Flexible literacies, cultural crossings and global identities: three Singaporean adolescent boys' reading and identity practices' in a globalized world

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Flexible Literacies, Cultural Crossings and Global Identities: Three Singaporean Adolescent Boys’ Reading and Identity Practices’ in a Globalized World

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ABSTRACT

This case examines the reading and identity practices of three highly literate adolescent boys from an elite all-boys school in Singapore, focusing on how they constructed their identities as global and local citizens through their reading practices. There have not been any studies examining the reading and identity practices of adolescent boys who have had every access to literacy, and this study contributes to much-needed research on youth literacy, identity, and globalization. The data consist of survey and interview data, classroom observations and email reading logs collected from September 2008 to September 2009.

The findings demonstrate that these boys exercise considerable flexibility in their reading choices and practices, both in the school and out-of-school contexts. The boys’ immersion in reading as everyday practice were supported by a complicated network of invisible resources in their home, school and peer settings that allow them to “find” books and to see reading both fiction and non-fiction as a natural part of their identity. Reading choices and practices were neutralized, masked with evaluative criteria of what makes for good literature or for satisfying entertainment. Reading constituted a cultural crossing for these boys, where global cosmopolitan identities are projected through knowledge of texts and knowledge of the world through texts. They exercise their flexibility through their ability to cross linguistic and geographical borders, as well as multiple genres and media in their reading practices. Flexible literate identities are constructed not just through the knowledge they possess, but through their relation to knowledge, which is the ability to read different texts in different ways for different
situations. These boys’ abilities to project themselves as flexible readers provided them with the intercultural capital necessary for mobility in a globalized world.

Viewing literature study as identity play may help educators to see textual spaces as spaces for engaging in conversation about various worldviews and trying on different stances. In addition, re-visioning curriculum construction as cultural crossings may allow for a more nuanced approach to designing curriculum as it takes into account the worldviews of both student and text to cultivate criticality in literature study.
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CHAPTER ONE

Reading and Identity Practices in a Globalized World

Introduction

In today’s globalized world, an increasingly interconnected world of intensified and rapid mass migration, mass media, market transactions and cyber-actions have resulted in a fragmented landscape of diverse “-scapes” (Appadurai, 1996) where the global and the local intermingle on an everyday basis. In this “network society” (Castell, 1997) of “time-space compression” (Harvey, 2001), national and cultural boundaries are daily being blurred with daily transnational movements of media and people being seen as a way of life. As Bauman puts it, “[A]ll of us are, willy-nilly, by design or default, on the move … even if, physically, we stay put” (1998, p. 2) in a permanently shifting world. These structural changes involving unprecedented mass movements of people and media have resulted in paradigmatic shifts in the nature of work, and correspondingly, education.

Those who benefit the most in this neoliberal economy of globalized flows are those who are able to easily straddle different worlds. Drawing on Robert Merton’s work, Hannerz (1990) uses the term “cosmopolitans” to distinguish these global travelers from the “locals” who are rooted in place. Hannerz describes cosmopolitans as people who are able to move at ease between different cultural contexts, having acquired an orientation towards engaging with the Other. They possess a greater understanding of diversity and of the need for coexistence of various cultures within the individual person. For Hannerz, these cosmopolitans are “‘the new class’ people with credentials, decontextualized
cultural capital” (p. 246). Unlike locals whose influence rested on whom they know rather than what they know, cosmopolitans possess knowledge less tied to others and are able to recontextualize their work in different cultural contexts (see Appiah, 2006; Cheah & Robbins, 1998; Lam, 2006; Luke, 2004 for discussion and reformulation of term "cosmopolitan” in global contexts). In today’s context, the term “cosmopolitan” can be said to apply not just to people who are out of country but even to those who live and work in cosmopolitan cities such as New York, London, Hong Kong and Singapore, where an eye towards the world has become part of the everyday practice of living and working. In that sense, being a cosmopolitan is a matter of attitude towards place rather than one’s actual place.

A sense of the kind of “cultural capital” that these cosmopolitans possess is painted in Aihwa Ong’s (1999) ethnographic study on the everyday practices of transnationality, focussing particularly on the practices of the Chinese diaspora. Spanning America to Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, Ong draws our attention to “the processes whereby flexibility, whether in strategies of citizenship or in regimes of sovereignty, is a product and condition of late capitalism” (p. 240). For Ong, the term “flexible citizenship” refers:

…especially to the strategies and effects of mobile managers, technocrats, and professionals seeking to circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments, work, and family relocation.” (p. 112)

This “flexible citizenship” is acquired in part through literacy skills achieved in educational systems designed to prepare students for the world of work, a world that has
shifted towards knowledge production, teamwork and flexible adaptations. In this “New Work Order” with its emphasis on knowledge production (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), “symbolic-analytic workers” who are able to work with ideas will fare better economically compared to “routine production workers” and “in-service providers” (Reich, 1991).

The projection of oneself as a literate person in the global and national economy requires the acquisition of skills that hold value within and beyond one’s locality. Luke (2004) calls for the cultivation of “intercultural capital” in teacher education, a vision which Lam (2006) appropriates for understanding youths and literacy in an age of globalization. Luke defined intercultural capital as

the capacity to engage in acts of knowledge, power and exchange across
time/space divides and social geographies, across diverse communities,
populations and epistemic stances.” (2004, p. 1429)

Essentially, the acquisition of intercultural capital includes a flexible and critical understanding of self in relation to others in a world of shifting relations. The ability to engage with different texts and different cultures, different forms of knowledge and different kinds of people, to cross borders and move beyond boundaries become desired traits of a cosmopolitan self. In terms of literacy skills, the ability to read, and to read particular kinds of texts can place individuals in positions to negotiate their identities as individuals who possess symbolic and cultural capital, able to succeed in their pursuit of educational and work possibilities across borders.

This study focuses on how three adolescent boys in Singapore make use of the resources they have to position themselves as global literate individuals. Through their
flexible reading practices, both in and out of school, they position themselves as cosmopolitan individuals who are able to access different texts differently for different purposes. This knowledge of texts is intercultural capital, which allows the boys to place themselves in strategic positions in relation to both global and local flows of knowledge.

**Rationale for Study**

This study focuses on how three highly literate adolescent boys in Singapore constructed their identities as global and local citizens through their school and out-of-school reading practices. In terms of their literacy skills, these boys have every resource for learning to read and are highly capable readers who are immersed in practices of reading both in school and out of school. There has been little research on readers who are highly literate (see Ivey, 1999 for a case study) and none in the context of reading identities in a world that is increasingly global. This study answers the call for more research on adolescents and education in a global context (Dolby & Rizvi, 2008; Maira & Soep, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, 2001, Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hillard, 2004) by examining how three adolescent boys in an elite all-boys school construct their identities as readers and citizens through their in school and out-of school reading practices in a globalized world.

Adolescence is a defining period in the formation of one’s identity, a turning point away from childhood into adult worlds (Erikson, 1968). In terms of their development as readers of fiction, adolescence is a time of maturation, when readers develop the capacity to reflect on stories to think about the “claims for competing truths in their own lives” (Appleyard, 1990, p. 101). At the same time, the kinds of texts read are a way for these adolescents to project themselves as particular kinds of readers and particular kinds of
persons (Finders, 1997; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008; Moss, 2007). Thus, understanding the everyday reading practices of these adolescents are a way for educators to understand how these adolescents learn to see themselves in relation to the world around them.

In terms of literacy research, much recent research has engaged with the issue of multiple literacies and multimodalities or what is termed “new literacies” (e.g., Beavis, 2008; Black, 2009; Gee, 2004; Kenway & Bullen, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; New London Group, 1996; Pahl & Roswell, 2006). The emphasis of current research on new semiotic forms belies the fact that print literacy remains an important form of literacy learning, albeit interacting with other new media forms (Collins & Blot, 2003; Wallace, 2003). The ability to read particular kinds of texts at particular times serve as a form of intercultural capital, as these boys are able to engage in “acts of knowledge, power, and exchange” (Luke, 2004, p. 1429) through their ability to exercise relevant reading skills at appropriate times. What has been unexamined is how highly literate students are able to exercise their agency to construct literate identities that allow them to insert themselves into the global flows of information and identities. These boys are able to fashion themselves in ways that are appropriate for a global world, albeit taking very different routes.

In addition, few studies have focused on the reading and identity practices of boys (cf. Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 2001; Finders, 1997; Walkerdine, 1990 studies on girls' reading and identity practices). Studies on boys’ reading practices have tended to portray boys as uninterested in narratives, and more interested in plot-driven stories if they read at all (e.g., Millard, 1997; Simpson, 1996). It is only more recently that studies
on gender and literacy have called for understanding the complexity of gender and literacy research (e.g., Moss, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Young & Bozo, 2003), situating gender-based literacy studies at the intersection of race and ethnicity, and social class (e.g., Dutro, 2003; Solsken, 1993). This study aims to complicate our understanding of boys reading narratives by examining the reading and identity practices of boys who can and do read.

**Perspectives**

*Reading and Identity Practices at the Intersection of the Social and the Imaginative in a Globalized World*

From sociocultural perspectives, literacies are best understood as situated practices (e.g., Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Heath, 1986; Luke & Freebody, 1997a; Street, 1984) that need to be contextualized in place and time. In line with what has come to be known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS), I recognize the need to pay attention to the micropolitics of local literacies. However, I also recognize the need to broaden our understanding of situated literacies by placing these literacies in the context of both local and global flows (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Pahl & Roswell, 2006). Globalization has far-reaching consequences, and affects even the most ordinary everyday practices (Giddens, 1991) such as reading. Book markets of production and international consumption practices, cross-media influences and reviewers are but some of the influences that shape the readings that are localized in the Singapore context by these adolescent readers. They exercise their agency in their reading choices and practices in the context of global and local flows.
I also foreground the role of the imagination in a study that grounds itself in the social. The imagined worlds (Anderson, 1991; Appadurai, 1996) of individuals very much shape the direction of and interaction in social life. For example, youths imagine and construct cosmopolitan identities through their participation in online fan fiction communities (Black, 2009), through engagement with movies (Giardina, 2008; Schneider, 2005), and even in their participation in sales and consumption practices of international make-up products (Fadzillah, 2005). In the same way, through their reading practices, the boys in this study imagined themselves as particular kinds of persons and also constructed their identities as readers and cosmopolitan citizens in a world that is concurrently local and global.

**Reading Individuals: Understanding Reading Histories and Identity Practices**

"A reader is a person in history, a person with a history."

(Jane Miller, 1990 cited in Hicks, 2002, p. 35)

Ien Ang (2000), a media scholar, has underscored the need to understand lived histories of readers and viewers in sociocultural and historical contexts. In Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain’s (1998) terms, readers make daily “improvisations” in their everyday practices. Improvisations are imromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no response. Such improvisations are the openings by which change comes about from generation to generation … there is a continual process of heuristic development: individuals and groups are always (re)forming themselves.
as persons and collectives through cultural materials created in the immediate and the more distant past.” (2001, pp. 17-18)

Thus, identity construction is an ongoing and fluid process (Gergen, 1994; McCarthey & Moje, 2002) where the individual draws on individual and collective history to make moment-by-moment everyday decisions that become part of the history of the individual. Narrative texts and the stories in these texts are cultural artifacts (Wertsch, 2002) that mediate the construction of identity by providing room for conversations about self in relation to the world (Applebee, 1996; Bakhtin, 1981). For the boys in this study, their reading practices as well as their choice of texts are a way for them to construct their identities as well as engage in thinking about identity.

Holland et al.’s (1998) notion of identity-in-practice speaks to the improvisational aspect of everyday lived actions, including the practice of reading. Holland et al. focus on the concepts of “figured worlds” and “positionality” to contextualize identity-in-practice. “Figured worlds” are “the frames of meaning in which interpretations of human actions or negotiated” (p. 271). They are the frameworks (Taylor, 1989) or cultural worlds (Gee, 1996) or imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) that direct words and actions in everyday lived realities. “Positionality” relates to the relational aspect of identity, and “is inextricably linked with power, status, and rank” (p. 271). Positionality has to do with durable social positions – such as gender, race and ethnicity, and class – as well as more temporal arrangements – such as group affiliations – which are adjusted for each new situation. For Holland et al., individuals “re-author” their worlds in order to make new worlds. In Bakhtinian terms of dialogicity, the worldviews of individuals are constantly
being shifted in response to other worldviews mediated by other social beings and texts. Thus, identity is relational, and constructed in relation to specific situations and persons.

This study focuses on the work of adolescent readers as individual agents, who while structurally constrained in some ways, are able to shift boundaries to manage their identities as literate persons. In an age of “reflexive living” (Giddens, 1991) where individuals have more choices than ever regarding their identity constructions despite continuing inequality (Bauman, 1997; Castell, 1997; Harvey, 2005), it is important to pay attention to the role of individuals in constructing specific literate identities that are multiple and fluid (Cynthia Lewis & Del Valle, 2009). Adolescents in this media-saturated age of mass migrations, particularly those in first world countries, have to learn to be what Gee (2004) terms, “shape shifting portfolio people” or “shape shifters,” who are able to manage their portfolio for surviving in a globalized world where change is the only constant. The acquisition of a literate self (or selves) relevant for a neoliberal economy requires constant engagement with texts and identities, both in and out of the school curriculum. Reading, then is a way for these boys to construct their identities as specific kinds of literate persons for a globalized world.

**An Overview of the Study**

I enjoy reading fiction from authors like Chuck Palahniuk and Lionel Shriver, don’t really enjoy fantasy however. I tend to read in spurts, sometimes I go for months without reading a proper novel during school term. During holidays and such however, I can devour 2-3 books in a week. I read mostly for entertainment.

(Sanjeev, 15 years old, Preliminary survey 2008)
I love sports and am a big fan of “chick lit”. You see me reading books by Jodi Picoult, Dan Brown, Michael Connelly, and right now, I’m reading *One Fifth Avenue* by Candace Bushnell. Reading has come naturally to me since I was a kid. I read when I’m not doing something else.

(Michael, 15 years old, Preliminary survey 2008)

I enjoy surreal humor, measured cynicism and unconventional, new ideas. Generally, I enjoy science fiction, humor, and fantasy books, in particular disguised social commentaries like Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld*.

Otherwise, in terms of internationally recognized literature, I become bored easily with those termed as “classics” – there is too much that can be found in other books – but prefer slightly irreverent books which explore new – for me – perspectives.

(Robert, 15 years old, Preliminary survey 2008)

This study initially started out as a case study of six adolescent boys’ reading and identity practices. The study was situated in an elite all-boys school in Singapore, and took place over the period of a year from September 2008 to September 2009. However, I eventually chose to focus on the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of three students - Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert. Although I wrote fieldnotes, conducted interviews, and exchanged emails with all six students, it became clear as I worked through the data that it was only through close examinations of individual students that I would be able to best develop case studies that could inform my understanding of the reading and identity practices of these boys. I elected to work with Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert eventually
because their cases best exemplified three different attitudes towards the global and the local in their reading and identity practices.

Attention to three boys allowed me to focus in-depth on the meaning-making processes and the practices of individual boys. In line with the turn in anthropological work towards complexity and individual agency (L. M. Ahearn, 2001; Holland, et al., 1998; Ortner, 1994), I focused on complexities and contradictions even while keeping an eye on consistencies. Studies from reader response perspectives have shown that even readers from seemingly similar cultures come to the same readings with different expectations and responses as a result of their individual backgrounds and history (e.g., N. Holland, 1975; Solsken, 1993; Sutherland, 2005). I hope that the case studies will provide “telling cases” (Mitchell, 1983) of how highly capable readers construct their identities as readers and as global/local citizens in one specific context.

The choice to site the study in Singapore is based on the fact that Singapore, a small Southeast Asian city-state, is very much dependent on global flows. At the same time, educational decisions are affected by the official preoccupation of what it means to be Singaporean, which paradoxically includes the deliberate crafting of a global identity or cosmopolitan identity suitable for global markets (Velayutham, 2007). Issues of identity or the Singaporean subjectivity are seen as an issue of national concern to be managed by the government for economic survival, even in the area of culture (Wee, 2007), and the local is very much tied up with the global in such conversations about nation and world.

I was very fortunate that the administration and teachers at Ace Independent (pseudonym used), a school I had taught at formerly, allowed me to work with the
students over the course of a year. As a national school with its curriculum and instructional practices designed around the principles of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, the education in Ace Independent was geared towards preparing students towards global citizenship (IBO, n.d.), while keeping National Education objectives in mind.

This study’s objective is to understand how Sanjeev, Michael and Robert constructed their identities as readers and local/global citizens both in their school and out of school practices. They identified themselves as readers who read during their leisure time, despite their perception of how well they read for school purposes. These boys’ identities as readers are constructed rather than natural occurrences (Heath, 2005; Luke & Freebody, 1997b), although they take for granted their inclination and their ability to read. The cultures of home and school in which they have been immersed in provided them with the resources with which to construct their identities as readers and as particular kinds of readers. In the three quotations by Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert at the beginning of this section, it is clear that they all see themselves as readers who consume books in their leisure time. At the same time, the reading choices of these three focal students are varied despite home and class similarities. These boys actively constructed their identities as readers both in and out of school through their decisions about what to read and how to read.

For these boys who have grown up in homes where English is the home language and where reading stories written in English (almost always inadvertently including classic children staples such as Enid Blyton, C. S. Lewis and Roald Dahl) formed part of their childhood experience, learning to read and reading has been very much a taken-for-
granted part of their identity. This immersion in an environment of reading seems well-suited to success in school reading (Agee & Altarriba, 2009; Moje, et al., 2008) and these boys are highly literate by national standards, studying in an elite all-boys school and preparing for their future studies in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP). The literary study that constituted their Language Arts program in school aimed to develop these boys as fluent and literate students for a global world. In addition, English is the default “native” language of these boys, even if they speak one or two other languages fluently. They are positioned as facile users of the English language in a country where English is valued as a language of mobility in a globalized world.

Clearly then, both home and school practices contributed to these high-school aged boys’ construction of themselves as highly literate and flexible global citizens. I was interested to find out how these boys, who have every resource to reading both in and out of school, conceived of reading and its relevance to their everyday lives. Although this is a study situated in one locality, it is a locality where diverse global and local flows interact even at the level of the everyday practices of reading. I hope that the case studies of Michael, Sanjeev and Robert’s reading and identity practices will “illuminate” (Eisner, 1998) our understanding of how highly literate adolescent boys exercise their agency in constructing reading identities for a global world.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question that guided this study was: How did three adolescent boys who are highly capable readers construct their identities as local/global citizens through their reading practices?
The sub-questions are as follows:

(1) In what contexts were the reading and identity of these boys situated?

(2) How did they perceive themselves as readers?

(3) How did they perceive themselves as local/global citizens?

(4) What were their conceptions of their school and out-of-school reading practices?

(5) How did their school and out-of-school readings intersect?

(6) How did they construct their identities as global/local citizens through their reading practices?

**Organization of the Study**

In Chapter Two, I give an overview of the theoretical perspectives and relevant research that inform this study. In Chapter Three, I discuss the methodology and methods that guide the study. In Chapter Four, I contextualize the study and discuss the findings of three case study students: Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert. I give a detailed description of these boys’ reading and identity practices. In Chapter Five, I discuss the cross-case analysis and conclude the study, engaging specifically with the overarching question about how these highly capable adolescent readers constructed their identities as local and global citizens through their reading practices. Thereafter, I conclude and discuss the implications of the study.
CHAPTER TWO

Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

In this chapter, I situate my research in the context of studies of identity and literacy from sociocultural perspectives, particularly situated approaches to the study of literacy. To do so, I turn to the work of what has been called New Literacy Studies (NLS) and ethnographic studies of reading and identity. Both bodies of work highlight the need to understand reading as situated practices to be understood in their sociocultural and historical contexts. Both bodies of work also highlight the interconnection between literacy and identity construction, focusing on the agency of individual readers set within sociocultural and historical contexts. Finally, I highlight the need to examine localizations of situated reading practices in the context of global flows, and also emphasize the role of the imagination in these adolescent boys’ everyday practices of reading and identity construction.

Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives from Sociocultural Studies

Work from sociocultural perspectives assume that reading is a “socially framed activity” (Long, 1993), situated in social contexts (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Luke & Freebody, 1997b). Reading as part of a set of literacy practices is viewed as a constructed practice shaped in large part by sociocultural factors (e.g., Cherland, 1994; Heath, 1986; Long, 1993; Twomey, 2007), and the value accorded to different reading practices, whether in the classroom or at home or in society, only makes sense when understood as situated practices, located in particular times, places and spaces.
Studies from the New Literacy Study (NLS) tradition focus on situated everyday practices of local literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1986; Street, 1984). The origin for NLS has often been attributed to Brian Street (1984) in his seminal work, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, where he challenged the idea of an autonomous literacy or a universal, overarching literacy. In *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Street proposed in his ideological model of literacy that there is not one literacy, but many local literacies that need to be understood in their sociocultural and historical contexts of use. Additionally, Street debunked the idea of a neutral literacy, pointing out that literacy is an ideologically-laden social construct.

NLS work has since contributed to the understanding of plural literacies, to cross-cultural differences across nation, races and class (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1986; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Street, 1984). The attention to local literacies foreground language and cultural practices that had until then been ignored in favor of studies of schooled or universal literacies. Attention to specific contexts of uses of literacy has highlighted the different uses of different kinds of literacies as well as the creativity inherent in everyday practices of literacy. In addition, NLS scholars have highlighted the agency of individuals who actively shape their literacy and identity practices (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Pahl, 2008), using the resources available to them.

However, with few exceptions (e.g., Gregory & Williams, 2000; Heath, 1986), most of these studies focused on out-of-school literacies, focusing on the creativity of local literacies in everyday contexts of use. The lack of attention to school literacy in relation to out-of-school practices actually neglects the power relations so strongly
emphasized in the NLS tradition (Collins & Blot, 2003; Wallace, 2003). By ignoring the intersection between school and out-of-school literacies, NLS scholars fail to engage in a nuanced examination of the relation between school and out-of-school literacies, and the power relation between the two different kinds of literacies. After-all, the micropolitics of power are present in the everyday practices of literacies and identities where individuals are marked and valued by the kinds of literacies they are seen to possess (Collins & Blot, 2003).

Collins and Blot’s (2003) in *Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power & Identity* point to the complexities of literacy and power at institutional levels and at the level of everyday practices. Using Foucault’s notion of the micro-techniques of “disciplinary power” in *Discipline and Punish* (1975, pp. 170-228 in Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 73), they argue that

… power is neither centralized nor repressive in the usual sense; it is unlike the raw coercion of dynastic monarchies, of the lord’s bailiff or the king’s army. Instead it is pervasive and complex, insinuating itself into the modern subjectivity, bringing the identities and physical characteristics of ordinary populations within the purview of bureaucratic procedure. (pp. 73-74)

In their view, schooling and literacy are sites of struggle for power and for definitions of what it means to belong – “being American” (p. 74) – by different groups within the nation. Issues of gender, race and ethnicity and class are linked to historically situated practices of reading and writing, and these literacy practices saturated with social categories are inscribed unto individual subjectivities, becoming what Collins and Blot term “acts of self-making: identification and potential sensed through books” (p. 97). As
such, there is a need to be attentive to the intersection between school and out-of-school literacy practices in order to understand how adolescent students are able to engage in acts of knowledge and power through the construction of literate identities that are relevant both nationally and globally.

**Imagining Self and World**

While the study of reading practices reveals how identity is performed and projected through reading practices, a more complete understanding of reading requires acknowledgement that the reading of texts impacts upon the identity of the individual in an imaginative sense. Narratives mediate our view of the world, and we interact with the worldviews of texts to imagine self in relation to world. Official texts serve to construct definitions of what it means to be American, Russian, Chinese or Singaporean (Collins & Blot, 2003; Luke, 1988; Wertsch, 2002) and unofficial readings can play a definitive role in the shaping of identity, as bell hooks describes in her memoirs (in Hicks, 2002). For example, the reading of romance novels may have the effect of inscribing traditional female roles to their readers (e.g., see Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 2001; Finders, 1997; Radway, 1984; Walkerdine, 1990).

I turn to the role of the imagination as the shaping force in constructing new worlds through media and social interaction in both global and local forces. Much youth research or study of “youthscapes” (Maira & Soep, 2005) has drawn on Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” to explore how youths construct new worlds in their media and social interaction with both global and local forces (e.g., Black, 2009; Dolby & Rizvi, 2008; Fadzillah, 2005; Lam, 2006; Maira, 2004; Maira & Soep, 2005; Schneider, 2005). The term “imagination” captures a sense of the constructed worlds and
projected desires that youths experience in their interaction with semiotic forms, including textual narratives. Textual mediation of various worldviews, national or otherwise, serve to influence the multiple imaginings of youths, who construct identities in relation to their understanding of the world as communicated through these media forms.

One significant work that deals with the intersection between the social and the imaginative in reading is Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984), an ethnographic study of a group of women reading romance novels in a suburban town in the United States. Radway’s study is significant in its focus on audience response to a form of popular literature. Understanding reading as situated in its social context allowed Radway to distinguish between “the meaning of the act and the meaning of the text as read” (p. 210), that is, to distinguish between what the act of reading meant to the readers in their social world and the imaginative world the texts conveyed to the readers.

In Radway’s study, the genre of the romance novel often constructed a world of patriarchal relationships that encouraged the reproduction of traditional gender roles (imaginative exercise). Yet, paradoxically, these suburban housewives made use of the activity of reading romance novels as a subtle form of resistance against what was expected of them as housewives. For them, reserving time for their own reading pleasure was a way to protest against the expectations of “mothering,” expectations that they should be caring for their family all the time (social practice). Reading was both a way to imagine self and the world, and a way to construct an identity that resisted the mothering role that they found themselves fulfilling most of the day.
Another way to look at Radway’s (1984) study is to see it as a local study of the global phenomenon of romance reading in one suburban context. Romance novels are commercial cultural commodities, produced for the mass market for profit. In the specific context of Radway’s readers, the suburban housewives see the romances as a way for them to imagine romanticized heterosexual relationships in unknown settings in other worlds. Thus, one justification the women gave for reading romance novels was that it allowed them to travel to other times and places that were often times exotic and unusual.

The specificity of the reading experience of different groups of individuals are best illustrated when Radway’s (1984) study is contrasted with Parameswaran’s (2002) study. Based on Radway’s study, Parameswaran’s study focused on young Indian women in the urban city of Hyderabad, South India, reading romances. Like the Smithton readers in Radway’s (1984) study, reading romance novels was a way for the young Indian urbanites to escape the humdrum expectations of everyday life. However, for these young Indian urbanites, their “fascination for the commodities of Western material culture in imported romance fiction is located in their desire to experience their identities as cosmopolitan, global consumers” (2002, p. 832).

The reading of romance novels thus became a way for these young women to position themselves as knowledgeable cosmopolitans, by plugging themselves into global flows of book consumption. Additionally, like the Smithton readers, reading romance novels was a form of escape for these young women. However, rather than escape from the duties of mothering that the middle-class housewives of Smithton sought, these young Indian readers instead constructed “romance fiction as modern manuals on sexuality that afford them escape from the burdens of preserving the honour of family and community”
The romances were a way for the young Indian readers to imagine Western worlds, and to determine where they stood in relation to the worlds portrayed in the romances.

Radway’s (1984) and Parameswara’s (2002) studies illustrate the intersection of the social and imaginative in the experiences of women reading romances. In the same way, the reading practices of the boys in this study are situated both in social and imaginative worlds.

**Between the Social and the Imaginative: Three Studies**

In the following section, I consider three ethnographic studies by Heath (1986), Cherland (1994) and Solsken (1993) to illustrate the interplay between the social and the imaginative in studies of reading and identity practices.

**Social Dimensions of Home and School Practices of Reading**

Heath’s (1986) classic nearly decade long ethnographic study of three different communities in the Piedmont region of the southeastern United States compared language socialization in these three different communities with the formal language expectations found in mainstream schools. Heath’s investigation involved three communities: Roadville, a white working-class neighborhood, Trackton, an African-American neighborhood, and Maintown, a middle-class neighborhood comprising both ethnicities. Through detailed ethnographic description to their everyday literacy practices, both oral and written, Heath demonstrated that the children from different communities picked up different literacy practices that are normalized in their everyday practices of reading and writing, talking and listening in the home environment. She showed how a
disconnection between school and home literacies may hamper literacy learning at school and suggests ways in which the different cultures might be bridged.

For example, in *What No Bedtime Story Means*, Heath (2005) traces how the Maintown children of mainly professional parents are socialized into a specific pattern of literacy through the innocuous literacy event of the bedtime story. Maintown children learn a question-answer pattern as they interact with their parents when reading the story and are encouraged to make up creative stories. As they get older, their parents discourage them from interactive participation, encouraging instead quiet listening to stories. Together with their immersion in a print-rich environment at home, these children learned to pay attention to books and to respond to books in particular ways. They are thus socialized into literate behaviours that are rewarded in school – the question and answer sequence, writing narrative fiction, and quiet listening – that further encouraged learning within the school system. The alignment of home and school literacy practices prepared the Maintown children better than the children of Roadville and Trackton to succeed in school-based literacies. Like the children of the privileged in Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) study of University French, the Maintown children are predisposed through home language socialization to mastering schooled forms of literacy. They were able to plug into systems of knowledge that were relevant for advancement in school.

Heath’s (1986, 2005) study demonstrates that children do not just learn to decode words at home and in school but are learning “ways with words” that characterize the way they see the world. For example, she shows how the children of Roadville are taught in their interaction with adults that only factual stories are to be told; whereas for Trackton children, the most exaggerated stories are the best stories: “For Roadville,
Trackton’s stories would be lies; for Trackton, Roadville’s stories would not even count as stories” (Heath, 1983, p. 189, in Toolan, 2001, p. 160).

These widely differing attitudes towards narratives in everyday practices shape the way these children make sense of language and the way language is used to frame the stories of everyday life. It is clear from Heath’s (1986, 2005) data that these attitudes become part of the identities of children from different communities. In Gee’s terms, it can be said that the children are socialized into various Discourses or ways of "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing" as part of their “identity kit” (1996, p. 127). These literacy practices ascribe themselves as part of the identities of these children who then learn to see themselves as particular kinds of literate persons.

Heath’s (1986, 2005) work makes visible the socialization process of literacy, pointing to how children acquire particular literate dispositions both in home and schooling contexts. These literate dispositions are intimately tied to their identities and seeped in particular lived cultural histories. The everyday practices of reading and writing, talking and listening become ways that individuals see and engage with the world. For the children of the different communities, their perception of the norm is shaped by the everyday literacy practices they engage in. Heath’s ethnographic work demonstrates the importance of understanding literacy as socially situated practices (see Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hicks, 2002; Street, 1984 for other examples) where lived cultural realities are embedded into the practices and hence, identities of individuals.

For the boys in this study, their reading abilities and the fact that they consume books out of school are very much part of their reading identities. Like the Maintown children who were exposed to print from young, the adolescent boys have grown up with
reading as an encouraged activity. As such, they learn to see themselves as reading persons, for whom reading narratives is very much part of everyday practice.

Experimentation with print and reading at home prepare these boys to learn school literacies. Their acquisition of reading skills in primary school then further prepare them to acquire literary reading skills as part of their literacy repertoire in secondary school. However, while Heath’s (1986) study underscores how these boys’ reading and identity practices may be socially situated, it does not explain individual constructions of self as reader, a gap that Cherland’s (1994) study hints at and Solsken’s (1993) study fills.

