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The Complex World of Adolescent Literacy: Myths, Motivations, and Mysteries

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In this article, Elizabeth Birr Moje, Melanie Overby, Nicole Tysvaer, and Karen Morris challenge some of the prevailing myths about adolescents and their choices related to reading. The reading practices of youth from one urban community are examined using mixed methods in an effort to define what, how often, and why adolescents choose to read. By focusing on what features of texts youth find motivating, the authors find that reading and writing frequently occur in a range of literacy contexts outside school. However, only reading novels on a regular basis outside of school is shown to have a positive relationship to academic achievement as measured by school grades. This article describes how adolescents read texts that are embedded in social networks, allowing them to build social capital. Conclusions are framed in terms of the mysteries that remain — namely, how to build on what motivates adolescents' literacy practices in order to both promote the building of their social selves and improve their academic outcomes.

It is popular these days to raise concerns about the adolescent literacy crisis. But what does it mean, really, to talk about adolescent literacy? Who are adolescents? What is literacy? What is a crisis? In our work with young people across a variety of spaces, contexts, and social, racial, and ethnic groups, we have noted both vastly different and remarkably similar approaches to skills in reading and writing a range of different texts. We find, in fact, that even within a tightly defined population of young people in one neighborhood, a predominantly Latino/a community in a large midwestern city, many different ways of and reasons for reading and writing can be discerned. We posed specific questions to the youth participants of our study, which are discussed throughout this article. Consider, for example, their responses to the interview question, “Why do you read what you read?”

My uncle wants to take me to hunting classes so he gave me his hunting books, so I could start reading them. I just started reading them yesterday . . . It's 'cause I never went hunting before so I can just do something for fun that I could do with my uncle, instead of just feeling left out 'cause he always talks about hunting, and he likes to go hunting and he likes to hunt for deers and stuff, so now I can, like, talk to him about that too.

Mysteries, because I like — it's so fun how they investigate and then, like, you try to guess who it is, and then sometimes you're right, and at the end it tells if you were right. And then you get so excited, like, "Oh yeah, I was right," you know.

For fun, see, 'cause my dad sometimes brings in magazines — newspapers, I mean. The Latin newspapers, like maybe once a month or something . . . I would just go to the sports section and see what's up and that's it . . .

Well, one, just Bill Clinton's book is real big, so I figure, "Hey, I could tackle that one." *A Lesson Before Dying* (Gaines, 1997), it was just something I picked up and couldn't put down.

[*Game Informer*] 'cause I can know which games are coming out and if they're good or not.

[I don't read] often. I only, like, when I don't got nothing to do, or when I think, like, I get bored of playing video games, I just grab a book and start reading it. I lay on my bed, and I put it on top, and I start reading it.

Responses to this question were so varied, in fact, that it was difficult to choose just which ones to include for this introduction. Virtually any set of responses would have represented the fact that while some youth read a great deal, others hardly read at all. Some read print novels, while others gravitate toward Internet texts and still others like a good magazine. Some do not read much but they love to write. Moreover, as we document in this article, the reasons the youth in this study give for their literacy practices are equally diverse. They read because they are part of social groups or because they are in search of role models or information. They write for self-expression, to get through periods of crisis, to document their beliefs, or to communicate with other youth. Thus, we see the world of adolescent literacy as complex, not only because both "adolescent" and "literacy" are ill-defined constructs, but also because young people are so different from one another. And yet, although the specifics of their literacy practices are different, they do share some important patterns. Our goal in this article, then, is twofold: We wish to complexify notions of what it means to talk about adolescent literacy, but we also want to draw attention to some overarching patterns in at least one group's literacy practices. Our larger purpose is to shed light on what, why, and how youth read so that educators can adopt policies and practices that address the range of youth interests, needs, and skills, and also to support youth in developing sophisticated academic, community, and workplace literacy practices.

To these ends, we offer analyses of what, how often, and why young people from one urban community choose to read. These analyses address the myths — and realities — of adolescent literacy in one community. We focus on the motivating (and demotivating) features of the texts these young people choose, and we examine the connection between out-of-school practices and in-school achievement. Conclusions are framed in terms of the remaining mysteries of adolescent literacy development, but we also suggest implications for practical moves, research designs, and policy interventions that may be helpful in enhancing adolescents' literate development.

Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on Adolescent Literacy

Adolescent literacy represents an ill-defined area of study in the field of education, with debates over what counts as literacy, who counts as an adolescent (with even a seemingly simple concept such as age debated), and on what adolescent literacy research should focus.

What Counts as Literacy: A Sociocultural Perspective

To address the definitional question of adolescent literacy, it is first necessary to define literacy more generally. Definitions of literacy range from perspectives that limit it to the ability to read and write alphabetic print (Goody, 1999) to those that posit literacy as any form of oral and/or written communicative practice (Resnick & Gordon, 1999). A sociocultural perspective on literacy acknowledges the role of print and other symbol systems as being central to literate practice, but recognizes that the learning and use of symbols is mediated by and constituted in social systems and cultural practices (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984).

To this sociocultural view on literacy practice we add a critical stance, arguing that power, identities, and agency play important roles in whose social and cultural practices are valued — and, thus, whose literacy practices are valued and

whose are not (Moje & Lewis, 2007). Literacy is not just any social practice, but one that requires making sense of a variety of codes — symbolic, visual, oral, and embodied (Kress, 2003). Having access to socially constructed and conventionalized codes is central to being part of a community and means having access to certain kinds of power; it also allows people to adopt the self (or identity) they feel is appropriate or demanded by a particular relationship, space, or time (see Moje, 2004, on “enacting” identities).

Although literacy focuses on making sense of written symbols, other ways of communicating (e.g., oral language, photographs, drawings, body language, and dress) also play a central role in making and representing meaning in conjunction with written symbols. Without each of these forms of representation, reading and writing would be limited tools. The research represented in this paper revolves heavily around how youth use print texts in the context of other activities in their lives, but at the same time, we cannot ignore the role of other forms of representation that shape how young people read and write print and other symbols. For example, one type of text that many of the youth in our study read is *manga* (Japanese comics on paper), which is an intricate combination of words and image. Because we are interested in their reading of manga, we are also interested in their watching of *anime* (Japanese animated cartoons, typically shown on television) and any other television, movies, conversation, art, or music that support meaning-making when reading manga. The same relationships between print and nonprint forms hold for the other types of texts we document. Thus, our research interest begins with the reading of written symbols but does not ignore other forms of representation that contribute to making sense of those written symbols.

What Is an Adolescent?

With this theoretical stance on literacy in mind, we turn to the question of what an adolescent is. Although the label *adolescent* is the source of some debate (see Lesko, 2001), it is generally accepted that people between the ages of ten and twenty are within the range of adolescence. A number of educators consider adolescent literacy to begin at the fourth-grade level, when text demands shift from a predominance of narrative, or story-based, texts to increasing encounters with expository, or informational, texts. This is a reasonable assumption, but allowing for such an age and grade span in the definition of adolescence overlooks at least two important factors that should be considered when thinking about adolescent literacy, particularly when much of the research conducted is cross-sectional in design (i.e., focuses on one age cohort at a time). One factor is the role of physical and cognitive development on youth literacy practices. The other is the role of secondary school contexts, with their changing classes and teachers, disciplinary divisions, and increasing controls (see Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, MacIver, & Feldlaufer, 1993, on the developmental mismatch between secondary school settings and adolescents’ needs). As a result, our work focuses on youth between grades six and twelve, with an approximate age range of twelve to eighteen. We focus on that age range in order to document how school and community contexts, as well as young people’s changing independent status and their advancing cognitive development, may play a role in their thinking about and practices of literacy. Our study design allows for both cross-sectional and, eventually, longitudinal analyses of these physical, social, and contextual changes over time.

What Is Adolescent Literacy?

The unique construct of *adolescent literacy* also requires definition. John Guthrie and Jamie Metsala (1999) describe proficient youth literacy in these terms:

A highly achieving student, whether at grade four, eight, or twelve, must not only comprehend passages of text but must also (1) integrate information across multiple texts, (2) critically relate paragraph meanings to personal experience, (3) employ knowledge from texts to evaluate science observations or historical documents, and (4) compose complete messages in the form of stories and reports for actual audiences. (p. 382)

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Donahue, Daane, & Grigg, 2003) suggest, however, that although a considerable percentage (approximately 70% across the age range) of young people aged ten to eighteen are able to read and write at basic levels or above, few are able to read and write with proficiency (23% to 30%) and even fewer (3% to 6%) at advanced levels. National attention has focused on those adolescent readers who perform below the basic level on these achievement measures and on the well-documented fact that the below-basic category is occupied by a disproportionate percentage of ethnic and racial minority youth and youth who live in poverty. Thus, the label *struggling reader* (and, to a lesser extent, *writer*) has emerged as a catchphrase associated with adolescent literacy. More recently, however, perhaps due to reports released by ACT, Inc., (2006) indicating that only 51 percent of graduating high school students read well enough to succeed in college, attention has turned to youth who read at basic but not proficient or

advanced levels.

Interest is also increasing in adolescents who are successful readers and writers of narrative and general expository texts but who struggle with the demands of the specialized or disciplinary texts they encounter in middle and high school. Germane to this focus on disciplinary texts, many scholars define proficient adolescent literacy skills more specifically as the ability to read, interpret, critique, and produce the discourse of a disciplinary area (Bain, 2006; Hand, Wallace, & Yang, 2004; Lee, 2005; Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). These scholars argue that to learn in a content area, young people need access to the conventions of disciplinary knowledge production and communication. Such knowledge, they argue, gives young people the power to read critically across various texts and various disciplines. Thus they become critical readers and thinkers.

From this perspective, young people in secondary school are expected to participate in the discourses of the disciplines, to incorporate these discourses into other discourses and identities they experience throughout the secondary school day, and to forge, or at least try out, new identities as they take up these discourses (Gee, 2001; Luke, 2001; Luke & Elkins, 1998). This suggests that teachers of content areas need to provide young people with opportunities to examine the discourses of the subject-area texts in relation to the discourses of everyday life (i.e., the ways they read, write, and speak with friends, family, and in the community) (Moje, Collazo, Carrillo, & Marx, 2001).

Still others claim that adolescent literacy skills for the twenty-first century must revolve around navigating multiliteracies (Luke & Elkins, 1998; Luke, 2002; New London Group, 1996) or having the ability to read many different types of texts, each imbued with the discourses of a particular community or affinity group (i.e., a group of like-minded people who engage in shared practices). The New London Group (1996) argues that education should be as much about learning to be metadiscursive as it is about teaching conventional codes and scripts. Metadiscursivity is the ability to engage in many different discourse communities, to know how and why one is engaging, and to recognize what those engagements mean for oneself and others in terms of social positioning and larger power relations. Metadiscursiveness provides access to many different literacies because readers and writers can understand the different discourses that authors bring to bear on a text or can produce such discourses themselves. Scholars of “new literacies” further argue that the technologies for accessing, creating, and producing codes and scripts, whether conventional or alternative, should be a site of instruction (Leu, 2005). These scholars suggest that the digital media themselves shape what gets written and how such texts should be read, and that young people need to develop both skills in using these technologies and strategies for navigating the technologies when their skills break down.

