Going with the Flow

WHAT BOYS LIKE TO DO AND WHY THEY LIKE TO DO IT
It was a cold, damp Saturday in March. Just the kind of morning that’s perfect for catching up on some much-needed sleep. The window was open a crack, just to let some air in, creating the need to snuggle tightly under the covers. But at 7:30 Michael was awakened by the *skratch-skratch* of wheels on pavement. He made his way to the window to see three neighborhood boys practicing their skateboarding, as they had been doing the night before and the night before that. 7:30 A.M.! In the drizzle!

Every day a group of three or four boys in Michael’s neighborhood is working on their tricks. They’re not very good, no heirs to Tony Hawk yet, but they are improving. They’ve built a ramp and have arranged with neighbors who have hilly lots to use their driveways. And they practice, practice, practice. Even in the rain. Even when Michael, at least, would rather be sleeping.

The mantra that boys are in trouble has been picked up by the popular press. In our last chapter we explained our reservations about much of the research upon which that mantra has been built. But even if we accept it, it doesn’t mean that boys are in trouble in all aspects of their lives. Michael doesn’t know how the skateboarders in his neighborhood are doing in school, but he does know that they’ve displayed diligence, ingenuity, and persistence—all qualities that ought to contribute to their success.

If boys are successful outside of school, then it raises the question of whether it’s the context or the kids that are to blame for their problems in school. Like Mahiri (1998), we believe that trying to understand the sources of young men’s success and enjoyment outside of school may shed light on how schools can better serve them. In this chapter we’ll look at what characterizes the activities that the boys in our study value and see how that relates to their feelings about school in general and reading in particular.

To find out, we asked the boys in our study to rank the activities they most enjoyed, and then talked with them about their rankings and the reasons behind them in interviews that ranged from thirty to sixty minutes. Michael used the ranking sheet illustrated in Figure 2.1. Jeff modified it somewhat, chiefly by specifying other kinds of reading that one might do. (For example, he added *Reading a Magazine* to the ranking sheet.) After transcribing the
interviews, we coded them, looking at each of the conversational turns the boys took and identifying its major theme or themes. We tried to understand why each boy liked to do what he liked to do. We then looked at how those themes played out across the interviews. We had technical difficulties with two tapes, so this chapter is drawn from interviews with forty-eight young men, one of whom dropped out of the study after the activity interview. (See Appendix A for the major coding categories that we used.)

As we explained in the last chapter, as we looked at our data, we wanted to be on guard against assuming a homogeneous population and overgeneralizing. The stance we took was a teacher’s stance. When we thought about a theme, we asked ourselves whether it sufficiently characterized the group to the degree that it would be a sensible starting point for us as teachers when we planned our curriculum and instruction. We found several such themes. But we also found several important ways in which the data suggest that our boys were different and defied generalization. The implications of both the commonalities and the differences challenged us as teachers and teacher educators. At the end of this chapter, we will highlight the key issues that the data from this activity and interviews raised for us, and we will share how this is causing us to think about our teaching in new ways.

Before we present what we found out, though, we want to turn to the lens that has helped us understand the activity interviews. And interestingly, that lens was not provided by the myriad studies of gender that we discussed in the last chapter. Instead it was provided by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990a), a psychologist who researches what he calls flow, “joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life” (p. xi).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) begins his book with a simple premise: that “more than anything else, men and women seek happiness” (p. 1). Everything else for which we strive, he argues—money, health, prestige, everything—is only valued because we expect (sometimes wrongly) that it will bring us happiness. Csikszentmihalyi has spent his professional life studying what makes people happy, more specifically by examining the nature of flow, “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (p. 4).

He offers eight characteristics of flow experiences that we think can be usefully collapsed into four main principles:

- A sense of control and competence
- A challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill
FIGURE 2.1  Activity Ranking Sheet

Please rank the following activities in the order that you like them. Put a 1 next to the activity you like most, moving down to a 14 for the activity you like least.

___ Listening to music

___ Hanging out with friends

___ Playing sports

___ Playing video games

___ Doing something mechanical, like fixing an engine

___ Drawing, painting, or cartooning

___ Reading a good book

___ Watching a favorite sports team on TV or at the stadium

___ Surfing the net

___ Learning something new about a topic that interests me

___ Working on a hobby (Please specify your hobby ____________)

___ Going to school

___ Watching television or going to the movies

___ Other (Please specify ____________)

Going with the Flow
• Clear goals and feedback
• A focus on the immediate experience

These principles resounded throughout all of our data.

What we found in our study is that all of the young men with whom we worked were passionate about some activity. They experienced flow. But, unfortunately, most of them did not experience it in their literate activity, at least not in school. Before we discuss how they talked about their reading, we want to give an idea of how they talked about the other activities that they loved.

**A Sense of Competence and Control**

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990a), when people describe flow experiences, they typically talk about a sense of competence and the feeling of control that stems from having developed sufficient skills so that they are able to achieve their goals. He quotes a dancer, who exclaims, “What a powerful and warm feeling it is! I want to expand, to hug the world. I feel enormous power to effect something of grace and beauty.” And though chess is a much different activity, a chess player offered a similar description: “I have a general feeling of well-being, and that I am in complete control of my world” (pp. 59–60). The young men in our study shared similar feelings. They gravitated to activities in which they felt sufficient competence to have a feeling of control. What they were good at varied widely, but their feeling of competence was crucial.

Here’s Johnny on cooking:

Um, it’s kind of a way I can express myself. I like to cook for my family and friends. They all like to cook. And when they know I’m cooking they say, “Oh, I’m coming over for dinner.” And they usually do. I just like cooking. It’s really the only thing I’m good at.

And Deuce on rapping:

Well, music, I’ve been doing music and art the same amount of years. Since I was young, I was doing music, and music, I just had this talent in music that I know. It’s some thing called freestyling or when you have just a person just knock over the song. When people try to battle me, it’s like a big thing. You know, different artists try to battle each other. I just look quiet, but everywhere I go, all around town, nobody can beat me. I get respect from everybody. Everybody comes out of their houses to come
listen on the corners and stuff, and I just walk away. I know that I can write because I'm smart. You know what I mean? I'm smart. Plus, I'm street smart so I know I could write about some good, interesting stuff. You know what I mean? So I'm real confident with music, and I'm confident in my team.

And Prinz on hockey:

Well, I think it's just a fast-paced sport, it's just something that, well, I'm small but . . . I have an advantage that I'm fast in hockey and I just like to play hockey because it's one of the things that I'm best at.

Our data also suggest that there may be a cost to this emphasis on competence, for it keeps many of the young men from developing new interests and abilities. Ricardo made this very clear:

Yeah, I can't do snowboarding. I thought I could, my parents got me a snowboard for the first time and I couldn't even stand up on it, so I gave up on that real quick.

