. In this way, she made it hard for boys to simply exist in her class, let alone be legitimate, active members (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). Her discipline approach emblazoned the girls, but stripped away the boys' power and likely their motivation.

Like Ms. Minerva's example, much of the discipline at Upper Mountain High was that of teachers overlooking girls' behaviors while reprimanding boys. Mr. Hodor witnessed this in one of Alex's class, and noted the following in his protocol.

Girl begins fidgeting with things in the room when finished early. She finds a Newton's Cradle and starts it moving, creating a constant "clicking" sound in the room. People laugh at it while Mrs. R continues to work with a student and has no reaction to the distraction. Alex decides to "rap" along with the beat of the clicking, and within 10 seconds, Mrs. R calls him out and tells him to stop.

Mrs. R appeared to be disciplining students differently based on their sex, which created a

distinctly unequal learning environment for the male students. Girls had the ability to decompress through mild misbehaviors while boys were not given the same freedom. In this way, the teacher was empowering the girls and discouraging the boys.

Throughout the study, the boys struggled to justify or understand this unfair discipline. Sergio thought teachers did this because “they just like to be mean to boys.” These hurtful actions created a cycle of discord between the male students and teachers. The boys would feel unfairly targeted and devalued by this sexist discipline and likely misbehave more out of frustration or vengeance. The teachers would then continue to discipline the boys for every action they take that was even remotely boisterous or rude. This cycle, which was also created by teachers’ sexist expectations, had negative consequences on both boys’ wellbeing and their ability to perform in class.

In addition to putting strain on the ST relationship, sexist discipline also had a direct effect on boys’ class grades. There were a few examples of this described, including Roger and Leo’s description of a female classmate crying to get a postponement for her quiz. Another issue was the teachers’ treatment of students’ participation grades. Upper Mountain High teachers were required to make participation twenty percent of their quarter grade and were given complete discretion as to how to calculate it. Thus, many teachers used participation points as a penalty for bad behaviors. This aspect of classroom grading had the most detrimental effect on male students, with dual consequences. As the findings point out, boys are disciplined excessively by their teachers, and therefore were more likely to have their grades reduced through participation. Secondly, because boys often felt disrespected and slighted when they were disciplined, they would misbehave and apply themselves less in class, which would also result in reduced achievement. Sexist discipline, being that it affects both the attitude and

achievement of students, could have a disastrous effect on boys' grades and be a significant contributor to boys' literacy underachievement.

The findings of this study illustrated the sometimes-sexist actions and beliefs the teachers of Upper Mountain High exhibited in class. In an attempt to gain power, teachers favored girls, had reduced academic expectations for boys, and used excessive discipline. It is important to note that most the actions that they used to gain power inflicted harm on the boys and had little repercussion for teachers. These power-seeking actions, which might not be intentionally malicious, significantly reduced students' power in the CoP in several ways. Because students were silenced by these actions, they had limited negotiability, which refers to their ability to contribute to the group (Wenger, 2008). Also, given the fact that boys tend to shut down or be disruptive in a class when they are disrespected, teachers' excessive discipline resulted in the boys being marginalized (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). The result was bleak for boys. It was clear that they were not welcomed members of the community, and as a result, they were either forced to the outskirts of the CoP, or purposely went there themselves. Without the ability to participate in the class in meaningful ways, the boys were unable to learn and thus likely did not earn high marks in the course.

**Disrespectful students and their struggle for power.** With a conventional power hierarchy in place in the schools, the male students had limited ways to gain power in their ST relationship. The data indicated that when they felt disrespected by their teachers, they consistently responded in two ways. They either acted unruly and disrupted the whole class, or shut down and gave up academically. These two responses, the findings suggest, likely had a significant bearing on boys' achievement, given that these actions were self-destructive and tended to only harm themselves.



First, the boys attempted to gain power and legitimacy by being disrespectful, defiant in class, and engaging in the numerous unruly and disruptive behaviors described in the section, *Rejection of Respectful Schoolboy Behavior* (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008). Ned stated the following in response to this topic, “if the teacher gives mutual respect back to the kids, that does help with behavior. If the teacher’s condescending and they’re not respecting the kids, the kids aren’t going to respect them back. They’re not going to behave well.” The two acts, teachers being disrespectful and students misbehaving were directly related. Students were unruly in response to a difficult teacher. The students said they did this in numerous ways. They would act out and be disruptive in class, seek vengeance through abhorrent acts, place blame on the teacher for their own wrong doings, and cross the student-teacher line, such as using sexual innuendos with female teachers. Ned asserted that the reason why they acted this way was to regain power from their teachers.

Elijah added to this argument and described how he dealt with a particularly difficult teacher. He said, “if a teacher gets mad at me and I don’t like her, I talk to spite her. I like to disrupt the class to spite her. If she tells me to shush, I’ll still talk and it’s kind of funny to watch her. I know it’s probably terrible, but it’s kind of funny to watch her get mad at me.” Elijah did not mince his words in this comment. In response to a teacher that got mad at him, and likely disciplined him, he disrupted the class “to spite her.” When he felt disrespected, he intentionally misbehaved to get the teacher upset. His comments support the assertion that underachieving boys who reject school sometimes have “caged resentment” towards their teachers, and they act out in ways that fall just short of direct confrontation (Willis, 1977, p. 12). He likely felt joy in watching her get mad because he was the cause of her emotions, which demonstrated Elijah’s power over her. He also became in control of the classroom through his disruption. And with the

entire class off course, the teacher could no longer continue with her instruction and, in that way, she had limited negotiability and was pushed to the periphery of the CoP (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). However, his gain in power came at a price. Elijah likely missed an important part of the lesson by acting unruly recalcitrant, which would affect his grade on an assessment. Additionally, by being so blatantly disorderly, Elijah's teacher likely disciplined him, possibly through a reduced participation grade. This would only perpetuate the cycle of disrespect between Elijah and his teacher, and continue to harm his achievement.

Another way boys tried to regain power in the classroom was through shutting down. This might not appear to be disrespectful or a power grab at first. When students shut down, they no longer apply themselves in the class, and often leave the room to roam the halls or fall asleep in class, like Leo did in math. By doing this, boys were disrespecting their teacher, proclaiming that the subject was unimportant, he or she were ineffective, both of which would delegitimize the teacher in his or her role as class leader (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008). The boys were attempting to take control of a situation in which they felt powerless. The class was not worthy of their time or effort, so they simply did not try. This was a way to boycott the teacher's exertion of power and challenge the conventional power dynamics in the classroom.

Alex explained how having bad rapport with a teacher often resulted in students shutting down and engaging in self-destructive behaviors. He stated, "this is how I feel, and I know a lot of my friends that are also boys feel this way, they feel like if they don't like a teacher they'll purposely do bad, or won't try at all, just to spite them. That's something I do sometimes." Alex purposefully performed bad in class when he did not like a teacher. As Alex pointed out, boys did this to spite their teacher, and clearly to frustrate and disrespect them. Instead of being a diligent student, which was the expectation, he was disengaged, defiant and sending a clear

message to the members of the class that the lesson was not valued or worthy of his effort. These actions tried to challenge the teacher's power in the classroom, however, the person who stood to lose the most was the student. By acting this way, young men were thwarting their own learning and achievement. Their attempts to gain back some of the power from a hated teacher could even result in them failing the class.

**A power struggle in a school hierarchy.** This complex power dynamic that exists in the class between students and teachers was amplified by the inherent power structure in the school. The boys in the study described themselves as feeling quite powerless regarding their agency. Upper Mountain High rarely involved students in community decisions, and often rejected or ignored the students' ideas and perspectives shared with administration. Ari's reaction to a question I asked demonstrated students' lack of agency. When I asked him to describe his ideal English classroom, he said, "I don't really know what the perfect classroom is. I never really gave a lot of thought about it. It was just like, I'll deal with whatever they put me in. You know what I mean? I don't have control over it. I can't be like, 'Hey, let's sit this way' because they'll just dismiss me, whoever the teacher is. Like, 'Can I sit here?' 'No.'" Ari's comments illustrated the powerlessness and indifference students felt because of the power dynamic in the school. Even though the UBC celebrated and empowered the boys and their voice, Ari had been so accustomed to being subordinate and dealing with the situation he was placed in that he could not respond to my question. The school, in addition to individual classes, forced students to the periphery. By not giving them power to change at least some aspects of school life, students, in this case boys and girls, were illegitimate members of the school CoP (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007; Wenger, 2008). This quote also showed the lack of grit the boys might have in dealing with a challenging situation. Instead of fighting to change their environment, which is

something that people with strong self-efficacy do, he just gave into his circumstances (Bandura, 1993).

The teachers also struggled with the power hierarchy in the school. They were expected to always be in control of the students and enforce a sometimes-strict code of conduct in their classrooms. This responsibility posed a specific challenge to the teachers in this study, as they were discouraged, and in some cases prohibited, from acting like a teacher. Instead, they were encouraged to be themselves. This request caused a great deal of stress in the teachers, who were afraid of being considered equal with the boys, and therefore losing their respect. Another example of this is with Ms. Angela and her relaxed approach to discipline. The teachers in Upper Mountain High were expected to remove students' phones and inform administration every time a cell phone was seen in the classroom. Ms. Angela, however, had a different approach to cell phone use. She explained "I can't tell you how much I don't care about phones. I don't know why. I'm like the only teacher who doesn't care about it. As long as you're doing your work, I honestly don't give a crap about a phone. I know you shouldn't have it in class but I just care so little. As long as you're doing your work." Ms. Angela did not follow the school's rule because she trusted the students to manage their cell phone use and recognize when it impeded their learning. However, her rule was in direct conflict to the one she was supposed to enforce and she could possibly be reprimanded for giving her students a bit of power and independence in the classroom. The power structure that existed in the school, with students having little to now power and teachers expected to exert theirs, likely contributed to the power struggle that existed between the two groups.

This study suggests that a classroom is a CoP, and should therefore be a partnership not a dictatorship. When it is the latter, the relationship between students and teachers are strained and

a power struggle ensued. This struggle only posed harm for the young men in the classroom. Whether out of immaturity or spitefulness, the boys responded in ways that had profound impact on their ability to learn and perform in the class. The individual's struggle to gain power, the findings suggest, was one that was cyclical and quite difficult to break. Once one party, say the teachers, exerted their dominance, the students would try to regain some power or retaliate against being mistreated. Those actions then incited and frustrated the teacher and caused them to respond with the same behaviors which started this struggle. Both parties acted this way out of fear of losing power or feeling powerless from the start.

The only way to stop the cycle and begin to build a fruitful relationship, this study posits, is through mutual respect. Boys are desperate to have a relationship with their teachers, which could be used as an advantage in the classroom. The parties could be respectful of each other through the ways prescribed above, such as caring about, trusting, and understanding each other. However, this could only be accomplished if both teachers and students were devoted to improving their actions. The use of mutual respect has numerous exciting applications to the issue of boys' underachievement in English. Through building a strong and respectful relationship, like Ms. Minerva did with her group of difficult boys, it is possible that male students could improve their motivation and performance in English class. And unlike trying to challenge current masculine norms, this is a scenario that could be implemented in classrooms with relative ease.

## CHAPTER 5: THE NECESSARY ELEMENTS OF A STUDENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIP

This study purposefully created a partnership between two diverse groups of people within the school community. Be it their age, experiences, level of education, place within the school hierarchy, and in some cases their gender, there were many obstacles that could have prevented the students and teachers from successfully working together. However, this study overcame those obstacles and, as evident in the previous chapter, UBC members effectively collaborated while examining boys' literacy underachievement. They debated several topics, and though they might not have agreed on every point, the two groups understood and respected the thoughts expressed by other participants.

Numerous data sources indicated that for a student-teacher (ST) partnership to function, nine key elements, which were observed in the UBC, must be present. Five of these elements were evident from the beginning, and represented the physical/structural factors of a ST partnership. They were: a purposeful selection of participants, a welcoming space, club-generated norms, meaningful work, and time and commitment. These elements represented the space in which the club operated. However, as the participants began to engage in their work, it became apparent that four other elements were necessary, which represented the social/emotional components of a ST partnership. These elements illustrated the ways in which the club interacted. They were: addressing participants' fear, brutal honesty, a "safe space," and mutual respect. Together, these nine elements of a student-teacher partnership, which will be described in this chapter, laid the groundwork in which the UBC functioned and thrived.

### **Physical/Structural Elements of a ST Partnership**

For a ST partnership to function, five elements must be in place from the very beginning. The facilitator of the group must make several crucial decisions before formally launching the

group. First, he must decide the phenomenon or issue the partnership plans to examine, which must be complex and meaningful. With the topic selected, the facilitator must then gather a select group of individuals, both educators and teachers, who could bring varying perspectives and the right demeanor to the partnership. Then the facilitator must begin to think about the physical space in which the meetings will be held, and attempt to design a space that will encourage collaboration and discussion. The last two things a facilitator must do is ensure that the participants have shared ownership of the group and that they can dedicate the time necessary for the partnership to be successful. The findings of this study demonstrate that these six elements, which represent the physical environment and structure of the partnership, are necessary for a successful and fruitful collaboration.

### **Purposeful Selection of Participants**

The first, and possibly most important element of the ST partnership, is the participants themselves. In many ways, the success of the UBC sat squarely on their shoulders, therefore it was imperative that they all possessed certain characteristics that enabled them to fully participate in this study. In CoP theory, the right participants will ensure that the three necessary elements of a community – mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire – are present (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). So the right participants can result in successful collaboration and, more importantly, learning (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). In picking participants, I looked for individuals who were mature, social, and candid. These traits, I believed, would result in a group of individuals that were eager and able to collaborate on the controversial subject of boys' underachievement. In addition to these traits, there were other important characteristics that became evident as the study progressed.

It was vital that the participants exhibit an ability to be open minded during discussions.

Throughout the study, there were instances where someone's thinking was directly challenged by another UBC member. Though students and teachers operated in the same environment, their diverse experiences and positions in the school could result in drastically different views.

Regarding the achievement gap, the teachers and students had to be willing to recognize how their group contributed to the issue, which they demonstrated during the discussions on teacher sexism, boys' behavior and reading. In these instances, the participants' ability to stay open minded and listen to what the other person had to say was vital to the group's ability to unpack complex concepts and understand each person's perspective. This characteristic was also demonstrated during observations, when preconceived notions and biases could have affected the participant's ability to understand their fellow club member's daily life. The participants not only remained receptive, but they were eager to understand the experiences of the others. This trait is correlated with a participant's ability to respect each other's opinions and see a topic from different sides.

Lastly, the members of the UBC had to show a level of interest and dedication to the work, which was to understand boys' literacy underachievement. It was likely that all the participants in this study had an interest in examining the gender gap, given that there were no outright benefits to their participation. However, time could have posed a considerable challenge for participants, given the amount of time they had to dedicate. All but one member stayed committed throughout the study. The one person who dropped out, Mr. Hodor, did so not out of lack of interest or dedication, but because of a schedule conflict with his coaching responsibilities. Simply put, the club could not function without participants' dedication to the work.

The last criteria in selecting participants, particularly the teachers, was the approval of the



UBC1 boys. Given that they had previously described tension and acrimony in many of their teacher relationships, any educator who participated in this study had to demonstrate a history of good rapport with male students. Though I selected the four teachers in this study, I sought out the boys' approval before finalizing the participants. The importance of picking just the right members to participate in the study was illustrated by a comment made by Jimmy. He said, "if you picked other teachers that we disagree with, the mood would have been completely different. We could open up to the current teachers because we liked them, but if those other teachers were in the room, this experience would have been completely different. We wouldn't have had the guts to say what we wanted to say." Jimmy believed that picking the right teachers to participate in this study was correlated with the boys' ability to be candid and open minded, which were two key traits for participants. By having individuals who exhibited the qualities listed in this section, participants felt comfortable enough to voice their opinions and share their experiences. This speaks to the importance of carefully selecting participants.

### **Meaningful Work**

Another feature of the ST partnership was the meaningful work in which the participants were engaged. For the UBC to function, the participants needed to believe the work they were doing in the UBC was worthwhile. This connects to the concept of mutual engagement, which is a deep level of commitment members have to each other based on the work they do and the roles they play within the CoP (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). As previously mentioned, one trait displayed by the participants was an interest in understanding the phenomenon of boys' literacy underachievement. The participants demonstrated their mutual engagement and interest in this topic throughout the study.

The reasons why the individuals valued their work in the UBC varied for participants.

