Social Support Networks for Literacy Engagement among Culturally Diverse Urban Adolescents

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto

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2012

Abstract
This thesis explores the influences of social networks and social support on the literacy engagement of 7 high school students from a multicultural, multilingual, and economically disadvantaged urban neighborhood in a large, diverse North American city. Specifically, this study describes (1) students’ social networks and social literacy interactions; (2) the types of social support the network relationships provide for participants’ literacy; and (3) the ways in which this socioliterate support might affect participants’ literacy engagement. Guided by Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992/2005), at three times during an 18-month period the 7 participants completed social network maps and interviews, checklists about their reading and writing choices, and retrospective interviews about their reading and writing practices on self-selected texts. These data were analyzed on the basis of Tardy’s (1985) typology of social support and the tripartite model of engagement proposed by Fredricks,
Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), then individual case reports were created for each participant. For cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006), the individual reports were compared across similar, predetermined themes. Two primary conclusions are supported by the data and analysis: These adolescents received varying amounts and types of socioliterate support from certain members of their social networks, particularly teachers and family members, and this support positively influenced their literacy engagement when they were facing difficult or uninteresting tasks. The study provides an understanding of the relationship between social support, motivation, and engagement in single literacy events, including proposed relationships between these three concepts, as well as perspectives on the role of technology in adolescent social network formation and on the sources from whom adolescents seek literacy-based social support. The study describes pedagogical spaces that can provide and activate such literacy support and suggests topics for future research relating to adolescent literacy, socioliterate networks and support, and literacy engagement.
Acknowledgments

Writing this thesis has reminded me how large my own social network is, populated with many different microsystems. Each of these ‘domains’ has provided a wealth of social support to help me complete this thesis.

I should start by thanking my participants, who, for hours over two years, talked freely about their friends, family, teachers, and about what they liked and did not like about reading and writing. They have touched my life in a meaningful way. Within that domain, I would have had a difficult time finding and staying in touch with these students without the valuable assistance of the staff at the after-school program who made it possible for me to track down hard-to-reach teenagers, find a place to record interviews, and keep my sanity during data collection. They welcomed me into their space as a colleague, which I appreciate immensely.

Many thanks go to my supervisor, Alister Cumming, a consummate scholar who has modeled for me how to be a researcher, writer, thinker, and colleague. His patience with my shortcomings seems to know no bounds! My gratitude goes also to my committee members, Shelley Stagg Peterson and Esther Geva, who have shepherded me through this process and shown me how they balance life and academia. I am very appreciative of the time and effort taken with this study by Linda Harklau, my external examiner, and Julie Kerekes, my internal examiner. Thanks, also, to the other faculty members in the SLE program at OISE, all of whom have made me feel like a valued member of the program. Before OISE, there were my professors—and now friends—in the UH MA program who saw me as an academic before I saw myself that way, and my teachers in a small town who never doubted I could find a place in the world beyond Smithville and, in so believing, helped me see it, too.
My friend domain is densely populated: the girls from Smithville whom I’ve known since elementary and who genuinely believe I can do anything; the girls from Rice who helped me struggle into adulthood and balancing my various identities while giving me a space in which I’ll always belong; the girls in my MA program who share my love of language and helped me see myself as a writing and language teacher; my admission and writing center colleagues who showed me what it meant to be a caring professional; and my dear OISE friends who are my ‘third space’ as well as role models in their commitment to making a better world through education. In particular, Robert, Stephanie, Won, and Christian provided socioliterate support in every form I describe in this thesis.

I am so fortunate to have three families to see me through this process. I couldn’t imagine having more loving parents—they have never once in my life stopped supporting or believing in me—and my sister is an amazing woman whom I continually strive to be more like. My husband’s family is also an important and loving presence in my life, especially my mother-in-law, Marian. And at the very heart of my social network are my husband and two little boys, who have had to bear the brunt of every rough day in this process: I am so sorry for dragging you all into this and so very grateful to you for never giving up on me! I will be thankful for your support and love every day for the rest of my life, and I love you three more than I can ever, ever express.

Finally, at the macrosystemic level, I would like to thank the Ontario Ministry of Training, College, & Universities for supporting my work with an Ontario Graduate Scholarship for the last two years of my doctoral studies as well as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting the original ALTUR research project (grant 410-2006-2442; co-investigators Dr. Alister Cumming and Dr. Esther Geva).
To my grandmothers, Linnet Shade and Nelda Spencer

Your passion for language and reading became my own, and my memories of how much we loved each other sustained me throughout the entire PhD process.

To Mike

For everything.
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Chapter 1
Introduction: Multicultural Adolescents’ Social Networks, Social Support, and Literacy Engagement

In this ecologically-oriented thesis study, I explore the socioliterate influences on the literacy engagement of high school students from a specific multicultural, multilingual, and economically disadvantaged urban neighborhood in a large, diverse North American city. Considering the widely acknowledged importance of social interactions and relationships during adolescence, it seemed worth investigating the results of similar interactions between high school students and their peers and teachers. Moreover, for students living in a close-knit and family-oriented housing project, I was curious whether influential socioacademic—or, in the case of this study, socioliterate—relationships might also be formed in students’ families and physical community. For the present study, I borrowed social network methods to help document the important relationships in students’ lives, and I drew from research on social support to frame the ways in which these relationships might be useful to students. Finally, I focused on literacy engagement as a possible outcome of the literacy support provided by the social interactions, assuming that engagement forms an important link between motivation and achievement. This chapter provides a justification of why these topics are important to study, definitions of important terms, my personal interest in these topics, and an overview of the thesis structure.

The concept of socioliterate influences evolved from the use of the term “socioacademic relationships” by Ilona Leki (2007) in a longitudinal study of the literacy development of multilingual, multicultural undergraduates. Leki operationalized this term to denote social interactions between her focal students, their peers, and faculty members “that proved to be critical to the students’ sense of satisfaction with their educational work and sometimes even to
the possibility of doing that work” (p. 14). In this study, I have adapted the term to refer specifically to relationships that have a reading and/or writing component.

An emphasis on social influences in literacy is supported by work in a variety of fields. Literacy researchers have long recognized the social nature of writing and reading, positioning literacy as “a set of socially organized practices” (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236) and recognizing that there exist “social variation in and constraints on literacy” (Barton, 1994, p. 41), such as socially constructed writing conventions that only have meaning in certain social contexts (cf. Street, 1984). An early study that illustrated the social nature of literacy development was conducted by a cultural anthropologist, Shirley Brice Heath (1983). Applied linguists (e.g., Gee, 2012; Pennycook, 2001) have shown how language, literacy, power, and social inequalities are interwoven. Even education scholars with a cognitive bent, such as John Guthrie (e.g., Guthrie & Anderson, 1999; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), have acknowledged the role of social interactions in processes often perceived to be mental such as reading motivation and engagement. Yet, much of this work focuses on the social at the macro-level and does not theorize or investigate the role of one-to-one or small group human interactions in the development and use of literacy skills and practices.

The importance of individual social relationships, as well as the overarching macro-social context, is foregrounded in ecological theories of human development, particularly in Ecological Systems Theory (EST; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992/2005). Although this specific theory is utilized more often in the field of educational psychology than in literacy and language research, it provides a valuable framework for considering the location and strength of influential socioliterate relationships. Moreover, adopting an ecological stance moves scholarship away from the “learner-as-computer metaphor” (Kramsch, 2002, p. 1) and toward viewing participants
as living social organisms who are influencing and being influenced by their many-layered and social environments.

One key aspect of these environments is human interactions; therefore, *social network* scholars have created a number of tools to learn about and describe sets of interactions at both the group and individual level (cf. Marin & Wellman, 2011). Furthermore, relationships within these networks can be characterized by the type and amount of support that flows between network members, generally referred to as *social support* (Hirsch, 1985; Wellman, 1981, 1985). Recognizing that social support plays a role in academic achievement, several researchers have attempted to create a typology of support available to students from a range of sources (e.g., Malecki & Demaray, 2002, 2003, 2006).

An ecological viewpoint is also congruent with both the concept of *resilience* (Levin, 2004; Masten, 1994; Terrisse, 2000) and the underlying assumption in investigating sources and types of socioliterate support that resiliency processes may be at work around such support. Often, students living in inner-city neighborhoods are labeled ‘at-risk’ for not completing high school, based on the low socioeconomic status (SES) and low high school graduation rates of these neighborhoods. While viewing ‘at-riskness’ based on such contextual factors is an improvement from earlier work that located the sources of risk as intrinsic to the individual or family, an ecological approach grounded in a resiliency perspective allows us to look at it from another direction (cf. Terrisse, 2000); instead of asking “what factors promote failure in certain students,” in designing this thesis study I wondered “what factors promote success (engagement).”

Finally, *engagement* is a key aspect of literacy to study because (1) it appears to correlate with achievement and learning (cf. Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000); (2) the concept of engagement
has multiple and sometimes conflicting definitions and models (elucidated in detail in Chapter 2); and (3) although social interactions are sometimes acknowledged to play a role in literacy engagement, the social aspect of engagement is the least studied. In this study, I apply the tripartite definition of academic engagement developed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) to understanding the ways socially supportive relationships influenced adolescents’ literacy engagement, and I attempt to use this theoretical and empirical information to model the relationship between motivation and engagement in single literacy events, particularly when the flows of motivation and engagement experienced interruptions or when initial motivations were lacking.

The intersection of adolescence and North American urban life in this thesis mirrors the modern genesis of both concepts. Adolescence as a social and psychological construct dates back to the early 20th century, generally accepted as being defined first by Hall in 1904 (as cited in Lesko, 2001; see also Alvermann, 2009); coincidentally, the late 19th and early 20th centuries also saw the rise of major urban centers, as new groups of immigrants came to both Canada and the US and as families left rural areas for city life. Both types of migrations have continued at various rates up to the present day, so that cities now represent an immense array of languages, cultures, races, ethnicities, life experiences, family arrangements, and socioeconomic levels. Certainly, the context in which this study was conducted represents this great diversity, in which my participants were fully immersed and which is representative of most North American cities. As a result of knowing these students, I have endeavored in this study to represent not Hall’s view of adolescents as battered and overwhelmed by the ‘sturm und drang’ of a difficult life stage but a perspective of adolescents as thoughtful human beings who are trying to make
decisions about many aspects of their lives in the best way they can, exploring multiple identities and learning to be agentic human beings.

**Overview of the Study**

Despite the seemingly obvious connections between social networks, social support, adolescence, and literacy engagement, social network and social support theories have rarely (and not systematically) been applied to research in adolescent literacy. To address this gap in knowledge, this project investigated the following overarching question: “How does social support influence the literacy engagement of culturally diverse urban adolescents identified as being ‘at-risk’ for literacy development?” I posed three specific research questions:

1) What people do the adolescents in this study report as being important to them (i.e., as belonging to their personal social networks)? Within these networks, with whom do they interact through literacy events?

2) Which of these relationships, if any, do participants report as providing support for their literacy events? What types of literacy support are offered?

3) What dimensions of engagement appear in participants’ literacy events, and what aspects of social relationships seem to influence this engagement in literacy?

As discussed in Chapter 3, to address these questions, I adopted a multicase-study approach (cf. Stake, 2006) with seven high-school-aged participants from an inner-city neighborhood in Toronto. All of the participants were enrolled in an after-school program designed to encourage local teens to stay in school and to attend college; it was adults in that program who labeled these students as ‘at-risk for literacy development.’ Through a series of interviews over two school years, I was able to gain a little insight into the students’ social worlds as well as their reading and writing practices. This thesis reports my findings and, through the perspective of EST, links those to current research in social networks, social support, and literacy engagement.
Definition of Key Terms

Literacy Terms

There is a proliferation of terms in literacy scholarship to describe the actions of individuals in relation to textual experiences. For the sake of precision and consistency, I have considered a wide range of those terms and adapted several to my purposes of attempting to describe what and how a small group of adolescents was reading and writing with important people in their lives. To convey my reasoning in this thesis, I have included an alphabetical list of terms that I use regularly in this work and the ways I have chosen to operationalize them.

Academic literacy: Those literacy activities that are undertaken specifically for the purposes of completing a school assignment.

Extracurricular literacy: Any text-based reading and writing that is not related to schoolwork. These literacy activities may physically take place in a school (e.g., texting friends between classes) but more often take place in another location.

Literacy: I subscribe to Street’s (1984) ideological model of literacy, that textual practices cannot be isolated from the social and cultural institutions, beliefs, and practices in which they are taught, learned, and carried out. Thus, I struggle with the “dominant emphasis on a single, ‘neutral’ ‘Literacy’ with a big ‘L’ and a single ‘y’” (Street, 1995, p. 2); however, the scope of this thesis project did not specifically address the concepts of ‘multiliteracies’ or ‘multiple literacies’ (cf. Street, 2000, for a differentiation between these terms), so I
have often used the term literacy to include all reading and writing the participants did.

**Literacy activities:** A general group of literacy events, such as reading books, writing email messages, doing homework; also used to denote a variety of literacy events that might be happening but without a focus on the specific patterns of various events that would elevate these to literacy practices.

**Literacy event:** Any single “occasion[s] in everyday life where the written word has a role” (Barton, 1994, p. 36); “a particular situation where things are happening, and you can see them happening” (Street, 2000, p. 21). Such an occasion might be an individual physically involved in the acts of reading or writing a text but could also include talking about a text with others.

**Literacy practices:** “[A] broader concept [than literacy event], pitched at a higher level of abstraction and referring to both behaviour and conceptualisations related to the use of reading and/or writing” (Street, 1988, p. 61); “common patterns in using reading and writing in a particular situation” (Barton, 1994, p. 37).

**Literacy skills:** The complex sets of processes (linguistic, cognitive, and sensory-motor) that a person must use in order to read or write. Scribner and Cole (1981) gave an example of skills
needed to write a letter in the Vai language: “Encoding language into graphic symbols, . . . retrieving the representation of a word from memory, planning and organizing the message, taking into account the informational needs of the reader” (p. 237).

The distinction between academic and extracurricular literacy is not based on the skills required (e.g., proper spelling for an essay versus abbreviated spelling for text messages) nor the practices used (e.g., group discussion of a text), but on the purposes for which the event is undertaken. I use the ‘extracurricular’ label in place of the more common “out-of-school literacy” (e.g., Hull & Schultz, 2002) because a literacy event occurring outside of school can still have similarities with one related to school (Hull & Schultz, 2001)—for instance, one has to assess one’s audience whether writing an essay or an email, and participants in this study reported using dictionaries to look up words in both texts required for school and those read for pleasure. The term extracurricular, then, denotes that a literacy event is occurring outside the required school curriculum.

**Engagement Terms**

The concept of engagement in education also teems with myriad phrases attempting to capture its nuances. Two recent thematic reviews of educational engagement (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004) have endeavored to clarify definitions of the multiple strands comprising educational engagement; in particular, I have relied on Fredricks et al. for working definitions.

**Behavioral engagement:** Participation in literacy events
Cognitive engagement: “[P]sychological investment” (Fredricks et al., p. 67) in literate activity—specifically strategy use, goal setting, and level of self-efficacy

Emotional engagement: Affective reactions to and value judgments about reading and writing

Engagement: “[A]ctive, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused interactions” (Furrer & Skinner, 2003, p. 149)

Literacy engagement: The combination of cognitive engagement and emotional engagement that leads to as well as occurs during behavioral engagement in reading/writing

Motivation: “[R]easons for reading” and/or writing (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999, p. 21)

Social Networks and Support

Since many scholars find close links between research in social support and social networks, I have combined terms from both in one subsection. To operationalize the concept of social support, I relied heavily on the program of research conducted by Malecki and Demaray (2002, 2003, 2006) as they designed and tested the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale for use in large-scale studies of sources and types of support, generally relating to school. While their instrument was not fine-grained enough for my purposes in this thesis study, their definitions of support types (based originally on Tardy, 1985) were very useful. Most of my conceptual understanding of social support is based on research conducted by one of the pioneers in the field, Barry Wellman, and his colleagues at the University of Toronto (e.g., 1981, 1985; Chua, Madej, & Wellman, 2011; Marin & Wellman, 2011).
The term *social networks* in this thesis refers not to popular online programs such as Facebook or MySpace, but to a theoretical construct describing the interactions among groups of individuals who know each other.

- **Appraisal support:** Evaluative feedback
- **Emotional support:** “[T]he provision of trust, empathy, and love” (Tardy, 1985, p. 189)
- **Informational support:** “[I]nformation or advice provided on a certain area” (Malecki & Demaray, 2002, p. 2)
- **Instrumental support:** “Helping behaviors, such as loaning money or giving one’s time and skill” (Tardy, p. 189)
- **Personal network:** The set of relations surrounding a single individual
- **Social support:** “[T]he many different ways in which people render assistance to one another” (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990, p. 462)
- **Socioliterate support:** Supportive behaviors specifically related to the acts of reading and/or writing
- **Social network:** “[A] set of socially relevant nodes connected by one or more relations. Nodes . . . are most commonly persons or organizations, but in principle any units that can be connected to other units can be studied as nodes” (Marin & Wellman, 2011, p. 11)
- **Social network map:** A tool for “identifying and visually displaying network composition and membership” (Tracy & Whittaker, p. 463)
What I Bring to this Study

My doctoral thesis study is grounded in both my past experiences as an educator and a recent research experience. As a new college graduate, I taught 9th grade English/language arts in a culturally and socioeconomically diverse suburb of Houston, the fourth-largest city in the US and a minority-majority metropolis (Pinkerton & Hanson, 2007). In that same city, at a university that claimed to be the most diverse research university in the US, which was located in an urban, inner-city neighborhood and enrolled students primarily from that metropolitan area, I later taught first-year writing to “non-native speakers of English,” as the course was framed (see Reynolds, Bae, & Wilson, 2009, for more details regarding the students enrolled in that course sequence). In both settings, I had the privilege of glimpsing the lives of my students outside the classroom, through their choices of writing topics, the content of course journals, and many informal discussions during weekly writing consultations. The more I learned about these students, the more I wondered how their life experiences outside of school affected their development of academic literacy. I talked to students whose families and friends supported them in their academic endeavors and those who were at school over the protests of parents or despite strong peer pressure to drop out. I had students who found having children kept them from studying and those whose children provided ideas for writing topics and motivation to get a degree. Several were dealing with the pressures of having parents and family members in other countries, and at least one lived in fear of deportation. Some accessed the university writing center on a weekly basis and built relationships with tutors there; others avoided it due to the suspicion that using it would brand them as weak writers or because they had negative experiences with tutors there. Some held jobs that required them to write; others felt that writing would never be useful to them in the workplace. The more I learned about my urban,
multicultural, multilingual students, the more I wondered how all of these “activities, roles, and relations” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 11) intersected to create support systems that influenced their engagement in reading and writing, particularly in periods of adjusting to new schools (in 9th grade and first-year university).

A second experience that helped me see the relevance of social relationships to literacy engagement was a recent research project on the academic literacy development of Grade 9 and 10 students considered to be at-risk for literacy development and who lived in a low-SES, culturally diverse urban neighborhood in Canada’s largest city. These 21 students were enrolled in a community-based support program called Pathways to Education (referred to as “P2E” hereafter), which provided them with mentoring, tutoring, a home-school liaison, and a small tertiary scholarship (cf. Cumming, 2012a; Rowen & Gosine, 2006). I was involved in multiple stages of the “Adolescent Literacy in Three Urban Regions” (ALTUR) project: creating and piloting instruments, collecting and analyzing data, and tutoring at one of the P2E sites over a school year. Through the data collection, I gained a general understanding of the reading and writing practices, academic backgrounds, and home and community milieu of the participants, while the tutoring provided me with an in-depth view of how several participants approached and engaged with literacy in/for their high school courses. This experience reminded me of my American 9th grade students who faced many of the same academic and personal struggles fifteen years earlier, and I began to wonder how those similar struggles and experiences might have influenced and still be influencing adolescents’ literate activities.

Another lesson I have taken away from both my teaching and research—particularly the research with adolescents—is that life is “messy.” Not only are there many facets to every person’s life, neither is there a single background that students can be assumed to share. I have
found it increasingly uncomfortable to read articles about academic literacy that appear to assume a homogeneous white, English-dominant, middle-class student population (e.g., Bruning & Horn, 2000; Elbow, 1991; Harris, 1992). Instead, when I was teaching first-year composition, I came across a study on second language writers that finally took into consideration all of the facets I saw of my own students’ lived realities (and with participants whose lives resembled those of my students). This study by Judith Rodby (1999) looked at how the constellation of different aspects of students’ lives affected their revision processes; her analysis was framed using EST. This theory’s conception of human development as dependent on all the activities and relationships in a person’s life, acknowledged to occur at multiple levels from the individual to the societal, both appealed to me as an educator and seemed a valid framework to me as a researcher to use to explore the intersection of social relationships and literacy engagement. As Claire Kramsch ably summed up, “an ecological perspective on language [and literacy] development opens up possibilities of embracing the paradoxes, contradictions, and conflicts inherent in any situation involving semiotic activity, rather than rushing to solve them” (2002, p. 22).

Overview of Chapters

This doctoral thesis consists of six chapters. In the first chapter, I have presented theoretical, empirical and personal reasons for undertaking this research; described the research questions I have attempted to answer; and defined important terms used in this thesis. Chapter 2 outlines EST and reviews past scholarship in social network theory, social support, adolescent literacy, and educational and literacy engagement in order to show how this previous work relates to the present thesis study. In Chapter 3, I describe my perspective on the use of case studies as a methodological approach as well as my research participants, data collection
instruments and procedures, and analytic techniques. I also assert the validity of this project, clarify my personal stance as a researcher, and discuss several limitations of this study. Chapters 4 and 5 both present findings from the thesis research: Chapter 4 from the individual case studies and Chapter 5 from the cross-case analysis. Finally, in Chapter 6 I summarize the findings and connect them to the research questions, discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, and suggest directions for future research in various topics related to this thesis.
Chapter 2
Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the theoretical framework used to contextualize this thesis study was Ecological Systems Theory (EST; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992/2005). EST views individual learning and development as socially influenced at many levels, from the people in one’s immediate contexts up to macro-level societal structures. To operationalize this conceptual framework, I have taken a social psychology perspective, specifically focusing on social network and social support theory and research. This chapter provides an overview of relevant work in these fields. Because a social psychology approach is relatively novel in adolescent literacy research, in this chapter I also present previous studies that support the application of social network and social support principles to investigations of teenagers’ reading and writing. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the state of research in academic and literacy engagement.

Ecological Systems Theory

In 1979, the developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner published his seminal work, *The Ecology of Human Development*. Drawing from such theorists as Kurt Lewin and Lev Vygotsky, he proposed a theory of human development that he hoped would encourage researchers to give equal attention to people’s environments as well as their cognitive and personal qualities. In the intervening years, as Bronfenbrenner (e.g., 1992/2005) and other developmental psychologists (e.g., Moen, Elder, & Luscher, 1995) have refined this work, it has come to be known as EST.

In Bronfenbrenner’s (1992/2005) words,
the ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p. 107)

Specifically, Bronfenbrenner conceived of an individual’s environment as composed of four nested, concentric structures: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Later versions of Ecological Systems Theory allude to a chronosystem (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1992/2005); however, because that element of the theory is not as well defined as the other structures, and because it is not nested with the other four, I did not use it in framing my data collection and analysis.

**Microsystem**

This innermost of the nested structures, “is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and mental characteristics, and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief” (1992/2005, p. 148). There are several important points about this conception of the immediate settings of a person’s life. First, *settings* are those physical places where an individual is engaged in social contact, and Bronfenbrenner viewed “activities, roles, and interpersonal relations” as the foundational elements of these settings. A further key word in this definition is “experienced,” as Bronfenbrenner, following the phenomenological tradition, wanted to focus attention on participants’ perceptions of their settings and lives instead of the ‘objective’ reality as described by outsiders.
As highlighted in the previous paragraph, *activities, relationships, and roles* are each a significant component of the microsystem. Bronfenbrenner differentiated between molar *activities* and molecular acts, which are instantaneous and have no momentum or internal goals. Instead, a molar activity (such as reading a book or talking on the telephone) is meaningful to the individual and encompasses intent, motivation for perseverance and completion, and a sequence of actions designed to reach a goal. Engaging in activities is one way an individual can interact with his or her immediate setting; these activities also provide a means for others in the setting to influence (directly or indirectly, purposefully or unintentionally) an individual’s development. Essentially, in EST molar activities can provide a context for development, be a cause of development, and/or occur as a result of development.

Bronfenbrenner referred to *relationships* also as “interpersonal structures” (1979, p. 56), and he placed great emphasis on the structures created when two (or more) individuals engage in molar activity together, believing these create vital contexts for development. He focused chiefly on dyads, primarily for their developmental potential but also because a dyad allows larger interpersonal configurations to form, which he referred to as an “*N + 2 system*” (p. 68). For Bronfenbrenner, there were several types of dyads: ones in which one of the participants simply observes the other’s activity, ones in which the participants are jointly involved in an activity, and ones in which the “members appear in each other’s thoughts, are the objects of strong emotional feelings, and continue to influence one another’s behavior even when apart” (p. 58). These dyad types are not mutually exclusive, so that there might be a mother-child dyad in which the child watches the mother cook, eventually the child joins the mother in cooking, and both fondly remember the activity afterwards. Bronfenbrenner acknowledged dyadic issues that can affect development, such as balance of power—which he believed must be allowed to shift
toward the developing person for optimal development to take place—and the affective feelings that can develop during joint activity (positive and reciprocal feelings are seen as beneficial for development). However, as referenced above with the $N + 2$ designation, Bronfenbrenner also recognized that “the capacity of a dyad to function effectively as a context of development depends on the existence and nature of other dyadic relationships with third parties” (p. 77), and he thus concluded “[a]n analysis of the microsystem must take into account the full interpersonal system operating in a given setting. This system will typically include all the participants present (not excluding the investigator) and involve reciprocal relations between them” (p. 66).

Bronfenbrenner conceived of roles not only as the socially and culturally constructed labels specifying an individual’s position in society (such as race, gender, kinship relation, occupation, socioeconomic status) but also as the expectations carried by such labels of how one should act and be acted toward. In this way, the concept of role integrates elements of the ideas of activity and interpersonal relations just discussed. Role also relates directly to the ideologies and social structures that comprise an aspect of the macrosystem, as will be discussed below, and it is this feature of roles—their representations of the larger society—that Bronfenbrenner believed makes them so powerful in influencing development. He hypothesized that “[h]uman development is facilitated through interaction with persons who occupy a variety of roles and through participation in an ever-broadening role repertoire” (1979, p. 104).

**Mesosystem**

The discussion of the microsystem is more detailed than that of the other nested levels of the ecosystem because many of the elements of each level—activity, relationships like dyads and $N + 2$ systems, and roles—are similar. The primary difference is how and where these interconnections take place. For instance, at its most basic, a mesosystem is comprised of a
single actor involved in activities in more than one setting, such as at home and at school.
Settings also can be linked by relationships across settings (a mother whose child is in school),
by communications across settings (notes sent home from school), or by “intersetting
knowledge” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 210) in which knowledge about one setting exists in
another setting. A mesosystem can be weakly linked, in cases where there is only one person or
one type of link across microsystems, or multiply linked (more favorable to development).
Development at this level is hypothesized to rely on interactions between settings that are bi-
directional, mutually positive, and “exhibit a balance of power favorable to those linking parties
who facilitate action in behalf [sic] of the developing person” (p. 218).

**Exosystem**

An exosystem consists of settings in which an individual is not an active participant yet is
affected by events occurring there. An example of an exosystem setting is a parent’s job in
relation to a child. The child may never venture to the parent’s workplace, but decisions to send
the parent on a work-related trip, a cut or raise in pay, or simply a bad day at work all can have
an impact on the child. (Not only can the exosystem exert an influence on the individual in
question, but the individual can affect the exosystem; for instance, a child becomes ill and the
parent cannot go to work.) As an example, Bronfenbrenner cited Ogbu’s (1974) study that
revealed the effects of middle-class “taxpayers” on a school in a working-class, minority
neighborhood. Although the “taxpayers” rarely if ever entered this neighborhood (except as
teachers), they believed they were equipped to make decisions about appropriate educational
programs for the students there. Bronfenbrenner cited this study to support his hypotheses that
the weaker or more remote the links between the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem of an
individual, the less effective the exosystem is in advancing development for that individual, and that the balance of power in a setting is related to how beneficial that setting is for development.

**Macrosystem**

Ogbu’s study (1974) also reveals certain elements of the macrosystem at work in the urban neighborhood setting he described. The primary traits of a macrosystem are the “consistency observed within a given culture or subculture in the form and content of its constituent micro-, meso-, and exosystems, as well as any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 258). The “Burgherside” neighborhood described by Ogbu was part of the macrosystem constituted by US society as evidenced by the consistency of its structure as an urban neighborhood, position within the social class system, educational system, employment opportunities, and government structure, among other aspects. Moreover, Ogbu described three myths perpetuated by the “taxpayers,” the schools, and sometimes the neighborhood families themselves that were (and are) characteristic of insidious assumptions rampant across US society. These myths included the assumptions that poor minority families do not value education and do not encourage their children to achieve academically, have no father figures, and are caught in a welfare cycle that discourages school achievement. Thus, these macrosystemic beliefs influenced the actions of the “taxpayers” in the exosystem who were making decisions about the neighborhood students’ school-home mesosystems. Ogbu’s study exemplifies why EST is incomplete without the element of macrosystem. Finally, it is important to note that Bronfenbrenner’s definition of macrosystem can include “newly evolving social structures [that are] developing a characteristic set of values, lifestyle, and other defining features of a macrosystem” such as “the two-wage-earner family” (1992/2005, p. 150). While all cultures and subcultures are macrosystems, the converse is not true, as the example of the family
with two working parents makes clear; relevant to my thesis study, other possible macrosystems listed by Bronfenbrenner were neighborhoods and educational systems.

To summarize, in EST each unique setting in which the individual appears is a distinct *microsystem*; moreover, EST allows for linkages between the microsystems, which create *mesosystems*. Decisions, policies, and interactions at the level of *exosystem* and *macrosystem* directly affect an individual’s life as well.

My participants’ microsystems included their homes, classrooms, the after-school program, neighborhood, and workplaces, and there is a variety of research indicating that the acquisition of academic literacy skills can be shaped by factors within and across such systems. Using a case study approach, Rodby (1999) found that two multilingual university students who were successful in a first-year writing course were characterized by multiply linked mesosystems, such as taking courses with interrelated subject matter and holding campus jobs that linked together home, workplace, and school. Adopting a quantitative approach, Kainz and Vernon-Feagans (2007) hypothesized and tested an ecological model of literacy development with 1,913 economically disadvantaged students in kindergarten through third grade, finding that multiple factors in home, classroom, and school-level literacy systems influenced students’ reading development.

**Social Network Theory**

These interpersonal and inter-setting links that fascinated Bronfenbrenner also form the basis of social network theory. The underlying principle of social network theory and research is that interpersonal relationships—and the patterns formed by these relations—are the building blocks of social life (Marin & Wellman, 2011). This field has its roots in sociological theories from the early 1900s that hypothesized that society is “nothing more than a web of relations”
(p.14), and the current social network perspective has been adopted by scholars in fields as disparate as anthropology, computer science, medicine, and economics in order to investigate the nature and implications of social connections between human beings.

There are two particular approaches used in the application of a network perspective to network-based research. The *formalist* approach generally uses mathematical modeling and computer programs to simulate networks based on particular patterns or ‘rules’ of human relationships. Formalist methods are familiar to the general public as they underpin various pop culture exercises like figuring out the fewest connections between two actors. The *structuralist* approach applies network analysis as a frame to investigate a topic in another discipline. Structuralists may use a network perspective in order to re-define an important concept in a new (i.e., network-based) way, to test or refine a current disciplinary theory, or to look for different causes of a particular phenomenon (Marin & Wellman, 2011). For example, an early proponent of social network analysis in language research was sociolinguist Lesley Milroy, who studied patterns of linguistic variation as related to individuals’ ties to their local communities in Belfast, Ireland, in the 1970s and 80s (e.g., Milroy, 1987). Although my thesis study is more concerned with investigating literacy-related behaviour than linguistic variation, it is aligned with the structuralist approach Milroy introduced into language research over 30 years ago (cf. Polat & Mahalingappa, 2010, for a current example of structuralist network research in linguistics).

There are also two types of networks that can be studied, a whole network (e.g., all teenagers living in an electoral district in Dublin, as in Kirke, 2006) or a personal network (e.g., individuals’ loss and gain of school friends during the transition from elementary to middle school, as in Cantin & Boivin, 2004). In the whole network approach, a researcher takes a “bird’s-eye view” (Marin & Wellman, 2011, p. 19) of all members in a network and the
connections between them; this approach is most common in fields such as anthropology and public health (Cotterell, 2007). The personal network approach, as the name implies, focuses only on a single individual and the links between this individual and others; it is most commonly used in counseling and child development (Cotterell).

Most studies on the social networks of adolescents have taken a whole network approach and have focused on health or negatively perceived behavioral issues. The largest of these studies—and encompassing all these issues—is the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) in the United States, which began in 1994 with 90,118 participants in grades 7-12 (Blum & Rinehart, 1997) and held the most recent wave of data collection in 2007-2008 with 15,701 of the original respondents (Harris et al., 2009). Specific issues investigated using network data include exercise and fitness, substance use, sexual behaviour, and violence (Blum & Rinehart). Kirke (2006), mentioned briefly above, interviewed 267 teenagers aged 14-18 and living in a politically defined neighborhood in Dublin about their substance use and the individuals with whom they regularly interacted, in an attempt to draw conclusions about the role of peer and parental influences on adolescent use of drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. Cotterell (2007) reviewed smaller-scale studies (e.g., Bearman, Moody, & Stovel, 2004; Liebow et al., 1995) that investigated the network structures of adolescents in specific neighborhoods or high schools and how these structures hypothetically could affect the spread of HIV within these networks or that used a network approach to predict the ‘deviant’ attitudes of gang members based on their location within a gang network (e.g., Baron & Tindall 1993).

Despite the exhortation more than 15 years ago that “Literacy cannot be described outside of social networks and the relationships that exist among their members” (Hayden & Fagan, 1995, p. 260), there is little work in literacy research that applies a social network
perspective. Ferenz (2005) explicitly claimed to be adopting such a perspective in her study on the English academic literacy development of Israeli graduate students whose first languages were Hebrew and Russian. Her study did describe the types of assistance various individuals gave to participants on literacy events (e.g., peers giving feedback on writing assignments). However, Ferenz focused more on the roles of network members (e.g., professors, students, co-workers) and the assistance given rather than on describing participants’ social networks in detail. In a study on the composing practices of two high school students, Oates (2001) referred to the ways in which students’ social networks influenced their writing practices, but he conflated social network with the notion of a homogeneous ‘community,’ rather than acknowledging the various ‘communities’ from which network members come; on the other hand, he did recognize that “textual meanings are contingent on the meanings a person makes/holds for the social and relational practices he or she is engaging” (p. 234).

In today’s popular culture, the term social networks is used to refer to online sites that allow people to create personal (e.g., Facebook) and professional (e.g., LinkedIn) profiles and to share these sites with other individuals whom they invite or by whom they are invited to link to. Because there is a literacy aspect to social networking [web]sites (SNS), as individuals are required to post to their own and others’ profiles in writing and read the posts of others (also, many people post links to informational or recreational websites), some recent research is shedding light on connections between adolescent literacy/ies and SNS. For example, in a qualitative study of 11 multicultural MySpace users in Grade 12 enrolled in an after-school program for low-income students, Greenhow and Robelia (2009) found that these students’ use of MySpace supported their school work, as they frequently communicated project resources, shared their written assignments, and gave each other feedback on work. While the
investigators’ approach was not based in traditional social network theory, studies on SNS are worth acknowledging here for two reasons: to clarify that my use of the ‘network’ concept in this thesis does not imply a focus on the current popular usage of the term to mean SNS and also to highlight the growing importance of SNS as one aspect of social relationships in the literate lives (both academic and recreational) of adolescents.

Similar to the Ferenz (2005) and Greenhow and Robelia (2009) studies, my concern in this thesis study was not on the membership of an entire group, such as the number of members connected to each other (density) or the strength or depth of connections between the various members (multiplexity), but on the individuals present in the lives of each of my participants, most of whom did not know each other and were not part of each other’s networks. Moreover, this study is investigating an educational topic, not a network topic. Thus, I adopted a structuralist, personal network approach in the implementation and analysis of this study. In particular, I was concerned with a possible flow of literacy support from the network members to each participant. Thus, my approach was also based in social support research, which “pursue[s] a wide range of questions concerning the positive (and negative) outcomes that people receive from social relationships” (Morgan, 1990, p. 195).

Social Support

The interdisciplinary field of social support has a long-standing relationship with research in social networks. Numerous scholars (e.g., Bambina, 2007; Laireiter & Baumann, 1992; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990; Wellman, 1985) have noted the reliance of social support research on social network theory and methodology. This overlap is not surprising, considering that “[s]ocial support has been broadly defined as the range of significant interpersonal relationships that have an impact on an individual’s functioning (Caplan, 1974)” (Cauce, Felner,
& Primavera, 1982, p. 418). In order for social support researchers to gain a perspective on what important relationships exist in participants’ lives, they generally need at least a snapshot of participants’ social networks. In particular, supporting my attention to participants’ personal networks, this snapshot should focus on “the intimate zone of a personal network [which] appears responsible for regulating people’s everyday needs for support” (Laireiter & Baumann, p. 50).

Social support as a research field grew out of epidemiological work in the 1970s on the benefits of social interactions in preventing disease. This work was further taken up by community psychologists and sociologists who studied the beneficial effects of emotional support from health care workers on health outcomes, particularly for economically disadvantaged individuals (Sarason et al., 1990). Although this research on health-related social support initially focused on adults, the work extended to children and adolescents in the form of research on the effects of social support on depression, behavioral issues such as drug use and delinquency, and, finally, to academic performance (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998).

In an early attempt to classify the types of social support that appeared to influence the “adjustment” of inner-city, low SES adolescents, Cauce et al. (1982) used the continuum of formal-informal support suggested by Caplan (1974, as cited by Cauce et al.). They found that the people perceived by students to be supportive fell into three distinct categories: family, formal (e.g., teachers, clergy), and informal (e.g., other adults, friends). Tardy (1985) extended the theoretical conceptualization of social support to include aspects such as whether support is given or received, whether the support is only available or actually being utilized, the type of support (i.e., emotional, instrumental, informational, or appraisal), and the source of the support. Malecki and Demaray (2002) confirmed through statistical analyses of empirical data from 757
adolescents that the four categories of parent, teacher, classmate, and close friend were supported as factors in a source-based model of social support. In 2006, the same authors added “school” as a fifth source of support in their model.

Social support research has been concerned not only with classifying the social support of adolescents, it has also offered evidence of a relationship between social support and academic achievement, although with mixed results. Cauce et al. (1982) found that socially supportive peer relationships correlated with lower grade point averages (GPA) for a culturally diverse group of inner-city high school students (N=250), as did Gillock and Reyes (1999) for 158 urban, low-SES Mexican American 11th graders. Neither study found a correlation between family support and academic achievement, although family support scores were very high in both. Gillock and Reyes conclude,

In this group of adolescents, high levels of support were found to be irrelevant in explaining school performance . . . although these adolescents perceived their family and friends as highly supportive, this support did not seem to be enough to offset stress-related difficulties in academic performance. (p. 278)

On the other hand, in a sample of 108 middle-class Grade 8 and 9 students, Levitt, Guacci-Franco, and Levitt (1994) found that perceived support correlated directly with SAT scores, and Demaray and Malecki (2002) found that teacher-reported “academic competence” correlated with overall perceived support (although not with any one source of support) for 1,711 students in Grades 3-12. Malecki and Demaray (2006) investigated the role of social support as an “academic buffer” in an urban, mostly Hispanic middle school, comparing results of students by SES; they found no significant correlations between any sources of social support and any GPA calculations for the higher-SES group, but for the lower-SES group significant correlations
were found between total social support and total GPA, language GPA, and reading GPA; between parent support, total GPA, language GPA, reading GPA, and social studies GPA; between teacher support, total GPA, language GPA, and reading GPA; between classmate support and reading GPA; between friend support and reading GPA; and between school support and reading GPA. Additionally, they found no significant negative correlations between any sources of support and any GPA measures.

Social support has also been implicated in at least two longitudinal, qualitative studies as influential in multicultural, multilingual students’ academic literacy development or success. Although social support was not the primary focus, in her three-year study of four university students for whom English was not the first language, Leki (2007) found that the academic success of these students was often based on the academic literacy support they received via relationships they had established (often for the purpose of furthering their learning) with their classmates and their instructors. Examples of this support include shared lecture notes, informal study groups, and mentoring. Leki hypothesized that when socioacademic relationships were positive, participants’ identities as successful learners were enhanced. Leki also noted situations that constrained socioacademic support, particularly conflicts between group members on class assignments and the power differential between undergraduates and faculty members. A second study (Snow, Porsche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007) followed 41 low-income students from age 3 through Grade 10 and used three focal students who were struggling in middle and high school—despite having above average scores on literacy measures—to illustrate how troubled relationships with parents can be one factor in “derail[ing] a successful academic trajectory” (p. 65). Overall, the authors concluded that “[t]he poorer academic outcomes of the students
highlighted . . . compared with those in the group who fared better has much to do with the availability of supportive adults in general, and strong parental support in particular” (p. 66).

One particular methodological issue is that many of the studies reviewed above—except Leki (2007) and Snow et al. (2007)—assessed only the presence or absence of positive social support and failed to assess *negative* support. Negative support includes network members who “actively undermine” or “who are unreliable or who provide support at great cost (conflict, demands)” (Vaux, 1992, p.197); such conflictual relationships have been shown both empirically and theoretically to have a negative impact on personal adjustment and well-being (La Gaipa, 1990; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1990). A second issue is that the nature of relationships and support may change over time (Pierce et al.), yet only the studies by Leki and Snow et al. were longitudinal. Finally, all the studies reviewed here—as appears common in social support research—focused on the perceptions of the individual receiving the support; instead, it would be useful to consider a supportive interaction from the viewpoint of all individuals involved in a supportive interaction in order to glean information regarding the similarities or differences in goals for the interaction as well as situations that inhibit network members from providing support (Pierce et al.).

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The previous three sections provide the conceptual background of my thesis research—how I planned to study a particular phenomenon. In the following two sections, I focus on theoretical and empirical work that informed my initial selection of this phenomenon.

**Adolescent Literacy**

What does previous research tell us about the social relationships implicated in teenagers’ reading and writing? With whom do they read and write and why? And what influences do
social relationships appear to have on adolescents’ literacy events/practices/development? Guided by Ecological Systems Theory, this review focuses on three physical contexts—home, school, neighborhood—in which adolescents seem most likely to participate in microsystems containing literate activities.

Before continuing, it is important to note that the term *adolescent literacy* carries a broad range of meanings and connotations, as succinctly summarized by Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris (2008): The terms *literacy* and *adolescent* can each be problematized in their own right, as can the compound term *adolescent literacy*. In Chapter 1, I have articulated the definition of literacy I am using for this study, and I emphasized my generally humanistic conception of adolescents as people; I should explain further that I am equating *adolescent* with *teenager* and *high school student*, while recognizing that middle school students are also entering the physical stage of adolescence and are often included in studies of adolescent literacy—thus, studies of middle school students are included in this literature review. I am also clearly adopting a North American view of what it means to be an adolescent/teenager; despite the multicultural backgrounds of my participants, they were experiencing adolescence in a North American context. According to Moje et al., the study of adolescent literacy has often focused on “what it means for adolescents to be literate in a new century” (p. 112) and how to most appropriately assess/measure/consider their literacy skills, practices, activities, and needs.

**Home**

**Interactions.** The range of socioliterate interactions documented by previous literacy researchers in teenagers’ home microsystems is quite broad. Finders (1997), in a study of five seventh-grade girls in a semi-rural middle and working class suburb, described the rich variety of one of her participants’ home literacy interactions: Cleo’s mother took her three children to the
library weekly and recommended books to them for the purposes of helping them understand their Jewish heritage and women’s issues; the family described reading together silently in the living room regularly; Cleo read books aloud to her younger brother and a bed-ridden neighbor; and Cleo reported receiving regular (though critical) feedback from her mother on her writing assignments. Unfortunately, not all adolescents live in such a literacy-rich environment with so many socioliterate interactions—nor do all studies look at as many facets of literacy practices.