**Gendered Social and Imaginative Practices of Reading**

Cherland’s (1994) study of girls reading literature in Oaktown, a middle school in an affluent Canadian neighborhood, takes us into the schooled and private reading practices of seven sixth grade girls to show us that reading literature is “constructed, not natural, learned, not given” (Luke, 1994, series editor introduction, xiv). Cherland moves away from psychological studies of literacy towards a psychosocial perspective that is concerned with what reading meant to the girls (p. 24), focusing primarily on reading as a social practice. Cherland examined the practices of reading fiction both at home and school to determine what reading meant to these girls. Cherland’s study is an example of a feminist study of reading and identity, and provides a contrast against which to examine boys’ reading and identity practices.

Cherland demonstrates how gender practices infused literacy practices both at home and in school. Cherland explained that “because the practice of reading served both as a means of doing gender and as a way of responding to other family members, it became a powerful site of cultural reproduction” (p. 92). The girls “did” literacy or
constructed literacy by following in their mother’s footsteps, reading fiction and talking
about fiction with their peers, as their mothers did. Reading fiction was seen as an
appropriate past-time for girls; whereas boys were expected to be more active and less
interested in reading. In addition to learning how to do gender through literacy from their
mothers, the girls’ reading of series fiction such as Sweet Valley Twins and Sweet Valley
High provided them “with access to textual constructions of gender” that positioned the
girls to “grow into certain kinds of women” (p. 96). Like the suburban romance readers
of Radway’s (1984) Reading the Romance and teenage working-class girls in Christian’s
Smith’s (2001) study, these sixth grade girls constructed feminine worlds through their
engagement with their reading of fiction. Thus, cultural reproduction of social habits of
reading as well as ways of imagining their roles in their social world were mediated by
their reading practices and their access to particular kinds of texts. This gendered literacy
was reinforced in consumption practices with bookstores marketing ‘girl books’ and ‘boy
books’ with series books such as Satin Slippers arranged attractively on shelves in
bookstores.

Yet, while the girls often appropriated the gendered cultural messages embedded
in books they read, the messages and worldviews in the books could not be assumed to be
singular and undistinguished. In addition, the girls themselves often negotiated and
contested the worldviews presented in the texts, at times embracing them, other times
rejecting them, partially or completely. For example, the girls read books from the
Babysitter series about middle-class preadolescent “good” girls who lived in the same
neighborhood. The characters were model girls who did the housework, beautified
themselves and loved their families, providing a comparable model of adult female
agency. At the same time, these characters “renegotiated the cultural messages of these texts” by making money through babysitting, which they then “used to achieve their own ends” (p. 167). By choosing to read these books, the girls adopted specific concepts about being female and being independent.

Moreover, the girls in Cherland’s study exercised agency by choosing books that they preferred, often with heroines who were able to exercise agency in their personal lives. The reading of these books as well as the shared community of girls who would discuss the books became discursive spaces for the constant negotiation and renegotiation of identity. In addition, plots and heroines themselves changed in response to the market – Radway (1991) points to trends towards more independent and unconventional heroines in romance novels in her closing chapters of *Reading the Romance*.

Despite focusing on the social constructedness of the girls’ reading and identity practices, Cherland (1994) demonstrates that the girls possessed individual agency in determining their choice of reading and their responses to stories read. In the same way that the girls chose their own readings and responded to them as individuals, the boys in this study choose to read different books, and responded to the same books differently. So while reading may be socially constrained by class or gender in some ways, the act of reading is ultimately an individual act where the individual reader, male or female, selects his or her own books and responds to them accordingly.

Cherland’s (1994) study also illustrates the imaginative aspect of reading. The worldviews presented in the texts become ways for the girls to try on alternative figured worlds where their roles might differ from that imposed on them in daily life. At the same time, because of dominant constructions of female agency, there was some limit to their
explorations of alternative worlds. The inevitability of cultural norms against which individual contestations take place remains necessary, even if problematic (Butler, 1998). In order to know one’s identity, one needs to state what one is not. The naturalized order of things where gendered practices are made invisible provides the framework, the structure against which these girls negotiate their identities.

Cherland (1994) also demonstrates the influence of curriculum on reading and identity practices. She showed how the institution of schooling conveys a “hidden curriculum” (Jackson, 1968 in Cherland, 1994, p. 118) through the texts chosen as well as the kinds of knowledge that are transmitted through the chosen methods of teaching these texts. For Cherland, curriculum contestations are really contestations about constructing dominant ways of viewing the world, and multiple frames of gender, nation, race and ethnicity, class are but some of the marked categories from which struggles issue. Texts read as well as the ways in which they are read serve to project particular preferred national identities and dominant national images (Collins & Blot, 2003; Luke, 1988). Anderson argues that official texts serve to mediate an “imagined community” (also see Wertsch, 2002) to project the vision of shared characteristics by citizens of individual nations.

It is thus important to recognize the role of the curriculum in shaping constructions of the world. While Cherland (1994) focused on gendered visions of the world shaped through curriculum choices, other visions of the world may be shaped by curriculum choices. For example, in this study, the choice of the school, Ace Independent, to include canonical texts alongside postcolonial literature positioned the ideal student as one who should be aware of classic English canonical texts and more
recent writings in English, specifically from postcolonial perspectives. The identity of the
ideal Ace Independent student is in part prescribed by texts chosen, and the boys
demonstrate their ability to construct these identities through their ability to talk about
and write about the chosen texts.

Complex Orientations towards Literacy

Solsken’s (1993) three year study of 13 children’s emergent literacy practices
complicates our understanding of gender and literacy by pointing out that even within
seemingly homogenous groups of children and compatible classroom pedagogies (cf.
Heath, 1986), the paths to literacy for both boys and girls are not uniform (see Moss,
2008 for another study on gender and literacy). Solsken’s attention to how thirteen
children negotiate their identity and status through their literacy practices at home and in
school demonstrate variation even between same-sex relations to literacy. She argues that
“the choices children made about how to participate in family literacy events were also
choices about who they were as individuals and as family members, and that their choices
constituted an orientation towards literacy that they brought into the classroom and larger
society” (p. 22). Solsken’s study reminds us that there is no one formula and history for a
reading child.

Solsken’s (1993) study highlights the complex negotiation of the individual
within the dynamics of family and school, and how these dynamics are connected to
relations of status and power in larger society. Through the use of learning biographies to
give detailed descriptions of her case study children over a period of time (pre-
kindergarten to Grade Two), readers get a sense of the history (both change and
continuity) in the literacy practices of these children, and a sense of how they negotiated
literacy and identity practices as they moved through school. Their ability to read and write improved in varying capacities, as did their motivation for reading and writing and their identification of themselves as capable readers and/or writers. Their social relations with important people in their home and school lives, such as parents, siblings, teachers and peers, and their perception of their identity as specific kinds of persons and readers influenced each child’s negotiation of literacy learning.

For example, there was little conflict or tension around literacy for one female student, Beatrix. Home and school literacy practices and values aligned with each other, and her own identity as a reader and writer who initiated and self-regulated reading and writing for her own purposes did not put her in conflict with gender and work relations. In fact, Beatrix did not seem to let gender divisions affect her view of reading and writing, a fact perhaps influenced by both her parents’ involvement in her literacy experiences at home. Jane, another student, however, resembled descriptions of feminine literacy learning, choosing to keep quiet and listen attentively. Although she was placed in the top reading group, her orientation towards literacy led her to define the classroom space as one where it was unsafe to take risks. Thus, she did not venture much participation unless certain, and it was not until Grades One and Two that she began to engage in the more public displays of literacy, such as sharing her published work and taking questions during Author’s Circle.

On the other hand, two other male students experienced literacy in kindergarten very differently. Jack viewed literacy work as adult-sponsored rather than play-related and his motivation for literacy work was the approval of adults, and also, his peers. Unlike Jack, however, Luke’s orientation towards literacy led him to cross-purposes with
his teacher. His perception of reading and writing as adult-sponsored work led him to resist attention to print in kindergarten. The reaction to school literacy seen to be a continuation of his reaction to home practices, where literacy was viewed as a feminine activity commonly engaged in by his mother and sister. This view of literacy only changed in Grade One when a male teacher provided a role model for Luke to see that literacy practices were not just for girls.

For Solsken (1993), there is “no single story to tell about the way gender figures in literacy learning, but many stories connected by themes and contradictions that characterize gender and work relations in larger society” (p. 168, emphasis mine). She writes that

From this new vantage point [of social status and identity], we see children constructing not only literacy knowledge and practices, but themselves and their relations with others, their histories and their futures. We see children as complex human beings making places for themselves in a complex society, an activity that cannot be reduced to a predictable cognitive development or to socialization into a set of shared social practices. Nor is it satisfactory to reduce the individuality of children’s learning to inborn differences in cognitive style and personality or to idiosyncrasies of social intention and experience. Rather, we must reconstruct our notions of individuality and social systems to account for ways in which structuring processes of gender and class operate in the literacy learning of individuals. (p. 214, emphasis mine)

Examining the reading history of each child provided clear pictures of the “regulated improvisations” (Bourdieu, 1977) within which literacy and identity practices are
negotiated and renegotiated. Children’s reading practices need to be understood within larger social and cultural networks as they are worked out in the everyday practices of home and school, adult and peer relationships. The orientations towards texts and the acquisition of particular identities as readers and literate persons are not isolated from overlapping structure power relations of gender, race and ethnicity, and class. At the same time, it is in the ordinary everyday practices of school and home that these children worked out the practical and individual constructions of identity in relation to the social world around them and the historical structures that imbued everyday practices. These are complex practices, stories and histories that are unique to each reading child.

Solsken’s (1993) use of learning biographies provides a historical overview of individual movements. It pays attention to the life histories of individuals, alerting us to the small things that are infused with structural realities and struggles. Themes and patterns emerge from cross-case analysis, but at the same time, the children’s complex negotiations of gender and class in relation to social status and identity are revealed. Structures do have a deep impact on developing personalities and individual orientations to literacy but they are not deterministic. Learning biographies are thus a way in which individual improvisations may be traced and made visible in ethnographic studies. In the same way, this study pays attention to individual improvisations, telling three different stories about three adolescent boys’ reading and identity practices in order to complicate our understanding of adolescent boys’ reading and identity practices.

For the children in Solsken’s (1993) study, home and school constitute the main networks within which changing relations to social networks and literacy develop. Within their limited but gradually expanding scope, choice and social relations expanded. Not
surprisingly then, adolescents’ expanding networks of social worlds, whether physical or virtual, mean increasing complication in their negotiations of texts, identities and literacies as they participate in different worlds, both physical and virtual. Thus, even while focusing on specific literacies and social relations within which these literacy practices are set, it is important to keep an eye on the multiple sites of literacies and the social relations within different networks that adolescents participate in.

Local and Global Literacies: Situating Reading and Identity Practices in a Globalized World

Cherland’s (1994) and Solsken’s (1993) study, set in the 1990s, and Heath’s (1986) study, set in the 1970s-80s, assume a more stable world of traditional categories than today’s globalized postmodernity where global and local forces intersect on a daily level. Today, adolescent youths are exposed to a greater variety of semiotic and linguistic texts in their daily lives. For example, mass media facilitates North American youths’ engagement in manga or anime (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Mackey, 2007) and Asian youths in hip-hop music, localized (Pennycook, 2005). Even in the midst of writing this dissertation, the death of Michael Jackson had sparked worldwide interest and participation in his works, demonstrating how individuals from different parts of the world engage with the semiotic influences of what is on the surface America pop culture.

The nature of life in the 21st century has altered with technological transformations that have made possible the interactions of millions via mass media and mass migration. In a context where global flows intermingle with local flows on a daily basis, change is an inevitable fact of daily life. This “time-space compression” (Harvey, 2001) has resulted in reorganization of traditional forms of institutional and identity
work. Self-reflexivity is a trait of these new times where “…the question, ‘How shall I live?’ has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and eat – and many other things – as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity” (Giddens, 1991, p. 14).

In addition, imagination plays a significant role in this “postelectronic world”, invading the everyday lives of ordinary people and empowering people to charter “new social projects”, moving “the glacial force of the habitus into the quickened beat of improvisation for large groups of people” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 6). Tomlinson (1999) argues that the "deteritorialization" of time and space where localities are constantly being transformed requires perspective changes that works towards the idea of cosmopolitanism as a necessary cultural disposition, particularly where difference and complexity are part of daily living (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hillard, 2004).

In this globalized world, youths move in a world that is very different from that of their parents (Dolby & Rivzi, 2008; Maira & Soep, 2005; Suarez-Oroco & Qin-Hillard, 2004). In the realm of travel, privileged youths may jetset across countries as part of their routine (e.g., Dolby & Rivzi, 2008), immigrants may move across continents in search of a new life while seeking to keep connections with their old (e.g., Maira, 2004; Sarroub, 2005), and youths may travel across nations for further studies (e.g., Rizvi, 2000; Singh & Doherty, 2008). In the virtual world, youths may engage in fan culture (e.g., Schneider, 2005), online chat groups (e.g., Lam, 2006), or online fan fiction groups (e.g., Black, 2009).

In the face of these technological transformations and people movements, the role of education and definitions of what counts as knowledge needs to be constantly re-
assessed (Kelly, Luke & Green, 2008; Surarez-Oroco & Qin-Hillard, 2004). It is not so much the acquisition of knowledge but the relation to knowledge, the ability to manipulate knowledge that is the currency in today’s world (Reich, 1991). To be literate involves more than knowing how to read and write; it involves knowing what to read and write, and how to read and write under the right circumstances.

In terms of reading, books remain a staple consumer commodity in this globalized world though the nature of consumer engagement with books has changed somewhat. Beyond reading, youths engage in activities surrounding books and other media such as fan fiction (Black, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) and cross-media readings (Hamer, 2009). The consumption of books is mediated and encouraged by news and online reviews, movie releases (e.g., *Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings*), and giant booksellers’ such as Borders’ bestseller’s list. The global is localized just as local traditions may become globalized in the transnational flows of people and information.

In this context of the inevitable interconnectedness between the local and the global, Brandt and Clinton (2002) argue that “more is going on locally than just local practice” (p. 338), even while acts of literacy are situated and localized in specific contexts. In Brandt and Clinton’s critique of the tendency of the NLS to focus on the local to the neglect of linking the local to global flows, they demonstrate that literacy can serve as a “transcontextualized and transcontextualizing” technology, while “locally manifested, nevertheless can function to delocalize or even disrupt local life” (p. 338). They point to the potential of literacy practices to travel across borders, and complicate literacy as a social practice by pointing to both the globalizing and localizing effects of literacy practices.
One example of a form of transnational literacy is curriculum programs that promise “globalised literacy” and that are moved across contexts. These curriculum programs are then constructed in different contexts of the importers of this literacy curriculum (Freebody & Freiberg, 2008). The International Baccalaureate curriculum is one example of international curriculum that is localized for local contexts. Another example of pedagogy travelling across contexts is how DeBono’s concept of “six thinking hats”, a cognitive thinking model, is taken off the internet for use by primary school teachers (Nichols, 2006). Furthermore, in out-of-school contexts, books as cultural products are produced and consumed across borders (Hesmondhalgh, 2007).

Ways of thinking about literature and literary texts are also another form of transnational literacy. While there are continual contestations about what counts as classics (Gates Jr, 1992; Tompkins, 1986), ways of thinking about works such as Shakespeare have a way of moving across colonial oceans (Said, 1993; Viswanthan, 1989). British and colonial impositions of the value of English literature (that is, British or other Eurocentric literature) remain dominant, particularly in a world where the English language, for reasons historical and economical, is the lingua franca (Graddol, 2006) of business. Against the dominant staying power of the English canon is the postcolonial voice that would place the language and work of the colonized nation on equal footing with preconceived imbued notions of Eurocentric superiority. In the Singapore context, the school curriculum is a place where global and national notions of what counts as literature are localized to a workable, practical curriculum trying to manage different aims of inculcating citizens into canonical English works and local literary works. In addition, the perceived need to construct citizens as cosmopolitan
global citizens require new considerations of literacy which take into account the genre of world literature.

The term “global citizenship” and “local citizenship”, already mentioned several times, serves to position the dual roles of these adolescent readers as dwellers in two different sociocultural, economic and political spheres of nation and world. The notion of citizenship comes tied with issues of rights and responsibilities. An increasingly globalized world means that the local is imbued with global flows, and that the local may travel beyond locality. Appadurai’s (1996) concept of “-scapes” (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes) in his marking out of the five dimensions of global cultural flows provides us with a view of the fluidity of flows across and beyond nations in a globalized world.

The adolescent boys in this study shape their literate identities in the context of these global flows. In Gee’s terms, these boys are “shape-shifting portfolio people” (2004, p. 93) who are able to fashion themselves through acquisition of literacies and identities that are relevant for the new capitalism of the 21st century. The language used to talk about books both in school and out-of-school contexts are specialist languages the boys have adopted as part of their identities, as discourses they are familiar with and that are natural to their portrayal of their cosmopolitan selves. Through their reading practices, both in and out of school, these boys are able to portray themselves as cosmopolitan citizens both of Singapore and the world, ready for a globalized world. It is in this context that I examine how these boys construct their identities as global and local citizens through their reading practices.
CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Methodology

This study originally started as a case study of six adolescent readers in one class in one elite all-boys school in Singapore. However, eventually I chose to focus on three students in order to paint in-depth portraits of how these three highly capable boys constructed their identities as global/local citizens through their reading practices.

The case study is informed by ethnographic research methods in its attention to culture. I am particularly influenced by what has been termed “ethnographies of reading” (Boyarin, 1992; Radway, 1984), studies focusing on reading as a social practice and on readers as active participants in the event of reading. For example, Radway’s (1984) classic study of a small group of women in the middle-class community of suburban Smithton and their reading of romance novels demonstrated how close textual analysis of texts and reading events and communities allow for insight into various reading practices of different communities.

Contextualization is essential to understanding the specific reading and identity practices of particular groups of readers. Different readers in different social contexts may approach the same genre and/or body of works somewhat differently, as the contrast between the Smithton suburban readers and Indian urban readers (Parameswaran, 2002) of romance illustrate. While narratives and texts may move across boundaries and borders as “technologies of literacy” (Brandt & Clinton, 2002), the social context and meaning of each reading shifts with the placement of the reader and the reading activity.
Geography, gender, class and nationality are but some factors that influence the reception to these works of imagination. Additionally, the norms, values, and practices of individuals and society are not static but constantly shifting (Heath & Street, 2008), and there is a need to situate studies of the everyday practices of reading and identity in specific contexts, paying attention to both continuity and change.

**Research Methods**

The selection of the classroom site was important to my goal of examining the reading and identity practices of adolescent boys situated at the intersection of the global and the local. Singapore is a city-state in which the global and the national are important in influencing economic (and thus, educational) decisions. The school where the study was conducted positioned itself as a school that prepared its students to be suitably literate in a fast-globalizing world, and its students were exposed to a variety of texts from different parts of the world through the curriculum.

It was also important for me to work with students who saw themselves as readers as I wanted to understand the practices and identities of highly capable boys who can and who do read. As such, I chose to work with students who identified themselves as readers, and who were willing to spend time telling me about their reading and identity practices over the course of a year.

**Research Site: The School**

Ace Independent, an elite all-boys school in Singapore, has had a long history of educational excellence, and has been at the forefront of educational innovation in Singapore. It was one of the first schools in Singapore to be chosen to become an Integrated Program (IP) school, where academically-able students are allowed to skip a
national high stakes examination, the GCE ‘O’ level examination, and move on directly from secondary school to pre-tertiary education.

In 2007, the school adopted the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) as the selected route for students who qualified to skip the GCE ‘O’ levels and opted to do so. In line with the decision to adopt the IBDP for Years Five to Six (usually between 17-18 years of age), the entire secondary school curriculum or the International Baccalaureate (Pre-IB) program (Years 1-4, usually between 13 to 16 years of age) was revamped to align with the aims of the IBDP. About half of each cohort in the school would go on the Pre-IB track that continued onto IBDP. The regular route of an Ace Independent IP student would involve four years in the Pre-IB program, followed by two years in the IBDP.

The fact that Ace Independent, a national school, had adopted the internationalist curriculum of the IBDP program meant that the curriculum provided fertile soil for examining tensions between the global and the national as it is localized in one specific schooling context. Ace Independent’s aim towards internationalism was evident in the school’s IBDP’s motto - “Scholar, Leader and Global Citizen”. Students were encouraged to think globally through curriculum choices, school-organized activities and overseas exposure trips.

In line with the school’s adoption of the IBDP, changes were made to the Years One to Four English curriculum to align with the aims of the IBDP English curriculum to “broaden students’ global perspective by introducing them to works from other cultures/languages” (van Loo & Morley, n.d., p. 213). This meant including literary texts by writers from different parts of the world such as Salman Rushdie’s (1999) *Haorun and*
the Sea of Stories and Chinua Achebe’s (2008) No Longer at Ease beyond the usual Eurocentric school classics such as George Orwell’s (1993) Animal Farm and Harper Lee’s (2007) To Kill a Mockingbird and Shakespearean plays. Teaching classic texts alongside literature from other parts of the world was not a complete departure from previous school practice. Rather, it meant that the principle of exposing students to texts from a greater variety of places and perspectives was given increasing prominence during curriculum planning process, and students were exposed to a few more texts from different parts of the world than before.

Institutional Review Board Permissions and Role as Researcher

I had previously taught at the school from 2003-2005 and contacted the Dean of English and the Deputy Principal for permission to conduct my research in the school. I obtained relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) permissions before I began the research in Ace Independent.

During the course of the study, I participated in school solely as a researcher-observer. While my previous experience in the school helped me gain access to teachers and students, I tried to distance myself in order to “see the strange in the familiar” (Erickson, 1986). This involved asking questions that seemed matter-of-fact with teachers I was familiar with and those I was not familiar with. It involved constant re-examination of the data and conscious reflecting on my own understandings (Schön, 1991) about what I knew, what I thought I knew, and what I did not know.
Participant Selection

The Class

The Singapore school system is structured around four terms of ten weeks each, from January to November of each calendar year. Prior to the official start of the study, I observed a number of Year Three classes in September 2008 during the fourth and final term of the year in order to have a feel of the different kinds of classes and to select the Year Four class that I would eventually work with. In addition to observations, informal interviews with the dean, teachers and students also informed my decision-making process.

As the curriculum was designed such that the students would eventually move closer to the kinds of texts they would study in the IBDP years, the Year Four curriculum (being the final year before the students would move on to the IBDP) was most like the IBDP English curriculum in terms of the kinds of texts and level of difficulty of texts. The Year Four English curriculum consisted of both classic and postcolonial texts and included the genres of poetry (Poems Deep and Dangerous (Phillips, 1995)), short stories (Four Continents (Gordimer, et al., 1998)), drama (Macbeth (Shakespeare, 2006)) and a novel (No Longer at Ease (Achebe, 2008)). As such, Year Four was a logical choice for exploration of classroom reading practices that involved reading texts from all over the world.

Upon discussion with the Dean of English and a few teachers, it was decided that I should study a gifted education class where the teachers were comfortable with having me observe during class observations and conduct interviews with them. Given that classroom research is a more recent occurrence in the Singapore context, I felt that it was
best to adhere to the school’s decision to have me study a class where teachers were comfortable with my presence. The gifted education class was also a suitable class as many of the boys seemed to be readers, and that was a suitable profile for a study focusing on boys’ reading and identity practices.

The chosen class was representative of the majority of the school population in having a majority of Chinese students, some Indian students and some international students. Students selected to be in the gifted classes were academically-able and deemed to be able to deal with an accelerated curriculum, compared with other regular classes at the same level. In terms of the English curriculum, it meant that while they studied the same texts as the other students, they were expected to move at a faster pace and studied a few extra texts, which were not examined. In Year Four, students in the gifted education classes discussed two more short stories and a few extra poems during the course of the year.

Another difference I noticed in my observations and conversations with these and other students was that many boys in this particular class identified themselves as readers. Even boys who did not see themselves as readers read novels during the course of the year. The profile of the class boys fitted in with my need to locate boys who could and did read for the study.

**Preliminary Survey**

I invited students from the class to participate in a preliminary survey (adapted from a literacy inventory by Agee & Altarriba, 2009). Seventeen out of 31 students completed the survey. The descriptive survey traced their literacy habits and reading practices to get a sense of the kinds of readers the students were. In addition, the survey
traced the travel background of the students in order to get a sense of their travel history and how “acquainted” they were with other parts of the world (See Appendix 1 for the preliminary survey).

From the survey, I was able to get a sense of the kinds of readers these boys were, and to come up with a preliminary list for selecting my focal students. When I examined the data in the preliminary survey, I found that the boys read widely and read very different kinds of books despite some similarities in their reading backgrounds and histories. From the survey, I also realized that these boys had often traveled abroad with their families or with the school. The information from the preliminary survey painted a picture of boys who were well-read and well-traveled.

*The Students*

While all the students in the class agreed to participate in the study, I wanted to follow a few boys closely. Purposeful sampling was employed to select the focal students I would work closely with as individual case studies. I observed the class three times in the final term of 2008 before school closed for the year. Based on the results of the survey, I made a preliminary list of students with different reading habits and interests. Upon consultation with the teacher who had taught them in Year Three as well as consultation with their Year Four English teachers, I short-listed six students who all agreed to participate as focal students. I collected data on all six students but eventually decided to limit the final case studies to three students.

Of the six focal students, there were five Chinese boys and one Indian boy. In my preliminary selection, I looked out for students who were vastly different in their reading
choices and who came from somewhat different backgrounds and had different interests. Brief descriptions of the boys are given below.

(1) Michael was an interesting choice because of his self-professed love for ‘chick-lit’ novels at the time of the survey and during the earlier part of the study. His liking for literature and the humanities contrasted with his “jock” image – he was a national canoeist and would run off during recess to play soccer with other students in the school field. In my first observation note about Michael during a class presentation, I had noted: “while Michael sounds tentative, he makes good connections from reading to the world.”

(2) Sanjeev, a school runner and prefect, was one out of two Indian boys in the class. Because of his father’s job, Sanjeev had lived in the United States and Germany before returning to Singapore when he was in Primary Three (nine-years-old). My first impression of Sanjeev in class was that he was quiet but attentive. In the preliminary survey, Sanjeev stated that he preferred realistic fiction to fantasy.

(3) Robert described himself as a cynic with a preference for Science Fiction and “British humor”. His favorite book included C. S. Lewis’ *Four Loves* (1991), a Christian classic that his older brother had recommended to him. As part of the school’s requirement for compulsory involvement in extracurricular activities, Robert was involved in the Drama Club and the Boys Brigade. Robert was usually attentive if quiet during class discussions, and would participate when called upon by the teacher.
(4) Joshua, a Singaporean Permanent resident and a Malaysian citizen, had a preference for adventure and thrillers but also tried to read Christian non-fiction. A good friend of Robert, he was also involved in the Drama Club and the Boys Brigade for his extracurricular activities. Joshua participated actively in class discussions.

(5) Joel, a school librarian, had read Ayn Rand’s (2005) *The Fountainhead*, a deep philosophical novel, when he was in Secondary Two (14 years-old) and listed it as one of his favorite books. In addition to picking up random books from the library when he was on duty, Joel also watched Japanese anime and read Japanese manga. In class, Joel maintained a quiet persona but was able to give insightful comments periodically. He was able to express himself better verbally than in writing, and was concerned with improving his essay writing skills during the course of the year.

(6) Roger, a violinist who also represented the school in science competitions, professed a preference for classics but listed many young adult adventure novels and thrillers as his preferred readings in the survey. Roger was very vocal and would often contribute his opinions during class discussions.

I chose Michael, Sanjeev and Robert as the final case study students because they illustrated very different experiences of reading and identity practices. In the case studies in Chapter Four, I give detailed descriptions of each boy, and show how they developed as readers and persons in the course of the year I spent observing and talking with them. I also focused particularly on the kinds of crossings they made as readers, both in their
school and out-of-school practices of reading and identity construction as global and local citizens.

The Teachers

I approached Mr. Lai and Ms. Rani (both pseudonyms), the teachers who had been slated to teach class 4.9. Both teachers agreed to participate in the study by letting me observe their classes and interview them. Both teachers had many years of experience, though it was Ms. Rani’s first year working with a gifted education class. In the middle of the year, Mr. Lai left to pursue further studies, and Ms. Rani took over his lessons.

Data Collection

Data collection began in September 2008 with classroom observations and informal interviews with teachers and students. A funnel best represents the data collection – I first focused broadly on the school culture, and then narrowed down my view to the class culture before zooming in on reading and identity practices of the six focal students. Data collection ended in November 2009 though I maintained email correspondence with the boys through to March 2010 for clarifications and updates.

General Data Collection

Official documents and curriculum material. Official documents such as the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) and school websites, annual school magazines and curriculum materials provided data for understanding the official curriculum of the English curriculum at different levels. In addition to examining the Pre-IB English curriculum and curriculum materials, I also examined the IBDP English curriculum materials.
General observations & interviews. To get a feel of the school culture and have a sense of how the English curriculum progressed from Years One to Six, I observed Year One to Six classes during the first and second terms. I observed a total of 10 classes. I also attended some morning assembly sessions and a drama production.

I carried out formal and informal interviews with the Deans and Deputy Deans (or Heads and Assistant Heads of Department) of English, various English teachers and students from different cohorts. Beyond the official perspectives given by curriculum and school documents, these interviews gave me a sense of the curriculum from both constructed and received perspectives (see Anderson-Levitt, 2008). Informal conversations with students across the years also helped to give me a sense of the school culture in which the study took place.

Class-Specific Data Collection

Classroom observations & student work. Classroom observations allowed me to examine the constructed curriculum in the specific context of this one classroom, and to observe the curriculum and the students’ development, especially from January to September 2009. Examining student work also gave me insight into how the students were learning the official literacies demanded of them.

I observed the class two or three times a week during the first and second terms, which amounted to about 80% of their Language Arts lessons, subject to public holidays and test days. During the third and fourth term, I observed periodically, with only one observation during the final term that students mostly spent preparing for their end-of-the-year examinations and receiving their results. Each lesson varied from 40 minutes to one hour. In order to get a sense of how the classes ran, I observed the class on regular
days for the first term. Thereafter, the teachers informed me when they felt it was best for me to observe (e.g. when the students were going to be doing group presentations, the lesson focus was on assessment, class discussions were going to take place).

**Table 1**

*Total Number of Lesson Observations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>No. of Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>January 5 – March 13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>March 23 – May 29</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>June 29 – September 5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>September 13 – October 29</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I took field notes during classroom observations and wrote memorandums after the observations as a deliberate attempt to reflect on my own observations. Some lessons were audio-recorded and transcribed to supplement field notes.

**Formal and informal interviews with teachers.** Formal and informal interviews were conducted with the teachers to get a sense of the curriculum as well as to understand their teaching practices. I interviewed both Mr. Lai and Ms. Rani formally at the beginning of the study, informally throughout the study, and formally via email at the close of the study. The interviews helped me to understand their teaching and instructional practices and provided the background for understanding the boys’ reading practices in the school and class context.
Formal and informal interviews with students. I conducted formal and informal interviews with various students in the class. The class grew used to my presence during their English lessons and would often supply me with information when asked. I sat in different parts of the classroom in order to interact with different students during the classroom observations. Sometimes, I would join the students during their meal breaks and converse with them or listen to them talk as they ate. While they saw me as an adult, they were less guarded with me because they were aware that as a researcher, I was not there to chide them or grade their work.