Raising the question of what it means for adolescents to really be literate in a new century also raises questions about whether school-based — or academic — literacy skills are the best metric by which to measure adolescent literacy skills. Although NAEP data suggest that many young people are not proficient in the literacy skills necessary for proficient and advanced literacy achievement, a number of adolescent literacy researchers who have studied youth engaged in literacy outside of school have observed what appears to be proficiency with sophisticated texts, even among youth identified as “struggling” in school (Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999; Cowan, 2005; Knobel, 1999; Mahiri, 2003; Moje, 2000). Such studies have suggested that some literacy activities may be more motivating and engaging to youth than others, compelling youth to persist even in the face of challenging texts. Another interpretation is that school texts and practices are typically static and even demotivating; thus, youth do not exert any effort to make sense of them, even when the texts are not terribly challenging (see Leander & Lovvorn, 2006).

Whatever the explanation, these studies highlight the complexity of literacy activities youth engage in outside of school, demonstrating that many young people are able to read across a variety of symbol systems, including print, such as those represented on the Internet’s instant messenger (cf. Lewis & Fabos, 2005), or in video and computer games (Alvermann, Hagood, & Williams, 2001; Leander & Lovvorn, 2006; Mahiri, 1994). Others have documented that youth can produce complex texts in a variety of media, including print on paper and in digital environments (Camitta, 1993; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Gustavson, 2007; Ingalls, 2005; Knobel & Lankshear, 2002; O’Brien & King, 2002). In each case, researchers have noted that the youth studied appear to be highly motivated to engage in and complete the activities under study, even when the literacy activities appeared to challenge some of their skills. Studies of youth engaged in digital or new literacies suggest that many of the text forms that hold young people’s interest have been designed to engage youth. Gee (2003), for example, argues that video games create identities into which readers can step, set goals for the different players to achieve, and provide lexical and other supports to guide gamers/readers as they engage with the texts. In their analysis of youth text choices out of school, Ellis, Moje, and VanDerPloeg (2004) demonstrate that even conventional print texts offer personas that call out to the reader, engaging their subjective experiences in ways that school texts do not.

“Motivated literacy” (McCaslin, 1990), then, is a construct worth studying in more depth. Scholars can ask not only whether adolescents are motivated to engage in particular activities, but also whether the types of texts and contexts available to them influence their abilities to engage in basic, proficient, and advanced levels of literacy skill. A number of scholars have studied motivation and engagement in reading (Alexander, 2003; Alexander, Kulikowich, & Jetton, 1994; Alvermann et al., 1999; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), whereas other researchers have studied motivation more generally (Blumenfeld, Kempler & Krajcik, 2006; Eccles et al., 1993). Each emphasizes the importance of understanding motivation and engagement as an aspect of reading comprehension and general school achievement. Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez (1998), in particular, highlight the importance of understanding motivation and engagement in relation to social context and the interactions in which young readers and writers find themselves. Alexander, Kulikowich, and Jetton (1994) investigated the intersection of learner interest with subject matter domain knowledge and strategic processing in reading. Similarly, Moje, Dillon, and O’Brien (2000) argued that reading (and all literacy acts) is the result of an intricate intersection of learner knowledge and interest, textual factors, and social, cultural, and disciplinary contexts.

Given the importance of motivated readers and motivating texts and contexts to literate proficiency, it seems that arguments for the development of proficient, strategic, metadiscursive adolescent readers and writers must be informed by studies of adolescent motivation and engagement. Does the motivation to obtain a particular type of information shape adolescents’ abilities to integrate information across texts, relate text meanings to personal experience, employ knowledge from texts to evaluate observations or documents, and compose messages for actual audiences? It may be that the contexts and texts of classrooms are not engaging enough to draw young people in, or that everyday literacy skills are cognitively different from those required in academic learning settings. Perhaps the different social and cultural arrangements of home, community, peer social network, and school constrain the transfer of literacy skills from one context to another. Or, are the literate demands of schooling not relevant to the literate demands of the world adolescents have come to value?

Each of the questions posed above is an open question in adolescent literacy research and theory. Although research on adolescent literacy learning in school has been conducted for the last fifty years — and research on outside-of-school literacy has increased dramatically in the past twenty years — few studies have united these two contexts to explore adolescents’ engagement in literacy practices and development of literate skills over time and across contexts. In particular, there are few large-scale studies of adolescents’ out-of-school practices, and there are few in-depth studies of adolescents’ academic literacy proficiencies.

To begin addressing those questions, we report here on our ongoing, longitudinal, integrated-methods study of youth reading and writing practices in one community, focusing on the following research questions:

- What do young people in one community read and write outside of school?
- What is the relationship between what they read and write outside of school and their achievement in school?
- What motivates youth to read and write outside of school?

Research Design and Methods

The theoretical frame for this study of adolescent literacy assumes that literacy is socially situated and mediated; therefore, our research design reflects a sociocultural orientation to understanding the social and cultural practices of literacy. At the same time, we are interested in representing the literacy practices of a normative sample of adolescents. Thus, the study design incorporates methods that allow us to document and analyze the practices, skills, and motivations of large numbers of youth, while also documenting and analyzing how and why youth read by focusing on a smaller subsample of the larger population.

Specifically, in this study, we administer a large-scale literacy practices and motivations survey, as well as a large-scale reading diagnostic. School records and writing samples are also collected for the overall sample. We then conduct multiple types of interviews and collect artifacts from a subsample of these youth, and we follow an even smaller subsample ethnographically by collecting data over time in schools and in the community served by the focal schools. Our methods of analysis, too, always derive from and speak to a sociocultural orientation; we employ statistical, constant-comparative, and discursive-analytic methods, with the goal of allowing our data sources and methods to inform each other. These procedures are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Participants and Sites

Data in this analysis are drawn from an ongoing longitudinal study in a predominantly Latino/a community in a large Midwestern city (population 950,000). Moje began research in this community nine years ago with a community ethnography focused on youth literacies, identities, and cultures. In 2004, Moje added a large-scale survey component combined with continuing ethnographic work. Two waves of data were collected at the time this article was prepared. The Wave 1 sample includes 329 sixth-, eighth-, and ninth-grade students in one private religious school and two public schools in the early spring of 2005. The Wave 2 sample for this article includes 716 seventh-, ninth-, and tenth-grade students from three public schools and one public charter school in early spring of 2006.¹ Each of these schools serves the community under study and thus were recruited for participation.

The ethnic/racial composition of the sample is 72.1 percent Latino/a, 20.9 percent African American, 5.6 percent European American, and 1.4 percent other, with some slight variation by year of the study.² Slightly more than half (56.1%) are female. Students range in age from 10.8 to 17.0 years of age, and nearly two-thirds of the students speak Spanish at some level (i.e., some identify as fluently bilingual, others identify as Spanish monolingual, and still others identify as speaking only some Spanish). The percentage of economically disadvantaged youth ranges from 73 to 91 percent, depending on the school setting. According to U.S. Census data, the majority of residents in these students' neighborhood(s) live below the federal poverty line. [Table 1](#) presents student demographics for the full Wave 2 sample.

Our sampling procedure is to recruit all students in the target grades from all schools, including students who receive specialized student services (e.g., emotionally impaired, honors, corrective reading, English as a second language classes). Our demographic data indicate that we have achieved a sample representative of the ethnic/racial, gendered, linguistic, and achievement-level populations of each school.

The subsample for the present study includes seventy-nine youth, which represents 10 percent of the overall sample. For this subsample, we make an effort to recruit youth who represent different patterns of literate practice in terms of reading frequency, nature of texts read, and motivations for in-school and out-of-school reading and writing activities. We also attempt to recruit members of both sexes and a proportionally representative sample of the different ethnic and racial groups represented in our larger sample. However, gender representation in the subsample is skewed toward females, who currently represent 65 percent of the interview sample (but only 56 percent of the overall sample). The subsample also does not currently include any European American youth. Finally, we recruit the subsample from across school contexts, and we continually add youth to the subsample as the study progresses.

The research team is comprised of researchers of varying years and levels of expertise, many of whom are former middle or high school teachers or community youth workers. The team is diverse in ethnicity, gender, and disciplinary and methodological background. Several team members are fluent in both English and Spanish, the dominant languages of the community.

Procedures and Methods of Data Gathering

Data sources for the larger study include (a) computer-based surveys, (b) computer-based reading diagnostics, (c) school record data, (d) semi-structured interviews, (e) reading and writing process interviews, and (f) ethnographic interviews and observations. The diagnostics and surveys are administered to the entire sample, whereas we conduct interviews and observations only with the subsample of the population. In what follows, we outline the data sources analyzed for this report.

Surveys

We administered computerized surveys to intact or whole school classes during regular class time. The survey examines a broad range of student perceptions of, motivations for, and practices with literacy across a range of contexts and texts. Questions focus on the four academic content areas of school (science, social studies, mathematics, and English language arts) and on multiple contexts outside of school. Questions about student background characteristics focus on school, grade, gender, age, race/ethnicity, birthplace, preferred language, and language spoken in the home.

Youth respond to sequentially presented survey questions on individual laptop computers. Administrations range over two to three class sessions, depending on the length of the regular class period in each of the three school settings. The overall survey covers a range of motivations for reading and writing in and out of school, text types read and written, educational and employment aspirations, and sense of racial and ethnic identities. In what follows, we provide details about the survey

measures of interest in this report, focusing on out-of-school literacy practices. Survey items focusing on out-of-school literacy practices tap students' frequency of reading and writing across a broad range of text types outside of school. Students are asked how often they read and write for pleasure as part of a larger set of activities, such as doing homework, engaging in family activities, and hanging out with friends. The reading and writing for pleasure questions are followed by the question, "What are you reading when not in school? During the last month, how many times did you *read* any of the following?" Seventeen types of texts, including novels, e-mail, newspapers, and comic books, among others, are offered as choices. For writing, we ask youth, "What are you writing when not in school? During the last month, how many times did you *write* any of the following?" Text choices include e-mails, poetry, music lyrics, and stories, among others. All responses were recorded on a 1–7 Likert-type scale, with 1 representing *never* and 7 representing *every day for more than an hour*. The list of choices was based on findings from a previous study conducted in this community (VanDerPloeg & Moje, 2004), and was updated from Wave 1 to Wave 2 as students indicated other texts they read with some frequency.³

Interviews and Observations

Drawing from the overall sample, we recruited students to participate in a series of interviews. To date we have administered seventy-nine semi-structured interviews and fifty-two reading-process interviews, and have followed fifteen youth ethnographically. We report here on only the thirty-eight semi-structured interviews analyzed to date, but draw from the ethnographic data of all fifteen youth to frame the interview findings.

Semi-Structured Interviews. Our semi-structured interview takes an individual youth through a series of questions that focus on prompts offered by a collection of seventy-eight different book covers, magazine covers, newspaper front pages, screen shots of Internet sites, handwritten notes and poetry, music lyrics, and more. Text prompts are drawn from texts nominated by the overall sample on a free-response task included on our survey, although we have also added materials based on previous ethnographic work conducted in this community (Moje, 2006a; VanDerPloeg & Moje, 2004).