A frequently reported interaction is that of students receiving help on their language arts or English homework from their parents (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006; McKay & Wong, 1996; Wilson, 2012) and occasionally from siblings, such as the daily help provided by Hassan’s older sister who was enrolled in college (al-Alawi, 2012); also, teens may be helping younger siblings with their homework, as in the case of the older sister Paw helping her younger brother Sy write down his story ideas for English class (Fu, 1995). However, it is important to note that parents of immigrant teenagers do not always have the linguistic—or cultural—knowledge to be able to help their children with homework (e.g., Gaztambide-Fernández & Guerrero, 2011; Valdés, 1998). Social reading for pleasure is another common theme, at times with parents but also with siblings. In a study of 10 urban middle school students of varying ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Knoester, 2009), 17 of the 20 parents and students interviewed indicated that the student liked to be read to by a parent. Five of the students reported reading books recommended to them by older siblings, and all who had younger siblings described reading to them. Moje et al. (2008) found that several participants reported parents encouraging them to read and even sharing their own books with the teens. Even more of their participants, especially young women, reported reading to younger siblings and helping them with homework (though none reported similar experiences with older siblings). Of note in the Moje et al. study is that a
few of the participants also reported that their parents disapproved of their reading choices, an issue which is rarely taken up in adolescent literacy research.

Finally, several studies uncovered adolescents reading with a parent or sibling for purposes that were neither academic nor entertainment. One of Finders’ (1997) focal students read pamphlets, magazines and catalogs together with her mother in order to plan how to decorate their home and to plan parties at which they sold home decoration items. Furthermore, the parties Dottie and her mother hosted in their home led to other literacy-related activities, such as giving answers from the catalogs in response to questions asked by the party leader. Knobel (2001) described 13-year-old Jacques in Australia working on his father’s computer with his mother and brother to compose a flier for his lawn-care service as well as apprenticing in business literacy practices by watching (and, it is implied, helping) his father order supplies and balance the books for his company. Edgar, in Ek (2008), read the Bible with his father. One of Yi’s (2005) teenaged participants (an immigrant from Korea) helped her parents read and write on the computer, and another corresponded via email with her father who was living in Korea. Miguel, in Rubenstein-Ávila’s (2003) case study of a struggling reader, helped his mother with translating court documents. Moje et al. (2008) described a mother helping her son read books written in Spanish so he would not forget the language. Finally, Moje (2000a) reported on one of her participants learning ‘gangsta’ literacy (e.g., how to write certain letters and phrases) from her older sisters in order to occupy a gang-related identity.

Influences. From the studies reviewed above, parental influence on literacy choices emerges as a recurring theme. Certainly, doing homework can be considered a ‘choice,’ and it appears that parental encouragement and assistance can lead adolescents to complete homework assignments, especially those they would have found difficult to complete on their own, as with
the example given by Fairbanks and Arial (2006) above. Finders’ (1997) participant Dottie would not have been participating in the Home Interiors parties nor reading home decorating magazines were those not interests of her mother and a way for the two females to connect. On the other hand, Cleo (also one of Finders’ participants) rejected her mother’s reading and writing suggestions as she attempted to establish her independence. Parental influence can be directly negative, also, as indicated by findings in Finders (1997) and Moje et al. (2008) by parents expressing disapproval of teens’ reading materials, though no outcomes of this disapproval were reported by these researchers.

Parental influence extends beyond simple reading and writing choices. Finders (1997) hypothesized that the practices at the Home Interiors parties of shouting out the right answers found in a catalog, with a prize for doing so, reinforced similar school literacy practices and thus Dottie’s identity as a “good student” (p. 91)—in opposition to the more popular girls who actively resisted such an identity through their public literacy practices and attitudes (discussed in more detail in the following section). As a counterpoint, Knobel (2001) viewed the employment-based literacy practices supported by Jacques’ parents as disjointed from and unsupportive of school-based literacy expectations.

Studies that report socioliterate interactions with siblings generally have not investigated the results of these interactions, and this topic recently has been labeled “under-researched” (Sokal & Piotrowski, 2011, p. 1). Moreover, the few extant studies have focused on the effects of elementary students reading to or teaching even younger siblings (e.g., Williams & Gregory, 2001; Sokal, Hathout, & Krahn, 2008; Sokal & Piotrowski, 2011). In one relevant longitudinal study (although about siblings “teaching”—which is never clearly defined—rather than actually reading) of 566 racially diverse 9th and 11th graders, Smith (1993) found significant effects of
“teaching” younger siblings on the older sibling’s scores on a standardized language test (although not on reading and math test results). Despite the lack of empirical work investigating the effects of older-younger sibling literacy interactions, interesting parallels can be drawn from the positive outcomes found in the research on cross-age tutoring. In many of the studies on cross-age tutoring (i.e., high school students tutoring elementary students in reading), findings show an improvement in literacy skills and practices not only for the tutees, but also for the tutors themselves (e.g., Jacobson et al., 2001; Paterson & Elliott, 2006). Thus, one likely assumption is that socioliterate interactions with either older or younger siblings may have a positive effect on multiple aspects of adolescents’ literacy.

Multilingual teens’ identity/ies as knowledgeable users of written language may be reinforced when family members need assistance, especially if the assistance is due in part to a lack of English knowledge; the teens may see themselves as ‘literacy brokers’ of sorts (e.g., Yi, 2010; see also the concept of ‘language broker’ in Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003). On the other hand, adolescents’ identities may be negatively impacted if family members view them as deficient in language and literacy skills or criticize their reading and writing choices.

Critique. Despite evidence from both educational and psychological research that parents have the potential to be influential figures in the lives of many adolescents (e.g., Finders, 1997; Mounts, 2001; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005; Snow et al., 2007), there is little research on the specific ways in which parental involvement, either at home or at school, might influence students’ literacy events, practices, and development. For instance, in a racially diverse urban middle school, Dressman, Wilder, and Connor (2005) “found evidence in several of the students’ cumulative files and in interviews of parents’ long-term involvement, and even more concern with their children’s educational progress and future” (p. 31). However, the authors failed to (or
were unable to) draw any conclusions about this finding and the students’ literacy development. In their meta-analysis of sociocultural factors affecting literacy development in L2 students, Goldenberg, Rueda, and August (2006) called for more research “on how specific parental behaviors and attitudes are related to enhanced literacy development” (p. 263), as well as whether the salient parental influences change over time and whether or not (and how) parental involvement programs are effective. Goldenberg et al. also could have appealed for more relevant work with adolescents since the majority of the research on sociocultural factors that they reviewed was conducted with elementary students. Finally, there appears to be little work that directly addresses sibling influences on literacy practices/development, despite the fact that older siblings, perhaps particularly in low-SES or multilingual urban settings where parental involvement might be limited by work responsibilities or language and cultural barriers (cf. Williams & Gregory, 2001), are often academic role models and tutors for younger siblings.

**School**

**Interactions.** Socioliterate interactions in the ecological context of a school include both those with teachers and those with peers. While adolescents have more opportunities than do younger students to make friends and same-age acquaintances outside of school, most of their friendships are still based around going to a common school; thus, I have chosen to include peer literacy interactions in this *microsystem*.

Through the shared reading and writing of a wide variety of print genres, such as writing on the board, assignment sheets, homework, feedback, journals, and report cards, teachers and adolescents have multiple literate interactions every day. These interactions, however, are different from the other socioliterate interactions described in this chapter, as those initiated by a teacher are rarely focused on a specific student as an individual, but tend to be part of a teacher’s
general pedagogical strategy. In other words, these interactions may not contribute directly to the construction of a microsystem between the teacher and a student.

Although my focus in this thesis study is on one-to-one literate interactions occurring in an overtly social manner, it is not possible to sustain that focus when looking at research on teacher-student socioliterate interactions for two reasons: First, there appears to be little research that has explicitly investigated the socioliterate aspect of teacher-student relationships involving adolescent students (cf. Moje, 1996), and, second, any socioliterate interactions that may occur do so within the overall social context the teacher has created in the classroom and cannot be separated from that context—for instance, if a student seeks out extra help from a teacher on an essay or enjoys literary discussions with a teacher at lunch, generally the student feels comfortable doing so due to the classroom atmosphere the teacher has created. (For example, Harklau [1994] documented a high school ESL teacher who was much more pedagogically engaging and supportive of the students than were their mainstream teachers, and, as a consequence, the ESL students sought out her assistance with documents such as college applications, draft registration, and a chain letter.) Thus, instead of reviewing literature describing such interactions, below I will focus on “how relationships and interactions among teachers and students shape the [literacy] decisions . . . students make” (Moje, 1996, p. 177).

Peers interact through literacy in many ways, perhaps even increasing with the spread of technology. Some of these interactions are academic in nature: Yi (2005) described two ESL high school students providing feedback on their essays through MSN\(^1\), and, in a qualitative study of 11 multicultural MySpace users in Grade 12, Greenhow and Robelia (2009) found that students’ use of MySpace supported their school work, as they frequently communicated project

\(^1\) MSN stands for Microsoft Network, which originally consisted of a variety of web-based services such as a browser, email, Internet portal, and instant messaging. However, in the first decade of the 21st century, many people used MSN as a synonym for instant messaging, as did the teens in Yi’s study and the participants in my thesis study.
resources, shared their written assignments, and gave each other feedback on work. Villalva (2006) described a bilingual high school student, who was working on a senior research project, getting both oral feedback and published sources from a friend. Valenzuela (1999) gave an account of a study group that formed between friends who shared not only an ESL class but also similar orientations to their use of Spanish and the same hometown in Mexico. In the same high school, she also documented a case of literate students reading the textbook to a “pre-literate” peer so that he could keep up with the class.

Beyond the school curriculum, literacy researchers have investigated adolescents engaging jointly in recreational literacy activities such as note-writing (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006; Finders, 1997; Moje, 2000), shared journals (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006), teen magazine reading (Finders, 1997), formal and informal book discussions (Moje et al., 2008; Worthy, 1998), co-authoring stories and poems (Hinchman, Payne-Bourcy, Thomas, & Olcott, 2002; Moje, 2000; Moje et al., 2008), instant messaging (Lewis & Fabos, 2000; Yi, 2005), video games (Leander & Lovvorn, 2006; Yi, 2005) and online web communities (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Yi, 2005, 2010). These interactions were often with close friends but could also occur between classmates who were less friends than acquaintances.

One issue regarding socioliterate interactions with peers that has come to light in research on multilingual adolescents is that these students may have fewer opportunities in the US for such interactions than teens whose first language is English. There are multiple reports of L2 adolescents feeling socially isolated across language backgrounds, gender, and age (all in high school unless otherwise noted): the four Laotian refugees profiled by Fu (1995), the Chinese immigrants Zhu and Ping (Lay, Carro, Tien, Niemann, & Leong, 1999), the Polish immigrant Jan (Leki, 1999), five immigrant students from Latin America, Taiwan, and Nigeria documented by
Ortmeier-Hooper (2007), all four Latin American immigrant middle school students in Valdés (2001), and the Korean immigrant student Soohee (Yi, 2005). Many of these students talked to the various researchers about experiencing racism and ridicule on the part of native English speaking peers, as well as not knowing the social conventions for approaching or interacting with those peers, while several of them also felt they had little in common with other L2 students in their ESL classes, particularly feeling a difference between newly arrived students with whom they were often enrolled in the same ESL courses or program even after spending several years in US schools. Thus, it is probable that adolescents who feel socially isolated are not experiencing many opportunities to write (and read) with a supportive peer network, certainly not in English and possibly not at all.

**Influences.** Teachers’ influences on students’ literacy can be quite positive. In a case study by Rubinstein-Ávila (2003), Miguel, an eighth-grade English language learner (ELL), talked about the influence his two core teachers had in turning around his attitude toward school and his grades. He attributed his renewed interest in school to their caring and support, and he mentioned that one of the teachers allowed him to read books in Spanish (his L1) and write the book reports in English, a process that allowed him to be successful on those assignments. Miguel said, “Sometimes I wanna flunk [eighth grade], ‘cause I know it won’t be the same without them [in high school]. Like, [Ms. Molina and Ms. Domingo] make me do my work. . . They watch out for me. I’m gonna miss them” (p. 296, italics in original). In a chemistry class, chosen as a research site due to the teacher’s commitment to using literacy to advance subject-area knowledge, Moje (1996) found “the students were willing to participate in literacy events because they believed [the teacher] used the activities to help them learn and be successful. They interpreted the teacher’s inclusion of literacy as evidence of her teaching effectiveness and
her caring for them as learners” (p. 181). At a more general level, Langer (2002), reporting on best practices in middle and high school literacy programs across three major US cities, identified caring and supportive teachers as a characteristic of effective literacy pedagogy: “. . . they all have a high-quality relationship with the majority of their students” (p. 75). The teachers observed by Langer’s team built these relationships in various ways: by actively working to be viewed as a resource and mentor (Mr. Mendez, New York), by knowing students’ “lives, their interests, their strengths and weaknesses as students of English and as young adults growing up in a troubled inner city” (p. 70; Ms. Masztal, Miami); by taking on a “persona . . . of an older, wiser friend whom students know is doing everything she can to help them do well, but more than that, who is trying to bring them to truly come to love literary life as she does” (p. 71; Ms. Gold, Miami); and by allowing and engaging in personal ‘chit-chat’ as an English language teaching strategy (Ms. Slater, New York). These examples of teacher-student interactions and relationships are part of what Campano (2007) called the “second classroom” (pp. 39-40), which he saw as a pedagogical space that values both students’ and teachers’ life experiences and stories. Moje (2000b) provided an explanation for why such teaching practices show up in literacy programs viewed as highly effective: “My research indicates that when kids feel cared for—when they believe they are working in a relationship with a teacher—they tend to be more willing to try different literacy practices and strategies that the teacher offers” (p. 69).

Unfortunately, these influences can be negative as well. In direct contrast to the teachers described in Langer (2002), yet still drawing on the theoretical concept of caring, Valenzuela (1999) documented how a perceived lack of caring on the part of teachers at a Texas high school fractured “scholastic support networks” (p. 28) and created an atmosphere like the one she observed in a ninth-grade English classroom, in which the teacher said to Valenzuela in front of
the class, “Look at [these kids], they’re not going anywhere. I can tell you right now, a full quarter of these students will drop out of school come May,” (p. 64)—not surprisingly, the students “challenged his ability to make them learn under abusive conditions” (p. 65) by not doing any work on their writing assignment during this observation. After providing multiple similar examples, Valenzuela concluded “a dearth of authentic relations with teachers subtracts, or minimizes, opportunities youth have to develop and enjoy a sense of competence and mastery of the curriculum” (p. 71). Although Dressman et al. (2005) did not provide specific examples, they did note that a factor contributing to their participants’ literate and academic failure appeared to be “contingent largely on a teacher’s demeanor, his or her instructional approach, and, more broadly, on the relevance of the content presented or the teacher’s ability to generate interest by demonstrating the content’s relevance to the students” (pp. 34-35). Ortmeier-Hooper (2007) related the story of Wisdom, a ninth-grade immigrant from Nigeria, whose rapidly disintegrating relationship with his English teacher led to his first detention, his first C grade, and his feeling that “she does not want to see me succeed, to do better in that class” (p. 133). He blamed these problems on the fact that “she just doesn’t know who I am” (p. 132), and he sought the assistance of his former middle school ESL teacher who “has been like a mother to me” (p. 134).

But even positive teacher-student relationships can have negative academic or literate influences. Moje (1996) pointed out that students’ use of literacy strategies learned from their chemistry teacher did not transfer to other classes, which she hypothesized occurred because students identified these strategies so strongly with the caring pedagogy of this particular teacher. Furthermore, Moje concluded that (1) such rapport may not have been so easily constructed had the teacher and students not shared the same cultural and social backgrounds and orientation to
academic success, and (2) this teacher’s “ethic of caring” (p. 193) may have focused her on students’ achievement at the expense of scaffolding them into literacy as a critical lens through which to construct chemistry knowledge. Jan, a teenaged immigrant from Poland, resisted engagement in his high school ESL class despite—or perhaps because of—his teacher’s caring attitude that seemed to resonate with other students in the class: “And the professor was just so sweet . . . I was like, just shut up and teach. I just hate like people just being so sweet in class” (Leki, 1999, pp. 23-24). Unfortunately, Jan initially found college work overwhelming, a possible result of his disengagement from his high school ESL class. Why did Jan object to his teacher’s attitude? Perhaps it was a personal preference, or perhaps it was due to a culturally based expectation: In a study of a California middle school beginning to implement an ESL program, Valdés (1998) found that “Latino children, who were used to teachers who are strict and who demand both silence and respect, had trouble reading the signals of those teachers who seemed nice, who wanted to be liked, and who wanted to make learning fun” (p. 7).

Nor is a pedagogy of caring always enough to ensure academic success or literacy development, especially in educational contexts with many controversial political and social overtones, such as ESL and bilingual education. In the same study, Valdés claimed “[t]he teachers cared deeply about the students, but there were too many students, not enough support, and not enough previous training” (p. 7). She also observed in a later volume expanding on this study (Valdés, 2001) that teachers with little or no formal ESL training are not equipped to work with students who are illiterate in their first language, nor do they have the luxury of time to tutor their students one-on-one. Campano (2007) pointed out that teachers often have too many demands placed on them, making a personally and intellectually nurturing classroom difficult to construct: “In a climate of remediation, standardization, and high-stakes testing, a teacher’s
ability to fulfill the needs of the school institution and accommodate the specific experiences and stories of students rests on his or her individual capacity to negotiate agendas that are often in direct conflict” (p. 41).

Adopting the view of identity/ies as “locally understood and constantly remade in social relationships” (Harklau, 2000, p. 37), one particular way that socioliterate interactions with peers can influence adolescents is through their construction of literate identities, which can have both positive and negative outcomes on literacy behavior and beliefs. Finders (1997) created an extensive, in-depth portrait of the literacy practices of two female middle school cliques, the “Social Queens” and the “Tough Cookies.” Finders claimed that “. . . literate practices could be unsafe. Carrying the wrong kind of book, writing the wrong kind of story, passing notes to the wrong people, all might mark one as an outsider or as an insider in the wrong group” (p. 118). In order to maintain the façade she had created of being indifferent to school, Tiffany, leader of the Social Queens, was unable to exhibit her genuine interest in an assigned story: “. . . Tiffany worked very hard to conceal the fact that she was a reader and worked equally hard to construct an image of herself as an uninterested learner” (p. 76). The Tough Cookie Cleo enjoyed writing essays about social issues but chose to deny that aspect of her literate identity and to write personal narratives in class even when given a choice—because she had been teased by classmates the previous year for writing about feminism. Her friend Dottie chose to write peer comments on her own papers in a different color of ink and sign another student’s name rather than break the Tough Cookie “code” of not sharing with peers. A desire to confirm to perceived peer expectations is not limited to girls or to ‘mainstream’ students: The ELL students Ken, Paul, and Wisdom (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2010) felt they had to hide their enthusiasm for school
from their peers in order to be ‘cool’ and learned from their peers to choose the assignments that required the least writing.

On the other hand, socioliterate events and practices can reinforce literate identities and behaviors in more positive ways. One of the Social Queens, Carrie, seemed to create an identity as a high achiever and literacy ‘middleman’ by writing stories for other girls to turn in, and most of the Social Queens read certain young adult novels and magazines (often together in groups) because it was ‘cool’ to do so—their choices may have been constrained by their social group membership, but at the same time they were at least reading. Yi’s (2007) participant Joan constructed identities as a poet and a knowledgeable user of technology through her socioliterate interactions in a local teen-focused web community. Lam (2000) hypothesized that online communication allowed her teenaged Chinese-American participant to create a “textual self” (p. 478)—one which helped him feel more connected to global users of English and the creation and maintenance of which appeared to improve his attitude toward and fluency in written English. Finally, a case study of two middle school “renegade readers” (Worthy, 1998) did not discuss the boys’ literate identities but did illustrate how the animated discussions of books shared by the boys influenced one of them to read more, especially popular novels.

Critique. While many in the field of education assume teacher influence is important in general student learning (cf. Galbo, 1994), the ways in which (1) this influence is imparted and (2) how it specifically facilitates or constrains adolescent literacy are rarely made visible through empirical research. Two exceptions to this statement are the volumes by Langer (2002) and Moje (2000b). In particular, Moje’s book is of value for her observations about the aspects of a pedagogy of caring that are particularly beneficial for promoting learning, as well as her
recommendations about operationalizing a pedagogy of caring in order to engage adolescents in academic literacy.

A particular element that is missing in research on teacher-student interactions is investigations of the ways teachers use literacy events and practices to build the caring relationships that other research tells us are important, whether those practices/events are pedagogical interventions like individual writing conferences or feedback or are more informal like recommending extracurricular reading materials or online interactions.

Despite recognition that adolescence is a life-stage when relationships outside the family become extremely meaningful (e.g., Cotterell, 2007; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005), there is little work that actively considers the influence of peers on literate practices, particularly school-based literacy. Instead, much of the literature on adolescent literacy investigates participants as solitary individuals or makes claims about some sub-group of adolescents as a unit (e.g., “adolescent boys’ literacy practices” [Hinchman et al., 2002, p. 230]). Even in work that purports to take an ecological view of literate activities (Villalva, 2006) or to examine the role of social resources in literacy learning (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006), peer influences have been mentioned as an aside and not explicitly investigated.

**Neighborhood Interactions.** The influences of individuals outside the home and school are rarely the focus of research on adolescent literacy. That aspects of a physical neighborhood correlate with adolescent literacy development is evident in PISA data, if we assume that the “social profile” of a school is determined by the SES level of its surrounding community: “On average, students who attend schools with a more advantaged ‘social profile’ are likely to show considerably higher levels of literacy than those at less advantaged schools” (OECD, 2004, p. 14), even more
so than could be accounted for by these students’ individual backgrounds. Yet, the PISA data provide no information about the ways relationships are formed in communities nor the possible influences, positive or negative, of such relationships.

In the limited literature related to socioliterate interactions at the neighborhood level, the community setting that is most frequently discussed is the organized, after-school-type program in which students are reading (e.g., Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999), working on multiple literacy skills, such as word- and sentence-level skills as well as reading and writing (e.g., Babbitt & Byrne, 1999), or receiving general academic tutoring with some undefined literacy component (e.g., Tucker et al., 1995). In these programs, students generally are taking part in academic-type literacy events and practices, with adults as tutors or teachers; however, several programs that have been described or studied by researchers have more novel designs. For example, Rubenstein-Ávila (2007) highlighted Latino youth writing public service announcements through Youth Radio in California; a GLBT writing group and teen magazine publishing opportunity through Horizon Youth Program in Chicago; high school students documenting local community issues through Voices Inc. in Arizona; and students composing multimodal personal stories through the Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth (DUSTY) in California. These programs are noteworthy for three particular reasons: the end products are not only not traditional academic texts but also have personal relevance to the participants, the adults involved are generally seen as mentors instead of tutors, and the participants appear to be working together to acquire these new literacy skills. Another program in this vein is STRUGGLE, a literacy and mentoring program offered to local adolescents through an urban community center in inner-city Pittsburgh (Long, Peck, & Baskins, 2002). The goals of STRUGGLE were more than literacy improvement or development: The program was
“designed to support teens in challenging adults’ naïve or reductive impressions of who they are and what they are up to in life” (p. 132), and a cornerstone of the program was supportive collaboration between a local adult and teen as each attempted to write about important aspects of their lives.

One other, much less studied, neighborhood setting for socioliterate interactions is organized religious activities. Knobel (2001) briefly mentions her participant’s involvement in the Jehovah’s Witnesses weekly Theocratic School at which he had to write about and present a Bible reading; moreover, his weekly required ‘witnessing’ activities meant he had to read and discuss a variety of religious literature with a variety of individuals. Ek (2008) approached church-based literacy through the longitudinal case study of Edgar, a 15-year-old immigrant from Mexico. Some of Edgar’s socioliterate interactions at church were only with adults, such as reading regular letters from his Sunday school teacher, but most occurred in a small-group setting with the teacher and peers together, such as oral reading and discussion of Bible verses and other religious lessons. Kelly’s (2001) case study of an African-American teen illustrates how writing also can be part of church-based socioliterate interactions: Through Saturday School activities, this young man took notes, wrote letters, conducted research, and wrote and edited an historical report.

Influences. These neighborhood-based socioliterate interactions have been shown to influence adolescents’ literacy in several ways. First, similar to the discussion in the previous section on caring teachers, Babbitt and Byrne (1999) claimed

In our experience, [a relationship with a caring adult] is the most critical component to success in working with this at-risk population, as we have seen children and young people, described as trouble-makers at school, often with multiple suspensions, come
with reasonable regularity to their reading sessions at the agency because they appear to have made that all important connection with their teachers. (p. 376)

In other words, many of the after-school-type programs may exert a positive literate influence simply by using supportive local adults as mentors and tutors, particularly when students attend over a long period of time. Rubenstein-Ávila (2007) acknowledged that the informal nature of these programs may enhance the relationship-building process. Long et al. (2002) reported more specific literacy outcomes: Participants were able to generate more text and more introspective compositions with the assistance of their adult mentor than writing on their own. In the community-based programs that encourage critical perspectives, adolescents see mentors engaged in literacy practices that are making meaningful changes in the world and are able to join that ‘community of practice.’ Many of these programs, particularly those with less emphasis on traditional academic content or teaching methods, may offer safer or less threatening environments in which students can engage in literate practices and practice literate skills (e.g., Alvermann et al., 1999; Ek, 2008). Moreover, those programs or sites that give teens a place to take up literacy in informal ways with groups of their peers allow participants to experience literacy as fun yet meaningful at the same time. Finally, identity is a relevant construct in this microsystem also—as Kelly (2001) noted, “All of [the literate experiences in the African-American church] contributed to the development of a sense of self for Anthony that was highly literate in multiple ways. His sense of self exists, not in isolation, but in a complexly communal and historical sense” (p. 257). Also, very importantly, this new ‘sense of self’ based in his cultural community “guided his uses of school-sanctioned written literacy” (p. 257). Another way to view Anthony’s assumption of a positive literacy identity is through the development of a
sense of “competence” that Hull and Schultz (2001, pp. 594-595) identified as a hallmark of successful after-school programs.

One caveat about organized community programs is that they often experience high rates of staff or volunteer turn-over, due to low or non-existent pay or other benefits, making it less likely that participants can develop the long-term relationships that appear to be so meaningful as a basis for adolescents to take up and enjoy literacy events and practices (Rubenstein-Ávila, 2007). Also, there may be little to no training for the tutors, which may lessen the effectiveness of the interactions if it is a program oriented to supporting academic literacy practices and skills.

**Critique.** One weakness in the available research regarding neighborhood-level influences is a lack of quality assessment practices. In many of the studies that draw conclusions about the use of community resources to enhance literacy instruction or development, there is little evidence given other than anecdotal stories about students’ doing ‘more’ reading, their writing seeming better, or feeling more positive about reading and writing. But a bigger issue in understanding the role the local, physical community can play in an adolescent’s literate life is that, in much of the extant sociocultural literacy research, community influence on literacy engagement is mentioned or can be extrapolated only as a by-product of a focus on family influences (e.g., Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Valdés, 1996). Or, community influences and programs are studied in relation to general academic support or success, not literacy development specifically (e.g., Ball & Heath, 1993, Kahne & Bailey, 1999). When literacy studies do actually investigate community influences, the participants tend to be preschool or elementary students (e.g., Heath, 1983; McNamee & Sivright, 2002) or adults in ESL or family literacy programs (e.g., Auerbach, 1989), not adolescents.
Finally, little research explicitly considers socioliterate interactions between adolescents and supportive adults outside the family and classroom, such as volunteer tutors or mentors in after-school programs, athletic coaches, or religious institutions. For example, in their discussion of a basketball coach and adults at a church, Fairbanks and Ariail (2006) touched on these support systems very briefly without looking specifically at the literacy implications. Few studies have investigated the literacy activities that occur with family members outside the home, but in many cultures extended family members are emotionally and even physically very close. For instance, following 21 multilingual teens in an inner-city housing development, the ALTUR project found that in many cases participants were reading and writing with aunts, uncles, and cousins who did not live in the same home but in the same neighborhood (Cumming, 2012a).

**Literacy Engagement**

The previous section of this chapter on adolescent literacy was concerned with the socioliterate interactions teens have with members of their social networks and how these interactions might influence the ways in which students in turn interact with and through literacy, or, in other words, how they *engage* with literacy. In educational research, engagement is defined as “active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused interactions with the social and physical environments” (Furrer & Skinner, 2003, p. 149). A thematic review of the construct established that school engagement consists of three facets: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). According to the authors, *behavioral engagement* is usually defined in terms of student conduct, such as attending class, completing schoolwork, and contributing to class discussion; *emotional engagement* consists of affect and attitudes toward general or specific characteristics of school; and *cognitive engagement* focuses on students’ investment in and self-regulation of their learning. Clearly,
work within these three strands intersects with research on motivation—topics such as strategy use, utility value, learning goals—although researchers differ on whether motivational concepts inform every facet of engagement (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004) or whether motivation is simply one aspect of engagement (e.g., Appleton et al., 2008; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). In the present thesis, I adopt the stance that research on a variety of motivational constructs informs multiple aspects of engagement and that “these [aspects of engagement] are dynamically interrelated within the individual; they are not isolated processes” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 61). Moreover, I posit that engagement differs from motivation in that engagement serves as the concrete manifestation of many of these various motivational processes, leading to the conclusion elucidated by Guthrie and Wigfield that engagement is the mediating factor between students’ experiences and their achievement.

That engagement and academic achievement are closely linked has been established by a number of studies, many of which can be classified along the three strands of engagement identified by Fredricks et al. (2004). For instance, Finn (1993) showed that school attendance, classroom participation, and extracurricular involvement (his definition of behavioral engagement) in a national sample of 8th graders correlated strongly with standardized scores on an achievement test, and Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) established that both strategy use and self-regulation (aspects of cognitive engagement) correlated significantly with middle-schoolers’ grades on science and English classroom tasks. Although emotional engagement is less well defined and studied than the other two strands, in one example Goodenow (1993) found a significant correlation between middle school students’ sense of ‘belonging’ in a classroom (affective feelings = emotional engagement) and their academic effort and grades. Despite several limitations in the research connecting engagement and achievement—engagement is not
defined systematically, achievement is assessed in different ways, and these studies tend to be
correlational in design—Fredricks et al. concluded “there is evidence from a variety of studies to
suggest that engagement positively influences achievement” (p. 71).

Furthermore, engagement is of particular interest to educational researchers because “it is
presumed to be malleable” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 61). In other words, engagement is not a
fixed state but a condition that responds to changes in a variety of circumstances such as task
enjoyment, feedback utility, teacher-student interactions, and student-peer interactions (Guthrie
& Wigfield, 2000). Revolving around these personal relationships, one particular sub-field of
engagement research is that of relatedness, defined as having “secure and satisfying connections
with others in one’s social milieu” (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991, p. 327)—in
educational research, this sense of relatedness is hypothesized to produce feelings of belonging
and being supported, which in turn positively influence engagement (Goodenow, 1993) through
a variety of mechanisms such as attachment, social support, and self-system processes (Furrer &
Skinner, 2003). Much of the work connecting relatedness and academic engagement, however,
has been confined primarily to the school setting and even to interactions between students and
peers and/or teachers in a specific classroom (e.g., Klem & Connell, 2004; Murdock, 1999;
although see Furrer & Skinner for an investigation of parent-student relatedness). My thesis
study builds on the current work in relatedness by illuminating the role in academic literacy
engagement of relatedness and social interaction outside the classroom.

While most engagement research has focused on students’ interactions with the general
school context, studies of engagement also have investigated students’ involvement with specific
academic subjects, such as math (e.g., Helme & Clarke, 2001), science (e.g., Lee & Anderson,
1993), and reading (e.g., Kirsch et al., 2002). Although these studies generally conformed to
Fredricks et al.’s (2004) model of the three strands of school engagement, often they investigated only one or two of the strands, and some, particularly in literacy engagement, conceived of engagement in ways that varied from these facets. For instance, Kirsch et al. (2002) defined reading engagement as only “reading practices and reading attitudes” (p. 108); while ‘practices’ can be equated with behavioral engagement and ‘attitudes’ with emotional engagement, no other topics associated with these two strands of engagement were considered in that study. In another case, a new model proposed and investigated by Dutch researchers divided literacy engagement into only two strands, motivational and behavioral, with the emotional aspects such as reading for pleasure and the value of the task for future goals subsumed under “motivational literacy engagement” (de Milliano, van Gelderen, & Sleegers, 2011). Although neither of these examples follows Fredricks et al.’s formulation of engagement, both made useful contributions to understanding literacy engagement, particularly in the endeavour to connect students’ engagement profiles to literacy achievement (thus underscoring the role of engagement as mediating between context and achievement).

In this study, I am adopting Fredricks et al.’s (2004) model of engagement—in this case literacy engagement—as consisting of three intertwined strands: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. I believe literacy engagement of adolescents is worth investigating as a malleable construct that may be influenced by supportive behaviours coming from social network members.

**Summary**

EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992/2005) conceives of an individual’s world as being composed of multiple contexts to which the individual is directly and indirectly connected through human relationships and decisions. Moreover, these contexts exert an influence on the
individual’s development. Using social network and social support theories about the ways in which these human relationships are formed and structured and how such relationships serve as conduits of supportive behavior allowed me in this thesis study to take an ecological approach to the engagement of adolescents in literate events and practices.

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Having reviewed in this chapter theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the framing and planning of my thesis study, Chapter 3 will delineate how this previous work was put into practice: the context, participants, data collection instruments and procedures, data analysis techniques, and an interpretation of the validity and limitations of my thesis study.
Chapter 3

Inquiry and Analytic Methods

My thesis study is based in an ecologically oriented “conception of the learning environment as a complex adaptive system, of the mind as the totality of relationships between a developing person and the surrounding world, and of learning as the result of meaningful activity in an accessible environment” (van Lier, 1997, p. 783). In an attempt to realize this ecological conception appropriately in the context and for the phenomena I have chosen to explore, my study is located in the tradition of qualitative educational inquiry, specifically a case study approach. This chapter delineates my use of this qualitative methodology—drawn primarily from the recommendations of Stake (2006), Merriam (1998), and Duff (2008)—in order to investigate and describe the possible intersections between students’ socio-literate support and their literacy engagement in their daily lives. Below I describe the context in which participants engaged in literacy events and in which I collected the data for this study; introduce the participants; explain my data collection procedures and the various analyses I conducted on the data; and evaluate the “interpretative validity” (Duff, p. 176) of the research design.

Case Study Approach

In his classic text, Yin (1989, p. 23) defines case study as a research “strategy” with three essential facets: It “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context;” it is particularly useful when “the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident;” and it collects data from multiple sources. Since it could be argued that Yin’s first and third features are also features of qualitative research in general (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994), the notion of ‘boundaries’ becomes critical to the definition of case study research.
Yin’s point about boundaries is that certain methods are not successful at investigating a phenomenon that relies on its context for existence (e.g., a teacher cannot teach naturally in a lab setting with no students). However, since a case study examines the phenomenon in its naturally occurring context, a lack of distinction between case and context is not an issue. On the other hand, Yin did not address the boundaries around the unit of analysis (the case), other than to admit that defining a case can be confusing and that perhaps a researcher should consult with colleagues. These outside boundaries have been taken up by other authors; in fact, an emphasis on “boundedness” (Stake, 1995, p. 2) occurs again and again in the literature as an essential feature of a case study. For instance, Merriam expressed that this notion “allow(s) me to see the case as a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. I can ‘fence in’ what I am going to study” (1998; p. 27). This sense of boundary has even been represented visually by some authors, notably as a theta, Θ, (Stake, 1995) and a circle with a heart (Miles & Huberman, 1994). (It should be noted, however, that van Lier [2005] warned that oversimplification of the case could result from setting the boundary of a case too rigidly.)

A few authors differentiate among the reasons cases can be selected (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995, 2006; van Lier, 2005). Intrinsic case studies occur when the researcher wants to learn about that particular case; in other words, there is an intrinsic interest in that object of study. Instrumental cases are those studied in order to shed light on something else, a more general phenomenon or situation. Third, a collective or multicase study collects data about several cases in a coordinated way, then applies cross-case analysis for a more generalized interpretation.

In my thesis study, the ‘hard’ boundaries of the cases are the life experiences of each individual participant, with an emphasis on literacy events and related support and engagement
markers. My cases were chosen primarily for their instrumental value in understanding the relationship between socio-literate support and literacy engagement, particularly for multicultural urban adolescents. As seven students participated in my study, I was able to apply cross-case methods as well—drawing particularly on Stake (2006) and Miles and Huberman (1994)—in order to add depth and complexity to the interpretations presented in Chapter 6. In another take on case boundaries, Stake named the phenomenon under investigation the “quintain” in order to distinguish it from the individual cases that are being examined for the purpose of shedding light on the quintain (2006, p. 6).

**Study Context**

The data collection for my thesis study was undertaken as an extension of the “Adolescent Literacy in Three Urban Regions: Toronto” (ALTUR) research project (cf. Cumming, 2012a). The ALTUR project recruited participants from among high school students who were enrolled in an after-school tutoring and mentoring program called Pathways to Education Canada, at the program’s Regent Park site. Although by the fall of 2010, 11 different Pathways to Education (P2E) programs existed in eight cities and four provinces in Canada (“About Pathways,” 2010), the Regent Park site was the initial location. Piloted in 2001, the P2E program originally was a local initiative of the Regent Park Community Health Centre designed, in the words of P2E personnel, “to help young people in an economically disadvantaged Toronto community . . . complete and succeed in high school by providing various forms of educational, social, advocacy, and financial support” (Rowen & Gosine, 2006, p. 278).

A look at the demographics of the Regent Park neighborhood is useful in understanding why such supports were viewed as necessary by community members. Regent Park is just a dozen blocks east of downtown Toronto and is home to the oldest and largest public housing
project in Canada (TCH, 2007). In 2007, approximately 60% of Regent Park residents were immigrants, speaking over 70 languages; 50% of residents had arrived in Canada in the past 10 years (TCH, 2007). I am not claiming that the presence of a large number of immigrants creates a ‘disadvantaged community’—in fact, it has been claimed that ethnic enclaves in Canadian cities carry a variety of social benefits (Qadeer & Kumar, 2006). However, these same researchers did not classify the census tract of Regent Park as an ethnic enclave because so many different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds are represented among the residents that no one group is in a majority. Instead, Qadeer and Kumar pointed out that poverty and unemployment, within defined neighborhoods, are more implicated than immigration status in creating an ‘underclass.’ Thus, it is relevant that Regent Park has been cited as one of the poorest neighborhoods in Canada (TCH, 2007): According to the 2006 census data, the median household income was $25,850, compared to $69,321 for the Toronto census metropolitan area (Statistics Canada, 2006); in that same year, the poverty line for a family of four in Toronto was considered to be a pre-tax income of less than $39,399 (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Much educational research has found a relationship between macro-social variables such as poverty and students dropping out of school (cf. Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2005). Not surprisingly then, research during the initial development stages of the Regent Park P2E program indicated that the school drop-out rate for Regent Park adolescents was 56% (compared to 29% for the Toronto District School Board [TDSB]). Drilling deeper into the data, the drop-out rate for Regent Park students who had immigrated to Canada was 70%, compared to 26% for immigrant students in TDSB (Rowen & Gosine, 2006). Eight years after the implementation of P2E in Regent Park, research results indicated that the first five cohorts of P2E students experienced an average drop-out rate of only 12%—roughly half the TDSB drop-
out rate over that same time and a reduction of 75% compared to Regent Park students in the two years prior to the founding of P2E (Rowen, 2012).

High school students in Regent Park are not required to enroll in P2E nor are there threshold requirements for enrollment (e.g., failing a class or family income level); the program is simply open to every high school student within the geographic boundaries of the neighborhood. In the first three years of the program, 95% of “geographically eligible” students chose to participate (Rowen & Gosine, 2006, p. 280), and the participation rate has remained consistently high: In 2008-2009, 852 of the 925 local high school students were enrolled in the Regent Park P2E (Rowen, 2012). Students whose guardians sign participation agreements have access to the four forms of support—educational, social, advocacy, and financial—outlined above as the mission of P2E. These goals are implemented through offering participants twice weekly after-school tutoring assistance in two church basements and one computer lab in Regent Park; a weekly social mentoring group; full-time Student-Parent Support Workers (SPSW) who are assigned to each family, spend time each week in their students’ schools, and track students’ academic progress; and public transportation tickets, school supplies, and $1,000 per year of participation for post-secondary education (up to a total of $4,000).

**Participants**

**Recruitment**

The primary participants in this study were seven high school students who were enrolled in the Regent Park P2E program during the school years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010. Initially, these students were recommended to participate in the ALTUR project by P2E staff members who viewed them as ‘at-risk for literacy development’ (cf. Cumming, 2012a). These seven focal students were selected from the original 21 ALTUR participants in two steps: First, I contacted
the eight students who were the subjects of case studies in the ALTUR project, as they appeared to represent a range of points on a continuum of interest and engagement in literacy events (“maximum variation” sampling, per Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28), documented in depth in Cumming (2012a); second, after only four of those students (Angel, K-9, Ning, and Shona) agreed to participate, I contacted all of the remaining ALTUR participants except two whose necessary data were incomplete (“convenience” sampling, per Miles & Huberman). Another three of those students (Acer, Hines, and Lala) agreed to participate in my thesis study. Although Miles and Huberman as well as Merriam (1998) point out that convenience sampling can produce lower quality or less information than other sampling strategies, in this situation the three participants gained through convenience sampling added to the diversity of the sample in terms of gender (Acer), age (Lala), and linguistic background (Hines), and they represented a range of literate and social experiences. (All participant names are student-selected pseudonyms.)

Students and their parents completed consent forms (see Appendix A for student letter) for the students’ participation in both the ALTUR project and my thesis study. As recognition for the time and effort the students devoted to participating in the thesis interviews, I gave each one a $15 gift card to a chain of Canadian bookstores. I believe firmly in the principle of reciprocity, that both the research participants and the researcher should gain something from the research process; thus, through the member check interviews, described in more detail below, I hoped the participants would gain an increased awareness of their reading and writing practices, their literacy strengths and weaknesses from an outsider’s perspective, and how to activate their social networks to gain more socioliterate support—but the gift cards were a more tangible
reward. Additionally, I gave participants the gift card at the start of our session, so the gift cards would not appear to be a form of coercion to participate (cf. Duff, 2008, p. 150).

A secondary set of participants was solicited for participation in this study but none agreed to participate. These were the individuals whom the primary participants named in response to the question in the Spring 2010 social network interview, “Which of these people is the most important for you in your school-related reading and writing? In what way(s) is he/she important? Do you mind if I contact this person to ask about your reading and writing interactions?” One participant (Shona) replied that there was not such a person in her life, another (K-9) named two people but declined to let me contact them, and in the other five cases the focal students took consent forms and stamped envelopes addressed to me to give to the ‘important persons,’ but I received no responses, despite my email and in-person reminders to the focal students. (All claimed at the time and later during the member check interviews to have given the documents to the appropriate individuals.)

**Demographics**

The cultural and linguistic diversity of the participants mirrors that of the Regent Park neighborhood in which all of them lived at the start of the data collection. (Ning’s family moved during the second year to a suburb—also quite diverse—but she continued her membership in P2E and to attend the same inner-city high school. It is customary practice for students, once enrolled in P2E, to remain enrolled even if they move out of the geographic neighborhood.) The basic demographic information about the participants is outlined in Table 3.1.
Table 3.1

Participants' Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade(^a)</th>
<th>Age(^a)</th>
<th>Age when moved to Canada</th>
<th>Country of birth</th>
<th>Language(s) spoken at home(^b)</th>
<th>Language(s) used for literacy events(^b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acer</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Cantonese, English</td>
<td>English, Cantonese, Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>Portuguese, English, French, Lingala</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hines</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>English, Somali, Arabic</td>
<td>English, Arabic, French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>English, Jamaican Patois</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lala</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Arabic, English</td>
<td>English, Arabic, Turkish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Mandarin, English</td>
<td>English, Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10/11(^c)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Bengali, Tamil, English</td>
<td>English, Arabic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) At the start of the ALTUR project. \(^b\) Listed in order of student-reported usage. \(^c\) Shona was in the third year of high school, but until the spring term she did not have enough credits to be classified as a Grade 11 student.

All of the participants were between the ages of 14 and 16 at the start of the ALTUR project in October 2009. Most were in Grade 9, although Ning was in Grade 10 and Lala and Shona were in Grade 11. There was much greater variation in the length of students’ residence in Canada: Acer and K-9 were born in Toronto (both were second-generation Canadians), Hines came to Canada at age 2, Shona came at age 9, and the other three had been in Canada for four years or less (Ning was starting only her second year of school in Canada). A cross-section of the linguistic diversity in Regent Park, these seven students reported speaking a total of 11 different languages at home, with at least two additional languages spoken by other members of
their families at home (e.g., Angel’s parents speak Kikongo and Hines’s parents speak Italian).