The young men in the study found the work meaningful primarily because this phenomenon impacted them directly and was a cause of their frustration. They also enjoyed the fact that they could be uncensored, as previously written, and their opinions were both lauded and sought after. For the adults in the study, it was slightly more complicated. At the start of the school year, teachers in Upper Mountain High were forced to participate in committees based on a new initiative by the principal, and they often felt their time was squandered on meaningless topics and ineffective collaborations. So, in order to participate in another collaboration, the teachers needed to find the work consequential and worthwhile. To do that, they needed to recognize the achievement gap as a significant issue worthy of exploration. Given that teachers had a strong sense of autonomy in their positions, the fact that the UBC was an outlet to which they could voice their opinions offered little value. However, they valued the ability to work with a group of boys in an unconventional way. Most importantly, to find this work meaningful, the teachers needed to have a vested interest in the performance of their boys and a desire to improve their learning.

Another way in which the work of the UBC was meaningful to the participants was through its foundation in the authentic and unique experiences of the participants. Everyone had a real interest in learning more about each other, a concept that will be explored in the next chapter. During discussions, members would listen intently, ask probing questions, and find ways to relate to each other. When one person described a situation, other members often tried to find ways to relate to and understand their experience. This occurrence often validated the participants' thoughts and emotions. In valuing the work of the UBC, it became apparent that participants valued each other, and the contributions everyone made to the group.

One component of the UBC's work that participants identified as the most profound was

the observations. This boundary encounter offered participants the ability to witness and examine a concept they might have discussed, such as teacher sexism and disruptive student behavior, in real life (Wenger, 2008). By observing each other, participants continued to understand the milieu which shaped the perspective and opinions of the individual. They also saw the challenges their person faced and the impact of their behavior and performance in the class. Participants took this aspect of the study very seriously, and used the guidelines and protocol to ensure a purposeful and productive experience. This study provided participants with the ability to learn about real people in the school and appreciate everyone's range of experiences. Through the observations and discussions, the work of the UBC was meaningful because it was a real phenomenon affecting their community and one they felt was worthy of exploration.

**Value in boys' voice.** One reason why the boys found the work so valuable was because it gave them an opportunity to have their voices heard and valued. From the very start, the boys were eager to participate in the study. They would always inquire about the next meeting, make an appoint to attend and stay as long as they could, and speak about the club with such pride. They even had a say in picking the teachers, which was a responsibility they took quite seriously. Elijah and Floyd, a sophomore, spoke about this at one of the meetings.

Elijah: I said this last year, I think the same thing. I don't know how far the study's going to go but I feel like I have somewhat of a say. You know, with all of these dudes around me ... I'm not the only one who thinks this about it. In the last year, I found out that I wasn't the only one who feel like I'm underachieving against the girls. The study really brought it out. I feel like I have a say in what possibly can change the future. It's given me a voice.

Floyd: The study, I feel is good that we get to get our voice out.

The boys valued the club and found their work meaningful because they had an opportunity to

share their perspectives with the group, and see that others had the same problems. At one point in the study, Ellen mentioned how sharing their experiences with others was the best part of the study, and many boys agreed. Their perspectives were both actively sought out and considered important, which was something that is quite rare. This quote also showed a strong sense of agency. Elijah, a boy who previously described feeling dejected and insecure in himself, expressed a heightened level of self-efficacy. He even said that he could possibly change the future through his participation in this study. It was clear that these boys valued their participation in the UBC, mostly because it gave them a voice they previously did not have.

### **A Welcoming Space**

The environment in which a ST partnership functioned is one that must encouraged camaraderie and free discussion. Knowing that participants were coming to the UBC after a full day of school, and that they were dedicating free time to participate, it was important that I created a space that was welcoming and supported their participation. This began with the club's physical space. The meetings always took place in my classroom, which was decorated in a homey fashion, with couches and numerous armchairs around the room, artwork hanging on the walls and desks arranged in tables. It was important to have the meeting in a neutral ground, one that did not belong primarily to one group or participant. My room was the meeting place for UBC1 and was often the location for English department meetings and lunch gatherings, so both the students and teachers had positive experiences in my room. Also, given the confidential nature of the club, it was paramount that the group meet in place that was safe and private. During UBC meetings, the room was locked and closed off to other members of the school community. The young men found this to be an important aspect of the club environment. In addition, to ensure the environment was safe and private, the group norms and rules were

consistently reestablished by referencing the rules, which will be discussed in the next section, at the beginning of each meeting and posting the rules in writing in the front of the room.

The seating arrangement was another aspect of the UBC that perpetuated a warm and welcoming environment. Each meeting featured seating arrangements designed to encourage collaboration and unity. During the first ten minutes, which was unstructured social time, the desks were arranged in tables and participants sat wherever they wanted. But, as the meeting got underway, the desks were most frequently organized in one circle and the participants chose where to sit. In the first few meetings, members segregated themselves, but as the study progressed, they naturally mingled.

Lastly, in creating a warm and welcoming environment, it was important that I created an opportunity for participants to casually interact, as well as something to entice them to attend. With most members being ravenous by the end of the school day, it was obvious that offering a large spread of food and drinks every meeting was the best option. There was a great deal of thought that went into the selection of food and the location. First, I asked participants for food preferences and allergies. Given that several of the members were athletes, I was sure to offer foods that were high in protein and healthy carbohydrates. Fresh fruit, baked goods, nuts, chips and guacamole were mainstays at the meetings. We also had a pizza party to celebrate the holidays in December and the end of the study in May.

The location of the food was also premeditated. I arranged the food in front of the room on a long table, away from the area where everyone sat. The intent of this was to create a “water cooler” or standing location where everyone could gather and organically connect. This became part of our shared repertoire, a vital concept in CoP, and added to our ability to collaborate (Wegner, 2008). The location was successful, and at each meeting, participants spent the first ten

minutes socializing and eyeing the spread. Members would greet each other, then gather their food, chat with peers, and find a place to sit. The casual discussions were at first focused on the quality of the food, and different food preferences. Eventually they evolved to include school events and gossip, the college application process, updates on family and friends, and daily challenges and successes. Though it might appear to be a trivial aspect of a ST partnership, the physical space of the meeting room encouraged the development of the club's strong camaraderie, a finding which will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **Club-Generated Norms**

Regarding CoP, Mitra (2008) defines joint enterprise as how a group collaborates and shares responsibilities. In this study, joint enterprise was demonstrated through the application of student-teacher voice. The thoughts and viewpoints of both the students and the teachers were mutually sought out and valued. One example of joint enterprise and student-teacher voice in this study was in the club-generated norms. At the first meeting, participants were given the task of generating a list of guidelines that would be used to govern the group. Though I had a list of rules I wanted the group to follow, I gave ownership of this task to the participants, both the students and the teachers. I wanted everyone to be able to shape the rules, thereby giving them a voice and increasing the likelihood that they both enforced and followed them. It was also important that the members had faith that everyone would follow the rules, given the sensitive nature of the work.

The club came up with seven rules, some of which were redundant and all of which focused on collaboration. The rules were: 1. What happens in the UBC, stays in the UBC! 2. Do not talk over anyone. 3. Commitment is KEY! Try your hardest to come to every meeting 4. Respect everyone's opinions and be sure to listen to everyone's opinions 5. Try to limit any

distractions 6. Follow the rule of the conch, whoever has the phone/recorder is the only person who can speak 7. Remember, a respectful debate is both healthy and ok!

The participants took this activity quite seriously, as I observed members listening to others' opinions, thinking carefully about what makes a collaboration successful and attempting to anticipate and prevent problems with collaboration. The result of the activity were rules that illustrated the thought process the participants had when they first joined the study. They became a part of the UBC's shared repertoire, and it acted as a guide for how participants should collaborate (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). The focus of their rules was on respect, both for each other and of their work, which was a key finding that will be discussed later in this chapter and in chapter 6. The creation of club norms set the groundwork for the rest of the partnership, and was the first step in valuing the participants' voice, building camaraderie and fostering a commitment to the study.

### **Time & commitment**

Another aspect of the ST partnership that was vital for its success was the time and commitment participants exhibited. Though at first, time might not appear to be a structural or critical element of a ST partnership, the participants' dedication of their time to the UBC was the foundation on which the club met and collaborated. Without it, the partnership would have quickly dissolved. Additionally, time and commitment were grouped together because if a participant was committed to the work of the UBC, they needed to dedicate a considerable amount of personal time. Having a strong commitment to the work and to each other while being part of a community is a key component of CoP (Mitra, 2008; Wegner, 2008). By participants committing themselves to the UBC, they were, in turn, showing the dedication and respect they had for each other.

Throughout the study, the participants showed a strong level of dedication to the study. Most members attended meetings consistently and would modified their schedule, when possible, to accommodate the UBC. During meetings, participants were engaged in the work, and were rarely unfocused or on their phones. The boys had a particularly high level of commitment to the study. From the beginning of the school year, they expressed excitement over their participation in the UBC. They would remind each other of the dates for the next meetings and would go to great lengths to attend, including skipping sports practices and arranging alternative rides home. If the boys were playing in a sports game, they would always suit up and come to the first 15 or 20 minutes of the meeting before leaving with their team. It was understood that those boys would be given the floor first so they could contribute with the little time they had.

Ms. Minerva showed the same level of commitment. She was the only teacher, and participant, to attend every meeting, and she would often come early and stay late to engage in casual conversations with the boys and me. Ms. Minerva's commitment had explicit effects on her experience with the UBC. As will be described in the next chapter, Minerva's dedication to the study resulted in the boys having the most favorable view of her out of all the teachers. She also developed the strongest camaraderie with the students, and experienced the most positive outcomes as a result of the study. Ms. Minerva's and the students' commitment was recognized during the boys' focus group interviews, when they mentioned how they liked her, and respected that she was "all in."

Though many members were deeply committed to the study, others struggled with making time to attend. The clearest example was Mr. Hodor, who had to drop out mid-study because of an unanticipated conflict with his coaching responsibilities. Ms. Angela and Mr. Rocco participated in the entire study, but Ms. Angela missed several meetings due to family and



work responsibilities and Mr. Rocco was often distracted and taciturn during meetings. It is important to note that Mr. Rocco was going through a difficult family issue that likely took a toll on his ability to focus in meetings.

Additionally, facilitators must recognize and work around their members' many commitments, and rearrange meetings when necessary. For some UBC members, their arrival and departure times varied, and I had to be ok with the club at times appearing to have a revolving door. With a variety of sports, clubs, play rehearsals, department and committee meetings that members had to attend, individuals would sometimes leave early or show up 20 minutes late. I always welcomed members whenever they arrived, allowed them to leave when needed, and never showed frustration in either case. It was important to understand that most members were committed to the work of the UBC and they would attend as many meetings as possible. This was one way I, as the participant researcher, showed respect to the participants.

### **Social/Emotional Elements of a ST Partnership**

Given the traditional power structures in schools, teachers and students who chose to join a ST partnership are making themselves vulnerable to several potential negative outcomes. For teachers, they run the risk of students being disrespectful in school once the two groups are acting as equals in the partnership. They also are placed in a precarious position where they might hear negative things spoken about their colleagues. For the students, the outcomes could be even more severe, with teachers in the partnership developing a negative perception of them, reducing their grades, or not being treated and valued as equals. And both groups run the risk of having the personal feelings and experiences they share in the partnership exposed to the school. Though the previously described five elements act as the basic foundation of a ST partnership, four additional social and emotional elements are needed to address these concerns and ensure

the partnership, and its members succeed.

### **Addressing Participants' Fears**

At the first focus group interviews the participants spent a considerable amount of time describing the numerous apprehensions they had in relation to their involvement in the study. The concerns that the study already anticipated- such as teachers changing students' grades because of the partnership and participants being in a precarious situation when students speak ill of their colleagues, were never voiced by the participants. Yet they shared, at length, other fears and worries that arose from their involvement. With the study rooted deeply in students and teachers working closely together, it was paramount that these issues be promptly addressed.

**Teachers' fears.** After analyzing the data, the teachers experienced several fears in regard to the participation in this study, all of which related to the newly constructed power dynamic between the groups. The first two were fear of their instruction being unjustly criticized and fear they would not be able to defend themselves verbally. With the partnership's intent to unpack the English gap, the teachers expressed concerns that their instruction would be harshly criticized by the boys. This was applicable to all teachers, but especially those who had UBC boys on their rosters. The teachers had to juggle being authoritative figures in the classroom and then co-researchers, and in many cases, peers, during the study. This could have led to students criticizing instruction recently given by UBC teachers. And being that many teachers see their instruction as a reflection of themselves, this disparagement could be quite painful. Coupled with their fear of criticism, teachers were concerned that they would not be able to defend themselves during heated debates and give their thoughts behind a specific lesson or assignment. Once I explained to teachers that they were encouraged to defend themselves and share their experiences, as it was the bedrock of the study, their fears were assuaged.

Throughout the study, the teachers referenced their initial fear of taking off their “teacher’s mask.” They were put in a problematic situation because they had to be a teacher in the classroom and then more open and authentic during the UBC. Finding a balance between the two modes of being was a challenge for some. At the beginning of the study, Mr. Hodor described his mixed feelings about the topic.

I mean, I am okay with it. I'm a little half and half between staying as their teacher, staying in my character that I totally create, and turning into the actual me that they really don't know yet. I guess, in some ways, I'm like wow! I actually get to show that to somebody. In some ways, it's like, but they can't know about it. I'm still supposed to be Mr. Hodor, and whatever that name means.

Mr. Hodor anticipated that he would struggle with being himself in front of the students. Like the boys and their masculinity, Mr. Hodor was so used to wearing his teacher mask, that he felt vulnerable when he had to take it off. His thoughts were echoed by the other teachers. They were excited to be themselves, but worried about the cost of being so vulnerable. As the adults in the classroom, certain expectations for decorum and professionalism have been placed on teachers. This study asked teachers to, as much as they could, shed that façade and share their true selves with the other participants.

Removing the façade was particularly difficult for Ms. Minerva, being that it was her first year as a teacher.

I think for me, I'm excited. I was a little apprehensive just because I'm so young. I think I've tried really hard to make that hard and fast line between ... Even though I'm only five years older than them, making sure I'm always very professional. Being asked to be put in a setting where I'm purposely not professional but definitely more laid back, and working together with them instead of them listening to me. I was at first a little apprehensive about it just because I still want them to respect me as a teacher.

Ms. Minerva had understandable reservations, given this was her first year as a teacher. She was worried, like the other teachers, that her participation in this study would put her in a particularly defenseless position. She feared that all the work she put into creating the perception of a teacher

who was professional and in charge, despite her age, would crumble if she acted like herself in UBC. In the word of the teachers, the UBC made them vulnerable to students “taking advantage” of them, being “disrespectful” and “crossing the line, which would create a totally different relationship dynamic.” The inherent power hierarchy in the classroom shielded the teachers from being vulnerable, and the UBC took that away from them. In that way, their concerns were valid and understandable. As the facilitator of the group, I ensured them that any disrespectful student behavior would not be tolerated, and I encouraged them to bring instances of students “crossing the line” to my attention.

As the study progressed, some teachers struggled with taking off their “teacher masks.” Mr. Rocco and Ms. Minerva both discussed initially how they felt wary of being themselves in front of the students, but by the end of the study, both members felt more comfortable with the new student-teacher dynamic. Ms. Angela felt the same level of discomfort but unlike her peers, she did not feel comfortable being her true authentic self during the study. She said, “yeah, I still feel separate, but I am comfortable with that. I do not know that I ... I still have not cursed at them, at least I do not think I have. That is just me, I am just not going to curse around students really unless I am really pushed to a limit. So yes, I do feel like there is still a bit of a distance, but it is not distance that bothers me.” Ms. Angela either did not feel comfortable or did not think it was appropriate to show her true self to the UBC students, which could call into question the authenticity of her participation. If she was afraid to be herself in front of the students, she might not have shared her true feelings about certain subjects. This could be a reason why, as will be described in a subsequent section, she did not witness any sexist or ineffective instruction, when Mr. Hodor and Ms. Minerva did.

Ms. Angela recognized a distance between herself and the students, one that was there by

intent. It did not bother her, she said, but it did make it difficult for her to be considered an entrenched member of the group. In fact, during the meetings she would often sit by herself away from the other participants. It was unclear why she acted that way, and when asked why she felt that way, she said it was just who she was. As facilitator of the group, I did not force Ms. Angela into doing something that made her distraught. Instead I encouraged her participation through friendly conversation and permitted her to participate in the study in the ways she felt comfortable. Ms. Angela was still able to contribute to the UBC, but her comments were more those of someone wearing their “teacher mask” than of a person who happened to also be a teacher. However, her comments, since they were the manifestation of her struggles, were equally as valid as the other teachers.

