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Literacies and Masculinities in the Life of a Young Working-Class Boy

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[...]

This narrative history of the life of one young reader draws on my three-year research study of two children growing up in blue-collar, or working-class families and attending a local public primary school. Between kindergarten and the beginning months of third grade, I observed and documented the home and school learning experiences of Laurie and Jake, recording their work and play in classrooms and spending time with them in the context of their family lives. That work drew on my own childhood experiences growing up in a white, working-class family, though in a very different time and place. My research purposes were to document children's negotiation of cultural and textual spaces between home and school as they participated in two different cultural settings. My interpretive lens is focused in this chapter on Jake, in particular on the complex ways in which he negotiated gendered identities and textual practices as he moved through primary school. As I compose Jake's history as a young reader, I reflect on how the social practices and relationships he experienced at home were brought to bear on the task of becoming a reader in school. My history of Jake's classroom learning moves between home and school as I construct a narrative that details the complex particulars of his values, feelings, and practices in a social context. My home visits with Jake as well as regular classroom observations of him in grades K–2 are threaded into Jake's story.

[...]

Kindergarten apprenticeships

An image from Jake's kindergarten year: he is working at the puzzles center, putting together an overlay of "Fireman Dan" (i.e., putting the fireman clothes and paraphernalia on Fireman Dan). While he is working, Jake begins to tell a fantasy story involving Fireman Dan, and he includes me in the story. I ask him if he wants to draw a picture of the story. He shakes his head as if saying, "Of course not." About two months later, I am again observing Jake at the puzzles center. This time he is putting together a puzzle, something he has often chosen during center times. Some of the other children working at the table have been drawing pictures. I ask Jake if he would like to draw something. He responds, "There's nothing to draw for me."

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In many respects, kindergarten was a resounding success for Jake in terms of his response to formal schooling. Because of the open-ended nature of many kindergarten social and academic practices, Jake was able to construct his own points of connection with school. He engaged with classroom practices during kindergarten in ways that mirrored his modes of learning at home. Jake moved freely and independently between centers, “roaming” as his teacher, Ms. Thompson, described it in our summary review of his kindergarten year. He very often chose tasks involving three-dimensional objects, seemingly preferring practices that involved building things or putting together puzzles and, less frequently, choosing tasks involving drawing, painting, or writing. In general, Jake created forms of textuality that involved manipulative *doing*. He worked for long periods of time at centers that involved building vehicles or working with objects. For much of his kindergarten year, Jake resisted activities that involved two-dimensional texts: reading or pretend reading; writing, drawing, and dictating stories; performing symbolic tasks that involved numeracy. His early response to textual practices like book reading, drawing, or writing seemed to be one of disinterest or “tuning out.” During whole-class, shared readings, for instance, Jake often sat in the back of the rug area, not participating verbally in the choral book reading. Defining himself as an independent agent within the social spaces of the classroom, Jake could become passionately engaged in activities that were of interest to *him*. Instructional efforts to nudge him toward school-like practices were, however, often met with the firm “no way” kind of response that I encountered at the puzzles center. As Ms. Thompson commented about Jake’s engagement in academic practices, “He’s always on task; it just might not be your task.”

Part of my objective in writing Jake’s history in kindergarten is to uncover the threads of love and identification that he experienced as a young boy that shaped how he responded to classroom literacies. Jake’s response to textual practices in his earliest weeks and months in school was a reflection of his home relationships and values. [...]

Love and independence

Some images from early home visits with Jake and his family evoke the loving acceptance and expectations for independence that shaped Jake’s early learning experiences. On a chilly winter day, Jake had gone out back to show me how he could hit plastic softballs (he could hit them all the way into neighbors’ yards). Lea Ann, his younger sister, was playing on the wooden swingset that happened to be within range of Jake’s flying softballs. I voiced concern about her getting hit, but Jake’s father, standing nearby, assured me, “Don’t worry, she’s really tough.” On a later visit in the fall of Jake’s first-grade school year, Jake was learning how to play umpire in a batting session with his father and some neighborhood children. He insisted on standing right behind a girl batting, in part because he wanted to bat himself. Warning Jake in a no-nonsense tone that he had to stand back, Jake’s father added gruffly, “He’s gonna find out himself.”