We ask youth participants to look through the entire collection; to nominate their first, second, and third choices for reading; and then to explain their choices. After this task, we ask them to look through the choices again, this time categorized by type (books, magazines, websites, etc.), and we ask them to choose from within a category. Each of these tasks is then repeated for writing, again using picture prompts. We also ask the participants to look at photos of people reading and writing different kinds of texts (books, magazines, newspapers, computer images, etc.) and ask them to choose which image looks most like something they would do, and then explain why. The photos show individuals, pairs, and groups of people reading and writing, and the people in the images represent different ages, genders, and ethnic/racial groups, insofar as can be indicated by physical characteristics.

Ethnographic Interviews. Ethnographic interviews occur *in situ*, with questions stemming from the activities in which youth are engaged at the time. Although the interviews are not constrained by a structured set of questions, the researchers prompt students to talk about particular literate practices as they occur. To date, we have accompanied youth to their homes, on bowling outings, bookstore visits, shopping trips, library trips, afterschool programs, and summer program activities.

School Record Data. We request school record data in the form of class grades, TerraNova test scores, state test scores, attendance records, and free/reduced-price lunch status from the schools and district. To date, we have grades and test scores for one public school at Wave 1; grades for the private school at Wave 1; and cumulative grades for the public charter school at Wave 2.

Analytic Methods

Descriptives. Student responses on the reading and writing for pleasure survey were compared across several items with t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedures using the Tukey post-hoc test, which allowed us to determine which group averages were statistically different from one another. These calculations explore how students differ in their reported frequency of pleasure reading and writing beyond differences based on gender, race, and grade level.

Regressions. After conducting ANOVAs on survey responses across schools, we determined that there were no significant differences in youth responses by school, so we could use one school to examine relationships between student achievement and the frequency and nature of youth reading practices outside of school. We used the school record data we had at each wave — Schools 1 and 2 at Wave 1, and School 5 at Wave 2. We tested these relationships using correlations and multiple linear regression methods.

For the Wave 1 analysis, we used grades as a dependent variable, arguing that grades represent a measure of students' achievement, if not actual ability. Because we wanted to test the relationship between reading out of school and in-school achievement, grades were the most reasonable measure. We created a year-end cumulative grade point average based on class grades reported by the schools, both of which used a 4.0 scale, in English, science, social studies, and mathematics. The cumulative GPA was calculated by taking the average of grades earned in each content area. We also analyzed frequencies against grades in English and science classes to determine if there were differences by subject matter achievement. Math and social studies grades were not analyzed due to missing data. Cases without grade information were deleted from the analysis, resulting in 208 cases from the total sample of 218. In the first three models, bivariate correlations led us to use the frequency of *writing for pleasure* and *reading for pleasure* as independent variables, controlling for student gender and ethnicity. The final three models incorporated the independent variables of reading novels and poetry outside of school, controlling for student gender and ethnicity.

For Wave 2 regressions, we again created a cumulative GPA by taking the average of student grades in math, science, social studies, and English. In this case, we did not analyze against discrete grades because they were non-normally distributed. Cases without grade data were deleted from the analysis, resulting in 96 cases from the total School 5 sample of 115 in Wave 2. In this model, we employed a three-tiered out-of-school variable to represent reading and writing frequencies (1 = never; 2 = once a month to once a week; 3 = 3 to 4 times per week or more). Bivariate correlations between frequency of literacy practices and school achievement led us to use frequency of reading novels, reading music lyrics, and writing graffiti as three independent variables, controlling for student gender and ethnicity.

Constant Comparative Analyses. Methods for analyzing the interviews and observations included constant comparative analysis (CCA) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparative analysis involves coding across three stages: open, axial, and selective coding. In the open-coding stage, categories and subcategories are noted and labeled, and initial connections among categories are noted. Our open-coding stage for this particular analysis yielded several codes of why and how youth read and wrote, including social networks (e.g., families, peers, popular culture affinity groups); identities (e.g., racial/ethnic, gendered, linguistic); school practices, entertainment, social capital, and information (utilitarian and personal interest); self-improvement (e.g., negative and positive examples, resilience, information); and genres (e.g., suspense, fantasy).

In the axial-coding stage, we reduced the codes to four of those listed above — social networks, identities, self-improvement, and information — with the idea that each of these was connected to the larger construct of *generation of social capital*, which we had determined to be the axis code, or category. Each code was compared to other codes, looking for overlap, points of convergence or divergence, and outright contradictions. Axial coding allowed us to assess whether the codes should be identified as categories, collapsed into other codes, or further separated into subcodes.

For example, codes of social networks and social capital might seem so closely related that they appear redundant; through axial coding, however, we determined that these codes signaled different, and equally important, points about *where* text choices originated (social networks such as peer groups, families, church) versus *why* some texts were sought out by youth (because they provided information, discourses, and practices that served as forms of social capital).⁴ This axial-coding process also required us to reexamine data at later points, thus safeguarding against premature typification (Erickson, 1992) of data patterns. In the selective-coding stage, we revisited the data organized into central categories, checked for data saturation, searched for discrepant cases, and assessed generalizability of patterns across the sample.

Throughout the CCA process, we prepared theoretical memos and integrative theoretical memos in order to link data to relevant extant theory and empirical research; to test, generate, and document initial hypotheses for later analysis; and to communicate theories being generated across the research team. We conducted several layers of independent analyses, each with different team members participating. In each case, coders noted the same codes (in many cases, with no prior training in the coding system), although language use differed at times (e.g., one coder might use the words *social capital*, whereas another might refer to *information useful for creating or building social relations*, and another might code using the label *funds of knowledge*). We discussed the nuanced differences in these theoretical terms and agreed on standard coding labels in recurring team meetings and via memo writing.

Results: Countering Myths and Exploring Motivations

What and How Often Do Youth Read and Write “For Pleasure”?

Given the popular belief that youth “don’t read” (National Endowment for the Arts [NEA], 2007), we thought it important to begin with a simple descriptive statistic: 92 percent of the 716 youth surveyed in this community — one that is described as high-poverty and/or underresourced — report reading some kind of text outside of school three to four times per week or more. They also write with some frequency (82 percent report writing some kind of text three to four times per week or more). What they read and write, however, varies. The majority of youth in this community do not often read novels or write stories, but many youth do read and write other kinds of texts, and they read and write with regularity. In what follows, we provide some flesh to the bones of this claim that youth read and write, and we paint a picture of what adolescent youth in one community do read and write, how often, and why.

Reading and Writing for Pleasure. As indicated, our survey includes a series of questions about activities in which youth engage when not in school, with *reading for pleasure* and *writing for pleasure* included as two of the activities youth are asked to rate. In response to the question asking students how often they read for pleasure in the last month, about one-fifth (21.3%) of students selected *never* (Figure 1). The remaining 80 percent varied in how they identified. Of those students who did indicate that they read for pleasure, the average frequency was 3.87 (SD = 1.56), or just under once per week (a 4 on our scale). Thirty percent of the students reported reading for pleasure weekly, and 12.3 percent of students reported reading for pleasure every day.

Females were more likely to report reading for pleasure ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.86$), than males ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.67$, $p < .001$). African American students ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.88$) reported reading for pleasure more frequently than Latino students ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.77$, $p < .01$) and White students ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.62$, $p < .01$). Students across grades responded with similar frequencies of reading for pleasure outside of school (see Table 2). There were no differences in average frequency of reading for pleasure outside of school based on race, or the language spoken mainly in the home.

To the question of writing for pleasure in the last month, 28 percent of students responded *never* (Figure 1). Of those students who did report writing for pleasure, the average frequency of writing was 3.93 (SD = 1.57), or slightly less than once per week. Twenty-nine percent of students indicated that they wrote for pleasure weekly, and 11.9 percent of students reported writing for pleasure every day.

Females were also more likely to report writing for pleasure ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.88$) than males ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.65$, $p < .001$). Seventh graders ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.88$) averaged higher frequencies of writing for pleasure outside of school than ninth- ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.92$, $p < .05$) and tenth-grade students ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.80$, $p < .05$). There were no differences in average frequency of writing for pleasure outside of school based on race, or the language spoken mainly in the home (see Table 2).

The finding that these youth read and write for pleasure once a week or less may seem to contradict the claim that 92 percent of the youth in our sample claimed to read something three to four times per week. The contradiction lies in what the words “reading and writing for pleasure” appear to mean to students. We ran bivariate correlational analyses of responses to this item against responses to each of our questions about specific text types to assess what the construct of *reading/writing for pleasure* signified to the youth in our study. Responses to the *reading for pleasure* item correlated only to responses to the questions that asked students how often they read novels, short stories, picture books, and plays. Reading for pleasure was correlated with the students’ frequency of novel reading ($r = .515$, $p < .01$), poetry ($r = .383$, $p < .01$), and information books (science, nature, history) ($r = .346$, $p < .01$). Pleasure reading was weakly correlated with digital reading, including e-mails ($r = .083$, $p < .05$) and websites ($r = .094$, $p < .05$). A similar relationship was found in outside-school writing. Writing stories was correlated with responses on writing for pleasure ($r = .403$, $p < .01$), whereas writing e-mails, chats, shout-outs,⁵ and blogs was less correlated ($r = .177$, $p < .01$).

These findings suggest that when the youth in this sample think of reading for pleasure, they think of reading literature; when they think of writing for pleasure, they usually think of writing stories. In some cases, they may even associate the words *reading* and *writing* with compulsory reading, as suggested by one young man who, when asked during an interview what he read for fun, responded: “I don’t like reading just for fun unless it’s something I like.”

Thus, surveys that base youth pleasure-reading statistics on questions about reading for pleasure may be tapping only the reading of conventionally published print literature, or even of school-like reading assignments, and not the reading of magazines, informational texts, digital or electronic texts, or texts written by other youth, whether teen ’zines (see Knobel & Lankshear, 2002), letters and notes, or text messages. Some may question, however, whether these reading and writing practices have much impact on the kind of reading that matters in school; in other words, are these practices critical to

understanding adolescent literacy?

A Second Look at Literacy Practices Outside School

We assert that such practices *do* matter for both school achievement and for young people's emotional and cognitive development. We also predicted how youth might interpret questions about reading and writing for pleasure, and therefore, we asked students to provide more specific information about their reading and writing of particular texts.

Reading and Writing Practices Outside of School. Data from the questions that tapped frequency of youth reading multiple text types demonstrated that, on average, students identified *reading* websites ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.94$) outside of school most frequently, followed by letters and notes from other people ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.83$), music lyrics ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 2.08$), e-mail ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 2.10$), magazines ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.70$), and novels, short stories, and plays ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.99$) (see [Figure 2](#)). However, it is important to note that most of the distributions were non-normal, with the majority of youth sitting at the low ends of the distribution, and, therefore, the mean responses should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, all calculations of text-reading frequency suggest that these six types of texts were read with the most frequency by the largest numbers of youth in the sample. In other words, these appear to be the most popular types of texts youth read.

In regard to *writing* outside of school, the type of texts students reported writing most often were e-mails, chats, shout-outs, and blogs ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 2.07$), and letters or notes (on paper) ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.92$), followed by music lyrics ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 2.13$) and graffiti or tagging on paper ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 2.14$). Creative writing in the form of stories ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.71$) and poetry ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.85$) averaged less than once a week. Again, aggregate student responses often did not reflect normally distributed histograms (see [Figure 3](#)), and, therefore, the means should be interpreted with caution. That said, the same note applies as with the reading of texts: By all calculations, these are the texts youth wrote most often.