Even the two participants who were born in Canada were functionally bilingual. On the other hand, most of these students were essentially monolingual readers and writers of English. For example, although Hines reported engaging in literacy events in Arabic and French, she used Arabic only to read the Quran and never for writing, and she read and wrote in French only for schoolwork for her French class in Grade 9. Shona’s literate use of Arabic also was confined to reading the Quran, and she admitted that she needed a fair amount of help from her mother with the Arabic vocabulary. Acer’s literate use of Cantonese and Mandarin were restricted to his schoolwork for Chinese school, which he had attended since middle school. Even Ning, the newest arrival to Canada, reported doing most of her reading and writing in English, except for occasionally reading Chinese newspapers and TV closed captioning and writing weekly emails to friends and family in China. Only Lala regularly and purposefully read and wrote in languages other than English: In Arabic, she reported reading the Quran, comic books, computer games, email, dictionaries, letters, stories, MSN, poems, and recipes, as well as writing cartoons, email, a diary, MSN, and stories. She was also teaching Arabic to a younger girl. Additionally, Lala reported teaching herself Turkish through watching television and movies and using it to communicate with friends via notes, letters, and MSN. The participants’ language preferences were very similar to those reported by Jia and Aaronson (2003) in their study of Chinese immigrant students of varying ages. One factor in this marked preference for English among the participants in my thesis study may be related also to findings by Jia and Aaronson, that L1 attrition was occurring by the time students had been in the US for 36 months, and that attrition was most severe in students’ reading and writing: Angel told me in June 2010 that she could no
longer read and write in Portuguese despite six years’ education in that language in both Angola and Brazil.

Information on students’ socioeconomic status or parents’ employment status was not systematically collected; for an overview of the economic condition of most Regent Park residents, see the preceding section and Rowen (2012). As most of Regent Park is a city-owned public housing project, generally families who could afford to live elsewhere did so. As mentioned above, Ning’s family moved to an eastern suburb after she completed Grade 10. However, as the ALTUR tutors developed relationships with these students, some information was gleaned about parents’ jobs. For instance, Ning’s parents, although both trained as engineers in China, were working at blue collar factory and food service jobs in Toronto. Likewise, Lala’s father, trained as either an engineer or an architect in Syria, was not working. Shona’s father had been employed in retail in some manner but had a heart attack during her Grade 11 year and was not working. K-9’s mother (his primary guardian) was in her sixties and had health problems; she was unemployed. Acer dodged a direct question about what his parents did by saying only that his parents “go to work” (member check interview, May 31, 2011), and no information was available about the employment status of Angel’s parents.

In fact, few students other than Ning and Hines reported that one or both parents were working; moreover, the experience of Hines’s father was the only one in this thesis study in which relevant work matched an advanced degree, as his master’s degree in chemistry allowed him to teach math, science, and English at a local college for adults. This “education-to-job mismatch” (Houle & Yssaad, 2010, p. 18) is unfortunately quite common in Canada: Houle and Yssaad reported that in 2006, only 24% of immigrants to Canada with university degrees were working in jobs that fit their field of study, and of those immigrants with university degrees not
working in their fields of study, 77% were employed in jobs that did not require a degree at all. Moreover, Houle and Yssaad found these issues were most prevalent for immigrants aged 45-59 and those who were ‘visible minorities,’ criteria which would fit most or all of these participants’ parents.

Because the project was not conducted through the public school system, there was no access to students’ official grades. However, participants were asked in January 2009 by their ALTUR tutors about their grades for the first half of the school year, so that self-report data exists for those who chose to respond. To help contextualize these students’ academic achievement and two dimensions of their reading skills, Table 3.2 provides these self-reported grades as well as participants’ scores on the Sight Word Efficiency and Phonemic Decoding Efficiency subtests of the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1999) they completed in November 2008 as screening measures for the ALTUR project. While there is a wide range of grades represented among these students (and among classes even for some individuals), most of the reading efficiency subscores are quite low. Although staff at P2E would not have access to these particular scores, perhaps the corresponding reading and writing challenges faced by these students led to their identification as ‘at-risk’ and their recommendation to the ALTUR project.
Table 3.2
Participants’ Academic Achievement and Reading Efficiency Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School grades(^a)</th>
<th>Sight word %ile</th>
<th>Phonemic decoding %ile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acer (^b)</td>
<td><strong>GLE = 82</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math = 93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science = 68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer = 83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>English = 65</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math = 75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science = 71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Space = 70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hines</td>
<td>English = 50</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math = 53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science = 80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography = 52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French = 62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business = 54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>English = 74</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction = 72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography &amp; French = no mid-term results</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lala</td>
<td>English = 70</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math = 80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science = 60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art = 92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>Declined to answer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>English = 81</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math = 80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology = 86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History = 61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Civilization = 50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Religion = 75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Self-reported in January 2008, out of 100 points. Participants were enrolled at different high schools and were in different grades, so they had varying schedules and numbers of courses. \(^b\) Acer referred to this class as his “special ed” English class; it required an individual education plan (IEP) for enrollment.
Instruments and Procedures

All of the instruments used in this thesis study were developed initially for the ALTUR project and were administered to the participants in the fall of 2008 and the spring of 2009 as part of that project. I administered these a third time, in the spring of 2010, to the seven focal students described above. The three sets of instruments used were a social network protocol, retrospective reading and writing interviews, and checklists of participants’ reading and writing activities.

The social network protocol consisted of a social network interview and accompanying social network map (Appendix B), used to analyze the depth and breadth of participants’ social relationships, especially those relationships implicated in participants’ literacy activities and engagement. I developed this set of instruments for the ALTUR project based on empirical studies in the fields of social work (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990) and child psychiatry (Samuelsson, Thernlund, & Ringström, 1996) as well as theoretical work in social psychology (Morgan, 1990; Wellman, 1981).

During the first step of the social network protocol, participants completed the social network map individually with direction from the interviewer. Students wrote down all the people who had been important to them since the beginning of the current school year, placing the names in the life domain (home, other family, friends, school, and outside of school) in which they had the most contact with each person. Once this part was complete, students were asked to identify the 10 individuals who they felt were most important to them; the interviewer transcribed these names into a table used with the network interview. At this step, participants were asked how often they interacted with each ‘most important’ person; how often these individuals helped with general advice and advice about school; how often they interacted with
these individuals through reading and writing; and if they had discussed their future plans with these people. The interaction frequency was categorized as “never or hardly ever,” “once or twice a month,” “once or twice a week,” or “every day.” The interviewer elicited examples of these interactions by asking participants questions such as “You mentioned [name of person] in the ‘every day’ category. In what way do the two of you interact using reading and/or writing? What is a reading or writing activity you did with him/her yesterday?” The interview script also contained follow-up questions regarding participants’ future plans, language use at home, and support from school personnel. The entire protocol took these students between 21 and 73 minutes to complete.

The reading and writing interviews (Appendices C and D, respectively) were designed for the ALTUR project by a graduate student in second language education (SLE) with a background in English language teaching, second language writing, and writing assessment. Each used a semi-structured interview protocol that asked students to describe their process of reading a text or of composing a piece of academic writing. The interviews were designed assuming students would bring school-related texts to these interviews, but in reality they brought texts they were reading for pleasure as often as school-assigned readings; however, they selected only school assignments for the writing interviews. The interview guides included questions about participants’ reading and composing processes for that specific text, such as “Did you ask for or receive any help while writing this paper? When? From whom? Why?” For the purposes of this thesis study, these questions elicited information regarding the sources and types of support participants had received during literacy events, as well as engagement markers such as specific strategies they used during those events. The interview guides also contained questions about participants’ general reading and composing processes and practices,
such as “What are some of your favourite reading activities at school” and “What did the teacher do to help you become a better reader?” When I discuss these interviews as a related pair in this thesis, I will call them “literacy interviews.” These interviews lasted between seven and 42 minutes.

The reading and writing practices checklists (Appendices E and F, respectively) were designed by the same SLE graduate student who designed the literacy interviews, and each listed a number of literacy-related activities in which it was hypothesized that adolescents might engage. The reading practices checklist contained a total of 30 items, such as email messages, novels, textbooks, tests, recipes, and train schedules, and the writing practices checklist contained 17 items, like journals, text messages, lists, poems, and homework assignments. Participants were asked how often they had engaged in these activities in the last month: “not at all,” “once or twice a month,” “once or twice a week,” “every day” (categories similar to those in the social network interview). In addition, students were asked to specify where these activities took place (home, school, library, other) and in what language(s). Participants were able to complete both checklists in a total of about 10 minutes.

In addition to these specific instruments, in writing the case reports I used information gathered during the ALTUR project, such as participants’ responses to and scores on the ALTUR literacy tasks which were administered to assess participants’ literacy development (e.g., reading comprehension questions, academic writing tasks, and vocabulary and morphology assessments; for more information, see Cumming, 2012a) and the weekly tutoring logs the graduate assistants had filled out after each tutoring session, as well as the case studies written as part of the data analysis for the ALTUR project. Table 3.3 below provides a summary of the various data sources described in this section.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Administration periods</th>
<th>Data collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social network protocol</td>
<td>Fall 2008, Spring 2009, Spring/Summer 2010</td>
<td>13 ½ hours of audiotaped and transcribed interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social network maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lists of 10 ‘most important’ people and interaction frequencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading sample interview</td>
<td>Fall 2008, Spring 2009, Spring/Summer 2010</td>
<td>6 ¾ hours of audiotaped and transcribed interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Examples of participant reading materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing sample interview</td>
<td>Fall 2008, Spring 2009, Spring/Summer 2010</td>
<td>7 ½ hours of audiotaped and transcribed interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Examples of participants’ academic writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading practices checklist</td>
<td>Fall 2008, Spring 2009, Spring/Summer 2010</td>
<td>Lists of types and frequencies of participants’ reading events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing practices checklist</td>
<td>Fall 2008, Spring 2009, Spring/Summer 2010</td>
<td>Lists of types and frequencies of participants’ writing events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALTUR literacy tasks</td>
<td>Fall 2008, Spring 2009</td>
<td>Reading comprehension questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Narrative and persuasive writing samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Real and pseudo-word morphological awareness tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocabulary task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALTUR case study(^a)</td>
<td>Summer 2009</td>
<td>Case reports (9-16 pages) composed by graduate research assistants on the literacy practices and development of selected ALTUR participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor log</td>
<td>December 2008-May 2009, weekly</td>
<td>Notes written by graduate research assistants, describing each tutoring session with an ALTUR participant; weekly-monthly, depending on student attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member check interview(^b)</td>
<td>Spring/Summer 2011</td>
<td>7 ¼ hours of audiotaped and transcribed interviews.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Only available for Angel, K-9, Ning, and Shona. \(^b\)Angel did not complete this step.
Finally, between May and July 2011, I conducted member check interviews (as suggested by researchers such as Duff [2008] and Stake [2006]) with all the participants except Angel, whom I was unable to reach by telephone or email even after seeking the assistance of the P2E tutoring coordinator and Angel’s SPSW. These sessions lasted between 51 and 103 minutes, during which time I clarified questions that had arisen during the data analysis stage (e.g., I asked Hines if she had two friends with the same name or if that name represented the same person in different domains), I asked how their networks had changed in the past year, and I read aloud their case study reports as they followed along. These were useful interviews in many respects, as the case reports provided a springboard for several participants to elaborate on some situations I had noticed (e.g., K-9 talked about why he had not been close to any teachers in Grade 10), and our informal conversations to ‘break the ice’ at the start of the interviews also led in some cases to relevant information (e.g., Shona described how her writing process had changed in her first year of university). As mentioned in the previous section, these interviews were designed not only to clarify information and perspectives for the purposes of my thesis study, but as a way for me to share with the students my perspective on their literacy support, practices, and engagement, in the hope that my insights would be beneficial to their literate lives.

Data Analysis

The data for this study came in both electronic and paper formats: All of the interviews were captured using a digital voice recorder and saved in WAV format and some of the writing samples from the ALTUR administrations had been photographed with digital cameras by the interviewers, while the ALTUR task results and tutoring logs were all paper documents.
Transcription

I selectively transcribed the recorded interviews, using a narrative format to describe the content of participants’ responses while transcribing verbatim passages that seemed related to my research questions (see Duff, 2008, for a justification of different levels of specificity in transcription). Transcription was a recursive process, in which I discovered new ‘relevant’ passages in the course of writing the case study reports and then transcribed those verbatim. The transcription conventions I used are documented in Appendix G, following Duff (p. 157).

Social Networks

In order to understand which people the participants perceived as being important in their lives, I created a Microsoft Excel database of the numbers reported by each participant in each life domain at each administration of the social network protocol. I then used this database to create radar charts for participants to show changes in the number of individuals named in their networks over the course of this study. I also documented in the database the numbers and domains of individuals named ‘most important’ by each participant at each administration.

I had originally intended to create an ecological systems map (cf. Rodby, 1999) for each participant. However, after completing one for Shona, I decided against attempting these maps for the other participants, as I realized that my study was more concerned with the students’ personal networks (Wellman, 1981) rather than how many individuals were in a network (density; e.g., the work of Milroy, 1987) or how all the individuals in a network fit together with each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rodby).

Social Support

Most research in the field of social support has been conducted using surveys or questionnaires, the results of which are aggregated and analyzed statistically (e.g., Cauce et al.,
1982; Malecki & Demaray, 2003, 2006; Richman et al., 1998). There is even a standardized instrument, the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS; Malecki & Demaray, 2002), developed to assess perceived social support for young people in educational settings. This quantitative, etic approach contrasts with the individualized approach of the personal social network map from the social work tradition described in the previous section and with the ecological focus of my thesis study, which is why I did not adopt a survey method to investigate social/socioliterate support. On the other hand, the categories of social support developed by Tardy (1985) and refined by Malecki and Demaray (2006), discussed in detail in Chapter 2 and implemented in their survey-based research, proved to be useful in identifying instances of socioliterate support as reported by my participants.

With these aims in mind, I read the transcripts of all nine primary interviews (social network interview, reading sample interview, writing sample interview, each administered three times) for each participant and identified, labelled (e.g., “emo” for emotional support), and numbered each reported instance of social support based on the categories outlined in Table 3.4. I recorded these instances in an Excel spreadsheet, with the accompanying information: the direction of the support (given or received), disposition (operational or available), content (appraisal, emotional, informational, or instrumental), description of the instance, source of support based on life domain, whether it was socioacademic or socioliterate in nature, and other relevant notes (e.g., if the instance were negative in nature). This database allowed me to sort the instances by participant within any of these categories and to sum various categories, such as the domain sources of support, to identify trends across participants.
Table 3.4
Aspects and Sources of Socioacademic Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Aspect</th>
<th>Support Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td></td>
<td>Whether the support is given or received by the participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td></td>
<td>Whether support is only available or is actually operational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td></td>
<td>Caring (e.g., trust, love, empathy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td></td>
<td>Helping behaviours (e.g., giving money or time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td></td>
<td>Advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluative feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Close Friend</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classmate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outside of School\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a}Malecki and Demaray (2006) did not include this category in their work; however, preliminary results from the ALTUR project indicated that some of the participants did receive literacy support from individuals in this category.

To enhance and verify the consistency of my coding, I conducted a coder check (Duff, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I asked a fellow graduate student in second language education and familiar with the ALTUR program to code the interview transcripts for social support instances, using the four content types (appraisal, emotional, informational, and instrumental). Per participant, our inter-coder reliability ranged from 69% to 84%, falling within the 70% range identified as acceptable by Miles and Huberman for the first round of coder checks (p. 64). Following this exercise, we discussed every instance on which we did not initially agree until we came to 100% agreement.
Engagement

The instruments used to measure engagement generally have included classroom observations (e.g., Lee & Anderson, 1993), teacher questionnaires (e.g., Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990), and student questionnaires (e.g., Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006)—and, often, a combination of these (e.g., de Milliano et al., 2011). While the classroom observations are often conducted at multiple points over a period of time, engagement questionnaires are often administered at a single point in time, and both types of measures are often analyzed using quantitative, linear models. As a result, weaknesses observed in engagement research are a lack of longitudinal studies and an over-reliance on quantitative methods (Fredricks et al., 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000); another criticism has been a lack of cultural and socioeconomic diversity of participants (Fredricks et al., 2004). To provide a unique perspective on literacy engagement, therefore, I aimed to provide a more qualitative, student-centered view of engagement over two school years and in a linguistically and culturally diverse population. I chose not to survey my participants directly about various aspects of engagement but to systematically analyze their interview data to look for behaviors and attitudes that might represent literacy engagement. Although not designed specifically to elicit information about the construct of engagement, many of the interview questions related to elements of engagement, and the interview format allowed me to probe these elements more deeply than a survey would have done. For example, I asked students to describe problems they encountered in reading a particular text and what they did to solve those problems (strategy use/cognitive engagement); to describe the types of reading and writing they did with members of their social network (participation/behavioral engagement); and if they had encountered negative influences on their reading and writing (affective experiences/emotional engagement). In addition, this qualitative
approach was appropriate to this study because it allowed the data collection to be consistent across time, as no specific engagement questionnaires had been used in the ALTUR project (the one related questionnaire, on goal orientation, turned out to have problems with its ecological validity [Cumming, 2012b]).

I operationalized engagement by relying on the tripartite construct elucidated by Fredricks et al. (2004) of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive strands, with each strand represented in this study in the following ways:

1) **Behavioral engagement**: defined as ‘participation in literacy events’;
2) **Emotional engagement**: defined as ‘affective reactions to and value judgments about reading and writing’ in terms of specific literacy events;
3) **Cognitive engagement**: defined as “psychological investment” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 67) in literate activity—specifically strategy use, goal setting, and level of self-efficacy for specific literacy events.

As I had done when coding for social support, I read the nine transcripts of the primary interviews for each participant and identified and labelled (e.g., “BE” for behavioral engagement) each separate literacy event as one instance of behavioral engagement. Some events were mentioned multiple times by a participant, as when Angel mentioned reading *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908/1989) during both the reading and writing sample interviews in November 2008 and the reading sample interview in May 2010; such situations were coded as only one literacy event. For each of the identified literacy events, I coded any instances in which a participant reported affective reactions to or value judgments about the event (emotional engagement markers) or reported using strategies, setting goals, or having positive or negative self-efficacy in relation to the event (cognitive engagement markers).
However, because my working definition of self-efficacy was “personal beliefs about one’s capabilities to learn or perform a specific action . . . perceptions of specific capabilities” (Schunk, 2000, p. 108), I found that participants did not make self-efficacy statements about specific literacy events, only about their reading and writing in general and primarily when asked directly. Thus, to account for self-efficacy in cognitive engagement, I coded all general self-efficacy statements participants made about their reading and writing capabilities.

I recorded the literacy events in an Excel worksheet, along with the number of instances of both emotional and cognitive engagement that were described for each event, whether the event was school-related or extracurricular, if there was a social aspect to the event, if there was relevant social support reported for the event, the type(s) of social support, the source(s) of social support, and what specific strategies, if any, were reported. Again, this database allowed me to sort the literacy events using any of these categories.

As he was now familiar with the interview transcripts from this study, I asked the same graduate student who had assisted in check-coding for social support instances to check-code two participants’ transcripts for the three strands of engagement. Although initially our inter-coder reliability for emotional engagement (EE) markers was low at 59% for the first set of transcripts, it improved to 81% on the second set. For behavioral engagement (BE), our reliability improved from 80% to 93%, and on cognitive engagement (CE), it was very stable at 87% and 88%. As with the social support coder check, we discussed every instance on which we did not initially agree and came to 100% agreement. After this exercise, I re-coded the transcripts of the other five participants in order to incorporate the ways the check-coding had clarified my definition of the engagement strands.
I used this information to place the participants into categories which I hypothesized to represent levels on a continuum: highly engaged readers and writers, moderately engaged readers and writers, indifferent readers and writers, and reluctant readers and writers (similar to the engagement ‘profiles’ described by de Milliano et al., 2011). In order to define the different levels on the continuum, I created a score for each strand of engagement. For BE, this score was the number of reported literacy events. For EE, the number of negative value judgments and affective statements was subtracted from the number of positive value judgments and affective statements. The calculation of CE was slightly more complicated: The number of discrete, or different, strategies reported was added to the number of goals reported; both of these numbers were based on specific literacy events. As described above, participants did not make any event-specific self-efficacy statements, so I tallied all literacy-related self-efficacy statements participants made, subtracted the number of negative statements from the number of positive statements, and added this number to the number of discrete literacy strategies and goals for a total CE score. The scores from the three strands were summed and the mean and standard deviation calculated. From these figures, z-scores were calculated and used to assign participants to the previously defined levels on the continuum.

Case Study Reports

For each participant, I first composed an interim case study report with six sections consistent across each in order to facilitate cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006): [Participant’s name] as an Individual, [Participant’s name] as a Network Member, [Participant’s name] as a Student, [Participant’s name] as a Reader and Writer, Literacy Engagement, and Summary. Several of these were divided into subsections; for instance the “Summary” section contained two subsections: “Challenges and Accomplishments” and “[Participant’s name] in the Future.”
The results of the analyses conducted on students’ social networks, social support, and engagement described above were incorporated into these reports. In addition, writing the case reports provided the means for scrutinizing the relevance of and drawing inferences from qualitative data from the various interviews, tutoring logs, and earlier case studies, as well as the quantitative data from the ALTUR tasks. In other words, writing the case reports was itself a form of data analysis, not simply a reporting device (e.g., Merriam, 1998). These interim reports ranged in length from 18-26 pages of double-spaced text.

Following the member check interviews, I revised the interim reports to create a final draft of each case report. These final drafts included information that participants corrected during the member check interviews as well as new information from those interviews. The final reports ranged in length from 22-30 pages of double-spaced text.

**Cross-case Analysis**

For the first phase of cross-case analysis, I followed closely the strategies recommended by Stake (2006) and used the worksheets included in his book, such as creating analyst notes for each case (p. 45), rating the utility of each case for each of my research questions (p. 49), identifying important findings from each case and relating those to the research questions (p. 51), and generating assertions across the cases (p. 73). After completing these analyses, I was not satisfied that the ‘assertions’ I had generated using Stake’s method captured the most important findings from this study, so I applied several other analytical strategies to the data. For this second phase of cross-case analysis, I created a “checklist matrix” for my engagement variable (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 107) and an “effects matrix” to look at the effects of type of support on the three dimensions of engagement (modeled on the example in Miles & Huberman, p. 140). With data from only seven participants, no statistical analyses were conducted.
Interpretive Validity of this Study

Defining Criteria

In her discussion of validity and reliability in case study research, Duff (2008) contrasts what she sees as a positivist approach to case studies, as illustrated by the work of Yin (1989) and Miles and Huberman (1994), with the more interpretive approach of scholars such as Merriam (1998). According to Duff, the first approach is more concerned with defining constructs, relating variables, and identifying causal patterns, while the second approach avoids asserting an external or universal reality, believing instead that every research participant and researcher “constructs his or her own reality” (Duff, p. 175). While I am a product of a relatively positivist/post-positivist educational system and my study design and data analyses in places reflect that orientation, I am constantly working toward adopting a more interpretive epistemology. Therefore, I maintain that the merits of my thesis study should be judged on the basis of the 11 criteria for interpretive validity elaborated by Duff (p. 177).

Duff presents these criteria in three clusters: “sensitivity to readers’ needs,” “use of sound research methods,” and “thoroughness of data collection and analysis” (p. 177). For the sensitivity cluster, my study (1) presents clear links for readers between the gap in existing knowledge, the research questions, the data collection procedures, the selected analyses, and the findings, including examples of instruments and analyses; (2) offers examples from case study reports that draw readers into my participants’ worlds; and (3) provides useful knowledge to both readers and participants. For the research methods cluster, my study (1) relied on data from multiple sources (interviews, questionnaires, written documents) and perspectives (students, tutors, researcher); (2) incorporated coder checks; (3) investigated cases perceived to be atypical in the sample (Angel’s negative attitude toward literacy tutoring and K-9’s status as a native
English speaker); and (4) incorporated member checks. Finally, for the data collection and analysis cluster, my study has attempted to provide—either to readers or myself or both—(1) a comprehensive description of the context, participants, and activities that composed this study; (2) a longitudinal perspective on the phenomena; and (3) an understanding of how typical this setting is for phenomena under investigation. The fourth criterion in this cluster, my self-reflection on my role in this study, is met in the following paragraph. Thus, I hope my readers will conclude, as I have, that this study does exhibit interpretive validity in the qualitative tradition.

**Researcher Involvement**

I have held a variety of roles from the start of the ALTUR project through the writing of this thesis. As a graduate research assistant present at the first meeting of the ALTUR research group, I was both a researcher and learner throughout the process of designing and implementing a multifaceted, international, longitudinal study. Specifically, I worked on designing our locally administered reading and vocabulary tasks as well as the social network protocol; I administered multiple tasks, both in group settings and to individuals; I was involved in the rating of the vocabulary and writing tasks; and I analyzed the morphological awareness and social network data. Moreover, I have given five conference presentations and was involved in writing three book chapters reporting on various aspects of ALTUR.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I served as a tutor for one P2E student in the ALTUR project from November 2008 to June 2009. This student, Ning, and I met weekly (except for holidays and weeks when one or the other of us could not come) for the duration of the ALTUR project; over this time, we developed a strong rapport and came to talk almost as much about her personal life as about her homework. We stayed in contact after the ALTUR
project ended: Between the end of that project and the onset of my thesis data collection, I met her once at a local library to help her with a physics project, and she occasionally called or emailed me to ask questions about course selection and college entrance requirements. The same type of contact continued between the interviews for this study in the spring of 2010 and the member check interview in June 2011, and she contacted me in April 2012 for assistance with her college entrance essay. Before my thesis study commenced, I did not have a similar personal relationship with any of the other participants, although I had briefly met Acer, K-9, Angel, and Hines through the ALTUR testing or at the tutoring sites. While I had not interacted with either Lala or Shona prior to contacting them about my thesis study, I have now forged a personal relationship with both, Lala through her revelations to me of her serious family problems and Shona because we thoroughly enjoy each other’s company. In all honesty, I cannot claim to have a detached perspective on any of my participants: To some extent I feel I have seen them grow up. Acer, for instance, began the ALTUR project in the fall of 2008 as a slight, quiet ninth-grader—the last time I saw him, he was a tall, confident young man finishing Grade 11. I ran into K-9 on the subway in September 2011, and we had a fun and informative chat about how Grade 12 was progressing for him. All of them opened their lives to me and shared information about their hopes and dreams, their families and friends, their failures and successes, and even their romances. I believe these personal connections do not detract in any way from the strength of my findings, but only enrich the information I was able to collect and the interpretations I draw.

Limitations

The design of this study was limited both by the approach to data collection and by my application of social support and social network methods. In hindsight, this study would have
benefited from a more ethnographic design, such as that described by Moje and Lewis (2007) in their application of a critical sociocultural lens to an eighth grade language arts classroom or the ethnographic case study approach used by Harklau (2000) as she followed multilingual students making the transition from high school to college. For example, I was unable to systematically observe students’ interactions with peers, other than occasional P2E-related interactions, or with teachers. The local school district had turned down the original ALTUR application to go into public schools, so unfortunately we were unable to conduct classroom observations or to get access to the participants during the school day. Thus, the data on supportive interactions were all self-reported by students; moreover, the data set was limited to support provided by those individuals identified by participants as ‘most important’ network members. In other words, a person outside the ‘most important’ network could have been supplying critical support that was not captured by these interviews. Another specific issue with the interview data is that the first two sets of the various interview protocols were conducted by 5 different research assistants (including myself). While there was a written set of instructions for each type of interview and we had a training session prior to the start of the ALTUR data collection, it is probable that we each administered these interviews in a slightly different way and asked different follow-up questions or focused on our own topics of interest.

I also made some choices regarding the application of social network research methods and tools that restricted the type of data available in this study. For example, in order to maintain a longitudinal perspective, I chose to use the social network protocol adapted for the ALTUR project; however, this protocol was not developed to gather data on social support, per se, so the interview questions were skewed toward eliciting information about instrumental-type supportive behaviors (as opposed to emotional support, for instance). Nor was this study a
traditional network analysis in the sense of investigating the number, direction, and/or strength of every relationship of every individual in a particular group. I have justified the ‘personal network’ approach in Chapter 2 and do believe it the most appropriate approach for this case study thesis, but in allowing participants to define what counted as an ‘important’ relationship (rather than using more objective ‘total network’ methods for verifying network membership), I lost the opportunity to gain the fullest possible understanding of each student’s network. As Cottrell (2007) reminded network researchers, every participant has a different standard of what qualifies as a relationship.

***

In the next two chapters, I present the findings from the analyses described in this chapter. Chapter 4 presents findings from the individual case studies in the form of profiles, and Chapter 5 presents the cross-case findings relevant to the research questions.
Chapter 4
High School Students Reading, Writing, and Living

The purpose of this chapter is to profile the seven individuals who so graciously agreed to share their socioliterate lives with me in the interest of advancing knowledge about the people with whom teenagers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds perceived to be struggling with reading and/or writing interact through reading and writing and how those social interactions might or might not influence these students to engage with texts.

Table 4.1 presents a brief overview of each participant, using the headings from the case reports. Because the final case reports averaged 26 pages in length, I have chosen not to reproduce them here in their entirety. In this chapter, I have excerpted the information I think most useful in outlining participants’ everyday and literate lives as well as most relevant to the three research questions outlined in Chapter 1. Profiles of each student are presented in the remainder of this chapter in alphabetical order, followed by an overall summary.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Social support</th>
<th>Academic literacy skills</th>
<th>Literacy activities</th>
<th>Literacy engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acer</td>
<td>Canadian-born; L1s are English and Cantonese. Wants career in computers</td>
<td>Older sister is very important to him. High consistency among friends.</td>
<td>High appraisal support. Most literacy support of participants.</td>
<td>High to average scores on ALTUR tasks. Writing samples show development over time.</td>
<td>Likes graphic novels. Plays online multiplayer games. Rewrites movie endings. Much Chinese homework.</td>
<td>Average behavioral and emotional engagement but low cognitive engagement. Social support seems implicated in his engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>Lived in Angola, Brazil. L1s are Portuguese and French. Wants to be a doctor.</td>
<td>Same-age cousin is very important. Network primarily composed of family.</td>
<td>Little support from friends. Relatives provide most support. Negative and null support present.</td>
<td>Extremely low scores on ALTUR tasks contradict her academic literacy samples.</td>
<td>High use of communication technology. Reads Bible daily. Reads to younger siblings. May keep a diary.</td>
<td>High positive and negative emotional engagement. Intrinsic interest more important to engagement than social support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hines</td>
<td>Born in Italy. L1s are Italian and Somali. Wants to be a nurse.</td>
<td>Notable both for high number of friends and few adults</td>
<td>Prefers to do schoolwork on own. High socioliterate support from parents.</td>
<td>High to average scores on ALTUR tasks. Writing samples show development over time.</td>
<td>Enjoys reading young adult novels and magazines. Very active on Facebook.</td>
<td>High cognitive engagement. Social support seems implicated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>Canadian-born; L1 is English but some use of Jamaican Creole. Unsure of future goals.</td>
<td>Older brother is very important, also girlfriends and long-time friends.</td>
<td>Prefers to work on his own. Least amount of socio-academic and socioliterate support</td>
<td>High scores on ALTUR tasks, except vocabulary. Writing samples show development over time.</td>
<td>Likes reading scary stories online. Most reading and writing has social aspect.</td>
<td>Lowest behavioral engagement in group. Intrinsic interest more important than support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Born in</td>
<td>L1 is</td>
<td>Network Characteristics</td>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>Literacy Engagement</td>
<td>Behavior and Emotional Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lala</td>
<td>Syria;</td>
<td>Arabic.</td>
<td>Only one whose network expanded over time.</td>
<td>Most support comes from friends. Gives much support. Has experienced negative and null support.</td>
<td>Average scores on ALTUR tasks, but notable improvement on vocabulary and reading. Writing samples show development over time.</td>
<td>High use of communication technology. Likes to read both online and print texts with friends. Writes stories as hobby.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>China; L1 is Mandarin. Loves music. Wants to attend university.</td>
<td>Mandarin.</td>
<td>High variability in network. Spends most time with parents. Close to ESL teacher.</td>
<td>Most support is socio-academic. Support split evenly between friends, parents, and teachers.</td>
<td>Very low scores on ALTUR tasks. Writing tasks did not match prompts, but writing samples show development over time.</td>
<td>Very low use of communication technology. Likes to read about human relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>Bangladesh; L1 is Bengali. Wants to be a teacher.</td>
<td>Bengali.</td>
<td>Close to same-age aunt and two long-time friends. Broke up with long-term boyfriend.</td>
<td>Most support comes from friends. Socio-academic and socioliterate support are average.</td>
<td>High scores on ALTUR tasks. Writing samples excel in organization, vocabulary, and sentence complexity.</td>
<td>Little print reading. “Addicted” to Facebook. Not excited by most academic literacy activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Acer**

**As an Individual**

In the late spring of 2010, Acer was 16 and completing Grade 10 at a local technical high school. He appeared to be a reserved and serious young man who answered the interviewers’ questions in a friendly and open manner. Born in Toronto to Chinese immigrants, he named
English as his first language, although he speaks, reads, and writes Cantonese at home with his parents. (Acer also speaks, reads, and writes English at home with his older sister.) In order to maintain his heritage language proficiency, Acer was attending Chinese school for two-and-a-half hours every Saturday, where he had learned to speak, read, and write Mandarin as well as Cantonese. When asked if he felt as if he belonged to any particular cultural group, he mentioned the Buddhist community.

Acer enjoyed working on and with computers: During the two academic years of this study, he was enrolled in at least three different computer courses at his school, and much of his contact with his friends seemed to be over the computer. For a community service project, Acer had taught computer skills to local middle school students. At each data collection point he mentioned wanting a career in computers.

Along with his passion for computers, Acer shared other interests typical of young men—he reported playing card games, Wii video games, basketball, and chess with his friends. The person Acer talked about most, however, was his older sister, who lived at home and was working on a degree in business management at a local urban university and who helped him with both personal and academic matters.

Although Acer was identified by P2E employees as ‘at-risk for literacy development,’ he appeared to be a hard-working student with average or better grades. His identification for the ALTUR project may have been based on the fact he was enrolled in the lowest level of English in Grade 9 and had an individual education plan (IEP), which allowed him to have extra time on tests.
As a Network Member

Acer’s social network was characterized by its consistency: Out of a total of 31 unique contacts, six were listed on his network map at all three administrations, and another five entries were the same for two of the three administrations. Although the contacts in his friend domain dropped from seven in Grade 9 to four in Grade 10 (see Figure 4.1), his closest friends remained fairly constant over the 18 months of the study; the friends who disappeared over time were hold-overs from middle school or Grade 9 classmates with whom Acer lost contact as high school progressed.

![Figure 4.1. Radar graph of the people named in Acer’s social network over 18 months.](image)

Three of Acer’s ‘most important’ network contacts appeared at each administration: his sister and two friends from Chinese School (CS); another CS friend appeared on his network
map all three times but was only noted as ‘most important’ twice. These three young men, Acer’s closest friends, were two grades behind him and did not attend his public school. The majority of his interactions with them appeared to be working on CS homework together, both during and outside of CS (via email), communicating via MSN, and playing online games together.

Acer’s parents appeared on his social network map at all three administrations but were identified as ‘most important’ contacts only twice. Acer revealed little about his relationship with his parents, other than he saw them every day. Although his father seemed to give him more help on his CS homework, his mother was the parent to whom he talked about his future plans.

Other family members who appeared multiple times on Acer’s network map were his younger female cousins, whom he babysat from time to time. In June 2010, they were seven and five years old; the older one was finishing Grade 2, and Acer sometimes helped her with her math homework. These cousins were placed on the map twice and named ‘most important’ once.

A notable feature of Acer’s network maps was the presence of multiple teachers. He listed between two and five teachers in the school domain at each administration, with either two or three of those also selected as ‘most important’ network members each time. Aside from his parents, these were the only adults Acer selected as ‘most important’ in his life.

**Giving and Receiving Support**

The supportive content of Acer’s network relationships, based on Tardy’s (1985) classification of social support aspects, is illustrated in Table 4.2.
Table 4.2
Supportive Content of Acer’s Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content of supportive interaction</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Total reported instances</th>
<th>Socioacademic instances</th>
<th>Socioliterate instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Caring (e.g., trust, love, empathy)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Helping behaviors (e.g., giving money or time)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td>Evaluative feedback</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a From Malecki and Demaray (2006). b Count confirmed by a second rater.

Acer’s strong academic focus may be reflected in his high instrumental support number, the highest of all the focal students. This support revolved around homework help, although one-third (16/47) of these instances were related to his CS homework instead of to his regular schoolwork. This factor could have increased his instrumental support relative to this group of participants since no other participants were enrolled in a program requiring additional homework. (Acer’s relatively high number of appraisal support instances—two to three times as many as most other participants—also may be related to his high motivation to succeed academically.)

Unlike several other participants (e.g., Shona, K-9), the content of Acer’s informational support instances focused on academic rather than behavioral advice. One-quarter (5/18) of these instances revolved specifically around preparing for tertiary education: His SPSW (Student Parent Support Worker) gave Acer advice about courses to take, and his sister talked to him about choosing a university. Acer also provided informational support to others, such as giving advice to his CS friends about middle school. Acer also supplied instrumental support to others in his network. For example, he reported that he helped his CS friends with their Chinese
homework, and classmates in English class asked him for help with spelling. In total, 13 of his 77 support instances (17%) reflect ‘given’ support (Malecki & Demaray, 2006), the highest number among the present participants. That others asked Acer for assistance would seem to reflect their high opinion of his academic ability and/or success.

Consistent with Acer’s reports of the importance of his familial relationships, members of his immediate family provided a large portion of his total support. Twenty-eight of his 77 social support instances (36%) were associated with his family, compared to the group average of 28%. Of these 77 instances, 19 (25%) came from his sister alone—in fact, over 18 months he reported receiving the same number of support instances from his sister as from two English teachers combined.

Of these 77 instances of social support, 55 (71%) constituted ‘socioacademic support,’ and 44 (57%) were ‘socioliterate support’ (see Table 4.2). Acer’s English teachers provided 21 of these socioliterate support instances, and his sister provided another 12. His only reported instance of emotional support was socioliterate in nature, when his family congratulated him on receiving a good grade on an essay. Other examples of socioliterate support included his sister teaching him to write formal letters and specific feedback he received on his writing assignments.

**Academic Literacy Skills**

Acer began the ALTUR project in the fall of 2008 with a relatively strong performance on his word-level skills: Of the 21 participants, he had the highest score on the persuasive writing task (15/18) and relatively high scores on morphological awareness (17/20) and vocabulary knowledge (13/30). He scored in the middle of the group on the multiple-choice and short-answer reading tasks, as well as the narrative writing task.
Despite participating in a personalized tutoring intervention through ALTUR, Acer’s scores showed little change over his Grade 9 year, except on the narrative writing task. In fact, his improvement on that task (increasing by five out of a possible nine points) was greater than for any other participant over the course of the ALTUR study. His lack of noticeable improvement on the other tasks was not due to a ceiling effect: Although he had one of the highest scores in the fall on the vocabulary task, his score was still below 50% (12.5/30), and he was able to define only 20% of the words expected to be known by a Grade 8 student, struggling with words such as robust and cartilage. (It is possible that the ALTUR instruments were not sensitive enough to detect small increments of literacy development over such a relatively short period of time, or that development would not be evident until later in Acer’s academic career. These issues should be kept in mind for all the case profiles in this chapter.) Although Acer’s performance on the reading tasks did not change over time, it was consistent with his claim, detailed in the next section, that he struggled with reading comprehension—while he was able to answer factual questions about reading passages, the questions he missed most often were those that required him to have understood the nuances of a story (i.e., interpretive and reflective questions).

Although Acer’s academic writing samples from his Grade 9 year mistakenly were not collected during the ALTUR project, it is possible to compare his writing on the ALTUR tasks from fall 2008 and spring 2009 and his academic writing sample produced in December 2009. Between administrations of the ALTUR persuasive writing task, Acer showed progress on formatting the letter (i.e., he added an address header), structuring his argument (he divided it into two paragraphs, one stating the problem and one the solution), and in his rhetorical use of pathos to appeal to his audience. On the narrative writing task, the biggest changes across
administrations were Acer’s adherence to the task instructions, inclusion of dialogue, and creating motivations for the characters’ actions. His advanced consideration of reasons for others’ actions also appeared in his school writing sample, when Acer used a rhetorical question in the middle of a poem summary to engage his audience’s attention and interest. This writing sample, prepared over two drafts with feedback from his teacher between them, also contained some of the same grammatical errors (comma splices, lack of quotation marks around direct speech) as the ALTUR tasks, illustrating that these issues were not limited to Acer’s timed writing.

**Literacy Interests, Events, and Practices**

**Outside school.** Acer reported a small amount of reading and writing outside of school. Like most other teens, he used technology to keep in touch with network members (e.g., using MSN and email to connect with his sister and several friends); however, this type of contact occurred only a few times a week. Acer also described writing stories based on movies and video games, such as a two-page story based on one of the *Harry Potter* movies. (He had not read the *Harry Potter* books [e.g., Rowling, 1997/2000] but had seen the movies.) In June 2009, Acer explained to the interviewer that when he does not like the ending of a movie, he might write his own ending. While his interviews made writing seem somewhat pleasurable for him, a drawing (Figure 4.2) he made for his ALTUR tutor in January 2009 presents a different perspective, one of writing as overwhelming at times:
Similarly, for pleasure reading Acer selected graphic novels or fiction books related to popular movies. He also mentioned enjoying the _Deltora Quest_ series (e.g., Rodda, 2001). The only other type of individual reading he mentioned was reading the _Metro_ newspaper on the subway on the way to school.

Acer reported two types of social reading: occasionally reading Dr. Seuss books to his younger cousins and sometimes talking about graphic novels with his friends (e.g., comparing what chapters they are on, predicting what is going to happen, and discussing the characters). He also mentioned playing online games (e.g., _Minecraft_) and video games with his friends once or twice a week, activities which require a fair amount of text reading as well as interpretation of symbols and images (as described by Gee, 2003; Leander & Lovvorn, 2006).

The descriptions of Acer’s out-of-school literacy events are corroborated by his responses on the reading and writing practices checklists. The two most common writing activities Acer reported doing at home were ‘Online Chat & Instant Messing (MSN)’ and email, claiming to engage in each of these ‘once or twice a week.’ In the ‘once or twice a month’ category, he reported writing lists, messages, notes, stories and ‘Art, drawing & cartoons.’ For daily reading outside of school, he reported only environmental texts such as street signs, instructions, and

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*Figure 4.2. What writing means to Acer.*

I think writing to me is just like a tornado at the beginning, it’s like your brain storming ideas, then it’s like your totally blown away by the tornado, when you stuck on how to write your story, later when the tornado stops it’s like you know what to write about and the water is flowing like a current.
transportation schedules. Weekly Acer read catalogues, comic books/cartoons, computer games, email, pamphlets/flyers, menus, novels/stories, MSN, price tags, and Chinese movie descriptions. Interestingly, although the only writing he reported doing in Chinese during the 18 months was for Chinese school, he reported a much wider range of reading in Chinese: comic books/cartoons, instructions, forms, notes, novels/stories, movie descriptions, computer games, and recipes.

**Inside school.** The two predominant themes regarding Acer’s academic reading were his struggle with comprehension and issues with reading aloud. Acer described his comprehension problems as

> These books, like they have a lot of text, so, there’s like, once I read it, like, there might be stuff that I don’t understand and sometimes I don’t go back to it, so I end up not knowing what I read and stuff. (reading sample interview, December 9, 2008)

While Acer recognized that he should “go back” when he did not understand something he had read, he acknowledged that he did not always do this. In addition, he mentioned a few other reasons for his difficulty in comprehending academic texts, such as lack of vocabulary knowledge and reading at too quick a pace.

Acer’s concern with the speed of his reading was related directly to his ambivalence about reading aloud in class. In May 2009, he told the interviewer that one thing he would like to do better in his reading was not to read too fast when he was reading aloud because he did not remember anything and that it was easier for him to read silently. Yet, later in that same interview, he said that one of his favorite reading activities at school was reading out loud. When questioned about this discrepancy, Acer replied that while he understood better when he read silently, doing so was “boring.” He followed this statement with a very animated
description of a recent Readers’ Theater class activity, which he clearly enjoyed. A year later he was still struggling with reading aloud:

When I read out loud in class, uh, I find that, uh, reading, like reading silently is, you retain more information in your head, but when you’re reading out loud, yeah, you just, uh, might read a little bit fast, so it’s harder to retain information. (reading sample interview, June 9, 2010).