As did Clint:

Like I try and do new stuff but I usually stick with what I already know. Like if I try and do something new, and I'm no good at it, like I won't just try something for a minute and then say I don't want to do it because I'm no good at it. I'll try it for a long period of time, but if I don't get better at it, I'll just stop.

Buster felt much the same way. He was a prize-winning mountain biker and he spoke about how he enjoyed the feeling of competence and control his sport gave him:

Just, I don't know, it just gives me a thrill and a sense of accomplishment I guess. I mean it's something that I did, not something you know that someone else did or you know it's all about if I had a good race, then I had a good race, and if I had a bad race, well then that was me.

The same feeling marked his mechanical work:

Um, I guess it's just kind of a sense of accomplishment as far as you know if I actually put something together or take something apart and plus I'm learning while I'm doing it. If, say I'm, say I'm replacing my exhaust and my dad's there teaching me how to do it and that's something I can learn and then I know and I can pass that on to my kids and it's just something, it's kind of like attained knowledge I guess that you can get from, you know, just from doing.
But absent that feeling of competence, Buster did not enjoy pursuing an activity, even if he thought it was important:

I don’t know, something about computers, I’m really not all that, I mean I like the communication aspect of computers, but I’m really not, I don’t know, something about them that I’m not—first of all, I’m not all that computer literate, and second of all, there’s just something about them that I’d rather, they’re too complicated for me I guess.

Buda took it one step further, suggesting that even within an activity in which he felt competence, he focused on his strengths rather than trying to address his weaknesses:

Stick handling is a hobby for me. I don’t have the speed like some people do, but I’m always aware and stick handling is one thing I’m very good at, like most people would say I’m very good at and ah, it’s something I always want to work on because I know I’m not the fastest guy. I know I have to work on my speed, but I don’t know, stick handling is just fun to improve. It’s fun to work on what kind of new moves you can come up with and you can. It’s also you can watch professional hockey and see what kind of moves they have and try them out.

Again and again we heard boys talk about how a feeling of competence kept them involved in an activity. Again and again we heard boys exclaim that they would quickly give things up if they did not gain that competence. That’s why it was so striking that only two boys made a link between accomplishment and reading.

Pablo talked about how he had enjoyed seeing himself improve as a reader:

Well, I think it gains a certain, like you gain knowledge from it, from whatever you read, and I like that aspect of it, that I’ve accomplished reading a book because I used to struggle when I was younger, I didn’t like to read at all. I liked to read, like, comic books and that was it. But I’ve gotten a lot better and I read more for myself and then I’ll read the English books and things and I think it’s almost a sense of accomplishment as well because—I think in everything you do you learn knowledge.

And Larry was alone in linking his increasing competence to school:

Um, I haven’t started reading until this year pretty much... I have been starting novels this year because of Mrs. ____, kinda like assigns the homework and this is the only time it’s really been due so I’ve been reading pretty good novels now and I like John Steinbeck and stuff.
lot of novels like that get to me and Mrs. ______’s been kinda showing me the road and the path. I kinda thought reading was dumb, but now I’m kinda getting more into it.

Larry went on to talk about the recognition his teacher had given him and the pride he took in recognizing and naming his own improvement. Several boys, however, reported that reading didn’t give them that feeling. Mark explained why he ranked reading so low: “It feels like it is almost a waste of time, because you are not accomplishing anything.”

Thus far, we’ve focused on competence. We’ve referred to both its importance as a motivator and how its absence might stifle activity. This has powerful implications for literacy instruction.

The boys also discussed the importance of feeling control. This came out clearly in their discussion of school. Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) notes that “knowledge that is seen to be controlled from the outside is acquired with reluctance and it brings no joy” (p. 134). The boys in our study seemed to concur, both in their discussions of reading and of writing.

Here’s Chris talking about writing:

A lot of times with writing I get excited, especially when the teacher doesn’t give you a limitation. Like with ———, we did a lot of writing assignments with poems and what not and that really caught my interest because you could write about whatever you wanted to write about.

Guy echoed his point:

I like writing without having any guidelines to follow, just where you have to do your own thing. I might not mind having a guideline as how long it has to be, but I don’t like having a topic to write about, just to make up my own story.

According to some of the boys, what was true for writing was also true for reading. Joe noted the importance of control over his reading:

I don’t like it if I have to read it, but if I read it on my own then it would probably seem a little better.

One indication of the salience of the theme of control is the reaction it provoked from Melissa Larson, a university student of Michael’s who did much of the transcribing for this study. Michael began every class with what he called “opening circle.” The circle was an invitation to students to discuss anything education-related that was of interest to them. The only time Melissa initiated the opening circle discussion was when she brought up the issue of
choice. “Choice is so important to so many of the kids whose transcripts I'm typing. I'm wondering what [my classmates] are going to do to allow choice.” From the time we began this study, our data have provoked similar questions for us. In this case, Melissa’s question started a long discussion about balancing the desire for choice and the chance to work on common projects with the mandates of curriculum and assessment (cf. Rabinowitz and Smith, 1998; Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube, 2001).

We’ll talk about the issue of choice and control at much greater length when we discuss our reading log interviews in Chapter 4. But from the time we began our interviews with the boys, the question that Melissa raised was with us. And so was the warning issued by Newkirk (2001) that sometimes when we think we are offering choices, our students—particularly the boys—may construe the classroom context and what is valued there in such a way that they do not feel they are really being offered a choice.

A Challenge That Requires an Appropriate Level of Skill

As Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) notes, “By far the overwhelming proportion of optimal experiences are reported to occur within sequences of activities that are goal directed and bounded by rules—activities that require the investment of psychic energy, and that could not be done without the appropriate skills” (p. 49). He explains, “Enjoyment comes at a very specific point: whenever the opportunities for action perceived by the individual are equal to his or her capabilities” (p. 52). We found that the young men in our study gravitated to activities that provided the appropriate level of challenge.

Unlike Martino (1995a), who found that sports are used as a way to enforce a particular kind of masculinity, it seemed that the young men in our study spoke instead of sports as a way to provide a particular level of challenge. Geo described it beautifully:

Because when I get the ball—people draw things and stuff like that—that’s my art, get the ball, I like to run, make moves, and like if they make good blocks, I just read the blocks, it’s like, I don’t know, it’s a challenge every time and I like challenges. So, I’m just going to go up there hard. If people are big, I’m going to run there anyway.