**Students’ fears.** The students in the study expressed the same level of concern as teachers, though theirs stemmed from their fear of marginalization and rejection. Many of the boys were in a unique situation being that they were original members of UBC. Given the positive experience they had in UBC1, they were fearful that their club, which they had come to cherish, would be negatively altered by the teachers’ presence. During UBC1, the participants exalted the club as being the only place in the school where their voices and opinions were welcomed and appreciated. They could air their frustrations, describe how being over-disciplined and undervalued affected them, and commiserate with peers who had similar experiences. The presence of the teachers threatened not only the basic function of the club, but the level of gratification they felt. Their biggest fear was that the teachers would stifle their voices or force them to censor themselves. This topic was discussed at length at the first focus group interview.

Oliver: I haven’t had a lot of the teachers in class, so I think I’m going to be a little more hesitant because it’s almost the first time they are getting to know me. They are going to hear me, not necessarily bash someone, but speak strongly upon a subject. That’s why I would be hesitant, because I

don't know them as much as I do to the boys in this room.

Elijah: I don't really know the new English teachers either. But no matter what, when you get observed by somebody, whether it's something like this, like Mr. Superintendent or something, or even a student. What Oliver said. You are really hesitant with what you're saying. I would correct myself. I would be more proper when a teacher that I don't know is going to observe me. I shouldn't be, but I will.

Antoinette: You guys are going to be ...

Elijah: I'll be on better behavior than I usually will be. For me, it'll be a little awkward.

The boys were concerned about the first impressions they would make on certain teachers, being that it might be one of them expressing their strong opinions on a provocative topic. Even without intention, the teachers could create an environment which restricts the free speech and honesty that was the hallmark of the previous study. The boys referenced the observer effect that often happens when an outsider enters a group. One way to address this fear was for teachers to become full members of the UBC through the mentorship of UBC1 members. This harkens back to Lave & Wenger's (2011) legitimate peripheral participation. As the new UBC members participated in the study and collaborated with UBC1 members, they moved from the edge of the community of practice to the center. Once inside the CoP, they were no longer outsiders and the boys could be themselves.

The most profound and widely discussed fear the boys had was fear of judgement and rejection from teachers. This could be the reason why the boys were adamant about not having to censor themselves. It is documented that a student's self-esteem and achievement are linked to the relationship they have with their teacher (Johnston & Logan, 2009; Hartley & Sutton, 2013). UBC1 had similar findings, but went further in positing that boys have an inherent need to like and be liked by their teacher. These findings are supported by the concerns expressed by the

boys. During the focus group interviews, they were afraid that if they showed their true selves, and did not censor their comments and actions, the teachers would judge and dislike them. This fear applied to both new and current teachers. They were concerned that teachers with whom they have a good rapport would suddenly dislike them because of their participation in the study. Equally frightful was being judged by teachers they did not have a relationship with, which showed that their concern was not based in possible negative academic outcomes.

This fear was discussed at length when introducing the student-teacher observations as a key aspect of the study. Sergio was the first to share a scenario he was worried about.

Sergio: It was a Monday, and Saturday night you went out with your friends, or went to someone's house. You were just having a great time, you know? You see your friend in school and were like, "Hey what's up? That was a great party Saturday night." That observer, which is a teacher, sitting right behind you, goes, "Wow, this kid partakes in those activities."

Ari: Call it a social gathering.

Sergio: Yes, that social gathering. They are going to look at you differently. Maybe not drastically different, but they are going to make that mental note in their head.

Sergio was concerned with UBC teachers passing judgment on him based on the decisions he made outside of school. To a certain extent, the boys could prevent this from happening by selecting or censoring what they shared. However, students would have limited control over this happening during observations. In this regard, the boys were wearing a mask as well. But they were not afraid of being disrespected by the teachers, they were afraid of being rejected by them.

The many concerns brought up by participants were warranted, but luckily none of them came to fruition. This was due in part to the design of study. The purposeful selection of participants, group-generated norms, truly collaborative work, and student-teacher voice model prevented these hypothetical issues from materializing. However, allowing the participants to

share their concerns was an important aspect of the study. Once they saw that others shared similar emotions, they were more able to put their fears aside and commit themselves to the partnership and its work.

### **Brutal Honesty**

Given that frankness was a prerequisite for participants in this study, it was inevitable that individuals would be very honest with each other, even when it seemed a bit harsh. This element of the partnership was quite important. Brutal honesty was needed for the club to gain a strong understanding of the phenomenon and to examine how the ST partnership functioned. It also kept everyone mutually accountable to each other and the work of the group, which is an important aspect of any CoP (Mitra, 2008; Wegner, 2008).

Though everyone was respectful to each other, they were not afraid to challenge each other's thinking. Their honesty was never mean spirited, in fact, it provided the opportunity for each group to empathize with one another. The boys were honest when it came to discussing their experiences in the classroom, particularly poor instruction, sexist, ineffective or mean teachers, as well as their own bad behavior and lack of effort in English. They challenged teachers' perspective on what makes instructions and assignments effective. One instance where this was seen was when the UBC examined artifacts from current English classrooms. Students shared their experiences with the documents, and argued that one homework was too long and one quiz did not capture the students' knowledge.

The teachers were equally honest, and challenged the boys' thinking and tried to increase the boys' accountability. During UBC meetings, teachers engaged in honest discussions about the perverseness of boys' disruptive, disrespectful and self-destructive behavior in the classroom. They also challenged the boys on their apathy and lack of engagement in the classroom, and why



they might perceive some teachers as sexist.

One example of the honest and powerful discussions participants had was when the boys, with meticulous detail, spoke about the prevalent cheating that existed in the school. When I asked them how often they cheated, the unanimous response was “every day.” One of my students, Harry, admitted to cheating on his homework the entire time I was out on medical leave, which took a great deal of confidence and trust in me. Jeremy and Elijah also spoke about their cheating habits.

Jeremy: Yeah, with sports and whatever else you’re doing, the homework all just piles up and then you’re sitting there, it’s 12:00 o’clock and crap, I have to be at school in seven hours. I have to go to sleep. I think that’s the point when people start cheating. It’s not like you get home from school and right away, you’re like I’m going to cheat. You want to give it a shot on your own and then it doesn’t work out.

Elijah: Yeah. If I have homework, and it's stacked and stacked and stacked I’m like, “Okay. I list it out for myself. I think, I can do my English homework by myself. I have math. I’ll ask for my government and I’ll do my psych.”

Antoinette: You’ll make a...

Elijah: I’ll make myself a schedule.

Jeremy: Yeah, you have to prioritize which one- I cheat accordingly. I have a calendar. I don’t mean to be an asshole to teachers, but my government class, I don’t give a fuck about what Ms. Miller says. I know she can’t stand me. I can’t stand her. So, I cheat to spite in that class.

Antoinette: That’s interesting that you’re more likely to cheat for teachers that you don’t respect or that-

Multiple boys: Oh yeah!

Jeremy and Elijah were honest in their description of their cheating habits. They admitted to doing it every day, asking others for their work, and even cheating to intentionally harm a teacher. They could have said that they rarely cheated and abhorred those who did, which was something they likely thought I wanted to hear. But instead they were brutally honest, and

described their extensive cheating behaviors. Earlier in the conversation, the boys detailed which teachers they often cheated for, and even the websites where the answers to homework questions could be found. They might have been somewhat apprehensive sharing the secret cheating strategies with “the opposition,” but they did so anyway. Because the participants were brutally honest with each other, participants, as will be described in the next chapter, could learn from each other, which resulted in their empathy and changing harmful behaviors.

### **Mutual Respect**

Through analyzing the discussions and observations of the study, it became evident that mutual respect was the most important component for this ST partnership to work. In analyzing the other elements present in this partnership, mutual respect was a reoccurring theme. For example, the criteria used to select participants, such as being open minded, candid and having a good rapport with others, related back to the participants’ ability to be respectful of others. The club-generated norms also promoted respect, particularly those that governed how participants interacted with each other. Brutal honesty also was a form of respect in that the participants valued each other enough to not lie and just say what the others might want to hear. And because members were respectful of each other, everyone could be honest and examine boy’s underachievement without fear of retribution or causing pain.

It was clear that participants had a deep level of respect for each other. In addition to it being verbalized in interviews, it was observed through small actions performed by the participants at every meeting. Individuals would not talk over each other, use their cell phones during meetings or say hurtful things. Members would also push their chair in before leaving for the day, and offer to get anyone food from the table if they planned to go up themselves. During conversations, the tone was, for the most part, calm, thoughtful and humble. This was

particularly true of the boys. Even if there was a disagreement, there was a desire to understand the other person's thinking. This was exhibited through asking follow-up questions and looking each other in the eyes while speaking.

There was one instance in the beginning of the study where this mutual respect was apparent. Ms. Minerva had a hard time acclimating to the group initially. During one meeting, she came in five minutes late and sat on the outside of the circle. I asked her to join the circle, and not wanting to interrupt the work that was taking place, she declined. Hearing this, a group of five boys reconfigured their seats so she would be inside the circle without having to move. Ms. Minerva did not want to be disrespectful in disrupting the meeting, and the boys responded to her kindness in like. There were numerous instances throughout the study where participants would voluntarily and covertly show respect to each other, which added to the strength of the UBC and the commitment members had to each other.

### **A Safe Space**

In addition to creating a welcoming space, the environment of a ST partnership must be emotionally safe for participants. However, to create a safe space, numerous elements need to be in order, many of which were previously described. They are: purposeful selection of participants, welcoming space, club-generated norms, commitment, addressing fears, and mutual respect. In essence, a safe space was the outcome of having the right components of the partnership in place. Adding to this were the rules in the consent and assent forms that ensured members' privacy and ensured that members would not abuse each other as a result of their participation in the UBC.

Many participants viewed the UBC as their safe space, and the one place in the school where they were able and encouraged to be themselves. At a UBC meeting, individuals could, to

an extent, share their thoughts, concerns, challenges, failures and fears without judgement or ridicule. Many of the UBC members expressed concerns over being disrespected by others and not being able to be themselves. However, none of their fears materialized. The boys could be uncensored, as cursing, lewd language, and certain gestures were allowed, so long as they were not harmful to others. And the teachers were encouraged to be uncensored, and many of them were able to express their true selves.

One instance where this finding was demonstrated was when a non-UBC teacher asked to enter the room. I stopped the UBC, and permitted her to enter briefly, at which point the boys became quiet and rigid, and remained that way until she left. Elijah reacted the strongest to her presence and became markedly withdrawn. He then described a negative experience he had with that female teacher just a few hours prior. Ari joined the discussion.

Elijah: She yelled at me for no reason. Down the hall, she's like, "Get to class."

Antoinette: So, you felt really protective of this territory when she came in.

Elijah: Yes. I was like, "This is my happy place."

Ari: I'm comfortable here and I can just say any curse word I want and not get scolded. I can't do that anywhere else. I can speak my mind here.

The boys valued the UBC and considered it one of the only places in the school where they could be unencumbered. When someone from outside of the group entered, especially someone who had an acrimonious relationship with the boys, they threatened the safety that the boys had grown accustomed to. At a later meeting, Ari called the UBC his "free therapy," to which many of the members agreed.

At the start of the study, both groups expressed fears of being themselves in the study, for fear of being judged and disrespected. They anticipated that participating in the UBC would make them vulnerable around the other participants. However, early into the study, as the group

began to develop respect and trust for each other, it became clear that their fears would not materialize. Ari and Ms. Minerva explained how that was the case for them.

Ari: I was afraid the teachers were going to have a more negative idea of who I am, especially with Ms. Angela. I didn't have her as a teacher before this year, so she didn't know me. Having her first impression of me at UBC meeting where I'm cursing and throwing shit around, it really wouldn't have been that good. I think everyone was a little tentative to be who they really are at meetings at first but then they seemed kind of cool with it.

Ms. Minerva: So my first few meetings I was a little bit more hesitant to speak up, but I think this is probably the first place my whole first year that I could kind of really be myself, more so than in the faculty lounge. Even there I feel like I have to watch what I say in front of teachers because I am seen as someone who is new and really inexperienced. But I felt like this was the first place in school this year that I was really able to be myself.

Ms. Minerva and Ari both seemed a bit surprised that they could be uncensored in the group. Be it Ari's rowdy persona or Ms. Minerva's inexperience, both members were used to being negatively perceived by others when they were being their true selves. However, in the UBC they could be uncensored without any backlash or negative outcomes. Instead, they described a sense of acceptance and validation as a result of being themselves in the UBC. Ms. Minerva's quote is particularly profound, as she pointed to the UBC as the only safe space she had in her first year as a teacher, despite the group consisting of mostly adolescent boys.

These nine elements, which represented the physical/structural elements and social/emotional elements, were vital to the success of the ST partnership. This study required participants to be dedicated to examining an issue that received little attention by the school community, but had long-reaching effects on how the school functioned and the students learned. From the onset of the study, participants were dedicated to the work and understood the importance of their participation. They followed the club-generated norms, and engaged in discussions on heated and controversial topics while being honest and respectful. And though

everyone had very busy schedules, they each made time to attend the meetings and contribute to the UBC. Their commitment to the club, each other, and their work was unwavering, and resulted in an effective and successful ST partnership.

## CHAPTER 6: THE TRANSFORMATIVE PARTNERSHIP & ITS EFFECTS ON PARTICIPANTS

With each element of a student-teacher (ST) partnership in place, the members of the UBC could fully commit themselves to examining the achievement gap that existed in Upper Mountain High. To do that, participants worked together in purposeful, authentic and unconventional ways. They had limited experience collaborated with each other so closely; the traditional student-teacher relationship was all they had known. Furthermore, this traditional relationship, as described in the previous chapters, was often hostile and resulted in participants disrespecting each other and exerting their dominance. The UBC, however, drastically altered their ST interactions and provided an opportunity for a genuine, honest, respectful relationship to bloom between participants.

The participants in this study spent approximately five months working together, observing each other, and getting to know each other. They spoke candidly, even though it might have made them initially uncomfortable. They listened to each other, even when they disagreed with what was being said. They asked each other questions with the intent of understanding the other person's perspective. And they debated each step of the way, challenging each other's thinking and beliefs related to boys' underachievement. These actions, along with the structure of the study and the dedication of the participants, resulted in the students and teachers rethinking many aspects of their school lives as it pertained to the phenomenon they studied. By the end of the study, they were changed individuals. Their perspectives were different and their actions were altered, all because of their participation in the UBC.

The path the participants took towards their transformation was not linear and was different for everyone. However, after examining the data, a single progression became apparent.

Through participating in the study, UBC members learned more about each other and developed a strong camaraderie. Because of their newfound understanding, they began to put themselves in each other's shoes and think about things from their perspectives. Once the participants developed a strong empathy, they started to change their behaviors and thinking about each other and the classroom. This transition- learning to empathy and empathy to change- took place while, and was likely the result of, the members participating in the student-teacher partnership. This chapter details this progression and examines what happened when students and teachers worked together in a real and meaningful way.

### **Learning & Understanding**

The structure of the UBC was designed for students and teachers to acknowledge each other's thoughts and perspectives on topics in which both parties were mutually invested. By listening to each other over the duration of the study, the participants learned a great deal about each other, and began to understand their experiences. This concept – the participants learning and understanding each other – was the most coded element of the study and yielded some of the most powerful exchanges between participants. It could be that the social component of this study, as the CoP theory states, resulted in their learning (Kapucu, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 2011). By talking about their lives, the participants developed a shared repertoire of stories, experiences and vernacular that enabled them to examine the achievement gap and relate to each other (Mitra, 2008; Wegner, 2008).

### **Learning Through “Being Real”**

The reason why the UBC members were capable of learning from and understanding each other was because, the members could, in the words of Mr. Hodor, “be real” with each other. Being real required students and teachers to be honest and share their authentic



experiences. It also required members to be unencumbered by the traditional power structure in schools. The elements of power that is inherent in CoP – access, participation and negotiability – were equally available to all participants (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Mitra, 2007). Teachers could not reprimand or give orders to students. Instead the two groups worked as equals. Participants could be unfiltered in ways that would have mandated repercussions, both for students and teachers, in a normal school setting. This section of the chapter describes the ways in which participants were real with each other, and how they began to understand each other's perspectives.

