

## Rural Working-Class Males in Sweden and Reading: Processes for Re-appropriating Written Culture

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Volume 24, numéro 3, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094809ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29585>

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Éditeur(s)

Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada

ISSN

1496-0974 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Asplund, S.-B. & Goodson, I. (2022). Rural Working-Class Males in Sweden and Reading: Processes for Re-appropriating Written Culture. *Language and Literacy / Langue et littérature*, 24(3), 68–87.  
<https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29585>

Résumé de l'article

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# ***Rural Working-Class Males in Sweden and Reading: Processes for Re-appropriating Written Culture***

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## *Abstract*

This article explores the intersection of place-based reading practices of rural working-class males and reading practices in school. Life story interviews have been conducted with six men in different ages (age 19-63) living in a rural region in Sweden, focusing on their reflections on their own relation to reading across a life span from the standpoint of the present. The analysis shows that there is a unique combination of factors at work when rural working-class men culturally re-appropriate written culture in ways that are sympathetic, and socially acceptable to a manual working-class culture. These factors include the processes of oralising and manualising and are often related to things learned in specific ancestral heartlands.

*Keywords:* reading, reading practices, literacy, life history, working-class, masculinity

## *Introduction*

Recently there has been a growing body of research illuminating some subtle shifts in working-class males' relationship to school, thus depicting academically successful working-class boys and more positive working-class learning trajectories (cf. Ingram 2018; Roberts 2018; Ward 2014, 2015). However, what these studies still identify is the presence of a sense of cultural misalignment with school culture among working-class boys' experiences of schooling. This especially concerns the way these boys have learned to use literacy within their local working-class community (Asplund & Pérez Prieto, 2018; Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Heath, 1983; Moll et al., 1992); forms of literacy that are often marginalised in school by the dominant, and institutionalised, forms of literacy.

The tension between the informal, vernacular literacy practices that take place among male members of a working-class community and more formal literacy practices that take place in school is often manifested as a clash. This is a central dilemma facing literacy teachers, which makes it an important educational issue to examine further (Anderson, Anderson & Gear, 2015; Leathwood & Archer, 2004). Not least, this clash is something that many working-class boys experience every day when attending school, meeting a straight one-way transmission from the dominant culture represented by the school subject and the teacher into the children with little, if any, mediation or acknowledgement of any informal literacy learning that they already have and bring to school (Heath, 2012; Scholes & Asplund, 2021). This makes it important to gain knowledge about working-class boys' lived experiences of literacy and how they make connections between the local, concrete and immediate literacy practices and sense that

they have of themselves and the specialised literacy knowledge they encounter in school. In this article we will take a closer look at this issue, by exploring the intersection of place-based reading practices and reading practices in school when rural working-class men reflect on their relation to reading across a life span from the standpoint of the present.

*Working-class masculinities, schooling, and reading*

Ever since Willis' influential study (1977) of a small group of working-class boys' resistance and opposition to schooling, there has been a massive body of research focusing on the schooling of working-class males. Above all, this research has highlighted these boys' underachievement in school, and anti-school attitudes and cultures (Corrigan, 1979; Lingard et al., 2009; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Åberg & Hedlin, 2015). Rather than reproducing these discourses of working-class males' negative responses to schooling, other scholars have shown how traditional masculine working-class norms and ideals are at odds with a predominant middle-class school culture, thus depicting the ways working-class masculinity relates and responds to structural inequality rather than foregrounding individual and class-based cultural deficit to explain poor achievement (Connolly, 2004; Keddie et al., 2008; Reay, 2004, 2017; Stahl, 2015).

In line with this strand of recent research, emerging critical studies of men and masculinities have identified a more inclusive construction of masculinity also among working-class men, as well as more general changes in working-class men's attitudes to both work and education. Acknowledging this development, scholars such as Ingram (2018), McDowell (2002, 2003), McDowell et al. (2014), Roberts (2018), Stahl (2022) and Ward (2015) have nuanced the previous rather static presentation of working-class masculinity by paying attention to the challenges faced by working-class boys as they maneuver between the discrepancy of their educational trajectory and its incongruity with their working-class heritage. Roberts (2018), for example, shows that despite facing an educational competition that is at odds with their habitus, the young working-class men in his study 'simply got on' (114) with their schooling, to greater or lesser extents, and Ingram (2018) pays attention to academically successful working-class boys, thus highlighting 'positive' forms of working-class masculinity.

Both Roberts (2018) and Ingram (2018) present strong arguments for paying close attention to local context when analysing working-class males' learning trajectories, thus emphasising that responses to schooling and education are not just contingent experiences therein. Therefore, locality is important to consider in order to understand people's educational experiences, as well as their learning trajectories and responses to literacy. This is also something that Connolly and Healy (2004) display in their study in which they show how intimately connected working-class boys' world-views are to their neighborhood, as compared to middle-class boys who are much less bound to their geographical location (cf. Reay, 2000, 2004). Altogether, this strand of research demonstrates that working-class learning trajectories are not only shaped by locality, but also that the sense of belonging to a particular place and community can constrain working-class people's educational and future career aspirations.