But the boys didn’t have to be starting on varsity teams as tenth graders as Geo was to have similar feelings. Wolf played on a club hockey team, and his remarks resonated with Geo’s:
I don't know, I just enjoy it. I think I like it because what other sport can you play on ice, you know. There is a lot more skill involved than playing football or basketball or baseball. Not to say that those games are not completely, totally skill oriented, it is just that in hockey there's a lot more going on. That's more of a thinking game than it is a physical game, despite what it looks like. I mean, there is a lot going on. I mean, yeah, there is a lot of hitting and checking and elbowing and sticking and things like that, but that is just like minor stuff. That's like low level, you don't have to think about that. At the same time you got to know where everybody else is on the ice and you've got to put yourself on the court, you need to be in a good position to make a play.

Even when the boys were not involved in team sports, they spoke of the importance of challenge. Deuce, who saw himself primarily as a rapper, reported:

Basketball, I'm not competing that much. Well, you got to compete, but I just like playing basketball, just like playing it. It seems like everything I like doing is proving a point to myself: How good can I do this? Do you know what I mean? I don't never do nothing to lose. I don't ever do nothing to lose.

We wrote earlier about the boys' feeling of the importance of control and competence. But control did not mean domination. Challenge had to remain. Aaron suggested that absent an appropriate level of challenge, sports lose their interest:

Well gym is, we're playing badminton in gym and my partner and I are like 9 and 0 in badminton games and I think we had—when we were both there—a total of 6 points scored on us in the 7 games that we were both there for. So it's kind of, gym is kind of boring.

Not every boy was involved in sport. But challenge was important for them nonetheless. Our data suggest that one of the primary attractions for the boys who enjoyed video games was that the games provided the kind of challenge they found compelling. And once again, if that was not the case, the boys rejected the game.

Maurice talked about why he liked Lara Croft video games:

Yeah, they're more of a challenge. Like you have to search here, kill animals, find keys, and find codes, and door latches, and everything. It's an adventure. Something like Indiana Jones but she's a girl, and it's real good.
And Fred talked about why he liked Zelda: “The video game, like Zelda, that causes you to think a lot . . .”

The fact that video games contain different levels means that the level of challenge will always be appropriate. That, Bodey explained, is what makes them so compelling:

James Bond, when you first play, um it's OK and then I think the thing that really sucks you into it is there is a lot of hard levels and there are a lot of things that you can do. In terms of finding cheat codes, um to make yourself invincible. Therefore, you feel the urge to keep playing.

Without that sort of challenge, the games lose their luster, as Barnabas, the most passionate devotee of video games, acknowledged. The best games, he said, are

games that take a long time to beat. Where you can finally beat it [after a long time]. Like fighting games, like they are OK but they get really old. Like if you play with every character it is like five times [before you master it] so it gets old. I mean if you can do all of the finishing moves, you do them all like ten times and it gets pretty old.

The importance of an appropriate level of challenge extended into schooling. As we noted earlier, Johnny loved to cook. So he tried to sign up for his school's cooking elective. He was unsuccessful, but in the end he thought that was OK:

Yeah, I cook good. I never took the cooking class here. I mean, I signed up for it every year, but I never got it. So, but the things they cook are like, so easy to cook, I think it just wouldn't be any fun. It's just the fundamentals they're probably teaching in there.

The emphasis on an appropriate level of challenge extended beyond their favorite sports and hobbies. It also marked their discussions of reading in interesting ways. Some of the boys wistfully recalled reading Goosebumps books that they had found interesting but that were now too easy. But more often the boys talked about feeling overmatched by reading. Haywood put it this way:

Ah, well I like a book that isn’t, isn’t easy but not so difficult that you don’t understand what is going on. Ah, because if you are reading a book that doesn’t make sense to you then you just, you know, “Well I don’t know how to read this” and then you have negative attitude and you don’t concentrate and you don’t really gain anything from the experience.

Ricardo provided a specific example:
Ah, I don’t like reading plays because it’s hard, it’s just everything is talk-
ing and . . . when you’ve done a page you have to look back and say OK, this person is talking to that person.

The potential impact of feeling “overmatched” is clear as we recall the comments in our discussions with the boys about the importance of competence and control. The young men in our study wanted to be challenged, but they wanted to be challenged in contexts in which they felt confident of improvement, if not success. If the challenge seemed too great, they tended to avoid it, instead returning to a domain in which they felt more competent.

Maybe this should not be surprising. After all, it jibes with very established research literature on self-efficacy. Bandura (1993) is a leading researcher in that field. He critiques psychology for its “austere cognitivism,” for its neglect of the impact of motivation and affect. Bandura is especially interested in the ways that people’s perceptions of their capabilities affect their courses of action. He puts it simply: “It is difficult to achieve much while fighting self-doubt” (p. 118).

Hundreds of studies have concurred. In fact, when we did an ERIC search on self-efficacy, calling for journal articles published after 1995, we found 619 entries exploring the impact of self-efficacy in a myriad of arenas—from performance in various school subjects, to health, to career choice, and so on. As Pajares (1996) points out in a comprehensive review, the area of research is abundant and thriving. Pajares also makes what we think is a significant point: “Particularized judgments of capability are better predictors of related outcomes than are more generalized self-beliefs” (p. 563). This means that self-efficacy beliefs don’t extend from one context to another, especially if those contexts aren’t clearly related. For example, Haywood’s self-efficacy beliefs about basketball seem to have transferred to his beliefs about his ability in football and lacrosse, but they didn’t extend to his reading. Our findings suggest that there may not be a generalized self-esteem that teachers can mine. Rather, the boys in our study developed self-efficacy beliefs that emerged from experiencing success in particular domains. This offers a clear challenge to teachers to work toward ensuring success with particular kinds of literacy tasks and texts, an idea we will follow up on in later chapters.

The work on self-efficacy and our findings here clearly relate to Vygotskian views of teaching. Vygotskian theorists (e.g., Tharp and Gallimore, 1988) emphasize that teaching is assisting learners to more competent performances. In other words, teachers need to provide students with a repertoire of expert strategies for approaching and completing particular tasks. This is a break with other views and models of learning that see teaching as transmitting
information or allowing for student discovery. The sociocultural model based on Vygotsky’s work instead argues that teaching is providing the procedural means for a student’s participation in a community task so that the student can move from being a novice to being an expert. This occurs by helping students understand the specific procedures that are required to complete particular tasks in particular contexts and by helping them name and employ their understandings. Unfortunately, the boys in our study did not report receiving such help. Instead, they reported being assigned texts that were beyond them and working (or not working) to muddle through them.

Clear Goals and Feedback

The importance of clear goals and feedback is intimately associated with the two characteristics of flow experiences that we have discussed so far. First, without a clear sense of a goal, it seems impossible to have a sense of competence. Second, it is impossible to identify an appropriate level of challenge. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) points out, sports and games provide goals and feedback by their very nature: a tennis player wins or loses a point, a lacrosse player scores a goal or is scored upon, a video game player moves up to a new level or loses the game.