Interviewing the focal students generally took a more structured form, with scheduled timings either during recess or after school. For me, interviews were active meaning-making processes for both interviewer and interviewee (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), and so were conducted in a conversational manner. Group interviews as well as individual interviews were held. Group interviews were conducted in groups of two to six. Out of four interviews with each boy, I conducted one large group interview with all six boys, three individual interviews and one small group interview consisting of two to three boys. The group interviews allowed the students to interact with their peers whereas the individual interviews provided a space for the students to share without peer pressure (Eder & Fingerson, 2003). I carried out one additional individual interview with Michael, and one additional group interview with Joshua and Robert (See Appendix 2 for interview protocols).

While earlier interviews followed a fixed format, later follow-up interviews were designed to probe each student’s reading and identity practices. For example, I discovered through two students’ (Robert and Joshua) reading logs that they had watched
the Broadway musical *Wicked* on *YouTube*. In addition, Robert had gushed about the book to me in class. Hence, a later interview was based on their readings, after I had read *Wicked* (Maguire, 2005) and a few other books by Maguire and watched the musical on *YouTube*. Because they had been influenced by each other, I interviewed both together to get a sense of the peer influence on their reading practices.

**Table 2**

*Total Number of Student Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanjeev</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* An individual X straddling more than one name is used to indicate that these students were interviewed together in a group interview.

I transcribed interviews within the week and follow-up interviews were designed based on an initial analysis of previous interaction and interviews. In terms of transcription, I transcribed selectively for meaning (Ochs, 2006). The interviews are presented for the most part in the interviewee’s exact words and clarifications are made in
brackets where necessary. Because there were often more than two persons conversing
during group interviews, there were often interruptions and overlapping segments of talk.
(see Appendix 3 for Transcription Notes).

**Reading logs and email correspondence.** The focal students completed reading
logs via email, in varying degrees of detail. The reading logs allowed for ongoing
conversation about both classroom and individual reading practices. Email
correspondence was also a way for me to schedule appointments and to clarify matters
with the students. With the exception of Michael who was much better at turning up for
interviews than submitting reading logs, the other students were quite regular at
responding to prompts for their reading logs (See Appendix 4 for reading log questions).

**Table 3**

*Total Number of Reading Logs Submitted*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Nov-Feb</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sanjeev</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reading biographies.** In addition, reading biographies (see Appendix 5 for notes
on the background of and construction of individual reading biographies) of the students
were constructed in August 2009. These reading biographies allowed me to articulate my observations about the reading and identity practices of the students, using the data I had collected up to a specific point (June 2009). The students read their individual biographies as a form of member checking. The reading biographies also provided a starting point for feedback and discussion during individual interviews in August, and formed part of the material for the final case analyses of individual students.

**Data Analysis**

Data was generated from the constant comparative method, which involved making comparisons at each stage of the analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach required attention to the data from the first moment of collection, and involved coding, writing memorandums, and developing categories. It is an interpretive analysis system that required comparing data with emerging categories and making connections between concepts and categories.

I coded the data using Nvivo, a qualitative research software. Classroom observations and interviews were transcribed and entered into Nvivo. Data analysis was an ongoing process and done in three phases. In the first phase, I noted down my general impressions and wrote memorandums about my general impressions from my analysis of the data. I first coded the interviews and email reading log data line by line.

During the next stage of my data analysis, I created categories and sub-categories to help me make sense of my data. Many of the categories corresponded with existing research and consisted of general observations of students’ reading and identity practices. From the codes, I created categories that captured concepts and activities across the data of all six focal students (see Appendix 6 for coding protocol). The categories were
confirmed, expanded or narrowed as I revisited the data. For example, under “criteria for book selection,” I was able to narrow it down from a list to two key elements: mass consumption criteria (entertainment value) and literary criteria (aesthetic value).

In addition, I included a second phase of coding using two guiding concepts: (1) global/local, and (2) social/imaginative. I continued to keep the distinction between in school and out-of-school practices, and to note similarities as well as differences between these practices. This phase of data analysis highlighted the fluidity between my initial distinctions between the global and local, and I realized that the global and local were so intertwined that it was hard to demarcate between the local and the global. For example, I realized that the boys’ practices of consumption were immersed in global book markets while being localized by the boys as an everyday home or school practice. Again, the demarcation between the social and the imaginative broke down as I realized how much social practices were tied together with imaginative practices. For example, I saw that Michael’s reading of chick lit was social in that it allowed him to position himself as an open reader and to talk about his readings with others; at the same time, it allowed him a way to imagine the world of teenage heterosexual relationships, and his stance on these relationships.

Thereafter, I worked through the data of each boy individually with these categories and concepts in mind, and the key theoretical concept of crossings emerged as a concept that would illuminate the data I had collected. From there, I focused on analyzing the data on Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert. I revisited the data working with the key concept of crossings, constantly returning to the overarching question: How did three adolescent boys who are highly capable readers construct their identities as local/global
citizens through their reading practices? I further explored the kinds of crossings that these boys made as they constructed their identities as global and local citizens.
CHAPTER FOUR

Reading and Identity Practices:

Case Studies of Michael, Sanjeev And Robert

In order to understand the reading and identity practices of these boys, it is necessary to understand the specific reading histories and identity practices of each student. As I wanted to highlight the active involvement of these boys in their reading and identity practices, case studies of specific boys allowed for illustration of how each boy constructed his reading and identity practices. Examining individual case studies also alerted me to tensions and contradictions that these boys faced as they actively constructed their identities as readers and as global citizens. While these boys had similar home and school resources, they were individuals who actively sought particular kinds of readings that they enjoyed and that resonated with their experiences of the world and their sense of the kinds of persons they were.

I focus on Michael, Sanjeev and Robert despite having data on all the focal students because their cases most richly illustrated the concepts of crossings that stood out in my analysis of the data. In addition, these three boys provided contrasting portraits of living out the local and global in their reading and identity practices. While all three boys seemed to portray cosmopolitan identities as literate citizens, they positioned themselves quite differently in their reading of global and local literature. They also positioned themselves quite differently in their visions of themselves as local and global citizens.
Before delving into the specific case studies, I contextualize the home and classroom context in which I observed these students. It was in the school context that I got to know the boys and interacted with them on a regular basis. I saw them most in the classroom, met them in groups or individually for interviews, and sometimes spent time with them during lunch breaks in the school cafeteria. Although I only heard about the participants’ home lives from themselves (rather than observed them), my observations of them in the school context supported their self-descriptions of their out-of-school reading and identity practices.

In the next section, I first give an overview of the curriculum and instructional practices within which the boys’ schooled reading practices are situated. After-all, their understanding of literature as a subject was shaped by their immersion in school practices of reading. Understanding the context in which school readings are formed provide a background against which to understand their responses to both their school and out-of-school readings. Following the overview of their school readings, I give an overview of the resources they had access to for their out-of-school readings to contextualize the reading and identity practices of these boys.

**Contextualizing the Case Studies**

**School Context**

In this section, I give an overview of the classroom context in which Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert constructed their identities as readers. I include a brief description of the Year Four curriculum. School readings are, after-all, very much dictated by the texts on the curriculum, and the official ways of reading these texts (Collins & Blot, 2003; Luke, 1988). It is in response to the official curriculum, mediated by the teachers and
their instructional methods, that Michael, Sanjeev and Robert constructed their identities as specific kinds of readers in the school context.

**The Curriculum**

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the Ace Independent English Language Arts (LA) curriculum was seen as lead-up to the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) curriculum that these students would graduate to in the following year. While the Year Four curriculum was attentive to National Education aims, the main focus was really on exposing students to a wider variety of literature from different parts of the world as well as more difficult work.

To prepare students for the focus on World Literature (defined as translated works not originally written in English) in the IBDP curriculum, the department had chosen to focus mainly on postcolonial texts in Year Four, along with one classic Shakespearean text, *Macbeth* (2006). The school-assigned texts were also chosen according to genre and consisted of a novel (*No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008)), short stories (*Four Continents* (Gordimer, et al., 1998), an anthology), poetry (*Poems Deep and Dangerous* (Phillips, 1995), an anthology) and drama (*Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2006)). *No Longer at Ease* and *Four Continents* were texts that could be categorized as “postcolonial” and the poems in *Poetry Deep and Dangerous* ranged from Chaucer to more contemporary poems.

The deputy dean of English explained the rationale for the selection of texts during an interview:

*We chose postcolonial works because Singapore is a postcolonial state and understanding postcolonial literature seems to be in integral in our understanding of our own identity as well. So I think the whole postcolonial idea forms a*
stepping stone to world literature. Because postcolonial literature isn’t exactly Eurocentric and yet they are not exactly English in nature, which is something like what world literature is like. The only difference is that world literature involves the study of works in translation, that means, not written in English. Postcolonialism will actually bring in new ideas, new ways of looking at things, new perspectives that students can experience.

Thus, the choice of Year Four texts was meant to expose students to new kinds of readings as well as new ideas. Postcolonial texts were seen as a bridge between the more Eurocentric readings from the students’ earlier years to the translated works they would be studying in the IBDP. While no Singapore text was used as the main text, the deputy dean explained that the choice to study works categorized as postcolonial meant that identity issues relevant to Singaporeans would be raised during class. In addition, the students could examine themes such as tradition versus modernization and discuss the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized when reading the selected texts. The school saw the chosen texts as a way to help students enter into culturally relevant conversations (Applebee, 1996).

The school-assigned texts were seen as more difficult than previous texts studied in that they were often set in unfamiliar contexts and included cultural references students had to find out more about in order to understand the story or issues. In an interview with the Dean of English, she said that she hoped “that in Year Three and Four, they’ll be more appreciative of cultures that are different from their own than in Year One and Two”. The school-assigned readings for Years One and Two tended towards British/American school canonical texts (see Applebee, 1974; Purves, 1993 for discussion of the
American school canon) and included school classics such as *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1993) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (H. Lee, 2007). The Dean’s opinion was that classics written from British or American perspectives were accessible as the students have had plenty of exposure to books from these cultures at home and in primary school. On the other hand, postcolonial novels were more difficult for the students to access linguistically as well as culturally.

The students were assessed in two ways in Year Four. They were assessed through an Individual Oral Commentary (IOC) in the third quarter of the year (for *Poems Deep and Dangerous* (Phillips, 1995) and *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2006)) and through a timed written test at the end of the year (for *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008) and *Four Continents* (Gordimer, et al., 1998)). Students also had to complete an “Unseen” written assessment, where they had to analyze a short passage of prose or a poem that they had not seen prior to the assessment. The assessment was modeled after the IBDP assessments that focused equally on the ability to write and talk about the text studied. The oral assessment was conducted over a period of time in Term Three and the written assessments at the end of Term Four. During the course of the year, the students had regular essay writing practices, and were gradually introduced to the examination format of the IOC. Michael, Sanjeev and Robert were generally attuned to the school’s assessment methods, and were above average students by the school’s standards.

**The Classroom Context**

Michael, Sanjeev and Robert were in the same Year Four class in Ace Independent. For a period of time at the beginning of the year, Michael and Sanjeev were sitting next to each other by the side of the window, at the back corner of the classroom.
It was a strategic corner as one could look out of the window over to the swimming pool to the neighboring international school and observe the activities going on there. One could also look out at the clouds, daydreaming while paying token attention to what was going on in the class. Michael often fell asleep in his quiet corner during the beginning of the year. Sometime in late-February, the form teacher moved Michael to the front center of the classroom, and Michael’s participation increased dramatically. In contrast, Sanjeev retained his prime spot by the window throughout the year. Robert was initially seated on the front right of the classroom, and voluntarily moved to the center front of the class sometime in the second term.

There were 26 boys in this class, a small class by the school’s standards since most classes had 30 or more boys. The class was a gifted education class, which meant that they were expected to move at a faster pace than regular Year Four classes and to study a few more poems and short stories than the other students. The boys in this class were generally more rowdy than the other classes I had observed. Ms. Rani once commented to me that she was impressed with some of the insights that certain class members had and the standard of their work, but that she was sometimes frustrated with their irreverent attitude towards her and to their work. Mr. Lai, on the other hand, seemed to expect the antics of the boys, and fluctuated between attempted fierceness and genuine resignation in his dealings with the class.

The lessons I observed could be divided into three kinds of dominant practices: text-centered lessons, student-centered lessons, or assessment-centered lessons. Text-centered lessons focused on the text that was being studied, and more often than not involved a close-reading of the text or discussions of issues surrounding the text (e.g.
background of writer or story, themes across texts). Student-centered lessons were dominated by research or group work, and involved presentations by students to the rest of the class. Assessment-centered lessons focused on preparing students for both summative and formative assessments, and involved teachers going through rubrics or demonstrating how to deal with an assessment style or question. Assessment-centered lessons were often conducted prior to the submission of an assessment or after the assessment as a form of feedback. These were really overlapping categories and the teachers often switched between different modes within lessons. Most of the lessons I observed were teacher- or student-centered lessons.

In the following narrative vignettes, I give a sense of the kinds of Language Arts lessons that Michael, Sanjeev and Robert were engaged in during the course of the study, focusing on sessions where they featured prominently, whether as active or quiet participants.

**Narrative Vignette #1**

I get to the classroom before Ms. Rani, and the boys are doing their own things. Some boys are milling about the teacher’s table, having a conversation. Others are doing their work at their desks. Michael is reading the short story they will be discussing today. It seems to me that he gets most of his first readings done just before or during class.

Sanjeev comes into the classroom late, after Ms. Rani arrives. I notice Sanjeev is often slightly late to class. I assume it is because of his prefect duties, but later he clarifies with me that being a prefect is an excuse rather than the real reason he is usually late.

Today, the students are continuing their discussion of *The Bridegroom* (1998), a short story by Nadine Gordimer, set in South Africa. The layout of the story in the
anthology, *Four Continents* (Gordimer, et al., 1998), includes a close-up photograph of
the side profile of the author, and a short write-up on her background, including prizes
won. I learn from the write-up that “she has used her literary gifts to highlight the
injustice of white supremacy in African countries” and that most of her work dealt
indirectly “with the political situation in her native country” (p. 8). The short story, just
12 pages long, is accompanied by footnotes that explain cultural references as well as
cultural terms used. It is followed by four pages of activities with headings such as
“characters”, “setting”, “symbolism” and “theme.” Ms. Rani selects students to read
excerpts out loud from the story, and asks questions at what she deems are relevant
points.

Ms. Rani and the students keep returning to the contrast between the cultures of
the main protagonist, an unnamed Dutch overseer of some workers (the soon-to-be
bridegroom of the title) and that of the colonized, his *kaffirs*. Ms. Rani talks about the
*erhu*, a Chinese instrument that she contrasts with the “one string instrument shaped like
a lyre” (Gordimer, 1998, p. 15) before pointing out that the protagonist seems to be
enjoying the music. She asks for evidence and one of the students point to the paragraph
that seems to indicate his enjoyment. Everyday items in the story are starting points to
talk about the attitude of the colonizer towards the colonized. A good discussion gets
going, and the students sitting near the front are particularly involved in the discussion.

They complete the discussion of the story. Ms. Rani turns to the questions at the
back and systematically goes through each question. She calls on students or else they
volunteer answers. Sanjeev is looking out of the window, inattentive today. One of the
students, Junyou, comments that “all whites are racist”. This prompts a sharp reaction
from Ms. Rani. She shares that both her siblings (Indian-Singaporeans) are married to Caucasians, and makes the statement that “you are not born racist. It is how you are raised”.

Towards the end of the lesson, Ms. Rani calls on Sanjeev, asking him about the significance of specific events in the short story. Sanjeev moves his attention to the book. He asks Ms. Rani to repeat the question, reads the relevant passage quietly and quickly, and replies that he wonders if “the decision of the bridegroom to give the kaffirs a drink shows some progress in his relationship with them”. The bell rings, and Ms. Rani states that they will have to continue the discussion during the next lesson.

**Narrative Vignette #2**

In today’s lesson, Mr. Lai discusses *What Happened to the Elephant?* (Bhatt, 1995), a poem in the anthology, *Poems Deep and Dangerous* (Phillips, 1995). He uses his exposition of the poem to demonstrate to the students the expectations for the Individual Oral Commentary assessment. He reads the poem, explains the rubrics, and asks the boys to annotate the poem before the class discussion.

In the discussion that follows the annotation exercise, the boys seated at the front of the class participate actively, and some boys seated behind are active participants too, particularly Ian, whom I am seated beside. Sanjeev is not in class today; it seems there is some school function that he has to attend to, and so he has been excused from lessons.

The discussion centers on the different perspectives that the main protagonist has when he is a child and when he is grown up. The naivety of the child who chooses to “believe the fantasy” is contrasted with the adult who sees the reality of decomposition and death in the Hindu mythology of Ganesh, the elephant-headed God. Robert is sitting
between Joshua and Roger on the front right of the classroom. He looks as if he has something to say but every time he leans forward as if to say something, he is interrupted by some other student’s contribution. Finally, he gets his turn when Mr. Lai calls his name. Robert comments that “for the child, he cannot conceive of the meaning of death whereas the grown-up protagonist sees the reality of the ‘rotting carcass’ covered ‘with bird shit/ vulture shit’”. Robert further elaborates the “the poet is trying to say that adults often hide the reality from children”, referencing the lines in the poem: “This is a dance/ a group dance/ no one talks about”.

At the end of class, when Mr. Lai reminds the students to read another poem in preparation for the next lesson, Michael remarks: “We have to read Macbeth, and we have to read this crap also!” to which Mr. Lai replies, “Do not use scatological terms in this class” before beginning to keep his laptop to make way for the Physics teacher waiting outside the classroom door.

**Narrative Vignette #3**

The boys are rowdy today, happy that they have completed the middle-of-the-year assessments. However, Ms. Rani informs them that the lesson will have to proceed as usual and they continue with their study of Shakespeare’s (2006) *Macbeth*.

Michael, who has been moved to the front of the class from his former seat near the window, seems particularly enthusiastic today, answering Ms. Rani’s questions about the prophecy. At one point, he suddenly remarks loudly “my biceps are aching” to which Ms. Rani retorts: “what’s the significance of that? It’s like saying, my toes are aching?” There is laughter and Michael is silenced.
Ms. Rani plays an audio-recording of Act 1, Scene 7, and Michael asks if it is a soliloquy after the reading is completed. Michael and Roger dominate the discussion today with occasional contributions from other boys. Ms. Rani continually refers to lines in the play and asks the boys for contributions (i.e. their interpretation) of the play. There is constant referencing to specific lines in the play as Ms. Rani or the students quote before explaining the meaning of each line.

When I look around the classroom, I see some students writing in either their copy of *Macbeth* or the green workbook that they have been given by the school. Sanjeev is making notes in his workbook, annotating the excerpts that have been included in the workbook for close study. Later, when I asked to see his workbook, I see sections highlighted in orange and yellow, and notes written in neat, tiny handwriting on both sides of Macbeth’s soliloquy.

Towards the end of the lesson, Ms. Rani confesses she was up late last night watching *Desperate Housewives* and the episode finale of *Survivors*, which accounts for her tiredness. The discussion turns away from *Macbeth* to a discussion of *Survivor* and various television programs instead. The students are dismissed for their lunch break after the class.

**Summary of Year 4 Curriculum and Classroom Instruction**

The narrative vignettes gave a sense of how the boys responded to the literature texts studied in the context of the classroom. What was clear in my observations was how very much of what went on in the classroom was driven by perceptions of what it meant to be a literate student. The focus of the Language Arts curriculum was on the study of literature and in order to be a successful student, one had to be able to analyze literary
texts in an appropriate manner. The students had to pick up the “Discourse” (Gee, 1996) of being amateur “literary critics”. They were learning how to read, write, and speak in a manner that conveyed knowledge of the literary text (Rex, 2001). The boys had to demonstrate their ability to do close textual readings of texts from different literary genres. They had to demonstrate the ability to talk about themes and literary techniques and to conform to school expectations of being literate. Their teachers, the books studied, assessments, school-produced workbooks and rubrics contributed to the students’ understandings of what it meant to be literate in the school context.

Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert participated differently in the classrooms, with varying degrees of involvement in class attendance, discussions, and attentiveness. The vignettes give a sense of how they portrayed themselves in the classroom – Sanjeev as quiet but attentive, Michael as actively participating in class discussions but also making irreverent comments, and Robert as attentively thinking, seeking to participate when he felt strongly about something. In the case studies, I elaborate on how these boys read and positioned themselves through their reading practices in the classroom.

**Home, Peer and School Resources: The Invisible Network of Resources**

In addition to their schooled readings, I was interested in the out-of-school contexts that supported the boys’ reading and identity practices. For these adolescent boys, reading as a practice was a natural, taken-for-granted everyday practice. Like the townspeople in Heath’s (1986) classic *Way with Words*, these boys were exposed to print as well as specific ways of reading that prepared them well for school literacies. In *What No Bedtime Story Means*, (2005), Heath demonstrates how the townspeople “enculturated” their children into ways of thinking about books. Through bedtime reading
routines, talking about stories, and watching those around them, these children learn “dispositions” or a “way with words” that predisposed them to particular ways of viewing the world of books and stories. From my examination of the data, it was clear that these “ways of "saying(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing” (Gee, 1996, p. 127) about reading, books and stories were so naturalized that the boys saw their identities as readers as integral to their conceptions of themselves.

These adolescent boys had access to an invisible network of resources that contributed to their conceptions and practices of reading. It is invisible because they were completely unaware of the resources that have made reading a potential habit for them. Reading as well as positive conceptions of readings for these boys was the norm because they had many resources for reading, both in terms of examples and expectations of reading, as well as the amount of print that was available to them (cf. Neuman & Celano, 2001). Their reading histories and practices were partly a result of their family and class circumstances, where book reading was perceived as suitable entertainment, and as such, encouraged. However, while class may have provided positive conditions for encouraging reading, the case study showed the boys to be actively constructing their identities as readers and as particular kinds of persons through their readings (Solsken, 1993).

The diagrammatic representation below gives an overview of the kinds of resources that the boys had. I used the term “network” to highlight combination of overlapping resources that contributed to these boys’ conceptions and practices of reading.
The data showed that these boys were surrounded by resources that made the business of “finding” and “picking up” books ordinary occurrences. During one group interview, I asked Michael, Sanjeev, and Roger if *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2003) had been on some school reading list because all of them had read the novel at about the same time. All three boys denied that it was on an official list, and in the following interview extract, explained to me how they had discovered the book.

Michael: Cliff recommended it to me… I wrote some freaking long commentary on my blog on it and everyone read it.

Roger: Really? I *picked* mine up in a bookshop.

Michael: I was like a freaking pioneer of *Life of Pi*.

Roger: I *found* it at the airport.

**Figure 1.** The Invisible Network of Resources

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Roger: Really? I *picked* mine up in a bookshop.

Michael: I was like a freaking pioneer of *Life of Pi*.

Roger: I *found* it at the airport.
Sanjeev: I found it at home. My sister brought it home.

(Group interview with Michael, Sanjeev and Roger, emphasis mine)

A friend had recommended the book to Michael and lent it to him. Roger bought his in an airport bookstore and Sanjeev found the book at home. Because these boys are attuned to looking for books as potential time fillers and entertainment, they were able to see the potential of a novel recommended by a friend, found in a bookstore or found at home. Reading was also something that they could share with others, for example, through book recommendations or writing about books read on one’s blog.

Resources were available at home. From childhood, books could be found at home, in the shelves of older siblings and bought by parents or other relatives who saw books as appropriate gifts. The boys were taught to find books, either through regular trips to the library or to the bookstore. So, for example, Joshua’s mother brought him and his older siblings to the library once every three weeks and Sanjeev visited the bookstore with his parents almost every week. Additionally, resources were also available in school. In most of these boys’ primary schools, reading was encouraged and quiet reading time allocated in the curriculum for students to read. The Ace Independent library was relatively well-stocked with books and magazines, and the boys could go there during their free time, either to do their work or to read.

Book reading was not just limited to print. Robert read his books online. Joel, another focal student, used to watch Pokemon and graduated to anime and manga, anime being the movie and manga being the print version of Japanese comics (as he enlightened me during one of his email reading logs). Robert watched Broadway versions of Wicked on YouTube and also read the book, together with his good friend, Joshua. The boys were
also surrounded with cross-media representations of stories that had originated as
storybooks. Harry Potter, The Chronicles of Narnia, Lord of the Rings, classic and
popular children’s books, had movie versions. Non-series books such as P. S. I Love You
(C. Ahearn, 2004), My Sister’s Keeper (Picoult, 2004) , and The Kite Runner (Hosseini,
2003) also spawned movie versions, and the boys were aware of multiple textual
interpretations of a text, even if they had not read the book or caught the movie at the
cinema or watched it.

This network of resources is part of the boys’ habitus or “history turned into
nature” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). Reading was so much a part of their history and
experiences that they have learnt to see reading and the resources which made possible
their reading identity as natural. At the same time, it is important to note that these
structuring influences are not set in stone, but rather allow for “regulated improvisations
(p. 78) within the boundaries of the resources available to the boys. The network of
resources serves to illustrate the opportunities these boys had to read, and to develop
reading as a habit. What it does not show is how these boys actively constructed their
identities as readers and as citizens through their reading of the word and the world. In
the following case studies, I hope to show how three of the boys actively constructed
their reading identities as well as their identities as global and local citizens through their
reading practices.

The Case Studies: Michael, Sanjeev and Robert

In this section, I focus on the case studies of Michael, Sanjeev and Robert as
“telling cases” (Mitchell, 1983). The purpose of this case study is to provide nuanced
descriptions of three highly literate adolescent male readers constructing their identities
as global/local citizens in one specific school context in Singapore. I do not claim that these boys are representative as a group. Rather, I hope to convey through the case studies an understanding of how these boys, as individuals, construct their identities as readers and global/local citizens through their readings. Through the case studies, I am also able to highlight the complexities of the boys’ reading and identity practices.

These case studies are my versions of the lives of Michael, Sanjeev and Robert. The interpretive nature of qualitative research work means that someone else could tell the stories of Michael, Sanjeev and Robert differently, with different emphasis. I have tried to keep to the spirit of the boys’ understanding of themselves by asking them for their feedback on their reading biographies, which I wrote in June 2009. However, things must change with the flow of time, and my rendering of the boys’ reading and identity practices is but a snapshot taken over the course of one short year.

When Michael read his reading biography in July 2009, he thought that much of it described himself but informed me that he was “over the chick lit phase”. In the same way, this case may accurately capture their conceptions and practices at one point in time, but cannot serve as a completely accurate predictor of future reading and identity practices. Sanjeev thought his reading biography “sounded alright” and did not see anything he wanted to correct then. Robert remarked to me that I “made [me] sound so good”, half-pleased, half-embarrassed perhaps that that was how someone saw him. My purpose was not to paint flattering portraits of the boys, even if Robert saw it that way. Rather, I hope that a sense of the complexities of their reading and identity practices would be conveyed through these case studies.
Michael’s Reading and Identity Practices: Reading beyond and within Boundaries

I love sports and am a big fan of ‘chick lit’. You see me reading books by Jodi Picoult, Dan Brown, Michael Connelly, and right now, I’m reading One Fifth Avenue by Candace Bushnell. Reading has come naturally to me since I was a kid. I read when I’m not doing something else.

(Michael, 15 years old, preliminary survey 2008)

I found Michael interesting from the very start. Michael’s description of himself in the preliminary survey resisted the mould of boys’ reading practices as he declared himself to be a fan of ‘chick lit’ and a reader of a wide variety of books. In addition, he declared that literature was his favorite subject, a seemingly unlikely combination for someone who portrayed himself as an active sportsperson. I wanted to find out what Michael meant by chick lit and why he read it and liked it. How did reading chick lit and liking literature tie in with masculine projections of a sports-loving adolescent boy?

As I interacted with Michael over the course of the year – observed him in the classroom, interviewed him out of the classroom, chased him verbally and via email repeatedly for reading logs that he never wrote, and even gave him a ride to one of his canoeing practices – I found him full of contradictions. While he was proud to identify himself as an Ace Independent boy who was fluent in English and who was self-assured and confident, he also resisted being identified with “the majority” of Ace Independent boys that he felt lived comfortable and cocooned lifestyles. While he projected himself as coolly unconcerned about his grades, he got stressed if he did not do well and expressed his determination to work harder on his blog. He wanted to be seen as tough and street-smart, but also as sensitive and emotional. I saw these contradictions as part and parcel of
everyday living for Michael, as he worked out his identity in relation to the different aspects of his life.

In terms of Michael’s reading and identity practices, what stood out for me as I examined the interview transcripts, email reading logs and classroom observations over and over again was how he tried to resist boundaries, but yet was constrained by these very same boundaries. He resisted gender boundaries by reading narratives, and reading a wide variety of books, including “girl books”. At the same time, Michael also read within gender boundaries, reading thrillers and adventures that tended to be associated with male readership. His reading also included books that could be said to transcend gender boundaries, such as the 2002 winner of the Man Booker Prize, *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001).

Another way that Michael resisted boundaries was in the school context of reading. Michael was a competent reader who was able to read and analyze literary texts well. Yet, Michael portrayed himself against the grain of a literary scholar (who read high-culture canonical or prize-winning “good” novels) by reading popular-culture books and evaluating his reading of both school and out-of-school texts by what entertained him. At the same time, he adhered to school criteria of what constituted good reading by participating in class discussions in a literary manner and by writing essays that were considered critical and often scored high grades.

Finally, while his classmates read books that were tended to be “Western” (as did Michael), Michael broke the mould by including “local” or Singapore books in his reading. Michael saw himself as someone who was “local” and resolutely Singaporean, in contrast to his classmates whom he perceived as out-of-touch with the majority of Singaporeans while being in touch with the rest of the world. Yet, despite his portrayal as
someone who was “in touch with the masses”, his reading practices (including the reading of Singapore literature) seemed to set him apart from the very people he claimed that he identified with.

**Reading Beyond and Within Gender Boundaries**

Much research has positioned boys as non-readers or as non-readers of narratives. Among the research, boys have been portrayed as reading less than girls, preferring information texts to fiction, being less likely to read for leisure, more likely to consider themselves non-readers, tending to resist reading stories about girls, and less likely to talk about their reading (see Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, pp. 10-11 for a summary of research on gender and literacy). In addition, the proliferation of feminist research on the reading and identity practices of women and girls (e.g., Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 2001; Radway, 1984; Walkerdine, 1990; Willinsky & Hunniford, 1993) only serve to emphasize the lack of research on boys’ reading and identity practices.

It is only more recently that scholars are calling for increased complexity in looking at boys’ reading practices (e.g., Moss, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2009). Studies focusing on femininities / masculinities and reading identities without attention to multiple intersections of race and ethnicity, social class and even nationality, gloss over the fact that for some boys, it is not so much gender that determine their practices of reading as family background and social class (e.g., see Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Solsken, 1993). For Michael at least, his family background immersed him into a world of reading, a practice that he did not see as conflicting with his being male. Michael did not question his identity as a reader because he had come to see it as part of his identity, as part of his personality and preferences.
The gendered view of literacy as social practice suggests that girls learn to do girls and boys to do boys from the people around them. Societal expectations are conveyed through important others in their lives (Solsken, 1993), including modeling after their parents’ behaviors and conforming to the expectations of teachers and peers (Heath, 1986). Cherland (1994) gives an account of this gendered view of literacy practice in her Oaktown study where girls were expected to read to fill their time but boys were not. However, in contrast to Cherland’s brief portrayal of the boys in Oaktown, Michael saw reading as an acceptable past-time for boys. His attitude towards reading was encouraged by home practices where reading was seen as a legitimate and valuable past-time by both Michael and his parents.