Although each of these forms of text is important to understanding students' reading and writing practices, space constraints prevent us from discussing each response in depth. Therefore, we highlight two types of text that seem central to youth reading, albeit for different reasons: websites/e-mail and novels. We chose digital texts because, despite a basically bimodal distribution, they are read and written with some frequency, and even students with little access expressed interest in and knowledge of digital text forms. We chose novels because of their similarity to school texts.

Digital Reading and Writing. Only 28 percent of students reported reading websites every day outside of school in the last month (10.1% reporting less than one hour, and 17.8% reporting more than one hour), while 11.5 percent of students reported that they did not access websites outside of school. Thirty-six percent of students read websites outside of school once a week or less. Evidence of a digital divide is more prominent in reading e-mail outside of school. More than one-quarter of students (26.5%) reported that they did not read e-mail outside of school in the last month. Twenty-nine percent of students read e-mail once a week or less. The remaining students (28.9%) reported reading e-mails outside of school every day.

The frequency of writing e-mails, chats, shout-outs, and blogs again shows a digital divide among the students. A substantial portion of students (18.8%) reported never writing online outside of school in the last month, while a larger portion (27.9%) reported writing online every day. About one-third of students write online in e-mails, chats, etc., once a week or less, while the remaining 19.5 percent of students write online three to four times a week.

According to Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin (2005), nearly 90 percent of American teens ages twelve to seventeen are online Internet users, and half of these wired youth access the Internet on a daily basis. However, our interview, survey, and ethnographic data provide a striking contrast to such claims. Consider this excerpt from an interview with one young woman from our subsample, Valeria,⁶ a sixth-grade Latina who represents the 36 percent of youth who read on the Internet once a week or less:

(V = Valeria; I = Interviewer)

I: How often do you use the computer?

V: Like, I don't use it much, 'cause I don't have a computer, so I don't use it much.

I: At school do you use it?

V: No.

I: No, you guys don't go to the computer lab?

V: No.

I: Really? OK, so you don't use the Internet to get information —

V: — Only when we have projects I go to the library, but it's just, like, or I go to my cousin's house, but I don't, like, use it, like, much. I might use it, like, a month and then a month, one day in a month, or not even a day.

I: Do you ever surf the web and just look for stuff, or [is it] usually just connected to a project for school kind of thing?

V: It's usually — I never usually play on the computer. I always use the computer to take information out.

Valeria's experiences are not the exception in our sample. Among youth interviewed who said they did not use the Internet, the most common explanation was lack of access. But, not one youth eschewed Internet use. In fact, for youth with Internet access, the technology proved to be a major source of reading material and writing audiences, as illustrated in the youth responses presented in a later section of this article. Thus, access to technology appeared to be the main roadblock to more consistent use among a subset of our sample.

These findings merit further, fine-grained research on the accessibility and use of technology for this population of adolescents and others like them. Although the experiences of the youth in this city cannot be generalized to all youth, these youth are not unlike youth in other large urban settings, especially in areas of high poverty. Given the large number of the nation's youth who live in such settings, educators should question the increasingly popular notion that all youth are wired. Does high use among middle- and upper-middle-class youth mask the poor access of young people in high-poverty communities, whether urban or rural?

Novels and Other Literature. Novel reading outside of school presents a highly skewed distribution, with 24 percent of students reporting that they have not read a novel, short story, picture book, or play in the last month. Only 17.2 percent of students reported reading these types of fictional texts every day (see [Figure 1](#)). On average, females ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 2.00$) spent significantly more time reading novels than males ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.87$, $p < .001$). In sum, novel reading was not a major source of activity among the youth of this community, although it should be noted that 30.2 percent of the respondents did indicate reading novels three to four times a week or more. However, 25 percent of the youth interviewed gave *lack of time for reading* — and often, homework as the cause of this lack — as a deterrent to reading more regularly. Lack of interest in reading novels was a close second to lack of time. These low levels for novel reading will have more importance as we discuss the results of our regression analyses of the relationship between out-of-school reading practices and school achievement.

What's more, on an open-ended survey question about book reading, 68 percent of the 682 youth who answered (among 716 survey respondents) were able to name and write about a favorite book. One point that we found particularly compelling is the number of times school-based texts were named as favorite books on the open-ended portion of the survey. *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), *Holes* (Sachar, 1998), and *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987) were among the most-popular youth texts (with *The House on Mango Street* [Cisneros, 1991] and a number of Shakespearean texts and Greek myths also top vote-getters). In other words, although the youth of this community did not report reading novels extensively, they did not typically disparage reading novels. They do, in fact, read this type of text, and school may be one important source of their text choices.

Although these data are representative of only one portion of the adolescent population and thus not generalizable to all adolescents, the fact that 30 percent of these youth — young people who live in a high-poverty setting and are often

described as reading in the basic or below-basic range — read novels regularly provides evidence that adolescents are not unmotivated to read. These encouraging statistics about youth reading also suggest that we need to look more closely at the texts offered to young people in school, and at the ways texts are offered (i.e., how texts are assigned, discussed, and used in classrooms), rather than simply ascribing low motivation to youth when it comes to reading this type of material.

Another Way of Looking: Exploring Effects of Outside-School Reading and Writing

With the above findings in mind, and prompted by reading research that suggests a relationship between the amount of time children spend reading outside of school and their school achievement (Stanovich, 1986), we turned to the question of whether these literacy practices had any relationship to school achievement. After determining that there were no significant differences in survey responses by school attended, we ran multiple linear regression analyses on out-of-school reading frequencies by text type for youth with school record data available.

Wave 1 Out-of-School Reading and Achievement. Analyses at Schools 1 and 2 in Wave 1 ($n = 209$) indicated that frequency of reading outside of school as measured by the question “reading for pleasure” related positively to English grades ($\beta = .180, p < .001$), science grades ($\beta = .138, p < .01$), and cumulative GPAs ($\beta = .156, p < .001$), after controlling for student gender and ethnicity. The frequency of novel reading did not have a significant relationship to science grades or cumulative GPAs. Writing did not relate to cumulative or science achievement, and, in fact, had a slightly negative relationship to English achievement, although with only marginal significance ($\beta = -.077, p < .10$), after controlling for student gender and ethnicity (see [Table 3](#)).

We also examined the relationship between frequency of reading particular text types and grades in English and science. Of the text types, only novel reading showed any relationship, and then only to English class grades, and this relationship was only marginally significant ($\beta = .067, p < .10$). Poetry reading did not have a significant relationship to any of our outcome variables (See [Table 4](#)).

Wave 2 Outside-School Reading and Achievement. To further examine these relationships, we examined data from one school in the Wave 2 data set, School 5 ($n = 96$), which was the only Wave 2 school for which we had school record data at the time of this analysis. Based on the outcomes of this second regression analyses, we found that, holding constant all independent variables in the model, increased novel reading again predicted an increase in cumulative GPA ($\beta = .138, p < .05$), while reading music lyrics ($\beta = -.135, p < .05$) and writing graffiti ($\beta = -.099, p < .05$) were negative predictors of achievement, as measured by cumulative GPA (see [Table 5](#)).

Although the influence of novel reading seems to be consistent from Wave 1 to Wave 2, further analysis is needed to understand the relationship that these types of outside-school reading and writing activities share with achievement. Writing graffiti, for example, may not have a direct relationship on achievement, but rather, it may be a proxy for a larger pattern of counter-school cultural behaviors, which, in turn, influence achievement for a host of reasons (e.g., negative teacher expectations or low student attendance).

Race and gender were not significant predictors of achievement in this model, nor was youths’ home language. We also tested the relationship between school achievement and weekly online access (reading e-mails and websites and writing e-mails, chats, shout-outs, and blogs outside of school at least once a week or more), and found no relationship. Finally, youths’ responses to the question about the frequency of reading and writing for pleasure did not show a relationship to achievement, which may result from the fact that the average frequency of reading and writing for pleasure for this subsample is low, and very few students included daily reading and writing behaviors, such as Internet reading, writing in a journal, etc., when reading or writing for pleasure (see [Table 5](#)).

With limited school record data available, our results can only be considered exploratory, but the findings suggest questions for future research. Specifically, these results are both surprising and unsurprising. The documented positive relationship between novel reading and achievement meshes well with past studies. Through a synthesis of research on time spent reading, Stanovich (1986) concluded that the more students read, the better readers they become (i.e., the “Matthew effect”). Specifically, an increase in reading caused an increase in students’ vocabulary knowledge, which in turn increased the students’ reading ability, which motivated the students to read more, beginning the reading cycle once again. The amount of reading done in school was not the only factor that related to improved reading; students’ out-of-school reading habits have also been documented as indicators of their reading ability (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding,

1988).

However, the fact that novel reading was the only type of text reading associated with achievement in our data set is perplexing, given Stanovich's theory. If time spent reading is an important explanatory factor, then *all* reading should increase opportunities for incidental word learning or the building of background knowledge. The fact that novel reading was associated with overall achievement, but not with achievement in classes other than English language arts, raises questions about whether the effect of out-of-school reading on achievement has more to do with how tightly a text type meshes with the discursive and rhetorical conventions of a discipline than it does with the simple act of reading. This finding could underscore one of the main differences between children's and adolescents' academic literacy learning: the impact of disciplinary discourse, conventions, and vocabulary on both content and literacy learning for older students. That is, general word reading and writing activities may not provide the incidental word and concept learning necessary for achieving high levels of success in upper-level, academic, content-area classes.

However, this finding could also suggest that achievement (as measured by grades achieved in middle and high school content areas) may not be as dependent on written language facility as it is in English classes. How much is text actually used in content-area classes other than English language arts? Could the lack of attention to texts in school classrooms be responsible for young people's moderate achievement on national tests, which are dependent to a great extent on language facility, even in content-area classes such as mathematics and science? These questions, relating to the impact of a host of out-of-school reading and writing practices on secondary school achievement in specific subject matter areas, merit further study.

Motivations for Youth Reading and Writing Outside School: In Their Own Words

With these large-scale analyses as a backdrop, we now turn to the words of the youth themselves to provide an analysis of what and why young people are motivated to read and write different kinds of texts outside of school. Do young people's motivations for reading and writing outside of school indicate possible explanations for the failure to see strong effects from these activities on school achievement?

Our major assertion about these young people's motivations to read and write outside of school is that reading and writing are situated in and constitutive of social networks and identities (either developed, or developing). As such, reading and writing provide important forms of social capital by providing information that allows for the maintenance of social networks, the development of subjective experiences and enactments of identity, and models for self-improvement and achievement of future goals. Text reading and writing also appear to allow for social and psychological adjustment, an important function in and of itself. For example, the youth in our study read and write for self-expression, to work through problems, or to seek information or models to help them live in their homes, schools, and communities. In other words, reading and writing may do more than merely influence school achievement, as illustrated in the following data exemplars.

In what follows, we present data to exemplify the two major categories — reading as situated in social networks, and reading as generative of social capital — in which reading and writing are situated, each followed by data exemplars that indicate the types of social networks or the forms of social capital and social/psychological adjustment opportunities these reading and writing practices provide to youth. Before diving into these categories, however, we should underscore the overlap among and across categories. Reading as situated in social networks, for example, also often means reading that allows for racial or gendered identities to be constructed or enacted. Reading in affinity groups is most often gendered and raced. Reading and writing that express racial identities may also be forms of self-expression or self-improvement. Each of these concepts will be exemplified and explained in the sections that follow.