Though the activities the boys most enjoyed were different, they all valued clear goals and feedback in the activities they enjoyed. Gohan talked about his love for taking photographs of sunsets. Marcel wrote poems. Hasan mixed raps. Mike was learning to play bass guitar. Rev played Dungeons and Dragons. Joe created hyperstudio stacks. Stan had taken up painting. In every case, the activity provided the kind of feedback of which Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) speaks. Gohan, for example, only had to look at his photograph to see what he had accomplished. Johnny, who loved cooking, provided perhaps the most succinct statement of the importance of clear goals and feedback when he talked about another of his loves—weightlifting:

Yeah, like, I mean, no pain, no gain. There has been times when I work out so hard that I can barely pick up an apple to eat. I’m in so much pain, but I like the way I look at the end. I look all pumped up and everything, and uh, I feel good. And actually, I feel, I look bigger. I like that.

This emphasis on immediate feedback has important consequences for reading. Reading extended texts such as novels is not likely to provide quick
and clean feedback, but reading short informational texts, such as magazines and newspapers, does.

For example, in the activity interviews, when boys spoke of their enjoyment of reading, most spoke about how they valued it as a tool they used to address an immediate interest or need. Here’s Timmy talking about what he read on the Internet:

Well, I like to go to the sports and stuff cause I like to see, I like sports a lot . . . I like to see what is going on and what’s, like, who won the games and . . . I like to go to NASCAR and I like NASCAR a lot so. I like to see what is happening and they are like [mumble] it is just fun to ah, find out.

And Mark talking about reading a golfing magazine:

'Cause ah, it’s probably the best golf magazine out there and it, I mean it just tells you ways and shows you pictures on how you can improve your swing and if you slice the ball, it teaches you how to hook the ball so it goes straight and it ah shows you what new balls come out that are fit for you and new clubs that would fit you and just different things like that.

And Bam on reading the newspaper:

Like, if you find something that happened around your neighborhood, “Oh, I didn't know that happened. I should read it.” Stuff like that. I didn’t know my friend went to jail because he tried to rob somebody. I didn’t know that until I read the paper. They put his name there in the paper.

And Maurice on reading his driver’s education book:

That was something that I thought was interesting because it helps me. It helps me to put my seatbelt on because before, if they see me without a seatbelt on, they couldn't do anything about it unless you were actually stopped and they saw you without a seatbelt on. But now, if they see you, they can just stop you like that. So that’s helping me put my seatbelt on at all times, and it’s keeping me out of ticket trouble, keeping points off my license.

And Barnabas on reading about video games:

Some of the stuff be frustrating. All the magazines I read, they say how they made the game too hard. It’s true. They made the game too hard. And, sometimes, I beat the game already and I want to see what all the secret stuff was. I mean, it tells you where all the secret stuff is, but I still got to find them myself. That’s all. I'm just asking for a little map.
The boys we cite here could be described as taking an efferent stance (Rosenblatt, 1978) in their reading. Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say that they choose texts that reward an efferent reading. Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) provides a lens through which to understand that choice. Efferent reading by its nature provides an opportunity for clear and immediate feedback that aesthetic reading does not. If you’re looking for information and you find it, you know that your reading is successful: You can beat the game, fix the electrical problem, or hit the ball straighter. Aesthetic reading, the kind that most teachers (us included) want to cultivate, is a much more nebulous thing. The focus in aesthetic reading is not what can be learned but what is experienced. As such it is consonant with the final characteristic of flow experience that we’ll discuss in this chapter, a focus on the immediate. But it is at odds with the way most of the boys in our study spoke about reading. (At the end of Chapter 4 we will explore some ways of cultivating more competent and informed aesthetic reading.)

Perhaps that’s why Larry’s comment stayed with us:

[My teacher’s] been kinda showing me the road and the path. I kinda thought reading was dumb, but now I’m kinda getting more into it.

Not only does this inspire us as teachers, but it was the only comment of its sort that appeared in any of the interviews. Notice that Larry went beyond saying the teacher took a personal interest in him, though that was important. Even more important was that his teacher shared her reading expertise with him, showing him how to approach and read particular texts in a way Vygotskian theory would endorse.

Larry helps us understand that there is a social dimension to competence, a point famously made by Vygotsky (1978) in his discussion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which stresses that learning can only occur when the learner is challenged and is able to perform with assistance what he or she would be unable to do alone. Teaching, then, should precede development, leading the learner into uncharted and challenging waters that can be navigated with assistance.

Our data suggest that many of our boys did not feel they received that kind of assistance. Our reading of Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) gives another lens through which to see the experience Larry’s teacher provided him. Larry developed a feeling of control and competence in his reading because he wasn’t overmatched by the challenge of school reading, in part because his teacher made the road to reading visible. Both lenses suggest that teachers need to do more work to assist learners to develop the competence of experts.
A Focus on the Immediate Experience

The implications of the way that boys valued reading become even clearer in light of the final characteristic of flow experiences. The *sine qua non* of flow experiences is that people are so focused on what they are doing they lose awareness of anything outside the activity. Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) speaks of this quality in a number of ways: the merging of action and awareness, concentration on the task at hand, the loss of self-consciousness, and the transformation of time. In his study, a young basketball player provides testimony: “Kids my age, they think a lot . . . but when you are playing basketball, that’s all there is on your mind—just basketball. . . . Everything seems to follow right along” (p. 58).

The young men in our study spoke in ways that resonate with the words of this basketball player. They valued their favorite activities for the enjoyment they took from the immediate engagement in those activities, not for their instrumental value. The boys played sports because they enjoyed them, not to win a scholarship or to impress others. They played music or rapped because they enjoyed being engaged in that way. And when they engaged with other media, they did so because it made them laugh or kept them on the edge of their seats. Unlike their experience with reading, their focus was on the moment, not on the instrumental value of the activity. Stan developed this idea when we talked about listening to music:

> Lately I’ve been listening to a couple hard-core bands, *Vision of Disorder*, and um *Machine Head* and stuff like that. I like listening to *Vision of Disorder* when I’m really mad because it helps me just, like, feel what I’m actually feeling.

Maurice’s description of his video game involvement also showed his focus on the moment:

> Say you’re having a problem with someone or whatever. You play a video game or it’s like a shooting game or airplane flying game. You have to take the mission. That helps you take your mind off the stuff that’s going on in your life, and you just, for that ten or twenty—for however long you play the game—it helps you forget that. It helps you relieve your mind from that and focus yourself on the game.

To these boys, the immediate experience was key. And as we’ll see later, when the boys who were engaged readers talked about reading—at least, the reading they did outside of school—they had the same emphasis.
The Importance of the Social

Although Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990a) work helped us understand our boys’ activity rankings, it wasn’t fully explanatory. Csikszentmihalyi notes that “Another universally enjoyable activity is being with other people” (p. 50), yet as he admits, socializing appears to be an exception to the rules for flow that he posits. What wasn’t an exception was how important socializing was to the young men in our study.