For Michael who declared that he “loved reading”, reading had been very much a part of his life since young. For as far back as he could remember there were “shelves of good books” at home. The books at home included novels by Tom Clancy and the entire *Harry Potter* series, books that he “picked up” whenever he had some free time on his hands. In one of my interviews with Michael, he informed me that he was convinced that his dad “bought them [the books] to make the shelves look good” since he had never witnessed his dad reading any of the books. The significance of others influencing one’s reading practices is visible in Michael’s statement – while his father may not seem to read the books, he ensured that his children had the opportunity to read by buying “good books” and making them accessible to his children at home.

His father’s influence did not stop at the provision of books for Michael and his brothers. Reading for Michael had involved a form of mimicking when he was younger, and he used to copy his dad’s practice of reading the newspapers, including his dad’s
posture of sitting in the armchair and crossing his legs to read the newspapers. Before Michael could read every single word on the page, he was already learning what it meant to read the papers. His father’s example showed him that reading was to be done in comfort and quiet, and that the information in the newspapers, including stories of current life, could be absorbing. Although Michael was not able to read everything or understand everything he read at that early age, he thought “it was really cool to read” and spent much of his time on the sports section of the newspapers.

In addition to the books and examples of reading that Michael found at home, Michael was also immersed in reading environments during his primary school years (aged 7 to 12). He spent Primary One to Three (aged 7 to 9) in a school close to his home, and transferred out to another school with gifted education classes when he was in Primary Four (aged 10). Both schools had been conducive to reading. Literature was very much part of the English curriculum and students had been given “quiet time” for reading, with prizes awarded to those that read a certain number of books.

What is clear from the description of Michael so far is that his identity as a reader was not so much natural as constructed, in large part by the circumstances of his home and primary school reading environments. The notion that books are lying around to be “picked up” required a mind trained to be alert to books as possibilities for entertainment and education. The practice of looking for books as everyday practice is a hidden practice, invisible to those who are accustomed to having books at home and to the practice of book buying and book borrowing. For Michael, making a trip to the library or to Borders to borrow or buy books was nothing out of the ordinary, and very much part of his everyday practice.
The fact that Michael read narratives may not so much be a gendered practice as a classed practice. The cultivation of his reading habits were started before Michael could even begin to remember (Nelson, 1996). Like the townspeople’s children in Heath’s (1986, 2005) study, Michael was exposed to print and specific ways of approaching language and stories from a very young age. As such, he saw reading stories as very much part of his everyday life and as legitimate entertainment. However, I do not want to give the impression that Michael’s actions and attitudes towards fiction are representative of all boys from middle-class homes in Singapore. As Solsken (1993) demonstrated in her study of young children, different boys responded differently to the presence of print at homes and in their early literacy classrooms despite similar home, peer and school backgrounds and resources. Even among the students in Michael’s class, there were boys who identified themselves as readers of fiction and those who did not, as I found out from my informal conversations with individual students in between and during classroom observations.

**Reading for entertainment.** Michael can be said to belong to the category of boys who can read and actually do read freely out of school (cf. boys who can read but choose not to read freely out of school). These “free readers” (Moss, 2007, p. 125) were competent readers by school standards and read in a self-motivated way. They actively looked for books to read and engaged in reading as a self-selected leisure activity. Competency was one factor for determining these boys’ identities as readers and enjoyment of the activity was the other factor (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Thus, understanding why certain boys read and why they read particular kinds of texts require
understanding of the social context of reading as well as the personal value of reading for individual boys.

Michael judged the value of a good book by its entertainment value. In fact, for all the focal students, reading was for entertainment, though what each student was entertained by and what each student meant by entertainment differed. For Michael, being entertained meant different things at different times. At times, it was a filler, a way to relieve boredom. At other times, he deliberately looked for books to read in order to “lose” himself in a good story. If a book was a good book, Michael could stay up “till two, three o’clock” to read it.

To be entertained could mean that there was an exciting plot (e.g., Dan Brown novels), that the story had something profound to say (e.g., Life of Pi (Martel, 2001)) or that the story kept him riveted (e.g., My Sister’s Keeper (Picoult, 2004)). Michael was not too concerned about the aesthetic value of the books he read as long as the books managed to keep his attention. In a group interview with Sanjeev, Michael and Roger, when I was probing further about Michael’s favorite readings, Michael insisted that Dan Brown “is damn GOOD” because the mystery element kept him engrossed in the novel.

Chin: Why do you like Dan Brown?

Michael: Damn nice. The mystery is very cool.

Sanjeev: (interjecting) I read in Primary 6, and I thought it was damn good. Then, after that, a few months later, I realized it’s –

Michael: (adamantly) It’s damn GOOD!

Sanjeev: No, as in, it’s damn entertaining but it’s not good.

Michael: Screw it! I don’t care! Anything that makes me less bored.
In the above excerpt, Sanjeev questioned the value of Dan Brown (cf. questioning the value of reading Dan Brown). Sanjeev agreed with Michael that Dan Brown’s novels were entertaining but did not think much of its value, in terms it being “good” literature. However, Michael was unapologetic about reading books by a popular-culture author who catered to the general masses and retorted that he could not care less about the book’s aesthetic value as long as the story achieved its purpose of entertaining him, that is, of relieving his boredom.

In the same way that he read Dan Brown, Michael read romances, self-help books, slice-of-life books, and mysteries without caring about what others thought about his reading choices. Thus, entertainment rather than aesthetic value was the primary criteria for selection of out-of-school readings. If the novel, like *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001), happened to be an award-winning book that was intellectually challenging, it was just as well.

In a later interview, Michael clearly articulated his reading philosophy: “I like the ending, makes you long for more. As in, the whole book can suck, but if the ending is damn good, you’ll remember it as a good book”. The endings of *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001) (a Man Booker prize-winning novel) and *My Sister’s Keeper* (Picoult, 2004) (a bestseller) were what made these books well-worth reading by his standards.

Michael expressed his sentiments in another way during an individual interview later in the year, this time in relation to a school-assigned reading. In Year Two, he had to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* (2007) for Language Arts. He had initially thought that the book was boring but decided it was a good book when he completed it because “it had a
damn good ending”. Using a dating analogy, he explained to me that how a book ended was really what was important:

You know, like what they say in those dating books? You can have a damn lousy conversation but as long as the last thing is a good one, then it’ll become a good conversation. It’s the same thing for a book. The book can suck the whole way through as long as the last part, the ending is good, you’ll think it’s a good book, right?

Michael imagined his interaction with books to be a conversation with a potential partner, where what really mattered was the last impression. The quality of the reading experience and the book could not be judged until one reached the end of the novel. The potential entertainment value of each book was what made reading a pleasurable past-time for Michael.

Reading ‘girl books’. It was in his reading choices that I saw Michael as a reader who actively constructed his identity as a particular kind of reader. Michael portrayed himself as an adolescent boy who read and who was open to reading all kinds of books, including books that were commonly associated with female readers. A list of his recent reading in the preliminary survey I conducted in September 2008 included thrillers by Dan Brown and Michael Connelly, Five People You Meet in Heaven (Albom, 2003), Life of Pi (Martel, 2001), My Sister’s Keeper (Picoult, 2004) and One Fifth Avenue (Bushnell, 2008). During the course of the study, Michael started on Fistful of Colours (Lim, 2003), Twilight (Myers, 2003), Joy Luck Club (A. Tan, 1989) and The Kite Runner (Hosseini, 2003).
Michael defied gender boundaries by reading chick lit during the year of the study, even though other students avoided it, categorizing it as a “girl book”. While the common definition of chick lit is fiction written by women for women, (e.g., see http://www.findmeanauthor.com/womens_fiction_genre.htm), the boys in a group interview (Michael, Sanjeev, and Roger) saw chick lit as fiction written for younger female audiences. They contrasted chick lit with romances that they saw as being targeted for older female audiences. Romances were, according to Sanjeev, “books about relationships” such as *P.S. I Love You* (C. Ahearn, 2004). Michael had further elaborated that there were different degrees of explicit sexual content in romances, with Sidney Sheldon novels ranking at “level 4” compared to Ahearn’s *P.S. I Love You* at “level 1”. However, they all agreed that there romances and chick lit were generally targeted at women audiences rather than male audiences.

Just as girls learn to insert themselves into imagined gender roles through their readings (Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1993; Walkerdine, 1990), boys too learn to insert themselves into these fictions through such portrayals in the cultural products of books, television, and movies. I draw an example from Michael’s viewing of *Gossip Girl* (Schwartz & Savage, 2007) rather than from his reading, simply because he spent the most time telling me about *Gossip Girl* as the television series about a group of privileged teenagers attending a private elite school in the Upper East Side of New York that got him started on reading chick lit. In one of my individual interviews with Michael, Michael told me about how watching *Gossip Girl* started him on his “chick lit phase”. He described the main characters, including Peter, a son of a “not-so-rich” artist attending the high school populated with “rich kids”. Michael described Peter as not fitting in
because he was not wealthy and highlighted that Peter was sensitive and genuine (cf. the other rich “damn hot” boys). Later in the story, the most popular girl in school fell for him because he was so different from the other boys.

In this narration of the television series, Michael mentioned two distinct categories: The rich, insensitive jock versus the poor but sensitive son of an artist. Michael shared with me about his personal relationship during a car ride I gave him to one of his canoeing practices after an interview. It seemed to me that Michael very much saw himself as belonging to the sensitive and faithful category. Michael used these categories portrayed in media to negotiate his conception of his own identity as a particular kind of “guy”. Categorizations and classifications are, ironically, necessary for thinking about self and others, for it is only response to definite categorizations that one can define what one is by identifying what one is not (Butler, 1998). Michael negotiated his gender identity in part through the worlds projected in his reading and viewing, whether in affirmation, negotiation or resistance.

Reading as social/imaginative practice. Reading was a social as well as imaginative activity for Michael. Books read provided fodder for conversation, and it was not unusual for Michael to visit bookstores, either alone or with friends. Michael described one specific incident where he visited Borders with a friend in between activities and they entertained themselves by reading a self-help book on dating and laughing at what was written. Michael also read books recommended by friends and recommended books to friends. Books and the stories in books were viewed as legitimate conversation topics with peers, as was talking about recent television series and movies.
The social function of books as fodder for conversation was especially prominent in Michael’s relationship with a 19-year-old girl he was dating at the beginning of the study. Michael had met Rachel in church and she was just his kind of girl – pretty, cool and intelligent. She was working as a substitute teacher while waiting for admission into the university and would often recommend books to him. They had started on *Twilight* (Myer, 2005) together at about the same time the movie was released in the cinemas. Midway into the book, Rachel had remarked she thought it was not worth continuing with the book. Michael concurred and stopped reading the book.

Rachel had also recommended *Fistful of Colours* (Lim, 2003), a Singapore novel, to Michael, and was herself reading “thick books” that Michael had no inclination to start on. In most of my earlier interviews with Michael, Rachel featured prominently as someone who could influence his reading choices, but that tapered off towards the end of the year as their relationship cooled and Michael became more absorbed with the academic demands of school.

Michael did not limit his social space to physical and verbal interactions with his friends. His online blog was a diary of sorts, a public space that his friends could access to read about his activities and his thoughts. Michael’s blog reflected his interests. His blog page was decorated with inspirational pictures of canoeists, and his reflections showed his preoccupation with canoeing and his schoolwork. This blog page was available publicly, which meant that anyone could access the information about Michael. As such, Michael limited the information on the blog, confining it mostly to his thoughts about canoeing and school. Michael was not a prolific blogger, and updated his blog about two to five times each month. Later in the year, he started a personal blog with
limited access and ceased to update the old blog. Michael had told me about his older (public) blog but did not update me on the address of his personal blog.

Michael occasionally shared his reading through his blog entries. He was convinced that “the freaking long commentary” he wrote on his blog about *The Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001) was the reason “everyone in class” had read the novel the previous year. Roger and Sanjeev, who were present at the same interview, were surprised – Roger had found *Life of Pi* at a bookstore in the airport and Sanjeev had found it at home, courtesy of his older sister, and both did not even know Michael had a blog entry about *Life of Pi*. Despite the fact that Roger and Sanjeev did not read *The Life of Pi* because of Michael’s blog, the fact that Michael blogged about his reading demonstrated that he thought about his reading choices as something worth talking about.

Michael’s blog entry on *Life of Pi* (2003) was a relatively long entry (by his standards). In the blog entry, Michael reflected on *Life of Pi* as an inspirational and thought-provoking novel.

Recently I have been noticing how beautiful life is. Perhaps it's due to the novel Cliff lent me entitled *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. Although I've only read up till Chapter 17, but I can safely say that this book has been an intellectually challenging read yet one which could accompany you as you go through your lazy Sunday afternoon alone. It describes in length the wonders of this world as the protagonist "Piscine Molitor Patel" otherwise known as Pi Patel goes through different experiences as the son of a zookeeper and a believer of 3 religions: Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Yann Martel has used the magic of words to allow me to understand this world better.
I feel that appreciating life is coming naturally to me after I have started reading this book. Standing on top of an overhead bridge looking down at the countless people going about their daily routines may sound dumb, but if you slow down to watch them all pass by, you'll notice how amazing it actually is; How God manages to create each and every one of us uniquely, everyone with a different dream, a different goal. Truly Breathtaking isn't it?

This reflection on *Life of Pi* was in keeping with Michael’s constant reflection on life and growing up. For Michael, *Life of Pi* was an “intellectually challenging read” that made him think about life and his attitude towards life. Yet, reading it was also a form of relaxation as *Life of Pi* was something that could be read on a “lazy Saturday afternoon alone”. Finally, it was also something to be appreciated as the fantastical story and the “magic of words” drew Michael into the story.

In the blog entry, Michael interwove his evaluation of the story at the level of entertainment, aesthetic value, and intellectual engagement. Michael approached the reading of *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2003) from different angles, and for multiple purposes. This showed that Michael was able to access books and the stories in them at different levels and for different purposes, even during a single reading. Even though *Life of Pi* was not a school-assigned text, Michael used his knowledge of language to evaluate the writing style and language of the novel. The blog entry also showed that Michael did not mind a “difficult” book that made him think, and that he was willing to exert some effort at reading if the story and the ideas in the book appealed to him.

Michael’s blog entry contradicts the idea that girls tend towards “discourses of feeling” and boys towards “discourses of action” (Simpson, 1996). While Michael did
read Dan Brown and other thrillers where an exciting plot was the key ingredient to enjoyment, he also read other kinds of novels and engaged with them emotionally. Reading could be inspirational for Michael, a way of “re-organizing” identity (Sumara, 1998) as he learnt more about what he believed in, and gained new ways of looking at the world through his reading. For Michael, Life of Pi (Martel, 2003) had been a significant text that he saw as having an impact on the way he viewed the world. He began to think about the inspirational in the ordinary in his everyday life. It taught him to imagine everyday ordinary events as something to be appreciated and amazed about. His way of looking at the world was transformed as he began to appreciate the unique individuality of every person.

Another inspirational novel for Michael was the Singapore novel, Fistful of Colours (Lim, 2003). Michael had not completed reading the book because he had thought the novel was “insomnia antidote”. However, he remembered a quote from it: “to be rid of feelings is to be safe, and to feel deeply is to court danger for oneself”. Michael admitted sheepishly to me after he cited the quotation from memory that he would commit phrases from books to memory if they “touch[-ed]” his “heart”. That particular quote had seemed applicable to his life then as he grappled with his adolescent emotional life. The reading of these novels differed from Michael’s reading of chick lit. Reading chick lit may have been significant for the moment, ‘sedimented’ (Pahl, 2008) in some ways unto Michael’s identity as part of his reading history but was remembered as part of a phase rather than an influential text for thinking about self and the world. On the other hand, books such as Life of Pi (Martel, 2003) and Fistful of Colours (Lim, 2003) had the
potential to influence the way Michael thought about the world in terms of his belief systems.

**Reading Beyond and Within School Boundaries**

Michael positioned himself as a reader and a literate person both in his out-of-school and in-school practices. In that way, he was very much like the other focal students who saw themselves as able and capable, even if he had to work harder in certain subjects compared to other students. In an individual interview with Michael where he told me why he chose to study in Ace Independent, it was clear that he thought of himself as someone who was a good reader and of reasonable intelligence. He spoke about his available choices among the top schools, and stated that he decided on Ace Independent eventually because it had seemed “more fun” than the other options he had.

Having fun for Michael seemed to be an important factor, and he judged the three schools he had been in by how much free time he had to pursue his own interests and the pressure exerted on students to excel academically. The tension between wanting to have fun and to do well was one thread that ran through Michael’s construction of his identity, and was evident in the way he approached school-assigned readings. While he sought to excel in his work (and thus, had to conform to school definitions of literacy), he also sought to distance himself from school-sanctioned ways of evaluating literature by reading them in his own way.

**The “value” of school reading.** Despite being a good Language Arts student, Michael resisted the mould of what a good student should be like at times. He tried to fit in with the social concept of being a ‘good’ literature student (Wortham, 2004, 2006) but did not always conform to school-sanctioned ways of valuing high-culture literary works.
He saw the value of school reading as twofold: it was economical in that he wanted to do well in school for his future, and his grades were tangible results for learning to read in school-sanctioned ways. At the same time, his attitude towards literature could be said to be humanistic in that he recognized that the study of literature held some intangible benefits for him. He explained that it was something he enjoyed and it helped him learn to be more analytical. He did not see the two aims as contradictory. Rather, his study of literature was situated along these two parallel goals, though there were times one goal may seem more pertinent than the other.

While Michael conformed to school criteria for his readings and writing by doing well for his assignments, Michael chose to judge the entertainment value of school-assigned readings by his own standards for mass consumption texts, and preferred particular school texts according to whether they were “fun” to read or not. Michael’s general reading stance can be described as defiantly populist. The populist position, according to Ang, in her study of Dallas viewers, "supplies a subject-position from which any attempt to pass judgment on people's aesthetic preferences is a priori and by definition rejected, because it is rejected as an unjustified attack on freedom" (1982, p. 113). Michael saw his reading choices as something he had a right to do, and did not see a need to defend why he read popular-culture books produced for mass consumption. In addition, he evaluated both his out-of-school readings and his school-assigned readings by whether they entertained him or not. Although he was able to judge the quality of school-assigned texts by literary standards imposed by the teachers, he determined books by his own standards when he was not being evaluated. Unlike Sanjeev who accorded value to different kinds of readings, Michael positioned himself as someone who read as
he pleased, in opposition to the notion of a middlebrow reader (Radway, 1997) who could declare he or she read for edification and for self-improvement.

Because Michael determined the value of books read by entertainment rather than aesthetic value, he considered school readings “damn boring” compared to his out-of-school readings. For example, he felt that an anthology of short stories, *A Sense of Belonging* (Stevens, 1989), studied in Secondary Two (which included the short story *Flowers for Algernon*) was far more enjoyable compared to *Four Continents* (Gordimer, et al., 1998), the anthology that was assigned for his Year Four reading. He felt that while he could read the stories in *A Sense of Belonging* for “the fun of it, enjoyment”, the theme of “the whole colonialism thing” in *Four Continents* was “super boring”. The graduation to more difficult issues and difficult readings in Year Four meant that Michael needed to put more work into reading his school-assigned compared to before.

To Michael, school readings sometimes rehashed common themes and he felt that “black and white discrimination stuff is such an old debate thing”, and was something that he “had been doing since Secondary One”. Michael felt that “the school [hasn’t] been giving anything fresh” and that racial issues were passé, even though the issues were set in different contexts and involved different ethnic groups and issues. For example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (H. Lee, 2007), was set in the U.S.A. and involved civil rights issues, whereas *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008), was set in Nigeria in a colonial context. Michael recognized these differences but still thought it boiled down to the same issue of “blacks and white”. For him, it was difficult to relate to these readings since he felt he would not “know what it’s like to be black”.
It was interesting how Michael commented that “we won’t know what it’s like to be black” in relation to his school-assigned readings. He had felt that it was difficult to relate to *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008). This comment on race and ethnicity and the ability of Michael to relate as a reader was ironic as many of the out-of-school books he read portrayed non-Chinese, usually “white” protagonists and he had no issues relating to these characters. It was the foregrounding of issues of race and ethnicity that made the school-assigned readings in Year Four more difficult. The popular-culture books that Michael read outside of school often did not require Michael to think through difficult political and racial issues. Similarly, the school-assigned texts in his lower secondary years had been “easier”. Though Michael had to deal with racial issues in his study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (H. Lee, 2007), the story and issues had been interesting and the themes novel to him at that time.

For Michael, a Chinese-Singaporean from a predominantly English-speaking background, settings in western contexts were far less distant than the postcolonial settings read in school. Hence, Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl were not perceived by Michael as culturally distant because culture had been neutralized in his reading of these texts. Culture was neutralized in that Michael did not think that culture was important or significant in his readings; he was unaware that his familiarity with particular books and kinds of stories was really to do with his reading history. Having grown up with *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, it had seemed easier to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 2007) than *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008) where specific unfamiliar cultural references in non-western contexts required more work to determine what was significant and why it was significant. In addition, he was not attentive to the author’s choice of race
or ethnicity in the popular-culture novels that he voluntarily read, and did not question the authorial choices.

For Michael, despite the foregrounding of culture in the postcolonial texts, he continued to evaluate the texts by his enjoyment of the texts rather than the significance of the themes raised. Because he did not see the postcolonial struggle in Nigeria as relevant to him and because the story did not engage him, he distanced himself from the text and the issues in the text. He was critical of the story, partly because of style but mostly because it had failed to entertain him. Yet, when Michael had to talk or write about the text for school purposes, he was able to do so in a way that met the school’s criteria.

**Michael’s schooled identity.** In terms of his school work, Michael cultivated a blasé attitude. He had declared to me during the first group interview that he did not read school books, and used “summaries and all that” to get by. As I later discovered, the declaration that Michael did not read school texts was untrue even though his declarations that he used guidebooks was true. It was also genuine when he expressed that he found some of the books boring. Michael deliberately cultivated an “I-couldn’t-care-less” attitude to give an impression of someone who did not have to try too hard to do well in Language Arts. Roger, another focal student, summed up Michael’s attitude when he remarked in a group interview: “he says he won’t do his homework, but he will”.

Michael’s portrayal of himself as coolly unconcerned came across not just in interviews, but during class. For example, at the end of a lesson when Mr. Lai reminded the class to read a poem for the next lesson, he commented to Mr. Lai that “we have to
read *Macbeth* and we have to read this crap also”, displaying an exasperated attitude towards school-assigned readings (see Narrative vignette #2). Another example was the attitude that Michael displayed towards group work. He shared in one of the interviews that “group work usually means my group does all the work and I slack off”. However, he did admit that his classmates would force him to do the work, and he would perform because he was concerned about the collective grade that would affect his own grade.

I myself had initially been confused by Michael’s declarations that he did not read school-assigned texts along with his declarations that it was important for him to do well in Language Arts. It was only when I examined my interview transcripts over again that I realized that Michael would position himself as someone who did not read his books during group interviews when other students were around. However, in his individual interviews with me, Michael was far more serious and perhaps honest in his evaluation of himself and his work.

During one interview, Michael revealed to me that he thought that “literature is good. It helps you to analyze things”. He thought that studying literature made him more attentive to analyzing life and issues in general. Michael felt that he did not have to work very hard for Language Arts compared to Science and Mathematics as he enjoyed the subject and was naturally better at it. He pointed out to me that he was awake and participated during Language Arts classes instead of falling asleep as he often would in his other classes, an observation that was backed up by both Roger and Sanjeev, present at the same interview.

Michael’s concerns about his grades were evident in his blog posts where he voiced his concerns about his work and in my individual interviews with him. He was
concerned about his grades and his success as a “good” student in Language Arts. As such, Michael conformed to what was required by reading school-assigned texts, analyzing them in a manner that was approved by the teachers. He had no qualms turning to various resources such as *Spark Notes* and other literature guides available online to help him with school-assigned readings. During an in-class online quiz (which I observed in the computer lab) when Michael was supposed to answer some questions about *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008), he turned to *Wikipedia* and various other resources he found through *Google* to answer the questions as he had not finished reading the text. It was an un-graded quiz that mostly assessed the student’s content knowledge as well as general thematic understandings, and in that situation, Michael saw online research as a quick-fix solution to complete the quiz.

An example of how Michael was able to speak as a literary critic was demonstrated during the lesson on *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2006) described in Narrative Vignette #3, Michael was able to identify the extract being studied as a soliloquy. He was also, at various points, able to identify the specific lines in the passage that supported points he was trying to make. In another class discussion of *Macbeth*, Michael’s grasp of the text and the language of the text were evident in the following exchange between Ms. Rani and Michael.

Michael: His “vaulting ambition” clouded his judgment.

Ms. Rani: He lost his morality in the process.

Michael: The fact that his ambition was so great…

Ms. Rani: Exactly, in the end, the tables turned, and Macbeth rather than Lady Macbeth becomes the domineering one.

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Michael: Now you know who is wearing the pants.

In the above exchange, conducted rapidly, Michael was able to quote from *Macbeth* and to conduct a discussion about the characters and relationships between the characters with Ms. Rani with ease. He remarked on change in the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth when he commented “now you know who’s wearing the pants”. Reading Shakespeare may be more difficult than reading some other texts, but it was something that Michael was able to do competently to demonstrate his literate abilities and literary knowledge.

Michael’s literary persona came across in his written work. For example, I found that he made detailed annotations in his written “unseen” assessments to help him analyze the passage or poem, and that he was able to use quotations from the text to support his argument. Michael wrote succinctly and coherently, using literary terms and picking out themes and issues easily to demonstrate that he was able to critique a poem critically. The following extract is Michael’s introduction to an “unseen” assessment.

“Siberian Dream” by Irina Pantaeva is a short prose about a young nine-year old Russian girl’s dream to break free from her cultural norm and traditions, against the strong, iron will of her entire society. Pantaeva touches on this sensitive topic of the Russian culture through the eyes of the protagonist. This first person narrative allows us to have much insight towards the real, actual feelings and emotions of the protagonist. Through the first person perspective, we can see what really goes on through the mind of a young cultural rebel. Michael began his essay with a statement by identifying the theme, which he saw as the struggle between individual freedom and societal expectations. He identified the use of a
literary technique – the first-person narrative – and pointed to how the literary technique was effectively used by the writer. In the rest of his essay, Michael proceeded to elaborate on this central theme and the writer’s techniques that contributed towards the effectiveness of the passage. He did well for this essay, scoring 23 out of 25 marks. Michael was a regular ‘A’ student, and did not usually score less than 20 out of 25 marks for his written work.

At times, Michael’s in-class persona seemed like a stark contrast to his written work, at least from the point of view of one his teachers. Ms. Rani expressed surprise when she returned his first written assignment. She was surprised at the fluency of his writing and remarked that she “wouldn’t have thought it”. When pressed further by Michael as to why she made that remark, she elaborated that he was “full of nonsense during class”. It was true, to some extent. While Michael participated in class discussions, he was also prone to irrelevant and sometimes even coarse comments spoken in the local colloquial slang (Singlish – a term for Singapore English, which included, among other things, affixes such as “lah” and particular sentence constructions). While Michael was concerned about his grades, he did not always portray himself as a “good” (in terms of behavior) student.

The complexity of Michael’s reading and identity practices can be seen in how he negotiated class values with his own values about what should count for good reading. He adhered to school ways of assessing his literary competency but contested the value that the school assigned to particular texts chosen. He agreed with the value of studying literature at times but also saw it as a chore at other times. His ability to override his own judgment and to adhere to school-valued reading and writing practices placed Michael in
a position where he was able to acquire the skills that were valued for moving on to the next level of education.

**Local/Global Boundaries.** Another way that Michael’s resisted the school culture was in his perception of himself as “local” rather than “global”. Ace Independent boys were primed towards internationalism, with the adoption of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) for Years Five and Six students. The general sentiment that teachers expressed to me and the sense I got from my visits to the school was that students were expected to be cosmopolitan citizens who were well-traveled, well-informed, and able to understand different cultures. The school prepared students for such a role in part through the curriculum and in part through school programs such as compulsory overseas enrichment trips for all students. Hence, Michael had traveled to Malaysia and Vietnam with the school, and could look forward to one more overseas trip in Year Five.

While most of the focal students were unclear about what course they wanted to pursue in university, it was a given for them that they would be heading towards university education. The only real issue they voiced to me was whether they wanted to study in a Singapore university or an overseas university. Michael seemed very certain about his own future. He thought that he would enroll in a Singapore university to pursue a double degree of law and economics after he completed the compulsory two-year army stint for Singaporean boys. He wanted to study in Singapore because “it would be hard to leave family and friends”.

Michael thought that because “the only thing I can do is English”, he was limited to particular subjects. In any case, it was something he was interested in because he was
“not a Math, Science kind of person”. Thus, just as Michael’s reading choices were driven by interest and the need for entertainment, his choice of a perceived future career was driven by what he felt he was good at and interested in. He felt that dealing with “language” came easy to him and he would be better off doing something he was good at and enjoyed.

Despite his proficiency at the English language, Michael deliberately positioned himself as a “hokkien-speaking Ah Beng” (Hokkien is a Chinese dialect, and Ah Beng a derogative term, often used in jest, to refer to an unsophisticated Chinese boy) who was able to code-switch when talking in school to his predominately middle-class English-educated friends and with his other friends. He positioned himself against his perception of other boys like Sanjeev and Roger who “all hate like those hokkien-speaking Ah Beng and stuff”. He told me that he had other friends from church and from his neighborhood that he often hung out with after school or on weekends. He emphasized that despite living in a condominium (often taken as a status symbol in Singapore, an indicator that one belonged to a relatively high income middle-class family), he often walked to the basketball court at the Housing Development Block (HDB) estate (or public housing that more than 80% of Singaporeans live in) near his home and played basketball with friends he had made around the neighborhood.

Michael’s positioning himself as distinctly ‘heartlander’ moved beyond the boundaries of school-based friendships and his perception of a cosmopolitan identity preferred by Ace Independent boys. The term ‘heartlander’ was coined by the previous Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong (1999), in opposition to the term ‘cosmopolitan’. ‘Cosmopolitans’ were defined as Singaporeans with an international
outlook and the ability to generate income by extending their economic reach beyond Singapore. ‘Heartlanders’, on the other hand, made their living within the country and formed the core of Singapore society. In Hannerz’s (1990) terms, cosmopolitans were well-equipped to deal with the Other, the culturally unfamiliar, unlike individuals more bound to specific contexts.

Michael saw himself as a ‘heartlander’ who was bound to his home. His identity within school conformed to the school-sanctioned image of being a global literate citizen but his out-of-school identity was very different. Michael seemed to be straddling two different worlds. He shared in an individual interview that “I can never relate to Ace Independent boys. Cos I think I’m very ‘heartlander’”. However, Michael seemed to get along well with the boys at school and declared that he was proud to be an Ace Independent boy, along with its association of being confident and cosmopolitan.

Ironically, Michael was both at home and yet not at home in the school setting.

Michael’s positioning as one who was resolutely Singaporean was also visible in his stance toward Singapore books, which he felt was “relevant” to him as a Singaporean. Thus, unlike most of the other focal students, he could name some Singapore novels he had read. He shared during an interview that he liked Colin Cheong’s (1991) *Stolen Child*, perhaps not just because the novel was set in Singapore, but because the story was about a young boy growing up in Singapore and finding his identity. The setting in Singapore did make the story seem more relevant as Michael was able to relate very specifically to some of the experiences that Wings, the protagonist, went through. More recently, Michael had read *Fistful of Colors* (Lim, 2003) but had not completed that. Just reading books by Singapore writers set in Singapore set Michael apart from his
classmates. With the exception of Joel, none of the other focal students could remember having read Singapore books.