Sharing their authentic experiences came natural to most of the participants, and was a valued aspect of the study. Mr. Hodor explained how he intended to “be real” with other UBC members.

Mr. Hodor: I think I'm going to argue with them. I see myself doing it. I see them bringing it out in me. Where I would usually just tell them “you can't talk like that blah, blah, blah.” Now I can just call them out for real and that might come out.

Antoinette: So, arguing with them about their behavior or what they're saying?

Mr. Hodor: Both. About kind of, listening to their opinions but also calling them out on the B.S. in their opinions.

Ms. Angela: How in class how we kind of have to just accept them. Where here we can, yeah.

Mr. Hodor: They're going to be real with us, I'm going to be real right back with them.

Being real, in Mr. Hodor's estimation, meant acting differently than he did in the classroom. The teachers were used to accepting the students' “BS,” but the dynamic created by the UBC gave him a freedom he did not have before. Mr. Hodor's comment demonstrated the framework of the student-teacher voice in action. The thoughts of both members were equaled appreciated, so teachers could now challenge the boys' biased comments instead of just ignoring it, like in the

classroom. Mr. Hodor appeared to revel in his newfound ability, but also recognized that he must listen to the students, a key aspect in the participants learning and understanding each other.

One example of teachers and students “being real” came in an exchange between Ms. Angela and Ari, who was a student in her psychology course, as they spoke about a specifically a group of boys in their class who continually spoke during her instruction.

Ms. Angela: What about the rudeness factor though?

Ari: For the guys?

Ms. Angela: That particular table, I get it. I'm not a yeller and I don't yell.

Alex: I've noticed that.

Ms. Angela: I don't know if they even realize they're being very rude or they just-

Ari: No, that's where I can give my point of view. Now that I'm with them-

Antoinette: They're constantly talking?

Ms. Angela: Right, and they're generally not very loud. They're just not always with us. The whole time they're just chatting about their own...you're looking at it like this is a positive way to get through class, at least what I'm seeing from the way you describe it. It's a coping mechanism, which is fine, but it's also kind of rude for the person who's prepared and is trying to get through the exam

Antoinette: Do you think those guys are concerned about the rudeness factor?

Ari: No, I think that when Ms. Angela has to say something like, "Can you guys stop talking," that's when it kicks in that you're being a little rude. That's when you tone it down a little bit. Before that point, you're not intentionally being rude. It just happens.

Ari and Ms. Angela viewed this instance through two different perspectives. Ari believed that this was just an example of harmless boy behavior, but Ms. Angela found it disrespectful. She challenged his thinking by describing how she perceived the boys, being the one whose emotions and job was affected most by their actions. Though Ms. Angela previously mentioned her

inability to remove her “teacher mask,” this exchange demonstrated her attempt to be authentic with the boys. One could argue she did remove her mask, if but for only a moment, to describe her frustration. This exchange also illustrated how both groups wanted to understand each other. It would have been easy to quickly dismiss the other’s beliefs, but Ms. Angela and Ari instead tried to learn from each other. In the end, Ari understood his teacher’s perspective and recognized how his friends crossed the line. Ms. Angela, through witnessing the boys’ actions in the study and listening to Ari’s argument, learned that the boys’ disruptive classroom behaviors, such as chatting and joking around, were typical teenage boy behaviors and not necessarily indicative of students’ disrespect towards her.

Another example of the participants learning through “being real” was in a discussion with Ellen, Ms. Minerva and Ms. Angela about literacy instruction.

- Ellen: I feel like with the teacher's approach to teaching reading... from teachers that I had in the past, it's more about when students are reading and where they're reading, as opposed to how they're reading. There should be more of a structured way to teach. If I was taught how I should read, like more reading skills, I could pick things up easier and stuff. I feel like that's a big part of me lacking engagement.
- Ms. Minerva: I think that's more on the... I think it's really on the middle school teachers to really teach conventions like that so that you can apply them.
- Antoinette: We did that last year when we did CTAs and analyzing quotes. Is that what you mean by skills? What kind of skills?
- Ms. Minerva: I think instead of being like, “All right, we're going to do a close reading activity,” he wants to know like, “How do I close read?” Is that kind of what you mean?
- Ms. Angela: When I taught younger grades, I modeled reading and we call it a read aloud, think aloud. I used to teach middle school. I would read and then I would stop and then explain what I would be thinking at that point in the paragraph.
- Ellen: Yes, like that.
- Ms. Angela: Sometimes it's helpful, but sometimes it's hard to translate my thoughts into somebody else's thoughts and how do you say it, but that's what I've

done with younger grades is to try to show how I stay engaged with the text.

Ellen described his struggles and lack of skills in reading, pointing to his teachers' instruction as a main reason for his deficiencies. This was a bold move for a student, and showed the unconventional power dynamic of the UBC. The teachers, however, did not respond with anger. Instead they wanted to understand what he meant by "how I should read, like more reading skills." This demonstrated their dedication to their students' learning, but also the ways in which the participants were mutually engaged, and dedicated to each other (Mitra, 2008; Wegner, 2008). Together, they brainstormed different methods to address Ellen's reading deficits, and settled on modeling as the ideal instruction. Ellen also displayed his vulnerability in this exchange, and like Angela did with her teacher's mask, he shed the masculine expectations placed on him to share his experience. By doing so, Ellen provided the teachers with an opportunity to understand why their male students might underperform, and how they could best address the issue through instruction.

### **Learning Through Debate**

As seen in the exchange about boys' misbehavior between Ari and Ms. Angela, the participants began to learn more about each other as they debated topics that were deemed important. Debating became a part of the club's joint enterprise, or the work they shared, and everyone could contribute equally because of the study's unconventional power structure (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). Throughout the study, the boys challenged the teachers on various topics, including the concept of masculinity, classroom instruction and policies. The teachers challenged the boys about their behavior, as well as their rejection of reading, apathy and thoughts about class instruction. The last concept produced a lively examination among the members on how to better engage boys in reading and the English classroom.

- Roger: Maybe once the teacher finds out the student doesn't read, guys don't read the first day, you go review, but you do something interactive ... an interactive review or something about the chapter. If you're playing Kahoot every time, because I love playing the Kahoot. If you play Kahoot every time after you read those set of chapters that you have to read, maybe guys would be more wanting to...
- Alex: Make it competitive. A lot of guys like that.
- Roger: Not making reading a competition, but reviewing afterwards or doing more interactive things, because guys like interactive, hands-on reviews of stuff, at least I do.
- Ari: If we play Kahoot after every I don't know like chapter or ...
- Leo: I would love that.
- Ari: Honestly if we took 10 minutes out of a class to play Kahoot, that would honestly make guys read because it's competitive and guys want that. If you put a little incentive like I don't know top three get a piece of candy or something, then guys will definitely get into it.
- Antoinette: Ms. Minerva what do you think about this?
- Ms. Minerva: That's bullshit. I think Kahoot is such an easy way to check out, or they just press the red button. I do think that boys like competition; I don't think that's the way to keep the entire class focused on reading. Review games like that are an easy way to check out.
- Antoinette: What do you mean check out?
- Ms. Minerva: Like to mentally check out, because it's a game and you want the right answers in front of you and if you don't ... I just don't see that being productive.
- Ellen: I don't know, I think that the Kahoot thing, for me at least, that would definitely not work, and I think that it is like BS, because at first the novelty of it it's appealing and we're all into it, but then after if it became a common thing we did it every time, then it would just be like, "Alright this is 15 minutes of class, where I just maybe try the first few minutes then it's over." I'll make a funny nickname, try to get on the leaderboard and then like, "Screw it like I'm ending the 15 minutes," like I'm wasting the time and I'm just showing off.

The participants clearly disagreed over the effectiveness of Kahoot, an interactive online review

game. Roger, Alex, Leo and Ari argued that it would help boys read more since it involved boys' interests. Ms. Minerva interjected in the conversation and challenged the boys' thinking. She argued the inverse, that the game resulted in some students' disengagement. Ellen agreed with Ms. Minerva, and used his own experience to prove his point. As the conversation continued, the two groups debated over the success of Kahoot in the classroom. Their arguments were articulate and detailed, which showed their commitment to discussion and desire to be understood. In the end, they did not come to an agreement. But by hearing the impassioned statements from each group, the UBC members learned everyone's diverse perspectives and why the game was liked by some and disliked by others.

Ms. Minerva also had a lively debate with Alex, her current English student, when discussing boys' reading interests and Alex's lack of reading. This quote was an extenuation of the one cited in the section "Rejection of Academic Reading."

Alex: I read the most out of *Catcher* and that one was the worst, for me. I read maybe four chapters and I was like, "I can't do this." Sorry Ms. Minerva. Now, Ms. Minerva's going to lower my grade by 100 points because I don't read!

Ms. Minerva: No I'm not, because I already knew that.

Alex: You knew that I didn't read any of those books?

Ms. Minerva: Of course I did, Alex.

Alex: How? Ms. Minerva, teach us your methods.

Ms. Minerva: Because I knew. You are like Sergio. I know he only reads *Shmoop* because his responses are always so canned. I know exactly what he knows and what he doesn't

Alex: She doesn't call out anybody, because she doesn't care about us.

Ms. Minerva: At least he's participating in the discussion. Sometimes I just say what I want them to say and I'm like, "Right guys," and they're like ...

Alex: Yeah! Ms. Minerva, for not reading the books, though, I'd throw in some really good insight, right?

Ms. Minerva: I don't know. You were good in the trial, when we had the trial for *Of Mice and Men*.

Alex: I didn't even read it.

Ms. Minerva: Well that wasn't really about reading it, you know? Really, nothing to do at all with reading it.

In this exchange, Ms. Minerva and Alex learned a great deal about each other. Ms. Minerva learned why Alex did not read, which he explained in the omitted section of the passage. She responded in a respectful manner, but also challenged him on his unfair statement about not caring about them. She called Sergio and Alex out for their apathy and explained how that frustrated her. Ms. Minerva also witnessed Alex's need for her approval. When Alex tried to get encouragement from Ms. Minerva at the end of the conversation, she did not lie and praise him for his insight and reading abilities. Instead she thought of an activity which did not require extensive English skills and extolled him for his contributions. Alex also learned a great deal, and was made aware of the perceptiveness and skill of his teacher, which he appeared to find surprising. Both UBC members gained a deeper understanding of the other person through this debate, and, as the next section asserts, likely applied this new knowledge in their shared classroom.

### **Camaraderie**

From the very beginning of the study, the participants were cordial and respectful to each other. But by the third or fourth meeting, a sincere camaraderie began to develop. The unstructured first five minutes of the meeting went from being segregated and somewhat awkward, to being filled with laughter, chatting and socializing. They would share stories and discuss topics that became a part of the club's shared repertoire and helped them understand each

other on a deeper level (Mitra, 2008; Wegner, 2008).

Members got to know the lives people lived outside of school. Students would ask me how the preparations for my baby were coming along. They would chat about their favorite TV shows, recent movies they had seen and their weekend plans. We would ask Ari for updates on his college application process, and Elijah how his new girlfriend was doing. When members quarreled with friends and family, they often sought advice from UBC members. And when it was semi-formal and prom season, members would discuss plans and share their own experiences at similar social events. Participants transitioned from speaking politely about UBC related events, to being their authentic selves and chatting about real life. Conversations about the achievement gap became more natural and free flowing, and participants appeared at ease working together. The UBC members transformed from students and teachers in a study to true compatriots.

The camaraderie was apparent through the passionate commitment members had to each other and the study, which Wenger (2008) called mutual engagement. The teachers commented on this during a focus group interview.

Ms. Angela: I have definitely felt that students appreciate that we are here. Even ones I do not teach in the hallway will give an extra look and "hello." I think they do appreciate that teachers in the building are participating and listening to what they have to say.

Ms. Minerva: Yeah, and on the students, I feel like they were always very observant, like they took it seriously. I think the ones that were honest and offer good insight in here, offered really good insight. Like when they were looking at your work, they were not just like "Oh this piece sucks Barriga because it is hard." They picked the one that was probably the longest to do, and they were like "It is hard but, it also is the most useful for us." The ones who were honest were ... honest, you know?

Ms. Angela: There is a level of commitment. I am impressed with their time commitment. Even if they have a game, they stop by before they have to leave, I think that is really nice.



Ms. Minerva: Right. Yeah, I think they take it more seriously than I thought, just junior, sophomore, and senior boys would. In a sense that they are willing to come after school and look at data and look at activities that you make and - you know?

The teachers' conversation illustrated how committed the boys were to the study and to the teachers. The camaraderie expressed by the UBC members translated to life outside of school. Ms. Minerva and Ms. Angela commented on the casual conversations the boys had with them outside of UBC, and felt special to be singled out in such a positive way by the students. The two teachers also seemed shocked at the seriousness the boys demonstrated during meetings and observations. Their comments were honest and their behavior was respectful. Even if their schedules conflicted with the club's, they still managed to squeeze in a few minutes of participation. By being so committed to the study, and so courteous, the boys gained the teachers' respect, which helped build the camaraderie that was evident in the interactions of the club.

The progression of how and where each member sat in the meeting illustrated how the camaraderie developed in the club. At the beginning of the study, the members segregated themselves. The UBC1 boys sat together in a group, the new UBC boys sat in the back of the class and the teachers sat together in the front of the room, near my desk. Once the meeting got underway, I would direct the members on how to sit and sometimes which group to sit with. We often sat in circles, with all the members expected to sit together. This was a difficult request for some. Ms. Angela, who previously commented on how there was a divide between her and the students, separated herself from the group. She often sat outside of the circle, and would not move when prompted. Mr. Rocco initially sat outside of the circle as well, but gradually started sitting with the group, though he would often sit on the desk, or push his chair far back from the

desk to sit. These two teachers had good rapport with students, but as the boys pointed out in a focus group meeting, they did not develop camaraderie with students as profound as the one the students had with Ms. Minerva, who they described as being totally committed, or in their words, “all in.”

Tyrion and Ned, the two boys who were mocked by the boys at one point in the study, also did not initially sit with the majority. They often sat in the back of the room just on the outskirts of the circle. They often sat back and listened to their peers instead of contributing to the conversation. It was not until the third or fourth meeting that the boys began to speak and sit with the rest of the group. Though they developed a good rapport with the other members of the study, it took time.

Other members of the study developed camaraderie quickly, as seen by their seating arrangement. Ms. Minerva and the other new UBC boys quickly moved to sitting on the inside of the circle. They had the easiest time acclimating to the group, and dove into discussions from the beginning of the study. UBC1 boys, however, were always in the circle. It was clear, based on how they sat and socialized, that they were comfortable in the club and already had a strong rapport with others. They were also the first to sit with the teachers and rearrange the circle to include Ms. Angela when she segregated herself.

These self-imposed seating arrangements are important to note because they correspond with an individual's participation (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). The UBC1 boys were expert members in the club, and they already had access and negotiability (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). They, therefore, had the most power in the group and felt comfortable sitting in the circle (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). The new members contributed through legitimate peripheral participation, in that they were novices who did not have full

membership to the club (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). Once they moved from the periphery to the center of the group, which demonstrated the shift from novice to experienced member, they literally moved from the periphery of the room to the circle. Ms. Angela, however, purposefully marginalized herself from the group. According to CoP researchers, members who are marginalized are powerless (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger, 2008). Though she felt some solidarity with the boys, it was superficial. The boys rarely joked around with her, and she also was not mentioned when they discussed which teachers they liked to work with.

The copious amounts of joking and laughter that took place during the meetings also demonstrated the strong camaraderie created by the group. This banter always took place at the beginning of the meetings, but also happened in the middle of meetings. Most of the jokes would be considered wildly inappropriate for an educational setting, but it was a welcomed comment in the UBC. Ms. Minerva and Alex would often engage in friendly repartee, as demonstrated by this quote.

Ms. Minerva: When you guys graduate I'll be ...

Alex: Ms. Minerva when I graduate college can we "goomer live"?

Ms. Minerva: I don't know what that means?

Antoinette: I don't care if kids say when I graduate high school can I ... When kids say Barriga can we go drinking, like, let's go drinking if you're ...

Ms. Minerva: See I've gone out with my teachers though once I turned 21.

Antoinette: When they turn 21 I would go out and buy them a drink.

Ms. Minerva: I'll pick you up on your 21st birthday.