Mike provided what could be a mantra for the whole group: “It’s always better with friends, always.” One of the most striking findings of our study was that virtually all of the boys reported having a small close-knit group of male friends. Only five boys reported having girls in that friendship circle. These friendships were absolutely central to the boys’ lives. That centrality was manifested in a number of behaviors that challenge conventional images. The boys talked about needing a place where they could be themselves. And all of them had that place. In short, all of our boys spoke of having intimate connections with others in a way not recognized by popular psychology accounts of boys’ experience.

Larry and Chris shared a sentiment echoed by many. Chris said:

I don’t know. I guess just because it’s the most fun, and it’s easy to relax around friends. And, you can be yourself. That’s why I put [hanging out with friends] first.

Larry noted:

There’s only like a couple good friends you know I really have. Um, one good friend—it’s just fun to, you know, go places. One friend, I go over to his house pretty much every day or whatnot, we’re with each other and um, but yeah, I like hanging out. Usually we talk about what’s going on with our life and stuff. Usually once you can find a best friend, you can talk to him and stuff, it’s usually how you want to spend your time I guess, that’s what I do. We always do stuff together, which makes it more fun. Watch a movie or just sit around, watch TV, play basketball, or swim or do something.

The boys talked about how their friendships allowed them to be themselves. What they seemed to mean was that they could talk more intimate with friends. Only two of them alluded to friends as a protection against the pressure of being male in a specified way. Both of those who did were very involved with the arts, and they seemed to see girls as more accepting of their artistic inclinations. Pablo put it this way:
I guess boys are more—they judge you. They think you have to be a big macho man in order for you to hang out with them. I mean, not all boys, but a lot of ’em, and I guess girls accept you more, for who you are, and I guess it depends on person to person, but that’s what I’ve found.

But this was decidedly a minority opinion. The rest of the boys had found friends who supported them. The "boy code" that Pollack (1999) describes as making intimate relationships taboo was not supported by the evidence in our interviews.

What was in evidence, as Larry suggests, is how the emphasis on the social extended to the boys’ discussion of other activities, sometimes in surprising ways. Chris, who used a wheelchair to help him get around after a battle with a childhood illness, was one of the few boys who watched much television. But when he did, he often did so with others. He would arrange with friends to watch a show and to be on the phone together as they watched so they could talk about what they were seeing.

Music, too, was a point of contact, as Zach explained:

That’s another thing. Like all the friends, we kinda listen to all the same music and we go to the concerts together and we go in the mosh pits and we do all that. And it’s hard for adults to comprehend sometimes.

We noted earlier how important feeling competent was to the young men in our study. In fact, only one of our participants talked about liking to do something he wasn’t good at. Jamaal continued to play video games because of his friends:

We play a bunch of them. We got one that’s like Tony Hawk’s pro skater or something. It’s like a skateboarding game and I, to tell you the truth, really stink at video games and they always make fun of me when I play it but I just . . . it’s just funny trying to do good.

The friendships occasionally affected the boys’ literate lives. Gohan had two friends with whom he shared poetry. Mark checked the Internet or the newspaper to keep up with the hockey scores not because of his interest but because his friends would expect him to know. Neil’s friendship circle was characterized by long discussions of movies by favorite directors.

The importance of having a closely knit friendship circle also affected the way the boys engaged with technology, especially the emailing and messaging they did. Although some boys spoke of how they enjoyed meeting people from different areas through the Internet, many more talked about how they
used the Internet to continue conversations with the same friends they hung out with at school.

Their friendships also affected their attitudes toward school. Of the twenty-one who talked about liking school, nineteen said they did so because of the social dimension of schooling. Buster’s sentiments provide a summary of this viewpoint:

Probably my favorite part of going to school is the social aspect. I don’t know, I guess I just like interacting with my friends and stuff. I mean, that’s probably my favorite part about school. As far as classes go, there’s certain classes I really don’t like and some that are OK, but . . . probably my favorite part of school is seeing my friends.

In contrast, only two boys talked about valuing school because they loved to learn. If, as Vygotsky maintains, all learning occurs in social situations where expertise is shared between people, then the boys’ desire to be social could be used to great advantage, as we’ll explore at the end of Chapter 4.

Not only did the boys have friendship circles to which they were closely tied, but they also spoke of their strong relationships to their families. We did not see the alienation from family that is often depicted in the popular press or popular psychology accounts. Fred, for example, talked of a family connection through sports:

I like to [watch football] because that gives me time to sit down with my stepfather and we, like, spend time, we sit there, cheer on the team, like if we’re on opposite teams, we still have fun. A family thing in my house is like the Superbowl. He’ll cook up some chicken wings, and some stuff, and I’m allowed to stay up and watch the entire game, and, like, we all sit there and cheer on the team we want to win. And it’s just a fun night.

The importance of socializing and friendship and the way all our boys were able to achieve healthy and supportive relationships belies the current psychological concerns. However, we recognize that our population may be skewed in the opposite direction from those of the psychologists whose works dominate the discussion in the popular press. We asked teachers to nominate a wide variety of boys, boys from diverse backgrounds and with different histories of school success. Some of those boys needed a little persuading before they agreed to participate. Though we’d like to think we achieved a representative sample of American boys, it’s not surprising that boys in therapy talk more about alienation than those who feel sufficiently comfortable with adults to agree to participate in a project that would require them to meet with a stranger for six interview sessions.
The Importance of Getting Away

One way that our data do relate to the arguments of those who argue that boys are in trouble is the number of young men in our study who reported feeling stress and the need to get way from it somehow. Nineteen boys made comments of this sort in their activity interviews. School was a source of pressure for some, as Brandon explained:

I watch comedies, like The Simpsons, Malcolm in the Middle, Married with Children, those kind of sitcom programs. Seinfeld is another one of my favorites. I just feel after a long day of school, I really try hard at school, I really bust my hump, and after I finish all my homework and take a shower, to relax, TV is the best thing to go to. I got a nice large TV up in my room, so I crawl in my bed and just put it on sleep timer and watch that until I fall asleep.

Liam sought his escape by being with friends:

Ah, I just enjoy really relaxing with my friends, getting out of the whole school mind-set and just kicking back. I go over to their houses, watch movies, um, other activities, I play lacrosse with my friends, I play sports with my friends, ah, but mainly just stuff that's relaxing that I like to do. I do it to just relieve stress.

Bam was among those who used music to escape stress:

That's when I like to just come home from school, I just want to sit down, just be myself. I'll go in my room and turn on the radio.