Michael’s positioning of himself as someone who liked Singapore literature was in opposition to the image portrayed by his classmates whom he saw as more cocooned in their own privileged worlds and out of touch with the Singaporean masses. However, while Michael explicitly portrayed himself as someone who liked Singapore literature and who was in that sense rooted to place, his reading choices and habits showed him to be a consumer of books from different localities, of different varieties. He was a flexible reader who was able to access books ranging from popular-culture books such as Dan Brown novels to high-culture prize-winning literature such as *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001) to canonical texts such as Shakespearean plays. While he would not deliberately seek out classics (in contrast to Roger, who thought he should read classics, and attempted to read novels such as *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 2004)), he was able to read them with ease for school purposes.

In Michael’s case, his reading of Singapore literature when juxtaposed against his other readings did not necessarily place him as a ‘heartlander’ (used here in opposition to the term cosmopolitan). Within Singapore literature, distinctions are made between canonical works and popular works catered to the masses (see Koh, 2008 for a list of Singapore writing; see Poon, Holden & Lim, 2009 for an anthology of Singapore writing). The books that Michael were able to list for me tended to belong to literature that was more highly-valued and had been awarded Singapore literature prizes. The reading of Singapore literature can be said to contribute to Michael’s construction of a global cosmopolitan identity, of someone who is familiar both at home and with the
world. The ability to straddle different worlds in his reading practices constituted intercultural capital (Luke, 2004) that is able to move across borders and boundaries within and beyond the nation.

**A Summary: Michael’s Reading History and Identity Practices**

Examining the reading history and identity practices of Michael allowed me to see the complexities and contradictions inherent in the construction of Michael’s reading and identity practices as he sought to construct his reading identity both within and beyond boundaries he faced in his everyday life. Boundaries existed for Michael to conform, to negotiate, and to resist as he worked out his identity as a reader and a person. Whether these identities were gender-based or school-based, they provided categories against which Michael could position himself. The complexities of adolescent reading practices can be seen in Michael’s negotiation of various boundaries and his portrayal of himself as a unique reader and person.

Michael’s reading identity can be said to be the sum of his reading experiences, and that included both his reading choices and practices. Since young, Michael had been immersed in an environment where turning to books and stories for entertainment was legitimate. This attitude towards books carried into his adolescence years. Michael was a competent reader of different varieties of texts, and declared himself to be a lover of literature and reading. He saw this interest as something that would influence the future direction of his work. He thought that as a lawyer, he could be a wordsmith, using his skill at the English language to do something he could be good at. While he did not think of himself as a cosmopolitan, choosing to position himself instead as resolutely Singaporean, his flexible reading practices did mean that he was highly literate and
correspondingly, able to move easily between English-speaking contexts in various parts of the world.

Sanjeev’s Reading and Identity Practices: Border Crossings

I enjoy reading fiction from authors like Chuck Palahniuk and Lionel Shriver, don’t really enjoy fantasy however. I tend to read in spurts, sometimes I go for months without reading a proper novel during school term. During holidays and such however, I can devour 2-3 books in a week. I read mostly for entertainment.

(Sanjeev, 15 years old, preliminary survey 2008)

The only Indian-Singaporean in the study, and one of two Indian boys in the classroom, Sanjeev was well-traveled and well-read. I chose to focus on Sanjeev because he seemed to epitomize the concept of border crossing that stood out in so much of my data across the focal students. These boys were crossing geographical borders in their reading and identity practices, even though they were unconscious about these everyday crossings, whether in their out-of-school or school reading practices. For Sanjeev, it was not until the interviews that I conducted during the study that he began to think about the location of their readings and the implications it had on his identity.

For Sanjeev, physical border crossing was nothing new. His dad’s job had meant that Sanjeev only returned to his “native” land of Singapore when he was 9-years-old. He much preferred living in Singapore and being able to meet up with his grandparents and other relatives regularly. However, being home did not mean that traveling stopped for Sanjeev. It was just that the nature of traveling changed, with Sanjeev traveling with his family for holidays during school breaks. In addition, Sanjeev also traveled on school-
organized trips. By the time he was fifteen, Sanjeev had been to the United States of America (a few times) and various parts of Europe, Australia and Southeast Asia.

Sanjeev’s identity practices can be described as hybrid – he was Singaporean by citizenship, Indian by ethnicity. He spoke English at home, took Tamil as a second language and French as a third language. He identified himself as Singaporean-Indian and admitted that he had never been to India and was less able to identify with an Indian national from India than with his Chinese-Singaporean classmates. He attributed this partly to his “western” upbringing where independence was valued. This identification with western values spilled over to his readings when Sanjeev realized during one interview session that he read mostly “American books”. It was not that Sanjeev deliberately only read American fiction, but that he almost always selected American fiction when he visited the bookstore. For Sanjeev though, his reading practices were directed not so much by geographical location as his interests, even if the books selected inevitably ended up being from America.

**Border Crossings in Out-of-School Consumption Practices**

Sanjeev demonstrated considerable flexibility in his out-of-school consumption practices. His reading choices indicated a wide range of reading, from popular fiction to award-winning novels. In addition to fiction, Sanjeev read magazines such as *TIME*, National *Geographic* and *The Runner*, which he accessed in the school library or at home. Sanjeev also read autobiographies and biographies. Sanjeev was a flexible reader for whom both fiction and non-fiction were equally accessible. Moreover, he was able to access both high-culture literature and popular-culture as potential leisure reads, even
though he realized that he seemed to be reading more mass-produced American fiction when I asked him about the geographical locations of his reading choices.

Reading had been very much a default leisure activity for Sanjeev, cultivated since young. He was allowed to buy as many books as he liked, “regardless of the price”. In fact, so long as Sanjeev had finished reading a book, he was allowed to buy a new book “every time [we] went out on weekends.” This meant that Sanjeev could read without worrying about having to return his books to the library or a friend, and that he accumulated a relatively large collection of books at home. Sanjeev’s access to books was not limited to those he bought since he could read books from his older sister’s collection, although it consisted mostly of fantasy, which he generally disliked.

However, as Sanjeev grew older, he had become increasingly busy with school-related extracurricular activities. For one, he served as an executive member on Ace Independent’s Prefectorial Board. The Prefectorial Board consisted of a small group of exemplary students (called Prefects) who were nominated by teachers and fellow students to serve the school. Duties consisted of organizing activities, monitoring behavior (e.g., booking students who arrived late in school, checking students’ school attire), and representing the school at important functions. As an executive committee member, Sanjeev was one of the older boys who managed the day-to-day running of the Prefects. In addition to his duties as a Prefect, Sanjeev was also on the school’s track and field team. He was a long distance runner and usually had to train three times a week. Scheduling interview times with Sanjeev was difficult, and once, he had to get permission to miss some school activity in order to turn up for the interviews.
There was very little time to read, but Sanjeev could not imagine a less busy lifestyle. During one interview, when we were discussing the stress of having to manage schoolwork and his extracurricular activities, he remarked: “I can’t imagine a life without prefects. I enjoy doing that kind of stuff”. It did seem to me that Sanjeev was the kind of person who liked having things to do all the time. When there had been a lull in his school activities the previous year, he managed to persuade his mother to let him restart his piano classes, something he had given up when he was twelve.

It was inevitable that with such a busy schedule, Sanjeev found less time to read in secondary school. He mentioned in one of his earlier email reading logs that he “read a lot up till Secondary One” but that “nowadays as I spend more time in school and on the computer at home, the only things [I] usually read are the newspapers and a couple of magazines”. Reading the newspapers and magazines instead of novels became daily reading staples. Novels required sustained reading and so were left to the school holidays, when he had more time to complete a book in one sitting or within a short period of time. The last few novels that Sanjeev reported reading had been read on flights en-route to a holiday destination during school holidays.

**The value of reading.** What stood out in my analysis of my interviews with Sanjeev and his email reading logs was how he saw reading as a valued activity and how he evaluated the kinds of reading that he and his friends did. The evaluation was not explicit; rather, the criteria for ranking books came across in the way he talked about different kinds of books.

Reading was seen as a valuable leisure activity that was both entertaining and potentially educational. Sanjeev thought of reading as a valuable and productive leisure
activity compared to some other entertainment. For example, playing video games was not as educational as reading though it could be enjoyable. Sanjeev noted in his preliminary survey that time spent on the Internet was not usually productive since it was mostly “wasted on msn and online forums” (emphasis mine). The use of the word “wasted” captured Sanjeev’s attitude towards the use of time spent on some leisure activities other than reading. Sanjeev elaborated during an interview that playing video games, chatting and surfing on the internet, and watching television were generally viewed as unproductive, and were not to be indulged in too often. On the other hand, reading was a habit that his parents had encouraged from young and was really something he ought to do more often.

Just as Sanjeev had a mental list of what constituted preferred productive activities for him to engage in, he had a mental list of what kinds of books constituted aesthetically more valuable reading choices. Sanjeev positioned himself as someone who was aware of the quality of available choices, even if he did not always read what he considered valuable. One occasion when Sanjeev’s values emerged was in the exchange with Michael about the quality of Dan Brown novels during a group interview (excerpt repeated for ease of reference).

Chin: Why do you like Dan Brown?

Michael: Damn nice. The mystery is very cool.

Sanjeev: (interjecting) I read in Primary 6, and I thought it was damn good. Then, after that, a few months later, I realized it’s –

Michael: (adamantly) It’s damn GOOD!

Sanjeev: No, as in, it’s damn entertaining but it’s not good.
In the above excerpt, Sanjeev remarked that Dan Brown novels were “entertaining” but “not good”. He appealed to the dual criteria of entertainment value and aesthetic value to judge Dan Brown’s novels, but ultimately seemed to indicate that the worth of one’s reading should be judged by aesthetic value rather than entertainment value.

Sanjeev explained that he had thought the novels were good when he initially read them at the age of 12 but had changed his mind about the quality of Dan Brown’s thrillers a few months later. He later elaborated that “it was interesting but you don’t really think about that after reading it”. By his comment, Sanjeev implied that popular-culture books written for general mass consumption did not require one to think much. All one had to do was to skim through the novel and immerse oneself in the plot for the few hours of enjoyable, if not memorable, reading. Sanjeev’s comments also demonstrated how he developed as a reader in terms of his evaluation of the books read. He had thought that Dan Brown was a good writer (in terms of aesthetic value) when he was younger but changed his opinion later. He still read Dan Brown; it was only his evaluation of the quality of Dan Brown’s novels that had changed.

It was not that one could not read popular-culture novels books but that one should be aware of the kinds of novels one read. However, even within his reading of popular-culture books, there were those that were “trashy” and those that were not. “Trashy novels” were good for when Sanjeev did not “feel like reading anything too heavy” but generally were not perceived as anything that would contribute to his aesthetic sensibilities. Thus, he sometimes would “indulge” in something “trashy” like *The Game* (Strauss, 2005), a book about “this guy who becomes extremely adept at seducing women”.

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The difference between literary novels and popular culture came across in Sanjeev’s discussion of two novels read. Sanjeev managed to read both *The Inheritance of Loss* (Desai, 2006) and *The Lost Symbol* (Brown, 2009b) during his end-of-the-year school break, and evaluated his reading experiences in his email reading log.

I did manage to read *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai in November. My aunt recommended it to me. I found that it was quite a struggle to read although at times I did appreciate the use of language and other literary devices. It did seem more like a book that I would do for literature though, and I read it bit by bit rather than devouring it in a few sessions. I suppose I could tell the difference between her work and Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol*, which I read not too long after that. It was a page turner in every sense of the word and I finished it much faster than *The Inheritance of Loss*. At the end of it though I could tell it wasn’t exactly a great book, but the point was that it kept me hooked until I was finished.

Sanjeev had read *The Inheritance of Loss* (Desai, 2006) at the recommendation of his aunt but thought it was a literary book that he would more likely study in his literature classes than pick up on his own. Literary books were read to be appreciated and admired (“I did appreciate the use of language and other literary devices”) whereas popular-culture books were read for entertainment (“it was a page turner in every sense of the word”). Reading *The Inheritance of Loss* was hard work that took a few sittings whereas reading *The Lost Symbol* (Brown, 2009b) took no effort at all as Sanjeev completed the book in one sitting.

Sanjeev evaluated his readings according to two different criteria: whether the story was aesthetically pleasing or whether it was entertaining. Thus, while *The Lost
Symbol (Brown, 2009b) was enjoyable in the sense that it kept him entertained as he read the novel from beginning to end, it was not “exactly a great book”. Unlike The Inheritance of Loss (Desai, 2006), language and literary style was lacking even if plot was not. Sanjeev’s criteria mirrored how high-culture literature and popular-culture literature are often judged – popular novels by their “narrative engagement, their excitement level, and the ability to "grab" the reader” and high-culture literature by “the author's language and stylistic skills” (Corse, 1997, p. 133).

However, the dividing line between good books and entertaining books were not always so clear-cut. The realistic fiction that Sanjeev generally preferred often dealt with thought-provoking issues. These novels were sometimes written by award-winning writers, awards that mark them out as potential books for eventual canonization (Corse, 1997), whether nationally or internationally. For example, We Need to Talk about Kevin (Shriver, 2003), one of his favorite books, was awarded the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2005, a prize “awarded to the woman who, in the opinion of the judges, has written the best, eligible full-length novel in English” (Orange Prize for Fiction: Entry Rules and Regulations). The novel engaged with the issue of parental responsibility in the context of a child who was involved in a school shooting. The story, narrated from the perspective of the mother in a series of letters to her estranged husband, had compelling characters and the twist at the end was both poignant and horrifying.

Another book that Sanjeev liked was What I Talk about When I Talk about Running (H. Murakami, 2009), a reflective philosophical memoir by award-winning author, Haruki Murakami, about running and life. Murakami had been awarded several prizes for his work, including the Yomiuri Prize, a prestigious Japanese prize, and the
Franz Kafka Prize, awarded by the Franz Kafka Society and the city of Prague, Czech Republic. While critics have not been unequivocal about his work, Murakami remains an award-winning author whose books are constantly displayed prominently in bookstores’ recommendations list. The book had “caught [Sanjeev’s] eye” when he was looking for some reading material at the airport bookstore. Sanjeev was an “avid runner” and so had “enjoyed it [What I Need to Talk about When I Talk about Running] thoroughly, being able to relate to it closely”. Murakami’s book reflected on the discipline required in running and in writing, and Sanjeev had found the reflections meaningful.

Sanjeev’s reading identity included the ability to talk about books as well as the actual reading of books. He displayed knowledge about books in our interviews. For example, in the following excerpt during a group interview, he discussed the background of Yann Martel, author of Life of Pi (2001), demonstrating his knowledge of the novel and the background of the novel.

Roger: He’s living in Canada but he’s from India? I bet it’s [the story] all rubbish.
Sanjeev: It’s not written by an Indian guy. It’s written by a Canadian guy.
Roger: With some strange name.
Michael: Something Martel.
Sanjeev: Yann Martel.

In the short extract, Sanjeev recalled the name as well as the background of the author of Life of Pi. This was despite the fact that Sanjeev usually had vague memories of books read, unless it was something that really captivated him. For example, when Michael was recounting the plot of My Sister’s Keeper (Picoult, 2004), he remarked after a while: “Oh, I think I read this one”. This was a clear contrast to his ability to recount the plot of We
*Need to Talk about Kevin* (Shriver, 2003), which was one of his favorite books, and thus worth remembering.

In addition, Sanjeev was able to talk about books that he had not read, displaying knowledge of book information that was often circulated in public spaces of bestseller lists, prize-winning titles and book reviews. In the same group interview with Michael and Roger, Sanjeev mentioned that he had thought about reading *Shopaholics* (Kinsella, 2009) and gave reasons for why he would not read or watch *Twilight* (Myer, 2005). He also made references to other books that he had not read such as *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (K. Y. Lee, 1999), an autobiography of the first Prime Minister of Singapore, and the books in the *Inheritance* series by Christopher Paolini.

*“When I read, I’m just reading American books so it’s not much”*. In one of my interviews with Sanjeev, he reflected on the geographical concentration of his out-of-school readings as primarily “American books”, taken to refer to “mostly fiction by American writers”. Sanjeev’s primary school readings had spanned a wider geographical reach and had included classics from monolingual English-speaking countries such as Britain and Canada. He was familiar with Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, C.S. Lewis and J. K. Rowling, amongst other well-known children’s writers. However, it seemed that as he got older and looked to adult bestseller’s lists for recommended readings, he had generally found himself reading more popular literature written by American writers. For example, he read Dan Brown’s bestselling novels, including *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown, 2009a) and *Deception Point* (Brown, 2006), when he was twelve. When Sanjeev was fourteen, he read two of his favorite novels, *We need to Talk about Kevin* (Shriver, 2003) and *Fight Club* (Palahnuik, 2005), both by American authors.
When questioned further about why he liked reading American books, Sanjeev suggested that most of his popular-culture readings, which made for quick, entertaining reads were by American writers, so it was fairly natural that he leaned towards reading books by American writers. It was “not much” because he did not see these readings as valuable to him or adding to his knowledge. He made the generalization in his email reading log that

I suppose American fiction appeals to me because the writing style is fairly engaging and interesting, appealing to the general masses compared to other works by international writers which might have more literary worth or are prizewinners (a.k.a. dry).

Sanjeev associated American fiction with works that appealed to “the general masses.” In contrast to popular-culture (and often American) novels, literary works by “international writers” may not be as entertaining because they were “dry”. Works by international writers or prize-winning novels may be more valuable in terms of aesthetic value (“more literary worth”) but they were not necessarily preferred readings. Because Sanjeev wanted to be entertained when he read, he preferred plot-driven stories that had the capacity to keep his attention, and the novels that fitted his criteria when he visited bookstores tended to be by American writers.

Reading popular-culture literature met the personal need of Sanjeev to be entertained, though entertainment meant differently for different kinds of novels. For example, Sanjeev found that Dan Brown’s novels were thrilling and exciting, even if he did not think much about the writer’s literary substance. On the other hand, he liked novels such as *Fight Club* (Palahnuik, 2005) and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (Shriver,
2003) because they had “twists” to the endings that really took him by surprise. While Sanjeev did not see his personal life as lacking, he appreciated the temporary experiences that reading provided for him.

Sanjeev exemplified Long’s (1986, 1993) observation in her study of more than 70 reading groups in Texas that while readers may defer to expert opinions of cultural value, they often appropriate the same readings very differently for themselves. Sanjeev could read in a critical manner and recognized that there were academic ways of evaluating the worth of a text, but chose not to do so. For Sanjeev, school readings and his own readings were segregated, with occasional overlaps (Moss, 2000). Sanjeev recognized that reading classics or middlebrow books may portray one as having good taste. However, he did not choose to read prize-winning books to portray his good taste or his ability to appreciate aesthetically valuable books. Rather, he chose to read these books for their entertainment value.

Sanjeev’s usual protocol for selecting books was to go to a bookstore and to browse the shelves. He explained during one interview that he would “go to Borders and [I’ll] pick the bestsellers”. He would buy a book that looked interesting and if he enjoyed the book, he would buy more books by the same author at a later visit. It was a hit and miss exercise, and it usually took “three or four tries” to find an author he enjoyed. He explained to me that this was how he had discovered Lionel Shriver. Her novel, We Need to Talk about Kevin (2003), an Orange Prize winner, had been prominently displayed at Borders, one of the major bookstores in Singapore. He had bought it, loved the twist in the ending, and went on to read other books by the same author. Through the process of self-selection, Sanjeev selected books that he felt he could most enjoy or relate to – books
that were set in America or written by American writers. He also read books based on his interests, so books that involved sports, such as *Fever Pitch* (Hornby, 2000) and *Double Fault* (Shriver, 2009), appealed to him. Although Sanjeev preferred realistic fiction and did not like fantasy very much, he did attempt to explore the fantasy genre. He had read one of Christopher Paolini’s *Inheritance* series, *Eragon* (Paolini, 2007) but had not liked it enough to continue reading Paolini’s other fantasy novels.

More recently, Sanjeev had ventured elsewhere in his book selection and began to read books by Japanese authors. Having read *What I Talk about When I Talk about Running* (2009) by Haruki Murakami, Sanjeev decided that “Japanese literature seemed quite interesting”. As such, he picked up *After Dark* (H. Murakami, 2007) by the same author, and *Audition* (R. Murakami, 2010) by another Japanese author. Books by Haruki Murakami were regular bookstore displays so it was not unusual for Sanjeev to come across the author on display. What was unusual was his decision to buy a translated book, though it was easy to see why he had thought a book that dealt with running might appeal to him.

Since Sanjeev had shared that he often bought his books from Kinokuniya or Borders, two major bookstores in Singapore, I wondered if his tendency towards the reading of American fiction had been influenced by the selection on display at these bookstores. I visited Kinokuniya on February 28, 2010, and was surprised by the variety of books displayed. While popular American writers such as Dan Brown and Michael Connelly were on display, so were works by writers from other regions. Fiction and non-fiction, translated works and works originally written in English, bestsellers and award-winning books were on display near the front of the bookstore. The following list gives a
sense of the variety that I saw on display: translated works such as *The Tale of the Genji* (Shikibu, 2000), *The Book of Heroes* (Miyabe, 2010), a Haruki Murakami collection, books by Xinran, a bestselling Chinese author; non-fiction such as Miles Cyrus’ (2009) *Miles to Go*, *The Singapore Lion: the Biography of S. Rajarathnam* (Ng, 2010), a biography of one of the founding fathers of Singapore, and *Field Notes on Democracy* (2009) by Booker prize winner author and activist, Arundhati Roy; international bestsellers including works by authors such as Michael Crichton, Dean Kootz, Michael Connelly, Jodi Picoult and Cecilia Ahearn; and movie tie-ins such as *Dear John* (Sparks, 2009) and Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll Lewis, 2010). The proportion of popular-culture books displayed was mainly written by American and some British authors. However, there were many genres from different geographical locales on display, including works by Haruki Murakami (not surprising, given that Kinokuniya is a Japanese-owned bookstore). A visit to Borders on March 7, 2010 showed similar variety, only with less emphasis on translated Japanese works, although books by Haruki Murakami were still rather prominently displayed in the literature section.

The wide range of books on display demonstrated that Sanjeev’s book choices were not constrained by the availability of books in these bookstores. Rather, because popular-culture books attracted him at a particular time in his life, he tended to self-select books that were more likely than not to entertain him. Sanjeev took an active role in his selection of his readings. Although he initially tended to read books by American authors or set in America, as he matured as a reader and thinker (Appleyard, 1990), it seemed that he became more willing to explore what he termed “international writers” and different kinds of works.
Sanjeev’s reading tastes expanded during the course of the year as he moved from “American literature” to reading “Japanese literature” for leisure. This categorization of writers by nationality is questionable and complicated, particularly when hybrid influences affect each writer and his writing. However, I used the geographical categorization in order to trace how Sanjeev moved from what he perceived to be a specific place in his reading to a different locale. This geographical expansion was also mirrored in his school readings as he moved towards the reading of postcolonial texts set in India, Africa and Australia.

**Border Crossings in School Practices of Reading**

While Sanjeev began to experiment with Japanese literature in his out-of-school readings, his school readings also expanded in location as the texts chosen for school-assigned readings shifted from familiar western contexts to unfamiliar postcolonial contexts. The texts were difficult in two ways: firstly, they were culturally distant in terms of their settings and their contextualization in postcolonial states; secondly, the texts required the students to read with postcolonial literary theory in mind, and were thus more difficult in terms of theoretical difficulty. Sanjeev had to cross geographical and cultural borders in order to make sense of his school readings because the stories were set in unfamiliar contexts and made unfamiliar cultural references that he had to find out more about in order to understand the stories.

Sanjeev was more quiet than vocal in class, though he contributed when the teacher called on him (see Narrative vignette #1). I observed during my class observations that he sometimes missed out on what was happening in class because of his prefect duties (see Narrative vignette #2). During one of my interviews with Sanjeev in
March, he admitted that he did not know what was going on because “I haven’t been paying much attention in class.” By his own admission, Sanjeev was a last-minute worker who could not “do consistent work”. He would just “slack off” during the first half of the year and “do nothing but study for the exams” when it was close to the examinations. Sanjeev’s self-description was quite accurate. When I traced Sanjeev’s written work from the beginning to the end of the year, I saw that marked improvement occurred during the second half of the year when his prefect duties had ceased and as it drew closer to the examinations.

**The value of school readings.** Like Michael, Sanjeev’s approach towards literature was both economical and humanistic. He viewed it economically in that he worked towards good grades and believed that the grades were a stepping stone towards his future education and job. However, he also believed that there were some intangible benefits to be gained from reading literature in class, such as learning about other cultures through the stories studied in class. He told me during an interview that “there’s lots to be learnt” in Language Arts. For example, he felt that reading *The Sacrificial Egg* (Achebe, 1998) and *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008) gave him “quite a good sense of the [Nigerian] culture”.

Sanjeev saw the exposure to texts from different parts of the world as a positive change from most of his previous school-assigned readings. He saw his earlier out-of-school readings choices as dominated by American texts, and admitted that “the only good thing about school literature” was the exposure to literature from other parts of the world. During the group interview with Roger and Michael, Sanjeev thought that the exposure to “more global literature” was a refreshing change because they had been
reading mostly what he viewed as classics. Sanjeev elaborated that he preferred texts such as *Malgudi Days* (Narayan, 1982) studied in Year Three and the postcolonial texts in Year Four compared to *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2006) because he found them more accessible despite the cultural distance. He found *Macbeth* more tedious to study because the language required him to work harder to understand the text and the story.

In the following exchange during the group interview with Michael and Roger, Sanjeev expressed his opinion about the school-assigned readings for Year Four.

Chin: What do you think of your readings this year?

Sanjeev: Expose[s] us to more global literature, because we’ve been reading classics, classics, classics!

Roger: I rather read classics though. I think world literature is quite rubbish.

Michael: I rather read Singapore literature. I think it’s nice.

Roger/ Sanjeev: Really?

In the above conversation, Sanjeev expressed slight irritation with the reading of classics in school and welcomed the exposure to what he termed “global literature”. In contrast, Roger took the position that reading classics was more valuable than reading global literature which “is quite rubbish”. The boys defined classics as books that were “timeless” or “famous” and cited *Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 2009) and *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2006) as examples of classic texts that were studied in school.

For Roger, institutional approval meant that particular books were more worthy of study than others. However, Sanjeev was more skeptical about the value of institutional authority as he later remarked that “just because it is classic doesn’t mean it is good.” When I questioned the boys about their demarcation between classics and global/world
literature, Sanjeev acknowledged that they could be overlapping categories and was not certain if he would categorize the books studied in Year Four, with the exception of *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2006), as classics.

Sanjeev’s response to Michael’s declaration that he would “rather read Singapore literature” was interesting. By asking Michael “really?” he was expressing his surprise that anyone would choose to read local literature. Sanjeev’s positioning of himself as a reader was only articulated in this instance through his response to the positions of the other boys. He positioned himself as someone who preferred global literature to classics. At the same time, his stance towards Singapore literature seemed to indicate that he thought more Eurocentric or international literature validated by external sources may make better readings than Singapore literature. In the short exchange, Sanjeev negotiated his views about what kinds of reading were preferred (both in school and out of school), in response to the opinions voiced by others.

While Sanjeev seemed to accept certain books as classics, he did not blindly accept that the definition of a book as a classic automatically classed it as a book that had literary value or was worth reading. In the same interview, he responded to Roger’s insistence that it was better to read classics by reminding Roger that “it doesn’t mean if it’s a classic, it’s good”. Reputable literary authorities and history may place a book as a classic, but Sanjeev still retained his right to evaluate a book’s worth. Just as Sanjeev had earlier evaluated that Dan Brown’s novels were “entertaining” but “not good”, he maintained his independent judgment about which classics were actually “good”.

The use of the term “good” meant differently in different contexts, and was related to the purpose of the reading and of the chosen text. At times, “good” meant that a
book had literary value, and at other times, it referred to the book’s entertainment value. If the purpose of the book was to entertain, Sanjeev evaluated the reading experience by the entertainment value of the story. If the purpose of the book was that it was to be studied, Sanjeev evaluated the reading in a literary manner. However, Sanjeev’s categories for evaluation did overlap. In the following evaluation of *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008), a school-assigned text, Sanjeev evaluated the book according to his own preference for a story to have a “decent conclusion”.

*No Longer at Ease* started out quite promisingly at first and was quite enjoyable throughout. However, when I realized that I was on my final few pages without a decent conclusion in sight, I was quite disappointed – there were so many loose plotlines (like what happens to his wife) that aren’t filled up.

The lack of a perceived closed ending made a potentially good read (in terms of entertainment value) unfulfilling.

Sanjeev did not mind the study of literature in school but did not see how it was relevant to his future studies. In his final email reading log, Sanjeev wrote:

Well, so far in addition to my Year 4 readings I've read *Siddartha* and about 2/3s of *Huckleberry Finn*, and I don't quite see the how they could possible help me in my future studies, unless perhaps I decide to pursue tertiary education in Nigeria. However, I suppose *No Longer at Ease* made me more aware of things like corruption, and maybe *Huck Finn* gave me some background as to America's past?

Sanjeev had graduated to Year Five by the time he wrote the email reading log in February 2010. He had been conscientious and had completed two texts (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 2009) and *Siddhartha* (Hesse, 2002)) that he had to read for
English in Year Five. In the reading log, Sanjeev acknowledged that the texts that he studied in school gave him a sense of the specific history of particular places (such as America and Nigeria) and raised particular issues (such as corruption) but did not see how the texts could contribute directly to his future studies.

Interestingly, Sanjeev evaluated the relevance of the school-assigned text by its ability to inform him about an aspect of a culture. It seemed that while he read school texts as narrative texts and knew he had to appreciate its literary value, he understood its relevance in terms of the texts’ informational value. Unlike Michael who saw literature as a subject that could help him learn to be more analytical, Sanjeev did not see the school’s reading choices or practices as contributing to a repertoire of practices that would benefit him in any real sense. Studying *No Longer at Ease* and other school-assigned texts contributed to his understanding of specific parts of the world but was irrelevant to his possible future plans to pursue a degree in a finance-related field.

The purpose of school readings was distinct from out-of-school readings. School readings were compulsory whereas out-of-school readings were chosen by Sanjeev. School readings were read for work (even if he occasionally derived some pleasure out of the experience) whereas out-of-school readings were read for leisure. Sanjeev remarked during one interview that “that’s why all the books I read for fun, I don’t remember them. But I remember the plots of all the school books I read”. Because the purpose of school readings was to analyze literary texts and because Sanjeev was assessed on his ability to critique these texts, he made an effort to remember these texts. Leisure readings, on the other hand, did not need to be remembered, and Sanjeev could not remember re-reading any of his out-of-school texts. When I asked him during an interview if he had re-read
any of his favorite books, he remarked that he did not re-read books, and thought it might be interesting to re-read some of his favorite novels if he had the time.

In addition to remembering the contents of school-assigned readings, Sanjeev had to learn to talk and write about these books. Success in terms of school grades required Sanjeev to be able to position himself as a competent critic of literary texts. Sanjeev was able to talk about themes and issues, and summarized the gist of some of his Year Four school-assigned as dealing with the conflict between western and traditional cultures in postcolonial states. During an interview, when I asked Sanjeev about the stories he had been reading for Language Arts, he gave me a brief analysis of the themes and authors’ position of three of the stories he had studied.