For working-class boys living in rural areas, this barrier may be even harder to break through. As Corbett (2007, 2010) has shown, people living in rural places understand education as an important but ambivalent force in their lives. Attending higher education generally means leaving the community, and this process is often

associated with tensions and mixed feelings for rural youth (Asplund & Perez Prieto, 2013). According to Corbett (2007), the fact that so many rural males tend to reject formal education should be seen as a rather rational decision; they make the choice to stay in the community in which their social and cultural capital is localized and valued. Hence, rural males' decisions to forgo formal education could be interpreted not only as the class-based form of resistance highlighted by Willis (1977) and other scholars, but also as a place-based form of resistance. However, this dimension has not yet received much attention in research on working-class men and their relationship to reading. To a large extent, this research has so far (and continuously) focused on highlighting a negative image of working-class males' relationship to reading, and even if this strand of research has contributed with powerful insights and knowledge, many advocates have often treated males as a homogeneous group and overlooked differences within the group of working-class boys and men in terms of, for example, ethnicity, and the connection to place and space. Recently, however, scholars such as Asplund and Pérez Prieto (2018), Martino (2019) and Scholes (2018, 2020) have presented more multifaceted stories about working-class males and reading that do not only focus on gender and class-related aspects. However, there are still important dimensions left to explore concerning working-class males and reading, not least how working-class males' experiences of the reading practices in school are incorporated in their daily life within their lived community, and how they make connections between local, concrete and immediate reading practices, and the sense they have of themselves as readers, and the specialised reading practices they encountered in school. Furthermore, there is a need to examine how the sense of belonging to a particular place and community can constrain or invigorate working-class men's relationship to and experiences of reading from a longitudinal perspective.

#### *Literacy and power*

This study aligns with the literature on the social and cultural practices of literacy, emphasizing that reading can be, and mean, different things for different people in different contexts (Brandt, 2001; Green & Corbett, 2013; Purcell-Gates, 2007; Street & Street, 1984). Some seminal studies within this strand of research include Heath (1983, 2012) and Barton and Hamilton (2012), who have studied local literacy practices in working-class areas of the USA and England. What these studies have in common is how they illustrate the ways in which some literacy practices are more powerful than others, and how the informal literacy practices of the working-classes are marginalized in favor of more institutionalized literacy practices. The existing gap between home and school literacy practices among marginalized students has been extensively documented (eg. Mui & Anderson, 2008; Phillips & Sample, 2005; Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). For example, Purcell-Gates (2013) shows how the "cultural mismatches" (p. 92) between the literacy practices of children of migrant farmworkers communities and school relate to the lack of knowledge among curriculum developers and teachers of the ways that reading and writing mediated the lives and actions of the migrant farmworker community. In another study, Li (2010) documents the rich and varied literacy practices of family members of three culturally diverse low-SES families (see also Perry & Moses, 2011). However, these literacy practices are constrained by adversities and cultural barriers, such as school-home literacy fracturing and family and neighborhood SES. Hence, Li's study confirms the marginalizing of minority students' literacy experiences in school.

The gap between home and school literacy practices is also related to geographical dimensions, and relevant for the present study is the growing body of studies describing rural reading practices as distinct from their urban counterparts. Not least, the negative effect of a lack of resources in rural places on reading instruction in school has been emphasized by several scholars (eg. Becnel & Moeller, 2015; Cantrell et al., 2018). Scholes and Asplund (2021) also illustrate a to-and-fro movement between school-based, non-reader identities and rural, place-based recognitions of the self as readers among rural males in Australia and Sweden, regardless of country of origin or generation.

Our study also brings questions about reading, power and meaning-making to the fore. As such, the study is situated within the context of critical literacy where reading is regarded as a political act; texts and reading are from this perspective never neutral but always represent a perspective with an ideological position (Comber, 2015; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012; McDermott & Rosenfield, 2018). Originating in Freire's critical pedagogy (1993), critical literacy has developed into a field of research that examines power structures in the education system with the aim of initiating transformation processes that can contribute to increased social justice and equality (Janks & Vasquez, 2011). In the present study, the perspective means that reading is seen as an act of transformation – as an empowering critical tool - through which oppressed social groups can become literate, act agentially about issues that matter in their day-to-day life in particular places (Comber, 2015), and position themselves against power structures and dominant discourses (see also Asplund, 2022, p. 42).