Although we separate data exemplars into categories for the purpose of analysis and for clarity of expression, we want to emphasize that these categories work together in young people's lives. In fact, our choices of exemplars are purposeful in that each exemplar typically represents at least one other category of analysis. Each exemplar also represents a pattern of practice among respondents, rather than a single instance. With these notes, we present the data that support our assertion about the motivations for and maintenance of reading and writing among youth in this community.

Reading and Writing as Situated in and Constitutive of Social Networks

Peers and Reading Groups. With few exceptions, each student indicated that peers were a source of reading material (either by giving recommendations for books/magazines or by providing actual texts). Several adolescents (all girls)

reported that they belonged to informal reading and writing networks, and six young women reported more formal reading groups that coordinated book selections, organized the procurement of books, and discussed the reading. One was moderated by an adult, and the others were facilitated by the students themselves. Brianna, for example, was a member of a book club organized by the mother of a friend. The mother would provide lunch for the group and assign vocabulary words based on the reading to each member:⁷

(B = Brianna; I = Interviewer)

B: Last but not least [would] probably be *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon G. Flake. . . . I was in a book club and they chose. We all, like, voted on books we wanted to read, and it seemed like an interesting book. So the majority of people voted for that book, and I like the book so that's why I chose it. . . .

I: So tell me about this book club. Who's in it?

B: Some of my friends and some people. It was my friend's book club, and she invited some of her friends that I didn't know, and now they're my friends.

I: So how many people are in this book club?

B: About seven people.

I: OK, and they're all your age — seventh graders?

B: Some are a grade higher, a grade lower. . . .

I: And so, how often do you meet?

B: Well, the book club stopped a couple years ago. Well, last year, and they're starting back in January, but we met every Saturday. And then we would go to see the movies of the books . . . and last Saturday we went to see *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* because that was one of the first books that we read. . . . [We read] about twenty books, 'cause we read one a month, and if the book was short, then we read two.

Five other young women offered similar descriptions of their book-reading experiences within peer social networks, ranging from book clubs that meet once a month, to groups of girls checking out the same book at the library (e.g., *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*) and discussing it during lunchtime in the school cafeteria, to reading scary stories aloud by candlelight with friends at a slumber party, to two girls who divided *The Coldest Winter Ever* into halves, reading their respective halves, and then discussing the total book.

Boys, in general, talked less about their experiences sharing books with organized groups. In fact, their mention of book-sharing is exemplified by seventh-grade Javier's rather qualified — and even half-hearted — description in an interview:

(J = Javier; I = Interviewer)

I: Do you share books with your friends?

J: Yeah, kind of; like when we go to the library and I tell them about joke books or books they might like to read.

I: So you find it and then you'll bring it over?

J: Yeah.

Writing Groups and Networks. Writing and sharing poetry is a popular activity among some youth — again, girls are in the majority on this dimension — whereas others share books and personal goals on a regular basis. For example, sixth grader Carlotta told an interviewer about being a member of a group that wrote and shared personal goals: “We all have a copy of it, and then we save it, and by the end of the year we see what goals we’ve accomplished.” Two other young women wrote chapter and comic books with friends; four talked about sharing poems with friends; and one described a group notebook designated just for writing letters and poetry. Alita, also a sixth grader, described a different kind of group writing activity engaged in at school, a notebook that she and other girls circulated in her homeroom class. To comment on a particular entry in the notebook — texts that typically “talked bad” about people — one had to read from the beginning of the thread, which was similar to a discussion among members of a digital community. Alita’s description suggests an awareness of the norms and conventions practiced among members of the group. In this way, the text was both part of and constitutive of a social network.

Family Reading and Writing Networks. Eight of the youth interviewed said that their parents encouraged their reading habits; in five of the cases, adults shared their own books with children. A few parents of children who read “urban books” disapproved of the themes of the books or wanted their children “to read different books from the books I read, you know, to expand [my horizons],” which suggests that parents were aware of and guided their children’s reading choices. Javier, for example, reported that his mother encouraged him to read in Spanish so he wouldn’t forget the language:

(J = Javier; I = Interviewer)

I: OK. Do you read things together with your family members?

J: No, only like when, like, I’m forgetting Spanish, or some hard-to-read Spanish, so my mom makes me read some Spanish books so I don’t forget Spanish and stuff like that.

I: So then you might read with her?

J: Yeah, and if I get, like, a word wrong, she has me pronounce it.⁸

Students also report reading books to or with younger siblings or writing material for younger siblings to read. Eva, in seventh grade, described reading picture books to her siblings. When asked, “Do you ever write to help yourself or other people get things done, like, you know, instructions or recipes for family?” Pedro, a sixth-grade boy, responded, “I help my brother with instructions.” Young women across the sample often referred to or were observed helping siblings with homework and reading to their siblings in the process. Jorge, a seventh grader, describes reading a video-game manual to teach his brother how to play the game:

(J = Jorge; I = Interviewer)

I: The Sonic Hedgehog video-game book? And why would you pick that?

J: I think it’s interesting because my little brother, I think he wants me to help him pass the game . . . He doesn’t know how to read, but he knows how to play.

I: How old is your little brother?

J: Like, four.

Affinity Groups and Reading and Writing. The two major affinity or community groups that dominated talk about texts involved cars or lowrider bikes on the one hand, and video games on the other. Four young men reported reading car magazines, car manuals, and looking at pictures of cars on [www.\[city name\] Raza.com](http://www.[city name] Raza.com),⁹ or talking to friends about cars. One seventh-grade youth, Sammie, described reading car and bicycle magazines, searching for car pictures online, watching movies about cars, and playing a video game about truck driving, as well as his future aspirations of working as an auto mechanic. In this interview excerpt, Federico, a sixth-grade student, explained that he read *Lowrider* magazine because he owned a lowrider bike and was fixing it up, a common affinity group activity among the young men in the sample:¹⁰

(F = Federico; I = Interviewer)

I: So the things that you do read, like *Lowrider* magazine and the dog stuff, where did you get that stuff from?

F: *Lowrider*?

I: Yeah, I mean, did somebody give you the magazines? Do you buy them? Do you go to the library?

F: I go to my cousin's house and I just take them. . . . He keeps [*Lowrider*], like, he wants to know how to draw 'cause he's gonna be an engineer — those people that draw houses — that's why he gets that [*Lowrider*] He just copies pictures off of there; he draws them.

Federico's literate practice, like the other lowrider bike fans, was stimulated by his relationship with his cousin, his own interest in the bikes, and a utility value for the work that he was doing on his bike.

Two young women also identified car and bike clubs as affinity groups that shaped their reading choices. Juanita, a ninth grader, helped her brother-in-law work on cars and reported reading car magazines. Carlotta, in fact, named *Lowrider* magazine as her number-one reading choice:

(C = Carlotta; I = Interviewer)

I: *Lowrider* is number one?

C: Uh-huh.

I: You read that?

C: Uh-huh.

I: You like lowriders.

C: I love lowriders; they're the best.

I: You're the first girl that I've interviewed that likes *Lowrider* magazine! Do you work on cars at all?

C: No, but like, in my street they have a community center, and when we get out of school — like, [at] the end of the

school year — they're gonna put [in] a bike shop, and it's gonna be mostly for lowriders. And then I'm gonna be working in it; like, they're gonna assign us each what we're talking about — what we're gonna work on, and we're gonna get paid seven dollars an hour.

These two girls were outliers among other young women we interviewed in the sense that they actively read *Lowrider* magazine. Many other young women talked about lowrider bikes and cars, but they did not describe reading the magazine. Like the boys of the sample, these young women situated their reading in affinity groups and family relationships.

Gaming is another example of an affinity group activity that shapes reading practices, albeit in unique ways. Gaming texts are not generally read in groups like the book clubs described by some of the young women, yet the ideas and information in gaming texts are often discussed among friends who share a gaming affinity. Six youth in the sample explicitly identified gaming as a reason for reading: They use cheat codes available in paper and online venues to guide their gaming. Many other youth with regular Internet access mentioned playing games, but we distinguish the casual players from “gamers” who actually read to access instructions, supports (or “cheats”), and ideas for new games. Although they talk about games and even play them while in the same room, they often do not share codes because they want to compete with one another. Although they read as part of an affinity group, they do not share the information they read, as exemplified in Jorge's description of his gaming literacy practices:

(J = Jorge; I = Interviewer)

I: Do you know the names of the sites that you go to?

J: CheatPlanet.com.

I: All right; and what do you do at CheatPlanet.com?

J: I look for cheat codes for the games that I have.

I: And again, do you do that with every game, or just some of the games?

J: Every game.

I: Do you ever look at walk-throughs? . . .

J: Yes.

I: OK, what else are on these sites? Do you ever, like, go to message boards and talk with other fans about the game, or not really?

J: No.

I: No. So basically you just go there and get information, get your cheats, get your walk-throughs, and you're done . . . Have you ever read something and you said, “Oh, wow, this was really helpful,” or “Oh, yeah, this will definitely help me pass the level,” and then you show it to somebody else?

J: I don't like showing people . . . other people that have the same game. I want to beat it first.

I: Oh, I see . . . OK, so you keep all the secrets; you keep all the codes yourself so you can finish it first.

J: Yes.

I: All right, when you finish it, *then* do you tell them?

J: I help them out.

Popular Cultural Networks. Popular culture is a unique kind of network because it is not held together by a gathering of people, but rather by information, ideas, and practices generated in and from popular cultural texts. The best example of popular cultural networks may be online “fanfiction,” in which participants write alternative storylines for popular television shows and movies. However, although many of the youth participants in our study had heard of the practice, few acknowledged writing fanfiction with any regularity. Still, when faced with a selection of unfamiliar texts, youth often used elements of popular culture (e.g., movies, television shows, musicians) to establish connections, as illustrated in this exemplar from Eva:

(E = Eva; I = Interviewer)

I: What would you choose to read as a third choice?

E: . . . *InuYasha* (Takahashi, 2003) [manga].

I: Why?

E: 'Cause I like the cartoon. I watch it with my sister when I'm at home. . . . I think that's a book, but it's on the cartoons. . . . Hey, *Harry Potter*. Hey, my friend had that book [points to *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000)]. We, I think we seen a movie on that *Esperanza* —

I: — *Esperanza Rising*?

E: I think we seen a movie on that . . . I think that's what they said on the front of it, the movie *Esperanza*. My friend was reading it, and she was telling me about it, but I can't remember what she said; and my friend was reading this book [*The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999)] in class. Sister Souljah.

I: You pointed to *Harry Potter*. Have you read any of the Harry Potters, or do you just know Harry Potter?

E: I think I read one of them, which was called . . . It was a long book, so like, after that I didn't read no more *Harry Potter*. It was like . . . Hey, look, that's *Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 2001) right there [pointing to image in interview book] . . . I seen the movie, too.