Acer’s ambivalence about reading showed in other ways, as well. For instance, when asked to rate himself as a reader, he consistently placed himself in the middle of the scale, although he just as consistently stated that he had not asked for help with the reading assignments he brought to the interviews and could not think of any reading problems he had when reading at home by himself. And, despite his statement about not always going back over what he read, Acer did describe using multiple strategies. For instance, in June 2010, he listed in order the strategies he used to help him understand new words: consult dictionary websites (like Dictionary.com), consult a paper dictionary, ask his sister, or just keep going. In particular, during Grade 10—on his own and with no prompting from a teacher—Acer decided that he would begin looking up unfamiliar words in a dictionary as he read. Moreover, Acer mentioned a variety of school reading activities and texts that he enjoyed, such as Readers’ Theater, reading folk tales and learning about the Brothers Grimm, reading a myth about Hercules, and reading poetry. He also mentioned enjoying short pieces, like articles about Mohammed Ali and segregation. Overall, it seems he was most attracted to fictional texts with an historical aspect, as well as texts that were shorter and easier for him to comprehend.

A major theme in Acer’s talk about academic writing was his view of writing as a process. Clearly, this understanding developed by his having teachers who encouraged process-
based writing (specifically his teachers in Grade 10 English and a Grade 9 learning strategies course), but Acer seemed to have internalized this view of writing. In May 2009, Acer specifically mentioned that he liked the act of brainstorming ideas and putting them down on paper; if the teacher did not give the class an organizer sheet, he did it himself, though he preferred it when she provided the organizer. In June 2010, he told his interviewer that he liked to write the whole piece first, then read it back, implying that he recognized more work can happen on a piece after the first draft. Acer also valued the feedback his teachers gave him on drafts as well as finished pieces:

> Teachers do add those comments, they’re like ‘Wow,’ and those comments sometimes, uh, ‘You should write a little more detail or little bit, uh, less,’ ‘Don’t give too much detail’ or something like that, and, yeah, that helps you next time to know what you’re writing. (writing sample interview, June 9, 2010)

Moreover, Acer claimed that in both Grade 9 and 10 he had individual talks with his English teachers about his writing: “They’re pretty good because you actually know how you can improve next time” (writing sample interview, June 9, 2010), indicating that he saw writing as a process not just on a single assignment but across assignments also.

In contrast to most of the participants in this study, Acer’s confidence as a writer seemed higher than his confidence as a reader; in fact, he explicitly stated this in May 2009, and he said that reading took him longer than writing. Acer repeated this feeling in June 2010, explaining that he found it hard to retain information when he was reading but that when he was writing he could just jot down whatever came into his head (in the prewriting stage). His grades bore up his observations about his writing, as he received A’s on the two writing assignments seen by
interviewers. He also enjoyed writing a range of academic texts, from the essay on his future goals, to a resume, to a myth about Apollo.

**Literacy Engagement**

In his interviews over the course of this study, Acer demonstrated behavioral engagement in 46 separate literacy events. Just over half of these (24) had a social component (e.g., writing an email to a friend), and one-third (16) had one or more related social support instances. For instance, in both his social network and reading sample interviews from May 2009, Acer described his English teacher giving him the young adult novel *Money Hungry* (Flake, 2001) in order to help him prepare for Grade 10 English. Around this instrumental support instance from an individual listed as ‘most important’ on this social network map, Acer demonstrated both emotional and cognitive engagement: He stated this action made him feel that he received ‘enough’ help from his teachers on his reading and writing and that he liked the book (emotional: positive affect); he claimed that reading this book would prepare him to move to an advanced track in English (emotional: value statement), and he recounted using six different strategies to help him read this book (cognitive). Despite claiming that this book was difficult for him to read, particularly due to the vocabulary, Acer persevered, perhaps in part because a person he cared about and to whom he felt close recommended it; certainly part of his perseverance is due to his goal to move into the highest track of English—in support of his goal to attend higher education—about which he made two goal-oriented statements (cognitive engagement). As well, this instrumental action by his teacher led to another instance of social support, when Acer asked his sister for help with some of the slang vocabulary in the book (e.g., “ain’t” and “dough”).
Proportionally, Acer showed more evidence of emotional and cognitive engagement in the literacy events on which he received social support (see Table 4.3). In the 46 discrete literacy events he reported during this study, Acer reported using strategies (a marker of cognitive engagement) for seven of these events, four events with social support and three without support. For each of the three events without social support, Acer reported using only three discrete strategies (a different one for each text), while he reported using nine discrete strategies (13 strategies total) for the texts on which he received social support.

Table 4.3
Acer’s Literacy Engagement by Presence or Absence of Social Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Behavioral engagement</th>
<th>Emotional engagement</th>
<th>Cognitive engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With social support</td>
<td>16 events</td>
<td>15 instances</td>
<td>3 instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without social support</td>
<td>30 events</td>
<td>14 instances</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The only instances in which Acer made negative affective statements (he made no negative value statements) about literacy events were ones on which he received social support. Interestingly, all three of these were mitigated to some extent by additional social support. Two of the negative comments revolved around how difficult Acer found reading *Money Hungry*, which he resolved by asking his sister for help with the vocabulary (instrumental support); the other comment was about how hard it was for him to find appropriate transition words for an essay, but his teacher actually praised his use of transitions in that particular piece (appraisal support).
Angel

As an Individual

In May 2010, Angel was a 16-year-old Grade 10 student at a technical high school. Her demeanor was rather reserved, at times even sullen, with the graduate students who interviewed and tutored her during the ALTUR project. Outside the project, however, Angel had a rich social life, full of friends and family.

Angel’s linguistic and cultural background also was rich: She had lived on three continents, and she spoke Portuguese, French, and English fluently, as well as having some proficiency in Kikongo and Lingala. Angel was born in Angola, where she lived until age 9; due to the conflict there, her family moved to Brazil for three years and then came to Canada when Angel was 12. Despite this cultural diversity—or perhaps because of it—Angel professed not to belong to any one cultural or ethnic group and to feel a part of Canadian society.

Angel’s family consisted of her mother and father, a twin brother, a sister two years younger, and a little brother who turned two in the spring of 2010. In addition, Angel had several aunts and uncles who lived in Toronto and neighboring cities, and her best friend was Promize, a cousin the same age who attended the same high school. Like her uncle, Promize’s father, Angel wanted to be a doctor. She was clear about this goal at each interview administration, and as early as Grade 9 she had done research on the education needed to reach medical school. However, it was not apparent what she was doing in high school to achieve this goal.

Angel was referred to the ALTUR project as being ‘at-risk for literacy development’ by P2E employees, though her reported marks in the middle of Grade 9 were average: B’s in science and math and a C in English. It is possible that Angel’s behavior at school placed in her
a ‘risky’ category, as she mentioned that members of her network had advised her to not fight at school and not to skip classes. It is also possible that Angel’s poor attendance at the tutoring program or her ELL status made her appear ‘at-risk,’ or a combination of these factors.

As a Network Member

As expected for a teenager over the first two years of high school, Angel’s social network varied in its composition across administrations, although it was remarkably consistent in several domains (see Figure 4.3). Although home was the most stable of her domains, it showed slight variation: In April 2009, Angel failed to list her youngest brother, and in May 2010, she mentioned that her father no longer lived at home, though she gave no other details about that situation and often spoke of her home life as if he were present. Her other family domain was also fairly stable, populated each time by aunts, uncles, and cousins—all in Canada, just varying in number—and always containing her best friend/cousin Promize. Finally, the numbers of contacts in her school domain were fairly consistent, although with different teachers each time.

Like most of the other participants (all but K-9 and Lala), the number of Angel’s friend contacts was lower at the end of the study than at the beginning. Only three friends appeared more than once on her network maps, and only one appeared at all three administrations. Another domain that experienced a large drop between December 2008 and May 2010 is outside of school: In December 2008, Angel listed six Pathways people by name as outside-of-school contacts, including three graduate tutors in the ALTUR project with whom she had only met once or twice, the director of the tutoring program, and her SPSW. However, at the following two administrations, she mentioned no one by name, preferring to write “Pathways people” or “SPW” [sic]. Throughout the project, Angel showed a predilection to tell us what she thought we wanted to hear, so it is possible that she only wrote those names in December 2008.
because those were the people she thought she was ‘supposed’ to write down. Also, it is possible she thought, still in her first few months of this program, that these individuals were going to be important to her but by April 2009 they had turned out to be less meaningful.

In terms of the individuals Angel identified as her ‘most important’ contacts, again there was high consistency but with some important variation. Six of the ten (actually, she selected 11 ‘most important’ contacts in May 2010) were the same across all three administrations, and all were family members: mother, father, younger sister, an aunt and uncle, and cousin Promize. Another two, her twin brother and baby brother, appeared in both December 2008 and May 2010. In December 2008, Angel listed only individuals who were related to her, and in total over the course of the study only six individuals were listed who were not related to her: three friends

**Figure 4.3.** Radar graph of the people named in Angel’s social network over 18 months.
in April 2009 and one friend, one teacher, and her SPSW in May 2010. None of her ‘most important’ friends appeared more than once; perhaps her tightly knit group of cousins replaced a need for friends outside this group.

**Giving and Receiving Support**

The ways in which Angel’s network contacts provided support to her, based on Tardy’s (1985) classification of social support aspects, are illustrated in Table 4.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content of supportive interaction</th>
<th>Descriptiona</th>
<th>Total reported instancesb</th>
<th>Socioacademic Instances</th>
<th>Socioliterate Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Caring (e.g., trust, love, empathy)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Helping behaviors (e.g. giving money or time)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td>Evaluative feedback</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a From Malecki and Demaray (2006). b Count confirmed by a second rater.

Although opportunities were given in the interviews to describe a variety of helping behaviors one might give or receive, all of the instances of **instrumental** support described by Angel related specifically to help on schoolwork. Most of this support was received by Angel, but she did mention four instances in which she had given assistance: helping two siblings and a cousin with homework, as well as advising her boyfriend not to skip school.

Although her parents were the single most common provider of Angel’s **informational** support, Angel also received a similar amount of support from her cousin Promize, most of which appeared to be very general advice about life and how to behave in school. Most of
Angel’s informational support seemed to be about her behavior—Promize and her parents told her not to skip school and her boyfriend told her not to fight at school—and to be unsolicited. She reciprocated this support, at least to her boyfriend, telling him not to skip school.

The amount of *appraisal* support reported by Angel was fairly average for the participants in this study, comprising about 12% (6/52) of her overall support. All of these instances came from teachers, specifically English teachers, primarily telling her that her writing, reading, or grammar was improving. Although, like all the participants, she reported a small amount of *emotional* support (4/52 instances), it is striking that Angel described an instance of emotional support that was negative in content. When asked if anyone on her network map had a negative influence on her reading and writing, Angel quickly pointed to her sister’s name and said, “*Her! My sister think I don’t know how to read. Yeah, she think that [...] ‘cause she think she can read better than me but she can’t*” (social network interview, April 30, 2009). Angel’s tone and demeanor indicated she was indignant about and hurt by her sister’s opinion, probably enhanced by the fact that her sister was only in Grade 7 at the time. Also noteworthy, Angel was one of only two participants (along with K-9) not to mention sharing a good grade with a family member or having a family member congratulate her on a particular assignment.

Of Angel’s 52 instances of social support, 43 (83%) fit the category of socioacademic support. Twenty-four of 52 instances were socioliterate in nature (see Table 4.4), and 14 of which (58%) were provided by teachers. Examples of the socioliterate support she received included an English teacher advising her to practice her oral reading in a mirror (consistent with her low scores on the oral word reading screening tasks for ALTUR), a tutor giving her examples
of how to write an essay introduction, and her mother helping her with her reading and writing homework.

An interesting note about Angel’s social support is that there are two instances she described that do not fit into the typical support aspects defined in the field. Rather than negative support (e.g., Hirsch, 1985) or a simple absence of support (La Gaipa, 1990), these two instances are more indicative of something akin to “null” support, in which an individual identifies a need for assistance but is either turned away by a potential source of support or consciously chooses not to approach that source (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon).

In April 2009, in a rare moment of rapport, Angel told her interviewer that she had been skipping geography because

[The teacher], he don’t help us. He just give us the paper, and if you don’t know, just do it by yourself. (xxxxxxx). He don’t explain or nothing, he just give you the paper and sit on the computer, on his laptop. When I ask him for help, he say to figure it out by myself. (social network interview, April 30, 2009)

Moreover, in response to a probe from her interviewer, Angel went on to say that there was no one at school to whom she could talk about this problem because she did not like any of her teachers. It is unclear (and unfortunate) why she did not consider her SPSW as a resource for this issue.

Academic Literacy Skills

Angel’s scores on the literacy tasks administered in the fall of 2008 were problematic, as the research assistants noticed her and Promize talking to each other throughout the testing, and later we discovered that their answers on all the tasks were either identical or very similar. The two girls were separated for the spring 2009 administration, although Angel’s results remained
questionable. In the spring of 2009, Angel’s scores on the vocabulary (2/30) and morphological awareness (6/20) tasks were the lowest of any participant in the ALTUR project. Comparing Angel’s oral vocabulary use to her performance on this task, Angel’s tutor questioned the accuracy of these results (Watanabe, 2009)—for instance, on that task Angel was unable to define *throat* or *flood*, writing instead, “I don’t know” for both and writing “beat means when you give bi” for the example sentence “The robin **beat** its wings.” Considering that a few months earlier Angel was able to use and spell correctly words like *refused*, *arrested*, *segregation*, and *racism* in a hand-written letter for her English class, I also suspect that Angel’s ALTUR vocabulary scores were not completely indicative of her word knowledge. Likewise, Angel’s reading scores were the second lowest (16/44 points) of all 21 ALTUR participants in spring 2009, even though Angel reported several times that her teachers had told her that her reading was improving, she said that she enjoyed reading, and she appeared to read a variety of texts regularly. The results on these reading-based tasks may have been complicated by Angel’s low sight-word reading skills (see Table 3.2). It also is possible that Angel did not give her best effort on the ALTUR literacy tasks because she resented being separated from Promize or was unmotivated by the tasks. Her lack of effort on the writing tasks from that administration was evident, as she did not follow the instructions, wrote very messily, and composed very short pieces. Her score on the persuasive task was the second-lowest in the group (8/18) and the lowest (11.5/26) on the narrative task, yet the quality of Angel’s classroom writing samples was inconsistent with the very low quality of these timed writing tasks. Another possibility is that Angel suffered from test anxiety and was uncomfortable in the timed setting of the ALTUR tasks.
Unfortunately, since I did not analyze Angel’s ALTUR tasks from the first administration of the assessment, her responses to those writing prompts do not shed any light on her writing development across this study. However, there are a few noticeable trends in the academic papers she brought to the writing sample interviews. Because Angel was writing fairly complex sentences with independent and dependent clauses even in the fall of 2008, the complexity of her sentences did not increase much over this study. Nor did her use of punctuation improve, as her writing contained comma splices and/or run-on sentences across the study. However, her appropriate use of metadiscursive devices, particularly pronouns with appropriate references and repetition of key words and phrases, improved noticeably over time, which also improved the flow and comprehensibility of her arguments. Finally, a sense of ownership and voice was more evident in her writing over time, as Angel inserted herself and her opinions into her writing.

**Literacy Interests, Events, and Practices**

**Outside school.** All of the extracurricular reading and writing events Angel reported in the interviews had a social dimension. Her traditional, text-based reading included daily Bible study with her family in the living room before bed; children’s books to her little brother; the Obama biography (Mendell, 2008) she read with her father, uncle, and older cousin; stories Promize wrote; and fashion magazines with cousins. In addition, at various administrations Angel reported texting daily with her mother, her boyfriend, Promize, her twin brother, and another friend. She also used Facebook and MSN frequently with siblings, cousins and friends. Angel rarely talked about writing as an activity on its own; outside of school, her writing consisted almost entirely of social media, other than a brief mention in December 2008 of making up and illustrating stories for her younger sister and in May 2010 of writing notes to her mother. Her lack of writing events is not surprising, considering her admission that thinking
about writing brought to mind “sad moments [. . .] because I don’t like writing” (social network interview, April 30, 2009).

Angel’s responses on the reading and writing practices checklists corroborate her face-to-face descriptions of her extra-curricular reading and writing events, with the exception of her involvement in a computer game called Zwinky and her diary. The daily reading Angel reported on the checklists were text and instant messages, email, computer games (specifically Zwinky), ‘novels and stories,’ transportation schedules, and ‘TV and theatre programs.’ On a weekly basis, Angel reported reading children’s books, TV closed captioning, newspapers and/or magazines, ‘price tags and tickets,’ and tests. Although she never mentioned playing computer games during the interviews, that omission is not surprising because many teens do not realize how much reading and/or writing is involved with such games (cf. Alvermann, 2001). The game Angel identified on her reading checklist, Zwinky, is an online, multiplayer game that takes place inside a world called “Zwinktopia,” with its own dormitories, chat rooms, and even a mall. Players create an avatar that moves within Zwinktopia and lives off “Zbucks,” which is a currency that can be earned in various ways within Zwinktopia or bought using a service such as PayPal (“Zwinky,” n.d.). Clearly, such an undertaking required Angel to do quite a bit of reading and writing, in addition to the technological literacy entailed. The writing Angel reported doing daily included email, instant and text messages, a journal/diary, and ‘poems, songs & lyrics.’ Although Angel repeatedly claimed in interviews that she did not like to write and did not write for fun, she also consistently answered on the checklists that she wrote daily in a diary and that she had done so since she was 11. Weekly, Angel wrote such texts as ‘art, drawing & cartoons,’ letters/postcards, and homework.
Despite Angel’s familiarity with multiple languages, in May 2010 she confirmed that all of her reading and writing during the study had been undertaken only in English. Although Portuguese was her first language and she was educated in it during elementary school, Angel told her interviewers at various times that she could no longer read nor write in that language.

**Inside school.** Three topics relating to Angel’s academic literacy were salient in her case report: her definition of writing as ‘grammar,’ her approach to her writing assignments, and the influence of Promize on Angel’s academic literacy involvement.

At every administration of the writing sample interview, Angel mentioned the importance of grammar. When proofreading her work, Angel said that she had changed verb tenses, ‘fixed’ mistakes, and made changes in grammar and punctuation. When asked what she would like to have done better on each paper, she either could not think of anything or replied, “Fix my grammar mistakes” (writing sample interview, November 27, 2008). When asked how her teachers had helped her become a better writer, Angel mentioned improving her grammar. Several times she mentioned receiving praise that she was “not making no more mistakes in grammar” (writing sample interview, November 27, 2008). When asked to rate herself as a writer, Angel knocked points off her score because “I do too much mistake” (writing sample interview, May 12, 2010). The only other yardstick she used to measure writing quality or improvement was length—she claimed that in Grade 10 she could write longer papers (i.e., more paragraphs) than she could in Grade 9. Although for two assignments Angel specifically described brainstorming and using a ‘web,’ and she generally tried to revise her essays, there was no explicit acknowledgement of writing as a process, nor did she ever mention the importance of content or organization in successful writing.
Although Angel did not specifically refer to writing as a process, it seemed that when Angel was interested in an assignment, she would treat it recursively. Even though her composition on the first sample (on *Anne of Green Gables* [Montgomery, 1908/1989], one of her favorite books) was not considered successful by her teacher and Angel was asked to re-write it, she still took the assignment seriously: She participated in a prewriting exercise, she read the book three times to prepare, she asked her teacher to help her get started writing the first sentences, and she made a few edits at the end. With the second sample, a letter from Rosa Parks’ perspective, Angel again created a prewriting ‘web,’ sought help from a tutor, and edited her grammar. Finally, for the presentation on Obama she checked out a library book and conducted Internet research, created an outline and edited it, and practiced in front of a mirror at home. These writing experiences contrast with Angel’s approach to writing a letter to a former prime minister in history class—an assignment she admitted she did not understand—in which she did not even bother to use her textbook, relying instead on her classmates for the content, nor did she ask for any assistance from her teacher. Angel mentioned no prewriting activities and said only that she corrected the spelling of a few words. These observations are similar to those of her after-school literacy tutor over a six-month period in Grade 9. Although it was quite difficult for this tutor to find activities on which Angel would work (see paragraphs below), when the two of them began to write about Angel’s favorite singer, she read articles about him, wrote two pieces (a letter and an argumentative essay) in response to those articles, and revised those pieces.

However, Angel’s interest level in a literacy event was not the only factor in how deeply she became involved with it; her behavior also was affected directly by her social interactions with Promize. Her literacy tutor described the situation:
It has been extremely challenging to tutor Angel. As mentioned throughout this report, since Angel likes to follow whatever Promize does, they go off task by talking on the phone, trying to talk to me about something not related to schoolwork (e.g., boys, celebrities) or criticizing tasks. I rarely saw both girls bringing any materials with them to the tutoring site. (Watanabe, 2009, p. 9)

Angel’s relationship with Promize even seemed to neutralize Angel’s interest level in a topic:

I brought a variety of magazines that Angel and Promize said that they would be most interested in. Nevertheless, although they showed great interest, it seemed almost impossible for them to work on the literacy activities. They normally ended up talking about the celebrities while refusing to read or write. I prepared a variety of seemingly fun reading and writing activities with the help of my colleagues each time; however, it seemed my efforts were in vain. Both girls – particularly Promize would come up with a variety of reasons (excuses) not to do any tasks. (p. 10)

On the other hand, the tutor eventually was able to counteract Promize’s influence and to enhance Angel’s engagement in at least one literacy event, discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Finally, it is noteworthy, considering Angel’s low scores on the word-reading screening tasks, that the school-related texts Angel reported enjoying (Anne of Green Gables, Obama biography for youths) were written for a reading level below the grade in which she was placed based on age, while the texts she found “boring” (Animal Farm [Orwell, 1945/1982], history textbook) were written at or above her grade level.

**Literacy Engagement**

In her interviews over the course of this study, Angel demonstrated behavioral engagement in 49 separate literacy events. Over 50% of these (26) had a social component (e.g.,
writing an email to a friend), and 10 of these events had one or more related social support instances. Although the number of events Angel reported and the percentage of these with social support were fairly average in this study, the percentage with a social component was the highest of all the focal students.

But how did these events, the support, and engagement interface for Angel? On an assignment in which she had to write a letter from the perspective of Rosa Parks, Angel received instrumental support from a P2E tutor whom she asked to help her get started and who gave her an example of “how to start” (writing sample interview, April 23, 2009). Angel made very positive comments (emotional engagement) about this assignment—“it just touched my heart” (ibid)—and she used six separate strategies (cognitive engagement), such as brainstorming and revising, in order to complete it. On the other hand, unlike both Acer and Ning, whose engagement on certain literacy events could be attributed at least partially to the social support they received, Angel’s engagement in this writing assignment appeared to be due more to her intrinsic interest in racial issues: “I like to read about black peoples’ lives” (reading sample interview, November 27, 2008), especially since she reported no support that would have led her to use these strategies nor appraisal support that would have encouraged positive feelings.

Social support also did not necessarily lead to general educational engagement for Angel. Even with a particular tutor assigned to her who worked to build a rapport with Angel and to design interesting tutoring activities (e.g., reading and writing about Angel’s favorite singer, Chris Brown), Angel only came to five full tutoring sessions over a six-month period. She either missed the other sessions or came only 30 minutes before the site closed (Watanabe, 2009). Moreover, “when we worked on her homework, Angel was often demotivated and trying to let
me complete her work rather than receiving assistance and completing it herself” (Watanabe, p. 12).

Although Angel showed more evidence of emotional and particularly cognitive engagement in the literacy events on which she received social support (see Table 4.5), it is clear from the examples above that the relationship between social support and engagement is complex.

Table 4.5
*Angel’s Literacy Engagement by Presence or Absence of Social Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Behavioral engagement</th>
<th>Emotional engagement</th>
<th>Cognitive engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With social support</td>
<td>10 events</td>
<td>14 instances</td>
<td>6 instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without social support</td>
<td>39 events</td>
<td>30 instances</td>
<td>8 instances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hines

As an Individual

At the time of our final interview in the summer of 2010, Hines was 15 and had just completed Grade 10 at a college-preparatory high school within walking distance from her home, where she was enrolled in the most advanced course track. She had lived in Toronto since the age of two, when her family moved here from Italy, where she was born. Her mother is Somali and her father Yemeni, and Hines listed Somali and Italian as her first languages, although she did not use nor remember much Italian at the time of this study; she also spoke and read Arabic. Her four younger siblings (two boys and two girls) were born in Toronto. Hines’ father had a masters degree in chemistry and taught math, science and English at a local private college; he
often helped her with her homework and was supportive of her plans to attend university and become a nurse, a goal which she mentioned consistently throughout the study. The family regularly attended mosque, and Hines dressed very conservatively, always wearing a hijab.

One of the most salient features of our interviews with Hines was her strict definition of what it means to be Canadian:

H: I can’t feel Canadian.

IV: Why?

H: Because I’m not Canadian, like my blood’s not Canadian. And I don’t act like Canadian, so (+) yeah, um, I don’t like it when people say “You’re Canadian,” I don’t feel comfortable, I don’t feel like I’m Canadian. (social network interview, May 21, 2009)

In particular, Hines viewed language and culture as differentiating factors and even went so far as to tell her tutor/interviewer, a native of Colombia who had lived in Canada for eight years and who had Canadian citizenship, that the tutor would never be Canadian. Yet, despite her feeling of not belonging to Canada, Hines still claimed to like living here: “It’s, like, better than living in a country with just your people. You get to know what other people do in their life and, like, how their life is different” (social network interview, May 21, 2009).

Despite being enrolled in the highest course track (“advanced”) at her school and reading young adult novels avidly, as a ninth-grader Hines was nominated for the ALTUR project as being ‘at-risk for literacy development.’ This referral was probably due to her grades: Hines reported marks of ‘D’ in math, English, business, and geography in the middle of Grade 9. (At the member check interview in July 2011, Hines explained that her marks were much better in
Grades 10 and 11. She attributed her low marks in Grade 9 to not understanding how different expectations were between middle and high school; she said that once she got behind in Grade 9, she found it very difficult to raise her grades.)

**As a Network Member**

Supporting my impressions of Hines based on our face-to-face interactions, her social network maps indicate a very social and friendly young woman. Although the number of her social contacts varied over time, she consistently reported the highest number of peer contacts of any participant in my study as well as in the larger ALTUR study (only Lala reported more in the spring of 2010). This consistency was maintained in the specific domains of her network: At each administration, Hines listed all six of her immediate family members (*home*) on her map, several cousins (*other family*) close to her age, at least 10 *friends*, and multiple acquaintances at *school* and in her neighborhood (*outside of school*).

![Radar graph of the people named in Hines’ social network over 18 months.](image)
The variations in Hines’ social network (see Figure 4.4) include some important items to note. Although the number of her school contacts fluctuated from two in December 2008 to 14 in May 2009 and back to six in June 2010, only two of these contacts—both at the very first administration—were adults (her Grade 9 math and science teachers). Similarly, in the outside-of-school domain Hines named six contacts in December 2008 and four in June 2010, rising to a high of 15 contacts at the middle administration, but none of those contacts were adults or mentoring figures. Also interesting is the fluidity of her placement of peers into domains; for example, four different friends appeared in more than one domain at the same time.

Looking more closely at her ‘most important’ network contacts, Hines named her younger sister (aged 7 in June 2010) and a slightly older female cousin at all three administrations. Her other family members living at home were all identified as ‘most important’ twice, as were her two closest friends. The greatest variability in Hines’ ‘most important’ contacts occurred in May 2009, at the end of Grade 9, when seven of these contacts (four cousins and three friends) were listed for the first and only time. The only adults who were identified as ‘most important’ at any administration were her mother and father.

**Giving and Receiving Support**

The ways in which Hines’ network contacts provided support to her, based on Tardy’s (1985) classification of social support aspects, are illustrated in Table 4.6.

Notably, Hines was the only participant to report receiving more informational support than instrumental support. This difference could be due to how Hines interpreted the interview questions or to how her tutor posed the questions in the first two social network interviews, as Hines was the only participant interviewed by this particular tutor. On the other hand, like K-9,
Table 4.6
Supportive Content of Hines’ Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content of supportive interaction</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Total reported instances</th>
<th>Socioacademic instances</th>
<th>Socioliterate instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Caring (e.g., trust, love, empathy)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Helping behaviors (e.g. giving money or time)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td>Evaluative feedback</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a from Malecki and Demaray (2006).  *b Count confirmed by a second rater.

Hines seemed to prefer working by herself on schoolwork, and she repeatedly made statements like, “I just work it out myself” (social network interview, June 21, 2010). This desire to work independently could also account for the fact that Hines reported the fewest instances of social support of these seven focal students: She was the only one with fewer than 50 instances. (Hines’ number of reported instances also could be negatively affected by the loss of the first three interview recordings in December 2008; while her tutor/interviewer quickly recreated these data from her extensive notes, it is likely that some pieces of information were lost.)

Half of Hines’ 22 reported instances of informational support were given to or received from her friends. Some of this support appeared to be about personal matters, such as friendship issues, but other instances were academic in nature, such as three of her friends giving her advice about how to study. Other trends in her informational support included several instances of advice from her parents regarding her future career plans and from various older cousins about both preparing for university and how to behave.

Although Hines indicated a preference for working on her own, she also reported approaching her father regularly for help with her homework (instrumental support). In fact, no
other contact provided her with more than a single instance of instrumental support, while her father reportedly provided her with 40% (6/15) of her instrumental support. For example, her father helped Hines with ideas and vocabulary when she was writing essays and math homework.

The four instances of appraisal support that Hines reported all centered around literacy activities. For example, her classmates in Grade 10 drama praised her oral reading, saying that her active oral reading style made them “get so into it” (reading sample interview, July 13, 2010). Like all the participants, Hines reported a very small amount of emotional support; it is likely that her close female friendships did provide emotional support but that the wording of the questions predisposed her to report this support as ‘advice,’ as in the case of mutual advice she and a friend gave each other about their ‘problems.’ One instance of emotional support appeared to be negative in nature, when she revealed that her parents criticized her extracurricular reading choices about fantastical creatures like vampires and werewolves.

Although school personnel provided only 9% (4/43) of Hines’ overall support, almost 75% (32/43) of her reported social support instances related to school in some way and can be characterized as socioacademic support, and 20 related directly to literate events (see Table 4.6), the second highest percentage of socioliterate support of these focal students. Half of this socioliterate support was provided by her parents, double the average for this participant group.

**Academic Literacy Skills**

At the beginning of the ALTUR project, in the fall of Grade 9, Hines had the second highest score on the morphology task (17/20), the narrative writing task (25/26) and the persuasive writing task (15/18). Her scores on the vocabulary and reading comprehension tasks were in the middle of the group. From the fall to the spring of that school year most of Hines’
scores changed very little; however, her scores on the reading comprehension test increased dramatically, from 64% (28/44) to 84% (37/44), the second highest score on that test. Further analysis indicates that her improvements were most dramatic on ‘retrieving’ and ‘interpretive’ type questions, and primarily on an expository reading task. It is not surprising that Hines scored well on the ALTUR tasks, considering her strong reading habits and early exposure to multiple languages (Italian, Somali, and English by age 3). Also, over the course of Grade 9 Hines was completing more tasks like the ALTUR expository task in which she read an academic text and answered comprehension questions.

Evidently, a ceiling effect applied to Hines’ spring scores on the morphology and narrative writing tasks—her scores on those tasks simply could not go much higher. It is a little surprising, considering Hines’ reading practices, that her vocabulary scores were not higher, but most of her reported reading material included magazines and young adult novels, and perhaps the vocabulary in those was not challenging her to learn new words. Even in her school texts Hines claimed to know all but about three words per page, so perhaps our vocabulary task simply did not accurately measure her academic word knowledge. On the other hand, in the logs of her ALTUR tutoring sessions I found listed words she did not know in both academic and extracurricular readings such as *calamity* (Grade 8 level, as per Dale & O’Rourke, 1976), *endearing* (8), *alarming* (6), *velocity* (10), *intrigued* (10), *scripture* (8), indicating that perhaps her vocabulary level was not at a Grade 9 level.

In Hines’ academic writing samples at the beginning and end of Grade 9, there was noticeable development. Even though the first assignment was one she wrote for homework and the second was written in class, the second was approximately twice as long. The first composition was a single paragraph, while the second was a traditional five-paragraph essay,
with content distributed appropriately among the paragraphs. Although there were a few informal phrases in the second assignment, it generally adopted the tone of an academic essay, while the first assignment was very colloquial. Finally, most of her sentences in the first assignment were simple, choppy sentences, but in the second essay, Hines used many more complex sentences. Finally, in the second essay Hines incorporated examples and direct quotations from a source to support her claims, while the first essay was a series of unsupported claims.

Unfortunately, Hines did not bring a physical example of her writing to the interview following Grade 10, but she did choose one to describe to me, and her comments illustrated small areas of progress in academic writing. For instance, when she did not know how to get started and thought the assignment was hard, she sought help from both a tutor and her father, rather than isolating herself as she preferred to do in Grade 9. Also, Hines indicated that she had edited this piece several times, which she juxtaposed with her experience on an earlier piece on which she felt she had too many mistakes. Finally, she used both books and the Internet to conduct research on her topic, an experience she had not mentioned in any earlier interviews.

**Literacy Interests, Events, and Practices**

**Outside school.** Hines’ extracurricular writing appeared to be limited to social purposes, such as using Facebook; however, her extracurricular reading events ranged from those with a social purpose (Facebook) to those with a social aspect (reading magazines with a friend) to solitary activities (reading novels for fun).

Hines seemed to rely on Facebook for most of her electronic social communication, and her reported usage of this tool increased slightly over the course of the study. For instance, in December 2008, Hines did not report using any type of electronic communication tools in her
daily life, while in May 2009, she stated that she wrote to her closest cousin through Facebook everyday “about life, like what’s up with our lives, like what happened during the day and stuff” (social network interview, May 21, 2009). By June 2010, Hines was using email as well as Facebook every day, with the same cousin as well as with a close friend.

While Hines’ electronic communications increased slightly over the course of the study, her face-to-face social reading events declined over that same period. At different points in Grade 9, she mentioned reading the Quran with her father, reading and discussing Twilight (Meyer, 2005) with two friends, fashion and pop culture magazines for fun with a third friend, and books by the African American author and musician Sister Souljah with yet two other friends. However, at the end of Grade 10, Hines mentioned only one text she had talked about with two friends, and even that book seemed to be one she had read first and then recommended to them. One possibility for this decline is that four of the five girlfriends with whom she reported sharing reading events in Grade 9 disappeared from her ‘most important’ contacts by the end of Grade 10, so perhaps her new friends were not as interested in reading as the old ones. Also, the only pleasure reading Hines reported in Grade 10 took place over the winter break, so perhaps her courses were more difficult than in Grade 9 and she had less time for extracurricular reading.

These observations are mostly supported by Hines’ responses on the reading and writing checklists. The daily reading events Hines consistently reported on the checklists included advertisements, TV guides and closed captioning, signs on the streets, and transportation schedules. Weekly, she mentioned reading catalogues, children’s stories, comic books/cartoons, email, newspapers/magazines, notes, novels and stories, online chat, poems/nursery rhymes,
religious scriptures, and pamphlets. As for her writing practices, the only daily writing event Hines consistently reported was ‘homework, projects & assignments’; in Grade 10 she also reported writing ‘online chat & instant messaging’ every day, but in Grade 9 only weekly, consistent with her increasing use of Facebook over time. The only weekly writing event she consistently reported was email. She read and wrote all these texts in English except for the Quran, which she read in Arabic.

**Inside school.** Three topics worth exploring in Hines’ academic literacy are her strategy use in reading and writing, her willingness to share her literate interests and products with others, and her improvement in reading aloud.

Apparently with very little formal instruction on literacy strategies (or perhaps she had internalized these strategies from so much use and did not remember their origins), Hines implemented a number of tactics to help her in her academic (and extracurricular) reading and writing. The approach she mentioned most often was to re-read parts of a text when she did not understand them, and she reported doing so with both school and pleasure reading. For instance, Hines described re-reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960/1988) when she was writing both an essay and reading comprehension questions based on it, and she ascribed her high grades on the *Mockingbird* quizzes to the fact that she read various chapters more than once. A strategy Hines reported to help her with single vocabulary words was in some ways the opposite: She just kept reading to see if the text still made sense, and, if it did not, she would stop and look up the word. When writing the in-class *Mockingbird* essay, the primary strategy Hines used was to recall both a practice essay she had completed earlier in the school year and a sample essay provided by her teacher (both on different topics). From these, one thing Hines said she had learned was “how to start and how to end. [...] Like, when you start, you don’t jump right into it [...] You [xx] introduction and talk about,
like, the topic. Like you talk about what the question is” (writing sample interview, June 8, 2009). Interestingly, what she described is also a strategy for approaching an essay. A final strategy Hines used when tackling literacy events was to ask for assistance, despite her stated preference to “work it out myself” (social network interview, June 21, 2010). Primarily the assistance she sought was on her academic writing: Hines talked over her ideas with her parents in the fall of Grade 9 for a ‘belief story’ for English class, and when writing a paper on Steve Nash in the spring of Grade 10, she sought help and information from a Pathways tutor, her father, and even her younger brothers.

Hines repeatedly talked about finding pleasure in reading, and she often took the initiative to share these texts with members of her social network, whether she found the texts on her own or read them in school. Over the course of the study, Hines reported talking to individuals about the following texts: J-14 (teen magazines), Elle, Twilight (Meyer, 2005), books by Sister Souljah, Romiette and Julio (Draper, 2001), the Quran, To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1960/1988), and the Night World (Smith, 2008) series. In addition, Hines openly shared her essays on To Kill a Mockingbird and Steve Nash with classmates, her father, and her siblings.

Unfortunately in Grade 9 Hines’ reading enjoyment did not extend to reading aloud. Specifically, she explained, “sometimes I like, I get nervous and I stutter” because she felt everyone was staring at her (reading sample interview, May 19, 2009). Later in the same interview, Hines lowered her self-rating as a reader because “I’m so nervous” about how to pronounce words even though she estimated that she knew all but three words per page in school readings. However, just over a year later, her self-confidence as an oral reader had improved tremendously:
I’d be asked to read stuff, but, um, before I wouldn’t know how to read it [...] like, how to say the emotion the person’s feeling and stuff. The drama class, it helped me, because I could actually, I knew by the context—’cause I read so much—I knew by the context what to say and how to say it. (reading sample interview, July 13, 2010)

Hines went on to say that not only had her own reading improved but she could now recognize “the flaws” in other students’ oral reading, all of which she attributed to her enrollment in an elective drama course.

**Literacy Engagement**

In her interviews over the course of this study, Hines demonstrated behavioral engagement in 41 separate literacy events. Half of these (21) had a social component (e.g., writing an email to a friend), and 15% (6) had one or more related social support instances. Did Hines’ engagement in these events intersect with her social interactions? On the essay Hines wrote for her Grade 10 history class end-of-year project, she used nine discrete learning strategies, such as reading books and visiting websites and editing the essay three times, and she articulated her goal of wanting it to “sound better” than a previous paper (cognitive engagement); moreover, she made three positive comments about it (emotional engagement), such as that it was a good assignment. However, Hines said that when she was first given the assignment, she thought it was “terrible, I thought it sounded so hard,” and she had trouble getting started. But a turning point in her engagement in the writing process came when a tutor at P2E helped her think about the definition of “hero” (the theme of the essay), which she said helped her to focus on that aspect of the assignment, and the tutor used his laptop to help her find relevant websites to start her research. In addition to the tutor’s support, Hines
reported receiving instances of support from her teacher, her father, and her brothers. Her teacher’s positive appraisal support, exemplified by the comment “Good work. I liked it, it was interesting,” also seems to have enhanced Hines’ retrospective engagement with this essay, as Hines said “I kinda enjoyed it, because I got good marks” (writing sample interview, July 13, 2010).

Another way to look at the possible influence of social support on engagement is to consider the quality of a strand of engagement when it interfaces with social support. Proportionally, Hines showed more evidence of emotional and cognitive engagement in the literacy events on which she received social support (Table 4.7). Her cognitive engagement was particularly striking, as she used a large proportion of strategies on literacy events on which she received social support, strategies that she linked directly to her social network: Her literacy strategies often included asking others in her social network (especially her father) for help, and in June 2009 she reported using specific strategies on her *To Kill a Mockingbird* paper that had been taught to her by her ALTUR tutor.
Table 4.7
*Hines’ Literacy Engagement by Presence or Absence of Social Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Behavioral engagement</th>
<th>Emotional engagement</th>
<th>Cognitive engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With social support</td>
<td>6 events</td>
<td>9 instances</td>
<td>4 instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without social support</td>
<td>35 events</td>
<td>23 instances</td>
<td>3 instances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**K-9**

As an Individual

In March 2010, K-9 had just turned 16 and was enrolled in Grade 10 at a vocational/technical high school about a 40-minute commute from his house. He was a gregarious, self-aware, and seemingly happy person who cared about the people around him and tried to make healthy choices about his life. For instance, K-9 described his philosophy regarding socializing:

I don’t want negative people around me, like, get it straight right now, I don’t want negative people. If you’re willing to change that negative way of you, I’m willing to be there for you, but if you’re just gonna stay that way, then I can’t do much, you know. Maybe you can just be negative with someone else cuz what I need is positive people to make me more happy and stuff, you know. I can’t just walk around with negative people and I just end up being negative myself. I need people to reflect off me to make me happy. (*social network interview, March 25, 2010*)
Family was important to K-9, and his older brother, who had a scholarship to an architecture program at a local college, was one of his closest friends. K-9 lived at home with his mother, brother, and an older sister, but he made an attempt to spend every Sunday in a suburb about an hour from his home with his three younger half-siblings, in part because he wanted them to know him in a way he has never known his three older half-sisters. He had reconnected with his father during Grades 9 and 10 and forged a strong relationship with his step-mother.

K-9 was a native Canadian, whose mother was Jamaican and father Egyptian. K-9’s mother spoke Jamaican Patois when she was angry, and he listened to Patois music, so he could recognize the language though not speak it. He seemed proud of his diverse heritage and described most of his friends as ethnically “mixed” (social network interview, March 25, 2010); at each interview, he was quite plain that there was no particular cultural group with which he identified.

It is not clear what aspect of K-9’s academic performance qualified him as ‘at-risk for literacy development’ in the eyes of P2E personnel. Not only did K-9 report grades of “B” in January 2009, but he also seemed very serious about school: “Education is one of the most important things to me [...] because it can actually get you something” (social network interview, December 1, 2008). His words are borne out by an anecdote he told about not sitting with his friends in chemistry class so he would not be distracted by them. Moreover, when I saw K-9 on the subway in September 2011, he proudly told me that he was taking all advanced courses in Grade 12 and was finding them “easy.” On the other hand, K-9’s tutor during Grade 9 reported that K-9 actively resisted certain academic labels and options that educators might assume he would aspire to:
I often heard him telling his friends that he is not on the academic track at his school and hopes he never is; rather, he proudly states that he is “applied,” preferring vocational training to college or university preparation courses. He once told me that he has had the option of taking more challenging academic courses, but has declined stating that they are “too hard” and that “he wants a life.” (Kohls, 2009, pp. 8-9)

**As a Network Member**

Like all but two of the participants in this study, K-9’s social network shrank a little from the fall of Grade 9 to the spring of Grade 10 (Figure 4.5); for the most part, however, his network exhibited impressive stability across domains. In fact, the only domain that contracted consistently over time was *outside of school*: In December 2008, K-9 named three people (two counselors from Kiwanis Club) in that domain, in May 2009, he named one person (his girlfriend’s mother), and in late March 2010, he listed no out-of-school contacts. The only other domain with much variability was that of *friends*, as it fluctuated from 10 to six to 10.

A final note about a domain that showed no change over time—at none of the administrations did K-9 name any school personnel as social network contacts. Considering his friendly, open manner with both peers and adults, it is noteworthy that he had not forged any supportive relationships with school personnel. When questioned about this situation during the member check interview (June 22, 2011), K-9 explained that he had not always sought out help from teachers in Grade 10 because he felt like he was “getting it.” But by Grade 11, he felt that he needed assistance, and he named four teachers whom he regularly talked to outside of class and whom he felt he knew as individuals and not only as teachers. He claimed that one way his social network map would have changed in Grade 11 was that he would have added these teachers to it.
Despite the consistency of K-9’s overall social network, there was considerable variation among the contacts he named as his ‘most important’ at each administration. His brother and his ex-girlfriend were the only two individuals who were so designated all three times. People who were named ‘most important’ twice include his father and step-mother and a life-long friend.