#### *Data, methodology and analysis*

The data in this study consists of life story interviews conducted with six men in different ages (age 19-63) who met the criteria for inclusion. The men live in a rural region in the middle parts of Sweden and they have completed vocational education and/or are engaged in manual occupations. The region is dominated by more or less populated forest areas and characterized by depopulation and an aging population. Most of the working-age population is employed in a welfare service sector, which is declining, but as approximately 10% are engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing, as compared with the national average of 2%, and due to the high level of self-employment, the local labor market is quite favorable. Two of the men (age 19) were unemployed at the time when the interviews were conducted (they had just finished upper-secondary vocational school) and the other men (two men in their mid-20's and two men in their 60s) were engaged in manual occupations such as excavator drivers, car mechanics and industrial workers. All six respondents grew up in the countryside, and they have stayed there ever since.

All the men (except Robert, in his 60s) attended traditionally male-dominated vocational programs, but none of them have experience of higher education. The interviews have been conducted as open-ended life story interviews with a special focus on the men's relationship to and experiences of reading. The men have been interviewed one to three times on different occasions and the material includes both face-to-face interviews conducted in their homes, and interviews conducted online due to the pandemic situation. All respondents were informed about the aims and implementation of the study, and gave their consent to participate (the names of the respondents are pseudonyms). The interviews have been transcribed verbatim in Swedish, and the excerpts in this paper have been translated into English.

When exploring how the intersection between informal, vernacular reading practices that take place among members of a class community and formal reading practices that take place in school emerges in a life storyteller's narrative, we consider it as vital to understand life stories as socially situated acts through which the storyteller constructs himself, expresses attitudes about knowledge and learning, and positions himself in relation to others. The narrative of the life storyteller is thus seen as both a performative act and a meaningful process in which he tries to understand himself and the surrounding context (Mishler 1999; Peterson & Langellier 2006).

A profile of each life storyteller has been constructed after close and careful readings of the transcripts. After that, a thematic analysis has been employed, focusing on commonly occurring themes and salient points (eg. Goodson, 2013; Plummer, 2001) regarding the storyteller's relationship to reading across his lifespan and in different contexts (in and outside school). In order to understand life stories and to examine them as expressions of individual and personal meaning-making, we must then relate life stories to their historical and cultural settings (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997). The analytic process will thus move from the collection of a life story to the construction of life history in order to understand the patterns of social relations, interactions, and material, cultural and historical constructions in which the life of the life storyteller is embedded (Goodson, 2013). In this approach, the local context of the rural region and the ethnographic encounter have constituted essential parts of the analysis as well as attention to broader contexts such as dominant discourses and values circulating in the particular rural region. The first author of this article has conducted research in the region for several years, for which ethnographic data has been collected, including interviews with local residents and documentary resources. These data have been central when providing the participants' individual stories within "theories of context" (Goodson, 2013, p.5). The sections below illustrate the dominant themes that emerged, namely; i) Reliving the past – being labelled as poor readers in school, ii) Living in an oral storytelling tradition, and iii) Transforming reading into physical and embodied action.

#### *Reliving the past – being labelled as poor readers in school*

Initially, and already early on in the interviews, the men are eager to position themselves as people who do not read much because they do not really have the time required for it. This positioning also links back to their experiences and memories of the reading instruction they encountered in school; experiences and memories that very much intersect with what Oser et al. (2012) describe as 'negative knowledge'. Negative knowledge refers to memories related to events, things and procedures that are experienced as false or inadequate. These memories are also connected to feelings such as shame, guilt, or punishment that these negative experiences originate. Negative knowledge is a crucial part of learning in working-class manual culture because so many of the experiences people who belong to this culture have from school are negative experiences (Reay 2017; Skeggs 2007). When it comes to the men in our study, the stories of their encounter with reading instruction in school are stories that lack genuine joy. Many of the men describe the reading practices they encountered in school as meaningless and above all boring. Samuel (age 19) describes his experiences as follows:

Samuel: (Literacy) was one of the most boring subjects that's for sure.



Interviewer: Because?

Samuel: A lot of reading, a lot, a lot, well meaningless.

Interviewer: A lot of reading?

Samuel: Yeah, a lot of reading and writing and neither reading, nor writing is fun I think.

The men have very few positive memories of the reading instruction in school and the texts they were supposed to read, and as soon as they begin to talk about reading in school they also begin to talk in terms of achievement, pressure and the teachers' judgement of their reading skills. Noel (age 30) remembers the many occasions when he had to read aloud in class, which he associates with a certain anxiety of embarrassing himself in front of teachers and classmates. He says that the pressure to read flawlessly and with fluency created a situation where reading only became a mechanical act and the focus on content disappeared completely:

I did not listen to what the others read, I tried to memorise the text that I would read there so I did not listen to what they said.