The motivation to read a book (or multiple books, as in Eva's case) after seeing a movie based on the book was mentioned time and time again by young people in the sample, as was the reading of manga that were directly connected to anime they watched on television. When browsing with youth in a local bookstore, many of the young people went immediately to the graphic novel section, where one young woman showed a team researcher a variety of different manga/graphic novels and explained which ones were based on television shows she watched.¹¹ In addition, young people's interest in elements of popular culture (e.g., music artists, actors, video games) can result in thematic reading across genres. For example, based on their interest in a particular music artist, students would read biographies, look up the artist's lyrics, and visit the artist's web page.

Reading as Generative of Social Capital

Reading and Writing as Racial/Ethnic Identity Development. Reading and writing certain texts also served as a way of enacting identities; that is, enacting the sense of self students felt was demanded or appropriate for a particular time, space,

or relationship (Moje, 2004). In addition, reading and writing those texts served as a means of gaining information needed to enact or develop new identities. Findings in this category replicate past ethnographic studies in this community (Moje, 2004; VanDerPloeg & Moje, 2004) by highlighting the important role of racial and ethnic identities.

Our youth participants' racial and ethnic identities both helped to shape — and were shaped by — reading and writing in three ways. First, reading choices were influenced by an interest in learning about cultural heritage. In some cases, this desire came about from a perceived lack of racial/ethnic representation in their school curriculum. Carlotta mentioned an interest in reading a Cesar Chavez biography so that she “would be more informed [about] what he did for the Hispanics,” and Alex, a seventh-grade youth, claimed that he read about ethnic culture to supplement what he learned in school: “You always hear about famous Black people and White people and barely hear any mentions of Mexicans.” Charla, a seventh grader, echoed his comment by saying, “They don't really tell us, like, they tell us about Martin Luther King.”

Second, youth read to locate current information about racial/ethnic groups. Much of this reading revolved around issues of immigration. Sammie, for example, stated that he reads the community newspaper, *Latino*, to obtain news about immigration, community issues, and Mexico. Alma, a tenth grader, echoed the desire to stay abreast of news and information related to her ethnic community, stating: “I am Mexican and would like to know what is happening.” Jacque, a ninth grader who identified as Blackfoot Indian and African American, stated explicitly that she read to get information about “what's happening with the Mexicans”:

(J = Jacque; I = Interviewer)

J: I probably will read this one [*Latino*] too . . .

I: All right, and what parts do you read of *Latino*?

J: Like, if there's a story about, like, what's happening now about the Mexicans, and, like, if they have anything about that, I'll read it, like, anything important.

I: What do you mean by “what's happening now with the Mexicans”?

J: Like, they're [going] to pass a thing, [and] I would like to know if they did pass it.

I: Oh, OK, yeah, I've heard about that, too. Would you go to the protests or no?

J: No, but I agree. I think they should earn their own freedom to be here because most of the time, they're the only ones who work. Like, they, most of the time there's like, they're owning most of the business here, so if it wasn't for them, no one would ever have business here. That's what I think, but I think they should keep fighting for that because they deserve it.

Jacque's discourse — particularly her use of the third person plural to refer to Mexicans — indicates that she sees herself as separate from other members of her community in ethnic terms, but she identifies with their “earning their freedom to be here,” and indicates a desire to read for solidarity with Latino/as. Having named herself as multiracial and living in a predominantly Latino/a neighborhood of a predominantly African American community, Jacque's discourse and her reading practice serve to position her as an insider, even while they simultaneously help her to maintain her own individual racial identity. Her reading, then, seems especially attuned to questions of power, identity, and agency within her geographic community and her ethnic and racial groups.

Finally, of the Latino/a youth interviewed who referred to website reading, all mentioned sites that were somehow connected to their ethnicity. Amanda, a ninth grader, in particular, sought out Latino/a websites and claimed that she frequented at least six Latino/a chat rooms, including Amor Latino, Hablando Espanol, Mexicano, Latino, Boricua, and www.[city name]Raza.com.¹² Sites such as www.southwest[city name].com were also routinely read by youth, as we have

documented in other ethnographic work. Southwest[city name].com is unique because it not only represents a Latino/a identity, but it also represents community issues and lowrider bike affinity groups, thus combining a number of social networks and identity enactments into one site.

Third, youth reading choices were often influenced by group members' desires to see a mirrored experience in the text or to bond with group members who generated the text. Sammie expressed an interest in *Always Running* (Rodriguez, 1993) because the main character is Mexican, and it looks like "an immigration thing."¹³ His interest in the book was piqued by what he saw as a possible link to his ethnic and lived experience (i.e., that of immigration). Others made comments about particular books such as *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991) because "it was, like, about [the] Latino experience," or *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998), which many young Black women described as important to them in terms similar to those described by Monica, a fourteen-year-old African American girl:

(M = Monica; I = Interviewer)

I: What would make you pick that? Let's say you hadn't read it before. What made you pick it the first time when you first saw it?

M: Because it stood out to me as being a good book that talks about you should like the skin that you're in. You know . . . What I got out of it was where it talks about her having problems about being dark-skinned, and I know I have problems like that, so that's what really stood out, too.

Charla, also African American, echoed Monica's need to explore her racial identity as she explained, "I could learn how they feel 'cause sometimes I don't feel like I like the skin I'm in." And Brianna described her interest in reading *My Sisters' Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out* (Jacob, 2002) because, "I'd think it'd be about girls that have [gone] through struggles based on racial issues."

Finally, Latino/a youth in the sample also read and wrote as part of their desire to maintain native language, suggesting an overlap between ethnic (typically Latino/a, in this community) and linguistic identities. That is, ethnicity was represented by language, but language identities may have also been a distinct motivating factor in the young people's reading and writing choices (or in their resistance to reading and writing certain texts). As one seventh grader, Clara, indicated, "I just seen it [*Latino* magazine], and it was in Spanish, and it's helping build my Spanish . . . I'm trying to build up my Spanish so I can get a little bit more better at it than I am now." Similarly, Eva described herself as going exclusively to Spanish-speaking chat rooms, even though she has some difficulty writing in Spanish and occasionally needs to look up words in the dictionary. Other youth were less self-directed in their attempts to maintain their natal language, but included it as a reason for reading, nonetheless. By contrast, it is interesting to note that although we interviewed several Spanish-dominant speakers, we did not document any youth referring to reading or writing as a way to learn English, perhaps because these English language learners were constantly immersed in texts that demanded English language fluency and did not feel the need to seek them out.

Reading and Writing as Gender Identity Development. A second prominent identity category revolves around gender identities. Most of the references to gender were made when female students selected texts that heavily featured the female voice (*Latina* or *My Sister's Voices*). In five instances, students were explicit about gender-related themes that they had gleaned from texts they read. For example, students expressed interest in a number of texts because the characters showed pride in being male/female. Tiana, a tenth grader, explained her interest in *Phenomenal Woman* (Angelou, 2000), by saying, "Just the fact that it's about a woman and me being a woman or growing up to be a woman, it's just the type of woman I want be, so that's what makes it special," whereas Burton, an African American ninth grader, found *A Lesson Before Dying* (Gaines, 1997) compelling because in it, "a teacher has to teach this guy how to be a man" and "two men forge a bond."

In other cases, text mirrored students' own experiences and, as such, spoke to them (see VanDerPloeg & Moje, 2004). For example, Brianna described *Clique* as a book about "how your friends will turn on you . . . very realistic; I know a lot of girls who do that." Finally, in terms of gendered identities, students read texts that allowed them to explore relationships

with the opposite sex. Alex described reading men's magazines as teaching him about "*Maxim* girls, cars, and games," whereas Jacque described reading books about sex and "what to do if he's not satisfying you . . . do not fake it. Just tell him so that way he can work on it." Two other young women described chatting on message boards for the main purpose of communicating with boys.

Reading and Writing for Self-Improvement. Reading and writing also served a number of purposes that allowed the young person to become stronger, more resilient, more informed, and more in control of their emotions. Writing as a therapeutic act was a major theme in the interviews. Of the thirty-eight interviews analyzed to date, eleven students reported writing poems, letters, or journals when they felt sad or angry. Two others described the use of personal writing to express feelings to themselves or to others, and one young woman, Clara, wrote poems when angered by her friend so that she could "keep it to myself [rather] than involve my friend, 'cause it comes to a whole conflict." Here, Patricia, a ninth grader, describes her motivation for writing as both a way to vent and, at times, to communicate her anger:

(P = Patricia; I = Interviewer)

I: OK, what makes you really want to write something?

P: Either — I don't know — sometimes when I'm mad or upset or tired.

I: OK, and what do you write when you're mad, upset, and tired?

P: Letters.

I: And who do you write the letters to? Are those the letters you write to your friends, or letters . . . [to] family?

P: No, I just the, like, the angry letters I never sent to anybody or . . . of course, I don't write about anybody, you know, but, like, angry letters . . . I never show it to them . . . Or, like, once when we start talking about all that, yeah, I show it to them but it would be, like, I didn't mean to write it like that or . . . Like, they don't get all that mad but they're like, OK, they know what makes me click.

This pattern in young people's reasons for writing was a dominant theme of the open-ended survey response in which students were to answer the question, "Are you a writer, and if so, then what kinds of things do you write?" Eighty-six percent of the respondents in Wave 1 answered that they were writers, and the majority described their reasons for writing as being rooted in self-expression. A comment, however, that was discrepant from this pattern is evident in ninth grader Adriana's response to the question, "What makes you not want to write something?"

(A = Adriana; I = Interviewer)

A: I don't know if like . . . political stuff. No, wait, I don't like writing about . . . stuff, but I talk about it with my friends, but I never write it. . . . Like, the president and all he's doing, sending our troops into Iraq. I don't write about it, but I talk about it.

I: OK; and so, would you ever talk about this political stuff in your ROTC class?

A: No.

I: Why not?

A: I find it too personal. It's my brothers who went to the war and [are] going again . . . I don't want to talk about it too

much. . . . Yeah, I don't know; writing about it makes it seem too personal, so I don't like it.

Adriana's talk about writing reveals an interesting contrast to the majority of the other responses, and raises questions about how young people take up highly personal topics in school classrooms. Whereas Patricia wrote to vent feelings that she knows nobody will ever read unless she allows it, Adriana resisted writing about topics that cause her anguish. Adriana's words — "writing about it makes it seem too personal" — might be interpreted as a concern that putting down fears in print may make them real. This contrast in how young people think about writing, and/or what kinds of topics make acceptable fodder for self-expression, has important implications for how teachers might think about engaging students in writing (and reading) about sensitive social topics in classrooms. Although writing about the highly personal might seem like a powerful way to make academic topics interesting to young people, this approach may also turn off some youth.

A second commonly mentioned form of reading or writing for self-improvement and reflection revolved around explicit attempts to develop one's sense of self or subjectivity, and thus to enact certain identities. Burton, for example, described writing on his bedroom ceiling inspirational quotes that he picked up from books and conversations, such as: "I will . . ." (reminder to achieve his goals); "Proper physical exercise increases your chances for health; proper mental exercise increases your chances for wealth" (from *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, Kiyosaki, 2002, p. 15); and a Malcolm X quote from his English textbook.