Relationships and activities within Jake’s close and extended family are fluid and shifting; social spaces in this home are therefore typically buzzing with ongoing talk and activity. One of Jake’s two grandmothers or a visiting cousin might be sitting in the family living room watching TV or chatting with his mother as Jake and his sister (and later a baby brother) move freely from one self-chosen activity to the next. Amid these fluid social relationships, the task of caring for Jake during his early years in school was distributed among family members. Jake spent the night at his grandparents’ home during kindergarten, so he could sleep a little later in the morning (he attended the afternoon kindergarten program). Jake and Lea Ann (often called Lea) were the recipients of frequent attention from their

mother, maternal grandmother, and other family members who shared their home. These close family relationships provided strong support for Jake's learning experiences at home. However, neither Jake nor Lea Ann were necessarily treated as young "students" in need of explicit direction and constant protection. Jake's mother voiced her family's philosophy of teaching and learning this way: children need to learn from their mistakes, to learn for themselves. Minor bumps and mishaps along the way were an accepted part of how Jake and his younger sister learned through participation and *doing* within their family.

The ways in which Jake and Lea participated as members of this extended family reflected their differences in age (Lea being about three years younger than Jake) and gender. Both Jake and Lea were treated as independents who could figure out things for themselves, given a reasonable degree of support within the family. Each received open expressions of love and affection from extended family members. However, their identities as learners and family members reflected the ways in which gendered relations were lived in their home. Lea's bedroom was painted in pink pastel colors and outfitted with a toy stove, replica kitchenware and china, and baby dolls. For Halloween, during Jake's second-grade school year, Lea dressed up as a fairy. Modeling her new Trick-or-Treating outfit for a video camera (I sometimes filmed the children during home visits), Lea was reminded by her "mom-mom" (her maternal grandmother) of how beautiful she was. That same Halloween, Jake had dressed up as a NASCAR driver, wearing the yellow and red "Kellogg's" racing colors worn by his personal favorite racing celebrity, Terry Labonte.

Growing up as a boy amid this close and extended family, Jake was drawn to the values and passions lived by his father, a no-nonsense or "direct" (as Jake's mother teasingly noted) man. Jake's father was a self-taught man—a ninth-grade dropout who had subsequently taught himself (through reading and apprenticeships) the professions of carpentry and mechanical contracting. He was a gifted carpenter whose craftsmanship astonished me during early home visits. His backyard workshed seemed the workspace of an artisan. Its walls were intricately lined with tools and wood materials, and a large powersaw was placed in the middle. Jake also had a powersaw, and he sometimes worked alongside his father, cutting small pieces of wood or painting objects his father had made. Jake demonstrated the use of his powersaw to me during my first "tour" of this amazing carpentry workshed. I watched (at first horror-struck) as he struck his finger in the vibrating needle that would cut wood but not small fingers. His own workspace in the shed was set up so that he could work alongside his father. However, in no sense was this required of him. Jake chose this activity as one of many forms of participation he embraced, and was one of many expressions of identification with his father's values and interests.

Jake also joined his father in a family (but especially male) passion for car racing and collecting small replica racing cars. In his parents' room was his father's extraordinary collection of miniature racing cars, each displayed with a picture of the car's driver. Hung in Jake's bedroom was an emerging collection of race car miniatures. As early as his kindergarten year, Jake could identify each NASCAR vehicle and its driver, "reading" details such as racing colors and insignia, car configurations, and print. He was, as a young boy, strongly immersed in the stories and practices that were lived by his father and seen by the women in his family as being aspects of identities Jake shared with his father.

At home, Jake "roamed" (to use Ms. Thompson's phrasing) between activities that met his particular interests and goals. Jake was nearly constantly in motion, sitting down only to perform a task (like cutting a piece of wood on his child-safe powersaw), then moving right on to the next activity. Jake was more than capable of sustaining a passionate

interest in a particular project or activity. His love for NASCAR racing and his emerging interest in joining his father in constructive jobs are things that could sustain him for long stretches of time, engaging his imagination and intellect. Jake's energy and his movement between activities did not preclude his doing more reflective activities like reading (Jake often listened to books read by his mom-mom), painting wooden objects made by his father in the workshop, or figuring out the particulars of how something worked (Jake sometimes joined his father on certain tasks around the house and even on some mechanical contracting jobs outside the home). Sustained interest in an activity, however, required that the task make sense to Jake. A task had to be something that needed to be done. Otherwise, as Jake would later say about some academic tasks, it was just plain "stupid."