Several of the other men have similar experiences and some of them also remember how they were separated from the other classmates due to the fact that their teachers thought they were 'poor' readers. Being labeled as poor readers by their teachers already at an early age is something that has affected several of the men's self-esteem when it comes to reading, and it is clear that when the men position themselves as poor readers, or in some cases even define themselves as non-readers, these are positions taken in relation to the dominant discourse of what constitutes reading. The image of a reader, as it emerges through the men's stories, is basically a person sitting alone, reading long and thick books, preferably fiction. Thus, the men's identities as poor readers, as they emerge in their storytelling, are largely a result of the negative experiences they have made from their encounter with the reading instruction in school which mediated this more institutionalised and formal view on reading. From this point of view, the image of the men's relationship to reading that emerges in their stories thus initially confirms the image of working-class males' relationship to reading that dominates the field of reading research; that is, that male readers do not read that much (or at all), that they experience reading as boring and meaningless, and that they, not least as students, can be described as both uncommitted and 'poor' readers (cf. Hammet & Sanford, 2008; Martino, 2019). However, the further into the men's stories we get when talking to them, the more nuanced the picture of their relationship to reading also becomes. When the men are given the opportunity to elaborate more on reading practices they are engaged in in different contexts, and when we approach their stories with a broad view on reading and texts, including multimodal aspects embedded in multiple contexts and associated with multiple forms of social interaction (eg. Asplund & Pérez Prieto, 2018; Hamston & Love, 2008), a more complex image of the men as readers emerges. Furthermore, as we will show below, there are some distinct and unique combinations of factors at work when these rural working-class men culturally re-appropriate the institutionalised reading practices in their daily life within their lived community.

### *Living in an oral storytelling tradition*

Although there was no explicit reading tradition in the respondents' homes and in their families, it does not mean that encounters with texts did not exist, rather the opposite. It is clear from the men's stories that they have grown up, and lived in an environment where the oral storytelling tradition is highly alive and vital, and that a large part of the informal literacy learning takes place through oral storytelling. This oral storytelling tradition takes different shapes, but have in common that it is through such oral processes that knowledge, cultures, traditions, attitudes and ways of being and behaving are mediated within and between generations. Erik (in his 60s) grew up in the 1960s in a home where he was surrounded by adults (both family members and neighbors and acquaintances) who constantly told stories about the history of the rural community and about the people who once lived there. Erik especially remembers the stories that were told to him when he was a child about Finnish culture, but also the stories that were told about the Finnish war children who grew up in the countryside during and shortly after the Second World War. When Erik then gets older, he will apply to the local library to get to nurture his interest in local history, but also to put this information and stories about local individuals in a larger historical context. With the help of some female librarians, he borrows a great many historical documents as well as non-fiction books to read about the Finnish culture and the second world war. The proximity to the oral (his)stories thus affects Eric and leaves traces in him which he carries with him from childhood to adulthood, and eventually this leads him into reading historical documents aiming to learn and understand more about the local community, its history and its inhabitants, and to integrate all that in 'the larger picture', as he says.

The closeness to the oral storytelling tradition also recurs in the men's stories about how they were read to as children. Although most of the men describe their parents as non-readers, they all grew up in homes where formal reading was still highly valued and considered as an important skill to master. Not least, it was thought of as an important skill in order to get a decent job after school, and to be able to function as a citizen in a democratic society This is especially evident through the men's stories about their mothers who read aloud to them during their upbringing. Nevertheless, several of the men also say that their fathers and grandparents read aloud to them when they were children. However, these instances of storytelling could also take place without the adults reading paper-based texts. Many of the men remember, for example, how their parents and grandparents told them different stories, fairy tales or tales about events and people in the community when they went to sleep.

### *Folk Music and Country*

Another way to approach texts is through music. There is a music tradition in the community with connections to folk music, dance band music, country and not least there is a highly vital rockabilly culture in the community. One of the young men in the study, Samuel (19), grew up with his father, who has been a dance band musician for as long as he can remember:

[...] so I have been with him a lot, and it was way before I was born so it is the only thing he has been doing.



Virtually “everyone” in Samuel’s family “is involved in music” and this interest in music has been passed down to himself, he says. Today he listens to a lot of music and through his father’s music making and songwriting he has learned to analyse how songs are structured and how the different instruments interact with each other in the songs. The interest in music, and its significance for men’s learning trajectories, can also take other expressions. Noel’s (30) paternal grandfather worked, besides as a forest ranger, as a trade traveler for a period of time and he used to sing songs for the customers:

Noel: They always said that my grandfather, when he came, he drove out goods also he drove out goods from, to people then, from shops and then he always had the guitar with him and he always played for them. And then he said that he played so that the old women wept in the cottages he said, he told me the old man there. But he sang a lot of ‘skillingtryck’ very sad songs, and then he performed other songs too but it’s like, he got that in turn as well then because his father also sang with a guitar and stuff like that.

Interviewer: How do you know that?

Noel: Well he (Noel’s paternal grandfather) has told me that and dad has told me too, and then, so it’s a lot. And then he has recorded songs on records and stuff so I have several records that my grandfather has sung so it’s a legacy that is still around after all. What I usually do, I always sat and sang the songs myself when I was young, so I do know those songs, but eh I should just have to try to learn to play the guitar then.