Ethnographic observations of the smaller subsample, together with past ethnographic work among youth in this community (Moje, 2006a), reveal that Burton was not the only one to keep written records of inspirational quotes. A number did just as Burton did: They decorated walls, lockers, and their own bodies with quotations that remind them to work hard, set goals, and to be certain kinds of people. As noted previously, Carlotta is a member of a group who meets to write as a way of setting and sharing personal goals. Additionally, Maria described writing as a way of enacting an identity that provided a positive example for her younger sister, and Clara used her writing as a way to reflect on the past, looking back on texts she had written to determine whether she had been upset "over nothing, or it was something important." In sum, interviews were filled with examples of youth writing to inspire or motivate themselves to work hard and stay focused on the "right" things in life.

Reading often served the same purpose. Alicia recommended the book *La Maestría del Amor* (Ruiz, 2001), which, she claimed, makes you "cherish what you have and not to want more," a mature sentiment for a twelve-year-old youth. Javier assessed his progress as a reader by looking at stories that he had read in fifth grade "to see what I used to study and how it has changed from what I'm doing now."

In a related vein, youth described seeing texts as providing examples of negative behaviors from which they could learn vicariously, or through which they could process actual experiences. Chrissa, a seventh-grade youth, echoed this notion regarding reading: "If you read about someone who is getting into trouble or doing drugs, they can teach you about a way of life and help you get on the right track instead of doing what they did."

Melissa, an eighth-grade student, claimed that "[*Chicken Soup for the Soul*] will tell you a story about that person and then it will tell you . . . why you shouldn't do it, and if you do it, this is what it's going to cost," whereas Alma described *Juventud en Éxtasis* by Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez (1995), part of a widely read series of books among girls in the community, as being about "youth and the risks that they have." And eighth grader Ari stated that certain books "make you realize not to make the same mistakes that they did. Makes you think of what would happen if it was you. . . . And . . . what would you do in her place — or, the person's place." Jacque, referring to *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999), argued that "When reading somebody else's mistakes — you can learn from them."

Two students offered the opposite reason for reading: the search for positive examples and inspiration, as indicated by Patricia, who responded to the question of why she read particular texts in this way:

Inspiration? Like, in one of the stories, it showed about a woman that was, like, fat or chunky, and she wouldn't be able to run or walk or things like that, and she got the inspiration to walk or run, and it's like, if she could do it, I probably could too, or things like that, so . . .

Reading for positive models of resilience, inspiration, and guidance, then, was a dominant theme across age levels and across years, and it is especially noted among the young women. Indeed, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* (Canfield, Hansen, & Kirberger, 1997) is one of most often-cited books on the open-ended survey task (two mentions in Wave 1 and ten mentions in Wave 2), and this book routinely comes up in ethnographic observations. In one trip to a bookstore, for example, two young women asked one of the researchers for advice on which *Chicken Soup* book to buy (*Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* or *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul: Love and Friendship* [Canfield, Hansen, & Kirberger, 2002]), and were delighted when one of the researchers suggested that they each buy a different book and then trade them.

Another form of reading for self-improvement demonstrated two respondents' awareness of how reading increases writing ability, an interesting — albeit weakly demonstrated — pattern, because few survey respondents noted a relationship between reading and writing in their response to two survey items that ask them whether their reading depends on their ability to write and vice versa. In interviews, Tiana stated that she liked to read poetry because “it makes me add to my writing the way they're writing . . . but it helps me better my writing,” and Antonio echoed that sentiment, claiming that, “Sometimes if you see something and you say, ‘Oh, I want to write something like that,’ and you make the effort and do it.” This pattern is not dominant, but it does demonstrate that at least some youth see relationships between reading and writing and, therefore, are strategic or metacognitive in their approach to writing. In sum, the range of reasons for reading to improve the self is powerful; whether or not these youth achieve higher grades in school as a result of their reading, the reading they do appears to have an important impact on their lives.

Reading and Writing for Information. The three categories detailed above could all be considered forms of information reading, if one considers that the young people described using texts to provide access to networks and relationships, models for self-improvement or resilience, and examples of and information about being certain kinds of people. But we also documented evidence of what might be more obviously considered information reading, in the form of reading to obtain facts, to prepare for college, or to follow news stories. The information reading we documented could be subcategorized in two ways: seeking information for utilitarian reasons, and for the satisfaction of personal interests.

Examples of seeking information for utility include activities as diverse as reading and translating (in speech or in writing) materials for family members and using the Internet to comparison shop. For example, in this excerpt, Valeria describes translating for family members and for other people (at times, for pay):

(V = Valeria; I = Interviewer)

I: Is there anything that you use to help your family get things done? Do you ever translate things . . . ?

V: Yeah. . . . Translat[ing] is hard sometimes . . . when we go to the store, when we go to the hospital . . . the doctor . . .

I: Are there any things that you have to read in another language?

V: Taxes, bills . . . forms like that I read . . . like, this couple was gonna get married, and I had to go with them to translate.

In addition to reading for translation purposes, some students used the Internet to search for information. Clara used the Internet to explore ideas for a school science project; Burton sought information about jobs and college; and Christopher, Burton, and Antonio each mentioned searching the Internet to comparison shop. Other youth read to follow news stories about current events, particularly ones of local or personal interest. One such interest was immigration reform, a topic discussed by four youth in semi-structured interviews.¹⁴ Alma described her interests in immigration and in the world beyond her in this way:

(A = Alma; I = Interviewer)

I: What type of articles in the newspapers are you interested in? When do you read it?

A: Mmmm . . . It can be like about sports. And news, but like . . . politics or whatever, something that is interesting, not everything, but something that has happened. . . . Like, for example, the place that one lives in, what happens there. That's what I meant . . . I don't know, immigration topics, what's going on, the laws that will be put in. . . .

I: Like, for example, would a war in another country interest you?

A: Yes. . . . Because I would like to know, like, what are the countries or the people involved in the war? Could be. And the immigration thing, well, in my case, I am Mexican, and, well, I would like to know, like, what is happening.

Other reasons to read for information included reading to obtain news about the war or to follow a friend in the military; reading about personal interests, such as articles related to owning a pet; and reading about current events, as described in the following excerpt from an interview with Ari:

(A = Ari; I = Interviewer)

I: Do you use the Internet to read for information about your favorite actors and stuff? What do you read for on the Internet?

A: Um, besides MySpace . . . I just, like . . . on AOL news, if they have something of, like . . . a celebrity I like, I'll just click on it and read the article. . . . Or stuff about . . . that might interest me, like . . . about . . . about the environment, like how the . . . the water is . . . like, not . . . the ice melting and then maybe, I don't know, by what year, we might not — polar bears might be extinct.

I: OK. So you read about environment and global warming and stuff?

A: That worries me.

We find the potential match between the content of the texts some youth are reading outside of school and the content of their science and social studies classrooms especially interesting and possibly fruitful. Yet, most of these youth express a lack of interest in science and social studies, with science nominated as the least-useful and least-liked content area on our survey, with social studies a close second (Stockdill & Moje, 2007). Such findings should raise questions for adolescent literacy researchers and secondary school teachers alike about the disconnect that exists between youth interests in scientific and social issues outside of school and their interest and achievement in these areas within secondary schools. One aspect of this disconnect may be that the texts of school content areas are not embedded — or, at least, are not presented as embedded — in social networks relevant to the lives of youth. As the findings of our qualitative analyses suggest, youth read and write when they have a well-articulated purpose, a purpose that is usually centered in a network of social activity.

The Mysteries of Adolescent Literacy: Implications for Practice, Questions for Research

These findings of what, how often, and why youth read and write outside of school, together with findings on the relationship between out-of-school literacy practices and in-school achievement, present a number of important possible implications for education practice. The findings, however, also pose some remaining questions — mysteries — to be studied in future research. We want to underscore our contention, based on the preliminary findings of this research, that before policies are made regarding the best methods for improving adolescent literacy achievement, a stronger research base is needed to understand the relationship between what, why, and how youth read and write on their own and in school. That said, we do think there are many points to be learned from this analysis.

First, youth *do* read and write outside of school. If this report communicates nothing else, it should debunk the myth that youth — at least in the community studied here — are not reading and writing. They do read and write, but they may not read and write the kinds of texts that adults value. The host of reasons for reading and writing indicated by the youth of this one community suggest that it would behoove educators, policymakers, and school textbook publishers to attend to the types of texts that young people value and the reasons for which they read. We find it compelling that in both the surveys and interviews, youth indicate that they read texts in school that are situated in social networks they can identify with (e.g., urban settings, or youth who struggle with adversity). Offering youth high-quality adolescent literature, in addition to canonical texts of English language arts, does appear to make a difference in young people's reading lives.

We have often heard from teachers that “kids don't read.” Our findings suggest that young people will read, but they may need suggestions for reading and writing activities, as well as a wider array of options within their chosen topic areas. The findings presented here provide a glimpse of what young people value in texts: They like to read books about people like them, and not only in terms of race, ethnicity, age, class, or gender (although these features are important). They also like to identify with characters who are resilient through struggles, people who are working through relationships, people trying to figure out who they are. They want to read books and write texts that offer them social capital in the form of information, ideas for self-improvement, models for identities, or ways to maintain existing relationships and build new ones.

Second, although our analyses demonstrate that this one group of urban youth does read and write outside of school, we must acknowledge that they may not be reading and writing widely or frequently enough to make a difference in their school achievement. Findings from preliminary analyses suggest that time spent reading novels does predict students' achievement, but that the reading or writing these youth engage in happens infrequently, or may be too different from school reading and writing to impact their achievement in domains other than English language arts. Thus, these data suggest that simply reading outside of school may not increase in-school academic achievement. It appears that genre, content, and subject area are important aspects to consider when evaluating the relationships between time spent reading and in-school achievement. In other words, school science learning is more likely to be bolstered by reading science texts, history learning by reading history, and so on. These findings must be supplemented with additional and more powerful analyses as data continue to be collected, but initial analyses raise key questions for future research.

Our qualitative findings suggest some explanations for the lack of relationship between out-of-school time reading and school achievement in content areas other than English class, as youths' purposes for reading out of school are more in line with the study of English language arts, and less connected to the kinds of texts and purposes they would typically encounter or be asked to produce in classes such as science or social studies. Reading and writing to explore or express emotions, for example, is not an activity typically valued in chemistry or economics classes. In fact, in previous studies we have documented that young people's emotions and opinions can interfere with their writing of social science essays. When they are asked to take a stand on social issues, young people often want to maintain their own impassioned stances toward social issues, rather than engaging in dispassionate critique using evidence (Moje, 2006b; Moje & Speyer, in press).

In other words, what and why young people read and write outside of school may affect their continuing literate development as they advance through school, especially in the disciplinary domains. This finding, however, presents a challenge: Knowing that much of the reading and writing youth are motivated to do on their own revolves around the maintenance of social networks, relationships, identity development, and self-improvement and self-expression, how do we engage young people in the texts of disciplinary domains outside of school (or in school, for that matter), which may often be far removed from the concerns of their lives? How do we build educational interventions that acknowledge youths' strengths and interests, while also engaging them in content-based reading and writing?

Gee's analyses of video gaming (2003), together with our analysis presented here, may suggest some possible directions. As Gee argues, video-game programmers are skilled at building social worlds and networks into which youth are drawn. Often, the virtual social world of the game is connected to a live social network, thus providing increased motivation for reading and sense-making. Gee demonstrated that video games not only offer worlds to gamers, but also identities and goals. Our data suggest that social networks, identities, and established goals are key motivators for youth reading outside of school. Youth read inside social networks, in line with identities they recognize or wish to enact, and they look for ways to build social capital in order to meet particular goals of self-improvement and future aspirations. What are the corollaries to such social worlds, identities, and goals in the disciplinary domains? What would it mean to help a ninth-grade student connect to the social networks of biologists or historians? Do most educators feel connected enough to these social networks to be able to reconstruct them for youth?