A scene from a first-grade home visit: Jake's mother and his mom-mom are sitting with me in the family living room, having a chat about Jake and his responses to school. Jake's maternal grandmother tells the story of how Jake's dad educated himself, after dropping out of high school, through reading manuals and then practicing his crafts. He could have gone into any number of professions, she noted; he was gifted in a number of arenas. Jake too was a gifted learner, she added as our conversation went on. After I asked what she thought Jake would do later in life, she commented that Jake would be his own person. Jake would probably end up doing not one thing, but different things. She noted how quickly Jake picked up knowledge and expertise at home—things like helping put together the family swimming pool. These words about Jake echoed themes from his father's life story: independence, giftedness as a learner, reluctance to box himself into one single profession or passion. These family stories of father and son were threads of the male identities and values he was later to bring to first- and second-grade literacy practices.

Embodied fictions versus school textualities

All during his kindergarten year, Jake had not one but two imaginary dogs: Max 1 and Max 2. He was very able to distinguish the Maxes from one another when asked which was present at a particular time. Out on the playground, Jake would throw one of his dogs a ball, follow the trajectory of the ball with his eyes, and then run at full speed if Max tried to run away with the ball himself. It turns out, as Jake's mother explained to me one day, that Max 1 was a fictional representation of the real "Max," a beagle who belonged to Jake's teenage cousin. The real Max would sometimes come along when Jake's cousin visited, and all the children present would pursue Max as he outran them easily. Max 2 was completely fictional—this seemed to be Jake's own dog, something for which he longed. In second grade, Jake composed in his Writer's Notebook a story that reflected his desires to have his own Max:

Today i myt [might] get a Dog. a Begt [Beagle]
 i am name [naming] hem max
 because my
 cosint [cousin] haves a Dog so i want a
 Dog i am going to the Farmrs
 makit [market] to get my Dog today
 and wan [when] i came

home i will thaek [take]
 ham [him] for a wak [walk]
 (Jake's Writer's Notebook entry, second grade)

During kindergarten, Jake's "Max" fantasies were enacted or performed on the playground and at home. His entire body expressed the narrative as he demonstrated, sometimes at the request of an adult, how Max (1 or 2) could perform tricks for his owner.

As a boy growing up, Jake's fictional worlds seemed largely constructed around physically enacted texts, texts that involved a high degree of movement and that often involved media forms. A special passion of his was Sega video games. He had acquired a Sega video player in kindergarten (for Christmas), and Sega action games like the *Lion King*, car racing games, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and football games were clearly textual forms that Jake valued highly. During my home visits, he demonstrated his command of various Sega games, his whole body becoming engaged in the physical action as he manipulated the Sega controls and tried to avert the disasters that loomed for characters like *Sonic the Hedgehog*. My field-note descriptions from one such set of observations in the fall of Jake's first-grade year evoke the forms of textual enactment that Jake practiced at home with his Sega games:

As soon as we entered Jake's room, he insisted on showing me a sample of his current collection of Sega video games. The first video game he inserted into the Sega player was a football game. Jake was able to choose which teams to set against one another, and he clicked on the 49ers versus the Dolphins. I was not able to follow all the rapid movements of his choices on the controls; he used the controls to decide tackles and other movements. During the Sega football game, Jake was extremely physically active. His verbalizations ("I tagged him," "I pushed him down") were uttered in the voice of one actually engaged in the game itself. Jake seemed to be on the field with the football players, his whole body moving with each hit. After Jake had played through a few football tackles, he switched to a race car video. In this Sega video game, the action occurred from the point of view of someone inside a car. The video game was constructed as if the player were inside the car, looking out the very rapidly passing landscape. At various key points in the "race," there would be an obstacle to avoid in order not to crash. Rather than what I would picture as a race track, the course was set in a landscape area—with hills, trees, etc. Jake was once again completely physically engaged in his enactment or performance of the video game. He used body movements and loud sound effects to perform the movement of the race car. He was the driver of the car, maneuvering it through the dangers of the race course. At one point, a slightly older visiting cousin, Cheryl, commented that Jake was always loud. A very physically engaged and vocal player was certainly on view during these Sega games.

Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue that such electronic and video game cultures are typically linked to discourses of masculinity. Video games like the ones played by Jake are marketed for young boys to play, and boys find the games exciting and fun. Boys get to experience "playing the body" (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 78) as a means of practicing the masculinities that they will perform outside of video game contexts. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) read such practices through a critical lens, pointing out how the video games can position

boys in hegemonic discourses of masculinity, ones that align masculinity with “power and aggression, with victory and winning, [and] with superiority and strength” (p. 72). They argue that:

Although some girls do play and enjoy electronic games, electronic gaming is constructed predominately as a male activity and a male field of pleasure. Just as the “Barbie” culture constructs a highly gendered representational field targeted at girls, the “Game Boy” world of video games offers much the same to boys and young men. Through participation in the multimedia practices associated with electronic gaming, boys and young men enter into a discursive field in which constructions of hegemonic masculinity dominate, and within which they can practice and play at masculinity, and at what it comes to represent. (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 73)

As played out in the particularity of Jake’s life, video games were indeed a discursive field in which he practiced the masculinities that were so integral to his gendered identities. In order to understand the passion that Jake felt for Sega games, however, it is important to see the embeddedness of the video games in his relationships at home. The ways in which Jake was able to enact fantasies of male power and control through Sega games stood between wider discourses of masculinity and the particular relationships and identities that Jake constructed at home. As part of that personal history, the Sega games were harmonious with the values and discourses Jake was coming to live in relation to others. The game were forms of textuality rooted in Jake’s family life and in the feelings and practices that enveloped him relationally as a young boy.

Ideally, schooling in the primary grades should be an opportunity for children to experience new identities and new ways of engaging with social and textual worlds. Dyson (1991, 1993, 1995) describes how children from diverse communities can engage in textual practices that draw upon and also extend or “pluralize” the means by which they mediate the boundaries of self and other, written text and embodied action. Children from poor and working-class communities, communities whose cultural discourses may differ from those of educational institutions, should be able to construct *hybrid discourses* that ultimately enrich their possibilities for living and knowing. Rather than giving up the cherished social practices they have come to live at home, students like Jake should be able to place those social practices and identities in dialogue with new ones. A richer consciousness, argues Bakhtin (1981), is one that is more dialogically engaged or hybridized. The instructional movement toward such cultural pluralism or hybridity, however, requires first that the learner’s primary values, passions, and identifications—ones that emerge in the particular relationships constitutive of family and community life—be an integral part of the cultural climate of the classroom. Without the acceptance within the classroom walls of what James Paul Gee (1996) refers to as *primary discourses*, poor and working-class students are faced both with the challenge of appropriating language practices and values that may seem unfamiliar, even unwanted and with the risk of losing integral threads of what they most love and value. For Jake to engage with the kinds of literacy practices valued by school, he would first have to see a cultural space for the things he most valued.

As my history turns to Jake’s engagement with first- and second-grade literacies, it will become clear that just the opposite occurred as academic practices became more formal and bounded. In kindergarten, there was space for Jake to interface with school literacy practices on his own terms, as an independent. In first and second grade, Jake’s self-reliance

and his reluctance to engage with formal literacy practices began to be seen as forms of resistance. The young boy who was so gifted a learner at home increasingly distanced himself from classroom values and social practices.

[...]

Coming to know and be in two discourse communities

School reading practices are often conveyed in educational research literatures as a set of competencies or cognitive skills, as indeed they are measured by the standardized tests so valued among educational institutions. Such portrayals readily miss the embeddedness of reading in the particularity of cultured and gendered (embodied) lives. It becomes all too easy to lose sight of the fact that reading involves a set of cultural *practices*, as integrally embedded within the webs of relationships as any other social act of living and knowing (see Lankshear & O'Connor, 1999, for discussion). If we ignore the cultured and gendered specificity of reading practices we risk missing how conflictual school reading can be for students like Jake, students whose identities so readily fall outside the box of institutional practices. How Jake came to negotiate the cultural boundaries of home and school reading practices is an integral part of his story in first and second grade. The fine detail of that history has to take into account how both men and women engaged in reading with Jake at home, and then later how Jake approached school reading practices, which was shaped, in his case, by women teachers.

My history of Jake's experiences in first and second grade turns now to how he moved between the social worlds of home and school, learning how to participate in two very different discourse communities. Jake did become a reader in first and second grade, but with some degree of struggle amid the social boundaries of classroom reading and writing practices. While learning through family apprenticeships at home, including those involving reading, Jake became, over the course of first and second grade, a struggling student; he was in danger of retention by the end of second grade. Jake's strong preferences for the forms of being and knowing that he practiced at home interfaced with first and second grade expectations. Jake's history as a reader and writer in first and second grade begins with scenes from his life as a reader at home.