“Skillingtryck” is a broadside ballad type of traditional song with folksy lyrics that was sung for the general public. Noel says that there were many biblical elements in the songs that his grandfather sang and that they were sung in churches in the past. Noel’s father also has a great interest in music and he has collected several thousand vinyls which Noel now keeps at home. The record collection is dominated by the musics from the 50s and 60s. ‘There is a special culture in this community,’ says Noel, and the community is known for its ‘raggarkultur’ (rocker culture in English). When Noel plays the song ‘One song away from home’ performed by Johnny Cash’s brother, Tommy Cash, during one of the interviews, Noel explains that country music is usually sad and depicts the virtues of a hard day’s labor, and poor people striving for a better life. One of the ‘treasures’ in the record collection is a record that Johnny Cash signed when Noel’s father once met him. Noel’s father’s experiences of and stories about his meeting with Johnny Cash and other musicians such as Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings are also stories that Noel himself recounts when he talks about his interest in Johnny Cash and country music. As such, Noel’s and Samuel’s stories show how the oral storytelling tradition also takes shape through listening to and singing music, specifically in terms of paying attention to song lyrics, and how these are processes through which culture, traditions and ways of being are passed down from older generations to younger generations.

#### *Listening to teachers and audio books*

The oral storytelling tradition also breaks through when the men reflect on the reading instruction they encountered in school. Although the majority of the men

experienced the reading instruction in school as both boring and meaningless, there were times when it gave them both meaning and purpose. In the interviews, this is often linked to moments when they were read aloud to. Samuel (age 19) remembers the preschool years and the reading aloud moments in the classroom as very special and he has positive memories of the ‘story time sessions’ which he thought were ‘great fun’:

When I was in first grade they had this reading aloud sessions like this, we sat in a circle and then we were read to [...] I remember what the books were about but I don’t remember the names. We actually read quite a few because I was caught up in that. It was like a, like a story time session, but it was a whole book that we read [...] I know I thought it was great fun...yes it was actually really fun, I liked it.

Samuel still prefers to listen to books, rather than reading them:

I don’t read that much today if I don’t have to. It’s more this ordinary reading, that is, I don’t read books. It’s not that I go to the library and borrow a book or buy myself a book. In that case I prefer to listen to books.

For a majority of the six informants, the teachers’ oral storytelling sessions and oral lectures have also been important for their learning trajectories in school, and in many cases these oral sessions have been absolutely crucial for them to be able to complete their studies. Samuel (age 19), for example, says that there were teachers who misjudged his ability to learn, because he did not read the texts in school as much, or as intensely as many of his classmates. His strategy was instead to listen to the teachers during their lectures:

I actually did not study that much, there were many teachers who said that when I sat in class it did not seem as though I was listening [...] but it used to show on the tests instead. So I sat and took stuff in, I listened and learned the stuff without thinking about it. That was how I was misunderstood many times [...] on the tests, it went well, it went very well.

Olov (age 19) also highlights the importance of listening to texts as a complement to reading, and clarifies that reading typographic texts is strenuous, which is why he prefers to listen to texts:

It is very easy for me to listen, but if I should read something then it is so hard for me, for me to read. I’m not dyslectic or something, it’s nothing like that, but it is so hard for me and it is so boring you know. It’s much easier to listen.

The oral storytelling tradition that surrounds the men thus opens up processes whereby a person not only tells stories about past events, and experiences or communicates know-how skills, but also processes whereby a person tells stories about content or reads content aloud, or in other ways turns writing into an oral phenomenon.

This seems to be a central dimension of how the rural working-class men in the study re-appropriate reading, and it also constitutes an important dimension in the men's literacy learning trajectories in that the processes of oralising make it possible to exceed the (cultural) distance to written text and written curriculum that is made visible in the men's narratives.

### *Transforming reading into physical and embodied action*

The men often describe themselves as having been restless students who had 'no calm in their bodies to sit still' and 'just' read. It is clear that the men in their storytelling position themselves as men who have a strong urge to use and work with their bodies and their hands. They describe themselves as practical people, as craftsmen, who have always enjoyed doing things with their hands and bestirred themselves in the woods and natural areas surrounding their community. However, what also emerges in the interviews is that they often transform the reading of written, typographic text into practical, physical, and embodied actions, a process we will refer to as manualising. We will highlight two such core patterns that emerge in the men's stories.

### *Motors and hunting*

One pattern concerns the practices of reading texts that the men encounter at work and texts they read about their hobbies, which primarily revolve around motor vehicles, fishing and hunting. Patrick (age 30) may illustrate our first example. Patrick describes himself as a self-taught person who has always loved working with his hands and solving practical problems while fixing motors, cars and motorcycles. When he was ten (years old), Patrick got hold of an instruction book for a new car, a Volvo, that his father had just bought:

I probably read that instruction book until I knew every single data on those Volvos by heart [...] It was so damn fun to check what there was for offer to read because then you were interested. So then, I know, it was a fucking instruction book that I sat and read through hundreds of times! And it was, it was everything from where the fuses set to what systems there were in the car.