Even those activities that brought boys joy occasionally brought pressure as well. Geo was an accomplished athlete, in both football and wrestling, and he felt pressure to do what was necessary to continue his accomplishment:

Because they don’t like—after that class, I go to a different class and then you know I do whatever, then after school I got wrestling and then I got to concentrate on that, then after that I got to take a shower and try to unwind a little and I’m a little tired and I got to still look over all my work. Usually I don’t do my homework at home, but if I got something important then I’m gonna look over it, but once I get home, I usually just watch the TV and unwind because you know sports is like real pressure like. I don’t want all that pressure to get to my head so I think about it too much. I'll just watch a little TV.

All of the boys we’ve cited in this section were successful at something important to them, yet their success didn’t reduce the pressure they felt. Not
all of the boys spoke about such a feeling, but the number and intensity of those who did surprised us.

**The Importance of Activity**

Other themes that emerged in our analysis were less salient but, we think, worthy of attention. More than half of the boys in the study talked about the importance of physical activity, the drive to be doing something at all times. None were as adamant as Robert. Here he is talking about watching a movie:

No. I can’t really sit down and watch no movie, just sit there and watch it. I got to be up, walking around or moving or talking or something. I can’t really sit down and watch no movie for a long period of time.

And playing a video game:

I just can’t sit down and play no video games. I’ll play, like, every once in a while. I can’t play it on a regular basis.

Wolf voiced a similar understanding:

One, I can’t sit down to a board game. Either my attention span isn’t long enough, or I don’t have enough patience. I can’t sit still. I’m always on the go. I mean, my parents can’t understand how I can always keep going ‘cause, I mean, I’ll go to bed at 1 A.M. and I’ll have to get up and ref a hockey game at 7 A.M., don’t go back to sleep after I get done with that, go right to a friend’s house after that, and go to the movies and then go sledding or skiing and then go out somewhere that night and then wake up early again. I’m always on the go.

Though the majority of the boys in the study were less insistent on the need to always be moving, many talked about their desire to avoid having nothing to do, a much-dreaded occurrence. In fact, many of the boys talked about the lower-ranked activities on their lists as activities of last resort, picked up only to ward off boredom. For some of the boys, this meant browsing to see what was on television. On occasion it meant picking up a book, as we’ll explore in greater detail later.

**The Importance of Avoiding the Routine**

A number of the boys spoke of their desire to avoid routines and to do things in new and different ways. As we’ll see in Chapter 4, one of the fundamental
criticisms boys had of school was its sameness. Eleven of the boys spoke of their enjoyment of variety. Scotty, for example, enjoyed snorkeling for just that reason:

When I started snorkeling when I was probably in fourth grade or fifth grade in the Bahamas, um, I just thought—I just had so much fun and thought it was really cool. Like I’ve been to Cancun snorkeling, uh, Hawaii, um, like scuba diving and snorkeling and different stuff, like probably every island, British Virgin Islands. I’ve been to the Bahamas. I’ve just been to different places where I’m able to scuba dive and snorkel and, like, each time is different. Like there is never two things that are the same. So I mean, every time you go down, a coral is going to be different.

Bodey enjoyed going to his family’s wilderness cabin for a similar reason:

Well, what I like to do is, see, when I’m here like now, I know what time lunch is, I know what time I’m going to go home, I know what time I have to wake up. Up there at [the cabin], let’s say, I have no idea what time I’m going to go to bed, I have no idea what time I’m going to wake up, I have no idea what I’m going to do the next day, if it’s going to be hunting, if it’s going to be snowshoeing, or if it’s going to be staying inside playing cards, and that’s I think what I like, and that’s what I like to feel, you know, once a year.

Of course, not all of the boys were able to get away from their routines in such a dramatic fashion. Rev offered a related view of a more mundane activity, game playing: “I play anything that’s not really repetitive.” School meant routine activity for many of the boys, and some of them emphasized the importance of the unexpected as an antidote to that routine.

Two Issues

Thus far, we’ve argued that our data resonate with the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990a). The young men in our study sought out flow experiences and described them in ways similar to the participants in Csikszentmihalyi’s work. Though we found these similarities compelling, we realize that discussing them to characterize the young men in our study is problematic for two reasons. First, if Csikszentmihalyi is right, then what we are saying about boys would be equally true of girls. That is, we realize that our analysis cannot be used to make a comparison. Second, we are wary of overgeneralizing, for we also identified important differences among our participants. We discussed some
of these differences when we explored the range of the boys' interests. Even more compelling was the patterns we noticed within two smaller groups that distinguished them from their colleagues.

**Significant Departures**

**The Readers**

As we noted previously, virtually all of the boys noted that reading played a part in their lives outside school, but only seven spoke of the enjoyment they received from reading extended text outside of school, which seems to us to be the conventional understanding of what it means to be a reader. Of these seven, two were primarily readers of history and five of novels, though two of the novel readers talked especially of their interest in historical fiction.

These seven boys provided a number of reasons for their enjoyment of books. Stan worked the hardest to articulate his feelings:

> I like reading books because they let you think about certain things that have happened or they... I wouldn’t say I want to get away from the world, but it’s kind of an escape, like watching TV but it’s better than TV. You can’t really—like reading a book is—watching TV is, like, no comparison to reading a book because reading a book you can get right into it and all that stuff, and I’m not quite sure what makes a book good, just it has to be sort of interesting. I mean it’s different for, you know, certain people. Certain people like certain things. I like a lot of books, I like books that sort of keep you on your toes, books that make you think, controversial books, just a little bit of everything I think.

Stan’s last statement resonates with previous ones we’ve cited on the importance of challenge. Suspense and the drive to figure out the “puzzle” a book provides were important. He raises other key points as well, including the need to be able to enter a book. We took this to mean that he was able both to visualize the story world and to see things from the perspectives of others. Like Stan, the boys who were readers spoke of a desire to be engaged in the big ideas they encountered in reading. Stan, in fact, distinguished the “pie and cake kind of reading” he does during the summer from the more serious reading he undertakes at other times of the year. They also talked about using books to get away.

For Neil, the engagement in these serious ideas were major markers of his identity. He spoke of how he and his friends thought and talked about things of little interest to most of his classmates. He asserted his difference from
those classmates through his reading, making a show of carrying complex adult books to class and reading them there.

**The Urban Young Men**

As we exchanged ideas about what we were hearing as we collected data, it became clear to us that what boys needed to get away from varied considerably. While boys in all four schools spoke of the pressure of school or sport, only the urban boys felt a pressure to make a success of themselves. This feeling was most clearly manifested in the elaborate plans for the future that many of the urban young men had. Jigg, a student in the learning community designed for students who could not make it in a traditional setting, detailed his future plans at a level of specificity far beyond any of the boys in the private, rural, or suburban school:

"After I graduate? I want to do this. This is my plan when I got out of high school. To go to barber school... but I said I want to try to go to college. I'm going to go to college first. I was looking at ______ University. They've been sending me letters. My grades are OK. My [test] scores are OK so they're probably good enough to get into that college. I was probably going to go to college for Computer Programming and Business Administration. That was just next year. Five years from then, I was planning on owning a barbershop because I know how to cut hair right. Five years from then, I was planning on a nail salon."