I think both of them [the short stories] are to do with the Western side against the traditional side. So I think in The Only American in our Village, the Americans are portrayed slightly negatively, like they are caught up in their own little world that they tend to ignore the others. It’s portrayed such that the traditional view is more important. Whereas in No Longer at Ease and The Sacrificial Egg, the debate is still open. Like the writer feels that both sides are equally important in a sense. But in The Only American in Our Village, it’s like Them against Us. Sanjeev was not only able to identify one key issue, he was able to identify the attitude of the authors towards the changes in society brought about by Western influences on traditional societies portrayed in the texts studied. He divided the texts into two categories, those where the author seemed totally against Western influences (The Only American in Our Village (Joshi, 1998) and where the authors seemed more ambiguous (No Longer at Ease (Achebe, 2008) and The Sacrificial Egg (Achebe, 1998)).
While Sanjeev seldom contributed in class unless the teacher called on him, his ability to write about texts improved as the year progressed, and this was evidenced by his essay grades which improved from regular Bs to As by the end of the year. Even though Sanjeev did not see himself as a “literary type,” he was learning to become a critical reader of literary texts, in accordance with school expectations (Rex, 2001).

Sanjeev wrote well and as the year progressed, learned to write literary essays that merited A grades. For example, in the following introduction from Sanjeev’s final year examination, Sanjeev was able to write about literary technique and characterization in a succinct manner.

In *The Only American from Our Village*, Arun Joshi exposes the inadequacies of the protagonist, Dr. Khanna, through his narrative style. In his encounter with the ashtamp farosh, the conversation is largely one-way. Even at the moment when the “astamp farosh paused (and) seemed to have lost his thread of thoughts,” Dr. Khanna remains silent, instead of interjecting or defending himself as would be expected. This reveals that Dr. Khanna has no response to the ashtamp farosh’s assertions, leading the reader to realize that the ashtamp farosh’s critical description of Dr. Khanna is accurate.

Sanjeev had not only learned to read *The Only American in Our Village* (Joshi, 1998), but he had also learned to write about his reading. He was able to decode the language at the level of linguistic understanding and cultural understanding to engage with characterization and theme, using quotations from the short story to support his interpretative claim. In addition, he was able to talk about it in a way that was meaningful in the classroom and in the context of literary criticism. He had adopted the discourse that
was suitable for literary analysis and was able to exhibit it for assessment purposes (Gee, 1996, 2004).

**Imagining other worlds.** Although Sanjeev did not see how reading literary texts could have direct relevance to his future studies and work, he did think that school readings exposed him to works that he would not otherwise have read, and in that way, they were useful. He recognized during the group interview that school literature did expand the geographical and cultural scope of his readings beyond books written by American authors or published in America. Reading was a way for Sanjeev to imagine other worlds (Bruner, 1986; Langer, 1995), and he credited the school selection with increasing his exposure to geographically different texts than he would have otherwise selected on his own. He recognized that the choice of Year Four texts was meant to expose him to works from different cultures, and appreciated the exposure. He thought that the stories helped him to see things from “the insider’s point of view”, useful because his own lifestyle was “closer to the Western one”.

When I questioned Sanjeev about what he meant by his lifestyle being more Western, he was not certain at first. He thought it was about “ideological differences” where “the Africans are more superstitious and they believe in all the rituals and stuff like that. The Americans are caught up in their materialistic life and rat race society and all that”. He thought that American lifestyle was “more self-centered maybe” and that perhaps the idea that “your job, your studies may be more important than staying at home than looking after your grandmother and siblings and all that” was reflective of an American attitude. The illustrations he used to explain what he meant by being Western seemed to be culled from instances in his own family history, where traveling out of
Singapore in search of schooling and job opportunities seemed to be the norm. Sanjeev also used the texts read to establish his idea of what traditional meant and to position his identity as more Western in relation to the images of the traditional provided by his school readings and from his own experiences.

Sanjeev recognized the sociocultural and historical specificity of the texts he studied. Books and stories were a way to imagine other worlds but Sanjeev questioned the accuracy and current relevance of the works studied. In one of my individual interviews with Sanjeev, he repeated an issue that he had brought up earlier in a group interview as well.

I don’t know whether these books are accurate or not. Because *No Longer at Ease* is like 50 years ago. I don’t know how old *The Sacrificial Egg* is but I think Africa will be different from the stories.

Sanjeev remarked that the setting of the story might not be relevant in terms of its reflection of the current state of things in Nigeria or more broadly, Africa. He had mentioned during the group interview that reading *No Longer at Ease* (2008) might give the reader the impression that the reader is “super backwards and all that” when the reality of Nigeria today might be very different. He was not able to state what these differences were though as he had no real knowledge of the current affairs in Nigeria.

Sanjeev thought that reading school texts helped him to know more about a place but at the same time, thought that it was not a reflection of “real” contemporary life, unlike his own out-of-school readings. Because the authors of school-assigned readings were dated, they provided dated perspectives of past events when contrasted with more contemporary readings. An example of a “relevant” book for Sanjeev was *We Need to
Talk about Kevin (Shriver, 2003). It was set in America and dealt with issues of school shootings and parental responsibility, topics that Sanjeev thought were current and appealing.

Sanjeev’s school readings in Year Four mostly tended towards postcolonial themes. Reading stories set in India were not any less distant than reading stories set in Africa even though Sanjeev was Indian by ethnicity. When asked to comment on a short story in the school’s chosen anthology, The Only American in our Village (Joshi, 1998), Sanjeev, who had never been to India, remarked that he could “imagine if you lived in India and you experienced that kind of foreigner coming to your village” in a way that was no different from a Chinese or Malay student in the same class imagining the experience as a reader. I had assumed that just because Sanjeev was Indian by ethnicity, he was likely to understand a story set in India or empathize with the characters. However, he had read the text as he would any other story, putting himself in the shoes of the Indian main protagonist, as he would any other character of any other ethnicity from any other place.

In fact, Sanjeev thought of the postcolonial stories studied in Year Four as unfamiliar and of “Western stories” as “something more familiar”. In one of the interviews, he remarked that he felt that the stories studied in school were interesting because it exposed him to different kinds of stories and different cultures.

I don’t know, the stories are quite interesting to read. Because we started on Africa first, right? Because we are doing No Longer at Ease and Four Continents, African-themed stories, so we have quite a good feel of the culture. Now, we’re moving to something more familiar, like Western stories.
Because he was used to the cultural references and writing styles in “Western stories” that he had been exposed to since young, he found them thematically and stylistically more familiar than the postcolonial texts read in Year Four.

However, reading postcolonial literature was not the most difficult task for Sanjeev in Year Four. Reading *Macbeth* (2006) was actually the most difficult text for the year. Sanjeev just did “not like that kind of stuff” as it was tedious for him to work through the language of the dramatic work. Because the language was distant, Sanjeev found himself relying on classroom interpretations of lines in the work. This was evidenced by the copious notes on the interpretation of each line in his copy of *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2006) and the accompanying workbook (see Narrative vignette #3). This was in contrast to his other texts and workbooks where Sanjeev wrote relatively little (except when required to do so during class). Cultural distance was not just geographical in this case, but also chronological. However, despite the difficulty of accessing different linguistic and cultural references in his school readings, Sanjeev was able to do so, and by the end of the year, proved his ability with his A grades.

**Global/Local Imaginings**

Sanjeev’s reading of a variety of texts, both entertaining and difficult, put him in good stead for what he saw as future studies in one of the top American universities. His older sister was scouting Ivy League universities in America at the time of the study and he saw himself following the same path, funded by his parents. For Sanjeev, being able to go to a top university in the States was all a matter of hard work – those who could not go overseas (whether on a scholarship or with funding from parents) probably did not work hard enough. The following statement made during an interview demonstrated Sanjeev’s
confidence at qualifying for a top university in the United States: “I would like to go overseas but if I can’t get into a university worth going for, then I’ll probably just study here. Most probably I can get into one of them”. Sanjeev thought that an overseas education was only worth the money spent if he could get into a highly-ranked university. Otherwise, he would rather study in one of the well-ranked Singapore universities. Thus, an overseas education was not just about getting an educational experience abroad, but about getting a superb and branded education abroad. The experience as well as the end qualification had to be worth the money spent.

Sanjeev saw his identity as an academically-able student as something that was achieved through individual effort. This came across in one of the group interviews when he commented that those students who did not want to study overseas or who were unable to study overseas had “no interest in being the best, being globally competitive”, whether in academic studies, in sports, in music or other areas. While Sanjeev acknowledged that his comment was a generalization, he did think that some Singaporeans just did not care about being “globally competitive”. Like the students in Demerath and Lynch’s (2008) study who constructed enterprising selves that were geared towards success in a globally competitive world, Sanjeev worked hard at learning to be globally competitive, mostly through achievement in his schoolwork and his extracurricular activities. For Sanjeev, being a good student prepared him for top universities and to be globally competitive in international markets, and he did not see how there was any other way to go about his educational goals. In the first group interview, Sanjeev had defined a global citizen as “someone who is comfortable
anywhere” and “able to adapt”. He did fit in with his description of the global citizen who was adaptable and comfortable in different situations.

Although studying overseas seemed definite for Sanjeev, he saw himself as Singaporean and envisioned a future in Singapore. While he was not averse to studying and working overseas for a period of time, he felt that he would “eventually like to stay in Singapore” and that it would be better to “start a family in Singapore than bring my family all over the world”. Unlike his “friends and cousins who say they don’t want to stay in Singapore”, Sanjeev thought that “the whole system is quite nice”. He saw himself as global and yet wanted to be rooted in place to the local.

However, Sanjeev was also critical of what he perceived as the lack of identity in Singapore, despite wanting to remain in Singapore. Sanjeev thought that the lack of identity was inevitable for any city that inspired to be a global city. In a group interview, he remarked that

Like if you want to be a global city, there will obviously be no identity. You see global city states like Hong Kong and Dubai, there is no identity. It is the same thing here. You can't have the best of both worlds.

For Sanjeev, being a global city meant being opened to flows of influences that made it difficult for individuals to claim specific characteristics as their own. He seemed to think that being global meant a loss of specific local identity as individuals or cities plugged into global flows. Comparing Singapore to Hong Kong and Dubai, he lamented the lack of identity that he saw as an inevitable consequence of being global.

Sanjeev saw himself as someone who was a cosmopolitan, despite his desire to stay in Singapore, and to stay rooted in Singapore. Being cosmopolitan for Sanjeev meant
being adaptable, being globally competitive, and being familiar with the concept of travel (not just for holiday but for work). By comparing his lifestyle as more aligned with Western ways, he seemed to equate globalization with a more Western mindset of independence and self-centeredness. Western for Sanjeev seemed to refer to American most times, and he was not troubled by his broad generalizations of what constituted Western and what constituted traditional.

A Summary: Sanjeev’s Reading History and Identity Practices

Sanjeev’s reading history showed him to be a flexible reader who was familiar with different kinds of texts, from non-fiction to fiction. His reading history over the course of a year also showed development in both his out-of-school and school reading practices as he moved from American and Eurocentric literature to reading literature from other parts of the world. Though Sanjeev did not see how the literature read in school contributed to his future studies, the knowledge of the classics and world literature studied in school would definitely contribute to his portrayal of himself as a well-read and well-versed individual, particularly in his eventual applications to Ivy League universities.

Sanjeev projected a cosmopolitan identity with his reading of both prize-winning novels and bestsellers in his out-of-school readings, and with his knowledge of classic and world texts gained through the study of literature in school. Reading was a border crossing experience. Whenever Sanjeev selected a book, he was electing to explore a particular culture through his reading. His familiarity with different kinds of texts from different parts of the world helped him to develop and construct a cosmopolitan self that was comfortable with crossing imaginary cultural worlds.
Robert’s Reading and Identity Practices: Cross-Media and Cross-Genre Readings

Generally, when I look for books, I look for originality, scope, genre, humor, action content, and plot. Simply put, if it’s original, has an epic scope, has a different take on the genre, is humorous but contains a modicum of action, and has a feasible and interesting plot, it gets first priority on my must-read list. Also, it probably doesn’t exist.

(Robert, 15 years old, email reading log, February 27, 2009)

The above quote from one of Robert’s email reading logs summarized Robert’s wish-list for a good book and also revealed his sense of humor with his final statement about the non-existence of a perfect book. The quote fitted in with Robert’s introduction of himself in the preliminary survey taken in 2008, where Robert had introduced himself as someone who enjoyed “surreal humor, measured cynicism and unconventional new ideas” and “irreverent humor”. As such, stories by Terry Pratchett and comics by Gary Larson were among his favorite readings.

I chose Robert as one of the case studies because he best illustrated the cross-media practices that the boys engaged in. In the middle of the research, Robert had started watching Wicked, the musical, on YouTube, and reading the book, together with his good friend, Joshua. Robert raved about it, and later, I arranged an interview with Joshua and Robert to talk about their reading of Wicked and their cross-media practices. I also kept up email correspondence with Robert for the longest period of time until March 2010, and that allowed me a longer stretch of time to observe changes in Robert’s reading and identity practices.
To Robert, who is “more of the stay-at-home type rather than go-out-cycling type”, reading was perceived as more of a solitary activity where he could be absorbed in the world of the novel. Reading as an everyday ordinary practice “was kind of standard” for Robert. Although he was uncertain if he had “picked up any reading habits from family members”, he could give many instances of the reading practices his family members engaged in, including his extended family. His parents used to bring him to the library when he was younger and bought him books, and his aunt used to visit him and read *The Berenstain Bears* and *The Magic School Bus* to him. More recently, he discovered that his grandfather “had this HUGE collection of Gerald Durrell and P. G. Wodehouse”, revealing his family’s history of immersion in books. Robert was so used to reading that he did not think he “ever needed any encouragement to read”.

However, while reading was a solitary activity, sharing books and talking about readings was not. Robert told me he shared books with his older brother who often influenced his reading choices, including his reading of *Four Loves* (C. S. Lewis, 1991), a difficult expository text. They also shared a mutual love of science fiction and fantasy, which made book buying an economical affair since they both could read the books bought. His friends also influenced his readings as he did theirs. I observed during the study that Robert influenced Joshua to read *Wicked* (Maguire, 2004) after Joshua introduced the musical to him. In school, he approached me voluntarily in between classes to recommend *Wicked* as something I should read because it was “awesome!”

Two things stood out in my interactions with Robert and in the data I collected: The first thing that stood out was that he possessed a strong thematic sensibility. He did not once tell me about a book he read (in or out of school) without explaining to me the
message that was being conveyed and evaluating how well the message had been conveyed. Despite his self-declared dislike of classics and school-assigned readings that “are supposed to impart some kind of message to [us]”, Robert was unable to get away from evaluating books by the quality and strength of their messages.

The second thing that stood out to me was Robert’s sense of humor – he declared that he liked “British humor” which was the “dry” rather than the “slapstick kind” and often exhibited this humor in his interaction with his peers and in his conversations with me. During my first group interview with Robert and Joshua, Joshua affirmed this aspect of Robert’s identity.

Robert: I prefer dry humor to slapstick. Sarcasm.

Joshua: Clearly part of your life!

Robert: What? No, no, no!

Joshua, Robert’s good friend, affirmed Robert’s dry wit by remarking dryly “clearly part of your life!” Robert replied with mock horror to Joshua’s retort, his very reaction confirming Joshua’s observations. Clearly then, Robert’s identity as a reader and his identity as a person overlapped. He liked to read books that had dry humor, and also exhibited that same kind of humor in his interaction with others.

The Problem with School Readings

While Robert was very vocal out of class and wrote relatively long email reading logs to me, he was usually rather quiet in class. It was not that he was not interested in his work: he sat near the front of the class and was attentive, and when he felt strongly about something, would volunteer an opinion (see Narrative vignette #2). In fact, he had strong opinions that he would often voice out to me during interviews.
The same old themes. Robert had very strong opinions about the texts that he studied for Language Arts in Year Four. He thought that the “learning materials [are] rather dull” and was “sorely disappointed that the school-assigned books for Year Four haven’t exactly been thought-provoking” and were “lacking in entertainment value”. School readings should, in his opinion, challenge him intellectually and be interesting to read. However, he felt that the problem with his Year Four texts was the repetition of the same old themes in new books.

In one of this earlier email reading logs, Robert wrote that he felt that themes of racism and discrimination had been over-used in school, to the point that he was bored of the discussions. He wrote in his reading log that

Personally I feel that the analyses of the book put forward are overlooking, for instance, the exploration of individuality and its meaning in a broadened world in favor of the more “traditional,” if I may, themes of racism and discrimination. After-all, we have had far too much exposure to these themes, with To Kill a Mockingbird. Furthermore, many exams set use such “stereotypical” themes, to the point where I can actually find out discriminatory issues in the set text/ poem without much difficulty.

In the above excerpt, Robert thought that themes of racism and discrimination were “stereotypical”, to the point that he could easily discover these issues in texts that he read for school. The messages that the school wanted to impart to the students did not seem to change in the four years he had been in secondary school. In the excerpt, he also pointed to how easy it was for him to look for standard themes in the texts that the school chose for reading or for examinations. Learning to identify literary techniques and themes was a
matter of knowing the right things to look out for, and that was something that Robert felt that he had become good at, simply because it had been discussed so often in class or examined so often in assessments. Taken together with his comments that literature was potentially interesting and that he wanted to discuss other themes, the statement seemed to imply to me that Robert felt slightly under-challenged with the repetitiveness of the themes and issues raised in school readings.

Robert’s preference for books that explored individual identity came across in his evaluation of the novel, *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008), and the short story, *The Bridegroom* (Gordimer, 1998). Robert remarked that *No Longer at Ease* was the study of “another bribery message!” in an exasperated tone during one interview. On the other hand, he commented that *The Bridegroom* explored “the much more interesting theme of finding an identity and its expectations for society”. School books had the potential to be interesting if they dealt with issues that Robert was interested in. Robert felt that the theme of exploring individual identity was far more interesting, and it was an issue that appealed to him even in his choice of out of school readings (see later discussion of *A Hat Full of Sky* (Pratchett, 2005) in pages 142-143).

Robert was very confident about his evaluation of texts and thought that school texts were often chosen because of some high-flown ideas of good (i.e., aesthetically valuable) literature. He positioned himself as someone who was “easily bored with those termed as ‘classics’” that did not explore new ideas and perspectives. His cynical attitude came across in the first interview that I had with Joshua and Robert. In the following conversation, Robert and Joshua were discussing what they thought was the problem with school reading choices.
Robert: The thing with all these award-winning books is that… sometimes I think that the people who give literature prizes don’t want to be entertained.

Joshua: [laughs] They’re the super artsy people who have very weird taste.

Robert: Who appreciate minimalist plays and such.

In the above extract, Joshua and Robert juxtaposed the concept of entertainment for the masses against award-winning books that do not appeal to the masses. These “super artsy people who have weird tastes” (that is, different from the general reading public) do not have a clue about the meaning of entertainment since they “don’t want to be entertained.” Robert’s comment about people “who appreciate minimalist plays and such” was in direct reference to his Drama Club teacher who had wanted to put up a minimalist play for a national drama competition. The comment showed Robert’s knowledge of literary genres and styles. He knew about high culture and had the terms to talk about high culture, even if he scoffed it.

Joshua and Robert aligned themselves with the common masses in their desire for entertainment, and positioned themselves as the reading public who knew what they wanted and did not read to appreciate aesthetic value, in opposition to institutional authorities that award prizes. It was not always the case that aesthetically valuable books were not entertaining. Robert pointed to *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1993) as “one of those rare ones [books] that are given prizes or at least accepted as a literary book and enjoyed by people”. For Robert, it was important that the books he liked were intellectually stimulating as well as entertaining, and *Animal Farm* was one such book.

*Competent assessments.* Robert had his own opinion about what the study of literature should be like. He thought that literature was a good subject as it encouraged
reading. However, he felt that the way it was taught in school was “too confined” because teachers “wanted certain answers, certain themes”. Robert felt that the study of literature should be “more of “what do you think about this book?” as opposed to “tell me what I think about this book”. Robert’s critique of school literature was that teachers were too often dogmatic, looking for one fixed answer when literature should really be about open discussion by all participants involved.

Certainly, Robert could competently discuss the texts studied in class, assessing the themes and literary techniques used. In one of our interviews, Robert summarized *No Longer at Ease* for me (Achebe, 2008) as a story that was “more like a tragedy than instruction on human morality”, the tragedy being that the main protagonist went into a “general decline” and was “brought down by the little things and not the big things he has avoided”. Robert identified the novel as a tragedy rather than a didactic morality tale. In his elaboration, Robert referred to the downfall of the main protagonist, a key element of tragedy, and was able to elaborate on the nature of the tragedy as the fact that the main protagonist was brought down by the “little” rather than “big” things.

Robert was also able to competently discuss themes across stories. With regard to the postcolonial themes studied in Year Four, Robert pointed out that “cultural conflict” was one of the most obvious similarities across the stories. In the same interview, he compared the stories read to illustrate for me how cultural conflict is played out in different short stories in the anthology studied.

You have your protagonist in *The Only American* who completely rejects his culture and who wants to be, literally, an American. Then you have people who keep their culture, try to merge it with other cultures, because… let’s see… in *The
*Bridegroom* and *The Sacrificial Egg*, both the protagonists appear to be of a different culture from what is there. Like the bridegroom appears to be unusually friendly to his road gang and Julius Obi appears to be Christian, but during the events of the stories, it’s shown to be just a façade and like their core … there’s no way you can mix, it’s very hard, if not impossible to mix their cultures.

In the above extract, Robert distanced himself from the texts studied to comment on the different takes on culture in the short stories. He contrasted the attitudes of the protagonists in *The Only American in Our Village* (Joshi, 1998) with *The Bridegroom* (Gordimer, 1998) and *The Sacrificial Egg* (Achebe, 1998), and explained their different stances to the blending of western and local culture. He pointed to two alternatives given in the stories - there either had to be complete rejection of western culture (“You have your protagonist in *The Only American* who completely rejects his culture”) or an uneasy blending of two cultures (“try to merge it with the other culture”) that did not work (“it’s very hard, if not impossible to mix their cultures”). The short stories provided points of entry for Robert to think about culture in a postcolonial context. He was able to see the different positions possible and evaluate what he thought about the mixing of cultures in postcolonial contexts.

For the realistic stories studied in the classroom, Robert was able to apply his knowledge of the world to comment on the story world. For example, he was able to compare the story worlds of *Malgudi Days* (Narayan, 1982) with that of *The Only American in Our Village* (Joshi, 1998) during one of our interviews.

Robert: …. Comparatively, the fictional town of Malgudi Days is quite up to date.

Chin: What do you mean by that?
Robert: As in, the colonial presence is more established there, so they have the so-called trappings of society.

In the above extract, Robert evaluated the settings of the two stories and their contemporaneity. He recognized that while both stories were set in India, they were fictional worlds and set in different periods. Robert thought that “the fictional town of Malgudi days [is] quite up to date” in that it seemed to have more western/colonial influences. Robert used his real world knowledge to situate his reading of the story.

Although Robert did not quite like the stories studied in Year Four, he had to “put aside personal dislike” to “grin and bear it” since he wanted to do well for his examinations. However, despite complaining about the texts studied, Robert really did like to study literature. In my final set of email correspondence with Robert in 2010, Robert asked me whether I thought he should opt to take Higher Level (HL) or Standard Level (SL) English in Year Five. He wanted to take HL English (which required reading more texts and a few more assignments) because he liked literature. However, he was also concerned about his ability to score a good grade at HL and wanted my honest opinion about his abilities.

This unsolicited question from Robert revealed to me the tension that existed for Robert about school readings – he wanted to enjoy literature but he also wanted to do well for literature, and he was not sure if it was possible for him to score a good grade if he took the more difficult HL English. In the end, Robert went with his heart and took HL English. He also opted to do Theatre Studies as a minor since he enjoyed drama. He reported in March 2010 that though school was hectic, he was having fun doing both HL English and Theatre Studies.
Media and Genre Crossings in Out-of School Readings

In his out-of-school consumption of texts, Robert had very clear ideas about what he liked and what he did not like. In the preliminary survey, he explained that he was “easily bored” with “internationally recognized literature” or “those termed as classics” because “there is too much that can be found in other books”. Robert saw plenty of opportunities for book choices and for entertainment and did not see why he had to be limited to classics that tended to revolve around the “same old stuff”. Instead, “slightly irreverent books which explore… new perspectives” were far more interesting. So while Robert had little choice about what he could read for school, he was very active in seeking out books that he thought he would enjoy for his out-of-school readings.

**British humor, Terry Pratchett and Four Loves.** Robert’s identity as a reader was clearly entrenched in his personal opinion of himself. He enjoyed studying literature in school and raved about out-of-school readings to me, unsolicited. In terms of his out-of-school readings, he saw himself as someone who liked “British authors”. He was a cynic by his own admission, and as such, was drawn to “British humor” – a quiet, sardonic, witty kind of funny that he associated with books such as Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* series, Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* series, Gary Larson’s *The Far Side* series, and Scott Adam’s *Dilbert* series. This preference for dry wit spilled over into his other media interests, and Robert liked the satirical British sitcom, *Yes, Minister!* (Jay & Lynn, 1980), as well as the theatrical production, *Monty Python Spamalot*, which he had watched on *YouTube*.

While Robert associated wit and sarcasm with British humor, it was not necessary that all the authors he liked were British. Two of his favorite cartoonists, Gary Larson
and Scott Adam, were American. Gary Larson is an American cartoonist whose parodies often featured animals as main protagonists and Scott Adam’s satirical cartoons centered on a main character, Dilbert, a white-collar worker in a modern enterprise. What was interesting was how Robert condensed a particular type of humor and associated with a national trait, which he identified with. So even though Gary Larson and Scott Adam were Americans, he categorized them as examples of “British humor”, along with Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams, both English.

One of Robert’s favorite authors was Terry Pratchett, a fantasy writer “whose Discworld series systematically disrupts… traditional features of classical fantasy writing” such as “a predilection for an archaized, cadenced language; the motif of the quest to attain something, discover some knowledge, or destroy some object…nobility of motive and heroism of deed” (Buchbinder, 2003, p. 171). He enjoyed Terry Pratchett mainly because his books “are like one big farcical commentary on society, where he really takes every subject under the sun, cuts it up, and turns it into something funny”. This evaluation of Terry Pratchett was one of many pithy statements that Robert would make during interviews, revealing a strong command of the English language, which he fully utilized to make known his opinions of both literature and life. It also demonstrated that while he wanted to be entertained by stories read, he also wanted to be intellectually challenged. This was one reason why he found Terry Pratchett’s novels so fascinating – Pratchett created a new world populated with unusual characters, and his use of satirical language and wry humor appealed to Robert. He felt that Terry Pratchett’s Discworld, while humorous, dealt with serious issues and was an avenue for social commentary, providing a way for him to think about the issues in the actual world he lived in.
Compared to Michael and Sanjeev, Robert seemed to possess a strong thematic sensibility when talking about his criteria for selecting books. While Michael and Sanjeev tended to focus on the presence of a strong plot (especially those with good endings) and interesting characters in their book choices, Robert focused on all that, plus the presence of strong social messages in the books he liked. Even though he scoffed at the books chosen for school readings as books that were “supposed to impose some kind of message”, he himself evaluated the worth of stories by the messages conveyed through good storytelling. It was just that books he had to read for school (especially in secondary school; at least the books read in primary school were interesting) were not engaging whereas his personal readings usually were. When he talked about books to me or wrote about them in his email reading logs, he exhibited point-driven rather than story-driven summaries as he summed up the themes or issues that were raised in the text. Point-driven readings are “a form of reading in which readers may be able to input motives to authors” and are important elements of literary reading (Vipond & Hunt, 1984, p. 261). Thus, for Robert, even his out-of-school readings were driven by literary ways of reading.

An example of how Robert evaluated his out-of-school readings is conveyed in this statement in one of his email reading logs. He had just finished reading *A Hat Full of Sky* (2005) by Terry Pratchett, a “simply awesome” book. He wrote in his email reading log that

Under the humor and satire lies a theme of self-acceptance and confidence, and the main character, Tiffany is rather like me, or many others of my peers, I’m afraid: Inquisitive, and perhaps looked down upon by elders, yet possessed of a
unique character. It’s rare that I find a character that I really can relate to, but
Terry Pratchett does it so effortlessly it’s almost disturbing in its accuracy.

In this evaluation, Robert identified the literary genre (“satire”) and stated the theme of
the book (“theme of self-acceptance and confidence”) with easy confidence. He
explained that one reason for his love for Terry Pratchett novels was in part shaped by the
perception that he could often relate to Pratchett’s protagonists (“it’s rare I can find a
c character I can really relate to, but Terry Pratchett does it so effortlessly it’s almost
disturbing in its accuracy”). In this case, the main character, Tiffany, is “inquisitive,
looked down upon by elders, yet possessed of a unique character”, and was someone that
Robert thought both he and his peers could identify with.

In addition to his enjoyment of dry humor, Robert’s desire to be intellectually
challenged meant that he occasionally would attempt readings that he felt were difficult
for him to read, the most memorable for him being reading *Four Loves* (C. S. Lewis,
1991). He had first read *Four Loves* when he was fourteen and was re-reading the book at
the time of the study. His older brother had recommended the book to him, and he had
found the apologetics text difficult to read. However, even though “after 6 pages, [my]
head starts to hurt”, he persevered with the difficult text. He had continued to plough on
with *Four Loves* because “everything fits in neatly” and “it has quite a few sharp
realizations” about love and God. Robert’s sharing about *Four Loves* showed his
willingness to spend time and effort on reading and re-reading non-fiction that he had to
work at if it made him think about what was relevant and of interest to him.

Robert’s reading of non-fiction also included reading magazines such as *National
Geographic, TIME* and *The Economist*, science and current affairs-related magazines that
Robert was knowledgeable about current affairs in the world and his knowledge of current affairs came across in my conversations with him. For example, when Joshua made an offhand remark about studying stories from “backward countries”, Robert remarked rhetorically, “India is a backward country?” to question Joshua’s assertion. During the same interview, when we were talking about the ease of traveling, he listed France and Germany as countries where the citizens spoke English even though it was not their first language, which made traveling easy for him in these countries. The knowledge was probably as much to do with Robert’s traveling as it was with his reading. Robert was well-traveled, and had been to London, Florida, France, Vancouver, amongst other places.

A distinctive habit that Robert had was the practice of re-reading books, something that Michael and Sanjeev could not remember doing when I asked them about the practice. He had a large collection of books at home that he shared with his older brother, and the availability of the books at home made re-reading easy. During the course of the study, Robert mentioned re-reading *Four Loves* (C. S. Lewis, 1991), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, various *Discworld* novels and *Far Side* and *Dilbert* comics. Multiple readings may provide opportunities for increased criticality (Mackey, 1993), and it may be that his re-readings allowed him to think deeply about some of the stories read. For example, he was reading *Four Loves* again because he wanted to really understand the argument that C. S. Lewis was making, to re-remember it as something he affirmed intellectually, as part of his identity.

Robert exhibited habits of critical reading where he distanced himself from the text to critically appraise it, as opposed to aesthetic responses that focused on
identification with the story and characters (Cynthia Lewis, 2000). He explained during an interview that he did not develop “emotional connections to books” though there were authors that he really liked very much. Rather, he evaluated a book by the ability of the plot and characters to hold his attention, and the ability of the ideas and issues brought up in the stories to make him think deeply about the world he lived in.

Like Sanjeev, Robert crossed borders in his reading experiences, except that the worlds of fantasy and science fiction were not obviously connected to physical geographical locations. However, during an interview, when I asked how it was that he found the postcolonial worlds distant but not the fantasy worlds, he explained that it may be that the fantasy worlds were modeled on the western worlds that he was familiar with. Thus, even the fantasy worlds of Terry Pratchett required cultural crossings into real worlds to make sense of both fantasy and real worlds.