This particular reading of instruction books is a type of reading that will follow Patrick through the years, and some ten years later Patrick will return to this type of reading when he, as an employee at a car repair shop, can satisfy his interest in how cars work by reading about them:

When I worked at Volvo, I read like hell about the computer systems, a bit about them as well then to see...well how it was built so it's stuff like that that catches someone else's interest in reading. Then you had...well, yes for my part I had a purpose because then I was able to know what it was about. But that was probably something that never happened in school, that is I did not see any reason at all for anything we did there what so ever.

Patrick's desire to understand how cars and other motorised vehicles work and how they can be repaired is a strong motivating factor when it comes to his relationship

to reading. He often searches for information on his mobile phone or in motor magazines about how someone else ‘has built an engine or something’ and when reading about this he can get access to other people’s experiences and knowledge and transform it into a physical, manual activity. It is also clear that this type of reading has a purpose and that it therefore also gives him not only pleasure, but also meaning. However, Patrick is not at all alone in transforming the reading of written word into physical activity; the pattern is repeated in several of the other men’s stories. Erik (63), for example, has a great interest in hunting and he spends a great deal of time training his dog before the hunt. In order to learn more about dogs and hunting, he subscribes to several different hunting and dog magazines which he reads to learn how he can develop skills such as how to communicate with the dog during hunting.

A key feature in the men’s life stories is their hunting interest that has engaged many of their male family members and relatives across generations. To be an active huntsman and to be a part of a hunting team is important for their sense of belonging to a community and for their identities as rural working-class men living in the woodlands. The quote from Noel (age 30) below illuminates how the hunting interest is a legacy that is passed down from one generation to another within the family:

Everyone has hunted, you could say. Dad and grandpa and grandpa and my brother and my cousin and my uncle, all of them hunt.

Several of the men talk about how they already at a young age, often as children, got to accompany their fathers and grandfathers on hunting and they tell how they then learned to handle firearms, but also how they were socialised into the hunting team community. Another dimension that some of the men highlight in connection with the hunting is how they also, by spending a great deal of time with their fathers or grandfathers in the forest, got to know nature on a deeper level. When Patrick talks about his relationship with the forest, he does so in terms of ‘reading’, ‘listening to, and ‘feeling’ nature and wildlife, and it is through the hundreds of hours he has spent in the forest with his father that he developed these skills.

For the respondents, a life in nature is vital, they cannot imagine another life - and this is also a lifestyle and an attitude that the men who are fathers mediate to their own children. Noel, for example, has engaged his eldest sons (8 and 5 years old) in the hunting, and they cannot wait to join him for the next hunting season, he says. Patrick (age 30) emphasises during one of the interviews that he wants his daughter to have the same upbringing that he himself got, and for Patrick this means, among other things, that his daughter should grow up in the countryside and have access to nature where she can learn to drive various motor vehicles, play with friends in the forest, and go hunting with him. Patrick’s story also testifies how strong the family ties are and how the social elements that are linked to activities such as hunting, for example, are dimensions that displace gender stereotypical patterns. For Patrick, hunting does not primarily signify a masculine activity, but rather a locally rooted, enacted, and community-building activity that is practiced together with family members - regardless of gender - and other people in the local rural community. The learning and socialisation that the men talk about when talking about hunting thus take place through the process of oralising, but a great deal of learning and socialisation also goes on while reading different types of texts. In the same way as Eric, many of the other men also read hunting magazines to nurture and develop their hunting skills, which yet again

highlights how the written culture is fed back into a manual culture and thus becomes re-appropriated.

### *Reading as a gateway to a manual community*

However, just as the family's involvement in hunting can be a gateway into the local community, the absence of male family members as 'pole star figures' (Goodson, 2013) can complicate this process of socialisation. Krister (age 65) lost his father when he was a child. He describes his father as 'a real hunter', but his father's early death meant that hunting skills were not mediated from father to son, as is customary in the community where Krister grew up. The hunting therefore became an arena that was not made available to him in the same way as for other boys his age in his surroundings, which also created a feeling of exclusion. However, Krister had a male cousin who taught him how to fish when he was six years old and since then fishing has been important to Krister, even as a means for reading. Besides reading a great many fishing magazines, Krister also reads biographies and fiction, and he is the only one of the six men who explicitly positions himself as an engaged reader. The Swedish author Hans Lidman is Krister's favorite author whose books Krister describes as fishing and nature depictions of what it was like in the past to live under harsh conditions in the northern parts of Norway and Sweden.

I think it is really captivating to read because he was up there in the north a lot, in the Cap of the North and he depicts human destinies and people who lives there and like how they coped and who lived under maybe very harsh conditions. [...] He has written a lot of fishing depictions and how he was there and fished then. He really is the one who has caught my attention the most, with people and the fishing depictions through all the years, so that is my interest.