Reading practices at home and school

On a late-fall visit to Jake's home during his second-grade school year, Jake's father told the story of how he had become a local expert on JFK assassination theories. He shared that he read voraciously, mostly books about the Kennedy assassination. He went on to recount an incident in a bookstore in which a store clerk had referred a customer to *him* for information on books about JFK. He told this story with a twinkle in his eye, teasingly noting how he (a working man) was considered an expert in this literary domain. He added that he owned many books on the subject of JFK's assassination.

Connected images emerge for me from my time observing as Jake engaged in reading practices at home. On an earlier home visit, in April of his first-grade year, I am sitting in

the living room and talking with Jake's mother and his mom-mom about reading. I suggest that Jake needs to do a lot of reading over the summer, to help him get ready for second grade. Jake's mother shares with me how much Jake loves to read. His mom-mom adds that Jake holds back in school, and notes his giftedness as a learner. Jake's mother pulls out an informational book about U.S. presidents and begins quizzing Jake (who is sitting in the living room with the adult women) about various presidents and other political figures. She asks questions like, "Who was the second president?" and "What did George Washington chop down?" At one point, Jake turns to an appendix that lists presidents and facts about them, making use of graphophonic cues and his memory to read or pretend-read presidential facts. He seems to make use of some graphophonic cues to read or pretend-read some of these historical facts. Other facts seem come to him from memory. For instance, when his mother asks him a question about the black man who was shot, Jake responds from memory that it was Martin Luther King. All the while, Jake holds the large informational book in his lap, occasionally consulting it to support his responses.

A second image from observing Jake at home in first grade: on a sunny, fall day, I am introduced to the first Charlotte, a very large spider sitting in its web spun along the side of the swimming pool. Jake's mother asks him to recite the spider's name, and then asks for the names of other characters in the children's book, *Charlotte's Web*. Later on that same afternoon, I meet the second Charlotte, who would narrowly escape demise from a softball hit by Jake. This second Charlotte has spun a web under the eaves of the front porch.

Literary references threaded into ongoing experience, and talk about a love of reading were an important part of Jake's home life during his primary school years. His childhood was richly informed by the literary interests of his mother and maternal grandmother, and by his father's passion for historical and informational books. In his bedroom was a bookshelf full of children's books—mostly books like the Dr. Seuss books (e.g., *Green Eggs and Ham*) and beginning children's readers that his mother ordered from a mail-order service. Some of these mail-order books came with "sight word" flashcards using words from the text. Frequently, adult family members noted how much Jake loved to read himself. His identity as a reader seemed to be embedded in a general family valuing of reading for enjoyment and information.

These rich and varied reading practices at home, however, did not seem to connect easily for Jake with first-grade reading practices. The boundaries between school reading practices and the cultural practices that shaped his life as a young reader at home were difficult for Jake to negotiate. Reading practices in school included whole-class readings of anthology selections (with children following along with their pointing fingers); independent reading during DEAR (Drop Everything And Read); and a variety of Morning Paper and skills activities (e.g., graphophonics, word analysis), often designed to go along with the children's anthology selections. For Jake, bringing with him as he did a history that placed *reading* amid the social practices in his family, many of these activities were constraining and pointless. Reading practices at home were more typically immersed in the ebb and flow of work, recreation, and intimate family relationships. Jake listened to stories when spending nights with his grandmother. Literary connections were made in relation to actual spiders who had spun webs around Jake's home. Race car magazines and information books were typical of the books that Jake read in ways that mirrored the interests and values of his father. When Jake encountered reading practices that emphasized the analysis of parts of texts, or when he read children's stories that were not of any particular use or interest to him, he could become disengaged, perplexed, or frustrated. For

instance, in May of his first-grade year, when asked to fill in a story map worksheet with plot information from the story “Strange Bumps” (a selection in Jake’s anthology reprinted from an Arnold Lobel book, *Owl at Home*), Jake seemed disengaged and perplexed. “I’m not sure what it is,” he commented in frustration. “What *what* is?” I asked, trying to figure out how he was responding to the story map activity. “This *paper*,” he said.