*Story worlds and the real world.* For Robert, it was important that the story world appealed to him. The story world was important in helping him make sense of the real world, and he liked science fiction and fantasy precisely because the new worlds portrayed allowed him a way to see into and critique the current world. He remarked in an email reading log that “there’s something about creating a new universe that’s so compelling”. Oftentimes, during interviews or in his email reading logs, he would describe to me the world of the story in addition to telling me about the message being conveyed.

The story world was for Robert a way to think about issues in the real world that he lived in. He often evaluated the stories read by how well they brought to surface a social issue in the real world. For example, he commented that “the world of Oz” in
*Wicked* “is almost a parallel to [our] own where [we] have minority groups being oppressed”, relating his knowledge of the world to the story world. The issue of human and animal equality featured strongly in the novel, and he saw that as a reflection of the current world where differences, including racial and ethnic differences, may lead to oppression.

Another example occurred in the following extract, taken from my first interview with Joshua and Robert. Robert used a story he had read recently to explain what he meant by Terry Pratchett’s farcical style, and in his summary, painted a detailed picture of the story world and the weird characters that populate *A Hat Full of Sky* (Pratchett, 2005).

Yeah, like *A Hat Full of Sky*… He takes the idea of conventional witches, and gives them honorary titles. Like if you are a really high-ranking witch, you earn the title “granny” and so on and so forth. And there are stereotypical characters, like farm girls who make cheese in their spare time, and have a cheese collection. The thing about these books is that it’s not always just funny. There’s always an underlying message. A recurring one is about belief. Some of his books, he mentions that when enough people start to believe in something, it becomes real to them.

These fantasy characters take on qualities of persons in the real world (“stereotypical characters”) or are used to ridicule real life scenarios to convey an “underlying message”. The people that populate Terry Pratchett’s story world, in Robert’s view, served the purpose of making fun of the social world he was familiar with, thus helping readers to understand or see clearly an aspect of the world they live in, such as the idea that one can
wish for something so much that dreams becomes part of one’s reality (“when people start to believe in something, it becomes real to them”).

In Robert’s final reading log in February 2010, he informed me that he had discovered another new writer, Haruki Murakami, “one of the first non-fantasy/science fiction writer that [I’ve] seriously read”. He had read *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (H. Murakami, 2001) at someone’s recommendation (not Sanjeev’s though), and found Murakami’s style of writing “subtly intoxicating” and the book “an engaging read”. In his evaluation of *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, Robert commented that Murakami “makes up his own worlds much like any fantasy/science fiction writer”, and went on to give me synopses of the stories, focusing on the moral dilemmas and growth of the main characters in both stories.

Bruner suggests that the narrative mode of thinking “strives to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience and to locate the experience in time and space” (1986, p.13). For Robert, the stories read allowed him to immerse himself in imagined worlds to think about his actual world. The particular world of the story was a way into different worlds and alternative visions. By choosing to read Terry Pratchett, he aligned himself with a critical, even cynical worldview where he could laugh at the foibles of human beings while not putting himself above such human idiosyncrasies. At the same time, his evaluation of the story worlds and the characters and events in the story world were a way for him to evaluate his own belief systems (for example, about reality and illusions in *A Hat Full of Sky* (Pratchett, 2005) or God and love in *Four Loves* (Lewis, 1991)).
In a sense, Robert’s life experiences can be said to include the experiences that he encountered in books and the stories in books. He stood out as someone who was very much influenced by the books he read. He identified himself as a reader and also identified himself by the kinds of books he read, and the issues raised in those books. While his re-reading and re-viewing of each story were not the same, the re-readings did help him to better remember stories and to re-remember (Sumara, 1998) his identity as a reader and as a specific kind of person. His re-readings of Terry Pratchett novels and *Four Loves* (C. S. Lewis, 1991) provided opportunities for the ideas in these books to be negotiated and “sedimented” (Pahl, 2008) into his “identity kit” (Gee, 1996, 2004). However, each re-reading was different, and Robert negotiated his identity in relation to new understandings gained each time he read the same book again. As such, multiple readings were not the same readings, but different readings of the same books, with new opportunities for identity construction.

**Wicked and other cross-media readings.** While all the boys constantly made cross-media references in their reading logs and interviews, it was Robert who gave me the most in-depth understanding about his cross-media readings through his reading and viewing of *Wicked*. Like the tween participants in Hamer’s study of two groups of students in London, United Kingdom and Toronto, Canada, reading and watching *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Robert experienced “books as part of a continuum of media engagement, integrating knowledge and practices garnered from a range of media forms into reading practices.” (2009, p. 18). When he spoke about, say *Lord of the Rings*, he was able to distinguish the book from the movie. However, his experience of *Lord of the Rings* consisted of both the book and the movie, and the “mental image” he called up
when he read the book a second time was that of the movie setting and characters. In a sort of double interpretation merged, Robert’s knowledge of *Lord of the Rings* was part constructed by the words in the book trilogy, and in part constructed by audiovisuals of the movie.

As part of the Net-generation or N-generation (Tapscott, 1998) who grew up surrounded by digital media, Robert was well-versed in the use of various digital media, including the Internet. In fact, he told me that he read many of his books from an Internet website. Though he had a large collection of books at home, he was able to read much more than he could actually buy because he could access books for free online. He refused to share the website with me, explaining that it was out of guilt that he was not actually paying for reading these books. He justified his actions to me by telling me that he would buy the books if he really liked them. *Wicked* (Maguire, 2004) was one book that he did buy that year because he liked it so much.

Reading books was not the only way into stories for Robert though it was often Robert’s first entry into a story. For example, he had skimmed through *The Lord of the Rings* series before watching the movie. After he watched the movie, he read the book in closer detail, using the movie setting to fill in the “mental images” of the place. He had found the lengthy descriptions too tedious to read carefully in his first reading, and found that he was better able to read the book and visualize the setting and characters after watching the movie. On the other hand, he only watched the first three movies in the *Harry Potter* series because he “didn’t think it was a good interpretation anymore”. Robert elaborated that he composed “mental images” of the worlds of stories and he would get “stuck” with his initial mental image. Hence, because the *Harry Potter* movies
ceased to fit in with his original conception of the world of the novel, he did not continue following the movie series.

The book that most enthralled Robert during the course of the study was *Wicked* (Maguire, 2005), and most of the data regarding his cross-media practices came from our email discussions and interviews about *Wicked*. He had written in his email reading log that he had “found a gem of a book in Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*” and raved about the book in a fairly long review. He wrote that “for other books [I] wouldn’t have written so much!” He had been enthralled by the book’s “engaging plotline” that reworked an old story from a different perspective, and thought the book’s discussion about the nature of evil refreshing.

What struck me when Robert wrote or talked about the book and/or musical was how he was savvy about the different purposes of different genres and could easily identify why certain directorial or authorial decisions were made. He was aware that different genres served different purposes, and that the craft was in part determined by the reader’s or audience’s expectations. In an interview following his completion of both the musical and book, I asked him what he found different in the two versions. Robert replied that

The musical is more or less based around the friendship as opposed to the whole underlying story of Elphaba in the book. In the book, you have Elphaba portrayed as this demon child at birth, with fangs and all but you don’t see it in the musical because it is not really important, in a sense, to the whole message of friendship and stuff…. The majority of the musical is about friendship and all. Relationships. It [Elphaba trying to save the animals] figures as a plot device.
In the above excerpt, Robert was able to highlight which parts of the book had been left out or reworked for the musical (“you don’t see it in the musical”) and highlighted that it was because it was not central to the message of the musical (“it is not important… to the whole message of friendship and all”). He identified one of the key subplots in the novel (Elphaba trying to save the animals) as unimportant to the musical, which resulted in it being reduced to the backdrop against which the main events took place (“it figures as a plot device”). He also explained later in the interview how particular characters were given a greater role in the musical than in the book (where Elphaba featured most prominently) because of the musical’s focus on friendship and relationships.

Robert explained in the same interview that the issue of evil was left open in the book where there were “all sorts of debates nearing the subject of wickedness but never really comes close to it”; whereas in the musical, the message that “wickedness is all relative” was clearly marked out. He pointed to Maguire’s open text (Eco, 1979) that allowed for the reader’s multiple interpretations about the nature of evil.

In addition, Robert was able to cross-reference his reading of Wicked (Maguire, 2004) with the original story, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (Baum, 2006), as well as the 1939 movie version starring Judy Garland as Dorothy Gale (Fleming, 1939). He thought that The Wizard of Oz (Fleming, 1939) was “rather dated” with its straightforward portrayal of good and bad characters, and much preferred the Wicked version with its sophisticated debate about the nature of good and evil. His reading and viewing of Wicked required intertextual knowledge of previous stories and the ways in which good and evil had been portrayed in literature. It was clear that he did not just know about the
stories in books; rather, he was able to talk about the discourse of books in a fluent way that showed a familiarity with genres and issues.

Robert’s awareness of different genres was not just limited to books and film. He had been exposed to many different genres, including plays and musicals. Robert was a member of the Drama Club, and thought he would like to study in London if he could “because there [is] West End”. Robert had watched *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat* as well as *Rent* with his family when these musicals were played in Singapore. He had wanted to watch *Avenue Q*, a comedy, with Joshua, in mid-2009. They could not watch the play in the end because it was rated NC-16 (No Children under 16) because of some adult themes and vulgar language, and they were both still 15 at the time the comedy was playing in Singapore.

Sometimes, Robert would just “do [my] own search” for a musical and watch it online if it was available. He informed me that it was a tedious process requiring constant refining of search terms and elimination of false leads. I knew it to be quite true because I had tried to search for *Wicked* online, but could not find the musical on *YouTube*. In the end, I had to ask Joshua for the link to the musical, which he sent to me via email. He himself had received the link from another friend who had bothered to do the search. He in turn sent the link to Robert, and that was how Robert had started on both the book and the musical.

Robert demonstrated the wide range of literacies that are present in everyday life (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), including multimedia literacies. Understanding everyday literacies now requires the understanding of various semiotic forms and their interaction (Pahl & Roswell, 2006; Prinsloo & Baynham, 2008), It is particularly important to
understand the range and variety in everyday practices of adolescents in this globalized age of multimedia. In Robert’s case, while reading was a key activity that he identified with, it was intermingled with other media flows. Stories could be re-told, re-read, re-viewed through multiple platforms, and the dialogic interaction between different versions and different media converged to create multiple experiences and images of a story for him.

Robert had almost unlimited access to different kinds of texts because of his access to books, films, and even musicals and plays via the Internet. He did not have to travel in order to borrow or buy a book, or to watch a movie or musical, whether it was from London or New York. In fact, one time, he described the play *Monty Python Spamalot* so graphically that Joshua and I thought he had watched the actual play, and were both amazed to find out that he had watched it on *YouTube*.

The various kinds of texts that Robert was exposed to served as “cultural artifacts” (Bartlett, 2008) with which to do literacy. His projection of himself as a well-read and cultured person (I use this to include both popular and high culture) was facilitated by the use of the Internet and multiple media forms. Examining his data in context of students on reader response, I was struck by how much of reader response research in the reading of literature have focused on single texts and single media, focusing on the single experience of reading a particular text. His experience of reading a book was often multiple, and across media and genres, and in his practices of book consumption, he was constantly crossing media, genres and borders.

In his readings and viewings, Robert demonstrated that he was able to move fluidly between different versions of the stories and to understand the rationale for the
different genre formats. It was a form of cultural crossing as he moved across different media formats, between high and popular culture, and between texts such as the different versions of *The Wizard of Oz*. The capacity that he demonstrated in accessing different genres and media as well as his awareness of the meta-functions of the genre and media showed his flexibility in his reading practices.

**Global Movements**

Well, I think it’s like being a citizen of a country like the EU, only a lot bigger. In that, you go around, and you just blend in… when people ask you where you are from, you can actually say you are from the world… I think it sounds quite cheesy… it’s the sort of person who does not have a country to call his or her own because he or she belongs to every country. Sort of like a cultural chameleon. You go to any country, you just blend in, and be as much of that country as any other. It’s actually quite a tough thing to do.

In the quote above, shared during an interview when I asked Robert what he thought defined a global citizen, he suggested that being a global citizen required a certain disembodiment from the local. His description fitted with Pico Iyer’s (2001) description of the “global soul” who is a “full-time citizen[s] of nowhere”. To Robert, a global citizen was “like a cultural chameleon,” someone who is able to blend into any country and culture with ease. In the same interview, Robert had expressed the view that being a global citizen was “like having a Permanent Residency in every country but citizen of none”, implying some sort of partial obligations to nations that one was committed to. He did not think that cultural blending was easy, although I perceived
Robert to be rather acquainted with the art of cultural blending in the specific contexts of traveling, and even residing abroad for long periods.

For example, Robert was widely traveled and when I asked him if he ever felt uncomfortable or unable to fit in to a place, he was quick to point out that so long as there were people who spoke English, it would be easy to get around. He did not possess multiple citizenships but he did hold permanent residency status in Australia while retaining his Singapore citizenship. He disclosed during one group interview that he thought that eventual migration to Australia was a possibility for his family. He had travelled to London, Florida, parts of Europe and Australia for holidays, and he had also visited his godmother in Whistler, Vancouver for long stays. Holidays were often spent abroad, and he informed me that during the school break in June 2009, he had mainly “been catching up on lost sleep and enjoying the cold air, either from the Australian winter or from my air-conditioner”.

Robert thought that one’s nationality or sense of belonging really depended on individual choice – home was the place where one was most comfortable. When I asked the students what they thought about the notion of a Chinese or Indian diaspora, a collective movement of a group of people connected by nationality or ethnicity to another nation or place, he suggested that the idea of displacement sometimes associated with diasporas may be misplaced. In the following exchange, he explained that the thought that the attitude of being away from home was really to do with one’s “state of mind”.

Robert: Isn’t being diasporic a state of mind?

Chin: What do you mean by that? That’s interesting.
Robert: If you consider a place your homeland, then even if you’re away from your birthplace, are you still classified as diasporic? For instance, a Chinese man moves to America, is assimilated, stays there for 40 years, is he still considered a diasporic?

Chin: So you’re saying it depends on whether he considers himself Chinese?

Robert: It’s his state of mind. If he accepts America as his homeland, then in that case, he wouldn’t have been displaced from his homeland in the first place.

Robert discussed the notion of diaspora and cultural displacement with ease, using his knowledge of the real world to give an example of how a Chinese-American man may be so assimilated that he thinks of America rather than China as his homeland. He questioned the assumption that race and ethnicity determined one’s basic identification.

Robert himself did not find the concept of movement across borders for studies or work or even eventual long term settlement strange. In terms of his education, he thought it would be great “if I got a shot at a university overseas”, possibly by obtaining a scholarship. London was attractive since he would be able to indulge in his love of theatre there while completing his studies. Although he was not sure what course he wanted to pursue, he was certain that “it should be nothing to do with physics”.

Robert thought that the essential features of a global citizen were “adaptability” and the “willingness to pursue goals”. It seemed to me that he displayed these very features with his ability to fit into different countries and his determination to do well at school. In his first email reading log, he remarked that his grades were “plainly, disgusting low” and told me that he hoped that he would do better.
My grades are plainly, disgustingly low 😊 I only got a 6 in several subjects when I should be getting 7…. However, although I’m really disappointed with my performance, I’m not going to give up yet. A friend of mine told me that the underdogs are the ones with the most determination to succeed, so I’m going to see this year through, hopefully ending my secondary school on a high note.

Actually, his grades did not seem bad to me (7 was the top grade, 6 was considered above average) but it was clearly a disappointment for Robert who wanted to excel in his school work. He expressed his determination to work harder so that he could end the year “on a high note.”

**A Summary: Robert’s Reading and Identity Practices**

Robert showed himself to be a flexible reader of multiple books, multiple genres, and multiple media. He moved between reading different genres of science fiction, fantasy, and exposition, exploring the story worlds in these books and using them to critique and to understand the real world. He moved fluidly between the story worlds of different media, such as between the movie worlds and book worlds of *Lord of the Rings*, and the musical world and book world of *Wicked*, and was able to use language effectively to evaluate the effectiveness of the storytelling when different media forms were employed.

Robert portrayed himself as a flexible reader (and viewer) of both popular and high culture. He saw himself as a reader and someone who enjoyed the arts. He enjoyed watching musicals and plays, reading science fiction and fantasy. While he positioned himself as someone who was not too fond of classics, he was able to read and analyze literary texts. In fact, in his daily practices of story consumption, he could not help but
evaluate even his popular readings in a literary manner. Robert’s reading choices and practices reflected his identity as a reader, a cynic, and critical thinker. His reading of British works and his preference for British humor saw him identifying with a specific national trait, though he did read works by authors from other nationalities. He was also moving on to new readings as the year progressed, even though he still judged the quality of the stories by how well the writer created a new story world, and by the characters that populated these worlds.

Media crossings, genre crossings, border crossings were all very much ingrained in Robert’s daily practices of reading, both in and out of school. His ability to navigate these texts and to make meaning was part of his identity as a reader and as a flexible literate citizen. Books were an important part of Robert’s life and it was likely that reading would continue to be influential as regular practice, and that he would continue to find in books a source of inspiration for thinking about self, about the world, and about life in general.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have painted detailed portraits of three boys – Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert – through the case studies. Their everyday reading and identity practices can only be understood as situated in the both their school and out-of-school contexts. These practices are relational and contextual to the life and reading histories of each boy. At the same time, I have highlighted how these boys actively chose to engage in particular reading practices and choices, and how these choices have contributed to their identity construction as particular kinds of readers and literate citizens. In the next chapter, I present the cross-case discussion.
CHAPTER FIVE

Flexible Literacies and Cultural Crossings:

Cross-Case Discussion and Conclusions

Literacy is neither cause nor consequence; the process of self-formation, self-fashioning is, rather mediated by literacy.

(Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 122)

The quote in the epigraph by Collins and Blot (2003) in Literacy and Literacies was made in reference to how colonizers have used the written word to shape the lives of the subjugated in both colonial and postcolonial worlds. I appropriate the spirit of the quote, and the message of Literacy and Literacies, that our notions of literacy (or, literacies) can shape our identities as well as our perception of the identities of others. This study has examined how three adolescent boys – Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert – fashioned their identities through their literacy practices, specifically their everyday practices of reading both in and out of school. For the cross-case discussion, I return to the overarching research question: How did three adolescent boys who are highly capable readers construct their identities as local/global citizens through their reading practices?

Cross-Case Discussion

The case studies of Michael, Sanjeev and Robert described in Chapter Four show the Singaporean adolescent boys in this study to be active readers for whom the practices of reading were very much ordinary everyday practices. Whether in school or out of school, their conceptions of reading shaped their attitudes towards reading as well as their
uses of reading. Reading permeated their social lives as well as their imaginative lives –
their conceptions and uses of reading were set within specific sociocultural contexts, and
they constructed their identities as readers and citizens in relation to these contexts. Their
readings also allowed them to imagine self in relation to other worlds, and to cast
themselves as national and global citizens through their engagement with the different
worlds portrayed in texts read and texts studied.

Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert positioned themselves very differently in relation to
their idea of the global and the local. Sanjeev saw himself as someone who was globally
mobile but would prefer to stay in Singapore with his family eventually. Robert,
however, was more open to the idea of migration elsewhere, and in that sense, was less
tied to the concept of Singapore as home. Michael, on the other hand, directly positioned
himself as Singaporean in taste and preferences, and thought that he would continue his
further studies in Singapore because he did not want to be away from family and friends.
He saw himself as local though he was really in fact very open in his outlook on the
world. While these boys came from similar class positions, they had very different
perceptions of their identities as global and local citizens.

Yet, despite these very different stances with regard to their perception of their
location in the world, the data showed that these boys were tied by a common thread –
the ability to locate themselves in global flows of literacies through their reading
practices both in and out of school. Their reading practices were local literacies that were
infused with global flows and implications (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). All three boys
displayed knowledge about the books in the market, including knowledge of different
genres, of authors and of what books were current and what were not. Their knowledge
as well as their reading of popular-culture books and award-winning books, coupled with
their school-assigned readings, served to position these boys as cosmopolitan citizens,
well-read both in the school and non-school context. They positioned themselves as
literate through the acquisition of institutionalized school-directed literacies (in this case,
demonstrating the ability to be a critical reader of literary texts) and the portrayal of
themselves as savvy consumers of both popular and high-culture texts. Moreover,
through their reading choices and immersion in the worlds of stories read, the boys
showed themselves to be aware of a world where different cultures exist. The boys were
immersed in a culture where book reading was legitimate everyday practice, whether at
home or in school.

The division between conception and practice in the data analysis helped to
highlight the invisibility of culture in the boys’ reading and identity practices, and the
concept of neutralization emerged as I realized that the boys did not see how culture
played a role in their everyday practices of reading, and how much their reading had
become part of their identities. They evaluated their readings according to what made for
good literature and satisfying entertainment, and these taken-for-granted criteria provided
a way for them to position themselves as literate global and local citizens. Their reading
choices, dominantly from the United States and Britain, serve to position them as aware
of books in the English-speaking world, and put them at an advantage in a world where
English is a key international language for mobility (Graddol, 2006). While the boys
consumed books locally, the books consumed came from multiple geographies, and
served to project their reading identities as globally connected (Craig & Jackson, 2001).
Also, while these boys’ practices were situated in their social histories as members of a particular class and nation, examining the reading histories of these boys as culturally embedded showed that there was a “potentially variable set of attitudes and practices” (Long, 1987, p. 307), despite similarities in their resources to reading both in and out of school. The boys exercised much agency as readers who were able to shape their identities through their reading practices and their reading choices, fashioning themselves as unique readers and persons. Although their background might have predisposed these boys towards leisure reading as common everyday practice, these boys took different directions in their reading choices and practices, improvising their reading identities on a daily basis. They constructed complex literate identities (Solsken, 1993) that were unique to each individual, yet relevant for a globalized world.

**Constructing Reading Identities**

The case studies demonstrated that the boys were actively improvising their identity practices as literate global citizens even as they engaged in their everyday reading practices. De Certeau suggests that the notion of *bricolage* captures the “artisan-like inventiveness” (1984, p. xviii) of everyday practices, and indeed, these boys constructed their identities as readers and citizens from a wide variety of texts, and from their engagement with these texts. Through the narratives read, the boys authored themselves and actively shaped their identities as readers and individuals. This “authoring self… occupies the interface between intimate discourses, inner speaking, and bodily practices formed in the past and the discourses and practices to which people are exposed, willingly or not, in the present (Holland et al., 1998, p. 32). The narratives read
in texts serve to mediate these practices of identity construction as these boys position and reposition themselves in response to their readings.

Like the children in Solsken’s (1993) study, these boys constructed not just their literacy knowledge and practices, but also their histories and their futures and their relations to others as they engaged in literacy practices. The boys’ self-authorings were complex practices constructed in response to the voices of others, whether in narratives or in life (Bakhtin, 1981). For example, Michael’s case study illustrates the complexities and contradictions inherent in the construction of his reading and identity practices as he sought to construct his reading identity both within and beyond boundaries (Agee, 2002) he faced in his everyday life. The boundaries of gender, school and nation act as seemingly stable categories and provided markers from which Michael was able to define his position. Taylor reminds us that “the full definition of someone’s identity … usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community” (1989, p. 36). Michael defined his identity in conversation with others, in relation to his readings and his interaction with others. In his reading practices, Michael actively interacted with the words on the page, a “space borrowed” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxi), positioning himself in alignment or in resistance to worldviews offered to establish his stance on particular issue.

The stances taken by these boys are temporal and contextual in that their significance may only be for the moment or for a period of time (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Moss, 2008). However, these choices and practices, temporal as they may be, remain part of their reading histories, inscribed in varying degrees unto their identities. Reading is part of a complex process of self-assembly where identification with particular
kinds of books and readings contribute to one’s identity as a particular sort of person. The very act of choosing to read particular texts, in particular ways and particular contexts, also contribute to the act of self-authoring as particular kinds of literate persons and readers. For example, reading chick lit served to position Michael as someone who was open-minded and “cool” for a period of time. Just as the “teen queens” in Finder’s (1997) study carried romance books as a marker of their social status, Michael’s reading of chick lit could been seen as a way he distinguished himself from his classmates, who sought to distance themselves from “girl books”. However, while Michael seemed to defy gender boundaries by reading chick lit, reading “girl books” for a period of time seemed to be really just a reflection of Michael’s willingness to explore different texts, regardless of their gender affiliations. On the other hand, Robert’s reading of science fiction and fantasy was a consistent part of his reading identity. Reading science fiction and fantasy allowed him to indulge in his love for new worlds, but it was also a way for him to position himself as a critical thinker who used books read as social commentaries to understand the world around him better. Readings and stances taken, whether temporal or more permanent, become part of the boys’ reading and identity histories.

These boys constructed their identities in relation to their readings, to each other, and to others in the world around them. The case studies show the boys’ reading practices and identities to be complex and complicated, full of tensions and contradictions as they engaged in everyday practices of reading. Contrary to two-dimensional images of boys as non-readers or as limited readers, the boys in this study defied gender boundaries portrayed in much research, firstly, by their identification as readers, and secondly, by reading a wide variety of texts. They read different kinds of texts, responded to them...
differently, and developed over the course of the year as readers, exploring new kinds of
texts and new ideas presented in the texts. While the boys may have developed reading as
common practice as a result of their home and school environments, their construction of
their reading identities and practices took varied routes. Like the girls in Cherland’s
(1994) study, these boys affirmed, negotiated and resisted the worldviews presented in
books read, demonstrating the complexity of constructing their reading identities in their
everyday practices.

**Flexible Literacies for a Globalized World**

This study concerns itself with reading narratives both in and out of school as an
aspect of literacy in a globalized world. The definitions of literacy have changed in the
New Work order, and one key feature of 21st century is not so much the possession of
knowledge but knowing what to do with knowledge (Gee, et al., 1996; New London
Group, 1996). Gee, Hull & Lankshear have pointed out that "*reading is understanding a
particular type of text in a certain way*" and that "*texts are parts of lived, talked, enacted,
value-and-belief-laden* practices carried out in specific places and at specific times"
(1996, p. 3). Literacy is not so much about the ability to decode words but the ability to
understand meaning in context. To be successfully literate, an individual will have to be
flexible in, firstly, possessing a wide repertoire of skills, and secondly, knowing when
and how to use these skills.

The notion of flexible literacies is lived out by these boys in their everyday
practices of reading, both in and out of school as they acquired multiple “*repertoires of
practice*” (Guíñíñez & Rogoff, 2003) with regard to reading. They were able to access
different texts differently for different purposes at different times as part of their practices.
of flexible literacy. Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert were like the flexible citizens of Ong’s (1999) study of transnational Chinese, and possessed the literate abilities to shift across borders in their academic and eventually, work pursuits. Although they were situated in Singapore, these boys were acquiring the skills to become “shape-shifters” (Gee, 2004), in the sense that they were able to make use of available resources to shape relevant identities for a changing global world. However, the “shape-shifting” is less deliberate than the term would have us think. These practices are so ingrained into the personalities of these boys that they do not think of themselves as deliberately crafting global cosmopolitan identities through their reading practices.

The boys’ ability to relate to particular knowledge in terms of their reading is one aspect of their flexible literacy. For example, in the construction of their identities as readers, the boys took different stances with regard to the reading of high-culture or middlebrow literature. Michael took a defiantly populist stance, evaluating both his school and out-of-school readings by mass consumption standards. Sanjeev recognized the aesthetic value of certain books, but continued reading books that he felt were not aesthetically valuable if they were entertaining. Robert saw classics as high-flown and preferred books that he thought were more accessible. Yet, despite their positioning towards classics or award-winning literature, all three boys read them, and more importantly, were able to access these literature, whether in school or out of school. While their knowledge to certain sorts of texts may have provided these boys with cultural and symbolic capital, it was their relation to knowledge – their ability to access different knowledge differently at different times – that mark these boys as flexible literate citizens in a globalized world.
Two concepts illuminate this notion of flexibility: (1) the concept of cultural crossings, and (2) the idea of tactical readings.

**Cultural Crossings**

Rampton’s (2005) concept of language crossing illuminated for me the notion of crossings. Rampton studied working-class multiracial youths in Britain, focusing on their mixed use of Creole, Punjabi and Asian English in their school and peer contexts. Language crossing refers to the using of the language variety of another group, including the language of minority groups. Rampton found that language was intimately bound up with the expression of identity and that such crossings were ritualized movements across social and ethnic boundaries rather than outright claims of identity. Language crossing was creative and was used across different ethnic groups in the process of self-assembly, to identify with certain groups to form social networks or to resist authority.

The concept of crossing suggests a movement from one place to another place, from one direction towards another. In this study, the boys were making different kinds of crossings in their reading practices, crossings that marked them as flexible literate citizens in a global world. In the three case studies, I have tried to highlight how the boys made linguistic and cultural crossings, as well as genre and media crossings in their daily practices of reading. Linguistic crossings refer to the language difficulty of a text and cultural crossings to cultural references in a text. Genre and media crossings refer to movements across different semiotic forms of storytelling, such as the movement between television and books. In their readings, the boys had to cross borders of language, culture, media and genre, some that were more familiar than others.
The ability to make these crossings was a part of the boys’ literate identities and contributed to the construction of their identities as global literate citizens. For example, they crossed cultural borders in their readings both in and out of school. A literary text contains more than the words on a page, and plural meanings are entangled in a text for readers to make sense of (Barthes, 1974). Beyond the actual unfamiliarity of the geographical settings of story worlds, there were hidden cultural codes (Anderson, 1994; Bartlett, 1932; Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey, & Anderson, 1982) that the students had to learn to read in order to understand both the word and the world (Freire, 1991).

Michael, Sanjeev and Robert’s readings, whether in school or out of school, were not neutral readings (Luke & Freebody, 1997a); rather, the stories read came from particular backgrounds, and required specific reading practices for the boys to access the meanings in the stories.

In school, reading stories set in different locations allowed Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert to see other worlds through the stories read. As Sanjeev pointed out, he was exposed to worlds he had not visited, and got to see things from “an insider’s point of view” through the texts studied in class. However, while the boys were exposed to different geographical worlds, they did not necessarily see the value of it – for example, both Michael and Sanjeev did not see how studying No Longer at Ease (Achebe, 2008), set in Nigeria, was of immediate relevance to them. It is important to note that the school curriculum is not neutral either (Freebody & Freiberg, 2008). The school canon, is after-all, a reflection of what counts as knowledge by institutionally-affiliated figures (Collins & Blot, 2003; Corse, 1997; Purves, 1991; Tompkins, 1986), and the selection of texts represented what was considered significant in terms of Eurocentric, world and Singapore
literature. The boys learned to read the various literatures and to talk and write about them competently as part of their schooled identity, in accordance with institutionally-sanctioned ways of reading, writing and talking.

Despite their immersion in these story worlds, it may be that this exposure to different worlds may be a form of “emotional multiculturalism,” which Resnik points out is not so much a deep understanding of other cultures as a “psychological predisposition that enables effective interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds” (2008, p. 9) and is suitable for global workers working with team-mates from different cultures. The boys demonstrate this emotional multiculturalism in their recognition of cultural differences and in their ability to identify and talk about cultural issues in their analysis of school texts. While the boys demonstrated their ability to talk about cultural difference, I hesitate to suggest that they managed to achieve deep cultural understanding through the study of these texts, an issue which is not the subject of this study. Suffice to say, the boys were socialized into an international culture of being aware of a variety of cultures and the texts of these cultures through their school practices. At the same time, they were learning to critique the texts as an artifact, and did not necessarily invest themselves emotionally in them. They were learning to appreciate the existence of various cultures, and learning a “universal” code of literary criticism that they used to critique the artistic value of these works and the themes raised in these works.