A number of educational projects simulate the activities of disciplinary communities (such as project-based science or social studies simulations). But do they replicate the goals, identities, and discursive practices of those disciplinary social (and cultural) networks? According to Rogers Hall and Susan Jurow (2006), some do. They experimented with bringing practicing scientists into the classroom to engage in a critique of students' written representations (i.e., poster presentations) of scientific investigations. Such activities provide social networks for youth and model discursive practices of the disciplines in ways that the learning of technical terms and discourse conventions do not.

More to the point of adolescent literacy development, however, is whether subject matter texts make evident the disciplinary social networks, goals, and identities involved. According to studies such as Paxton's (1999), the social identities and work of the discipline as represented by the historian's voice are absent in typical history textbooks (see also Schleppegrell, 2004). Thus, in addition to building social networks that engage youth in the identity enactments, content representations, and literacy and language practices of the disciplinary domains, educators and publishers might consider developing different kinds of texts in those domains. In this case, we are referring to engineering new types of classroom texts, ones that recognize the need to situate reading and writing within social networks and invite young readers into a relationship with the text and the work of the discipline. Visiting scientists (or historians, mathematicians, literary theorists, or artists) may not be practical for all classrooms, but texts can be generated to provide simulations of those social networks and discursive practices.

The work of Annemarie Palincsar and Shirley Magnusson (2001), in which researchers constructed a fictional scientist's log that young children read and critiqued as they carried out their own investigations, offers a compelling example of the possibilities for engaging readers in deep content reading and writing that connects them to other learners and investigators. Similarly, Lee's (2007) recent study of the use of history textbooks — revised to demonstrate the thinking of the historians — suggests that making social networks, goals, and identities visible can make a difference in how young people read (and possibly, write) in content areas. Some of these texts might employ digital platforms, thus allowing for interaction with actual social networks of members of the disciplines. Our data suggest that young people would read such texts with enthusiasm.

However, this idea raises concerns related to a third key finding of our research. In this community — one not unlike many other high-poverty settings — Internet activity does *not* seem to be responsible for distracting youths' attention from school reading and writing, as some would argue. Nor is Internet activity particularly supportive of school achievement. In fact, when compared to statistics of daily youth Internet use reported by others (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005), our data suggest that the digital divide has not closed. If the popular conception of equal digital access dominates, then educational and social policies may overlook the need to continue working toward more-equitable digital access for all people.

We wish to conclude by emphasizing that, even without a demonstrated impact on school achievement, the literacy practices of youth documented in our study are significant and powerful in their lives. In other words, the value of youths' out-of-school practices should not be assessed only by the influence of the practices on school achievement. The qualitative data we present demonstrate that youth read and write for social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual purposes. Their reading and writing practices foster communication, relationships, and self-expression among peers and family members; support their economic and psychological health; and allow them to construct subjectivities and enact identities that offer them power in their everyday lives. These consequences of literate practice in the everyday world should not be diminished by the quest to improve the school achievement of all young people, even as educators pursue the important goal of closing the achievement gap. Indeed, future studies of adolescent literacy development should continue to examine how educational practice and policy can draw from and support — without co-opting, exploiting, or diminishing — the powerful literacy practices of young people's everyday lives.

Notes

1. A third wave of data collection has just been completed, resulting in a stronger longitudinal sample. These data, however, had not been analyzed at the time of paper preparation.
2. These ethnic/racial identity data are both self-reported by the youth in the study and verified by school reports. As part of the survey, we ask youth to report their ethnic/racial identity according to U.S. Census categories, as well as to answer open-ended questions about how they identify. The open-ended questions yield more complex information about how youth prefer to represent themselves, but the self-report categories provide access to their primary representations at a given point in time. (Most, it should be noted, are stable over the two years of the study, with slight variation in

representation of specific national identity for those who claim a Latino/a identity.)

3. Namely, *cheat codes*, or tips to enable video/computer game players to play a game or figure out a clue in a game, were added because they were written in so often, and the phrase *graphic novels* was added to *comic books*.

4. These constructs have an important iterative relationship; that is, social capital provides access to social networks, and social networks provide opportunities to build social capital.

5. In this instance, *shout-outs* are messages that youth write to each other in Internet chat rooms and other electronic media. The origin of the term is found in popular music, in which references or “nods” are made to artists, well-known people, or to people of personal importance to the performer.

6. All names are pseudonyms.

7. Exemplars are edited for clarity or to achieve brevity, but not for content. Throughout the transcripts, extended ellipses are used to indicate pauses in speech. Short ellipses at the end of a line indicate speech trailing off, and dashes at the end and beginning of lines of speech indicate that one speaker has interrupted another speaker’s speech. An ellipsis after a period, question mark, or comma indicates that text has been edited out for brevity or clarity.

8. It is worth noting that although Javier denies reading with his family, throughout this particular interview and a second reading-process interview, he describes a number of other instances in which he reads with various family members.

9. Masked to maintain anonymity.

10. It is more common for these youth to own bikes than cars, primarily because of their age and the relative cost differences, although lowrider bikes can run into the several-thousand-dollar range.

11. In truth, anime typically derive from manga, rather than the paper-based comics deriving from animated versions. However, the young people in our study are often introduced to the texts via the television programs they watch, and thus see the manga as derived from anime.

12. Masked to maintain anonymity.

13. Sammie’s comment makes clear that he has not actually read *Always Running*, which is an autobiographical narrative of gang life in Los Angeles.

14. We also noted this focus in reading-process interviews in which we asked students to think aloud about content and reading processes as they read academic texts and texts of their choosing, but, due to space constraints, we have not included those analyses in this paper.

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Tables

TABLE 1 *Student Demographics for the Full Sample*

Student Characteristics — FULL SAMPLE (n = 716)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Mean (S.D.)</i>
Age (years)		14.9 (1.28)
Female	56.1	
Male	43.9	
Race		
White	5.6	
Black	20.9	
Latino	72.1	
Other	1.4	
Seventh Grade	21.6	
Ninth Grade	41.1	
Tenth Grade	37.3	
School 2	14.7	
School 3	62.2	
School 4	7.0	
School 5	16.2	
Spanish Speakers ^a	63.0	
Language Mainly Spoken at Home		
English	18.4	
Spanish	42.4	
Both	39.3	

^a Includes Spanish-Only and Spanish-English Bilingual Students.

TABLE 2 *Students' Self-Reported Frequencies of Reading and Writing for Pleasure by Gender, Grade, Race, and Language*

Student Reading and Writing Outside of School (n = 716)

Variables	Mean (S.D.) Range (1–7) ^a
Read for Pleasure — All Students	3.26 (1.81)
Gender: Female ^c	3.58 (1.86) ***
Male	2.85 (1.67)
Grade: Seventh ^{d e}	3.53 (1.65)
Ninth	3.25 (1.92)
Tenth	3.11 (1.77)
Race: White ^{b d}	2.50 (1.62) ***
Black	3.77 (1.88) **
Latino	3.17 (1.77)
Language Spoken in Home: English ^d	3.42 (1.74)
Spanish	3.24 (1.84)
Both	3.18 (1.72)
Write for Pleasure — All Students	3.11 (1.87)
Gender: Female ^c	3.62 (1.88) ***
Male	2.46 (1.65)
Grade: Seventh ^{d g}	3.48 (1.88)
Ninth	3.03 (1.92)
Tenth	2.98 (1.80)
Race: White ^{d f}	2.64 (1.78)
Black ^f	3.47 (1.96)
Latino	3.05 (1.84)
Language Spoken in Home: English ^d	3.31 (1.94)
Spanish	3.02 (1.84)
Both	3.08 (1.80)

^a1 = never, 2 = once a month, 3 = 2–3 times a month, 4 = once a week, 5 = 3–4 times a week, 6 = every day less than 1 hour, 7 = every day more than 1 hour.

^b White compared to Black ($p < .001$), Black compared to Latino ($p < .01$), all other racial differences not significant in reading.

^c Differences calculated via t-test.

^d Differences calculated via one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc.

^e Seventh compared to tenth ($p < .10$), all other grade differences not significant for reading.

^f White compared to Black (p < .10), Black compared to Latino (p < .10), White compared to Latino not significant in writing.

^g Seventh compared to ninth (p < .05), seventh compared to tenth (p < .05), ninth compared to tenth not significant in writing.

~ p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

TABLES 3–4 Summary of Wave 1 Regression Analysis Estimating the Effect of Reading and Writing Outside of School on Academic Achievement as Measured by Grades on a 4.0 Scale (Schools 1–2; n = 209)

TABLE 3 Relationship between Reading and Writing for Pleasure and Academic Achievement

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i> <i>DV = English Grade</i>	<i>Model 2</i> <i>DV = Science Grade</i>	<i>Model 3</i> <i>DV = Cum. GPA^b</i>
Constant	1.584 ***	1.416 ***	1.453 ***
Reading for Pleasure	.180 ***	.138 ***	.156 ***
Writing for Pleasure	-.077 ~**	-.063 ***	-.059 ***
Female	.242 ~**	.260 ***	.181 ***
Hispanic American ^a	.115 ***	.267 ***	.270 ***
African American ^a	.050 ***	.526 ***	.309 ***
R-Square	.107 ***	.071 ***	.091 ***

^a Reference group is Caucasian Americans.

^b An average of student grades in English, science, and math.

~ p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

TABLE 4 Relationship between Reading Novels and Poetry and Academic Achievement

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Model 4</i> <i>DV = English Grade</i>	<i>Model 5</i> <i>DV = Science Grade</i>	<i>Model 6</i> <i>DV = Cum. GPA^b</i>
Constant	1.661 ***	1.566 ***	1.624 ***
Reading Novels ^c	.067 ~**	.043 ***	.052 ***
Reading Poetry	.037 ***	-.029 ***	.004 ***
Female	.158 ***	.261 ***	.157 ***
Hispanic American ^a	.167 ***	.331 ***	.301 ***
African American ^a	.166 ***	.621 ~**	.404 ***
R-Square	.050 ~**	.037 ***	.036 ***

^a Reference group is Caucasian Americans.

^b An average of student grades in English, science, and math.

^c Full category in the computer survey response includes “Novels, short stories, picture books, plays.”

~ p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

TABLE 5 Summary of Wave 2 Regression Analysis Estimating the Effects of Reading and Writing Outside of School on Academic Achievement (School 5; n = 96)

Reading and Writing Texts Outside of School as Predictors of Academic Achievement

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Fitted Coefficient</i>
Constant	2.702 ***

Reading Novels, short stories, picture books, plays	.138 ***
Reading Music Lyrics	-.135 ***
Writing Graffiti or Tagging on Paper	-.099 ***
Female	.169***
Hispanic American ^a	-.101***
African American ^a	1.091***
R-Square	.181 ***

^a Reference group is Caucasian Americans.

^b An average of student grades in English, science, and math.

~ p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

DV: Cumulative GPA.



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