Alex: You can't just buy me one drink

Antoinette: I will buy you a round of shots.

Alex: Exactly.

Ms. Minerva: Yeah, we'll go straight Patron we'll go shot for shot.

Alex: Five back to back.

Ms. Minerva: You won't be able to keep up.

Antoinette: Like that's perfectly fine.

Alex: Five back to back rounds of tequila?

Ms. Minerva: Yes.

Alex: With lime?

Ms. Minerva: No lime, straight with a smile.

Talking about drinking alcohol with a student when they come of age is not a suitable conversation to have in a classroom, but in the UBC, it was a sign of camaraderie. In fact, joking around is often the bedrock of boys' friendships (Newkirk, 2012). By jesting with Ms. Minerva, Alex demonstrated how much he liked and respected her. One could imagine that Ms. Minerva did not intend to go shot for shot with Alex, but she likely understood the subtext of their conversation: Alex was expressing how he appreciated her, and she returned the sentiment. Their witty banter, as seen in Ms. Minerva saying she would take tequila "straight, with a smile," demonstrated their strong rapport and how comfortable they were with each other. The camaraderie in this quote is seen through the participants' desire to hang out with each other after they graduate and the banter in which they engaged.

The camaraderie in this study was based in mutual respect. The participants had to respect each other to develop a meaningful relationship. As discussed in the fifth chapter, the students and teachers developed a deep level of respect for each other. The boys did not cross the line with the teachers or take advantage of them and the teachers did not judge or reprimand the boys, which were two fears expressed by the members. The exact opposite happened, however.

The teachers could understand and relate to the boys' experiences, and in turn, the boys grew more respectful. Ms. Minerva even said that the partnership had a positive impact on her relationships with Sergio and Alex, who happened to be in her junior English class at the time.

I think it's just a better level of understanding. With Alex and Sergio, especially with Sergio, who likes to challenge and argue all the time, he takes me more seriously. Like, when I mean business, he doesn't really challenge that, because he knows that if I do that, it's after thinking about it, and that I'm not just kind of shouting orders to shout orders, because I think he sees us working just as hard as they have been in here, and so I think that translates outside, as well.

Ms. Minerva believed that her relationship with her two students improved because they collaborated in the UBC. Furthermore, Sergio's once cantankerous attitude had now softened, and he demonstrated more respect towards her when she taught. Ms. Minerva attributed this change in behavior to their mutual commitment to the UBC and the bond that had grown. Sergio's transformation could also be the result of understanding her perspective more, as described in the previous section.

Honesty and interest in each other were two other elements in which the participants' rapport was built. Participants could be themselves, and they felt they could share things they never would in a traditional ST relationship. The boys' candid discussion of masculinity was one example of this. Lastly, the members were also dedicated to learning about and understanding everyone. A strong relationship cannot exist without both people at least trying to understand each other. The camaraderie created by UBC members was the result of these three elements: mutual respect, honesty and interest in each other. Throughout the study, most of the students and teachers developed a significant bond, one which they demonstrated through seeking opportunities to socialize with each other, joking and laughing together, sharing personal aspects of their lives and caring about each other's wellbeing. This camaraderie was highly valued by members and was likely a reason why the partnership thrived and succeeded at unpacking the

achievement gap.

### **With Understanding Comes Empathy**

As the members of the study learned more about each other and developed camaraderie, an interesting thing started to happen. The students and teachers began to put themselves in each other's shoes and feel compassion towards the other person. This finding, participants developing empathy towards each other, was mostly the result of the observation process, when participants experienced an average day of a fellow UBC member. As Sergio said, "we have a better understanding for each other now that we know what each other has to deal and put up with." As Sergio asserted, the participants saw firsthand the challenges the members faced, which altered their understanding and perception of one another. Debates then evolved from sharing their own perspectives to relating their experiences to each other's. Thus, the participants experienced a significant change in how they initially thought about each other.

### **Fixing a Skewed Perception**

The participants' empathy was seen through their profound change in perspective. At the start of the study, both parties spoke about how they thought the other group had it easy. Teachers were lazy, did not really care about students, and just walked around the classroom doling out prefabricated handouts. Students were complainers, with no work ethic, who just sat in classrooms chatting with their friends, and occasionally doing work. These harsh views were consistently challenged during the study. After observing one another for a day, and working together in the UBC, the members experienced a significant shift in their perception of each other.

Harry illustrated the change of his skewed perspective after observing Mr. Rocco for a day.

I just, I always felt like at Upper Mountain High, the teachers are just one big joke. I always thought there is just teachers that could sit there all day and nobody would really even realize. They could just sit there the whole day, students wouldn't care or anything. But I guess I realized after shadowing Mr. Rocco and stuff, teachers actually do a lot of work. They have to prepare for every day and stuff. I don't know, it showed me that like, they're actually working, there is actually stuff going on. Whether it's working or not working for the students, helping them learn, they're still trying and I guess after watching kids in classes, I was like "Oh wow, these kids are really bad." Then I was thinking, "I do this kind of stuff too."

When asked to walk in Rocco's shoes for the day, Harry altered his beliefs about teachers in general. They were not big jokes, as he once proclaimed, but hardworking professionals dedicated to their students. He felt sympathy towards Rocco. However, the most momentous shift happened when he observed his classmates' through the teacher's eyes. He recognized the effects of misbehaving that the UBC teachers continually described, and came to the realization that he acted this way as well. At that moment, he put himself in the shoes his teachers, and felt bad for how he once treated them. Harry had a great deal of respect for Mr. Rocco, and seeing him being treated poorly by his peers affected him and altered his perspective.

Ari experienced the same shift in viewpoint. He explained, "the observations just gave us a better understanding of what the teachers have to go through each day and how they prepare for each class and if it's disrupted, that can really mess with them. I mean, they're putting a lot of effort and then it gets constantly disrupted by the same kid, or the same group of kids each day. That would kind of mess with me." In this passage, Ari, like Harry, put himself in his teacher's shoes and understood how difficult it was to be continually disrespected by students. This was a significant change in perspective for Ari. The same student who defending his friends for speaking over Ms. Angela during psychology class and used the phrase "guys will be dudes" to justify his misbehavior, now expressed sympathy teachers and frustration at their challenges.

The teachers also recognized that students had it hard as well. Ms. Minerva commented

on this during the last focus group interview, when she said, “Yeah, I thought the observations were kind of just like a nice way to put a teacher back in a kid's shoe for the day. I forgot how challenging it is when you have all these classes, because I said at one point, “When's your free period?”, and he was like ... like thinking my prep, and Ellen was like, “I don't have one.”, so I was thinking about that.” Ms. Minerva’s preconceived notion of what it was like to be a student was inherently flawed. She was likely getting fatigued by Ellen’s schedule and was surprised to see he did not get any breaks. Ms. Angela came to a similar conclusion from her observations. “I felt myself getting tired of sitting, so I can only assume that the students did too,” she observed. As a teacher, Ms. Angela could move around the room as she pleased, and struggled when required to sit all day, like her students. Both teachers experienced a profound realization. Just like Ms. Minerva. said, the observations put them back in the students’ shoes, and doing so made them realize that the students had it harder than they previously thought.

### **Empathy Creates Common Ground**

The students and teachers tackled some controversial topics related to boys’ underachievement during their time in the UBC. The findings suggest that the reason they could find common ground as a group, and come to an agreement was due to the empathy they displayed. This was seen when the boys reflected on teacher’s use of excessive discipline, which was a huge point of contention for the students. After the observations, the students developed a stronger understanding for why it happened, and even altered their views. They noted in their observations that the boys were far more likely to misbehave than girls. And unlike the girls, who twirled their hair or looked at their phones, the boys’ bad behavior disrupted the entire class. Sergio went so far as to say that now when he sees a boy being reprimanded, he was “more likely to see why that teacher called that student out and not be upset about it even though it is most



likely a male.” Instead of making the common assumption that teachers who discipline boys are sexist, Sergio now stopped to see the whole picture. In the past, he disregarded the boys’ role in the conflict, but now he purposely tried to see if and how the student contributed to their discipline. By making that small change, Sergio will likely not respond in a self-destructive manner when he is disciplined, and he might not engage in the hateful rhetoric boys sometimes engage in about teachers.

Ms. Minerva had a similar transformation in thought, in relation to passive versus active instruction.

I’ve come to realize that student engagement is even more imperative to students’ success than I thought before. The students who were disengaged in certain classes were undisputedly more disruptive and off-task than the classes where they were engaged in the lesson. It was also during these classes of disengagement where I noticed the most off-task behavior with the teachers. The student who did not enjoy the classes they were in were also the ones who did not listen to the teacher when he or she was trying to reprimand behavior (eating bagel, cell phone, etc.).

Ms. Minerva witnessed firsthand what many boys in the study lamented over: how difficult it was to be engaged in the lesson if the class itself is not enjoyable. She saw the correlation between a student’s inability to engage in class and the likelihood of them being disruptive. If the class was boring, the teacher was “bad” or as she described, the teacher was off task, the boys simply would not apply themselves. Ms. Minerva came to this conclusion without any criticism of the students. She simply saw things through their experience, and subsequently had sympathy for the situation they were in. Instead of blaming the boys’ disengaged behaviors on lack of effort or apathy, she now understood that poor instruction was likely a main cause.

Rocco was also able to relate to the students, particularly their plight with sexist teaching through being empathetic. “My experiences have been positive with the students. It was interesting to listen to how they perceived certain classes and behaviors,” he told me. “I don’t

believe we realize as teachers how the students analyze our day to day interactions. Behaviors that we may consider to be neutral, may actually be perceived as unfair or biased.” Rocco was surprised at just how perceptive the boys were. Through his participation in the study, Rocco could understand why the boys often felt that their teachers were sexist. Though he was not able to observe a student for the day, participating in the UBC provided an opportunity to see things from the boys’ perspective. And like in the other examples in this section, Rocco’s empathy resulted in him changing his perspective and finding common ground with a group who once caused him a great deal of frustration.

### **With Empathy Comes Change**

The individuals in this study underwent an intensive partnership where they had to collaborate with students and teachers in an unconventional way. As time passed, a change was observed in the way the members thought about themselves, each other and the achievement gap. They listened to one another at meetings and started to think about situations from their perspectives. During observations, they witnessed firsthand the encounters and difficulties that made up an average day for their particular person. And through it all, they developed a strong bond based on mutual respect and understanding that translated to life outside of the UBC. These progressions were profound in their own right and answered the question if participant would be able to understand each other better. But the students and teachers in this study took it a step further: they acted upon their newly-evolved perspective. After reflecting on how their actions contributed to the gap and affected others, the UBC members purposely changed their actions to improve the daily lives of the people in their classrooms. Teachers and students changed in different ways, which often depended on how committed individuals were to the study. Teachers used their new knowledge and experiences to improve their pedagogy and more

purposely support boys' achievement. Students evolved in numerous ways, including improving their attitude and behavior in class.

### **A Shift in Pedagogy**

The three UBC teachers each identified concrete changes they made to their teaching due to their participation in this study. After observing the boys and understanding their perspective on a variety of topics, the teachers recognized their contributions to the gap and decided to make changes to their pedagogy. Though the teachers were already unbiased, they realized that their male students would benefit by certain alterations in instruction and classroom management. As Ms. Minerva pointed out, they realized how important it was for boys to be engaged in the lesson and how that could suppress much of the disruptive behaviors they found so frustrating. So, teachers began crafting lessons that were more active, hands on, and allowed boys to be social.

Ms. Angela's perspective on boys' learning changed as a result of her participation. "I have definitely enjoyed hearing their perspective, and I think among them the differences in their experience has been interesting, it has reminded me to think about different types of male students," she said. She applied her new perspective by "planning more 'talk' time, like group activities, so that the boys have a chance to be social." Numerous discussions took place in this study on the boys' inherent desires to talk throughout the day. Ari even claimed that it was unavoidable. Ms. Angela recognized this and made small changes to accommodate the boys' learning style. This example illustrated how Ms. Angela's new perspective on boys' learning translated into her pedagogy through adding activities to better engage and instruct her boys.

Ms. Minerva also made changes to both her junior and eighth grade classes to boost engagement.

With my juniors, the first two novels, I just ... when reading was homework, reading was homework, and then when they were in here and they were like, "If we have no handouts

to do with it, we're not even going to SparkNote it.", and so, with Huck Finn, now, I've been giving handouts for homework, and I do see that at least those who had never read would at least SparkNote it, so at least our conversations were better in class so that my instructions changed. My middle schoolers, I do a lot more hands-on activities. I bring them outside probably once a week for independent reading, they get to sit on the tires, they'll sit up in the bleachers. This study kind of changed the way I looked at how I lesson planned, and the student choice I gave, and it kind of changed my whole viewpoint on boys learning, and how they're tactile learners versus other things, and I definitely made changes because of that.

Ms. Minerva had, in her words a new viewpoint on how to teach male students. Therefore, she made a concerted effort to improve her pedagogy based on this new perspective. The changes she made were numerous and significant. Just like Ms. Angela, she shifted the current structure of her classroom to make learning more active. During a UBC meeting, when the boys stated that they never do the reading homework unless accompanied with a study guide, Ms. Minerva understood why she had a hard time getting students involved in discussions. She modified her approach to homework and started to give handouts to accompany the reading. Thus, she saw an improvement in classroom discussions. In addition to offering more student choice, which the boys stated they greatly preferred, she made small changes with her eighth graders by taking the class outside and giving them more hands on activities. Ms. Minerva clearly respected her students and wanted to offer them the best learning experience possible. These small changes likely had a great impact on the boys' experience in her classroom, and according to the findings, resulted in an increase in engagement and achievement, and a decrease in misbehavior.

Mr. Rocco, who once admitted he disciplined the boys more harshly than the girls, changed his approach to reprimanding antsy boys.

I think this study changed that I'm more understanding of when they need to get up and move, and how the physical-ness that they exhibit isn't really their own- they aren't doing it to be obnoxious, they're just doing it because they need to move. I've got a couple of student who always have to do something. Instead of giving them a hard time, I kind of just, I allow more of it without saying, you know, "Stop being an idiot for two seconds." I think they're just, they're boys, and unfortunately, I don't remember being sixteen, so I

don't remember having to move that much, but now I feel like that they've expressed that they hate sitting still for fifty-five minutes, that they need to get up. I think that's something that they need to do. You got to let them do it, otherwise it comes out in other ways.

Just like Ms. Minerva and Ms. Angela, Mr. Rocco listened to the thoughts and perspectives of the boys and realized his pedagogy, in this case his classroom management, must change. In the quote, he expressed sympathy for the boys and a deep understanding of their needs. He no longer reprimanded the boys when they initially moved around the class. Instead he put himself in their shoes and recognized that their restlessness was not an affront to him, but a compulsion. That small adjustment could have huge effects on his male students. The UBC boys spoke at length at how they felt unfairly and disproportionately disciplined and that they had the urge to move during class. By recognizing the boys' learning needs, he was likely to see an improvement in students' behavior, engagement and perception of him.

The biggest teacher transformation happened to Ms. Minerva, as she not only changed portions of her pedagogy, but her entire thinking about teaching boys evolved.

Yeah, and I think how important it is to establish a relationship with your male students. Especially in English, they said teachers that they can form a relationship with, they do better in that class because of the positive reinforcement and the kind of self-efficacy that's built when you have a teacher that believes in you, so I think I use that a lot, and more purposefully establishing relationships with my male students. Things that would come easier, like female teacher, female student, where I feel like it might be easier for you, it comes more naturally to have like a funny relationship with a male student, just because you can goof around, and I feel like girls, you automatically have things in common.

As a female teacher, Ms. Minerva recognized that creating a bond with her male students might not come naturally. However, given the numerous benefits that come from a strong ST relationship, she made a direct attempt to learn about and connect with the boys. Instead of thinking of her pupils as vessels that would collect the information she disseminated, Ms.

Minerva now viewed them as individuals who have an inherent desire to connect with and like their teachers. This is not just a strategy, but an entirely new approach to teaching that could go a long way to improve the engagement, performance and self-efficacy of boys, and possibly reduce the achievement gap in her class. In fact, it had already affected her group of eighth grade boys. As previously described, although they were unruly and underachieving in other classes, Ms. Minerva's middle school boys were attentive, focused and eager to participate in her class. She was so effective that she was slated to teach them another year as well. Ms. Minerva's shift in perspective and the numerous boy-friendly instructional elements of her class had a direct effect on the success of her male students. And this success could be tracked back to her participation in this study.