Compared to Heath’s study (1986) set in the more stable world of the 1970s to 1980s, the “way with words” that these boys have acquired in the 21st century seemed different from Heath’s middle-class children. For one, these boys are not located in a suburban town in the United States, but in post-colonial Singapore where English has
been adopted as the language of business and school. The fact that a study of Singaporean boys is relevant in today’s context is a sign of changing times. English is no longer the prerogative of Kachru’s (1992) inner circle countries where English is the native language. One the other hand, neither can these boys be easily categorized as foreign language learners as English just because they were Singaporeans. English for them was very much a first language, used both at home and in school, and they have adopted “a global literate English” (Wallace, 2002) that can be transferred across borders as part of their identities. As such, what counts as literacy in a globalized age needs to be re-contextualized in light of the changing demographics of English speakers in different parts of the world to take into account the daily border crossings that students engage in as they learn literacies both global and local.

The relation to knowledge that these boys have acquired includes the ability to understand the cultural codes embedded in stories from different locations, whether they in fact agree with the points of view in the stories or not. What counts as knowledge for these boys is a transcultural literacy that is able to move across borders, and these boys all portrayed themselves as flexible readers able to cross cultural borders of gender, nationality and race and ethnicity in their school and out-of-school reading practices, something which their early reading practices have predisposed them to. Their history of reading English narratives since young helped them to learn easily how to access different linguistic, story and cultural codes, particularly Eurocentric linguistic, story and cultural codes, so that when it came to reading school-assigned texts that originated from Eurocentric perspectives, they understood the cultural references. Being a flexible global
literate citizen was not a natural occurrence, but because cultural crossing seemed so natural for these boys, it had become part of their everyday practices.

**Tactical Readings**

Another concept that illuminated the concept of flexibility is De Certeau’s (1984) concept of “tactics” and “strategies.” For de Certeau, many everyday practices (including reading) are tactical in character. Strategies are moves that are situated in “proper” places and can be linked to institutional (political, economic, and scientific) relations. On the other hand, tactics are disassociated from institutions and describe the improvisational aspect of practice. For de Certeau, writing is strategic in nature whereas the act of reading is tactical in nature, where a reader “insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation” (p. xxi). Reading is thus an active process whereby the reader chooses to read the text when he pleases and as he pleases, perhaps seizing opportunities to read into the text what the author did not mean.

School-sanctioned ways of reading can be viewed as approved strategic moves (Collins & Blot, 2003; Luke, 1988) where readers are encouraged to view the status of a text as well as what the text is trying to say in ways that are in alignment with school- (and often, state-) approved ways. Just as Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* has been “hypercanonized” (Arc, 1994) by generations of American printers and educators to be read in specific ways to represent the American spirit, the texts that are read in school carry with them the history of their publication, reception, and institutionalization. For Michael, Sanjeev and Robert, school readings carry with them the baggage of their reading history and expectations of what it means to be a literate student. While they had to read and write in accordance with these school-sanctioned ways of reading (which they
did, with varying degrees of protest), they also chose to read these texts with the twin lenses of school-derived criteria and the mass consumption criteria of entertainment. In addition, they each had their own definitions for what constituted a good read, and selected books in accordance with their own criteria. The ability to make these tactical moves was part of the flexible maneuvering that these boys made in terms of their choice of reading and their responses to readings.

Guillory (2003) has suggested in the area of canon construction that canon construction is really less an issue of representation, and more an issue of the distribution of social power, a form of cultural capital, which regulate access to literacy through the practices of reading and writing. The boys’ possession of knowledge in the form of English school classics and more recent postcolonial works were a form of cultural capital. More importantly, their ability to use these texts appropriately was a form of intercultural capital, as they were able to access knowledge that was relevant for different contexts. It was their relation to knowledge - their ability to utilize such knowledge in appropriate situations – that put them in a position of power. Through their grasp of both strategic and tactical moves in their everyday reading practices, these boys were able to demonstrate flexible literate selves. They know when to use these moves, and to shift between modes of reading for school purpose and for their own purpose. Their very flexibility is a form of power that allowed them to plug into global notions of literacy in their localized context.

The fact that these boys possessed particular resources and the abilities to use the resources cannot be isolated from structures of class (Solsken, 1993). Their predispositions towards reading were in part encouraged by home and earlier schooling
practices. However, this study demonstrates that the boys’ “regulated improvisations” (Bourdieu, 1977) were not just a product of class. The focus on individual agency in this study show the processes of globalization and localization to be more complicated and complex than a single issue of class where it is one’s class positioning that determine one’s location in the world and one’s perception of the world. These boys’ tactical moves in their everyday practices showed that they consumed books, whether in school or out of school, and did so in different ways, as part of their improvisations of identity, and that these decisions were not always class-dictated issues.

**Conclusion: Flexible Literacies, Cultural Crossings and Global Identities**

The significance of this research lies in part in the focus on boys reading and identity practices in a location that has until now not been examined. As previously mentioned, the significance of this new location is also a signifier of new times and new ways to examine literacy – it is a way of understanding local literacies and global implications in an increasingly interconnected world. What counts as literacy in a globalized age is one’s knowledge as well as one’s relation to knowledge, and having a flexible literacy means having the ability to cross various borders in one’s reading practices. In addition, there is a need to understand what tactical readings may mean for different groups of students. This involves examining the active participation of students’ in the construction of their identities as global literate citizens without neglecting the role of structuring influences of nation, class, and gender within which self-fashioning takes place.

In Chapter One, I quoted Luke’s definition of intercultural capital and suggested that being a flexible literate citizen included “the capacity to engage in acts of
knowledge, power and exchange across time/space divides and social geographies, across diverse communities, populations and epistemic stances” (2004, p. 1429). For these boys, it is their capacity to engage in what Luke has termed “acts of knowledge, power, and exchange” across different contexts in terms of their reading and identity practices that mark them as flexible literate citizens. They are able to read different media, to read different genres, stories from different cultures and to read them differently. Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert have adopted as part of their identities a flexible “global literate English” (Wallace, 2003) that can be used in a range of different settings. In this case, the global literate English consist of more than knowing the right words; it also consists of knowing the right stories and knowing how to read these stories. Knowledge of these stories served as currency for constructing a knowledgeable, well-read self. The boys understand the social and academic value of these different texts and which ones matter in terms of their own futures.

The case studies of Michael, Sanjeev, and Robert have been useful in helping me to track consistency and change, helping me to see beyond a snapshot in time (short as it was) what these boys read and how they read. Reading and identities are linked, saturated with histories of individuals, and as educators, understanding the role of reading and of particular texts in individual lives at specific moments of their history may illuminate our understandings of youth culture in the area of reading and identity practices, in this case, as readers and as global/ local citizens. These boys are active readers who do not just read or receive cultural products; rather Michael, Sanjeev and Robert were actively involved in the meaning-making process, and in constructing their identities through the act of reading and through their reading identities. Literary texts as well as their out-of-school
readings provide dialogic spaces for these boys to engage in a form of identity play as they imagined alternative worlds, and responded to these worlds by positioning and re-positioning themselves.

Literature study can be seen as a form of identity play where the texts read become “habitable” spaces (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxi). In their reading of a text, the boys are provided spaces within which to determine what kinds of stances they will take in relation to particular issues and worldviews. The narratives read both in and out of class provided discursive spaces for the boys to imagine different selves in relation to the world. From a Bakhtinian (1981) perspective, dialogic interaction between self and text takes place as the reader responses to the text read in specific contexts. Individual imagination of self as adolescent, as male, as Singaporean, as cosmopolitan were constructed in response to the imagined worlds in the narratives read, and in response to other positions taken by other people.

Luke & Carrington suggest a “glocalized literacy” that remediates students’ relations to “global flows of capital and information, bodies and images” (2004, p. 62), while making teaching more relevant to local experiences. From critical literacy perspectives, the literature curriculum can provide opportunities for students’ position-taking in both global and local worlds. Students should be given the opportunities to question the kinds of identities they put on and to question their own alliances and stances. While these boys show themselves to be competent and critical readers of literature, particularly in the school context, there is little awareness of the geographical and cultural limitations of both school and own reading choices. Although the boys moved away from Eurocentric and/or popular-culture literature in their reading choices,
they did not see these movements as cultural crossings, where they were learning to explore different kinds of readings and different ways of thinking about the world. In the school context, the expansion from Eurocentric to postcolonial literature directed them towards more expansive readings, but there was little attention paid to critical understanding of their own reading and identity practices.

While there has been much literature on the inclusion of multicultural or postcolonial literature in the classroom, I believe that the terms “multicultural literature” and “postcolonial literature” are often used in too broad and diffuse ways to identify the kinds of conversations or crossings that need to be raised in specific classrooms. Understanding the position of the student as reader, and the conversations that allow for cultural crossings may help educators be more specific about the kind of “multicultural” or “postcolonial” texts that they choose to introduce to the class. The implications of globalization for literacy education have to be localized to be relevant to specific student populations. At the end of the day, the specificity is required to further define what “glocalizing” (Luke & Carrington, 2004) literature study or literacy education may mean for specific student populations.

In a global order of multiple media and increasing cultural diversity, adolescents have to learn differently in a networked world of multiplicity and complexity. The boys demonstrated that they were able to make connections to multicultural worlds through their knowledge of stories from western and postcolonial origins. They also demonstrated awareness of the world through their consumption of award-winning and popular-culture literature (and other media), though it was limited in some ways. The ability to make
these cultural crossings in their readings was part of these boys’ flexible literacy that prepared them to engage in a globalized world.

The knowledge of these forms of knowledge and the ability to make use of this knowledge were a way for these boys to locate themselves in global flows. They constructed flexible global literate identities through their reading choices and reading practices in and out of school. Although the locations of these boys in particular class structures may have better prepared these boys to access relevant knowledge for the 21st century, they were not passive receptors of knowledge. Rather, they were active agents in their self-fashioning as literate global citizens, making use of available resources to construct dynamic flexible literate identities for a globalized world.
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Books cited (School texts)


**Books cited (Out-of-school texts)**


**Movies and television series cited**


Dear Student:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey on your reading practices. Please log on to [website address] and complete the survey online. The information obtained from your survey will be confidential and only the researcher will have access to the survey information. You will receive a $5 book voucher as a token of appreciation within two weeks from your completion of the survey.

There are 50 questions and this survey will take you about 30 minutes to complete. Please read each question carefully before answering the survey question.

Survey Questions on Literacy Practices

The purpose of this section is to determine the literacy and reading practices of the students.

1. How much time do you spend at home reading for enjoyment?
   - None
   - about 30 minutes a week
   - 30 to 60 minutes a week
   - more than an hour a week
   - 30 minutes or more a day
2. How many books do you generally read in a month?
   - none
   - 1-3
   - 4-6
   - 7-or more

3. How much time do you spend on the computer each day?
   - none
   - 1-3
   - 4-6
   - 7 or more

   Please elaborate on what you spend the time on, e.g. surfing, instant messaging, facebook, school-related research.

4. On the average how many text messages do you send a day?
   - none
   - 1-3
   - 4-6
   - 7 or more
5. On school days, how many hours a day do you watch TV?

- I usually don’t watch TV
- about 1-2 hours
- about 2-3 hours
- 4 or more hours

Please elaborate on the kinds of programmes you catch regularly and periodically.

6. How much time do you spend each day playing video games?

- about half an hour
- about 1 hour
- about 2 hours
- 3 hours or more
- I usually don’t play video games

If you play games, please list some games you play.

7. How many movies/shows do you watch on the internet or at home each month?

- none
- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5 or more
8. How many movies do you watch each month (in the cinema)?

   none
   • 1-2
   • 3-4
   • 5 or more

Survey Questions on Reading Practices

The purpose of this section is to understand the adolescents’ practices as a reader and their attitudes towards reading.

9. I like to read.
   • almost never
   • sometimes
   • often
   • most of the time
   • almost always

10. I consider myself to be a good reader.
    • almost never
    • sometimes
    • often
    • most of the time
    • almost always
11. I read widely.

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always

12. I start but don’t finish books.

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always

13. I only read for assignments.

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always
14. I will continue reading a story only if I like it.
   - almost never
   - sometimes
   - often
   - most of the time
   - almost always

15. I will read the book assigned for my English Language Arts class before we start studying it.
   - almost never
   - sometimes
   - often
   - most of the time
   - almost always

16. I read books that my teacher recommends.
   - almost never
   - sometimes
   - often
   - most of the time
   - almost always
17. I have attended creative writing workshops and seminars that are related to literature or creative writing. Please give an example of some workshops or seminars attended: _______________________

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always

18. I like writing stories or poems.

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always

19. I talk to my friends about what I read.

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always
20. My friends and I recommend readings to each other.

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always

21. I look up additional information on the internet when I read.

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always

22. Adults or older siblings read to me when I was younger.

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always
23. I spend time reading with a younger sibling or person.
   - almost never
   - sometimes
   - often
   - most of the time
   - almost always

24. I read books in English.
   - almost never
   - sometimes
   - often
   - most of the time
   - almost always

25. If you read books in other languages, what languages are they? ____________

26. How often do you read a book/ short story/ poem/ play set in Singapore or written by a Singapore author (in class, as part of the curriculum)?
   - almost never
   - sometimes
   - often
   - most of the time
   - almost always
27. How often do you read a book/ short story/ poem/ play set in Singapore or written by a Singapore author (on your own)?

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always

28. If you have read a book or some books, give examples: _________________

29. How often do you read a book/ short story/ poem/ play that is not set in Singapore or written by a Singapore author (in class, as part of the curriculum)?

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always
30. How often do you read a book/ short story/ poem/ play that is not set in Singapore or written by a Singapore author (on your own)?

- almost never
- sometimes
- often
- most of the time
- almost always

31. What kinds of books do you read on your own? You may check more than one.

- Science fiction
- Romance novels
- Non-fiction/ Informational texts (including magazines on sports, technical matters)
- Adventure stories
- Fantasy
- Travelogues
- Sports stories
- Comic books
- Biographies/ Autobiographies
- Teen speciality magazines (e.g., fashion, skateboarding, TV)
- Others, please state: __________________
32. Please list three to six books and/or magazines you read within the last month.

33. Please list three to six of your favorite books and/or magazines.

34. How often do you purchase a book that is not required for school readings?
   - never
   - about once a month
   - about once a week
   - a couple of times a year

35. How often do you read or check out materials from the public library?
   - never
   - about once a month
   - about once a week
   - a couple of times a year

36. How often do you read or check out materials from your school library?
   - never
   - about once a week
   - about once a month
   - couple of times a year
Survey questions about yourself

The purpose of the questions about travel is to establish how much they have traveled and if that correlates in any way to their readings.

37. My age is (as of 1 January 2009)
   - 14
   - 15
   - 16
   - 17 or above

38. I was born in
   - Singapore
   - a Southeast Asian country (e.g., Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines)
   - China
   - India
   - Others, please state: ________________

39. What is your first language?
   - English
   - Malay
   - Chinese
   - Tamil
   - Others, please state: ________________
40. What other languages can you speak? Please list:________________

41. What other languages can you read? Please list:_________________

42. Have you traveled to Malaysia (with the school)?
   a. Yes
   b. No

43. Have you traveled to other parts of Asia, excluding Malaysia (with the school)?
   • Yes
   • No

44. Have you traveled to another country, other than one within Asia (with the school)?
   • Yes
   • No

45. Have you traveled to Malaysia (not with the school)?
   • Yes
   • No
46. Have you traveled to other parts of Asia, excluding Malaysia (not with the school)?
   - Yes
   - No

47. Have you traveled to another country, other than one within Asia (not with the school)?
   - Yes
   - No

48. Have you lived in another country?
   - Yes
   - No

49. Have you read books about the country or countries you have visited?
   - Yes
   - No

50. If you have, please elaborate on books you have read and how they have influenced the way you think about a particular place or particular places.
APPENDIX 2

Interview Protocols

First Interview

(1) Tell me about your family and school background.

(2) How would you describe yourself?
   (a) What kinds of activities are you involved in?
   (b) What role does reading play in your life?
   (c) What kinds of travel have you done? How do you think the traveling has contributed to your vision of the world?
   (d) How do you see yourself as an Ace Independent boy?
   (e) How do you see yourself as a Singaporean citizen?
   (f) How do you see yourself as a global citizen?

(3) How would you describe yourself as a reader? Tell me about your reading practices.
   (a) What are your favorite books?
   (b) What kinds of books do you read?
   (c) Why do you read these books?
   (d) How do you select the books you read?
   (e) What kind of reader would you say you are?
   (f) What kind of reading environment would you describe yourself as having?
   (g) Discussion of specific books read and the impact on them.
(4) What do you remember of your school reading practices? Tell me more about them.

(a) What is your impression of *No Longer at Ease* so far?

(b) What are your thoughts on your Language Arts curriculum?

(c) Any thoughts about the rationale for selection of particular texts? Why would certain texts be chosen?

Second Interview

(1) Tell me about your class experiences so far.

(a) What did you think of the *New York Girl* assignment?

(b) What is your opinion of *No Longer at Ease* at this point?

(c) What is your opinion on the stories studied in *Four Continents*?

(d) What have you learnt in the past term?

(e) What have you learnt about different parts of the world from your readings? How have these readings contributed to your knowledge of the world.

(f) How do the study of *No Longer at Ease* and the stories from *Four Continents* change your perception of India, Africa, etc.?

(2) Tell me more about your out-of-school readings. Discuss specific books reads.
(3) Questions about self-identity.

(a) Future projection: What do you see yourself doing after IB? School, university, course, job?

(b) How do you think what you are learning in ACS is going to be useful to your future?

Third Interview

On Home and Being Singaporean

(1) What does home mean to you?

(2) How does Singapore relate to this notion of home?

(3) What are some positive aspects you see about Singapore?

(4) What are some negative aspects you see about Singapore?

(5) In my last interview with you, some of you mentioned you would not really like to leave Singapore while others would like to. For most of you, leaving for a short time, e.g. studies, is an option but you would like to settle down here. Why is that so?

(6) How would you describe yourself as a Singaporean?

On Diaspora, Global Citizenship and Nationality

(1) The term “diaspora” was initially used to refer to Jews living outside Israel, and now is used commonly to refer to people who are not living in their homeland. Increasingly, in this global day and age, we see more and more movements of
people across boundaries and continents, mostly in search for jobs. Do you see
yourself as a potential traveler in that sense?

(2) What does home and nation mean for these people?

(3) What are we in Singapore then? We are considered Chinese and Indian diaspora.
If we move from Singapore, what then?

(4) What kind of qualities do you see as necessary to survive in today’s world?

(5) What kinds of qualities would you like to see in today’s world?

(6) Back to an idea that I brought up at the beginning of the research, how do you see
yourself as global citizens?

(7) How does that tie in with your sense of being Singaporean?

Fourth and Fifth Interviews

The fourth and fifth interviews varied according to the individual profiles of each boy,
and centred on specific reading and identity practices. The reading biography was used as
material for discussion.
## APPENDIX 3

### Conventions used in the Presentation of Transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Convention</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(laughter)</td>
<td>Parenthesis surrounding text usually refers to student’s behaviour or researcher’s observations of student’s non-verbal responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[No Longer at Ease]</td>
<td>Brackets, containing explanatory text inserted by researcher, may included book title or note about what student is referring to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>damn GOOD</td>
<td>Capitalized letters, to indicate increase in volume, usually for emphasis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Underlined word, indicates student stress on word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…</td>
<td>Ellipsis, indicates pause.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ewh -</td>
<td>Dash, indicating interruptions, usually occurring in group interviews.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hi [name],

This is a quick email to touch base and to start a thread from which we can begin a conversation about your reading both in and out of class. I'm interested in what you read, why you read and even why you don't read.

For now, it would be great if you could tell me more about the following:

(1) what you've been reading during your holidays
(2) since school started
(3) your thoughts on *No Longer at Ease* and other school-related readings
(4) any other random thoughts on your reading, perhaps a summary and/or recommendation of particular writers/books etc.

I'm going to use this reading log as well as the survey you completed last year (your survey attached for your reference) to guide our next interview session.
Anyway, as part of my research, I'm keeping up with what you guys are reading both in and out of school. Before and over the Chinese New Year break, I manage to complete Lionel Shriver's *A Perfectly Good Family* and *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*, and am now reading Candace Bushnell's *Lipstick Jungle*. I must say that it's a good break from all the academic work and research I've been reading, and I guess we can talk more about them during our interviews.

By the way, you don't have to feel like you have to complete everything in one email. Feel free to mail me any short thoughts that occur to you along the week.

Cheers,

Chin Ee
Hi [name],

Here are a few questions for your next reading log:

(1) How are you finding the study of *No Longer at Ease*?

(2) How are you finding the study of the various short stories from *Four Continents*?

(3) Any comments about your class readings, grades and group activities?

(4) What have you been reading (and/or) watching? What are these books about?

Cheers,

Chin Ee
Hi [name],

Trust that you are enjoying the hols. Could I trouble you to do the following reading log over the June holidays? You can either do them all at once or one question at a time.

(1) Describe the literacy environment (i.e. reading, writing, listening, speaking, anything to do with language) that you grew up in. For example, did your parents, siblings or other people model habits of reading in any way? How did they encourage or not encourage you to read, both in and out of school?

(2) Take a quick scan of your room and house. Can you please describe the kinds of books (including fiction and non-fiction such as biographies, cookbooks and magazines) that you see around the house? Where are they found? Who reads them? Are any of your family members currently reading? What are they reading?

(3) Do you see yourself as having a lot of books? What are some of the books you see at home that you used to read? Anything significant to you?

(4) What have you been reading since the holidays started? Anything of interest? What else have you been up to with your time?

(5) How did you spend your book voucher? Please let me know what books or items you considered and why you finally chose what you did.

Thanks lots!

Chin Ee
4th Reading Log

August 2009

Hi [name]

Please find attached a draft reading biography of yourself, gathered from the interviews and reading logs. What are your thoughts on it? Let me know when you are able to meet up to discuss the reading log? Anything in yellow are points that I would like to confirm with you or check about.

Cheers,

Chin Ee
Hi [name],

[personal question about school and holidays]

Anyway, could you please do a quick reflection for me?

(1) How did you do for your Language Arts and any additional thoughts on the texts studied this year?

(2) What do you think you've learnt about reading and about these texts that are set in different parts of the world?

(3) How do you think your reading has changed/ progressed this year, both in terms of school and own reading practices?

(4) Any reading plans for the hols?

(5) Any other thoughts?

Thanks lots,

Chin Ee
APPENDIX 5

Background on and Construction of Individual Reading Biographies

The reading biographies that I used in the initial construction of the reading and identity practices of the focal students drew its inspiration from two sources. Firstly, I drew from the learning biographies that Solsken (1993) constructed of her participants in her study, and secondly, I drew on a teaching method used by Dr. Jane Agee in her classes (Agee, personal communication). Dr. Agee had her teacher trainees write their own reading biographies in order to understand their own reading histories and practices. I wrote my own reading biography at her suggestion in the first year of my P.H.D. program at SUNY Albany, and found it a useful way to understand my own background and position as a reader and educator.

The reading biographies were useful in helping me to put down in words how I made sense of the data that I collected on each student. In addition, they became material for me to triangulate my interpretation of the students’ reading and identity practices. As a form of member checking, the students read through their reading biographies and discussed it with me during an individual interview. The following is Robert’s reading biography, included to give a sense of what the students read and commented on close to the third quarter of the study. It captured what I had observed at that particular point in time through my preliminary coding. Robert had commented that it was a flattering portrait of him, confirmed the facts, and generally agreed with the interpretation.
Robert’s Reading Biography

My name is Robert. I enjoy surreal humor, measured cynicism and unconventional, new ideas. Generally, I enjoy science fiction, humor and fantasy books, in particular disguised social commentaries like Terry Pratchett’s Discworld. Otherwise, in terms of internationally recognized literature, I become bored easily with those termed as “classics” – there is too much that can be found in other books – but prefer slightly irreverent books which explore new – for me – perspectives.

(Survey, September 2008)

As Robert pointed out in his survey, he was not one for classics, except those he had to read for class, in which case he would complete reading them, being the conscientious student he was. Robert described himself as an introvert, “more of the stay at home than go out cycling type” for whom reading is an important leisure activity. Robert usually read books off the Internet but would buy books that he likes. During the semester, he was enthralled with Gregory Maguire’s Wicked (Maguire, 2005), and eventually bought the book after reading it. An active member of the school’s Drama Club and Boy’s Brigade together with Joshua, Robert found little time for reading (which he still did) during the months of March and April as he was acting in a key role for a bi-annual inter-school Drama Competition known as the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF). In addition to stories, Robert also read “science and current affairs-based periodicals” such as National Geographic, TIME and The Economist, magazines that his father and brother subscribed to.
One key feature that stood out in Robert’s reading choices was his preference for books with a certain satirical humor, such as the Discworld series by Terry Pratchett, books by Douglas Adams, famous for The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy and Gary Larson’s The Far Side comics. He enjoyed Terry Pratchett’s books because they are “are like one big farcical commentary on society, where he really takes every subject under the sun, cuts it up, and turns it into something funny.” As mentioned earlier, Robert pointed out reflectively that the kind of humor he enjoyed was associated with British humor, and this carried over to his television preferences (for example, Yes Minister!). That this humor carried over as part of his identity can perhaps be seen in the following reading log entry.

---

*Generally when I look for books, I look for originality, scope, genre, humor and/or action content, and plot. Simply put, if it’s original, has an epic scope, has a different take on the genre, is humourous but contains a modicum of action, and has a feasible and interesting plot, it gets first priority on my must-have list. Also, it probably doesn’t exist.*

(Reading Log #3)

Robert shared the love for Science Fiction and fantasy with his older brother, and suggests that “it’s something about creating a new universe that is so compelling” in fantasy and science fiction. For Robert, it was a priority to follow Discworld and Robert Jordan’s Wheel of Time – “I don’t usually start on sagas or series, but if I do and like it, then I usually get every book in the series.” He shared a huge library of science fiction and fantasy with his brother, and would often head to the science fiction and fantasy section in a bookshop, his “usual hangout.”
In contrast to his regular reading diet of Science Fiction, fantasy and comics, one of Robert’s favorite books was *Four Loves* by C. S. Lewis, which he had read upon recommendation by his brother. The religious and philosophical text had quite a profound effect on Robert, who re-read the book despite the difficulty he had doing it. Unlike his other readings, which were entertaining rather than difficult, *Four Loves* required deep concentration and thinking.

*Robert:* It was recommended to me by my brother because he read it, and it’s actually quite a powerful book. At one point, I was reading like 6 pages a day, trying to get a mental picture. After 6 pages, my head starts to hurt.

*Chin:* Why?

*Robert:* It’s really… everything fits in really neatly. It has quite a few sharp realizations…

*Chin:* Like?

*John:* From a religious point of view, it differentiates God from love in that God is love but we cannot let love become God. And when you start to think about it, the implications are quite serious… in the sense that it’s a whole different path.

(Interview with Robert & Joshua, February 2, 2009)

In the above extract, Robert deliberately engaged in difficult reading that was not compelled by school, and contrary to his usual practice, read the non-fiction text twice in order to comprehend the author’s concepts.

A significant reading event that happened during the school semester was Robert’s reading of *Wicked* (Maguire, 2005) by Gregory Maguire. He was introduced to a YouTube copy of the musical by Joshua, and had started reading the book, which he later
recommended to Joshua. He liked the book so much he wrote a long entry on it in his reading log, and asked me if I had read it during one of my class observations. I promised I would read it, and that we would discuss the book and the musical during our next interview.
## APPENDIX 6

### Coding Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Sub-Codes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading Resources</strong></td>
<td>1. Family</td>
<td>Joshua: Of course, it started with my parents and siblings reading to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Recommendations</td>
<td>Robert: It <em>Four Loves</em> was recommended to me by my brother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Bookstores</td>
<td>Michael: I was at Borders…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Libraries</td>
<td>Joel: I mostly borrow books from the library.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Other media</td>
<td>Joel: I watch anime and read manga.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading different genres</strong></td>
<td>1. Adventures and thrillers</td>
<td>Roger: He [Matthew Reilly] uses a bit of Dan Brown, and Michael Crichton, and a lot of adventure stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Romance</td>
<td>Michael: I read so many chick lit books I can’t remember.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Mystery</td>
<td>Joshua: I like Agatha Christie’s mysteries…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Comics</td>
<td>Joshua: <em>Asterix</em> is a sell-out now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Others</td>
<td>Joel: I read Ayn Rand’s <em>Fountainhead</em> when I was in Secondary Two. (philosophical fiction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>Sub-Codes</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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<td>-------------------------------</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cross media readings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sanjeev: Again, <em>Fight Club</em> [the movie]… the twist is good. Because it’s about him and he misses this guy. In the end, it turns out this guy is in his imagination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of reading the same story or genre across media (e.g. reading and watching <em>Lord of the Rings</em>)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Michael: Everything started from <em>Gossip Girl</em> I think.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Robert: The musical is more or less based around the friendship as opposed to whole underlying story of Elphaba in the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria for evaluation of readings</strong></td>
<td>1. Entertainment value</td>
<td>Roger: Yah, but his books [Matthew Reilly] are quite interesting. Entertaining.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria for book selection</strong></td>
<td>1. Interest</td>
<td>Sanjeev: The title [<em>What I Talk about when I Talk about Running</em>] caught my eye because I too am an avid runner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the boys selected books for out-of-school consumption.</td>
<td>2. Recommendation</td>
<td>Michael: Cliff recommended the book [<em>Life of Pi</em>].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Series</td>
<td>Joshua: Of course, if I have favorite writers, I keep looking for their books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Random</td>
<td>Roger: I found it [<em>Life of Pi</em>] at the airport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>Sub-Codes</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading from different geographical locations</strong></td>
<td>1. Singapore literature</td>
<td>1. Michael: Maybe that’s why I think Singapore books are very relevant, because I think I can relate to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Literature from monolingual English-speaking countries (United States, England, Australia and Canada)</td>
<td>2. Robert: I’ve actually come to quite like British authors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading difficult books</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Robert: I was reading like 6 pages a day, trying to get a mental picture. After 6 pages, my head starts to hurt. [<em>Four Loves</em>]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sanjeev: I found that it was quite a struggle to read through it [<em>The Inheritance of Loss</em>]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School readings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sanjeev: Because we are doing <em>No Longer at Ease</em> and <em>Four Continents</em>, we have quite a good feel of the culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Joel: Most of the books we do are classics or have some sort of message that the book wants us to understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Michael: …like black and white. That’s such an old debate thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Robert: The books chosen are supposed to impart some sort of message, but secondary school students are too cynical for that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>Sub-Codes</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social practices</td>
<td>Examples of social practices of reading.</td>
<td>Michael: Then I read it <a href="#"><em>Twilight</em></a>, and I read it halfway. And Rachel too. And I read quite a lot. And then, she was like, it’s not nice lah, don’t read lah. So I stopped reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sanjeev: My sister said it <a href="#"><em>Shopaholics</em></a> was so gay so I didn’t buy it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative practices</td>
<td>Examples of imagination of self and world in relation to readings.</td>
<td>Robert: <a href="#"><em>Hardboiled Wonderland</em></a> is set in the future where people’s minds are basically messed around with in order to become Calutecs…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sanjeev: To be honest, I’ve never been to India. I can imagine if you lived in India and you experienced that kind of foreigner coming to your village.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>