Reading Lidman's depictions of people who live in the woodlands and stories about living under harsh conditions is something that Krister can relate to himself. While we do not want to psychologise Krister's reading preferences, it is an interesting fact that he shares some lived experiences with Lidman himself, who also lost his father when he was a child, and who developed feelings of exclusion from the male community and found his resort from these feelings in nature and specifically in fishing waters (see also Asplund & Ljung Egeland, 2020).

### *The coexistence of reading and physical activity*

Another manualising feature in the men's relationship to reading that can also be linked to the oral storytelling culture that they live in, and that also makes it possible to make visible how they create spaces in which reading and physical work or physical activity can coexist, is the listening to audiobooks that some of the men engage in. However, according to the respondents, the listening to audiobooks is an activity that should be done while doing something 'useful'. This 'useful' category consists of physical, manual work such as painting a house or driving an excavator or forestry machine. To 'just' listen to audiobooks is considered a waste of time. This form of listening (i.e., 'just' sitting and listening when someone is reading aloud) is thus equated with the more solitary form of reading fiction novels. Patrick (age 30) may clarify this:

- P If someone were to sit and read aloud to me now, I would be so bored that I would sit and do something else. That it...
- S There is a difference between that and audio books?
- P Well no, but then I do something in the meantime. Then I sit and drive and then I do the job. But if I had to stop to sit and just read then I would feel so inefficient so then I would not be able to do it then anyway.

Olov (age 19), also listens to audiobooks and he thinks that the fact that his mother listens to audiobooks 'very much' could be a reason why he does that himself today.

- O: I have started listening to an audiobook, I think it is going well.  
[...]
- I: How did you get into audiobooks?
- O: Well, my mother listens to audiobooks a lot, so it's probably from there in that case.
- I: How do you listen? Do you lie down when you listen or do you do something when you listen to audiobooks?
- O: No, I can do something. I have been home and painted the house now when I have not had anything to do, then I listen to audiobooks and it works out fine.

Like Patrick, Olov says that he prefers to be engaged in a physical or a practical activity while listening to audio books.

#### *Interacting (physically) with books*

Another example that we would like to highlight where processes of manualising also function as a gateway to reading is the physical handling of books. When Noel (30) was a child, his father started collecting books and today he has over 10,000 books in his collection. The books are stored at Noel's father's home in a large storehouse in the yard, and a vast majority of them are placed in self-carpentry bookshelves. Throughout his upbringing, Noel has been involved in this work and in addition to traveling around large parts of Sweden and Norway, purchasing books with his father, he has been involved in the physical handling of the books. For Noel, the handling of books has included actions where he has sorted books and 'typed them' in a computer, including the names of the authors, titles, publishers, places of publications, years of publication, and numbers of pages. For Noel (and his father), it is important that the books are stored in the right place in the bookshelves and it turns out that thousands of the books are published in chronological order (in volumes), which is marked with a number on the respective book spine. When Noel talks about the book collection, it also appears that this was not just an activity that he was engaged in together with his father, but also together with one of his cousins, Martin. The two cousins spent a great deal of time among all of the books and Noel says that during certain periods they hurried home to Noel's father after school to build bookshelves, and to help him with the sorting and categorisation of all the books. For Noel, however, the book collecting activity is not only about a physical handling of books - it is not just a tactile activity - it also includes social actions where books can be read and talked about.



So you sat down then. It's like you tell each other stories, stories when you think of a book then. If you sit like that and then 'yes yes right, oh yes that one' and then you told the plot of that book, right. And he (Noel's cousin) has told me a lot about books when I was sitting there writing. I may not have read those books however. And then he told me then. It was he who told me about Bernhard Nordh then. Then I got stuck in those books you know. [...] You sit with the books, and then you can just be caught up in a text, and then you can just be caught up in reading that text, and I guess that is, you know, that's what happens when you sort this books you know. 'This was interesting then'. And you read some. And sometimes it happens that you read several pages.

Noel's story shows that he (and his cousin) does not only read in a solitary way but also in a social way. This pattern is also evident in other respondents' stories. Patrick, for example, says that other men in the company that he works in, also listen to audio books, and that they occasionally talk to each other about books they have read during breaks, and that they give each other suggestions of 'good reads'. So what Noel and Patrick are doing here is that they re-appropriate written culture; they read aloud, they listen to stories, and they tell and listen to stories about books when interacting with other men. In this way, they also re-appropriate the written culture through the processes of oralising in ways that are familiar and socially acceptable to a specifically male manual working-class culture.