### **The Brand-New Boys**

The young men of the UBC underwent the greatest evolution of the two groups. Like the teachers, they developed sincere empathy for one another. But their change was twofold. First, the boys changed their behaviors and attitudes in class. They stopped being as defiant and disruptive, and viewed the instances in the classroom through the teachers' perspectives. Second, the boys became accountable for their role in the achievement gap. During UBC1, the boys blamed a series of outside forces for their underachievement. But, by the end of this study, they recognized that their own behavior and immaturity that were also to blame. These changes are likely due to the student voice component of the study, which often result in positive outcomes for students (Mitra, 2006; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Because the boys shared the work of the UBC equally, they understood the teachers' perspectives and therefore grew as students.

**Attitude & behavior.** The boys identified the numerous changes they made to their behavior because of the study. Several boys said that they did not misbehave as much, were

quieter, more respectful and less combative in most of their classes after participating in the UBC. Roger shared how he changed because of this study.

I would say that, I took the theme of like respect that I observed and tried to put it into my classes. Some of my classes, I was able to change my behavior, but like the chemistry teacher of course, I didn't change because there's just no respect there. I'm not going to like change what I do in that class just for him and just like from what I learned in the study. I think I've behaved well in all my other classes since the study, and I don't think I've ever really behaved badly before the study either, but I definitely keep the study in mind whenever I'm in my classes because I know what teachers go through now and I know what they must deal with. So, I feel like I should respect what they do and behave to the best of my ability that I can.

Floyd also developed sympathy for teachers over the course of the project, saying:

Floyd: This study has given me a lot more sympathy for teachers. I always knew that there was like some disruptive kids, but like now I realize they're kids that just set out to totally shit on the teachers' lessons and stuff. I feel bad for teachers sometimes now. Not all teachers, but some. Mean ones that I hate.

Antoinette: You feel bad for the good teachers.

Floyd: I feel bad for the good teachers that get disrupted and taking advantage of and stuff.

Harry's actions were changed when he experienced what it was like to be a teacher. He stated,

I guess like after watching kids in classes, I was like "Oh wow, these kids are really bad." Then I was thinking like, "I do this kind of stuff too." I'll be honest, I feel like I stopped doing it but, I think I've calmed down since. I feel like I used to be really crazy in class and then I've like calmed down a little bit.

Lastly, Alex proclaimed that the respect he had for teachers increased as a result of his participation.

Alex: I think that my behavior improved from being in the UBC a little bit but my performance wasn't really affected. I have more respect for some teachers but teachers that I didn't like, I would say the same. Also, I feel like, for you though, the reason that you saw a change in students in UBC, is because that you grew a connection with them from being in UBC.

Antoinette: It could have been.

Alex: That grew respect.

These comments demonstrated how the boys improved their behavior and attitude because of the study. The reason for these changes was due to the empathy and sympathy they developed for the teachers. During the observations, they saw firsthand how students' behaviors emotionally affected the teachers and their ability to do their job. Now, instead of joining their unruly peers, they thought about what it was like to be that teacher. This has long-reaching implications for the boys. If they misbehaved less, and approached certain classes with a more positive attitude, it is possible that they could be more engaged during lessons and more successful academically. With their rejection of academics identified as a main contributor to their underachievement, it is possible that through their improvement in demeanor, they could begin to narrow the achievement gap between boys and girls in literacy.

The only caveat to evolution was when the boys had a "bad" teacher. When teachers were mean, disrespectful, sexist or ineffective, the boys reported no change in their perspectives of that person and their behaviors in the class. Roger explained how this was linked to mutual respect. He said that he did not improve his behavior in chemistry because "there was no respect there." The teacher, he felt, constantly disrespected him, therefore, he responded in kind. The boys matured and improved their behaviors, but because they valued and required mutual respect in their ST relationships, they could not swallow their pride act respectful towards "bad" teachers.

**Accountability.** During UBC1, the boys spent nearly all their time pointing the finger at everyone besides themselves. The teachers, administration, society, even video games were to blame for why they did not get similar English grades to girls. However, with a reconfigured UBC and the addition of teachers, the boys were finally able to see the role they play in the gap.



They recognized their bad behavior and apathetic attitudes, and after explaining why they acted that way, they acknowledged how they were responsible for their underachievement. Without any resistance, they agreed with the laundry list of bad and disruptive behaviors the teachers mentioned. A conversation between Ellen, Alex and Elijah illustrated this.

- Alex: Observing the people was really powerful to show us how we can be a part of the problem, too, and to show us what the teachers have to deal with.
- Ellen: What Alex said, perspective. I thought that a lot of problems that we all have in class ... they might be problems to us but if we change our perspective and look at it through a different view of a teacher than they are not really problems, they are almost just occurrences or something that happens every day. It's something that you have to deal with from a teacher's perspective but a student might view it differently and I thought that was a big difference.
- Antoinette: Meaning, something that you consider as a problem from the teacher's perspective, isn't?
- Ellen: Yeah ...
- Antoinette: Or vice versa?
- Ellen: Yeah. Something that ... I'm trying think of an example. Say I am talking to Sergio in class and the teacher gets mad and talks to us and say we continue doing it they will send us a Mr. P. We would think of that as the teacher not being fair and probably say a whole bunch of other words to describe that teacher, but the teacher would just be doing their job. That perspective is the difference.
- Elijah: When you said last year we weren't ready to admit that we ... Last year I would always bitch about the teachers and I would be like "it's all them" but now it's like, stop complaining. Now that I've changed my view and I can be like, it's me seventy percent of the time. Even if it's a bad teacher I think it's still on me because there's some teachers that I can't change but there's some that I definitely can.

This discussion illustrated how the boys matured and saw the connection between their actions and their underachievement. Like Sergio said in another quote, when a teacher disciplined a boy, the boys now realize it was not necessarily sexism – it could be a warranted response to a boy's

disrespectful action. Elijah admittedly complained about teachers a great deal during UBC1. But now he took responsibility for his actions, and recognized that he was more the problem than the teacher. The boys might experience sexism, struggle following the masculine construct, and dislike reading, but they saw that they were responsible for their academic outcomes. And as Elijah pointed out, even if they have a “bad” teacher, they could not just give in to the situation. This has profound implications for boys’ underachievement. As Bandura (1993) argued, there is an explicit link between a person’s self-efficacy and the control they feel they have over their environment. In the past, they felt that their underachievement was the result of these outside sources they could not regulate. However, by realizing they had partial control of their achievement in school, they were more able and likely to improve their performance and feel they had stronger self-efficacy.

This growth demonstrated by the boys’ comments, was even recognized by Ms. Minerva.

I think it's good that the boys are not in denial of the problem. So, when you guys were presented with this information, you guys were very self-aware. And even at the times where you were complaining about teachers, and there were times where we turned around and said, "Well, what about this?" There were definitely moments of clarity where you guys were like, "Oh." You guys definitely were open to it and were not totally bottled up about the fact that none of this could be your fault. I think you guys took responsibility for the aspects that you could take responsibility for. That's kind of a solution in and of itself.

Ms. Minerva was impressed with the boys’ self-awareness and maturity, both of which were necessary for the boys to take ownership of their underachievement. Unlike in UBC1, the boys took responsibility for the elements of the gap that they could control and recognized how their behaviors contribute to their situation. It could be that Minerva, and the other teachers, aided the boys in this growth. Though boys’ underachievement is a vastly complex issue with no clear solution, recognizing how their actions and attitudes directly affect their achievement could be the start, Minerva argued, of boys earning higher grades in English.

**Investment Equals Outcome**

Though every participant in this study stated that they changed because of the study, there was a connection that existed between how invested a participant was in the study and the outcomes they experienced. It appears the more they were committed to the work of the UBC, both emotionally and physically, the more profound the transformation. Ms. Minerva and Ms. Angela were examples of this. Ms. Minerva had an unwavering commitment to the study. She came to every meeting, made a point to chat and engage with the boys, and as evident in the numerous direct quotes from Minerva used in this study, contributed in a consistent and honest way during discussions. Thus, she experienced a momentous change in her pedagogy and understanding of boys, their experiences and how they learn, all of which resulted in an improvement in her practice. She also experienced a profound sense of belonging and camaraderie with the boys. When asked to share their thoughts about working with the teachers, the boys unanimously identified Ms. Minerva as their favorite member of the UBC,

- Jeremy: I think the study like, helped build my relationship with teachers that I don't have. Like with McGonagall. Yeah, now I talk to her in study hall and stuff.
- Harry: She's pretty cool.
- Ari: She's a chill person
- Floyd: Totally dope.
- Ari: The dopest.
- Elijah: Yeah, we liked her because she was all in.
- Alex: It's like a father. If he's never there, you're not going to like him.
- Jeremy: True.

The boys showered Ms. Minerva with compliments in this exchange. They clearly liked her,

admired her, and enjoyed working with her in the UBC. But what Elijah and Alex said was particularly telling. One of the reasons they liked her was because of her commitment to the partnership. Throughout the study, the boys demonstrated their steadfast dedication to the work of the UBC, and they felt that Ms. Minerva was equally devoted. Both parties were mutually engaged in the study, which was why they thought so fondly of each other and had such a strong camaraderie (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008).

Though she said she enjoyed participating in the study, Ms. Angela did not demonstrate the same level of dedication to the study. She attended less meetings, and often left early or joined late. It is true that her teacher responsibilities and difficult home life were contributing factors of her absences, but they had an effect nonetheless. She also purposefully separated herself from the boys, both emotionally and physically, which likely contributed to her limited change. Though the other teachers noticed the boys' improvement throughout the study, Ms. Angela viewed them as whiny. She shared this at one of the focus group interviews.

I have been a little disappointed at how they are still ranting at this point, and haven't really ... the self-check isn't really - it may just be a maturity issue. I feel like they are still very much in the "complain zone", or the "this-is-what-is-wrong-with-school zone" more than the this is what we could do to give ourselves a better experience but that may just be the nature of being an adolescent.

This comment is in direct conflict with Ms. Minerva's beliefs. Ms. Angela still saw the boys as apathetic, passive and immature. Her frequent absences and aloof conduct likely impacted the camaraderie she felt in the UBC and her ability to empathize with the students. Thus, she changed her pedagogy and perception of the boys the least. Whereas Mr. Rocco changed his entire discipline approach, and Ms. Minerva changed numerous aspects of her pedagogy, Ms. Angela said she only included more discussions in her lessons.

It is also important to note that the most dedicated UBC boy also experienced the most

profound change. Elijah was among the most enthusiastic members and attended every meeting and focus group interview, except for one. When asked how the study impacted him, he agreed that his behavior had improved, but he identified other changes as well.

Elijah:           The giving to the stereotype I didn't want to give into?

Antoinette:      Yeah. Talk to me about that a little bit

Elijah:           I don't know, I just, I see it a lot. Now I'm more aware instead of just being, sometimes I take a step back and take a look at the class and I'm like, "Jeeze, all these guys are really being assholes." Maybe that is kind of what ... I don't want to be like that reason why the stereotype exists ... Also, academic I did better. Yeah.

Antoinette:      You feel like you did better?

Elijah:           Yeah, I really did...especially my core classes.

Elijah recognized the stereotype of boys being unruly and disrespectful, and he did not want to follow that expectation. He behaved better in class, but he also indicated that he was beginning to reject hegemonic masculinity. This was likely related to why he believed he was performing better in class. Elijah's and Ms. Minerva's significant transformation were likely the result of their unwavering commitment to the UBC and its members.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This study was based on the creation of a student-teacher partnership. Fourteen male students and five teachers, including myself, came together and participated in the Underground Boys Club (UBC) with the hopes that participants would better understand one another and build stronger relationship. Give the use of student-teacher voice, each member was equally appreciated and encouraged to participate, which promoted a positive and fruitful collaboration. The boys' pervasive underachievement in English was the focus of the UBC. Every week, the participants would gather in my classroom and examine the achievement gap from numerous angles.

They dissected classroom artifacts and debated several aspects of the male student and teacher experiences. Various aspects of the English classroom, including instruction, assessments and boys' complicated relationship with reading, was the first set of concepts to be studied. The club then began to analyze the thoughts, behaviors and experiences of the male student. They wanted to understand the boys' often unruly actions, their conflicted emotions, and their apathetic approach to learning. Together, members examined the hegemonic masculinity that boys were forced to follow. The students were both mature and introspective as they explained how the social construct affected every aspect of their lives. The UBC then examined the role of the English teacher, and how important student teacher interactions were for the boys' academic success. The teachers shared their attempts to design and implement engaging lesson and assignment, and the boys offered their insight into what might work.

Each member also had an opportunity to observe someone in the club for a day, specifically those who were not their peers. The teachers observed boys in their natural setting, and saw the passive instruction the boys spoke about, and how exhausting it was to sit in a

classroom all day. Some of the teachers witnessed the sexist behaviors that the boys often lamented about during the study. The boys were eager to observe their teachers. Wearing a shirt and tie and carrying a clipboard, each boy shadowed their teacher for an entire day and were aghast by their peer's behaviors. Teachers, they had realized, did not have it easy. To spend a considerable amount of time crafting and preparing lessons just to have them derailed by an unruly child was demoralizing.

Over the course of five months, the UBC – through the members' work and commitment to each other – was transformed from a boundary encounter with teachers and students from separate communities, to a new community of practice in which they all esteemed members (Wenger, 2008). Wenger (2008) declared that when mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire are present, a community of practice has been formed. The mutual engagement in the UBC was seen through the members' camaraderie, mutual respect and consistent attempts to put themselves in each other's shoes (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). The lively conversations, passionate debates and creation of group norms demonstrated the groups' joint enterprise (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). Given the extensive data on boys' literacy underachievement produced by this study, the UBC was successful at creating and negotiating their joint enterprise.

Lastly, their shared repertoire, or the stories, language and processes that helped members negotiate meaning, was extensive (Wenger, 2008). As previously asserted, the members learned a great deal from each other through their participation in the study. They did this through structured club activities, lively debates and the casual conversations that took place over the food table and outside of the club. The members' profound learning and understanding were the result of the social component of the UBC, which relates back to the social learning theory CoP was founded on (Kapucu, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 2011). Instead of reading about the

achievement gap, the UBC shared their thoughts and experiences with each other, which likely made their experience significantly more meaningful. The members of the study underwent a profound change in perspective and practice because they both created and participated in a community of practice.

### **Gender Gap Findings**

The findings of this study fell into two categories, one focused on boys' literacy underachievement and the other on the execution and outcomes of a student-teacher partnership. The underachievement of boys in English, it turned out, was convoluted and a bit confounding. The boys were suffocating at the hands of the hegemonic masculinity construct. It affected nearly every aspect of their academic and social lives. They did not read books because it was considered gay and they would most definitely be persecuted by their friends for engaging in such an act. They behaved like hooligans in the classroom, cracking jokes, defying rules and disrupting instruction, all with the intent to look cool and be considered masculine. They even tried hard to look like they did not care about their academic achievement, because a boy who earned an A in English was "a fag." Probably the most disheartening of all was how they forced other boys to follow hegemonic masculinity as well. They described mocking, deriding, and even ostracizing boys who did not fit their specific gender norm, which was often heteronormative.

The instruction observed and described by participants was less than ideal. Too many teachers sat in front of the classroom lecturing or assigning questions to be completed in silence. The teachers in the study wanted their boys to learn, and shared their numerous attempts to improve the engagement and behavior in the classroom. While discussing and debating the different types of instruction and assignments, both groups expressed disbelief at the fact that they wholeheartedly agreed. Active, student-led instruction, where teachers shifted from being



the disseminator of information to the facilitator of it, was considered the best approach to teaching not only boys, but all students.

The student behavior and attitude described was even worse. Boys cited throwing random objects, cracking jokes, distracting their classmates, cutting class, falling asleep, mocking their teacher, creating bodily noises, and even spitting in a teacher's cup, as all actions that took place in the classroom. The boys acted particularly horrible when the teacher was mean, sexist, or ineffective. And when the boys were not unruly, they were apathetic, and boasted about not doing their work as if it was an achievement. They outright rejected the expectations placed on them to behave well and seek academic success. Teachers shared their frustrations at the sometimes deplorable, often disruptive and always self-destructive ways the boys behaved in class. When the students called their behavior innate, the teachers called it rude, and challenged the boys' thinking about its impact on themselves and the classroom. The boys also challenged the way teachers disciplined. They cited numerous instances where they were reprimanded excessively and unsuccessfully. Some teachers were sexist, the boys argued, and favored girls because of their skills and quiet demeanor. Even though they felt their teachers were sometimes unfair and mean, the boys still wanted to like them and have them return the sentiments. Their disorderly and disruptive actions, the teachers argued, were not the way to earn their affections.