![Radar graph of the people named in K-9’s social network over 16 months.](image)

*Figure 4.5. Radar graph of the people named in K-9’s social network over 16 months.*

The other 18 ‘most important’ individuals were named only once, although nine of those appeared on his network map at least twice. Nor is there a visible trend in how his ‘most important’ contacts changed over time; for instance, in December 2008, K-9 listed one family member, seven friends, and two out-of-school contacts; in May 2009, he listed eight family members, one friend, and one out-of-school contact; in March 2010, he went back to seven friends along with three family members.
Giving and Receiving Support

The ways in which K-9’s network contacts provided support to him, based on Tardy’s (1985) classification of social support aspects, are illustrated in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8
Supportive Content of K-9’s Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content of supportive interaction</th>
<th>Descriptiona</th>
<th>Total reported instancesb</th>
<th>Socioacademic instances</th>
<th>Socioliterate instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Caring (e.g., trust, love, empathy)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Helping behaviors (e.g., giving money or time)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td>Evaluative feedback</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a from Malecki and Demaray (2006). b Count confirmed by a second rater.

K-9 reported the fewest instances of appraisal support of any of the focal students. It is difficult to get a feel for how much school-based appraisal support might have been available to K-9 on a regular basis, as none of the work K-9 brought to the three writing sample interviews had been graded. Otherwise, he seemed to give his network members limited opportunities for feedback, claiming that he worked alone because “I like to be independent” (writing sample interview, December 7, 2008).

K-9’s instrumental support came primarily from two sources: his Grade 10 English teacher and his brother. This English teacher allowed him to come in after school when he had questions; his brother provided less tangible support, such as going to a job interview with K-9 and teaching him about architecture. K-9 admitted that his brother only helped him with homework when K-9 asked for help, which occurred rarely.
While K-9 gave and received an average amount of informational support, only one of the instances was academic in nature: His mother exhorted him to read over his homework and look for mistakes. The rest of his informational support revolved around ‘life’ advice, ranging from his half-sister telling him how to wear his hair to advice from Ade about “anything and everything” (social network interview, May 7, 2009). Fully half (9/19) of K-9’s informational support revolved specifically around relationship and friendship advice.

It is worth noting the support K-9 gave to others—24% (12/51) of his reported support instances were ones in which he was giving social support to people in his network, the highest percentage of any participant. K-9 explicitly mentioned that a number of acquaintances, especially girls, came to him for advice about romantic relationships. He also reported a few instances of helping his girlfriend with her homework, as well as a next-door neighbor. While this information fits with the developing picture of K-9 as a thoughtful, caring friend within his network, it also means that K-9 reported receiving less support than any participant except Hines.

Although school personnel provided only 22% of K-9’s support, half (26/51) of his reported social support instances were socioacademic in nature. Of the 51, 12 instances (24%) related directly to literate events (see Table 4.8), nine of which were provided by teachers. Overall, K-9 reported the least amount of socioacademic and socioliterate support of the participants.

**Academic Literacy Skills**

In Grade 9 at the start of the ALTUR project, K-9’s scores on all of the literacy-related tasks were among the highest of the 21 ALTUR participants. In fact, on the morphological awareness (18/20) and reading tasks (37/44) his scores were the highest of the group. However, his scores showed little change over the school year: At the second administration, his scores
fell to the middle of the participant group for vocabulary, reading, and persuasive writing but remained near the top for morphological awareness and narrative writing.

K-9’s vocabulary scores warrant a closer look. Even as a native speaker of English, K-9 scored only 13 (fall) and 14 (spring) out of a possible 30 points. The words on this task were classified according to the grade level of a test group of students who could correctly define the words (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001): K-9 struggled with words even on the Grade 2, Grade 4, and Grade 6 levels. For example, in April 2009 he wrote “to over full something” as the definition of “flood” based on the example sentence “The flood caused a lot of damage to the town.” Other words he consistently defined incorrectly included “beat” and “secure.” His struggle with word knowledge is consistent with his emphasis on vocabulary mentioned in the previous section, as well as with his stated dislike of reading aloud. As a multilingual teenager who was born in Canada and considered English his L1, it is noteworthy that K-9’s weak oral reading proficiency and low scores on the sight word and phonemic decoding efficiency tasks seemed to parallel behavior expected in elementary-aged ELLs (e.g., Geva, 2006).

Unfortunately, I have no samples of K-9’s authentic academic writing, as the two samples from ALTUR were not collected by the interviewer, and in March 2010 his essay had not yet been returned by the teacher. However, looking at his timed writing tasks from ALTUR provides some insight into his writing progress over Grade 9. On the narrative task, the higher of his two scores, K-9 matched his story to the prompt and the closing sentence more accurately in the spring than in the fall. There was also more dialogue and even a sense of suspense that was not present in the fall task. Thus, it seems K-9’s ability to weave a tale improved across that school year. This observation is not surprising, considering both his recreational reading habits (CreepyPasta and Twilight) as well as the texts he was reading in school at the time (young adult
novels *Freak the Mighty* and *Tears of the Tiger*). There was also an increase in formality of language on both tasks.

However, across both tasks and both administrations, there were numerous sentence-level errors in spelling and punctuation. K-9 misspelled words such as “specál” (*special*), “wrappers” (*wrappers*), “u” (*you*), and “butterflys” (*butterflies*), although the timed nature of the tasks meant he had little or no time to proofread these pieces. Such mistakes are not surprising, considering his low scores on the sight word and phonemic decoding efficiency tasks used as screening tests for ALTUR (see Lesaux, Koda, Siegel, & Shanahan, 2006, for a discussion of the link between spelling and word reading skills). Corroborating his claim that he struggled with punctuation when he read and wrote, K-9 both under- and over-punctuated sentences, leading to a combination of sentence fragments and run-on sentences in these tasks, and, in his attempts to include dialogue, he often left out opening or closing quotation marks. None of these errors interfere with a reader’s understanding of these pieces, however, and all four samples used cohesive devices such as conjunctive and temporal adverbs so that a reader can easily follow K-9’s train of thought.

**Literacy Interests, Events, and Practices**

**Outside school.** Almost all of the extracurricular reading and writing practices K-9 described in this study had a social aspect: He read the teen novel *Twilight* with his girlfriend and recipes with his step-mother, read and wrote on Facebook everyday with friends and family members, read and wrote text messages, and played video games with half-siblings. In fact, the only literacy event he specifically mentioned doing by himself was reading spooky stories on a website called *CreepyPasta*. Also, his former tutor reported that while K-9 did not keep a diary
or journal, he sometimes jotted down thoughts about his day, and that he liked to ‘doodle’ extensively on his homework and assignment papers (Kohls, 2012).

These observations were supported by K-9’s responses on the reading and writing checklists. The daily reading events he reported (other than Creepypasta stories) were either social in nature—email, Facebook, text messaging—or environmental—advertisements, TV closed captioning, price tags, signs, and transportation schedules. Other frequent reading materials he reported on the questionnaires also support behavior he discussed in the interviews, such as his reliance on dictionaries to help with words he does not know (uses them weekly in Grade 10, daily in Grade 9), playing computer games (weekly in Grade 10, monthly in Grade 9), reading recipes and cookbooks (weekly in Grade 10, monthly in Grade 9), and reading textbooks (weekly at last two administrations, daily in the fall of Grade 9). The daily writing events he reported were all social in nature—email, messages, Facebook, and text messages—while the weekly were either academic—homework and tests—or the drawings discussed above (specifically, images based on computer games). K-9’s rate of involvement in these writing-related events was quite consistent over the two school years.

His ALTUR tutor shared with me a set of drawings he had asked K-9 to make in January 2009 about what reading and writing meant to him. The tutor did not specify to K-9 what type of reading and writing, so these images serve as a transition point in this case report to tie together K-9’s out-of-school and in-school literacy. About reading, K-9 said, “Reading to me means to have an image in your head that makes the story come to life and helps you understand the story” (Figure 4.6), and he drew his vision of the River Lethe because he had just been learning about the etymology of “lethargy.” This statement corroborates the comments K-9 had made in an earlier interview about liking Twilight because he could visualize the story as he was reading.
Although K-9’s drawing about writing appears to depict a craggy, impenetrable mountain range, his comments are not negative or fearful: “Writing to me means to be creative and different because you get to write your own way you feel about something and it can also help you out at a lot of stuff” (Figure 4.7).

**Inside school.** Three recurrent topics about K-9’s academic literacy were his independent work habits, positive attitude toward assignments, and focus on sentence-level concerns. As referenced in the section on social support, K-9 mentioned on multiple occasions that he liked to work on his own and did not ask for help often. On only one specific assignment over the three sets of interviews—the writing sample for Grade 10 English—did K-9 acknowledge asking a teacher for help, although he mentioned asking for general help in his welding, chemistry, and Grade 10 English classes (mostly by raising his hand in class to ask questions). Otherwise, K-9 neither asked for help from nor shared his work with others during or

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2 Figures 4.6 and 4.7 also appeared in an earlier case study report on K-9’s participation in the ALTUR project (Kohls, 2012, pp. 174-176). They are reprinted here with permission from Taylor & Francis Group LLC.
after an assignment, nor did he seem to consult sources other than himself for the content of his assignments.

A second visible theme in K-9’s school-related reading and writing is how positively he talked about his assignments, even when he admitted that an assignment was not actually interesting to him—consistent with the impression K-9 gave of being a positive person. For instance, K-9 said that he found *Freak the Mighty* (Philbrick, 1993) “alright” (reading sample interview, December 7, 2008) and a short story about a birthday party just “OK” (reading sample interview, March 29, 2010), but he talked fluently and animatedly about characters and plot in both. For a letter writing activity on *Tears of the Tiger* (Draper, 1994), K-9 again thought the assignment was “alright” (writing sample interview, December 7, 2008), but he talked at length about the plot and several specific scenes from the book. K-9 enthusiastically informed an interviewer about the topic of fire safety, based on a reading assignment from his welding class. He spontaneously read passages of the handout to his interviewer/tutor, taking time to point out information he felt was important and supplementing his reading with information he had learned in class. Finally, K-9 took the initiative in Grade 9 to create his own chemistry study notes, even about topics not yet covered in class, and to discuss these notes with the teacher in order to enhance his understanding of certain topics.

Despite his creative descriptions of reading and writing documented in the previous section, K-9’s view of academic reading and writing often centered around sentence-level concerns, particularly vocabulary and punctuation. When asked during the reading sample interviews whether or not a reading was difficult, K-9 invariably reduced the difficulty level to a matter of vocabulary. He claimed that *Freak the Mighty* was easy because “the words aren’t that big” (December 7, 2008). The hardest part of reading the welding material was
that the words were “more high up, in a higher level of reading” (May 6, 2009); on the same day K-9 said, “I’m pretty confident about my reading, my vocabulary.” In Grade 10, he found the short story easy because there were no difficult words, and for the writing assignment about that story, K-9 said that one of the hardest parts was “us[ing] the right and proper words” both to get his point across and to not be “disrespectful” to the characters (writing sample interview, March 29, 2010). For example, K-9 chose the word “naïve” instead of “stupid” to describe the main character. He also spent a lot of effort to improve both his receptive and productive word knowledge. Even before the ALTUR tutoring began, K-9 was keeping a vocabulary journal, though he did not call it that and seems to have come up with the idea on his own. K-9 told the interviewer that when he came across a word he did not know in a reading, he tried to “break it down” (reading sample interview, December 7, 2008); if he really wanted to know the meaning, he would look up the word in a dictionary, and he showed a notebook where he wrote down these words. (By Grade 11, K-9 was keeping this word list on his cell phone, and he showed me that the most recent word on his list was “lycanthropy” [member check interview, June 22, 2011].) This description is consistent with K-9’s report of frequent dictionary use on all of his reading practices checklists. K-9 seemed less focused on punctuation than on vocabulary, but the topic did come up in both the reading and writing interviews in Grade 10. When asked what he thought he could improve about his reading, he mentioned noticing punctuation: “the period is like right there but I keep going on” (reading sample interview, March 29, 2010), and when rating himself as a writer he said he was good at explaining but not at punctuation.
Literacy Engagement

In his interviews, K-9 demonstrated behavioral engagement in 27 separate literacy events. Over 40% of these (12) had a social component (e.g., writing an email to a friend), although only five had related social support instances. Although K-9 reported the smallest number of literacy events of the participants, the percentages of these in which he interacted with others and received social support were average among this group of participants. For instance, while writing an essay on the short story “The Stolen Party” (Heker, 1982/1986), K-9 received a variety of support, such as his English teacher helping him shape and place his thesis statement, the same teacher helping him craft a conclusion, and his drafting teacher allowing him to use the class printer to print his final draft. K-9 had positive affective responses to this assignment, saying that he liked it and thought it was interesting (emotional engagement); he also reported using 8 different strategies to complete the assignment and keeping one goal in mind while writing (two types of cognitive engagement). On the other hand, unlike both Acer and Ning, whose engagement could be attributed at least partially to the social support they received on certain literacy events, K-9’s engagement in this essay appeared to be due more to his intrinsic interest in the social class issues inherent in the story. He decided to structure his entire essay around this topic:

Well, [the story is] pretty much all around, it’s about class issues. Like, it didn’t make sense to be talking about class issues first, because I’d be getting off-topic. So, for me to explain that class issues is there, I’d have to explain about how she, how Rosaura sees herself before the party. So, what I did was, I explained Rosaura, like who she is (xx) then I did the thesis, then I did the first paragraph [...] in detail how she
thinks about her mom, [...] after that the class issues make more sense, for me to just go on to how it changes after the party.

K-9 even went so far as to claim that “some people didn’t really get the moral of the story, that it’s about class issues itself, like the rich, the poor, the middle class.” In other words, K-9 was proud that he understood the underlying message of the story, one that personally appealed to him, and this combination of pride and interest propelled him through multiple drafts and encouraged him to ask the teacher for help with both his thesis statement and conclusion, to carefully read the instruction sheet to get ideas about structure, and to formulate the goal of finding the “right and proper words” to precisely communicate his ideas. (His teacher’s appraisal support when she called his thesis statement “perfect” early in the writing process may have contributed to his dedication to this task.)

The story is similar for the handout from his welding class on fire safety that K-9 brought to his reading sample interview in May 2009. K-9 registered five separate positive comments about this piece (emotional engagement) and used two strategies while reading it (cognitive engagement), one of which was to ask his teacher for help with vocabulary (social support). But his overall high engagement in reading this text was spurred not by social support, or even a social dimension to the literacy event, but by K-9’s recognition of the importance of the piece to the course topic—if welding students do not understand this information, he said they will “be done for” (reading sample interview, May 6, 2009).

It is also possible to look at the quality of a strand of engagement when it interfaces with social support. Proportionally, K-9 showed more evidence of emotional and cognitive engagement in the literacy events on which he received social support (Table 4.9), although it is
clear from the accounts above that the relationship between social support and engagement is complex.

Table 4.9  
**K-9's Literacy Engagement by Presence or Absence of Social Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral engagement</th>
<th>Emotional engagement</th>
<th>Cognitive engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With social support</td>
<td>5 events</td>
<td>10 instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without social support</td>
<td>22 events</td>
<td>14 instances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lala**

**As an Individual**

Lala was a quiet-spoken young woman who laughed often, out of both genuine amusement and self-deprecation. She was very sociable and outgoing, despite her quiet voice. Born in Syria, Lala came to Canada in 2004 at age 11 and was 17 ½ in the summer of 2010. She dressed modestly in traditional Muslim clothing, wearing an overcoat and headscarf. Her home language was Arabic; no English was spoken there, both to help the younger siblings learn Arabic and because her mother did not understand English. However, because most of her friends did not know Arabic, Lala spoke English almost exclusively outside her home.

Her family moved first to Ottawa, then after a year relocated to Toronto. Lala’s family was large: She had three older sisters, one younger sister, and two younger brothers. Her relationship with her father appeared to be strained and she mentioned him very little. Her
mother completed high school in Syria and her father had a university degree in engineering, although Lala reported following Grade 12 that neither was working.

Lala was a devout Muslim, attending mosque every Friday night and reading the Quran every day; she talked in interviews about enjoying these activities and feeling like she was a member of the local Muslim community. She had also participated in a school club in which she served as a mentor to new immigrant students and a book club at the local library in which she read *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky), and she had worked briefly in a medical clinic in Grade 11.

In June 2010, Lala graduated from a college preparatory high school with a strong focus on business and the arts about an hour commute from her home. She was the only participant in this study not to have been identified as ‘at-risk for literacy development’ by P2E personnel; instead, she participated in the ALTUR study on her own initiative by approaching one of our tutors and asking to be involved, both out of curiosity and because she saw this tutor helping students with their reading and writing, which she wanted.

Lala had a strong desire to attend college and university; during the study, she mentioned career interests such as elementary education, computer science, and medicine. In the summer of 2010, she had just graduated from high school and was planning to enroll in computer science courses at a local community college in the fall.

**As a Network Member**

Lala was unique among the participants in this thesis study, as her social network was the only one that expanded in size over the course of the study (Figure 4.8). One possible explanation for this expansion is that Lala was involved in a greater number of activities than
most of the participants (P2E, reading group, newcomers club, mosque, part-time job) and so was exposed to more people. These changing activities may also account for the somewhat transient nature of Lala’s network—overall, the only two domains with high consistency over time are home and other family. Lala named the same eight individuals in her home domain, as well as an aunt and cousins in other family, at each administration. Additionally, she named her grandmother (other family) twice.

In the school domain, Lala’s network varied from two teachers in December 2008 to four teachers in May 2009 to no adults in June 2010. Her outside-of-school domain showed a similar peak at the end of Grade 11: four individuals in December 2008, up to eight in May 2009, and back down to five in June 2010. Her SPSW appeared at the first two administrations but not in June 2010 (though they were still in close contact at that time). Aside from an after-school tutor,
the others named in this domain appear to be peers, such as several friends from her mosque.

Lala’s social network map in June 2010 was the only one with no adult presence outside her family.

As is evident from Figure 4.8, Lala’s *friend* domain is both her largest and the one which grew most over time. Lala reported the largest single number of *friend* contacts of all the participants in both this study and the larger ALTUR project. However, only three of these friends appeared on her network maps at every administration.

Likewise, Lala’s ‘most important’ contacts showed much change over time—only two close female friends appeared more than once (in December 2008 and May 2009). Other people who were named by Lala as ‘most important’ included 10 different friends, her SPSW, Grade 11 math teacher, Grade 11 art teacher, three different friends from mosque, a P2E friend, a P2E tutor, a co-worker at the university health clinic, and a girl she was tutoring in Arabic. Despite having been away from Syria for over four years, at different times Lala named as ‘most important’ three individuals who still lived there: her aunt (father’s sister), her grandmother, and a cousin.

**Giving and Receiving Support**

The ways in which Lala’s network contacts provided support to her, based on Tardy’s (1985) classification of social support aspects, are illustrated in Table 4.10. Almost half of Lala’s *instrumental* support was associated with her friends (13/28), and the balance of her instrumental support instances was split evenly between teachers, family members, and individuals from the *outside-of-school* domain. This support revolved almost entirely around homework help.
Table 4.10
Supportive Content of Lala’s Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content of supportive interaction</th>
<th>Descriptiona</th>
<th>Total Reported Instancesb</th>
<th>Socioacademic instances</th>
<th>Sooliteraee instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Caring (e.g., trust, love, empathy)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Helping behaviors (e.g. giving money or time)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td>Evaluative feedback</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a from Malecki and Demaray (2006). b Count confirmed by a second rater.

Similarly, about half of Lala’s informational support instances (10/21) also were attributed to her friends, with family members and individuals from outside of school responsible for most of the remainder. Much of the informational support Lala reported revolved around how she should behave: A friend at her mosque told her to “be [a] nice girl so people will like you” (social network interview, December 9, 2008), and her best friend told her “don’t talk to guys a lot” (social network interview, June 17, 2010).

All seven of Lala’s reported appraisal support instances were related to writing assignments for English classes, although only three came from teachers. Three of the seven reported instances occurred around a single assignment, in which Lala had to write a fictional story based on Lord of the Flies (Golding, 1954/2001). Because she was so pleased with her story, she showed it to her best friend and to staff members at P2E, who also liked it. Lala, more than other participants, reported showing her writing, both academic and recreational, to members of her network, although she rarely reported their reactions.
Notably, two of the three instances of emotional support Lala mentioned were negative in nature. One of her younger brothers has told her regularly that he was smarter than she was, because he believed he spoke better English than she did. Although Lala reported this as an example of a negative influence someone had on her reading and writing, she also described a useful strategy she used to end this teasing—she asked him the meaning of English words he did not know—and she seemed to find the situation moderately humorous. The other negative instance appeared to have had longer lasting consequences, as Lala mentioned it to both interviewers; apparently, she had a teacher in Ottawa shortly after she immigrated who Lala felt ignored her because Lala knew little English. An instance of negative instrumental support Lala reported was the criticism she received from her father on her reading when he helped her with her homework.

Like Angel, Lala reported one instance of “null” support. When asked if her Grade 11 writing teacher ever met with her individually to discuss her writing, she replied that her English teacher in Grade 11 had not done so, nor did she ever approach him to discuss her writing because “the teacher don’t have time” (writing sample interview, May 11, 2009).

It is worth mentioning how much support Lala gave to others—22% (13/58) of her reported support instances are ones in which she gave social support to people in her network. Some of this given support appeared to be general advice about life, but most of it was helping friends with homework, generally writing, math, or science (when specified). This information substantiates both the characterization of Lala as friendly and outgoing as well as her self-reported interest in these particular subjects.

Although school personnel provided only 17% (10/58) of Lala’s overall support, 64% (37/58) of her reported social support instances provided socioacademic support. Seventeen
instances related directly to literate events (see Table 4.10); Lala reported only one support instance for an extracurricular literacy event (learning to read and write Pashto). More of these socioliterate support instances (seven) were provided by teachers than by any other domain or person.

**Academic Literacy Skills**

At the beginning of the ALTUR project, Lala’s scores on the literacy-related tasks hovered around the mean (compared to all 21 of the ALTUR participants), with the exception of her reading comprehension scores, which were the third lowest in the group. For the most part, her scores showed little improvement over the school year, other than on the reading comprehension and vocabulary tasks. On the reading comprehension questions, Lala’s score improved from 32% (14/44) to 48% (21/44); however, her scores were still the fourth lowest in the group. On the vocabulary task, although her score remained near the mean, she had the third best improvement among the ALTUR participants, perhaps indicating that her focus on vocabulary or her approach to considering the nuances of words (see next section) was paying off. Even more meaningful, Lala improved her knowledge of words specifically on the Grade 6, 8, and 10 levels, closing the gap between her word knowledge and the native-speaking populations with which the instrument was normed (cf. Biemiller and Slonim, 2001). Lala’s progress on the reading tasks paralleled the type of reading assignments she was doing for school, as she improved most on questions relating to a narrative task and an expository task.

Unfortunately, I obtained only one sample of Lala’s authentic academic writing—her story based on *Lord of the Flies*—as the two samples from the ALTUR interviews mistakenly were not collected. However, looking at her responses to the ALTUR persuasive writing task provides some insight into Lala’s writing progress over Grade 11. Although the length of her
responses were about the same at both administrations, in the spring Lala organized the structure of her piece more logically, her argument was more persuasive, and there were fewer errors at the sentence level.

On her responses to the narrative timed tasks, Lala’s organization, story development, and grammar and language seemed similar, perhaps because she liked to write stories and had been practicing this genre in English for some time. The primary difference was her use of direct quotations from the characters in the spring sample. That this insertion of character voice seems to be a development in her writing, and not just due to chance, is corroborated by Lala’s extensive use of character speech in her school-based writing sample, composed a few months after the second timed task. Lala’s school-based sample also indicated that her struggle with composing run-on sentences was an issue not only on timed tasks but also when she had several weeks to compose and revise. Another issue evident in all three narrative samples is that Lala created an interesting, logical, detailed beginning to each story but all three stories ended rather abruptly. One noticeable difference between her timed and untimed narratives is that the vocabulary Lala used in the school-based story—*responsible, shelter, suggested, creature*—was more complex than in her timed narratives and than her scores on the vocabulary tasks would indicate, implying that she did indeed write school assignments with a dictionary near her, as she claimed.

**Literacy Interests, Events, and Practices**

**Outside school.** Lala described being involved in a variety of literacy events beyond traditional schoolwork, from those with a social purpose (Facebook) to those with a social aspect (reading books together) to solitary activities (reading the Quran). Unlike several other participants (Shona, Angel, K-9) who strongly preferred one mode of electronic social
communication over others, Lala appeared to use email, Facebook, and MSN equally, depending on the person with whom she was communicating. For example, Lala reported using only MSN with her grandmother in Syria and only email with a friend in Syria. With her Canadian friends, she tended to use all three modes, and even said that she and her best friend were on the Internet “24/7” (social network interview, June 17, 2010).

Lala and this friend not only read and wrote in order to socialize electronically, they also “read together so many things” (social network interview, June 17, 2010), such as news stories on the Internet and books—especially mysteries—they checked out from the library. In Grade 11, she reported reading Crime and Punishment (no information was available regarding the edition) with a mentoring group for immigrant youth at the local public library. Another type of literacy event Lala engaged in with members of her network was language teaching and learning: From one friend she was learning Pashto by reading and writing, and to a younger girl she was teaching Arabic using reading and writing activities.

Finally, Lala described several individual literacy events, such as reading the Quran, reading the young adult novel Frost (Luiken, 1997), playing individual online games and writing stories. She particularly liked an online Sherlock Holmes game that required her to read stories. Her favorite writing topics included people’s lives and love stories; she would start writing these in Arabic but sometimes switch to English: “Sometimes, words I forgot in my language, then I just like to write that story in English. Sometimes I feel odd, this topic doesn’t belong, like, I mean, doesn’t fit in Arabic [xx], I just write it in English” (writing sample interview, July 6, 2010).

These observations are supported by Lala’s responses on the reading and writing checklists. The daily reading events Lala reported on the checklists included email, MSN, Quran, street signs, and TV programs. Weekly, she mentioned reading TV closed captioning,
children’s stories, comic books/cartoons, dictionaries, letters, newspapers/magazines, notes, novels and stories, poems/nursery rhymes, and tests, as well as environmental texts such as pamphlets and price tags. As for her writing practices, she reported writing email, instant messages, and homework daily; her weekly writing practices included drawing, keeping a journal, writing letters and notes, writing stories, and taking tests.

A surprise appeared on the checklists, that Lala read and wrote some texts in Turkish (notes and letters, MSN, TV programs) and read texts in “Indian” (newspapers/magazines, TV programs). When questioned about these anomalies, Lala explained she has been learning Turkish and “Indian” from watching TV and movies. She also reported reading and writing in Arabic (as well as English) such texts as comic books/cartoons, computer games, email, dictionaries, letters, novels/stories, MSN, poems/nursery rhymes, recipes, TV programs, art, and a journal. The Quran was the only text she read solely in Arabic.

Lala’s ALTUR tutor shared with me a set of drawings he had asked Lala to make in December 2009 about what reading and writing meant to her. The tutor did not specify to Lala what type of reading and writing, so these images and quotes serve as a transition point to tie together her out-of-school and in-school literacy. About reading, she wrote, “Reading is like looking for small piece of expensive jewellary lost in a big amount of garbage” (Figure 4.9), and she drew someone standing on a ladder, throwing garbage from a large pile to a small pile. Lala’s comments could shed light on why she seemed to enjoy reading well-regarded texts by authors such as Dostoyevsky and was critical of what she sees as plot and character shortcomings in a more mainstream young adult text like Frost—in the ‘classics’ often there is less “garbage” to sort through. About writing, Lala stated “To me writing is like a big tornado from inside that doesn’t have ending and it is and it has so many things from inside but is so
cool” (Figure 4.10): Perhaps this tornado-like excitement fueled her short story writing. It is also interesting to note that Lala articulated the notion that writing “doesn’t have [an] ending,” which seems an advanced way to think about composing texts.

**Inside school.** Three topics worth documenting in Lala’s academic literacy are a strong focus on vocabulary, her willingness to share her writing with others and to ask for assistance on it, and her desire to write more stories as assignments.

Lala’s primary reading goal (and strategy use) revolved around improving her knowledge of word meanings. She reported that her only challenge when reading *Romeo and Juliet* was not knowing some of the words, for which she used the included glossary. At the end of Grade 11, Lala described her pre-reading process as looking at the back of the book, looking at any pictures, then getting paper to write down words she did not know; when asked what the hardest part of reading this particular book (*Crow Lake*, Lawson, 2006) was, she replied simply, “vocabulary” (reading sample interview, May 11, 2009). She described keeping a general list of words she did not know, looking up the words in an Arabic-English dictionary, then writing down the definition in Arabic. And, again, in the summer after Grade 12, the only problem Lala
reported in reading Frost was “getting to know the words’ meaning, put in the proper meaning” (reading sample interview, July 6, 2010). When asked in that interview how her reading had changed since the previous interview, over a year ago, Lala said that how and what she read had not changed, only that she knew more words now, and the only way she wished her English teachers would help her more is with more explanation of and activities about vocabulary. Lala also focused on word knowledge and word choice when thinking about her writing; when asked about an assignment at the end of Grade 11, she said thought it was successful except “I felt I had to learn some more vocabularies” and wished she had “add[ed] more fancy words” (writing sample interview, May 11, 2009). It would have been interesting to see whether this systematic vocabulary work would have had a positive impact on Lala’s very low scores on the sight word and decoding efficiency tasks over time.

Another aspect of Lala’s focus on vocabulary knowledge was her level of interest in nuances of word meanings. Rather than ask for help with vocabulary, Lala preferred to look up words on her own, both because she felt like it helped her better understand the words and because “sometimes it gets fun, looking for a word” (reading sample interview, July 6, 2010). In particular, she described her enjoyment of translating words into Arabic and trying to decide which meaning best fit the sentence she was reading. (Perhaps this explains why Lala reported only one instance of social support across all three reading interviews.)

In contrast, Lala reported multiple instances both of asking for assistance with her writing and of sharing her writing with network members. In December 2008, she said that she asked various family members for help when she got stuck writing an assignment. She also asked friends for ideas to help her get started writing and said that she showed them things she had written (although she did not specify what). Several months later, Lala talked enthusiastically
about a recent assignment for which she had to describe the differences between life in Syria and Canada: “’cause, like, I like share my experiences with people” (writing sample interview, May 11, 2009), indicating that she looked forward to having her teacher read what she had written. She also received feedback from several P2E tutors during the process of writing that piece. Lala indicated that another enjoyable writing assignment that year had been a literacy autobiography; again, she wanted to share her life with others through writing. For her favorite writing assignment in high school, the story based on Lord of the Flies, she shared it with a variety of people after composing it, like her classmates, her best friend, and several people at P2E.

One of the reasons Lala enjoyed writing that story so much was that story writing was a hobby of hers, as described in the previous section. In fact, in every writing sample interview, Lala stated a desire to write more stories as English class assignments—in contrast to other participants who were unable to think of or articulate writing activities they enjoyed or wished they were given.

**Literacy Engagement**

In her interviews over the course of this study, Lala demonstrated behavioral engagement in 43 separate literacy events. Nearly half of these (20) had a social component (e.g., writing an email to a friend), but only 21% (9) had one or more related social support instances; moreover, because Lala gave so much support to friends, only four (9%) of these literacy events were ones on which she received support herself! Although the number of literacy events on which Lala received social support was low among this group of participants, this trend probably reflected her desire to work through her vocabulary and reading issues on her own (see the previous section).
So, for Lala, was there a relationship between social support and engagement? On two of the three literacy events on which Lala received social support, she also showed strong emotional engagement—making very positive statements about these events—and cognitive engagement—using 5 learning strategies on each. However, the social support she received on all of the events was fairly minimal: Only on her shipwreck story did she get help with more than vocabulary words; in this case, she talked over her ideas with her teacher in the course of composing, and he praised the story afterward. But, because Lala repeatedly had said in previous interviews that writing stories was her favorite class activity, her high level of engagement with this event probably was due more to personal interest than to her teacher’s support. Likewise for the book *Crow Lake*, which Lala reported using five strategies to help her read, her enjoyment of the book likely kept her interested—as she told her interviewer that she never lost motivation to read it—rather than the small amount of help she received with unfamiliar vocabulary from her teacher and tutor.

Proportionally, Lala presented more tokens of emotional and cognitive engagement in the literacy events on which she received social support (see Table 4.11). However, as illustrated above, her various types of engagement in these events seemed to be motivated by a personal interest (emotional engagement) that was unrelated to her received social support.

Table 4.11
*Lala’s Literacy Engagement by Presence or Absence of Social Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Behavioral engagement</th>
<th>Emotional engagement</th>
<th>Cognitive engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With received</td>
<td>3 events</td>
<td>7 instances</td>
<td>3 instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without social</td>
<td>35 events</td>
<td>25 instances</td>
<td>5 instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Therefore, while Lala did show evidence of literacy engagement—for instance, she activated a number of strategies on her own, even on extracurricular reading (cognitive engagement), she initiated reading and writing activities that were not required for school (behavioral engagement), and she was the only participant who reported a strong enjoyment of both academic and extracurricular writing (emotional engagement)—her level of literacy engagement seemed to be based more on internal rather than external, social factors.

**Ning**

**As an Individual**

When I first met Ning in November 2008, she was a very reserved Grade 10 student who had lived in Canada just over a year; in the late spring of 2010, Ning was 17 and completing Grade 11 at a local college-preparatory high school. From birth until age 14, Ning lived in Harbin, China, a large city northeast of Beijing. In the summer of 2007, she and her parents moved to Toronto, and in the summer of 2009 they moved out of Regent Park to an eastern suburb with a large Asian population. (Although this move meant a 35-minute trip to her school, Ning decided not to change high schools). Both of her parents were educated as civil engineers in China; however, in Canada her father worked in a light bulb factory and her mother was studying English and working in the food service industry. Mandarin was Ning’s first language, and she reported that only a small amount of English was spoken and read in her home.

Ning was an only child, but she has two older cousins in Harbin whom she thought of as her ‘brothers.’ One of these, a journalist, she called on the telephone and contacted by email regularly and especially when “something happened and I didn’t want to talk to my parents about [it]” (member check interview, June 4, 2011). Although I would
describe her demeanor at P2E as reserved, Ning appeared to be more outgoing at school, reporting a number of friends, some she had met in her classes and others through dance club, a multicultural club, and Mandarin club; on the other hand, she did not seem to spend time with these friends outside of school, especially after her move to the suburbs. Despite her seemingly gregarious nature, Ning at times seemed socially isolated from her peer group.

Ning was very passionate about music: she was a member of the choir at her school and dreamed of a career as a singer; she belonged to a dance club at her school and auditioned for the school talent show; and every time she came to tutoring she was listening to her mp3 player. We had many conversations about her musical interests during the ALTUR project, and she often recommended musicians she thought I would like. In addition to music, Ning also appeared to enjoy recreational reading, especially young adult fiction.

It was not clear specifically why Ning was referred to the ALTUR project as ‘at-risk for literacy development.’ The grades she mentioned informally in tutoring sessions were A’s and B’s in her ESL courses, but several times she referred to not doing well in Grade 9, and she seemed embarrassed and declined to list her grades for an ALTUR questionnaire. Her low scores on the ALTUR tasks (described in a later section) indicated that she would benefit from individualized attention to her English reading and writing skills.

As a Network Member

As evident in Figure 4.11, Ning’s social network varied quite a bit over the course of this study in all but the home and school domains. Even after moving to a suburb, Ning continued to attend the same downtown high school; moreover, she had the same English teacher for three years in a row, and he appeared on her network map at each administration. Likewise, her parents were on her map each time. On the other hand, the longer Ning lived in Toronto, the less
contact she reported with her Chinese *other family* members—even the male cousins she had regarded as her brothers—to the extent that by May 2010 none of them appeared on her network map, only an aunt who also lived in suburban Toronto.

![Radar graph of Ning's social network over 18 months.](image)

*Figure 4.11.* Radar graph of the people named in Ning’s social network over 18 months.

Focusing on Ning’s ‘most important’ relationships provides more insight into the diversity of her network over time. At the second administration of the network map, she selected all 10 friends listed on her map as the 10 people who were most important to her. (Thus, in May 2009, no other domains were represented among her ‘most important’ contacts.) In fact, when Ning listed friends on her network map, she always selected them as ‘most important’ contacts. While Ning listed a total of 19 *friend* contacts over the three administrations as her ‘most important,’ only one of these appeared all three times and only four others appeared
more than once. Apparently, there was low consistency in her life with her friendships, which
she attributed primarily to course enrollment: “Sometimes, it’s like, we were not in
the same class so we didn’t have time, like, talk to each other [...] you have to make some new friends” (member check interview, June 4, 2011).

The most variable domain on Ning’s network maps was outside of school. There was
some consistency in that in both May 2009 and May 2010 Ning included people from her
YMCA group on her map. However, in May 2009, the single YMCA contact was not
considered ‘most important’ by her, while two of the 10 YMCA contacts appearing in May 2010
were labeled ‘most important.’ This sizeable increase in YMCA contacts accounted for the spike
in her outside of school domain. Indeed, all but one of her 12 total outside of school contacts
were related to the YMCA (none were part of P2E). This group provided support for immigrant
teens, and through it Ning did volunteer work, went on outings and met students from around
Toronto, went to parties, and practiced English conversation skills. During Grade 10 Ning
attended these gatherings twice a week but was going less in Grade 11 because she was too busy
(and perhaps due to her move). In fact, because Ning had been going to this group so often in
Grade 10, her SPSW waived the requirement for her to belong to a mentoring group through the
Pathways program.

Overall, the people with whom Ning spent the most time were her parents. Not only did
they provide her with occasional help on her homework (once or twice a month) as well as
weekly advice about school and life, but she and her mother also talked about books Ning was
reading. Additionally, she said that for fun on the weekends, she watched television and “go
out with my parents on Sunday” (social network interview, May 15, 2010).
Giving and Receiving Support

The supportive content of Ning’s network relationships, based on Tardy’s (1985) classification of social support aspects, is illustrated in Table 4.12.

Table 4.12
Supportive Content of Ning’s Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content of supportive interaction</th>
<th>Descriptiona</th>
<th>Total reported instancesb</th>
<th>Socioacademic instances</th>
<th>Socioliterate instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Caring (e.g., trust, love, empathy)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Helping behaviors (e.g., giving money or time)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td>Evaluative feedback</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a from Malecki and Demaray (2006). bCount confirmed by a second rater.

Ning’s instrumental support was primarily in the form of help with her schoolwork; in particular, multiple times she mentioned receiving help (which she sought out) in understanding assignments and instructions. More than half of this support (24/42) was associated with her friends, though she received nearly as much from home and school sources. Ning’s informational support instances were split between those that were academic in nature and those that were not and also were fairly evenly divided between the home, school, and friends domains. Ning’s mother was the single most common provider of this support. Much of this support was in the form of advice from one or both parents about improving her English or asking her teachers for help when she needed it. The rest of the informational support Ning received was quite varied and seemed to be discrete instances (e.g., a friend told her what kind of food to bring to a club meeting) in contrast to the regular, ongoing support characterizing her instrumental support (e.g., weekly homework help from a specific friend). Most of Ning’s informational
support instances also seemed to be ones in which the advice was unsolicited by Ning, such as when her aunt told her to make more non-Chinese friends to improve her English.

Ning reported a below-average amount of *appraisal* support. Despite her claim to turn in her revised written work to her teachers even when that was not a requirement, there is no evidence either that she was getting useful feedback from this effort or that there was any extra feedback at all; in fact, in May 2009, Ning mentioned a particular piece of work that she thought the teacher might have lost because she had not gotten it back. When asked explicitly in the writing interviews if she had shown her work to anyone other than her teacher or if she asked for assistance with those pieces of work, Ning replied that she had not done so, which decreased her opportunities for appraisal support. Ning reported an average amount of *emotional* support, but one instance did involve negative support from her father, in that he became angry with her when “I don’t know how to do some things” on homework (social network interview, December 3, 2008).

Ning reported receiving only a single instance of support from contacts in both the *other family* and *outside of school* domains, despite listing 24 contacts from these domains on her network maps (though only three of these appear on her ‘most important’ grids).

Of these 70 instances of social support, 50 (71%) of them relate to school in some way, and 27 relate directly to literate events (see Table 4.12), half of which were provided by teachers.

**Academic Literacy Skills**

Ning began the ALTUR project with relatively weak performances on the literacy tasks: Compared to the other 20 ALTUR participants, her scores were the second-lowest on the morphological awareness and reading tasks, third-lowest on the vocabulary and narrative writing.
tasks, and only 4 participants scored below her on the persuasive writing task. (It should be noted that Ning was the most recent immigrant to Canada of all 21 participants.)

Ning’s scores showed minimal improvement across the ALTUR project, although her English literacy skills did seem to be developing. For instance, although her overall score on the reading tasks changed very little, she did answer a few more reflective and interpretative questions correctly in the spring. Likewise, her responses on the writing tasks were longer at the second administration, with more complex sentence constructions and fewer mechanical errors. Similar development can be seen in Ning’s authentic samples from the three writing interviews. These essays increased in length, complexity (e.g., more complex sentences and use of cohesive devices), and correctness (e.g., fewer capitalization and verb tense errors).

One striking issue with Ning’s performance on the writing tasks was that her responses did not completely match the prompts for both tasks and at both administrations. On the narrative task, the test-taker was instructed to write an ending to the story he or she had just read, an ending that must match the first and final sentences which were provided. While both of Ning’s stories followed the general idea supplied by these given sentences, neither of her stories fit logically with either sentence. On the persuasive task, the goal of the test-taker was to convince a candy bar company that he or she deserved to win two movie tickets despite not fulfilling the requirements of a contest. At neither administration did Ning follow the explicit directions. This mismatch between task instructions and her responses corroborates Ning’s reports about being advised to ask her teachers when she did not understand, as well as my observations during our tutorial sessions that she did not always grasp her assignment instructions. Thus, despite improvements in sentence complexity and correctness, Ning’s writing scores were negatively affected by the mismatch between content and instructions. It is
distinctly possible that Ning’s difficulties with task instructions stemmed from an inability to comprehend the instructions, based on her extremely low scores on the sight word and decoding efficiency tests.

**Literacy Interests, Events, and Practices**

**Outside school.** For pleasure, Ning was more likely to read than to write. Over the course of this study, she talked about reading a variety of texts for fun, including the book of stories she brought to the first reading interview, the young adult novels *Twilight* and *New Moon* (Meyer, 2005, 2006), and *Sing Down the Moon* (O’Dell, 1970/1992). Young adult literature seemed to appeal to Ning, probably because she had a stated interest in reading stories about human relationships; also, she said she did not like reading books that were “too hard” and in which she did not know a lot of the words (reading sample interview, November 26, 2008). The only writing for pleasure Ning recounted was writing down song lyrics or about her dreams to be a singer.

In the first year of this study, Ning’s extracurricular reading had a distinctly social dimension. At multiple points in Grade 10, Ning described sharing books with four different friends; they passed them back and forth and recommended books to each other. In addition, she and several of her friends had volunteered at the school library. By Grade 11, however, these particular friends were no longer on her social network map, and she did not report sharing books with any of her new friends. On the other hand, at this point in the study Ning did talk specifically about a particular library book she read and then recommended to her mother, who had begun reading it; Ning said that she talked to her mother about books about twice a week.

Notably, Ning reported very little use of technology or the Internet, primarily because she was concerned about “safety” (member check interview, June 4, 2011). She had an email
address and used it either to ask questions of her school friends or to visit with friends and family in China. In Grade 10, she reported emailing Chinese friends and her cousins one to two times per week, but by Grade 11 stated that she only talked to her local friends in person or on the telephone. She did not appear to use Facebook or other social media at all, nor chat programs such as MSN. When she did email her local friends, it was for very specific purposes, such as asking questions about homework or club activities. Also, in Grade 10, Ning did not have a cell phone, but by Grade 11 she did have a phone and used it to text friends and family two or three times a week, mostly about where she was and where and what time she would meet someone.

For the most part, the descriptions of Ning’s extracurricular reading and writing events were corroborated by her answers on the reading and writing practices checklists. For instance, she reported reading children’s books, TV closed captioning, and text messages (only in Grade 11) either every day or weekly, activities she also mentioned in interviews. The only other daily reading Ning reported was typical environmental text (e.g., advertisements, notices, street signs) or school texts (e.g., tests and textbooks). Ning also reported reading newspapers and magazines, dictionaries, letters and postcards, and poetry on a weekly basis, while ‘comic books and cartoons’ and ‘novels and stories’ appeared as either weekly or monthly reading. The only writing she reported on a daily basis was homework, and only in December 2008; she noted homework as a weekly activity on the other checklists. Other writing Ning did weekly consisted of descriptions, email, instructions, letters and postcards, notes and messages, ‘poems, songs, and lyrics,’ text messages, and tests. In Mandarin, Ning reported reading advertisements, closed captioning, recipes, and email; she reported writing email, stories, and ‘poem, songs, and lyrics.’ These categories are consistent with her reported use of Mandarin in interviews and during tutoring sessions.
Inside school. Because I worked directly with Ning as her tutor over six and a half months during Grade 10, I had more direct knowledge of her schoolwork during that year than for the other participants in my thesis study. Tables 4.13 and 4.14 detail, in order of their appearance at tutoring, the school-related texts and projects she brought to our tutorial sessions.