### *Discussion*

Our analysis shows how the respondents re-appropriate the written culture they encountered in school into a social and cultural practice that is sympathetic and socially accepted within the local working-class culture, and how two kinds of re-appropriation emerge as central in this process. One kind of re-appropriation is oralising, whereby a person tells stories about content or reads content aloud, or in other ways makes the written into an oral phenomenon. The second kind of re-appropriation is to turn written discourse into a manual operation or a physical and embodied activity. Our analysis also shows that these two kinds of re-appropriation are not two separate dimensions of reading practices, but that they can exist simultaneously and mutually contextualise each other. So instead of reading being a 'cold' unfamiliar act, it is transformed into a meaningful act that goes on through oralising, and/or while physical work and embodied activity take place. Hence, the men re-appropriate their negative knowledge (Oser et al., 2020) and experiences of the reading practices they encountered in school into a joyful and meaningful social and cultural practice which can be integrated in their daily life within their lived community. As such, the men re-design (Janks 2010) the dominant written forms of literacy practices into a practice that becomes associated with 'having a good time' (cf. Asplund & Olin-Scheller, 2021; Goodson, 1996; Willis, 1977), but also associated with doing something 'useful'. In this way, the written activity and the written culture are fed back into a manual and/or oral culture and thereby become culturally re-appropriated.

Working-class children and youth have a historical and collective memory of marginalisation and subordination in schooling (Gerrard, 2013). What they instinctively know from their community history, family history, and ancestral history is that schools will fail them or succeed in pushing them into manual jobs (Reay, 2017; Willis, 1977). Hence, the continuous 'failure' of working-class males in school is a

particular case of misalignment – not a case of ‘cultural deficit’. In light of this, it is not that strange that many working-class children and youth are looking for other things from schooling. However, the cultural re-appropriation that emerges through the analysis of the men’s stories about their relationship to reading should not be perceived as a mere ‘reflex’. The cultural re-appropriation comes from a pressing need ‘to create a hinterland’ beyond the intentions and artifices of school. By creating this hinterland, a familiar world beyond the nefarious intentions of the school and the dominant culture, the working-class men are trying to create a space for action. Hence, through the processes of ‘manualising’ and ‘oralising’, the rural working-class men in this study are agentially seeking to redirect this misalignment through the re-appropriation of written culture within the way that their own culture is aligned. Not surprisingly, this space is filled with the traditional working-class patterns of behaviour and cultural resources; a desire for fun and enjoyment, a need to be physically active, and a need to connect with the broad ancestral history of the group (Goodson, 1996; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Willis, 1977; Åberg & Hedlin, 2015). By culturally appropriating the more institutionalised practice of reading in this manner, they are setting up a hinterland, a familiar space, a friendly space where they can once again begin their reading and their learning. Furthermore, it is not that working-class boys and men do not have the capacity to learn, nor that they do not have the desire to learn – it is that the reading practices and reading cultures of school mediate against their capacities and desires. Hence, cultural re-appropriation is a prerequisite for learning and for reading and for general education and emancipation.

An important task for literacy teachers, in light of this, would be to mediate between vernacular literacy practices and literacy practices in school. Although this message has been emphasized in earlier literacy studies on minorities (Mui & Anderson, 2009; Purcell-Gates, 2013; Sarroub, Pernicek & Sweeney, 2007), struggling and reluctant male readers (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016; Smith & Wilhelm, 2004), as well as the working classes (McTavish, 2007; Scholes, 2019, 2020), the voices of the rural working-class males in this study emphasize the need for this message to be repeated. This especially concerns the need for literacy teachers to acknowledge the literacy learning that the rural working-class children carry with them to school. This includes embracing features such as oral culture, manual culture, and ancestral voices, and making reading instruction in school relevant, ‘fun’, and worth engaging in.

Li (2006, 2010) has suggested that efforts are needed to change the power relationships between school and home and this postulates a ‘culturally reciprocal change’ in which teachers have direct contact with and systematically study the cultural lives of students’ families and communities (see also Cremin et al., 2012). This approach goes beyond shallow efforts to connect with students’ social and cultural realities based on unfounded generalizations. Hence, finding effective ways to get in touch with students’ literacy practices and their social realities outside school is crucial, according to Li (2010). Reflecting on our findings, we think that one feasible way to bridge the gap between rural working-class boys’ reading practices and school reading practices, and to build a narrative community in the classroom that makes it possible for working-class boys to build a different narrative identity of themselves as readers would be to use their own narratives about reading as a starting point for reading instruction. As our findings illustrate, when the males get the opportunity to share their experiences of reading, a myriad of reading practices emerge which are often hidden for teachers (cf. Purcell-Gates, 2013). The approach we advocate for intersects with the

narrative research tradition that highlights storytelling and narratives as important and useful resources that can be used to develop teaching (Goodson & Gill, 2011, 2014) and connects with what Goodson et al. (2010) describe as *narrative learning*. Narrative learning is about the different ways in which we learn from our lives *in* and *through* the stories we tell about ourselves. Hence, storytelling could be used not only as a means for literacy teachers to develop knowledge about the informal reading practices students bring with them to school, but also as a means for students to shape, reshape and strengthen their identities as readers in a school context. Students who develop these autonomous insights about themselves as readers in the social order will be able to create their own learning patterns which respect their own sense of who they are and where they come from.

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