Hasan displayed similar kind of planning:

"Yeah, I just want to have a better life. I ain't really had to go to public school. I chose to go to public schools because I just wanted that experience because I wanted to be a counselor and I wanted to counsel urban area kids to encourage them to do better and let them know that they can do it. I don't want them to say, "Well, you went to private schools, and, if I go to private schools, I could do the same." So, yeah, I knew what I wanted to do in the future. I always wanted to do it."

The sense of an impending future that would require careful planning and preparation was largely absent from the interviews of the boys outside the urban area.

But that does not mean that the feeling of pressure was absent for the working-class boys from other settings. When Michael read the interviews Jeff had done at the private boys academy, he was able to pick out the two scholarship boys, not because they referred to money pressures but rather because of a feeling of pressure that permeated their entire interviews. One of
our worries about the emphasis on gender as a superordinate category is that it may bring with it a lack of emphasis on other structures that affect an individual's experience. Our data strongly suggest that social class is one of those structures.

**What This Makes Us Think About: Where Do We Start?**

When we talked about the way that we approached making thematic generalizations from our data, we noted that we tried to do so in a teacherly way. We asked ourselves whether the understandings that we gained across our participants was sufficiently similar to provide us with a sensible starting point for us as teachers in thinking about how to teach them. The most compelling question our generalizations in this chapter raised for us is a very basic one: *Where do we start when we plan instruction?* We think our data fundamentally challenge the starting point from which many teachers, ourselves included, proceed.

In planning instruction, most teachers start by asking, “What am I preparing my students for?” The answers to this question vary: for the unit test, for college, for the upcoming state assessment, for next year’s class, for success in the world of work. And each answer is undoubtedly important. But if we want our students to bring something of the passion to our classes that they bring to the activities in which they engage outside of school, our data suggest that we have to start by asking another question right along with it: “What is the quality of the experience I want them to have today?”

This isn’t a question educators are used to asking. Our friend Brian White, who read a draft of our book, told us that our analysis reminded him of a metaphor he heard in a curriculum theory class taught by Herbert Kliebard at the University of Wisconsin. “In the education-as-preparation view,” Kliebard argued, “life is a concert—and education is the bus that takes you there.” In such a view, as long as students ultimately hear the music, it doesn’t matter how long or bumpy the ride is for them.

How much changes when teachers ask “What is the quality of the experience I want them to have today?” instead of—or along with—“What am I preparing them for?” A lot, we think. When we apply this new question to our own teaching of preservice teachers, we see that it makes us more immediately accountable for our curricular and instructional decisions. For example, it means we can’t select a difficult text for our reading list and say simply “This is important for them to know in the future.” It means we have to think
about the kind of instruction that will make their engagement with that book immediately rewarding.

Doing this kind of thinking has caused us to look for inspiration in unlikely places. For example, we suspect that many teachers regard video games with suspicion or even contempt, as symptomatic of our students’ need for flashy visuals and instant gratification, which are at odds with what they get in our classes. But our study has convinced us that thinking about video games can be a useful guide, or heuristic, for us as teachers. By their very nature, video games are designed to hook their players by providing flow experiences. Because they get more difficult as players become more accomplished, they provide both a feeling of competence and an appropriate level of challenge. Because the goals are clear, they provide unambiguous feedback. It’s no wonder that many of our boys could lose themselves in video games.

**Sequencing Curricula**
The attraction of video games resides at least in part on the fact that they provide players with a careful sequence of experiences. But a similar sort of careful sequencing characterizes too few classrooms. When Applebee, Burroughs, and Stevens (2000) examined the curricular structure of the classes of a group of experienced and highly regarded literature teachers, they found that in the vast majority of them, teachers did not sequence texts in such a way that students could make connections and build understandings from text to text.

Unless curricula are structured so that the understandings students gain in one text or activity can be brought forward to the next one, they can’t develop a sense of competence. Instead, as our respondents told us, they’re likely to feel overmatched and then resistant. But if students can bring their learning from one text to the next, they can feel equipped to meet the challenges they encounter in their new reading. Moreover, they’ll be more likely to understand why they’re doing it.

In Chapter 6, we explore in greater depth the idea of sequencing assignments so that students develop strategic knowledge in one activity or assignment that they can then apply in the next activity or assignment. Right now, though, we want to stress that we think the notion of carefully sequencing experiences with texts challenges many common practices in language arts classrooms. When you play a video game you know the rules and get better at abiding by them and using them to your advantage. When you read a certain kind of text like a satire or an editorial, the same thing happens. But the genre divisions that inform textbooks and curricula are simply too broad to
provide the same kind of experience. Are short stories sufficiently similar that one reads them all in similar ways? Poetry? In many American literature anthologies, Dickinson and Whitman appear close to each other. The fact that both wrote poems in the same country at about the same time doesn’t mean that they have the same expectations of their readers. In fact, what it takes to read the free verse of Whitman is very different from what is required to read the lyric poetry of Dickinson.

While short stories might not be a useful category, short stories with unreliable first-person narrators might be. Accepting the invitation to read such stories requires one to identify what might make a narrator reliable or unreliable in certain circumstances. It requires identifying the facts of the story that are beyond question. It requires applying standards from outside the story to the interpretation of those facts. (See Smith, 1991b, for a more complete discussion of judging narrator reliability.)

Other sets of stories that share the same expectations of readers might also be usefully grouped. Stories told through letters and diaries, for example, require attention to dates in a way that other stories don’t. However, more than using strategies is typically involved in responding to a genre or a particular kind of theme. Stories told through diaries can also require assessing how and why a character changes. And if the diary is by an adolescent, it often means thinking about what it means to grow up and whether the character is making positive progress in that direction. As another example: survival stories usually need special attention paid to the setting and how people relate to nature.

Our object here is not to make exhaustive lists, for slicing genres so thinly would involve teaching a virtually limitless number of rules that had very limited application. Rather, it seems to us that we can help our students feel competent in playing the game by identifying relatively broad genres that invite the application of similar interpretive strategies. Thinking of poetry as a genre probably does not work, so putting Whitman and Dickinson together might not be sensible. But maybe grouping Whitman with some Sandberg and some Ginsberg and some rap in a unit on what might be called oratorical poetry would.

Ricardo didn’t like reading plays because he was baffled by them. We wonder how much experience he had reading them. If his experience is like most students, the answer is likely one a year. We wonder how he would have felt if he had experienced reading short dialogues and then one-act plays as a way to gain experience in understanding the subtext of dialogue, and of imagining the scenes in which that dialogue takes place. We wonder how he would
have felt if his teachers had shown him “the road and the path” and had given him repeated practice in traveling. We think he would have felt more competence and as a consequence his attitude about reading plays and his performance both would have been much better.