These concepts – gender norms, instruction, boys' behavior – impacts the relationship that exists between students and teachers. The participants all agreed that for the ST relationship to be healthy and productive, mutual respect had to be present. Understanding boundaries, trusting each other, being empathetic, and caring about one another were all elements present in a mutually respectful relationship. Without respect, the two groups engaged in combat, fighting to gain the most power. Teachers displayed sexist beliefs and overdisciplined boys, boys acted even

more unruly, and this cycle resulted in strained relationships that the students argued were beyond the point of repair. The boys proclaimed that they would never respect a mean and unfair teacher. When a strong ST relationship existed, however, the boys were more eager to learn and less likely to act out. The boys were on their best behavior to ensure they stayed in their teachers' good graces.

The UBC members were experts at unpacking complex aspects of the gap, but struggled in identifying concrete solutions. When asked how to address the literacy gap that exists in schools, their answer was brief. You cannot. The issue was so overwhelmingly delicate and convoluted, they argued, that every member of the school, the community, and even society, would have to be on board for a solution to work. Even schoolwide initiatives, they argued, were out of their hands. They needed the support of administration to enact different strategies to improve the gap. And given the difficulty they gave me in running this study, their support was questionable. The teachers knew this was going to happen and even shared their fears at how the students would react to this. They understood how school systems functioned, and had witnessed how implementing change could be problematic and fruitless. Alex's response to realizing this lack of a solution was quite poignant and worth mentioning. He said:

I feel like this past year we've been just hitting at a brick wall, trying to get that wall down and trying to get past it. Right now, we finally broke in the wall and behind that wall was the gap between the male and female achievement in the classroom. And we finally can see what we're looking at and what's happening and now it would take us so much more time to fix this problem that we found and uncovered.

The wall, he described, was the gender gap in English. They fought all year to break down the wall and find a solution, just to find out that behind the wall was a more challenging structure, one that would require a great deal of time to break down. Alex's initial view on the phenomenon was a simple one, given the fact that he thought we would be able to fix it in a few

short months. However, as the study progressed, he came to see just how complex the issue was. The members thought that the act of examining the achievement would result in a solution, but all they discovered was the exact thing they were studying. Yes, they had a clearer view of it now, but the problem they were investigating while the wall was erect existed even after we tore it down. This caused widespread frustration and disheartenment among the participants, but offered a possibility to continue the work of the UBC after the study completed.

### **ST Partnership Findings**

The second set of findings of this study pertained to the function of the UBC. In creating a ST partnership, and subsequently a new CoP, there were several things that were needed for the group to be effective. The partnership needed meaningful work to accomplish. Participants had to be open minded, brutally honest and committed to the club. Time would prove to be a challenge for some. Participants needed to rearrange their schedules, when necessary, to attend meetings, and I needed to be flexible with dates. I also needed to be mindful of the fears my participants had, and address them any way I could. One way I did this was through paying close attention to the environment in which the partnership functioned. I made a concerted effort for it to be welcoming, safe, and encourage collaboration. Members were bashful in the beginning, but offering food and time to mingle, as well as a thoughtful seating arrangement, and ensured privacy, were ideal ways to promote camaraderie. The most important component, however, of the partnership was mutual respect. Members had to respect each other as they collaborated during activities and debated topics. Given the newly constructed power dynamic and student-teacher voice, which rendered all participants equal, it was vital that everyone respected the opinions and beliefs of others. Without respect, the club simply could not function.

With all these elements in place, the club began to engage in their work. As they

examined the numerous angles of their chosen dilemma, the UBC members began to experience a change in their perspectives. At the beginning of the study, while the members were getting comfortable working together, they started to learn more about each other. They would ask each other questions and listen intently at the response. Even when discussing sensitive topics, such as teacher bias and student behavior, the participants respectfully debated each other and shared their authentic experiences. With as much candor as possible, the club discussed their challenges, their frustrations and their successes. These stories and interactions made up the shared repertoire that the club revolved around (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). The authenticity demonstrated in the discussions allowed for the members to truly understand each other. It went beyond just student and teacher; participants came to know the people beyond those roles.

As members began to comprehend the experiences of other UBC members, a strong bond was formed within the club. Relationships that were created that transcended the study, and members would often seek out each other during the school day to connect. Laughter, smiling and friendly banter were common occurrences at meetings. Participants genuinely liked each other and cared about their wellbeing, which demonstrated the group's mutual engagement and commitment to each other (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). When individuals came in late, the entire club would move their chairs so that they had a place to sit among the group. At the end of the meeting, my class was spotless. Members would clean up after each other, put the tables back in order and push in their chairs. It was clear from these actions that the members were mutually engaged in the UBC (Wenger, 2008).

The observations were a turning point for the study. Beforehand, members would try to understand each other. After the observations, they would live in each other's shoes. When we would discuss things, their commentary went from describing their experience to thinking about

the situation from the perspective of others. The observations transformed how members made meaning in this study, which again, reflected the club's shared repertoire and mutual engagement (Wenger, 2008). Boys would constantly think about what it was like to be a teacher, and the teachers would do the same for the students. Almost instantly after developing empathy, members of the study began to feel bad for one another. Friends turned into "assholes", and best practices became biased. Both groups realized, with some shock, how hard each other had it. Teachers had to deal with disrespectful students and a challenging profession, and the boys had to deal with unfair teachers and boring instruction. No one had it easy, they concluded.

As participants transitioned through each phase of the study –learning about, developing a bond with, and understanding the perspectives of each other – an organic shift began to take place. With new perspectives came a new way of being in the classroom. Teachers began to think about the boys' lived experience, reflecting how the instruction, teacher interactions and constrictive gender norms affected their ability to achieve. In an attempt to improve their classroom experience, teachers started to offer more interactive activities, reduce how often they disciplined boys, and forge sincere and respectful relationships with their male students. The boys, now understanding the trials of many teachers, abruptly changed their once recalcitrant, rude, self-destructive behaviors. The actions of both sets of participants reflected their newfound understanding of and respect for the other group. More importantly, these actions, as this study demonstrated, will likely have a profound impact on boys' ability and motivation to succeed in English class, which could result in the gradual decrease in the literacy achievement gap in Upper Mountain High.

### **Implications**

The results of this study have specific implications for researchers, policy makers and classroom teachers, and thus will be organized accordingly. The participants succeeded in examining boys' literacy underachievement and identifying numerous causes for the phenomenon. Through their collaboration, the UBC members demonstrated what happens when two divergent groups, who are often antagonists in the classroom, join the same team. The results showed how the individuals found common ground and evolved because of their interactions. This alone has several implications for schools. However, the study also identifies concrete reasons for why boys underachieve in Upper Mountain High, and how students, teachers and educators contribute to the phenomenon. Though, it is important to note the small size of the school and its location in a predominately white, suburban, upper-middle class community might hinder its transferability, the findings still demonstrate broader themes that could be implicated with potential success in schools which are larger and more diverse.

This study adds to the expansive body of research on the boys' literacy underachievement, as well as those on student voice initiatives and community of practice. It also suggests a new framework, student-teacher voice, where students and teachers are equally valued and contribute to the group in meaningful ways. Given the success of the study, it is vital that additional researchers implement a similar alliance in schools to authenticate the findings and further examine a ST partnership in progress.

### **Implications for Theory and Research**

There are several implications of this study that have direct connections to theory and related bodies of research. First, the CoP theoretical framework proved to be a very useful way to understand a ST partnership and examine the interactions of two distinct groups. In doing so, I

discovered that the UBC had been transformed from a boundary encounter to a newly-minted CoP. The elements of mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise were crucial in coming to that conclusion (Mitra, 2008; Wenger, 2008). Based on the findings, it is possible for other groups of divergent participants to create a CoP if they mimicked the work of this study. The group should follow the nine identified elements of a ST partnership, described in chapter 5, which ensures the work is meaningful, the interactions are stimulating and the bond between participants are strong. By creating a new CoP, a great deal of learning took place that altered the members. Though they still identified as student and teacher, members now saw how their roles were intertwined and equally important in ensuring the success of adolescent boys in English. The outcome of this study – the transformation of the participants – was significant, and calls for other researchers to use this same model and methodology to see if they produced equally positive results.

Another useful aspect of this study's theoretical framework was student voice. Building on the concepts of Mitra (2008) and Fielding (2001), I designed a new concept, student-teacher voice. This theory conforms to many of the same principals of student voice, particularly the emphasis on the individual's voice and experiences as a vehicle for change. However, I argue that the voices of the student and the teacher are mutually necessary in understanding a phenomenon and should be equally sought out and valued. The students' voice is still important, but, as the findings suggest, the addition of the teachers can have a profound effect on the students' learning and growth. Though teachers traditionally have all the authority in classroom, this framework rejects conventional power dynamics and ensures equality among participants. Building on the already well-established concept of student voice, this theory poses a new framework through which researchers can examine both their participants and an important

school phenomenon. Student-teacher voice could be particularly useful in schools, like Upper Mountain High, where students and teachers have acrimonious relationships and rarely have the opportunity to collaborate in new and meaningful ways. Additional research using this theory is needed to further substantiate these findings. Researchers who intent to study a school phenomenon could find this theory effective at assembling a diverse group of participants, gathering rich, descriptive data, and creating a transformative, collaborative learning experience for participants.

The last implication for theory and research relates to the findings on hegemonic masculinity in schools. The participants of this study unearthed a complex relationship between how boys perform in English class and the restrictive gender norms they are compelled to follow. Boys cannot read for fear of being openly and brutally ridiculed by their peers. Young men who have high academic aspirations face similar scrutiny in school, as being a strong student is considered gay or girly. Even if a boy wants to read a class text or get a good grade, he is forced to face the seemingly insurmountable task of rejecting his gender norm and surviving the relentless peer scrutiny. This challenge, the UBC members asserted, was too much for most young men to take on, and often resulted in boys rejecting reading, the pursuit of high grades, and school in general. There was no clear solution for this complex gender issue put forth by participants or this study. Though a great deal of research already exists on the topic of masculinity and boys' achievement in schools, the findings pose a question as to how to address this issue that should be further examined through empirical research.

### **Implications for Policy**

The policy implications that arise from the findings are significant. Educational change is a complex and often slow-moving process that involves multiple stakeholders. The change



policy makers attempt to implement can often fail if they do not have a strong understanding of the setting and issue at hand. The new theory put forth by this study, student-teacher voice, can offer administrators the ability to involve the key stakeholders and possibly produce real change in their participants. The UBC members experienced a significant transformation as a result of their participation. They understood how their actions affected each other, and changed elements of their classroom behaviors to address boys' underachievement. Furthermore, the group was able to successfully examine the numerous angles of the phenomenon and produced a significant amount of rich, descriptive data, which I used to analyze the UBC's work even more.

Though the school administration did not participate in this study, policy makers still have a key role in the success of student-voice initiatives. First, they can be the ones to design and implement a ST partnership in their schools. This study puts forth a roadmap that other schools can follow in creating a similar partnership. Given the authority most policy makers have in their schools, they would likely not encounter the same roadblocks I did in conducting the group. With the proper administration support, I asserted that the UBC would have been even more successful and could have produced even more knowledge and change. Release time during school and the support of student and teacher observations were two ways in which administration could have aided in our work. It is also possible for administration to join the ST partnership, if they follow the nine elements set forth in chapters five, and ensure all participants are valued equally. This study also demonstrated how the lack of administration support can possibly stifle a partnership's work. My principal's aversion to the observation element of the UBC prevented Rocco from conducting his observation and could have derailed what turned out to be one of the most meaningful aspects of this study. It is imperative that administration either support or do not block the work conducted by ST partnerships if the groups are to be successful.

In regard to boys' literacy underachievement, this study poses several possibilities for policy makers to address this issue in their schools. Boys in Upper Mountain High were underperforming in English in large numbers, refused to read both academically and recreationally, and often engaged in unruly, disrespectful and self-destructive acts in the classroom. They had acrimonious relationships with their teachers, yet expressed how they wanted their approval. The teachers often espoused negative, biased perceptions of male students that colored their interactions. However, this study makes clear assertions on how to address these issues and improve boys' literacy performance. First, administrators must assess their discipline policies to see if they are excessively and unfairly targeting boys. Experiencing sexist discipline had a clear impact on the boys, and as Alex demonstrated, resulted in them acting out and refusing to engage in classwork "to spite" their teachers. Schools who have unfair discipline policies could be perpetuating boys' poor behaviors and the achievement gap without even knowing it.

Another way to address boys' performance is for policy makers to provide teachers with an opportunity to observe students. As the UBC teachers demonstrated, observing students was an eye-opening experience. They saw the sexist discipline and actions the boys complained about first hand, and witnessed the effects of passive, teacher-led instruction. They also developed a strong sense of empathy for their students that directly changed their instruction and classroom management. Administrators could use observations in the implementation of a ST partnership, or in a separate program to create empathy and understanding in their staff.

Policy makers could also create a meaningful observation experience for their students. One way to do this is through a mentor/mentee program where students observe a teacher for the day. This could work particularly well with disobedient male students. Instead of giving

detentions and suspension, a school could consider having the child partner with a teacher. They could observe them, or be their “assistant”, and aide them in small tasks throughout the day. Boys that perennially misbehave likely have an underlining cause for their actions. Instead of continually disciplining them, which this study demonstrated was ineffective, this collaboration could provide students with a different, more positive school experience, which could improve their behaviors.

The last two implications for policy makers are in relation to classroom instruction and hegemonic masculinity. This study asserts that passive, teacher-led instruction is both ineffective and results in boys acting out and shutting down. Leo, a respectful, high-achieving student, would walk the halls, sleep and even verbally challenge his teachers when the classroom instruction was passive. Inversely, interactive, student-led, scaffolded instruction was correlated with improved motivation, focus, behavior and performance in boys. Administrators could apply this finding in their schools by offering professional development for staff on the topic or designing an opportunity for teachers to gather to share their effective, interactive lessons. Lastly, the findings illustrate how hegemonic masculinity affects every aspect of a young man’s experience in school. Though there were no clear solutions set forth by this study, it was apparent that supporting the gender norm had profoundly negative consequences on boys. Therefore, administrators should be aware of how they are perpetuating hegemonic masculinity, and find ways to provide students with positive male role models, preferably those who read and are academically successful.

### **Implications for Practice**

Teachers who desire to improve their boys’ learning and achievement may find the numerous practice implications of this study both appropriate and effective. First, and most

importantly, teachers should reflect on the relationship they had with their male students. This study asserts that a key to improve boys' performance and behavior in the classroom is by having a strong, mutual respectful ST relationship. To do this, teachers must first reflect on the biases they expose through their thoughts and actions in the classroom. This study demonstrates how teachers often treat their male students differently than their female students. In Upper Mountain High, this was seen through teachers' reduced academic expectations for boys, their biased classroom management and their excessive and unfair discipline. As Rocco demonstrated, it is possible that teachers engage in these behaviors and think they are benign, while their male students perceive them as sexist.

One way teachers show sexist tendencies is through the targeted, excessive discipline boys often experience. The young men in this study described, with a great deal of frustration, how girls could act out in class but the boys were quickly reprimanded if they stepped out of line. This inequity fueled the boys' recalcitrant, harmful behaviors. Like administrators, teachers should also assess their discipline policies to ensure they are not unfairly targeting their male students. Sexism and excessive discipline were two ways that teachers disrespected their male students, therefore teachers must reflect on how they view and treat boys, and change any biased behaviors, for a strong ST relationship to be formed.

Respect was found to be the ideal remedy for both an acrimonious classroom and unruly, apathetic boys. It appears that students who are disobedient might feel devalued by their teacher and the school system. Although it might seem counterintuitive to be respectful to a child who is acting out, the findings emphasize how it can be the best way to successfully address the situation. Minerva's caring and encouraging approach to teaching a challenging group of eighth grade boys illustrated how a strong ST relationship can result in improved student behavior and

performance. Teachers can find ways to foster their bond in the classroom in multiple ways. UBC members found that recognizing boys' interests and incorporating them into the classroom was an effective strategy. Also, given the boys' desire to talk, engaging in casual conversation could strengthen the connection between students and teachers. It is true that teachers cannot create a strong ST relationship without their students being invested. However, as this study indicates, the boys' powerful need to connect with their teachers makes it likely that if a teacher is dedicated to the relationship, the students will be too.