Reading and writing masculinities

In second grade, Jake encountered reading practices that hearkened back in some ways to his kindergarten year. Jake’s second-grade teacher, Ms. Williams, tended to ascribe to the philosophies and methods embraced by whole language advocates (e.g., Edelsky, Atlwenger, & Flores, 1991; Goodman, 1986). She had attended special workshops given by prominent language arts educators like Lucy Calkins. Jake’s teacher based her reading and writing instruction largely around the *workshop* as a pedagogical space and metaphor (see Atwell, 1987). Children read daily in Reader’s Workshop, and they composed narratives and other genre pieces in Writer’s Workshop. At the same time, she wove a considerable amount of “traditional” instruction in graphophonic relations, word analysis, and genre characteristics into her language arts teaching. Like many contemporary language arts teachers, Ms. Williams strove for teaching methods that balanced out children’s need for a focus on whole texts and their structural parts.

Given Jake’s history of independence and apprenticeship-style learning at home, and his preference for certain kinds of texts, the Reading and Writing Workshops seemed well suited to Jake’s hope of finding a cultural and discursive space for himself amid school reading practices. Although Reader’s Workshop was still a space where interaction was not boundless (children had to do certain kinds of reading that excluded three-dimensional textualities), there was a considerable degree of latitude. Children could move about during Reader’s Workshop—stretching out on the rug, sitting in a rocking chair, or huddling in a corner off to themselves. Moreover, as long as he was reading, Jake could choose books of interest to him. During Reader’s Workshop, Jake often sequestered himself in a corner, defining himself as an “independent” in ways evocative of his kindergarten year. He alternated between choosing narrative texts, often beginning level narrative books like *Popcorn*, *Caps for Sale*, and *Frog and Toad*, as well as informational books. [...]

Jake also enjoyed writing in Writer’s Workshop. The practices that constituted writing in this workshop afforded a pedagogical space for the kinds of textual enactments that Jake valued. On the pages of his Writer’s Notebook, he could negotiate textual boundaries that drew on those practices that he lived at home. Though Jake could not *perform* his fantasies and experiences, as in the Sega and “Max” stories he enacted at home and in kindergarten, he could begin to negotiate the sometimes difficult crossing of textual and cultural worlds. On the pages of his Writer’s Notebook, Jake composed entries that reflected his embracement of the gendered practices and identities that shaped his life as a young boy at home. In the two Writer’s Notebook entries below, Jake composes scenes of boyhood: accompanying his Dad to the car racing store, and hitting some balls in the front yard with his baby brother, Brad.

yesterday i want [went]
to [store name]
it is a racing stor
me and bab [dad] we go

to the stor to go
 to get nascar sthav [stuff]
 and pay for it thend
 we go home to pat [put]
 it in oro [our] rooms
 wana [when] war [we're] don
 we eat Banta [dinner] then
 we go to bud [bed]

(Jake's Writer's Notebook entry, 12/9)

me and Brad play baesball
 out fraint [front] in the grss
 and Brad hits home runs
 and i hit home runs to
 I hit the ball ovar
 a van the ball allmost
 hit the van. Brad hit
 the samft [soft] ball it hit the wndooe
 of the van. But it didn't
 bast [bust] the wndooe on the van
 at my house in the driveway
 the red mieni [mini] van wndooe
 it hit the van tier [tire]
 [not?] the wandooe I feal cool and
 I faet [felt] like the big boys.

(Jake's Writer's Notebook entry, 5/15)

These narrative fictions, or shaping of events (Davis, 1987), seemed situated somewhere between home and school cultural practices. Jake could write the culturally specific masculinities he lived at home, while appropriating the rhetorical forms that helped align him with those discourse practices valued in second grade.

Although Jake ended the school year on the very positive note of having made enormous gains in school literacy practices, he was about six months behind his more successful (i.e., on target vis-a-vis grade-level expectations) peers. Midway through his second-grade year, Jake had just begun to interface with textually focused story and chapter books, like Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad*. Toward the end of the school year, when more successful readers in his classroom were reading short novels, Jake was still working with short informational books and beginning chapter books. His accomplishments as a reader and writer in second grade, though impressive, did not match up with the expected sequence of achievements for children at the end of primary school. Jake was to enter third grade as a fragile reader amid the values and expectations that constituted reading in a formal or institutional sense. And yet, the complexities of Jake's story do not begin or end with reading fluencies, as important as these might be within an institutional setting.