An interesting aspect of Ning’s academic literacy is the amount and type of support she reported receiving. In the social network interviews, Ning reported receiving a fair amount of assistance on homework from her friends. During Grade 10, she named multiple friends who helped her daily and weekly with her homework, although by the spring of Grade 11, only one friend and her mother helped her with homework weekly (and no one daily). However, on the four academic reading and writing pieces Ning brought to the literacy sample interviews, the only help she reported requesting was to ask her father about one unfamiliar word. The only other assistance Ning reported receiving was unsolicited advice from her ESL-D teacher on improving her word choices for a news story on *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967/1997). I believe that the pieces Ning chose to bring to the interviews were ones on which she had done particularly well and with which she felt comfortable, so she did not seek assistance on these specific pieces. Indeed, Ning did not always activate the support that was available in her network.

A specific type of literacy-related assistance Ning clearly valued was teacher feedback on her writing. In Grade 10 she said, “Sometimes I have some question and I don’t know, and the teacher write it on the paper, and then I understand how to correct the essay” (writing sample interview, November 26, 2008), and similarly, “Like, if I forgot [grammar points or writing advice], and then I will look at the essay we write it before and then if the teacher write it
down, then I will like remember again, just doing the right thing (writing sample interview, May 20, 2009). Moreover, Ning claimed at both administrations in Grade 10 that she always rewrote her essays with the teachers’ corrections, even if not required.

Table 4.13
Assigned Reading Texts Ning Brought to Tutoring, Nov. 2008-June 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title (author, if known)</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amistad</td>
<td>Penguin abridged version, for ESL-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver Twist (Charles Dickens)</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Outsiders (S.E Hinton)</td>
<td>Novel required for ESL-D; she wanted to read it in preparation for switching to that course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Day of the Jackal</td>
<td>Penguin abridged version, for ESL-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay on Japanese pop culture</td>
<td>For ESL-B, in relation to watching Karate Kid 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography of David Suzuki</td>
<td>For Canadian history course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach (William Bell)</td>
<td>Young adult novel about slavery, for history course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sign of the Beaver</td>
<td>For ESL-B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Heaven Shop (Deborah Ellis)</td>
<td>For ESL-C; brought to interview but not to tutoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.14
Writing Assignments Ning Brought to Tutoring, Nov. 2008-June 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment (course)</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay on Amistad (ESL-C)</td>
<td>Half-page, with guided prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework assignment based on Oliver Twist (ESL-B)</td>
<td>Composing sentences describing characters’ emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay on important person (ESL-C)</td>
<td>One-paragraph essay assigned prior to start of tutoring; brought it to the writing sample interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career exploration (science)</td>
<td>Short-answer format; required an APA-style bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project on pollution in the Great Lakes (science)</td>
<td>First stage of project was one-page essay, followed by 5-minute class presentation with visual aids Day of the Jackal, David Suzuki biography, Karate Kid 2, The Sign of the Beaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading comprehension questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(both tables modified from Wilson, 2010)
to do so, and that she sometimes gave those revised essays back to the teachers, hoping for more feedback. Unfortunately, this written feedback was essentially the only type of feedback she received on her writing—when asked explicitly at each administration whether she had ever talked one-on-one with her teachers about her writing, she said she had not.

Another interesting point about the type of assistance Ning received is that she seemed to need help decoding instructions for her assignments. In the social network interviews, several times she mentioned her network contacts telling her to ask her teacher if she did not understand how to do something. This type of advice was consistent with what I noticed in our tutoring sessions:

We struggled some tonight. [Ning] had a very hard time understanding the teacher’s instruction sheet, things like “List 3 aspects of your topic that you will discuss”—she didn’t understand the word “aspect” nor, really, the concept of breaking a topic into component parts. . . . I have noticed before that often her low grades are as much a function of her not understanding the assignment as of her actual performance. (tutoring notes, April 8, 2009)

As mentioned earlier, these issues are not surprising, considering her struggles with sight word reading and word decoding.

Another trend from Ning’s extracurricular literacy events/practices that carried over to her academic literacy was her interest in reading texts about personal relationships. The school-related books she chose to bring to the reading sample interviews were The Heaven Shop (Ellis, 2004) and Of Mice and Men (Steinbeck, 1937/1993); in both cases, she stated she was drawn to the aspect of the stories where characters were “tak[ing] care of each other” (reading sample interview, May 20, 2009).
Literacy Engagement

In her interviews over the course of this study, Ning demonstrated behavioral engagement in 54 separate literacy events. Almost 40% of these (21) had a social component (e.g., writing an email to a friend), and 35% (19) had one or more related social support instances. Both the number of discrete literacy events and the percentage of those on which Ning received social support were the highest among the focal students, while the percentage of these which included social interaction was the lowest (probably because she did little communicating using technology).

An example of how social support may have influenced Ning’s literacy engagement appeared in the first writing sample interview, in November 2008. Ning brought a short essay she had written for her ESL-C class on “Someone I Admire” (she chose her mother). Although she neither asked for nor received any assistance on this piece, she did receive appraisal support from her teacher in the form of useful comments: “I have some question and I don’t know, and the teacher write it on the paper, and then I understand how to correct the essay.” Using this feedback from a ‘most important’ network member—and completely on her own initiative—Ning revised the essay and turned it back in. I interpret this behavior as a learning strategy on Ning’s part, representing cognitive engagement. In addition, she made at least two positive statements about her success and grade on this essay, exhibiting emotional engagement.

Looking more quantitatively at the intersection of social support and engagement, Ning showed proportionally more evidence of emotional and cognitive engagement in the literacy events on which she received social support (Table 4.15). To further illustrate the numbers in Table 4.15, in the 54 literacy events discussed in her profile, Ning reported using strategies (a
marker of cognitive engagement) for 13 of these events, 12 events with social support and only one without support.

Table 4.15
*Ning’s Literacy Engagement by Presence or Absence of Social Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Behavioral engagement</th>
<th>Emotional engagement</th>
<th>Cognitive engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive instances</td>
<td>Negative instances</td>
<td>strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With social support</td>
<td>19 events</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without social support</td>
<td>35 events</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Shona**

**As an Individual**

In the spring of 2010, Shona was a fast-talking, high-spirited, 18-year-old Grade 12 student, getting ready to graduate from a well-regarded high school walking distance from her home. She laughed often, and, once trust was established with an interviewer, she was willing to talk openly about her family, her complicated relationship with her ex-boyfriend, and her reading and writing.

Shona was born in Bangladesh and moved to Canada at age 9, although her father had come to Canada much earlier. Her L1 was Bengali; she reported using it occasionally at home, though her father yelled at her to speak it more so she would not forget it. Her father spoke English, but her mother did not, although she understood it. Shona said she did not use Bengali at all outside of her home.

Shona appeared to be a typical teenager. She talked about arguing with her mother, lying to her parents in order to hang out with her friends, reading *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005), breaking up
with a boyfriend, letting her grades drop in the first two years of high school, and going to prom. She was also a real person with real concerns: Her father had a heart attack in her sophomore year and had several operations to unblock his arteries, and she worried about his health. She had a part-time job, selling subscriptions to a local paper, but she hated being a telemarketer and wanted to quit. She wanted very much to go to university and be a teacher someday, but she had heard how competitive admission was to education programs so had applied to some social work programs as well. Shona had a five-year romantic relationship with the son of family friends who lived about 6 hours away, but his family disapproved of the relationship, so they ended it in January 2010; she missed him tremendously, and he appeared to have been one of her closest friends and confidants. This situation also created tension in her family, as her parents were considering sending her to Bangladesh for a year (and maybe to get married), while she wanted to stay in Toronto and start university. Shona applied to two local universities in the fall of 2009, then withdrew her applications, then reapplied, and in April 2010 was still waiting to hear if her applications could be reinstated.

In Shona’s case it was relatively easy to appreciate why she had been referred to the ALTUR program as ‘at-risk for literacy development’: She had failed one course in Grade 9 and three in Grade 10. When asked in Grade 11 why she thought this had happened, she replied:

> When we were younger, like let’s say, like, last year, we were all like stupid, we wouldn’t like really focus on stuff, but now that we’re in Grade 11, we know that, like, the consequences are if we fail and stuff, then we have to stay back, so we’re like all focused in school and we’re like trying, we’re all trying to get into universities. (social network interview, April 21, 2009)
As a Network Member

Despite shrinking over time, Shona’s social network was characterized by its consistency: Five of the ten ‘most important’ entries were the same across all three administrations, and another two appeared twice. The most obvious changes over time were that her friend contacts dropped from nine in December 2008 to three in April 2009, and that she included several school personnel (teachers and guidance counselor) at both administrations during Grade 11 but none in Grade 12 (Figure 4.12).

![Radar graph of the people named in Shona’s social network over 16 months.](image)

Figure 4.12. Radar graph of the people named in Shona’s social network over 16 months.

The people Shona saw every day were also the ones who appeared most consistently on her network map: her mother, her father, her aunt, and her best friend. Her aunt was her mother’s youngest sibling (of seven), who had moved in with her immediate family in 2007 and
was only two years older than Shona. They shared a room and were in the same grade at school, but the aunt was not very close to Shona’s other friends, so she did not hang out with Shona socially; despite this, Shona said she and this aunt were “like best friends, sisters” (social network interview, April 13, 2010). The fifth individual who appeared as a ‘most important’ network member all three times was a close friend who attended school with Shona for the first year of the study but had changed schools following that summer—despite the change, they still saw each other several times a month and stayed in touch via text messages and Facebook.

The other people who appeared more than once on Shona’s network map were her uncles (counted as one network contact, since Shona did not distinguish between them and purposefully grouped them together, a common occurrence for extended family members in this project) and her ex-boyfriend. Her uncles, who live across the street, appeared all three times on her network map but only in December 2008 and April 2009 did she list them among her ‘most important’ contacts. Appearing twice (April 2009 and April 2010) both on her map and among her ‘most important’ contacts was her [ex-]boyfriend. As mentioned in the previous section, theirs was a complicated, long-term, long-distance relationship that seemed to have had an impact in most domains of Shona’s life, especially at home and at school. In April 2009, Shona reported interacting with him every day, especially via MSN, but in April 2010—after their families discovered their relationship and they were forced to break up—they were connecting over email and Facebook only once a week or so.

In the first year of the study, two teachers and a guidance counselor appeared twice on Shona’s map, though only once as ‘most important’ contacts. Six other individuals were named
only once as ‘most important’ contacts: her SPSW in Grades 9 and 10, her SPSW in Grades 11 and 12, a P2E employee, her grandmother in Bangladesh, and two friends at school.

**Giving and Receiving Support**

Just as Shona’s network was quite varied in terms of domain, age, and social role, so were the types of support she received from the members of her network. Table 4.16 illustrates the supportive content of her network relationships, based on Tardy’s (1985) classification of social support aspects.

Table 4.16
*Supportive Content of Shona’s Relationships*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content of Supportive Interaction</th>
<th>Descriptiona</th>
<th>Total Reported Instancesb</th>
<th>Socioacademic instances</th>
<th>Socioliterate instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Caring (e.g., trust, love, empathy)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Helping behaviours (e.g. giving money or time)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td>Evaluative feedback</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a from Malecki and Demaray (2006). b Count confirmed by a second rater.

The *instrumental* content of Shona’s network relationships was composed almost solely of the help she received on her schoolwork. Almost half of these support instances (13/27) came from friends and revolved around homework help. Shona also reported receiving instrumental support from several of her teachers at two of the three administrations. In the fall of Grade 11, Shona said that her teachers helped her before and after school and at lunch: “If I go to them, they will help me out, I know” (social network interview, Dec. 11, 2008). In the following spring, she described her English teacher giving her ideas and tips for writing the provincial literacy test and her World Issues teacher making notes for her, at her request, on
writing complex sentences and helping her after school on writing in a comparative format. A unique source of instrumental support was the private tutor Shona had in Grade 12, a friend of her father who was teaching at a local community college, who appeared to help her mostly with grammar and word choice revisions after she had written essays.

Specific examples of informational support that Shona received included getting advice from friends, her SPSW, and her guidance counselor about what courses to take; her mother telling her not to lie because “it doesn’t get you anywhere in life;” and advice from friends about “family problems” (social network interview, December 11, 2008). A particular situation that elicited at least three instances of informational support was when Shona was trying to determine the best way to make up the credits she had failed—she sought advice from her mother, a close friend, and her SPSW about this situation.

All six instances of appraisal support Shona reported originated with teachers, and in four of the six either her reading or her writing was praised. The others both reflected times a teacher pointed out what Shona had done incorrectly in an essay in order to help her improve her writing.

One point to note about Shona’s social support is that only three of the 57 instances she described can be characterized according to Malecki and Demaray (2006) as support that is ‘given’ (rather than ‘received’). This is the smallest percentage (5%) of ‘given’ support among the focal students. In other words, while Shona was the recipient of much support, she rarely reported being a source of support to others. Also, over 60% (35/57) of her support came from the friend and outside-of-school (e.g., boyfriend and personal tutor) domains, compared to the average of 40% for the participant group; conversely, Shona received less support than the average in the home and school domains.
Of these 57 instances of social support, 40 (70%) of them can be characterized as socioacademic support and 23 (40%) as socioliterate support. Consistent with the findings for the other participants, more of these socioliterate instances were provided by teachers than by any other person or domain.

**Academic Literacy Skills**

Shona began the ALTUR study with the second-highest scores in vocabulary (13.5/30) and reading comprehension (34/44) among the 21 participants. Her high scores are not surprising, considering she was one of only two participants in Grade 11 at the time. Her scores showed modest improvement over the course of the year on all but the reading and narrative writing tasks, which remained essentially the same. (Shona’s tutor in the ALTUR project reported that her grandmother had died shortly before the second administration of the literacy tasks, and he felt her depression over this death affected Shona’s performance [al-Alawi, 2009].) On the persuasive writing task, Shona achieved the highest score (16/18) in the group in the spring, perhaps reflecting her additional exposure to school-based argumentative/persuasive writing as an older student (compared to most participants, who were in Grade 9 at the time).

At both administrations of these literacy tasks, as well as in her academic writing samples from this year, Shona showed an aptitude for considering audience expectations, organizing information logically, and crafting complex sentences, while she struggled with minor sentence-level grammatical errors (verb aspect and number, spelling, form of possessives, comma usage). It is also evident from these samples that Shona benefited either from composing on the computer or being given time at home to compose (or both), as the piece from Grade 11 with the fewest errors and strongest vocabulary (e.g., *ramifications*, *tempted*, *obesity*) was the one sample she composed at home and not in a timed or classroom setting.
Shona’s relative comfort with argumentative academic-type writing was evident in Grade 12 as well. The paper she chose to bring to her writing sample interview in April 2010, a case study of two wrongful conviction cases in Canadian legal history, received an A and was singled out for praise by her teacher. Moreover, Shona called this paper one of the best she had ever written, and she clearly enjoyed the process of writing it. While there were minor errors in comma and pronoun usage, overall the paper presented a coherent account of the two cases with a thoughtful analysis of why a miscarriage of justice occurred in each case and a solution for preventing such incidents in the future. Although several complex words were used incorrectly (e.g., stasis, culpable), the paper is notable for the high level of vocabulary used (e.g., wretched, mitigate, meted out, ample, vindicates)—seemingly verifying Shona’s claim to write with a dictionary beside her as well as my supposition that Shona’s writing benefits from composing on a computer and/or in a relaxed setting. Not only did she choose to take this course, but the paper topic itself was one she chose; this paper seems to be an example of the high quality of work students are capable of when challenged by material and assignments that are personally appealing.

**Literacy Interests, Events, and Practices**

**Outside school.** Most of Shona’s extracurricular literacy events revolved around social media or occurred for social purposes. Although she said she liked to read scary adventure and mystery books and had read several of the books in the *Twilight* series (which was recommended to her by a friend during Grade 11), Shona reported very little print reading other than that assigned for school. She claimed not to enjoy writing very much, and only twice during the course of the study did she mention writing a text other than an electronic message to a network member: When younger Shona used to keep diaries and in Grade 12 she wrote a poem, all of
which she subsequently threw away. However, before the final interview, I found her name listed as a contributor in the *CatchDaFlava* youth magazine published by a local youth arts organization; when asked, she remembered that the previous summer she had been involved with that organization and had written an article on a city-wide arts festival. Her seeming lack of confidence about writing (documented more fully in the following section) may have led her to downplay—to herself, to others, or both—her actual enjoyment of or desire to engage in extracurricular writing.

But Shona was constantly reading and writing with her network members for social purposes. In fact, she called Facebook “*the biggest distraction of my education [...] because it’s so: addictive*” (social network interview, April 21, 2009), and she appeared to use it to interact with all of her network members except her parents and teachers. When asked for details about how she used Facebook, Shona said that she and her friends generally posted messages on each other’s profile pages, unless the message was private, in which case they used the Facebook email tool. In addition to Facebook, Shona reported using MSN every day with her best friend and frequently with her ex-boyfriend. In April 2010, she mentioned that she used to text her ex-boyfriend and her friends, but her parents recently had taken away her cell phone. Although Shona also used email with her friends, she preferred not to use that mode of communication: “*email sucks, you have to agree, you have to wait till that person [can read your message and reply]*” (social network interview, April 13, 2010).

Shona’s responses on the reading and writing checklists told essentially the same story as her interviews. She reported only reading email and writing email, messages, notes, and instant messaging daily, in addition to school-related work. Weekly, Shona reported reading items such
as notes, instant messages, and TV closed captioning and doing no writing. Additionally, she identified ‘children’s books’ and ‘novels and stories’ as items she read once or twice a week, substantiating her claim to enjoy reading.

**Inside school.** At each interview, Shona described her school reading activities primarily as ones in which students read a text and then answered comprehension questions. In general, she seemed fairly indifferent to these activities; she did not actively dislike these activities, but she clearly was not excited by them, either. Two class reading activities Shona did mention favorably were class discussions about the readings in her Grade 12 philosophy course and reading law cases in her Grade 12 law textbook. She also reported enjoying both reading *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* (Chevalier, 2000) and a book about Frida Kahlo and writing a paper comparing those books for Grade 12 English. Shona seemed even less enthusiastic about her school-based writing activities: “Well, we don’t really write at school; we barely write at school [...] We just take notes and stuff” (writing sample interview, Dec. 11, 2008). In the spring of Grade 11, Shona named reading comprehension questions as the most common writing activity, and in the spring of Grade 12 she said she did not have any favorite writing activities at school. Interestingly, Shona claimed to have done more writing in her Grade 12 World Issues course than in her Grade 12 English course.

Despite Shona’s identification by P2E personnel as ‘at-risk for literacy development,’ her self-efficacy regarding her academic reading skills seemed fairly high based on her comments in her reading sample interviews. Across the 16 months of her participation, she consistently made positive remarks about her school-related reading such as, “I think I’m a pretty good reader” and “I am a good reader; what else do I need?” (reading sample interview, Dec. 11, 2008) and “I’m OK, I can read, like, I don’t suck at it”
(reading sample interview, April 2009). However, over time Shona was either more willing to admit room for improvement at each interview or perhaps became more aware of possible improvement as her courses became more challenging. For instance, during the second set of interviews, she admitted that she needed to read more to improve her reading and that she could not always pronounce the words she was reading. In April 2010, Shona went even further in admitting doubts about her reading, observing that she sometimes came across words she did not know that she needed to learn in order “to get on the same level as everybody else” (reading sample interview, April 13, 2010).

On the other hand, Shona’s feelings about academic writing seemed to become more positive over the course of this study. She first said that as a writer she was OK, not good [...] Because, like, I can say, like, I can tell somebody a story, but when it comes to writing I won’t know, like, what kinds of ways to write it, like the content and like how to start it and stuff like that [...] Like, I wouldn’t be able to explain myself in words, like in writing [...] Like, I can write but it won’t be good, won’t be my level. (writing sample interview, Dec. 11, 2008)

The next spring she stated,

I think I’m a pretty good writer [...] because I like to write, like when I get started, I can’t stop, I don’t know why. But, then, I don’t think like my writing is (+) like I can write, but I don’t think it’s as good, get it? Like, I don’t think it’s like my grade level. (writing sample interview, April 30, 2009)
Finally, Shona asserted that “the more I’m writing, the better I’m getting at it” (writing sample interview, April 13, 2010). It was to this interview that she brought the 1400-word research paper on wrongful convictions, which she wrote as the summative project for her legal history course. Shona was justifiably proud of this paper, and even mentioned it in her reading interview as the school-related text she had most enjoyed reading lately.

**Literacy Engagement**

In her interviews over the course of this study, Shona demonstrated behavioral engagement in 54 separate literacy events. Almost 40% of these (21) had a social component (e.g., writing an email to a friend), and 19% (10) had one or more related social support instances. These numbers are fairly average among this group of participants; instead, it is the confluence of literacy event and support and engagement that is of interest. For instance, the single literacy event on which Shona indicated both the most social support and the highest number of engagement markers was her legal history essay on wrongful convictions, mentioned several times above. On this assignment, Shona received instrumental, appraisal, and emotional support from three different individuals, and she made three positive affective comments (emotional engagement) and used eight discrete learning strategies (cognitive engagement). However, her high level of cognitive engagement seemed to be due more to her intrinsic interest in the topic than to the support she received, as all the support came after she had already implemented the strategies, in fact, at the end of or after her writing process. Moreover, Shona received social support on only two of the 17 extracurricular literacy events she reported: learning to read the Quran and learning to read and write in Bengali when young. In other words, she chose to engage in literacy events such as writing poems for fun, reading the
newspaper, and reading mystery and adventure novels about which she expressed positive
eotional engagement but for which she had no social support.

Another way to look at the possible influence of social support on engagement is to
consider the quality of a strand of engagement when it interfaces with social support. Shona
showed proportionally more evidence of cognitive engagement in the literacy events on which
she received social support but not of emotional engagement (see Table 4.17). But as illustrated
above, Shona’s use of strategies (and positive emotional engagement) was not necessarily related
to her social support.

Table 4.17
Shona’s Literacy Engagement by Presence or Absence of Social Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Behavioral engagement</th>
<th>Emotional engagement</th>
<th>Cognitive engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With social support</td>
<td>10 events</td>
<td>6 instances</td>
<td>2 instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without social support</td>
<td>44 events</td>
<td>30 instances</td>
<td>14 instances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

These seven students all lived, at least for the first year of the study, in the same urban,
low-SES neighborhood. All were labeled—either by a tutoring program or themselves—as ‘at-
risk for literacy development.’ All attended public high schools in the same school board. All
were multicultural in comparison to the ‘White Anglo-Saxon Protestant’ norm attributed to
Canada. All lived in multilingual homes. However, their reading and writing practices and skills
varied considerably: Acer preferred books and graphic novels relating to popular culture and
occasionally used MSN with friends; Angel enjoyed pieces with an historical or biographical aspect and texted continuously; Hines chose books about “black people” and was a regular Facebook user; K-9 read spooky stories online and preferred Facebook to MSN; Lala loved to write stories and spent hours a day on the Internet; Ning liked stories about human relationships and rarely used technology to communicate; and Shona’s reading and writing revolved mostly around school, work, and social communication using a variety of tools.

Moreover, the ways in which these students built relationships with people around them and accessed these relationships for socioliterate support varied, too. Acer had a small and stable network and received more socioliterate support from his older sister than any other network member; Angel had few close friends but a large family presence in her network and received most of her socioliterate support from her English teachers. Hines had a large group of friends but preferred to do most of her reading and writing on her own, although she got a small amount of socioliterate support from her highly educated father. K-9 received much general support from his older brother but little socioliterate support from anyone in his carefully selected network; Lala’s home life was difficult but she actively built relationships with a wide range of peers, and she gave a notable amount of support to others. Ning actively accessed her peer network and a particular ESL teacher for much socioliterate support; and despite naming only one teacher as a close network member, Shona received most of her socioliterate support from teachers and talked about her confidence that her teachers would help her.

In terms of literacy engagement, there was less variation among the individual participants. Four participants (Angel, K-9, Lala, Shona) showed tokens of engagement that were unrelated to socioliterate support, while three (Acer, Hines, Ning) reported literacy events
on which the socioliterate support they received appeared vital to their engagement in those events.

***

This chapter has served to introduce these participants and to give individual details about the ways reading, writing, and relationships figured in their lives. The following chapter presents the results of the analysis that looked for patterns across these seven case studies.
Chapter 5
Social Networks, Socioliterate Support, and Literacy Engagement

This chapter presents the cross-case findings associated with each of the research questions, complementing the previous chapter, which focused on contextualizing findings within each case.

Students’ Social Networks

My first set of questions focused on participants’ social networks: “What people do the adolescents in this study report as being important to them (i.e., as belonging to their personal social networks)? Within these networks, with whom do they interact through literacy events?” In Chapter 4, the radar graphs illustrating participants’ social networks at each of the three administrations were presented within the case profiles. To look at these data across cases, I calculated the means and standard deviations for each domain at each administration (Table 5.1) and aggregated the means into a radar chart (Figure 5.1). Although several cases showed noticeable variation within a domain over time, on average the picture is one of consistency.

One noteworthy change over time occurred in the school domain: In both the fall of 2008 and the spring/summer of 2010, participants reported two school contacts in their networks, but that number rose to four in the spring of 2009. This spike is directly attributable to Hines’ social network maps; she consistently situated classmates (instead of adults) in her school domain, while few other participants did so, and in May 2009 she wrote the names of 14 peers in that domain. It is hard to know if this inconsistency between participants may have been due to differences in instructions from interviewers or if other participants simply did not view their classmates distinctly as members of their social networks.
Table 5.1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Medians of Network Contacts by Domain and Administration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Other family</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Outside of school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F '08</td>
<td>S '09</td>
<td>S '10</td>
<td>F '08</td>
<td>S '09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average no. of network members (SD)</td>
<td>4 (2)</td>
<td>4 (2)</td>
<td>5 (2)</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
<td>4 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median no. of network members</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.1. Radar graph of social network domain averages across participants and across time.
To try to control for outlying situations such as the one just described, I also calculated the median number of network members in each domain at each administration (Table 5.1). Looking at these results graphically (Figure 5.2) illustrates two important differences from Figure 5.1, both of which are worth considering. First, there is a dip in the number of outside of school contacts in the spring of 2008. This decrease is more representative of participants’ network maps than is the consistency indicated in Figure 5.1: Three participants (Acer, Angel, K-9) reported fewer outside of school contacts in the spring of 2009 than in the fall of 2008, while only two (Hines and Lala) reported more. (Ning reported the same number.) Although Hines appears to have reported noticeably more individuals in all non-family domains in the

![Figure 5.2. Radar graph of social network domain medians across participants and across time.](image-url)
spring of 2009, Lala’s number of outside of school contacts increased due to several new extracurricular activities, including a part-time job. In fact, all participants except Ning and Lala experienced a drop in outside of school contacts between the first and third administrations—Lala continued her involvement in several extracurricular activities (though not her job), and Ning had made several acquaintances through membership in a YMCA club—although this overall decline is not represented by the median calculations in Table 5.1. A number of outside of school contacts were acquaintances from P2E, middle school, extracurricular activities, and religious organizations; similar to the friend domain, many of these individuals tended to disappear from participants’ networks over time, with only the strongest relationships consistently appearing over time: “There’s actually not a lot of people [this year]. I cut off a lot of people. Like, not cut them off, it’s just, I say hi to them, like ‘I know you,’ that’s it” (K-9, member check interview, June 22, 2011). The second noticeable decline, occurring in the friend domain, may be even more specific to school-based relationship changes:

This [network map] is in Grade 9, so that’s when they just got in high school and you have a lot of friends, and then this [network map] is like in Grade 10, where like a lot of people went into their own cliques, and (+) Like, in Grade 9 everyone’s friends, and then after that it’s just, like everyone only has like a small circle of friends. But they still talk to other people, but it’s just like acquaintances. (Hines, member check interview, July 7, 2011)

Finally, despite attempting to control for Hines’ different approach to populating her school domain, there is still an increase in the number of individuals listed on network maps in
the spring of 2008. This increase does not appear to reflect a trend among participants: Ning, Acer, K-9, and Angel consistently reported the same number of teachers at each administration, while Shona and Lala reported more school contacts at the second administration than at the first, then fewer at the third time than at the first. One possible explanation is that Shona and Lala were in higher grades than the other participants so may have felt less need to connect with or seek support from their teachers.

Because participants generally included only school personnel in the school domain, that domain was regularly the smallest in their networks. The percentages of network contacts by domain are detailed in Table 5.2. Another less populated domain was outside of school; in the ALTUR project we hypothesized that, due to participants’ enrollment in the P2E program as well as the community aspects of the Regent Park neighborhood, students might have as many or more contacts outside of school as at school, but that did not turn out to be the case for any of the thesis participants except Lala.

Table 5.2
Percentages of Network Contacts by Domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Other family</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Outside of school</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All network members</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Most important’</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also surprising was the relatively large number of network members located in the other family domain; this domain was essentially the same size as the home domain. A few contacts in this domain lived overseas (e.g., Lala’s grandmother in Syria and Ning’s friends and cousins in China) or in other parts of Ontario (e.g., Angel’s aunt and uncle in southwest Ontario), but for
the most part these network members also lived in Regent Park (e.g., Hines’s cousins, Angel’s cousins, Shona’s uncles) and participants had daily or weekly contact with them. So, while there were no noticeable neighborhood effects for the outside of school domain, neighborhood did seem to influence the density of the other family domain.

Participants’ friend relationships were very important in their lives. Indeed, the percentage of friend contacts was the highest among all network domains, for both the general networks and the ‘most important’ contacts. (As indicated in Table 5.2, the percentage of ‘most important’ individuals in each domain was very similar to the percentages found among all network members by domain, with slight increases in the home and friend domains and accompanying small decreases in the other family and outside of school domains.)

The ‘most important’ network contacts were a key component of this study, as participants were queried about their reading and writing interactions with those specific individuals. As described in Chapter 3, participants were asked to identify up to 10 individuals on their social network maps as ‘most important’ in their lives. Participants were then asked how often they interacted with these individuals, how often these individuals gave them help with or advice about life and school, how often they interacted with these people through reading and writing, and whether or not they talked to these people about their future plans. Table 5.3 lists how often specific individuals were selected as ‘most important’ by the participants. Again, friends were very important to these adolescents. Angel was the only participant who did not pick a friend as a ‘most important’ contact at every opportunity (she elected not to do so in December 2008); however, her closest friend throughout the study was her same-age cousin Promize, whom she did select as ‘most important’ every time. Immediate family members also were important in the lives of the participants, contrary to the popular notion of adolescents
turning away from their families during their teens. From the case profiles in the previous chapter, one can note that siblings in particular had strong influences, both positive and negative, on several of these participants.

Table 5.3

*Frequency of ‘Most Important’ Contacts*

| Relationship to participant | Times named ‘most important’
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend(s)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt(s) and/or uncle(s)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher(s)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin(s)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmate(s)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPSW</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent(s)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other individual(s)*</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Out of a possible 21 (7 participants x 3 interviews).*

Specifically, family friend, Kiwanis club counselors, girlfriend’s mother, step-mother, friends from mosque, P2E tutors, YMCA counselor, older boyfriend.

**Socioliterate Interactions**

The previous section described the people who were important in the participants’ lives, but with which ones did they interact through reading and writing? Throughout the course of this study, participants described having social interactions on 208 discrete literacy events; as indicated in Figure 5.3, 31% (64/208) of these socioliterate interactions were with individuals named as friends. The next closest groups were teachers (17%), parents (15%), and siblings
Interestingly, when parents and siblings are merged together into the home domain, they comprise the group with the second-highest number of socioliterate interactions.

![Figure 5.3](image)

*Figure 5.3.* Percentages of literacy events (n=208) on which participants reported interacting with specific individuals.

What did these interactions look like? One way to address this question is to categorize the underlying purposes for participants’ literate interactions. Essentially, the socioliterate interactions of these participants fell into the same categories as those proposed for related data from the ALTUR project (Wilson, 2012): (a) literacy for social communications (e.g., MSN, Facebook); (b) literacy for academic purposes (e.g., homework assignments); (c) literacy as entertainment (e.g., reading books and magazines for fun); (d) literacy to support religious activities (e.g., reading the Quran); and (e) literacy for linguistic purposes (e.g., learning to read and write Mandarin).

All of these adolescents were doing a lot of reading and writing for social purposes, as elaborated in Table 5.4. Only Acer and Ning did not report any daily social media usage,
Table 5.4
Participants’ Social Media Usage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>MSN</th>
<th>Texting</th>
<th>Facebook&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acer</td>
<td>Weekly&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Gr. 9: yes, but frequency not reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gr. 10: daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hines</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Gr. 9: weekly</td>
<td>Gr. 9: none</td>
<td>Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gr. 10: daily</td>
<td>Gr. 10: weekly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>Gr. 9: weekly</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Gr. 9: none</td>
<td>Gr. 9: weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gr. 10: daily</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gr. 10: daily</td>
<td>Gr. 10: daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lala</td>
<td>Gr. 11: weekly, daily</td>
<td>Gr. 11: weekly, daily</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Gr. 11: weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gr. 12: daily</td>
<td>Gr. 12: daily</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gr. 12: daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Gr. 10: none</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gr. 11: weekly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Gr. 11: none, daily</td>
<td>Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gr. 12: none&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Facebook usage was not specified on the literacy practices checklists, but participants discussed it during the social network interviews.

<sup>b</sup>Usage was reported consistently across the three administrations unless otherwise specified.

<sup>c</sup>This usage had been ‘daily’ in Grade 12, but her parents had recently taken away her cell phone at the time of the questionnaire.

although both had computer access at home. On the other end of the spectrum, by the end of the study Angel and Shona were engaging in daily use of every social media tool queried. For many participants and types of social media, usage did not change over time, but on the occasions that change was reported, usage always increased. This trend is particularly noticeable in the use of
texting: Many of the younger participants during Grade 9 did not have cell phones or had limited calling minutes but were sending text messages by the end of Grade 10, consistent with the findings of a recent Pew report indicating that cell phone ownership was noticeably higher for 16-year-olds than for 14-year-olds (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

One of the more interesting findings regarding social media use was the marked preference some participants had for certain platforms or tools. While some used all forms of social media, others stated very strong preferences for or against specific ones. Echoing the findings of Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, and Smith (2007) that email is “losing its luster” (p. 20) as teens gravitate toward tools that allow synchronous communication, MSN was Acer’s preferred method of communication:

J: Which do you prefer, email or MSN?

Ac: Uh, MSN is more, more social interacting, and you can just get the message to the other person more faster than emailing, so MSN I guess.

J: So, when you say more social, is it the quickness of it that makes it more social, or is it something else?

Ac: Uh, you can, like, add a lot of friends to the conversation and talk. (social network interview, June 9, 2010).

Likewise, Shona preferred MSN to email: “From school, you can’t go on MSN or something, you have to email, and email sucks, like, you gotta agree, like you just have to like wait till that person like [replies]” (social network interview, April 13, 2010).

On the other hand, MSN was not universally popular. K-9 explained: “I don’t like MSN. I hate it. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I don’t like it, but
it’s just a habit” (social network interview, March 25, 2010), while Ning stated: “I do not use Facebook and MSN. I don’t feel like Facebook is safe, that’s why” (member check interview, June 4, 2011).

Even when students used a social media tool regularly, they recognized issues with it. In Grade 11, Shona had the following discussion about Facebook with her interviewer:

IV: And how often do you use the Facebook?
S: Ev:ery sing:le day:.
IV: And you like it?
S: No:, it’s the biggest distraction of my education.
IV: Really. Why are you using it then?
S: Because it’s so: addictive. (social network interview, April 21, 2009)

Participants generally were using these digital tools to communicate with friends, although in a few cases with older siblings (Acer, K-9, Lala), parents (Angel, K-9, Lala), cousins (Angel, Ning), and even a grandmother (Lala). K-9 shared a humorous anecdote about how his step-mother learned from Facebook that he and his long-term girlfriend had broken up.

In addition to socializing with network members via reading and writing, all of the participants interacted with network members on literacy events related to schoolwork. Most of these socioliterate interactions involved providing assistance with schoolwork (explored in more detail in the following section of this chapter on social support), while others were examples of peers working side-by-side on assignments. Network members with whom multiple participants worked on school-based literacy events included friends (all 7 participants), teachers (all 7), parents (5), siblings (5), P2E staff (5), and classmates (4). Other network members mentioned by participants included a Kiwanis Club counselor (K-9), aunts and uncles (Angel), and cousins
(Angel). During Grade 12, Shona was being tutored by a friend of her father’s, but she did not consider this person to be a member of her social network.

Prior to the data collection, I speculated that there would be a clear divide for socioliterate interactions between extracurricular and academic literacy events, with social interactions for the former revolving around social media and for the latter around homework help. To some extent this pattern held, but there was a much larger ‘gray area’ than I expected where academic and extracurricular literacy events overlapped. For example, in Grade 9 Angel was reading a biography of Barack Obama (Mendell, 2008) with her father. She had checked out this book from her school library completely on her own initiative because she thought it looked interesting; when she had difficulty reading it on her own, she and her father began to take turns reading pages aloud to each other. This was an expository text that she was reading outside of school for pleasure and on which she was receiving school-like assistance. Similarly, Acer’s older sister (who was in a business program in university) decided to teach him to write business letters—this was an extracurricular undertaking but an academic topic. K-9 had read Tears of a Tiger (Draper, 1994) for English class in Grade 9, but during Grade 11 he and his older brother decided they wanted to read the book for fun, so they both bought a copy and read it chapter by chapter, stopping after each to “gossip about it” (member check interview, June 22, 2011); K-9 reported that they had held this ‘book club’ of sorts since he was in Grade 8 and had read several mystery novels and The Outsiders (Hinton, 1967/1997) in this way. In such an activity, with text-based discussion and especially involving texts K-9 (and probably his brother, since they had attended the same high school) had read previously in class, it is impossible to distinguish between academic and extracurricular events and practices. In fact, every participant reported reading or writing at least one text for pleasure that was or could be a part of a school
curriculum; moreover, many of these literacy events had a social aspect, whether participants were actually reading or writing with others in their network, as described above, or talking about a text with others in their network, such as Hines sharing with her friends how much she liked the young adult novel *Romiette and Julio* (Draper, 2001).

Reading and writing with others in the pursuit of *entertainment* was a common trait across all seven of these participants as well, a surprising finding considering six of these students had been labeled as “at-risk for literacy development” (as described in Chapter 3)—surprising in the sense that adolescents from low-income and immigrant backgrounds who are furthermore labeled as “at-risk” are easily stereotyped in public opinion and even by educators as uninterested in reading or writing for fun (e.g., Greenleaf, Brown, & Litman, 2004). However, this finding is not surprising in light of the work of literacy scholars such as Finders (1997), Luttrell and Parker (2001), and Moje et al. (2008). Table 5.5 delineates the types of texts participants reported reading and writing for entertainment purposes as well as the network members with whom they interacted during these literacy events.

While the participants engaged in literacy-for-entertainment at roughly the same rates (Table 5.6), there was a dichotomy between those who were more likely to share the reading and writing process with other people and those for whom reading and writing were more often solitary pursuits. Acer, Ning, and Shona showed the least diversity in their pleasure reading and writing and were more likely to read and write these texts on their own. On the other hand, Angel and Hines, in particular, seemed to approach reading and writing for fun as a social endeavor and to engage in reading and writing a wide variety of texts with members of their
social networks. This finding is particularly interesting in light of Angel’s and Hines’ attendance at the P2E tutoring program being the lowest among these participants.

Table 5.5
What and With Whom Participants Read and Wrote for Pleasure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of texts</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
<th>Most common partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s books</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Younger siblings, younger cousins, parents, grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American literature</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Friends, Kiwanis Club counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young adult novels</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer and video games</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Friends, younger siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy novels</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Friends, girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion magazines/teen magazines</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News articles</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories written by self and other network members</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Younger sibling, cousin, friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic novels</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic novels &amp; comics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystery novels</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resume</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kiwanis Club counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short stories</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somali cultural information</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.6
Participants’ Reading and Writing for Pleasure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of literacy events reported&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>No. of literacy events for ‘fun’ (% of total)</th>
<th>No. of ‘fun’ literacy events with social dimension (% of total)</th>
<th>Examples of social literacy for pleasure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acer</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>11 (24)</td>
<td>5 (11)</td>
<td>Talking about graphic novels with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>10 (20)</td>
<td>10 (20)</td>
<td>Reading fashion magazines with cousin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hines</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11 (27)</td>
<td>9 (22)</td>
<td>Reading and discussing <em>Twilight</em> with friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7 (25)</td>
<td>4 (14)</td>
<td>Reading <em>Twilight</em> with girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lala</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9 (21)</td>
<td>6 (14)</td>
<td>Sharing stories she’s written with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>11 (20)</td>
<td>5 (9)</td>
<td>Asking mother for help with vocabulary in book of short stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>10 (19)</td>
<td>4 (7)</td>
<td>Writing article for local youth magazine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Across all nine primary interviews for each participant (for more information, review the calculation of behavioral engagement in Chapter 3).

Three of the participants—Angel, Hines, and Shona—reported socioliterate interactions relating to religion. In all three cases, these interactions revolved around reading the text considered to be most sacred in the participant’s religion, the Bible for Angel and the Quran for Hines and Shona. Angel’s experiences were the most structured and consistent: She reported that every night her entire family gathered in their living room, and, after praying, one of them selected a Bible passage to read aloud. The reading was assigned so that each night it was a different person’s turn. Angel also mentioned that visits from her aunt and uncle in a nearby town were occasions for family Bible reading. Shona talked several times about reading the Quran; she read it with an imam when she was a young girl living in Bangladesh, but doing so
recently had been a more solitary activity for her, since she and her family did not attend a mosque in Toronto. However, during her member check interview, Shona mentioned that in high school her mother would watch her read the Quran in Arabic, giving the activity a social aspect:

I would read it, my mom would just come and look and see if I’m reading it right cuz I don’t practice it so I don’t know the words so much, and like some of the words I forget and I get confused with the other ones, so she likes to just look over and she’ll be ‘It’s like this.’ Now, I read it, like, last month or something, and she was standing there, and I had so: many mistakes it was crazy. (member check interview, June 16, 2011)

Of the three, Hines was the least specific about her socioliterate experiences around religious literacy, but in December 2008, she mentioned reading the Quran together with her father.

Two of the participants, Acer and Lala, engaged in reading and writing with others specifically for the purposes of language learning. As mentioned in his case profile in Chapter 4, Acer attended a Saturday Chinese school throughout high school, where he studied Cantonese and Mandarin. Because his closest friends also attended this school, he worked extensively with them on Chinese reading and writing assignments, even emailing them about this work during the week. In addition, his parents and older sister regularly helped him with his CS homework. In his member check interview, Acer described how his mom would sit down with him and teach him Chinese characters when he was younger. Lala was both a language learner and teacher. She was in the process of learning Pashto, primarily from a high school friend, and she talked about reading a Pashto book with him as well as practicing writing in Pashto. In June 2011, Lala described her reading in Pashto as “bad” but then said she was able to help another friend whose
family received letters in Pashto but could not read them. In addition to her own language learning, throughout this study Lala was teaching Arabic as a heritage language to a younger girl in her neighborhood who had immigrated to Canada from Syria when she was very young.

**Socioliterate Support**

The previous section reported findings regarding the important social relationships in the participants’ lives and the ways in which the participants interacted with these individuals through reading and writing. My second research question focused on the possibility that participants were receiving specific support on their reading and writing from their network members: Which of these relationships do participants report as providing support for their literacy events? What types of literacy support are offered?

Table 5.7 provides the percentages of instances when students reported receiving some type of supportive behavior (see Chapters 2 and 3 for more details on the typology of social support used in this thesis study) as well as the network domain of the individual providing the supportive behavior. When considering all types of supportive behavior in all daily life situations, it appears that the most social support came from participants’ home domains, followed closely by the school and then the friend domains. There was a noticeable drop-off in supportive behaviors between these three domains and the other two, other family and outside of school. When the support instances are limited only to those involving reading and writing (‘socioliterate support’), the most sizeable differences occur in the friends and school domains, with support from friends dropping by half and school-related support increasing by 80%.
Table 5.7
Percentage of Received Social Support by Network Domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain of network members</th>
<th>Percentage of social support instances&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Percentage of socioliterate support instances&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside of school</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> n=353 reported instances of general support. <sup>b</sup>n=155 reported instances of socioliterate support.