This study also asserts that members of a classroom would greatly benefit by acting like a unified team with the same goal. To make the shift from boss to partner, teachers do have to give up some of their power. I recognize how this can be a challenge for some. The teachers in this study expressed fears over the possible detriments of being considered equals with the boys. But in the end, the change in perspective resulted in positive outcomes for everyone involved. Instead of the boys losing respect for them and being insolent in the classroom, they grew to respect and admire them, and demonstrated a profound dedication to maintaining their relationship. There was certainly a time of discomfort for the teachers, but the change resulted in an increase in respect, which is a key to improving boys' achievement and behavior.

Another way to bolster the ST relationship is through effective, interactive classroom lessons. Too often boys are forced to sit and take notes for an entire school day. Such a passive approach to learning results in disengaged, disillusioned boys. And, as numerous findings indicate, students are more likely to misbehave, disrupt the class and shut off from learning when they are not engaged in the lesson. Even the teachers found an entire day of passive instruction frustrating when they observed the boys. Simply put, it is hard for boys to dedicate themselves to academics when they are asked to learn in a passive way.

This study sets forth several suggestions to improve boys' engagement and learning. First, this study argues that boys need to socialize and move around in class. Teachers can use this to their advantage to engage boys. Lessons should be active, and require the students to generate knowledge, not just have the teacher disseminate it. Boys like activities-based, hands on learning, but as they pointed out in numerous UBC meetings, taking boring lessons and making them engaging does not require a drastic change. Incorporating mini-discussions during power point presentations, and turning a handout into a group assignment are two ways to recognize boys' need to be social and active in the classroom. Trying to incorporate the boys' interests was also an effective strategy identified by the participants. Male students also tend to be antsy, which can distract them from learning. Having them run errands during class, or even giving students 30 seconds to stand and stretch could address the boys' need to move, which could help them stay engaged in the lesson.

The last implication for practice relates to the masculine norms boys are compelled to follow. Throughout the study, the UBC boys illustrated numerous instances where they felt pressured to act masculine, lest they be openly and harshly derided by their peers. As Ari stated, masculinity is connected to everything boys do in school, and it has clear implications for the English classroom. Being a good student, particularly in English, was in direct conflict with being considered masculine. Smart students were "bitches," "faggots" and "gay," all terms that were the worst labels boys could be given. Therefore, young men who were academically driven received intense scrutiny and ridicule, and risked losing the friendships they held so dear.

In English class, this concept was amplified by the highly-controversial act of reading. The UBC males, including the teachers, described feeling shame, fear and concern over reading in the open. Ms. Minerva's example of her male student reading *Gone with the Wind*

demonstrated how boys were relentless persecuted because they were bibliophiles. Reading was social suicide, and like Ari and Harry explained, boys should keep their love of reading “inside the closet.” Under the current masculine construct, when teachers ask their male students to read, they are asking them to risk their social status and friendships. Therefore, we cannot hope to improve boys’ literacy performance without dispelling the ridiculous belief that reading is not masculine or important to men. Though there are no clear solutions to the issue of masculinity, this study asserts that classroom teachers must understand how their boys’ actions are driven by the beliefs that reading and academics are a gay and girly pursuit and being apathetic begets popularity. Also, creating a safe place in the classroom where boys can examine and challenge the masculine construct can also be an effect strategy to help students subvert gender norms. Finding ways to make reading and school “cool” is certainly a challenge, but a worthy pursuit of any educator.

The ST partnership formed in this study was created with the intent of learning more about two phenomena, student teacher relationships and the boys’ literacy underachievement. The UBC participants were successful in examining the achievement gap, but along the way, they experienced an unintended outcome. The two divergent groups developed a strong camaraderie and realized they had more in common than they thought. As a result of their newly acquired knowledge and empathy, the members changed their perspectives and altered their behaviors, all with the intent of improving each other’s classroom experiences. This was an unexpected, yet happy outcome, which demonstrates the power and opportunity that comes when both students and teachers are asked to unite and work together towards a common goal.

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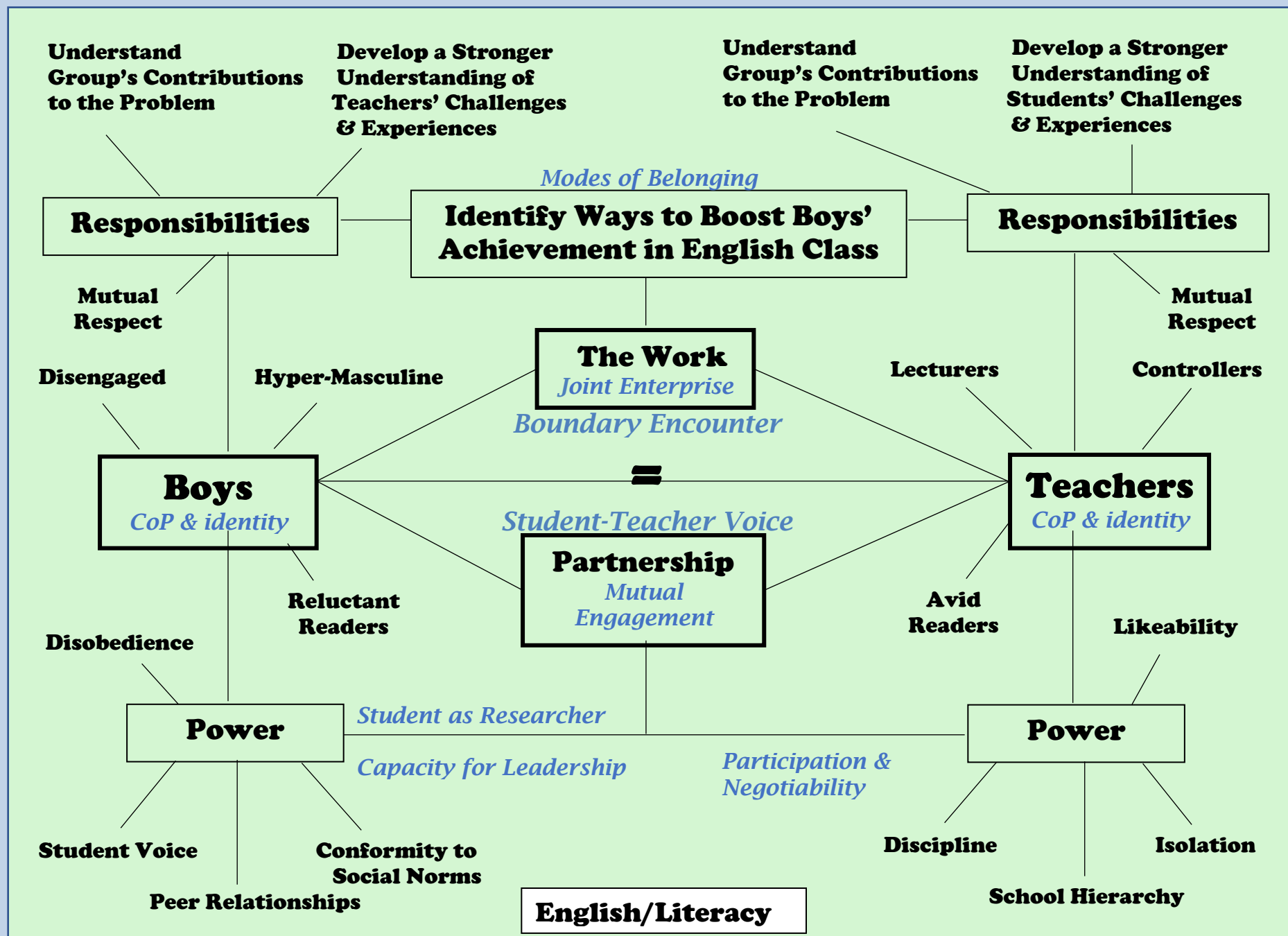
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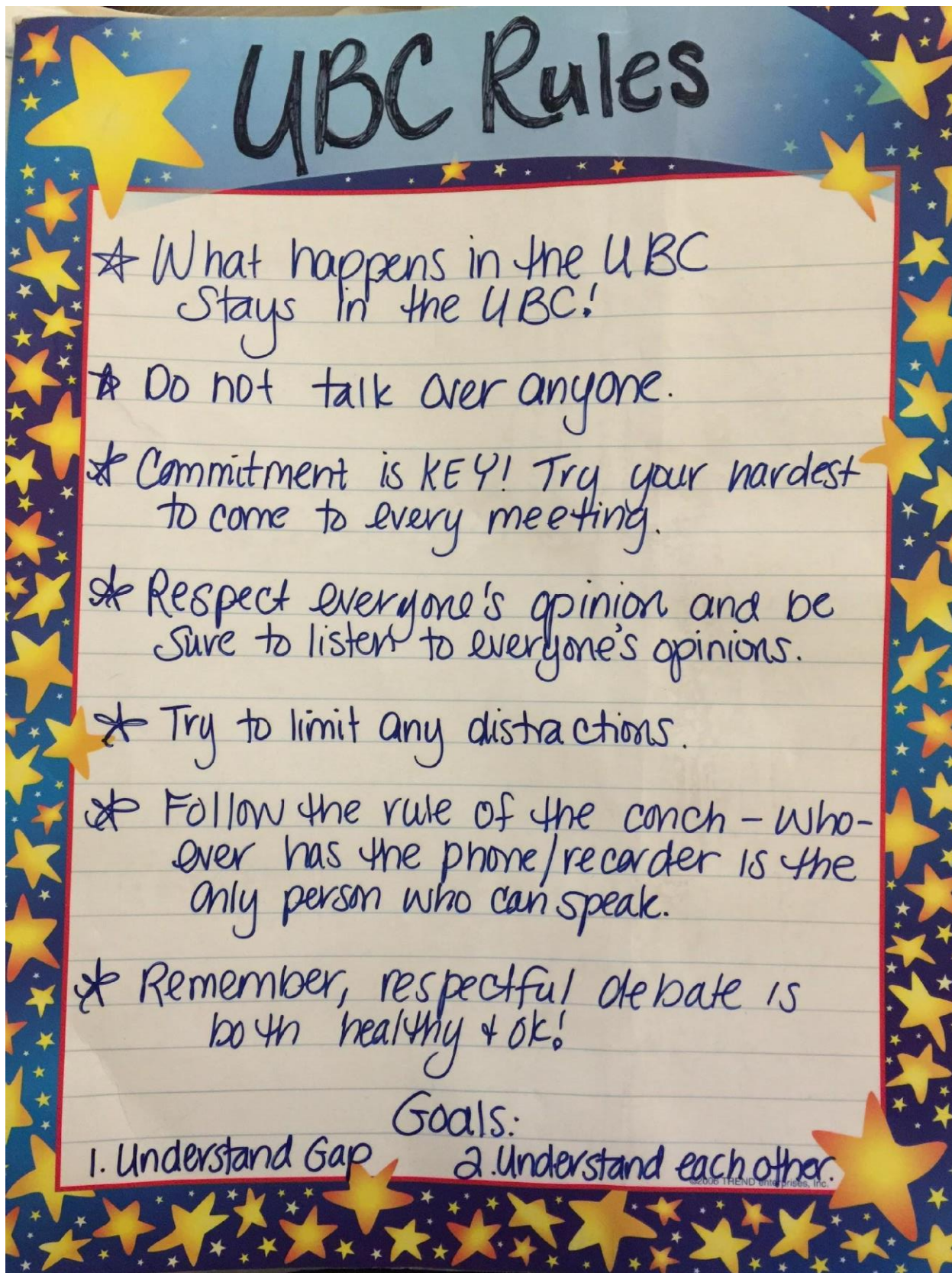
## **Appendix A**



## ***Collaboration Leads to Change: A Student-Teacher Partnership and Its Work on Boys' Literacy Underachievement***



## **Appendix B**



## **Appendix C**

## UBC Observation Rules

It is expected that **observers** will:

- a. Show up to meet their observee at 7:40am in a previously agreed upon location.
- b. Dress professionally (yes boys, you must dress up like a teacher. Look to Mr. Rocco & Mr. Hodor for inspiration).
- c. Follow the rules of the teachers, which includes, no leaving during the class period, no cell phones during class time, etc.
- d. Act professionally and appropriately at all times.
- e. NOT interact with ANYONE during the class and duty periods, this includes other teachers and students in the class.
- f. Sit in the back of the classroom as to not draw attention to themselves.
- g. Shadow their observee the entire the day. This includes:
  - i.in the hallways
  - ii.during students' free periods
  - iii.in the classroom
  - iv.during a teacher's duty periods
- h. Observers, however, are *not* to follow their observees in certain situations. These includes:
  - i.bathroom visits
  - ii.lunchtime (the observer will take the same lunch period as the observee)
  - iii.lockerrooms
  - iv.teacher's prep periods (during which time students will go back to class)
- i. All observers complete the observation protocol sheet in its entirety and as thoroughly as possible.
- j. Submit their completed (and neat) protocols to Barriga 72 hours after the observation is completed.
- k. Considers meeting with their observee some time after the observation concludes, however this is not necessary.

## **UBC Observation Protocol\***

Person being observed:

Date:

\*Because you are observing several classrooms, please take notes on each class. You can either complete the first three sections of this form for each period, or complete it holistically, and include information on all periods in each question. Remember, your role is to describe what you are seeing during the observations, there will be time to analyze your notes and make connections AFTERWARDS.

### **GENERAL**

1. **Describe the environment of the room.** Describe the physical arrangement of the room, how it's decorated, the smell, the temperature, etc.

1. **Describe the class.** How many students are male vs. female? How are students seated? How are people interacting (both verbally and through body language)?

1. **What movement is happening in the classroom?**

- a. How are the students and teacher moving?
- b. Are more boys moving than girls?
- c. Is the movement productive and/or related to instruction?

1. **Describe the relationship between the teacher and his/her students.** Is it a respectful relationship? What actions/comments happen in the classroom that illustrate this relationship?

1. **Describe the discussion that exists between students and teacher.** How long does the teacher wait to call on the students? Who does the teacher call on frequently?

### **STUDENTS**

1. **Describe the level of student engagement in the class.** What student behaviors illustrate how engaged (or disengaged) students are? Is there one gender more focused?

\*Protocol created by UBC before altered by building principal

1. **In general, how are the boys behaving differently than the girls?**

**1. Who is leaving the classroom?**

- a. When students leave, where do they go?
- b. Are more boys leaving than girls?
- c. When do they leave the room?
- d. How does the teacher respond to their request to leave?

**1. Describe any bad, distracting or disengaged activities/actions done by students.**

- a. How does the bad behavior impact other students in the class?
- b. How does the bad behavior impact the teacher's ability to teach?
- c. Are the majority of students engaging in this behavior boys or girls?

**TEACHER(S)**

1. **Describe the teacher.** Consider his/her demeanor, actions, emotions, tone, etc. Is he/she multitasking? How often does he/she sit down? Does the teacher seem to understand his/her students?

1. **Describe the teacher's teaching style in the classroom.** What kind of instructional techniques and activities is he/she using? How does he/she respond to challenges in the classroom?

1. **How does the teacher react to/handle students who misbehave?** How do they discipline boys and girls?

1. **What role does gender play in this classroom in regards to the teacher and his/her students.** Is there apparent sexism/favoritism? Describe how the teacher engage with boys and girls. Is it different?

**OBSERVEE****1. With as much detail as possible, please describe the person you are observing and their average day.**

- a. Describe their interactions with various people in the building.
- b. Is there a perceived difference in how they act, talk, perform from morning to afternoon?
- c. How does your observee's behavior, attitudes, interactions change depending on the class they are in.
- d. For teacher observers, describe any distracting, inappropriate behavior your observee engages in.
- e. What causes their happiness and what causes their frustration/anger/sadness?
- f. What is the high point and low point of their day?

1. **What challenges does this person face on an average day?**

### **POST OBSERVATION**

1. What connections have you found between:
  - a. gender & students' interactions/performance in class
  - b. gender & teacher's interactions with students
  - c. students' behavior & their performance
  - d. students' behavior & teacher's reactions
  - e. any other connections?
  
1. What are some big, overarching themes or findings you made through observing your person and their daily life?
  
1. How has this experience changed or informed how you view this group of people in the school? Please be thorough in your response.