In September, I observed as Jake participated in a thematic unit on communities, including the buildings that made up different communities. Ms. Williams was reading the book, *Up Goes the Skyscraper*, a book that chronicles the sequential building of a skyscraper. Pictures and text depict the process of constructing a skyscraper, and Ms. Williams'

discussion and reading drew on terminology and concepts from construction and engineering. I noticed that Jake, typically distant and disengaged during such whole-class read-alouds, was extremely alert and engaged. Some of the text and pictures depicted the construction of heating and air conditioning systems in the new building. At one point, Jake raised his hand and commented that his father worked as a heating and air conditioning repairman.

Two additional images come from my classroom observations in Jake's second grade. In early December, he puts his head down on his desk and pretends to fall asleep during a math activity in which children were doing "take away" problems. As I walk by him to see what he is doing (and to try to figure out why he's doing it), he whispers softly to me and tells me this story: The night before, his father had awakened him in the middle of the night to take him along for a heating repair emergency. Jake's words are, "I had to" [i.e., I had to be up all night]. He is aware that he is losing focus on the math activity, and so he creates a fantasy that reflects a reasoned (i.e., consonant with family life) explanation for why things would be so difficult right now.

A second image comes from an observation I made in March. Jake had been having a lot of trouble in school that week. For days, he had written nothing in his Writer's Notebook. Ms. Williams had expressed her concerns that week that Jake was still reading on a first-grade level though he was now in second grade. After a whole-class read-aloud of a chapter from the children's novel *How to Eat Worms*, I try to gain a better understanding of the meaning that Jake is making of late second-grade reading practices. During the read-aloud, he had put his head on his desk, seemingly disengaged, though I wasn't sure. After the read-aloud, as children are getting ready for lunch, I ask Jake if he was listening, and what he was thinking about when he put his head down on his desk. He was listening, Jake assures me. He tells me how he was thinking of the time when he went fishing and threw out a line with live bait. He demonstrates physically, enacting the motion of throwing out the fishing line.

I think that Jake struggled to align school reading practices with the particularity of his life as a reader at home, including the gendered relationships and identities that shaped reading amid the intimacy of family life. His history as a reader at home, as this was embedded in the ways of knowing and being that he embraced as a young boy, certainly did not preclude becoming a reader in school. However, the cultural spaces, practices, and values that defined classroom reading also made it sometimes difficult and risky for Jake to read successfully in school. Jake did on occasion find hybrid cultural spaces—a cultural and discursive borderland in which the values and practices he lived at home came together with classroom values and practices. The whole-class reading and discussion of *Up Goes the Skyscraper* was one such moment for him. More typically, however, Jake struggled to find meaning in many classroom reading practices. Reading, like other practices in his community life, had to make good sense before they became something of value to Jake. Adult men, at least in his family world, did not bother with cultural practices that were not linked to constructive *doing* or informational learning. Jake searched to find a place for himself as a school reader, and he was only partly successful in doing this.

Things were not dramatically different for Jake in second grade than they had been in kindergarten—in terms of the ways in which he drew connections between the stories and identities he lived within his family and the particular textualities and identities valued in school. What was different was that, by second grade, the stakes were getting higher. In kindergarten, there was more room for Jake to express his gentle resistance and independence.

He could walk away from a center and simply choose one more to his liking. Rarely did he tune out amid kindergarten social spaces and practices; he was constantly in physical motion, much like at home. By second grade, social spaces and practices were much more bounded and constrained. Within those more bounded practices, Jake's options were more limited. He continued to express an open and trusting warmth toward adults; he still typically had a huge smile on his face upon entering the classroom each morning. Alongside that trust in adults more generally, however, was an increasing dislike of academic practices, and on occasion the teachers who insisted upon them. By second grade, Jake had begun telling family members that he didn't like school, and he had begun resisting things like homework.

At the same time that Jake was struggling with academic practices and identities in school, he was thriving as a young apprentice in family projects and hobbies and in his father's business. In kindergarten and first grade, Jake had helped with home projects like putting together a large Christmas train set and building a backyard swimming pool. In second grade, he had begun to accompany his Dad on those repair jobs where it seemed appropriate to bring him along. By this time, his family had started a mechanical contracting business, and Jake had been named vice president (his mother was the office manager and secretary; all in the family were co-owners and business partners). Sitting at the kitchen table after the more difficult chore of getting through homework, Jake's mother shared thoughts about the future. Following my comment that Jake needed to read over the summer to get ready for third grade, she noted that Jake needed to learn to read well to go on to college. Jake replied quickly and firmly that he would not go to college. Passing through the kitchen, Jake's father added his two cents worth: that Jake would take over the family business. As if in enactment of this prediction about him, Jake picked up the phone nearby and began demonstrating how he answered calls for the family business.