Within these domains, there tended to be specific individuals who provided socioliterate support to the participants. Table 5.7 shows that just over half of the reported socioliterate support came from individuals in the school domain (n=80 instances); further analysis identified that 69 instances were reported from English teachers, compared to five instances from classmates and six from teachers in classes other than English/language arts. Indeed, English teachers were the single most-cited source of socioliterate support, accounting for 45% of the total reported socioliterate support instances. In comparison, the group with the second-most reported instances was parents or step-parents, who were described as providing 15% (23 instances) of the socioliterate support. All sources reported as providing support to two or more participants are listed in Table 5.8. (Individuals named by only one participant included a Kiwanis club counselor, a P2E SPSW (Student Parent Support Worker), an imam, a family friend, and a private tutor.) Despite occurrences in previous research indicating that school
personnel other than teachers could provide positive (or negative) socioliterate support to teens (e.g., a librarian in Hynds, 1997), there were no similar instances reported by my participants.

Table 5.8
*Individuals Providing Socioliterate Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of socioliterate support</th>
<th>No. of reported instances(^a)</th>
<th>Percentage of socioliterate support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English teachers</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/step-parents</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2E tutors</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers other than English</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmates</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousins</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)\(n=155\) reported instances of socioliterate support.

The ways in which English teachers provided socioliterate support varied greatly, of course. (When coding for such support, I excluded instances which appeared to occur as part of a teacher’s lesson plan or were provided to an entire class, such as when Shona described how her Grade 12 English teacher’s grading practices helped her learn grammar points or when Acer talked about how his Grade 9 English teacher would answer students’ questions while the class was reading aloud.) Support instances described by students ranged from short interactions such as asking a teacher for help with words a student did not know in a required reading (reported by Acer, Angel, K-9, and Lala) to slightly more involved one-on-one meetings, such as when Angel’s Grade 9 English teacher helped her with her oral reading by (a) having Angel practice reading to her and (b) advising Angel to practice reading aloud to a mirror. Finally, two students
(Acer and Ning) reported receiving very meaningful support from their English teachers, support that had an impact beyond a single assignment or class. For example, Acer described how he and his Grade 9 GLE English teacher regularly talked about preparing him to move up to the next level of English (‘applied’) in Grade 10; she gave him a particular book to read outside of class, and Acer was keeping a reading journal that he regularly turned into the teacher to help her check his progress. Acer successfully made the transition to the higher course level, and by Grade 11 Acer had moved into the college-preparatory English track (‘academic’). In both December 2008 and May 2009, Acer selected this teacher as a ‘most important’ network contact. Likewise, Ning had an ESL teacher (in Grades 9-11) who took an interest in her academic progress and with whom she forged a mentoring relationship, even seeking help from him in other classes:

Like, we sit together and he tell me, like [...] I have to know the Depression, the D-Day, lots of things I don’t know, so he helped me with my history [...] He was, like, very friendly and kind to me, so I just asked him ‘what happened’ and he helped me. (reading sample interview, May 29, 2010)

Ning named this teacher a ‘most important’ network contact in December 2008 and May 2010; moreover, in May 2010, she selected him as the single-most important person in her school-related reading and writing.

To provide a more systematic analysis of the content of these support instances, I applied a typology of social support (based on Malecki & Demaray, 2006, and Tardy, 1985; see Chapter 3). Table 5.9 outlines the ways in which the participants were being supported by their network
Table 5.9
*Types of Social and Socioliterate Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of support</th>
<th>Percentage of social support instances(^a)</th>
<th>Percentage of socioliterate support instances(^b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a n=353\) reported instances of social support. \(^b n=155\) reported instances of socioliterate support.

members. *Instrumental* support (helping behaviors) was high among the support instances and played an even larger role in socioliterate support. Students reported receiving *appraisal* support (evaluative feedback) at a much higher rate in relation to socioliterate events than in their daily lives, but the amount of *informational* support (advice) students received was lower in relation to their socioliterate events as compared to their daily lives. Seemingly due to the content and focus of the interviews, few instances of *emotional* support were reported by participants, so that category of support appears under-represented in this data (although it is relevant to my later discussion of negative social support).

Despite the many differences between participants’ life and school experiences, there was much consistency in the manner in which these types of support were provided to them. *Appraisal* support, for instance, consisted primarily of teacher feedback on reading or writing assignments (32 of 39 appraisal instances), as reported by all seven participants. Lala and Ning also reported receiving appraisal-type feedback from parents on school or tutoring assignments. Hines reported two instances of appraisal support from peers, and Lala reported one: Hines’ classmates in Grade 9 praised her essay on *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960/1988) and in Grade 10 told her “you’re reading so good, I’m so into [the text]!” (reading sample
interview, July 13, 2010), and Lala’s best friend really liked Lala’s shipwreck story. Lala was the only participant to report a source of appraisal support from the *outside-of-school* domain, when she showed her shipwreck story to a group of P2E staff members.

*Informational* support comprised a much smaller percentage of socioliterate support than of general support because so many of these instances revolved around the category of ‘general life advice’ as solicited by the social network protocol. K-9, for example, described how his step-sister gave him advice about how to style his hair; he also asked for a lot of relationship advice from his strong peer network. Several participants also discussed the advice their parents gave them about focusing on and doing well in school (Angel, Hines, Ning). When informational support was specifically literate in nature, it tended to take the form of explicit advice from teachers about an action to take, such as to read a certain book (Acer) or to improve a certain skill (Angel, Ning). Hines was the only participant to report an instance of general socioliterate informational support, in that her father encouraged her to read more books. Three participants reported no supportive instances that fell into the category of advice about reading and writing (K-9, Lala, Shona).

*Instrumental* support encompasses any action that is considered a “helping behavior” (Tardy, 1985, p. 189). Even in this category of support that comprised the largest number of supportive instances reported by these participants, there was still much consistency about the manner in which this support was delivered—almost 80% (78/101) of instrumental support for reading and writing events consisted of a network member helping a participant with schoolwork. Two other types of ‘helping behaviors’ for reading and writing were reported: (1) assisting participants with reading and writing events that were not school-related (e.g., Acer’s sister teaching him to write formal letters, Angel’s father reading an Obama biography with her,
Shona’s imam teaching her to read the Quran in Arabic), and, less commonly, (2) teachers or tutors giving general reading or writing assistance (e.g., Hines learning writing strategies from a P2E tutor). These instances of instrumental support for literacy could be very simple, such as defining a word from a reading (as received by Acer and Ning) or could be more involved, as in a P2E tutoring situation described by Hines:

[The tutor] had a laptop with him, he showed me a bunch of websites [...] Basically, cuz like the whole point [of the essay] was heroes, right? But I didn’t really think of that part. I was thinking more of the 20th century part, and then like he helped me like really think about what a hero is and what they do, and then it helped me with my essay. (writing sample interview, July 13, 2010)

Although the data collection instruments were not designed to elicit specific examples of emotional support, participants did mention 23 instances of social support that fit that category. In general, these instances involved a participant feeling like a network member was watching out for him or her (e.g., K-9 said his older brother “keeps me on the path, like he makes sure I don’t do anything stupid,” social network interview, December 1, 2008); a participant talking to a network member about life problems (e.g., Shona described the importance of her friends as “when I have like family problems and stuff, they help me, like, talk it out and stuff,” social network interview, December 11, 2008); or parents making the participants feel good about themselves (e.g., Angel’s mother texted her ‘I love you’ every day).

Of these 23 instances of emotional support, only five were related to participants’ literate endeavors. For Acer, Hines, and Shona, emotional support for literacy took the shape of family
members praising a grade on an essay (as opposed to praising the content or writing of an essay, which would be appraisal support). Emotional support also can be negative in nature (cf. LaGaipa, 1990), which Angel, Hines, and Lala all reported in relation to literacy events. In response to a question asking if anyone made her feel bad about her reading and writing, Angel pointed to her younger sister’s name and said in an angry and defensive tone, “Her! My sister think I don’t know how to read. Yeah, she think that [...] ‘cause she think she can read better than me but she can’t” (social network interview, April 30, 2009). Lala named her father as a negative influence on her reading and writing, giving the example that he had criticized her reading when helping her with her homework: “and he say, ‘Why you read like that?’” (social network interview, June 17, 2010). In Hines’ case, her parents discouraged her from reading young adult books about vampires, her favorite genre, although she appeared to find this situation more humorous than upsetting.

**Literacy Engagement**

My third research question in this study considered the participants’ engagement in literate behavior, particularly in relation to the social relationships delineated in the previous two sections: *What dimensions of engagement appear in participants’ literacy events, and what aspects of their social relationships seem to influence this engagement in literacy?*

**Dimensions of Literacy Engagement**

As previously explained in Chapters 2 and 3, for this study I adopted a tripartite conception of engagement, as synthesized by Fredricks et al. (2004), consisting of behavioral engagement (BE; participation in an activity), emotional engagement (EE; affective reactions to and value judgments about an activity), and cognitive engagement (CE; strategy use, goal
setting, and level of self-efficacy for an activity). By coding all mentions of literacy events in the interviews and counting tokens of these three engagement strands, I attempted to quantitatively describe the strands implicated in participants’ literacy engagement (Table 5.10).

Table 5.10
*Participants’ Literacy Engagement by Strand*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acer</th>
<th>Angel</th>
<th>Hines</th>
<th>K-9</th>
<th>Lala</th>
<th>Ning</th>
<th>Shona</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of reported literacy events (BE)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of positive affective comments and value judgments (EE+)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of negative affective comments and value judgments (EE-)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of strategies, goals, and positive self-efficacy statements (CE)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total raw engagement score</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The behavioral literacy engagement (BE) of participants was assessed by their explicit mention of reading or writing a particular text. As described in Chapter 3, if a participant mentioned a text multiple times or in multiple interviews, the text still counted as only one instance of BE. For example, reading *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908/1989) in her Grade 9 English class seems to have made a noticeable impact on Angel, as she mentioned this text in three different interviews and at two administrations as one she had most enjoyed reading in high school. However, reading *Anne of Green Gables* counted as only one literacy event for Angel (although writing an essay about it counted as another event).
Participants exhibited emotional literacy engagement (EE) through affective statements such as “at the end, I kind of like the book […] the author, he did the writing and creating the characters so good!” (Ning, social network interview, May 15, 2010) and value judgments as when K-9 explained that writing his chemistry notes while the teacher was talking allowed him to “understand it more” because he was hearing the information and seeing it on paper at the same time (writing sample interview, May 7, 2009). While both of these examples indicate positive EE, participants also displayed negative EE. Most of the negative EE examples were affective statements about not liking a particular text because it was uninteresting or too difficult: About a book her uncle lent her, Angel said, “He said I have to read it cuz it was interesting, but I didn’t, I didn’t find it interesting […] so boring” (social network interview, March 5, 2009), and from Hines: “[This essay was] hard, because I didn’t know what to write (+) I didn’t know how to state the examples” (writing sample interview, June 8, 2009). There were only two negative value judgments stated during this study, both by Shona, who made the largest raw number of negative EE statements overall. Shona described the negative influence Facebook participation was having on her academic performance (discussed earlier in this chapter), and she also expressed the opinion that completing the weekly writing assignments in her world issues class was not worth the effort those assignments required: “it sucks because we work our butt off […] I’ve got like 80s and 90s and my mark doesn’t go any higher” (reading sample interview, April 13, 2010).

Cognitive literacy engagement (CE) was exhibited by participants primarily through their use of strategies for reading and writing, although four of the participants also stated goals about specific texts. Self-efficacy is the only engagement measure in this study not tied to specific
texts, as described in Chapter 3. I chose to quantify strategy use based on the number of different strategies participants reported using, rather than the number of times they mentioned using a strategy, with the understanding that a skilled reader, for example, is more likely to use several strategies rather than a single strategy multiple times when reading a challenging text (e.g., Duffy & Roehler, 1989; Guthrie & Anderson, 1999). Table 5.11 presents the raw scores for each facet of CE considered in this study.

Table 5.11
Facets of Participants’ Cognitive Literacy Engagement (CE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acer</th>
<th>Angel</th>
<th>Hines</th>
<th>K-9</th>
<th>Lala</th>
<th>Ning</th>
<th>Shona</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total CE score</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of discrete strategies</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of positive self-efficacy statements</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of negative self-efficacy statements</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants reported using a variety of strategies. One of the most common reading strategies mentioned was to ask a teacher for help; two others were to read over a difficult text or passage multiple times and to look up words in a dictionary or glossary. The most common writing strategies were revising during or after the writing process, researching a topic in external sources, and using their own prior knowledge about the topic. Several participants also asked for help from the teacher before or during the writing process and worked on prewriting activities. Not surprisingly, the student who reported using the greatest range of strategies (Shona) was one of the oldest—so would have had more opportunity to be exposed to academic literacy strategies—and had relatively high scores on the ALTUR literacy tasks.
Of the six literacy goals mentioned by participants, five related to academic writing tasks and one to an extracurricular reading task (Shona wanted to read the Quran more often). The goals on the school tasks included wanting to do more prewriting and learning to edit one’s own writing so it would “sound better” (Hines, writing sample interview, July 13, 2010); Hines, K-9, and Lala specifically mentioned they wanted to use more appropriate vocabulary to better express their thoughts.

A number of statements participants made regarding their perceptions of their literate competence (i.e., self-efficacy for literacy tasks) were neutral, as if they did not want to commit one way or another, did not feel adequate to assess their own capabilities, or simply did not want to share their self-assessment with their interviewers: At least once during the study, when asked directly to rate themselves as a reader or writer, all seven participants answered ‘OK’ or ‘in the middle.’ But at other times, participants were able or willing to share an assessment of their reading or writing capabilities. As indicated in Table 5.1, Shona had a consistently positive view of her literate capabilities, especially reading, making statements such as, “I am a fast reader. Like, I can finish a book in like two days. Like a big-ass book” (reading sample interview, December 11, 2008), and “I think I’m a pretty good writer […] because I like to write, like when I get started, like, I can’t stop” (writing sample interview, April 30, 2009). Although Angel made several positive comments about her literacy capabilities, she also made the largest number of negative statements:

IV: In general, how good a writer do you think you are?

A: Not so good, little bit.

IV: Why?
A: ‘Cause I make so much mistakes. (writing sample interview, November 27, 2008)

Taking all of this information into account, for each participant the raw scores from each strand of literacy engagement were summed and, using the mean and standard deviation of the raw scores, z-scores were calculated. Table 5.12 presents these data, organized by the previously hypothesized levels on a literacy engagement continuum (see Chapter 3).

Table 5.12
Participants by Literacy Engagement Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Raw engagement score</th>
<th>Z-score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly engaged</td>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately engaged</td>
<td>Hines</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>Lala</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acer</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctant</td>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-1.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*M=88.71; SD=11.74

While participants’ engagement scores fell very neatly into these predetermined levels, I had difficulty reconciling what I knew of these students’ literate lives with their assigned levels. For instance, of the three students with the lowest engagement scores, K-9 and his older brother had their own ‘reading club,’ and Lala and Acer wrote stories for fun. However, I chose to continue to use these labels as I investigated possible connections between literacy engagement,
socioliterate interactions, and social support as it is common in reading engagement and motivation research to create or apply such labels or “profiles” (cf. de Milliano et al., 2011; Guthrie et al., 2007; Lenters, 2006). In Chapter 6, I question the use of such labels in adolescent literacy scholarship.

Social Relationships and Literacy Engagement

Social interactions relating to literacy events. Participants reported a range of social interactions surrounding their BE in reading and writing. As documented earlier in this chapter and in the case profiles in Chapter 4, participants sometimes read and wrote with others face-to-face—such as Hines and a friend reading fashion magazines together and Angel and her father collaboratively reading the Obama biography—and sometimes over a distance, either at the same time (Angel texting her boyfriend for hours every night) or asynchronously (Ning emailing her cousins and friends in China). At times these interactions were mutual or reciprocal, such as texting friends back and forth, but other times one party or another initiated them (e.g., Lala showing her shipwreck story to P2E personnel, or Acer’s English teacher suggesting he read a particular book). These interactions often involved extended acts of reading and writing, but at other times consisted only of conversation about what had been written or read.

All participants reported some amount of social interaction in relation to multiple literacy events. For some, most of their literate undertakings were social in nature, while others preferred to read and write on their own. In order to see possible trends in both literacy engagement and socioliterate interaction, for each participant I calculated percentages of how many literacy events had a social dimension (Table 5.13). The hypothetically most-engaged participants had the lowest percentage of literacy events with social interactions, and participants with the highest percentages appeared in the middle two engagement levels, indicating little connection between
these participants’ literacy engagement and whether or not their literacy events were social in nature.

Table 5.13
Participants’ Literacy Engagement Level and Socioliterate Interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant by literacy engagement level</th>
<th>Z-score</th>
<th>Literacy events with social dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly engaged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately engaged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hines</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lala</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acer</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>-1.76</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Socioliterate support.** As documented in this and the previous chapter, participants reported receiving differing amounts of social support on their literacy events (although not wholly different types of support—socioliterate support was overwhelmingly *instrumental* in nature, with a small amount being *appraisal*). This support primarily revolved around homework help, although Acer, Lala, Ning, and Shona all reported one or more extracurricular literacy events on which they received social support (e.g., Acer’s sister taught him to write business letters; Ning asked her parents for help with reading a book of short stories). To compare possible trends in literacy engagement and socioliterate support, for each participant I calculated the percentage of literacy events on which they reported receiving social support (Table 5.14). As with socioliterate interactions, there was no apparent relationship between the
amount of socioliterate support participants reported over the course of the study and their literacy engagement scores. Moreover, comparisons of participants’ socioliterate support and socioliterate interactions with the individual strands (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) of engagement showed no relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant by literacy engagement level</th>
<th>Z-score</th>
<th>Literacy events with social support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly engaged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately engaged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hines</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lala</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acer</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctant</td>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>-1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Further observations on social relationships and engagement.** Quantitatively, then, there did not appear to be associations between socioliterate relationships and literacy engagement for this group of adolescents. However, looking qualitatively at each literacy event reported by participants to have a social dimension produced indications that social relationships could influence literacy engagement, primarily through socioliterate support on literacy events perceived by students to be difficult or uninteresting as well as the use of literacy to sustain social relationships. Also evident, however, was that students’ interest in a topic or activity may be even more important for literacy engagement than the social dimension.
For three of the participants—Acer, Hines, and Ning—social support appears implicated in their literacy engagement. It was not the quantity of social support that appeared to be important: Although Acer and Ning reported the highest percentage of literacy events with social support (35%), Hines reported the lowest percentage (15%). Rather, for these three adolescents, social support seemed to provide them with the motivation to pursue certain literacy events regardless of their emotional investment in those events, to help them learn and apply useful strategies to texts, and to raise their literate self-efficacy. As described in Chapter 4, Acer did not choose on his own to read the young adult novel *Money Hungry* (Flake, 2001) and did not seem very interested in the subject matter. However, after his Grade 9 English teacher, an important network contact, suggested the book to him, Acer read it and kept a reading journal about it (BE), ended up liking it and feeling as if reading it would help him advance academically (EE), and used six different strategies to understand it (CE). For Hines, the assistance she received from a P2E tutor to get started on the capstone project in her Canadian history course was directly implicated in converting her attitude from thinking the assignment was “terrible” and “sounded so hard” (writing sample interview, July 13, 2010) to enjoying the research process (EE) and earning an A; along the way, she used nine different strategies and sought help from two other sources (CE) to complete the essay (BE). In addition, the appraisal support Hines received from her drama classmates on her oral reading appeared to have positively influenced her self-efficacy for reading aloud (CE). And, in an episode not described in her Chapter 4 profile, Hines attributed part of her success on an in-class essay on *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960/1988) to her use of several strategies (CE) she had learned from her ALTUR tutor, a regular source of socioliterate support for Hines. In the engagement example for Ning in Chapter 4, the appraisal support she received on an ESL essay from an
important network member appeared to have encouraged her to revise and resubmit the essay, above and beyond the course requirements (BE and CE). This same network member, an ESL teacher who taught her English three years in a row, also went out of his way to provide her regular tutoring in reading and comprehending her Canadian history textbook during Grade 10, a situation which Ning mentioned as direct evidence to support her positive self-efficacy (CE) claim that “I think [my reading]’s, like, improving” (reading sample interview, May 29, 2010).

Three of the participants—Angel, K-9, and Shona—seemed to be motivated to engage in and complete literacy events by their intrinsic interest in an event rather than by social support. In the example described in Angel’s profile in Chapter 4, Angel was highly engaged in a writing assignment on Rosa Parks, using six different strategies (CE) and making five positive comments about it (EE), but these engagement markers seemed unrelated to the one act of socioliterate support she received and much more dependent on her interest in African-American history, illustrated by both her self-professed interest in the topic and her continued reading and writing about Barack Obama. Similar compelling examples appeared for K-9, as documented in Chapter 4, regarding his high EE and CE in a writing task on which the themes of social class and power resonated with him and on which he took pride in his skill in understanding the short story on which the essay was based. Also, K-9 showed high EE and CE in a difficult reading task on fire safety because he felt knowing the information was a matter of life and death in his welding class. The literacy events in which Shona was most highly engaged were her essay on wrongful convictions and reading *Romeo and Juliet*. On the wrongful convictions essay, as documented in her Chapter 4 profile, Shona received three different types of support from three different individuals; however, all this support was received after she had already implemented the eight
strategies (CE) she used to help her write the paper. Instead, she found the topic so gripping from the outset that she did not want to stop writing once she started: “I wrote it in one night. Yeah, I was so surprised, I couldn’t, I couldn’t believe it [. . .] I just started it, it was a Friday night, too; who does their homework on a Friday night? ((laughs)). It was so: interesting, I just loved [it]” (writing sample interview, April 13, 2010). Although Shona reported no socioliterate support while reading *Romeo and Juliet*, she used three distinct strategies to help her understand the vocabulary (CE) and made four positive statements about the text (EE). In fact, it is these statements that illustrate why she was willing to work so hard on reading Shakespeare’s language: “I felt good [about reading this] ‘cause it’s an interesting book, and it has a different, it has the, it’s so poetic, so yeah, I enjoyed it” and, later in the same interview, “It’s just fun reading it, cause it’s not (+) it’s different, right? So saying the words are just fun because some of them are like so funny, it like doesn’t make sense, but then again it makes sense because it talks about, it has so many metaphors” (reading sample interview, April 30, 2009).

Although social support did not appear to be prominently implicated in literacy engagement for Angel, K-9, and Shona, all three of these adolescents reported high motivation for extracurricular reading and writing based around maintenance of social relationships: These three were the most prolific users of social media, and, in addition, Angel and K-9 both reported taking part in regularly occurring paper-based socioliterate interactions that were an important part of a close relationship, Angel reading fashion magazines with her cousin/best friend and K-9 being a member of a self-directed ‘book club’ with his older brother. Even though socioliterate support did not appear to be an influential factor in these teens’ literacy engagement, particularly
their academic literacy engagement, many of their social relationships had a literate dimension, and in some cases these relationships resulted directly in traditional paper-based reading practices found in schools (e.g., K-9 discussing novels with his brother, Angel reading a biography with her father).

Finally, Lala had so few literacy events with social support (three) and the support she received on these was so minimal (primarily vocabulary assistance) that it is difficult to draw any conclusions about a possible relationship between socioliterate support and engagement in her case. Overall, however, Lala’s literacy engagement appeared to be prompted more by her personal interest in the topic or the activity (e.g., reading teen fiction or writing stories) than by social support for those events/activities; in other words, she chose to read texts (BE) that intrinsically interested her, thus her attitude about these events was positive (EE) and she used a variety of strategies to move her reading forward (CE). When the events were ones required for school, her EE and CE were noticeably higher for those that held an intrinsic interest for her (e.g., texts about young adulthood, such as *Crow Lake* [Lawson, 2006] and *Romeo and Juliet*, and creative writing projects).

**Summary**

The cross-case analysis revealed that, despite individual variation in social networks over time, in general there was high consistency in the average population of each network domain over the 18 months of this study. Participants had the most network contacts in the friend domain and the fewest contacts in the school domain. Notably, participants had a similar number of contacts in both the home and other family domains. In terms of the ‘most important’ network contacts, friends and immediate family members were most likely to be selected.
Within these social networks, participants reported reading and writing with a wide variety of individuals across domains. The purposes for these socioliterate interactions fell into one of five categories: to communicate socially, to complete schoolwork, for entertainment/pleasure, to practice religion, and to learn a language. All of these socioliterate activities included aspects of academic literacy practices, such as reading a text and discussing it. Every participant, despite having been labelled at some point as ‘at-risk for literacy development,’ was able to animatedly discuss a variety of texts he or she read or wrote for fun.

A number of these network relationships offered social support to the participants, and a smaller number offered support specifically on literacy events. Most of the general social support was provided by individuals in the home domain, and most socioliterate support came from people in the school domain. In particular, English teachers were found to provide 45% of the reported socioliterate support, support that went beyond that offered as part of a lesson plan or curriculum. Instrumental, or helping, support was the most common type reported, most of which consisted of participants receiving assistance on schoolwork. Three participants also reported receiving negative socioliterate support.

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate possible relationships between social support and literacy engagement. Participants did report literacy-related actions, thoughts, and feelings that were consistent with the three hypothesized strands of literacy engagement; however, there was no quantitative intersection between the literacy engagement scores and measures of socioliterate interactions or support. On the other hand, qualitative analysis indicated that socioliterate interactions/support might have promoted participants’ literacy engagement particularly on challenging or uninteresting tasks and when the literacy events were
related to maintaining social relationships. And even more important than social interaction to literacy engagement was participants’ interest in a literacy event.
Chapter 6

Networks, Support, and Engagement: What Do They Mean for Adolescent Literacy?

In this chapter, I summarize the findings from Chapters 4 and 5 that are most relevant to the purpose of this study and then consider how they might enhance understanding of multilingual adolescents’ networks, support, and literacies as well as theoretical conceptions of EST, social support and literacy engagement. I then consider the practical implications of these findings for educational programs, and I conclude by discussing possibilities for future research.

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

Social Networks

My first set of research questions asked, “What people do the adolescents in this study report as being important to them (i.e., as belonging to their personal social networks)? Within these networks, with whom do they interact through literacy events?” In answer to the first part of this question, while participants reported social network contacts in each of the five life domains investigated, most of their contacts (both general contacts and ‘most important’ contacts) were family and friends. Friends made up about 40% of network members, whereas home and other family contacts each comprised roughly 20% of network members. Considering the frequency with which the ‘most important’ contacts were named, aunts/uncles and cousins appeared as ‘most important’ contacts on one-third of the social network maps; mothers, fathers, and siblings each appeared on two-thirds of the maps; and friends were named on 95% of the maps. In short, friends were reported as social network contacts more often than any other
domain or relationship, but family members, immediate and extended, were also quite central in these participants’ lives.

Interestingly, although the social networks of individual participants did show variation over time—Ning listed one **out-of-school** network contact in 2008 and 2009 but 10 in 2010 as she became more active in a YMCA group, and Shona’s **friend** domain contracted from nine to three to two as she approached graduation—across the cases, the proportion of different relationships (e.g., parents, siblings, friends, teachers) represented in the networks remained fairly stable. In other words, as K-9 described, “. . . it’s progress. And over and over you decide whether or not those [people] will remain or whether those [people] will, like, drift away” (social network interview, March 25, 2010)—yet as individuals ‘drift away,’ others come to fill those spaces and play similar roles in adolescents’ lives.

During adolescence coming to rely more on friends than on parents is a hallmark of adolescents’ desire for autonomy and control over some areas of their lives (Mounts, 2001). Taking this desire for autonomy to an extreme, in popular culture adolescence is often stereotyped as a time when individuals push to separate from their parents—sometimes in an angry, repudiatory manner—a view which is related to the ‘sturm und drang’ metaphor often employed to describe perceived emotional upheavals during this life stage. In contrast to this popular stereotype, Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, and Coleman (1992) reported on a range of studies that found adolescents named their parents as mentors and that parents continued to be seen as important to their adolescent children even as the children’s networks grew. Similarly, researchers in educational psychology have found evidence that parents “are never relinquished as attachment figures” (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005, p. 227) and continue to play an important role in providing the specific attachment function of ‘secure base’ (a person one turns to in order to
share good news and who can always be counted on) to their adolescent children, while noting that during adolescence peers take over from parents the attachment function of ‘safe haven’ (the person one turns to when upset or for advice). It is noteworthy that the present research participants—despite being slightly older and more culturally and linguistically diverse than participants in many previous studies—reported similar views of and attachments to parents and peers.

Another interesting point is that individuals from the outside of school domain were the least likely to be selected as ‘most important’—surprising, since all the participants were enrolled in an established, well-organized after-school program that provided tutors, mentors, and support workers for the students. Were these individuals so far in the background of these students’ lives as to be forgotten, or, conversely, so much a part of the warp and weft of their lives that students overlooked them? Were these interactions not as important to students as program administrators believed? Are relationships more meaningful or noticeable to students when they initiate the connection rather than having a mentor assigned to them?

EST’s emphasis on molar activities provides a measure of insight into students’ nomination of their ‘most important’ network members. Bronfenbrenner (1979) differentiated between molar and molecular activities on the basis of whether an activity has meaning for those engaged in it (molar) or not (molecular). It makes sense that these students perceived individuals with whom they engaged in molar activities, such as their families and close friends, as ‘most important.’ Indeed, the types of interactions they described with these individuals seemed quite meaningful to them. On the other hand, their interactions with P2E personnel may have been more molecular in nature, such as getting transit tickets from their SPSWs and meeting with various tutors to work on school assignments that did not particularly interest them. The EST
concept of *roles* also is applicable here: “The placement of a person in a role tends to evoke perceptions, activities, and patterns of interpersonal relation consistent with expectations associated with that role as they pertain to the behavior both of the person occupying the role and of others with respect to that person” (p. 92), particularly when such roles and their accompanying expectations are widely recognized in society. The research cited above on parents and peers indicates that both groups have implicitly defined roles in adolescents’ lives, while a less commonly encountered position, such as that of assigned mentor or SPSW, may not have registered as a potentially useful part of my participants’ networks.

**Socioliterate Interactions**

The second part of the research question inquired about participants’ socioliterate interactions with network members. Again, friends proved to be very involved in these interactions. Participants reported such literate activities with friends as emailing (all seven participants), texting (Angel, Hines, K-9, Ning, Shona), and using Facebook (Angel, Hines, K-9, Lala, Shona); doing homework (all); going to the library (Ning, Hines, Lala); reading African American literature (Angel, Hines, K-9) and reading video game instructions and text (Acer, K-9). Teachers were the second most common partner for reading and writing activities, slightly ahead of parents and siblings; however, when parents and siblings were combined into the home domain, they were involved in more reading and writing activities than were teachers.

Thus, these multilingual adolescents who had been labeled ‘at-risk for literacy development’ were reading and writing (both traditional texts as well as multimedia texts)—and often they had social motivation to do so, whether this was to communicate with others, to entertain themselves and others, or to get assistance on school assignments. In terms of EST, participants were engaging in *molar activities* via *interpersonal structures*. As Moje et al. (2008)...
asserted, “youth read and write when they have a well-articulated purpose, a purpose that is usually centered in a network of social activity” (p. 146).

Some of these socioliterate interactions appeared to be apprenticing the participants into the world of academic literacy, even when the purpose of the literacy event was ostensibly for entertainment: K-9 and his brother reading and talking about novels together and Angel doing a guided read-aloud with her father on a biography she had chosen for pleasure reading. Acer’s sister teaching him, on her own initiative, to write business letters is an even more obvious example of this sort of apprenticeship. Thus, it seems that these participants’ close (and supportive) network ties were helping them buy into school-based expectations of how readers and writers should interact with texts as well as with other readers and writers, consistent with EST’s hypotheses about microsystemic roles being reinforced by social interactions around molar activities.

**Socioliterate Support**

The second set of research questions asked, “Which of these relationships do participants report as providing support for their literacy events? What types of literacy support are offered?”

**Sources of socioliterate support.** As described in Chapter 5, although individuals in the school domain were involved in only 17% of the socioliterate interactions, they provided just over half (51%) of the socioliterate support participants reported receiving. Moreover, English teachers in particular provided 45% of the total socioliterate support, more than parents, friends, and siblings together. Hines was the only participant to report receiving more socioliterate support from a source other than a teacher: As documented in her case profile, Hines’ father—a high school science and math teacher with a graduate science degree—was very influential in her
reading and writing. This situation brings up a series of intriguing questions: Was Hines getting more help from a parent than other participants were because, as a teacher, her father was more likely to be familiar with her schoolwork and enjoyed assisting her, or was the phenomenon related to the broader issue of parental education? And does the locus of socioliterate support matter to adolescents’ literacy engagement or achievement?

While in some cases, participants in this thesis study reported teachers going out of their way to provide socioliterate support—lending books to read outside of class, providing reading and writing help at lunch or after school or even for a different subject area—many of the behaviors that students singled out as helpful or noteworthy were part of teachers’ regular pedagogical practices (e.g., praising their work, giving feedback on how to improve, giving advice on the writing process). Was it that these particular practices resonated with these particular students at that particular point in their literacy development or due to their needs at that particular time? Or did it have less to do with the specific activity and more to do with the students’ overall perceptions of those teachers? In a book pulling together teaching-related conclusions from a wide range of her studies, often with marginalized adolescents, Moje (2000b) claimed that “[m]y research indicates that when kids feel cared for—when they believe they are working in a relationship with a teacher—they tend to be more willing to try different literacy practices and strategies that the teacher offers” (p. 69).

The caveat here is that ‘caring’ is not enough: “Students who are especially successful note that their teachers’ care extends beyond niceness: They highlight caring teachers’ abilities to make content meaningful and relevant to their lives, as well as the teachers’ commitment to their learning” (Moje, 2000b, p. 89). Moje’s conclusions reflect the work of Hendry et al. (1992), who found that when teachers were selected as a ‘significant person’ by adolescents, it
was overwhelmingly due to participants feeling the teachers “had confidence in me” or “had taken me seriously” (p. 260). In other words, social support from a teacher is important not only for the actual assistance it provides, but also because it illustrates that the teacher is taking the student and her needs seriously; as well, activities that make a student feel that a teacher has confidence in him or is taking his needs seriously appear particularly supportive to that student, even when those activities are routine for the teacher.

Once again, the concept of roles in EST is useful to understand why the present participants approached teachers more than anyone else for socioliterate support, as they likely had established expectations of what kinds of supportive behavior would be forthcoming from the socially defined roles of ‘teacher,’ ‘parent,’ ‘sibling,’ and ‘friend.’ In addition, the supportive literacy situations students described often occurred in the joint activity dyads—and incorporated molar activities—that EST posits as vital to human development. As established above, an important aspect of teacher-student dyadic interactions is that the student feels that he or she is being taken seriously by the teacher; this position is congruent with the EST hypothesis that educational benefits of such interactions “increase[s] as a direct function of the level of reciprocity, mutuality of positive feeling, and a gradual shift of power in favor of the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 59).

**Types of socioliterate support.** Over half of the socioliterate support received by the participants was instrumental in nature, meaning that network members provided a helping behavior (such as giving of time or effort) around a literacy event or endeavor; the vast majority of these support instances involved giving help with schoolwork. About a quarter of the socioliterate support was appraisal support, generally involving teacher feedback on reading or
writing assignments. Less than 10% of the reported socioliterate support consisted of informational (i.e., advice) and emotional support.

The two most common types of socioliterate support—instrumental and appraisal—may be more characteristic of molar (i.e., in-depth and meaningful) activities such as literacy events than are the other two types, at least for these particular students. Indeed, informational support, which was reported mainly as general life advice (such as Angel’s mother telling her to “focus on school”), occurred five-and-a-half times more frequently in the natural flow of daily life than in conjunction with specific literacy events. For their literacy activities, students may have been actively seeking more meaningful support (i.e., actual help instead of only advice) or the individuals to whom they turned for assistance may have recognized that in-depth assistance was needed more than simple advice. For example, Angel, Hines, K-9, and Ning all described situations in which they were not able to begin a writing project without someone else sitting down with them and walking them through part of it; moreover, they recognized they needed a high level of assistance and sought a particular individual (in all four cases, either a teacher or P2E tutor) who was willing to spend time with them and who had appropriate knowledge. Once again, through the lens of EST, it seems that important educational scaffolding was occurring around molar activities in joint activity dyads; moreover, the type of socioliterate support offered to students may have been dependent on the ‘molarity’ of the activity, and the effectiveness of the support dependent on the aforementioned reciprocity of the dyads.

Although emotional support was the least reported type of socioliterate support, an interesting phenomenon emerged from its analysis. Three of the seven participants (Angel, Hines, and Lala) reported receiving negative emotional support on literacy events, all from family members either criticizing their reading and writing or discouraging them from a certain
type of literacy activity. Hirsch (1985), a leading scholar in social network and support, termed this phenomenon “social rejection” (p. 121) in order to contrast it with social support, and he linked its relevance to its impact on “our social identities in major spheres of life” (p. 119), one of which spheres he identified as high school. Applying Hirsch’s perspective, if adolescents are being told that they are bad at academic reading or writing (i.e. negative socioliterate support), their conception of themselves as academic readers or writers will suffer.

On the other hand, how such negative support might affect students depends on individual variables such as implicit personality theories, relationship goals, interpersonal skills (cf. Dweck, 1996), need for support, and amount of support received from other sources. Lala seemed to find it humorous when her little brother criticized her intelligence, while a similar situation made Angel angry. But it is still important to recognize that this phenomenon exists and can have very real consequences on teens, such as when Ning avoided asking her father for help on her homework for fear that he would criticize her inability to do it.

Another type of ‘social rejection,’ while not overtly negative in nature, is when support is sought and not provided. I have termed this ‘null support’ in several of the case profiles. It was more rare than negative support, perhaps because it is more difficult to capture the absence of support than the presence of it, nor was I explicitly asking about such situations. Null support too can have important consequences: When Angel felt her geography teacher would rather play on his laptop than answer her questions, Angel started skipping the class. Another type of null support can occur when an individual identifies a need and source for support but consciously chooses not to seek assistance because she believes support will not be provided, as when Lala assumed that her English teacher was too busy to talk to her about her essays.
EST acknowledges the existence of such negative situations, framing the overtly negative support experienced by these students as “mutual antagonism occurring in the context of a primary dyad” and recognizing that it can “[be] especially disruptive of joint activity” and therefore learning opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 60). Bronfenbrenner also noted that in order for dyads to promote learning and development the engagement in the molar activity must be mutual and “the balance of power [must] gradually shift in favor of the developing person” (p. 60)—in the situations of null support in this thesis study there was no mutual engagement, nor did the participants feel they had the power to force the interaction they desired. In fact, Bronfenbrenner claimed “perhaps the most destructive effect of third parties on the course of human development [is] the damage produced by their absence. Such absence means the unavailability of someone to function in the constructive roles I have described” (p. 81, emphasis added).

Literacy Engagement

My final research question attempted to connect participants’ socioliterate relationships and support with their literacy engagement: What dimensions of engagement appear in participants’ literacy events, and what aspects of their social relationships seem to influence this engagement in literacy?

Dimensions of literacy engagement. Consistent with the three-strand model of engagement described by Fredricks et al. (2004), the adolescents in my study demonstrated behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in a wide variety of literacy events. They read and wrote for entertainment, to socialize, and to fulfill academic requirements; they evinced positive and negative feelings and values about these literacy events; and they used a range of strategies to meet goals for these events. Thus, the three strands of engagement provided a
useful qualitative lens to consider the various ways in which these adolescents demonstrated literacy engagement. On the other hand, quantifying these strands did not accurately portray participants’ investment in reading and writing. The most compelling example of this inaccuracy was the labeling of K-9 as a ‘reluctant’ reader/writer: While K-9’s engagement score was the lowest (more than three standard deviations below the highest score) of the group, he regularly read scary stories on the website CreepyPasta, he took the initiative to write his own chemistry study notes that he checked with his teacher, he enthused about the positive effects of reading fire safety material in his welding class, he kept a running list of new vocabulary on his cell phone, and he had an informal reading club with his older brother.

It is possible that when literacy engagement is studied or discussed, it should be done at the level of a specific literacy event rather than to describe an individual’s general orientation to literacy. Even in research accepting labels such as ‘resistant readers’ (e.g., Lenters, 2006) or ‘struggling reader’ (e.g., Ivey, 1999), examples are given of students who did not like to read certain genres or for certain purposes but readily did so when they perceived an authentic purpose for doing so, when the material was interesting, or when they did not feel forced to read a specific text. In other words, these adolescents were less ‘resistant readers’ than ‘readers who are resistant at certain times and engaged at others.’ I discuss the topic of engagement at the event level in more detail in a later section detailing the theoretical implications of this study on engagement theories.

**Social relationships and literacy engagement.** All seven participants reported taking part in multiple literacy events with a social dimension; for three of the participants (Hines, Angel, Acer), over half of their literacy events were conducted with other people. All participants also reported receiving social support on multiple literacy events, primarily on
homework but, for four participants (Acer, Lala, Ning, Shona), on extracurricular literacy events as well. But did these interactions influence participants’ literacy engagement, as the concept is defined in this study? Two primary observations can be made based on the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5: (1) socioliterate support appeared to be most influential for literacy engagement when a literacy event was difficult or not intrinsically interesting, and (2) maintenance of social relationships positively influenced literacy engagement.

At the end of Grade 12, Shona wrote an essay on ‘wrongful convictions’ for her Canadian law course, which she described as being one of her favorite essays she wrote in high school. On this one essay, she received four instances of socioliterate support, including help with revising grammar and vocabulary as well as praise for referring to a previous topic of study. However, all this socioliterate support did not appear to influence Shona’s engagement in writing this essay.Repeatedly, she talked about how she had found the bibliographic sources on her own and how she had written the first draft in one sitting, using a dictionary and thesaurus when needed and revising as she went, due to her high interest in the topic. In the same semester (Spring 2010), Hines also chose to talk about an essay she had written recently that she had enjoyed writing. In contrast to Shona, Hines initially did not approach the assignment with a positive attitude and she had difficulty getting started on it; it was not until she worked with a P2E tutor and her father on understanding the topic and writing the introduction that Hines began to look on her own for source material, revised the essay multiple times, and formulated a goal for how she wanted the piece “to sound.”

That the influence of socioliterate support is more evident or important in challenging situations is a finding similar to that of Wellman (1985) who was investigating the types of support available through a network of community members in a working-class Toronto
neighborhood: He found that the most common types of support were those easiest to give (e.g., lending household items, providing companionship) but that the more rare and difficult types of support (e.g., helping someone find a job or housing, helping with a large home improvement project) were actually the types most “crucial to wellbeing” (p. 211). The parallel in this thesis study is that telling a student ‘good job’ or providing summative feedback after an activity is completed does qualify as a supportive behavior and may be appreciated by the student but may not influence future literacy engagement. On the other hand, taking the time to consider what a student needs and offering assistance or advice to fill that need can be critical to the student’s engagement in the task at hand. Another perspective on the data from this study is that when students were able to motivate themselves to take part in and complete a literacy event, receiving socioliterate support may have been superfluous, but the same support was invaluable when those motivations were lacking and/or when there was a breakdown in engagement during the literacy event. This link between socioliterate support, motivation, and literacy engagement will be further explored in the following section of this chapter.

These analyses also suggest that it is not the cumulative amount of socioliterate support nor the specific source of socioliterate support that influences literacy engagement, but the intersection of a particular supportive act with a particular need. As discussed in the final section of this chapter, this conclusion has implications for the study of social support and academic achievement in specific content areas.

Furthermore, the conception that a particular supportive act can enhance literacy engagement is sustained by EST’s focus on molar activities. Bronfenbrenner claimed that when molar activities were undertaken with “others present in the setting, [molar activities] constitute the main source for direct effects of the immediate environment on psychological growth” (1979,
Thus, when a teacher, tutor, parent, friend, or older sibling sits down with a high school student and provides the instrumental support of helping the student grapple with a particular literacy challenge, this mutual work on the molar activity (encompassing the supportive act) directly affects the student’s engagement in the specific literacy event.

While socioliterate support appeared to play a limited role in the literacy engagement of these adolescents, the importance of social relationships played a more consequential role in literacy engagement: Students engaged cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally in literacy events that helped them sustain their social relationships, such as Angel and Hines reading fashion magazines with friends, K-9 texting his brother to share thoughts about a movie both were watching, and Shona joining a friend to write for a local youth publication. Moreover, some of these socioliterate activities inspired similar engagement qualities to those required by school-based literacy activities. At the level of individual literacy events, students manifested signs of both emotional and cognitive engagement in their socially oriented extracurricular literacy events. For instance, when reading the *Night World* series (Smith, 2008)—which she talked about with her friends—Hines reported looking up words in the dictionary, reading the back cover to help her understand what was happening, and asking her father for help with vocabulary. Acer and his friends predicted what would happen next when reading graphic novels. When Lala wrote stories, she used the topic and purpose to help her decide what language to compose in.