We want to stress that when we look to video games for inspiration, we’re doing more than saying study has to be leavened with a bit of fun. If, say, we were faced with the requirement of teaching Twelfth Night (as was one group of teachers we observed) or another text that we felt would be too difficult for our students, creating the conditions of a flow experience would have to involve far more than tossing in an occasional wordsearch or Jeopardy game. Instead it would have to involve setting up a sequence of texts and instruction so that students would understand why they are reading, how they ought to be reading, and that they’re able to do the reading.

We want to stress as well that our attention to students’ likes and dislikes in this chapter doesn’t mean that we are simply saying, “Just give them reading that relates to their interests.” The boys’ interests were sufficiently different that doing so would mean a class could never read a common text. Rather, we are saying that if we understand why they like what they like, we can work to create the conditions that will make students more inclined to engage in learning what they need to know. These conditions are those of “flow” experiences: a sense of control and competence, an appropriate challenge, clear goals and feedback, and a focus on the immediate. Sensible sequencing can help us to do just that.
Meet the Crew

Zach
Gohan
Haywood
Yuri
**Zach**

In many ways, Zach, a European American eleventh grader, was an English teacher’s dream. He was in an honors class and was consistently engaged in the classroom activities. He worked hard to excel in school. He went out for the school plays, often winning the lead. He planned to become an English teacher himself. However, the activities he most enjoyed, and on which his literate life revolved, centered not on school but on the complex role-playing game he and his friends played. The movies he watched, the books he most enjoyed, the music that he listened to all related to the game. The game provided him a chance to enter an alternate world—one, he explained, that involved taking on multiple identities. He told us:

> I have a definitive taste for books. I do. Quite narrow. I mean, don't get me wrong I appreciate Thoreau, Emerson, Dickens. And there's nothing wrong with them. And I love English class, but I'm more of...like I read novels associated with my game. And Dungeons and Dragons. Sci-fi. And, um, people like Tolkien and, um, occasionally someone like H. G. Wells. Kinda like science fiction a little bit.

For Zach, the game’s the thing.

**Gohan**

Gohan, a Puerto Rican twelfth grader who was also the father of a young daughter, attended the same alternative school as Jigg. He had been unsuccessful at the district’s traditional high school, which he left after a year with only two credits. A facile description would label Gohan as “at risk” of failure, and indeed he had experienced failure in school. Yet when he talked about the activities he most enjoyed, his intellectual curiosity was clear. Listening to music was his favorite activity, one to which he devoted his undivided attention. He loved the complex rhymes of his favorite hip-hop artists. And he wrote himself, though he wrote poetry and not raps, because of the freedom it gave him:

> Poetry, it don't have to rhyme. You could write anything on the poetry. You could write about the sunset or about how you’re failing in school, but won’t nobody know what you’re talking about and it doesn’t have to rhyme. Rap is more complicated because if you want to write raps, you’re going to have to write it for other people so they will like it, and they have to rhyme and it’s hard to rhyme sometimes. But poetry, it’s just free, more free. It’s freestyle writing.
Unlike most of the boys in our sample, Gohan described two friendship circles, one with whom he played basketball and one with whom he shared his poetry. He noted that he never got a chance to use his poetic ability in school, but if the subject ever came up, he’d be the first with his hand up. His reading interests were also schoolish. Like many of the boys in our study, Gohan enjoyed magazines. But rather than use magazines to find out specific information, Gohan like to browse through news magazines, looking for stories on the latest technological developments. Gohan may have experienced failure in school, but his interests led us to wonder why he wasn’t more clearly at risk of success.

**Haywood**

Haywood, a European American eleventh grader at the private boys academy, appeared in many ways to be a stereotypical man’s man. He loved sports, especially physical sports in which he could “hit.” In his words, he enjoyed “dominating” others, both through his size and his skill. And he used sports as a way to get out his frustrations and escape the stress of his work at school. He put it this way:

Well, the thing that I like about sports is that, ah, you know, school is very hard. There is a lot of time put forth into your work and stuff and after going through a six-hour day of classes and, you know, using your brain and stuff, sports kind of relaxes you. It is kind of a way of, like, meditating, I guess you could say.

When we spoke about his favorite activities, he said he enjoyed challenge and competition both on the field and off, such as when he played video games. Haywood explained how he read little outside class, using the newspaper, the Internet, and magazines to do assignments or to read brief articles about his interests. But as he continued, the stereotypes seemed to fail away. He had lots of friends, most of them athletes, and had a group of four with whom he was especially close and could share “anything.” Though he talked about the action and horror movies that he enjoyed watching, he talked at much greater length about historical movies, in which he could vicariously experience something that he had never gone through. He talked about *Amistad* and *Schindler’s List*, and his empathy was clear. And he talked about books he had read for school, texts such as *Black Like Me* and even *Hamlet*, and how much he enjoyed them (though he felt overmatched by *Beloved*). Haywood
never did extended reading outside of class; he didn’t have the time. But the seeds for a lifelong engagement in reading seem to us to be planted.

Yuri

Yuri was a European American eleventh grader from the same school. He described himself as a “loser” and “nerd” because he didn’t like sports in a very sports-conscious school. Yuri deliberately set himself apart from what he saw as the mainstream, both by his dress (he favored all-black, goth-style clothing) and by the attitudes he espoused. He was especially concerned about how men objectify women, something he actively worked against in his interactions with girls. Those interactions were almost exclusively electronic, for the center of Yuri’s out-of-school life was the computer. He used it to converse, and he had a website on which he posted his latest writing. And he devoted countless hours to simultaneously playing various role-playing games, text-based games that require extensive reading and writing. Yuri lost himself playing the games. As he explained:

I get a lot of stress out because, you know, sometimes it is like something hypnotizes me and I can just set there for hours and then by that time I’ve forgotten what I am mad at. I have forgotten what I have been stressed about.

Yuri loved to read fantasy. He explained that reading Ender’s Game by Orson Scott Card helped him think through some of the problems he had to confront in middle school. Despite this love of reading, Yuri didn’t enjoy much of the reading he did in school, believing the school “pounded” away at multicultural issues until they were not longer interesting.

As the portraits reveal, there is much that the boys share. They all have intense interests they actively pursue and lose themselves in. They all have arenas in which they are accomplished. They all have close friends with whom they share their accomplishments. But they are very different too. And each defies conventional expectations. For teachers, generalizations are comforting. They give us something to go on when we devise curricula and instruction. But the complexity of the portraits provides a warning. We have to be alert for differences too. Surfaces can be deceiving.
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