The stories voiced about us, by those whom we most love and value, shape our identities and values in ways that are sometimes more powerful than even the most authoritative institutional systems of cultural power and social regulation can muster. Caught between the discourses of home and school, deeply committed to the practices and relationships lived within his family, Jake struggled to negotiate a space for himself as a young reader and writer in the classroom. He practiced school literacies—sometimes giving himself up to the task of writing about car racing or family events, or reading books reflective of his interests. His embrace of those storylines voiced about him within his family, however, often seemed to exert a stronger pull for him, a more powerful shaping of his identities as a young boy. Presented with the substantial risks he faced if he challenged school textual practices, ones that would require him to think and be in new and unfamiliar ways, Jake chose what must have seemed a safer route: tune out, fantasize, resist; then go home to live the practices and identities that so warmly embraced him. That there was sometimes room in primary school for Jake to enact the identities he lived at home as a young apprentice is testimony to the skill and compassion of his teachers.

Toward hybrid discourses of instruction

Literacy education for poor and working-class children is sometimes viewed as a process of helping children move *from* the familiar language and cultural practices of home and community, *to* the more unfamiliar textual practices of the classroom. Children from

ethnic minority and poor and working-class communities, it is argued, bring divergent *primary* discourses to their primary grade classrooms (e.g., Gee, 1996; Michaels, 1981). The process of becoming literate in school, then, entails the appropriation of cultural, textual forms and practices that are more typical of institutional life—what literacy theorist James Paul Gee (1996) calls *secondary* discourses. [...] Literacy educators working toward more socially just relationships have argued, on the whole, that something must be done to equalize children’s opportunities in classrooms and later in the workforce.

While such metaphors of literacy learning and instruction certainly provide a well-grounded depiction of cultural conflict in the classroom, and, in this case, of Jake’s lived classroom experiences, they do not fully capture the moral particularity of lived experience. Nor do they reflect the rich potential of cultural hybridity in the classroom. To suggest that the movement from home and community discourses is a unidimensional process of cultural appropriation (i.e., a movement *from* one thing to something else) is to miss the particularity of readers’ histories in relationship to schooling. In writing the history of one young reader, a boy growing up in a blue-collar family and community setting, I have tried to reveal the complex ways in which he came to know and be in multiple ways, even as he struggled with the personal conflict that this process sometimes entailed for him. Jake’s history as a reader and writer in school suggests the intricate and hybrid ways in which one young boy moved from the particular loves and identifications he experienced at home, to create points of intersection with school social practices and values. He managed to construct hybrid pedagogical spaces for himself, and he did this on his own terms. In kindergarten, Jake could know and be in familiar ways, while trying on some new textual practices and identities. Once he bumped up against the more constrained textual practices of first and second grade, things became more challenging and conflictual for him. However, Jake’s occasionally rich engagements with school reading and writing practices speak to his willingness to risk change and explore new ways of being and knowing.

There are many things that mitigate against such cultural hybridity and change, including the educational mandates and “accountability” measures that are now *de rigueur* in public school systems. Jake’s teachers struggled with the extreme pressures they faced in teaching responsively to children’s needs while satisfying the administrative bureaucracies that seemed to limit their options as teaching professionals. Larger even than the individuals working within the system, however, and the wider cultural practices that shape schooling in relation to gender, social class, and ethnicity. The politics of schooling leave little room for the kind of hybridity that I think would be enriching for Jake. [...] Rather, he lived his life in school in a kind of cultural borderland, one that entailed increasing resistance on his part.

Hybrid discourses of instruction for boys like Jake need to make space for the particular identities and textual practices that are valued and practiced by men and boys in culturally specific settings. Though highly capable of multiplicity and change, Jake also needed space to “roam,” to *do*, and to live his passions throughout primary school. Rich school apprenticeships for Jake would entail space for movement as well as reflective activity, for independence as well as social relationship, and for reading and writing in ways that reflect boys’ textual interests and performances. Hybrid pedagogical spaces require the radical move of opening up the curriculum to practices and forms of textuality valued by boys like Jake, and creating an instructional dialogue that both embraces and extends.

[...]

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