That social relationships provide a purpose for reading and writing is not necessarily a surprise, more a reminder: After all, “people use written language to participate in a meaningful social formation” (Oates, 2001, p. 234). As well, motivation and engagement scholars have recognized that social interaction can provide a motivation to take part in literacy activities (e.g.,
Guthrie & Anderson, 1999; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Many other studies of adolescents reading and writing share similar findings, that teens willingly take part in reading and writing events when these activities are woven into their social lives (e.g., Finders, 1996; Moje et al., 2008). In contrast, a number of studies on second language students paint a more sterile picture of students’ socioliterate lives, often due to the issue of isolation discussed throughout this thesis (e.g., Fu, 1995; Leki, 1999; Valdés, 2001). It is refreshing, then, to find the culturally and linguistically diverse group of participants in this study involved in a wide variety of reading and writing events with a number of close people in their lives.

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In short, these findings related to the three research questions support the two main conclusions of this study:

1) that these adolescent students received varying amounts and types of socioliterate support from certain members of their social networks, and

2) that this support at times positively influenced their literacy-related behavior, emotions, and cognition, or literacy engagement.

Theoretical Implications

Certain aspects of this thesis study have implications for Ecological Systems Theory as well as for current hypotheses regarding social networks, social support, and literacy engagement.

Ecological Systems Theory

This study was not designed to test or critique EST, rather to use EST as a conceptual framework for conceiving of the influence of social relationships on activities that could potentially affect academic development. In this process, however, it became evident that
adolescents’ online interactions were perhaps overlooked by EST’s traditional conception of microsystemic contexts as physical locations. Thus, I propose that researchers applying EST, particularly to research involving youth, should consider the Internet as a developmental context at the level of microsystem.

As Genevieve Johnson and her colleagues (2008, 2010) have pointed out, most of Bronfenbrenner’s work on EST was undertaken before the Internet became ubiquitous. Therefore, Johnson has advocated for a three-dimensional “ecological techno-microsystem” (2010, pp. 34-35) in which all technology use mediates children’s development across the other, physical microsystems. While Johnson provided preliminary survey data to support her hypothesis, I believe the in-depth qualitative data in this thesis study indicates that the Internet itself—in contrast to all technology use—could serve more as just another microsystem within the current conception of EST. (For the teens in this study, most of the consequential technological interactions occurred in Internet-based programs, such as email, MSN, Facebook, and online multiplayer games. Texting was common among the participants but was used more for brief, superficial communication than for relationship building or potentially developmental activities). In other words, rather than reformulate Bronfenbrenner’s layers of systems to add a new dimension, a new developmental context can be added within the layer of the microsystem when appropriate. For example, Ning’s Internet microsystem would be sparsely populated (only a cousin and a few friends) compared to Angel’s Internet microsystem, which would contain several immediate and extended family members, her boyfriend, and multiple friends. If friendships or other relationships existed only in cyberspace, they would be viewed only as part of the Internet microsystem, but if the relationships also extended into other contexts (such as Angel interacting with her cousin Promize at school, at P2E, and online), then such a relationship
would create a mesosystemic link between one or more microsystems. Johnson was correct that EST can benefit from acknowledging the effects of technology on human development; I maintain that, instead of a complex reformulation, Bronfenbrenner’s conception of humans’ development as being fostered through molar activities with others in their microsystems is still viable with the simple addition of another possible microsystem.

**Social Networks and Social Support**

Adolescent technology use also has ramifications for how we conceive of and study social networks and social support. For example, technology provides another avenue of relationship-building in social networks, strengthening existing network ties and increasing the overall number of network ties, as well as enhancing the flow of information via these ties. While this understanding is not new to social network studies (cf. Chua, Madej, & Wellman, 2011), my study provides qualitative data to illustrate these processes, such as Angel and her boyfriend texting for several hours a day and Lala skyping with her grandmother in Syria. After Angel broke up with her boyfriend, her network changed noticeably (he and friends associated with him dropped off her map and were not replaced): Did their extended contact via text message prolong their relationship or hasten its demise? If so, then technology influenced the composition of Angel’s social network. Moreover, a longitudinal approach captured (1) this change in Angel’s network and (2) the reason for the change, neither of which would have been evident in a cross-sectional study, illustrating the importance of longitudinal research on social networks even though much work on network change over time has been cross-sectional (cf. Snijders, 2011).

My study also demonstrates ways in which EST and social network theory can be used in a complementary fashion. For example, K-9 revealed that his stepmother, whom he generally
saw only on Sundays, learned about his break-up with his longtime girlfriend through K-9’s Facebook page. Because of this knowledge, she was able to provide him with emotional support immediately instead of having to wait until he told her the news on the weekend, illustrating the flow of information and support via a network tie that was strengthened by its online existence in addition to its face-to-face component. Practically, online ties provide additional avenues through which information and support can flow, but, theoretically, why is such a tie strengthened by having both online and face-to-face aspects? EST would explain this situation as K-9 and his stepmother now having a dyadic relationship in more than one microsystem—her home and the Internet—therefore creating a multiply linked mesosystem. Moreover, EST posits that it is not just the flow of information and support that is important, but the result of these flows, especially for a young person: “Development is enhanced as a direct function of the number of structurally different settings in which the developing person participates in a variety of joint activities and primary dyads with others, particularly when these others are more mature or experienced” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 212). In addition, Bronfenbrenner’s hypotheses regarding the importance of socially recognized roles in the various settings of individuals’ lives could contribute to enhanced understanding of why certain individuals are selected as network members and how these individuals enhance or constrain the flow of information through a network.

Looking beyond technology, my study also contributes to recognizing adolescent personal networks as possibly configured differently than adult personal networks. Chua et al. (2011) described typical personal network structures as having “a dense inner core made of immediate kin and a separate middle and outer core containing a range of close to superficial friendship relations” (p. 110). However, in my study this characterization appeared to hold true
only for Ning’s network. In contrast, Acer’s friends and other acquaintances seemed to be closer to his ‘inner core’; for at least two others (Angel and K-9), their ‘inner core’ varied from administration to administration; and for Hines, Lala, and Shona, it was difficult to recognize ‘cores’ from their placement of individuals on their network maps. While the studies cited by Chua et al. were conducted in a variety of countries (e.g., Canada, Iran, France, Germany), all focused on adult networks. It appears that research with adolescents, particularly longitudinal research, would enhance the picture—or provide the case for multiple pictures—of a ‘typical’ personal network.

In the social support literature, research with adolescents has focused on the sources they perceive to be supportive, the type of support received from those sources, and correlating that perceived support with some type of outcome (e.g., academic, social, health). However, it seems that few investigations have connected work in child psychology, such as the distinction between peer and parent attachment functions discussed earlier in this chapter, to explaining the differential types and amounts of social support that teens report receiving from their various network members. This present study demonstrates the usefulness of considering multiple aspects of support providers—why adolescents seek (or do not seek) support from certain individuals is as least as important as the type of support they receive and could have ramifications for applying social support tenets to practical work in fields such as social work and education.

**Literacy Engagement**

This study provides a unique insight into the relationship among social support, motivation to engage in an activity, and engagement during the activity. According to Guthrie and Anderson (1999), an increase in motivation leads to an increase in reading engagement, and
they list approximately 10 different motivations for reading, which they define as “reasons for reading” (p. 21). Interestingly, when these 10 motivations are viewed through the tripartite construct of engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), all could be described as representative of either emotional or cognitive engagement. For example, Guthrie and Anderson list “importance,” defined as the “belief that reading is valuable,” (p. 22) as a ‘reason for reading’—aligning it with the value orientation Fredricks et al. assigned as part of emotional engagement. Another reading motivation named by Guthrie and Anderson is the goal to obtain good grades; in the Fredricks et al. construct, goal-setting is considered a form of cognitive engagement. The other eight motivations named by Guthrie and Anderson can be similarly assigned to emotional (e.g., enjoying social interactions, enjoying a challenge) or cognitive engagement (e.g., work avoidance, efficacy) or could be considered representative of both strands (e.g., curiosity, losing one’s self, seeking recognition, seeking competition).

In seeming contrast to Guthrie and Anderson’s conception of motivation as specific ‘reasons’ for undertaking an activity, Strunk (2000) defined motivation as “the process of instigating and sustaining goal-directed behavior” (p. 300). This definition aligns with the behavioral engagement strand in Fredricks et al., which is the condition of actually participating in an activity. Considering that Guthrie and Anderson’s ‘reasons’ and Strunk’s ‘process’ are illustrative of the different strands of engagement in the tripartite model, is it possible that these two definitions of motivation are not actually divergent but represent two different aspects of what occurs in order to ‘initiate and sustain’ a literacy event? I propose that the motivations are necessary to initiate the event and create the requisite conditions for various manifestations of cognitive and emotional engagement, which in turn are both necessary for behavioral
engagement. Figure 6.1 gives a visual representation of this putative relationship between motivation and engagement.

![Figure 6.1](image)

**Figure 6.1.** Possible relationship between motivations for undertaking a literacy event and engagement in that event.

An example from Angel’s case data illustrates the relationships presented in Figure 6.1. As a ninth-grader, Angel became interested in Barack Obama’s life; this curiosity (a motivation for reading, per Guthrie & Anderson, 1999) led her to check out an Obama biography from her school library, thus initiating a literacy event. Curiosity/interest in a topic fed into the emotional engagement quality of having positive emotions about something as well as the cognitive engagement quality of setting a goal to learn more about something. Thus, both Angel’s emotional and cognitive engagement were stimulated by her interest in the topic and led to her initial behavioral engagement in reading the book. Furthermore, her emotional engagement was raised as Angel found she liked the book, and her cognitive engagement increased as she used strategies like consulting a dictionary and asking her father to read collaboratively with her,
leading to sustained behavioral engagement and her completion of the book. Angel’s case also illustrates the dotted line between emotional and cognitive engagement: As her emotional engagement (liking the book) increased, it led to an increase in her cognitive engagement (strategy use).

Shona’s case provides an example of how these kinds of relationships appeared in a writing event. Shona reported sitting down and writing her best high school paper in a single night, because she was very interested (defined as a type of motivation) in the topic of wrongful convictions. Her interest therefore initiated the event and stimulated her to use cognitive strategies such as a prewriting heuristic, consulting outside sources, using a dictionary and thesaurus, and revising her writing, again leading to sustained behavioral engagement and a completed literacy event. Her emotional engagement in this event was also high, as represented by her statements regarding the ease of composing this paper and her naming it one of her favorite papers. However, the horizontal relationship between cognitive and emotional engagement is less clear in this case than in Angel’s: Did Shona’s positive emotions about her interest in the topic and the ease of writing this paper lead to her use of cognitive strategies? Was it her ability to easily activate her cognitive strategies that led to her positive emotions? Or were these two strands working so closely together that we cannot tease them apart? I suggest (1) it was the latter (cf. Hidi, 2006, for a discussion of the close relationship of affect and cognition in text processing), and (2) that the role of emotional engagement may diminish as students become more self-regulated learners—note that Shona wrote this paper in the spring of her Grade 12 year, while Angel read the Obama book in the fall of ninth grade.

These examples taken from the case studies also highlight the important role of interest in literacy engagement. While engagement scholars Guthrie and Anderson (1999) did mention
“intense interest in a particular topic” (p. 21)—which they named “curiosity”—as one motivation for reading, interest as a motivational (and pre-motivational) variable has been more systematically investigated and defined in educational psychology (cf. Hidi, 2006; Hidi & Renninger, 2006) than in literacy research. Because interest as a theoretical construct was not a focus for the scholarship I used to define engagement for the present thesis research, there is limited discussion in my thesis of the role of interest in literacy engagement. However, as presented in the later section on future directions for research, the relationship between interest and engagement should be explored.

The representation in Figure 6.1 is intended only to present one possibility for the highly complex relationship between motivation and engagement, not to make claims for causality or directionality nor to function as a tested model. For example, it is probable that using strategies (cognitive engagement) to improve comprehension of a specific text could lead to higher self-efficacy for reading, which Guthrie and Anderson (1999) classified as a motivation (cf. Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007, for how this could happen in a writing task). Likewise, as behavioral engagement increases, it could lead to a belief that reading is valuable, again classified by Guthrie and Anderson as a motivation to read. Finally, characteristics of a writing task, such as its perceived usefulness and opportunities for collaboration, may increase a student’s interest in—and therefore motivation to continue—the task (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007). However, those arrows are not included in this representation as such relationships were not observed in my study.

The possible relationships that are visually represented in Figure 6.1 allow for my suggestion in the previous section that it is not cumulative aspects of socioliterate support, such as total amount received, that influence literacy engagement but rather a particular supportive act
that occurs at a particular time for a particular event. This support can create or augment a
motivation or can bolster emotional or cognitive engagement. This view is consistent with
Boscolo and Hidi’s (2007) description of the difference between novice and expert writers as
being that expert writers can recognize and figure out how to solve problems when they are
writing, whereas novice writers cannot see what their difficulties are without help from a more
knowledgeable other (such as a teacher) and see these difficulties as obstacles that make a
writing task “‘dangerous’ and unattractive” (p. 3). In other words, without socioliterate support
being injected into the motivation/engagement relationship, a novice writer might choose not to
continue with a task when encountering a setback, therefore not achieving behavioral
engagement or breaking off behavioral engagement before the end of the task is reached.
Moreover, such a view also is consistent with EST, as Bronfenbrenner (1979) adopted the stance
that motivation to undertake a molar activity originated from the environment instead of inside
an individual. Figure 6.2 illustrates this possible interaction of socioliterate support with both
motivation and engagement.

Again, concrete examples can be drawn from the case studies. Acer had no initial
intrinsic motivation to read the book Money Hungry (Flake, 2001), but his teacher gave it to him
as an activity that would help prepare him to move up to the next English track. This supportive
act created the extrinsic motivation of pleasing his teacher and the intrinsic motivations of
challenging himself and of recognizing the value of this reading event. (I am using “intrinsic”
and “extrinsic” motivation as they were applied by Guthrie and Anderson, 1999, to describe the
various motivating ‘reasons for reading’ they identified. For a more nuanced discussion of the
problems with the simple internal/external dichotomy, see Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000.) Thus,
Figure 6.2. Possible relationship among socioliterate support, motivation, and engagement for a literacy event.

despite struggling with the vocabulary and characters’ dialect, Acer began to enjoy the book (emotional engagement) and to use multiple strategies (cognitive engagement) to work through the challenges of reading it. Moreover, one of Acer’s strategies was to ask his older sister and his teacher for help understanding the dialect, thus eliciting socioliterate support that mediated between his cognitive and behavioral engagement. Socioliterate support also can be drawn upon at a later time to enhance engagement, as when Hines reported using a strategy she had learned from her tutor when writing an in-class essay weeks later. (Like the examples of Angel’s and Shona’s topic-based interest given above, Acer’s example indicates that the relationship between
situational interest, individual interest [cf. Hidi & Renninger, 2006, for a detailed description of interest phases], and task engagement is worth considering.)

These relationships have been described only in terms of individual literacy events because that is the pattern revealed by this study. I found it difficult to gain a holistic overview or measure of these adolescents’ literacy engagement—every literacy event embarked upon, small or large, had a wide range of possible motivations (and combination of motivations), stimulating different aspects and levels of at least two engagement strands. Perhaps it is more fruitful for researchers when thinking about content-area engagement (in contrast to overall school engagement) to consider the factors that influence students’ engagement at the task level rather than to attempt to measure overall levels of reading or math or science engagement or to create quantitatively based engagement labels or profiles (cf. Guthrie et al, 2007).

Quantitatively, K-9 appeared to be the least engaged of these participants in reading and writing, yet he partook in a variety of reading and writing activities: Instead of a single measure of literacy engagement, it was a careful look at the interplay between his motivations and his engagement on individual tasks that provided insight into K-9 as a reader and writer.

**Educational Implications**

In practice, what do spaces that promote socioliterate interactions and support look like? They may resemble the after-school programs like DUSTY and Voices, Inc. (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2007a), where young people are apprenticed into literacy events with real-world applications, often mentored by other young people who look and speak like them. They may be classrooms with an established system of teacher-student writing conferences (e.g., Sperling, 1991), journal writing (cf. Fu, 1995), or collaborative writing (e.g., Hynds, 1997; Rish & Caton, 2011), or other teacher practices that build a general sense of trust, such as creating safe spaces for students to
perform their spoken word poetry (Kirsh, 2011), reaching out when a student needs additional help or is struggling in class (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000), or simply getting to know students’ lives outside the classroom (Langer, 2002). Ek (2008) and Kelly (2001) illustrate the various ways religious institutions can be supportive spaces for socioliterate interactions. Such a safe ‘space’ could be located in cyber-space as well, like the local social site Welcome to Buckeye City (Yi, 2007), used by Korean teens in a midwestern US city to write texts such as comics, poems, and reviews, or more global networking sites like MySpace (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). In terms of EST, all of these contexts provide meaningful, molar activities, at the same time increasing the number of microsystems available to adolescents: “Development is enhanced as a direct function of the number of structurally different settings in which the developing person participates in a variety of joint activities and primary dyads with others, particularly when these others are more mature or experienced” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 212).

In the present study, students found supportive socioliterate relationships primarily with teachers and tutors who reached out to them in some manner. During his Grade 10 year I felt like K-9 resembled adolescents I had seen in my teaching career who were ‘falling through the cracks’ in the educational system. This situation occurs when a student could benefit from direct academic assistance yet does not seek it out or make her needs known in any way or is not visibly at the top or bottom of the class—teachers may actually praise these students for behaving in class, although this silence more often renders the student invisible to the teacher or to other adult sources of support (see the example of Elisa in Valdés, 2001). From the perspective of EST, this model behavior may prevent a teacher from recognizing the need to initiate molar activities with such students. Fortunately, in Grade 11 K-9 found a teacher in an elective philosophy course who referred K-9 to sources on topics he knew interested K-9, like
Native American and Greek mythology, which contributed to K-9’s renewed interest in learning and school: “Like, there’s not a lot of teachers that do that. And when I catch those, that’s why I get so involved. [...] They just talk to me like I’m a human being” (member check interview, June 22, 2011). Also in Grade 11, Ning was able to get much-needed assistance on understanding her history readings and homework because her ESL teacher offered to help her at lunch. Angel had a P2E tutor who did not give up on her despite her sullen demeanor and marked preference for her cousin’s companionship over the tutor’s—in the end, with this tutor’s guidance, Angel wrote several drafts of a letter to a popular singer about the serious topic of physical abuse and began to take pride in her writing. Per EST, all of these situations are examples of molar activities occurring in joint dyads; moreover, these particular instances are examples of dyads that link microsystems together (e.g., an out-of-school interest with a school figure) to create a mesosystem.

Another point of emphasis in EST is that for relationships to foster development, the balance of power must be in favor of the developing person. The supportive spaces described in this section welcome teens as active and equal participants who are voicing their own needs, concerns, and interests, instead of trying to guide or even force adolescents into an expected model of learning or literacy. Moreover, such settings are congruent with Lesko’s (2001) vision of adolescents as ‘active participants’ and may explain why simply creating what administrators believe are supportive positions may not be enough. For example, on the surface the SPSWs (Student Parent Support Workers) in the P2E program appear to serve an important role as advocates for students and their families within the individual schools, as well as being a very visible presence in both the schools and the P2E office—a study in 2005 found that “more than two-thirds of Pathways participants at all grade levels indicated being ‘very satisfied’ with their SPSW” (Rowen & Gosine, 2006, p. 297). On the other hand, in this in-depth, qualitative study,
only three participants named an SPSW as a ‘most important’ person (and only once apiece), and SPSWs only appeared on six network maps out of twenty-one possible times. Moreover, no participants reported specific socioliterate interactions with their SPSW. One possibility for this oversight might be that students were so close to their SPSWs or their SPSWs were so ubiquitous in their lives that students forgot to put them on their maps. However, when asked directly about their SPSWs in member check interviews, participants still had little to say about the role of SPSWs in their lives: Lala even thought her SPSW had been on maternity leave during a year when I know the individual was working full time. Similarly, I found that Ning was resistant to my suggestions that she meet with her high school guidance counselor or SPSW to learn more about the college application process. Perhaps these positions are configured on a deficit model that these teens were subconsciously resisting, or perhaps it is a matter of choice—would teens respond better to adults whom they have identified as support figures, thereby exercising their own agency, rather than adults who have been thrust upon them in some manner?

In addition to teachers, the teens in my study also found supportive socioliterate relationships with parents, siblings, and friends. The potential for socioliterate support in families could be activated by teachers and administrators in a manner similar to the way the social network map was used by Tracy and Whittaker (1990) with mothers who were being counseled by a social work agency. The very act of completing a social network map often revealed supportive relationships that the clients had not initially recognized. The women were coached about how to ask for assistance from these resources, and social workers characterized the network map activity as being empowering for many of these mothers. Likewise, when teachers or administrators are talking to students who are struggling with literacy events or practices, they could help students think about who in their social networks might be able to help
them with particular literacy tasks, practices, or situations. As for peers, there are a variety of classroom activities that can activate peer socioliterate support, such as very carefully crafted group projects (cf. Moje, 2000b) or projects that involve the entire class, such as service learning projects (e.g., Edwards, 2001). Other possibilities include well scaffolded peer feedback (e.g., Parks, Huot, Hamers, & Lemonnier, 2005) and writing workshop (e.g., Rothermel, 2004) activities. While technology in classrooms still is not widely available, Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) concluded that two middle school girls’ use of technology in composing fan fiction and anime in online communities positioned them first to receive support from more-experienced peer mentors and later to become supportive mentors themselves. According to EST, “[t]he placement of persons in social roles in which they are expected to act . . . cooperatively tends to elicit and intensify activities and interpersonal relations that are compatible with the given expectations” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 101). Moreover, these activities are examples of molar activities occurring in dyads and probably increasing the number of supportive relationships within or across microsystems.

Future Research Directions

Socioliterate Influences on Multicultural, Multilingual Adolescents

Home. More research is needed on the specific ways in which parental involvement, either at home or at school, influences teens’ literacy events, practices, and development. I would echo the call of Goldenberg et al. (2006) for researchers to investigate parental behaviors and attitudes toward literacy and the effect of those on literacy development, how parental influence changes over time, and whether or not (and how) parental involvement programs are effective. Specifically, research needs to look closely at how parents and teens interact with each other through literacy. Little work has looked explicitly at siblings and literacy interactions, but
the case studies of four of the participants in this study (Acer, Angel, K-9, and Lala) indicate that another promising area of inquiry is sibling influences—both older and younger and both positive and negative—on literacy practices/development.

**School.** It would be useful in future literacy studies for researchers to shed more light on the ways in which informal teacher-student interactions (e.g., informal tutoring, shared reading interests) facilitate or constrain adolescents’ reading and writing in both school and extracurricular contexts. One specific line of inquiry in this area could be to look at the ways teachers use literacy events and practices to forge caring relationships. While such interactions have been noted in passing in previous studies, they were rarely investigated for their own merit. As well, it is important to examine whether the quality of ‘caring’ in a teacher is perceived differently by students of varying cultural backgrounds—Valdés (2001) and Moje (1996) noted that such rapport may depend on teachers and students sharing common cultural and social backgrounds and/or orientation to academic success.

Considering the importance of peer relationships in providing socioliterate support, more work is needed that actively considers the influence of peers on literate practices, particularly school-based writing. I agree with Finders’ (1997) assertion that there is “a great need to consider further how social-group affiliations constrict and enable particular literate practices” (p. 128), especially in light of an ecological view of adolescent literacy. Certainly, her study needs to be replicated in the more culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms of this decade and in the highly peer-focused environment of high school. Finally, in today’s wired world and with teens who may be acquiring a second or third language, it is especially important to be aware of ways in which online interactions with peers facilitate (or constrain) their composing activities, practices, and skills in English.
Neighborhood. More scholars concerned with adolescent literacy should investigate the influence of supportive adults outside the home and classroom, such as volunteer tutors or mentors in after-school programs, athletic coaches, and local community leaders or role models. In addition, neighborhood- or community-based studies should not ignore the literacy activities that occur with family members outside the home but living nearby. Finally, I would echo Rubinstein-Ávila’s (2007b) call for a closer look at the role religion plays in the literacy practices and events of multilingual teens—not only at religious beliefs but also at the socioliterate interactions that occur within organized religion.

Social Networks and Social Support

Identity is increasingly acknowledged to play a crucial role in literacy practices and development, especially for multicultural students (cf. Cox, Jordan, Ortmeier-Hooper, & Schwartz, 2010; Harklau, 2007). If, as Hirsch (1985) hypothesized, “social networks affect the quality of our involvements and the satisfactoriness of our social identities in major spheres of life” (p. 119), then more research on adolescent literacy should focus on the role of social networks in identity formation, maintenance, and adaptation. Possible areas of inquiry include how to foster social networks so as to alleviate the social isolation of ESL middle and high school students illustrated in a range of studies (Lay et al., 1999; Leki, 1999; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2007; Valdés, 2001), the literate components of such networks, and the impact of such networks on students’ literate identities and practices. Studies of ESL students engaged in constructing identities through participation in online communities (e.g., Lam, 2000; Yi, 2007) could take a more overt social network approach to study who a student’s network contacts are in these communities and how these relationships influence the student’s literate identity/ies. One perspective to apply to such studies is “communicative styles” (Harklau, p. 647), investigating
whether social interactions and social network formation for multicultural adolescents are based in cultural expectations; also relevant is a student’s choice of language to use in reading and writing within a social network as well as how language is used to include and exclude individuals from a social network (cf. Harklau). Social network research is also congruent with the concept of collective identity (cf. Cotterell, 2007), and it could be used to inform studies like that of Ortmeier-Hooper (2007) that explore how school practices affect the identities of ESL students by categorizing them in specific ways.

Why do some students receive more socioliterate support than others? Might such individual differences relate to certain beliefs that encourage or constrain humans from seeking support (Hirsch, 1985)? Or culturally embedded beliefs or practices, as evident for both of the Chinese participants in my study who were specifically told by their parents to ask their teachers when they needed help, and who both reported close, supportive relationships with English teachers? Can adolescents be socialized into seeking support? Hirsch reported on research that found adolescents had received no social support for both a major school and family problem, yet the participants in my study were all, to some degree, actively seeking support from members of their social networks: Were they socialized into seeking support by their membership in an organization like P2E, where they were surrounded by supportive individuals? Could these differences be due to macrosystemic differences between Canadian and US (Hirsch’s context) societies? To the close-knit nature of the neighborhood in which they lived? And what is the role of agency in determining from whom adolescents will and will not seek socioliterate support? Why adolescents seek (or do not seek) support from certain individuals is as least as important as the type of support they receive and could have ramifications for applying social support tenets to practical work in fields such as social work and education.
Finally, is there still a ‘digital divide’ along social class lines and, if so, how does it affect socioliterate support for the literacy practices, skills, identities, and development of adolescents? This issue first became evident to me during the ALTUR project, as several of the participants revealed that they or their friends did not have computers at home, and at least one described how that constrained his interactions with his best friend (Wilson, 2012). While K-9 seemed to have considerable computer access based on his reported social media usage, he mentioned during his member check interview that he was saving up to buy a computer because he did not have one. In order to augment the various large-scale quantitative studies investigating the percentage of homes with computers and Internet access (NTIA, 2004) and high school students who are online (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005), I encourage qualitative adolescent literacy researchers to gather descriptive information about their participants’ computer/Internet/wireless use and access to provide a more nuanced picture of where and how such a digital divide might still exist and its ramifications for students and the ways they read and write with others in their lives (cf. Gee, 2012; Moje, 2009; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008).

**Literacy Engagement**

A specific question brought to mind by Figures 6.1 and 6.2 is how recursive the relationship between engagement strands and motivation might be. For example, can behavioral engagement flow ‘up’ to influence students’ motivations? In what situations? How might the different strands of engagement fit into the model suggested by Guthrie and Anderson (1999, p. 20)? Which gives rise to the question: Can we model general literacy engagement or only task-based engagement (e.g., novel reading) or simply engagement on a single literacy event? There also is an element of growth in engagement over time assumed by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000): If general literacy engagement does exist, can it increase over time? Can task-based or event-
based engagement? Earlier in this chapter, I tendered the possibility that an increase in self-regulation could decrease the role of emotional engagement in a literacy event—is there an effect of time on how the strands of engagement manifest themselves in a student’s literacy event(s)? A more ethnographic approach to investigating literacy engagement among high school students could provide more depth of insight into many of these questions.

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) claimed that “engaged readers can overcome obstacles to achievement, and they become agents of their own reading growth” (p. 405), but do they become ‘agents’ on their own or with the support of important others? And is this statement applicable to all students or all literacy activities? As the present study illustrates, teenagers can be highly engaged in reading or writing something outside of school yet unengaged in a school-based literacy event, often based on interest. What, then, is the relationship between interest and engagement? The work of Suzanne Hidi and her colleagues (e.g., Hidi, Berndorff, & Ainley, 2002; Hidi & Renninger, 2006) on interest appears to be investigating a concept very similar to engagement: for instance, Hidi (2006) defines interest as “a unique motivational variable, as well as a psychological state that occurs during interactions between persons and their objects of interest, and is characterized by increased attention, concentration and affect” (p. 70). This definition reflects the three strands of engagement, and it could prove worthwhile to attempt to connect the research on reading engagement and writing interest to look for (1) similarities between the two constructs; (2) how each might interact with motivation and with each other; and (3) if the two can be combined into a single construct of literacy engagement or literacy interest. In addition, how might socioliterate support facilitate or constrain interest, and is it more relevant to situational or individual interest?
Finally, links between identity and literacy engagement should be more closely examined; according to Harklau (2007), researchers “increasingly portray interaction and semiotic practices as mediating between intra-individual psychological processes and institutional and social contexts. Nevertheless, this remains perhaps the least researched area of inquiry on adolescent ELL identity formation” (p. 649). Studies like that of Chiang and Schmida (1999) on language identity and ownership could be extended to ask questions like, “Is emotional engagement related in some way to a student’s literate identity(ies)? Are students’ literacy motivations driven by their various identities?” This study was not designed to consider issues surrounding identity, but they certainly are evident in the data: For example, how did Hines’ classification of herself as ‘not Canadian’ affect her choices of what and with whom to read and write, her emotions about what she was reading and writing, and strategies she used to read and write? Angel enjoyed reading a range of texts but concealed this enjoyment with an anti-academic identity she constructed for her tutor (and perhaps for others in her network)—how did this constructed identity interact with her engagement in various literacy tasks? Yi (2010) examined the identity formation of an adolescent ELL writer through the lens of communities of practice (CoP) theory; it would be interesting to apply the CoP lens to the intersection of language, identity, social networks, and literacy engagement.
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Appendix A

Student Consent Letter

Why are you receiving this letter?

During last school year, 2008-2009, you were involved in a research project called “Adolescent Literacy in Three Urban Regions: Toronto.” You might remember being tutored and interviewed by a graduate student at the University of Toronto. The purpose of that project was to understand better how students in Grade 9 and 10 improve their reading and writing during tutoring at Pathways. I am now planning to extend that project further to learn more about students’ continued reading and writing activities and engagement, and I am inviting you to participate in this follow-up project. Specifically, I want to learn about the people in your life and how they help support your reading and writing; this information can help educators understand better how to improve literacy education and so help other students improve, too.

This new project, “Social Support Networks for Literacy Engagement among Culturally Diverse Urban Adolescents,” will fulfill part of my requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and is being conducted under the guidance of Dr. Alister Cumming, a professor in second language education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT), and is approved by administrators of Pathways to Education Canada. I am a teacher experienced with diverse students from around the world. I also met you during the research project last year, so you already know me and may have worked with me at the Pathways tutoring sites.

What will happen?

I will ask you and about 7 other students from the previous project to do 3 different interviews about your reading and writing at school, at home, and in the community, very similar to the interviews you did as part of the earlier research project. These interviews will take place at the Pathways-Regent Park office in a session of about 90 minutes in May or June 2010 and will be audiotaped. I will arrange the times with you at your convenience as part of your tutoring at Pathways. Before beginning the research, I will give you clear instructions and explain to you the information that you should expect to provide to me. To compensate for the 1.5 hours of the research, I will give you a $15 gift card to Indigo book store.

What are the benefits and risks?

The interviews should be interesting and help you think about your knowledge, abilities, and approaches to reading and writing. If you find the interviews difficult, let me know, and I will stop them. There are no particular risks associated with this research other than what you usually experience at school. Although I will write about these interviews in my doctoral thesis and perhaps in some articles published in scholarly journals, I will keep all information about you private. Your name will not be recorded or reported. I will not tell any teachers about your involvement in the research, so your participation will not affect your grades in school. Similarly, your parents or guardians will not know what you tell me. You do not have to participate in this research; participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the research for any reason at any time or refuse to answer any of my questions. I will offer you, your parents, and Pathways a report on my research in about August 2011.

If you agree to participate in this research, please sign and date the form below and take it to [tutoring coordinator] at the Pathways office. Keep this page for your personal information. If you do not agree to participate, then you do not have to do anything.
Assent

Have you read my letter describing the project and would you like to participate in this research?
Yes______  No ______

May I make an audiotaped recording of your interviews?  Yes______  No______

Your name: _________________________________
Your signature: ______________________________  Today’s date: ______________________

What is the best way for me to reach you to set up a meeting?

☐ email? ______________________________
☐ cell phone? __________________________
☐ home phone? _________________________
☐ other? ______________________________
Appendix B
Social Network Interview Protocol and Map

Pseudonym: _____________________         Date: ________________

I. Map
This chart is called a “network map.” It’s a map of people in your life, and that star in the middle is you. I want you to think back to when school started this semester – What people have been important in your life since then? These could be people you saw, talked to, wrote emails to. These could be people who make you feel good, who make you feel bad, and really anyone you think of as an important part of your life.

Once you have people in mind, I’d like you to put them down on this map. I don’t care about proper names; just put down what you call them. And the more important they are to you, the
closer you should put them to that star that represents you. To help you think about people, I’ve divided the circle into parts of your life (going clockwise) – people at your home, other people in your family who may not live with you, your friends, people at school, and people you know outside of school who don’t fall into one of these other categories.

Do you want me to write, or do you want to do the writing?

Now, look over your map. Is there anyone else who’s important to you that you’ve forgotten?

II. Grid

OK, now let’s do the second part of the activity. (If there are more than 10 people on the map, ask the participant to choose the 10 most important people, using a highlighter.) I’m going to write each person’s name on this chart, then ask you some questions about your interactions with them. (The interviewer can share this chart with the student as the questions are asked if that makes the process easier for the student to understand.)

How often do you see or talk to these people? Your choices are “every day,” “once or twice a week,” “once or twice a month,” or “never or hardly ever.”

Now think about which of these people give you support and advice about your life, anything in your life. Your choices are the same as before (list again for the student).

What kinds of advice do you get from these people?

Can you give me an example of a time you asked one of them for advice?

We’re going to get more and more specific, so this time think about whether or not these people give you support specifically with school. This could be advice about problems you’re having at school, help with your homework, advice about teachers or school friends, anything like that.

How often do you get school advice from each of these people?

What kinds of advice do you get?

Can you give me an example of a time you asked one of them for advice?

What is something you’ve asked someone about this week or that you were told?

This question is about interacting with these people through reading and writing. This can mean that someone gives you help with your reading or your writing, it could be that you do some reading activities together or that you write to them. For instance, I see you have _______
[grandmother, friend’s name] on your map – do you ever write a ________ [letter, instant message] to him/her? How often?

*Ask about each person listed for this category!*  

This time you mentioned __________ [your friend Danny] in the “every day” category. In what way do the two of you interact using reading and/or writing? What is a reading or writing activity you did with him/her yesterday?

Which of these people is the most important for you in your school-related reading and writing? In what way(s) is he/she important? Do you mind if I contact this person to ask about your reading and writing interactions?

You’re doing great – only two more questions in this part! Which of these people has ever talked to you about your future plans? You know, like do you want to graduate from high school, go to college, what you want to be someday, things like that.

Which person do you think you’ve talked to the most about your future plans? What kinds of things do you discuss? Who generally starts these conversations? How do you feel after you’ve talked about these things?

OK, last question: Is there anyone on your map who you feel has had a negative influence on your reading and writing? In what way do you think that’s true? Can you give me an example?

Thank you very much for going through that with me. I think I have a good understanding about the people in your life now. Do you have any questions about that activity we just did?

III. Follow-up Questions

I have a few more general questions for you, but we can go ahead and put away these papers. You wrote down the names of several of your friends; what do you do with them for fun? How important do they think it is for all of you to graduate from high school? Are any of them planning to go to college or university? What about you – what do you think about graduating from high school or going to college or university? What do you want to be later in life? What kinds of skills do you think you need to do that kind of work?

(This is a time to probe in-depth about other interesting factors that may have come up on the social network map. For instance, asking how the participant met his coach at the rec center, how he got involved in the rec center, how long he’s been going there, do any of his friends go
there, etc. If cultural activities came up as part of the map, these should be explored, too. If not, then go on to the next set of questions below.)

People in Canada come from a lot of different racial and cultural groups – is there a particular group or groups you feel like you belong to? Are you involved in this community at all? What kinds of activities are you involved in; is this very important to you?

Were you born in Canada? *(If not, continue.)* Where are you from? How old were you when you first came to Canada? *(If the country is not typically English-speaking, continue with questions.)* What is the first language you learned? Do you use ______ (language) very much? When do you tend to use _____ (language)?

Along the lines of thinking about your childhood, do you remember anyone reading to you when you were little? Did you ever read to anyone? Did you ever write anything for fun? *(If the student is ESL . . .)* What language(s) did this activities take place in?

You’ve been really patient with all these questions, and I only have one more topic for us to talk about. So far, most of these questions have been about your life outside school, but I’m curious about some of your school experiences. Do you feel like your teachers and other people at your current school give you enough help with your reading and writing? If not, what other kind of help do you think would be useful? Do you participate in any after-school activities through your school; if so, what?

Thank you again, so much. . .
Appendix C
Reading Sample Interview

Pseudonym: _______________  Date: _______________

Introduction for Interviewer:
Prior to the interview, the student to be interviewed will be asked to bring a reading text or activity that they have recently done for school (but not necessarily at school; for example, it can be done, partially or entirely, at home, school, the library, etc). All the questions below, except for those in section 4, General and Classroom, should be asked specifically with reference to the reading text or activity the student brings to the interview.

Interview Questions:

1. Context

1.1. Time and location: Where and when did you read this material (story, book, or article, etc.)?

1.2. Purpose: Why did you read this?

1.3. Choice/assignment: How did you know or find out about this (story/book/article? (Assigned, chosen by student, recommended by friend, family, etc.).
   a. If assigned, ask: What did your teacher say? Why did the teacher assign this?
   b. If chosen or recommended, ask: Why did you choose this to read?

1.4. Attitudes: How did you feel about reading this? Did you enjoy or find it interesting? Why/why not? What was important to you?

1.5. Why did you bring this particular reading activity to the interview?

2. Processes

2.1. How did you start reading this? Did you need help getting started? If yes, how? What did you do to keep going?

2.2. Attitudes: Overall, what was this reading like for you? Was it easy, hard, etc.? Why?

2.3. What was the easiest part of reading for you? What was the hardest part of reading for you?

2.4. Problems/Difficulties: Did you have any problems or find something you didn't know (e.g., a word, situation, information) while reading? What? When? What was the problem?

2.5. Strategies/Metacognition: What did you do to solve this problem? Tell me exactly. Give an example.

2.6. Cooperation/Sharing: Did you ask for or have any help while reading? When? From whom? Why?

3. Satisfaction/Evaluation

3.1. Self: How did you feel about reading this? Were you successful? Why/why not?

3.2. Teacher and grades: Did your teacher grade or respond to your reading? What did the teacher say? What do you think/feel about that?

3.3. Peers: Did you tell any of your friends or classmates about reading this? Tell me about that.
3.4. Other: Did you share your reading with anyone else (family, friends, other people)? Tell me about that.

3.5. Improvement: What would you like to do better in your reading? Explain this. Give an example.

4. General and Classroom

4.1. In general, how good a reader do you think you are? Why?

4.2. Over the last year what changes have you made in the way you read texts for school?

Now, think about a class in the past week or two where you read something that you liked (or past month, if necessary):

4.3. What was that? Tell me in detail.

4.4. What are some reading activities your teacher assigned? Why do you think your teacher assigned these activities?

4.5. What do you think you learnt doing these activities?

4.6. What are some of your "favorite" (not so favorite) reading activities at school?

4.7. What did the teacher do that helped you become a better reader?

4.8. Did the teacher talk with you about your reading? Tell me about that.

4.9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your reading?
Appendix D
Writing Sample Interview

Pseudonym: _______________  Date: ____________________

Introduction for Interviewer

Prior to the interview, the student to be interviewed will be asked to bring a writing sample of their choice that has been written for school (but not necessarily written at school; for example, it can be written, partially or entirely, at home, school, the library, etc). The writing sample can be one that is in progress or has been completed at the time of the interview. All the questions below, except for those in section 5, General and Classroom, should be asked specifically with reference to the writing sample the student brings to the interview.

Interview Questions

1. Context

1.1 Time and location: Where did you write this piece of writing? (Home, school, other). When?

1.2. Media: Did you write this on paper or do any part of it on a computer? What tools did you use (e.g., dictionary, spell checker, grammar checker, other tools)?

1.3. Purpose: Why did you write it?

1.4. Choice/assignment: Was this written for an assignment at school?
   a. If assigned, ask: What did your teacher say? Why did the teacher assign this?
   b. If chosen by student, ask: Why did you choose to write this?

1.5. Attitudes: How do you feel about this assignment? Did you enjoy it or find it interesting? Why/why not?

1.6. Why did you choose to bring this particular piece of writing to the interview?

2. Information Sources

2.1. Where did you get your ideas for writing this?

2.2. Did you use any information from reading? If yes, could you explain what and how you used these readings?

2.3. In addition to reading, what or who gave you ideas for writing this?

3. Processes

3.1. How did you decide what to write? Did you need help getting started? If yes, how? What did you do to keep going?

3.2. Did you reread this paper or make any changes to it? (Or would you if it is not completed yet?) If yes, why? What were some of the changes you made (or would make)?

3.3. Attitudes: Overall, how did you feel while writing this? Was it easy, hard, etc.? Why?

3.4. What was the easiest part of writing for you? What was the hardest part of writing for you?
3.5. Problems/Difficulties: Did you have any problems or get stuck while writing this paper? When? What was the problem?


3.7. Cooperation/Sharing: Did you ask for or receive any help while writing this paper? When? From whom? Why?

4. Satisfaction/Evaluation

4.1. Self: How do you feel about this paper? Do you think it is successful? Why or why not?

4.2. Teacher and grades: Did your teacher grade or respond to this? What did the teacher say? What do you think/feel about that?

4.3. Peers: Did you share your writing with any of your peers? Tell me about it.

4.4. Other: Did you share your writing with anyone else? Tell me about it.

4.5. Improvement: What would you like to have done better? Explain. Give an example.

5. General and Classroom

5.1. In general, how good a writer do you think you are? Why?

5.2. Over the last year what changes have you made in the way you write assignments for school? Now, think about a class in the last week or two where you wrote and you liked the experience:

5.3. What did you write? Tell me in detail.

5.4. What writing activities did your teacher assign? Why do you think your teacher assigned these activities?

5.5. What do you think you learned by doing these activities?

5.6. What are your favorite writing activities at school?

5.7. Did the teacher do anything that helped you write better? If so, please describe that.

5.8. Did the teacher talk with you about your writing? Tell me about that.

5.9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your writing?
# Appendix E

## Reading Practices Checklist

How often did you read the following?
Please indicate how often you read each of the texts listed below *in the last month* by circling one of the numbers from 0 to 3.

- 0: Never
- 1: Once a month
- 2: Once a week
- 3: Every day

If you did not do that activity at all in the last month, then circle 0.

If you are reading in a language other than English, circle O in the next column and specify the language. Also, list where you did this activity. Circle S for school, H for home, L for library, and/or O for Other. If you circle O, note what the other place is.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Once a Month</th>
<th>Once a Week</th>
<th>Every Day</th>
<th>Where did you usually read this?</th>
<th>Where did you usually read this?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalogues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's books</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close captioning (on TV)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic books &amp; cartoons</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer games</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictionaries</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directions &amp; instructions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamphlets &amp; flyers</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters and postcards</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers &amp; magazines</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manuals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S H L O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Appendix F
Writing Practices Checklist

Please indicate how often you wrote each of the texts listed below in the last month by circling one of the numbers from 0 to 3.

- For example, if you did this activity every day or almost every day in the last month, then circle 3.
- If you did it once or twice a week in the last month, then circle 2.
- If you did the activity once or twice in the last month, then circle 1.
- If you did not do that activity at all in the last month, then circle 0.

After you circle a number for each activity,

1. If you did the activity in English, circle ENG for English. Also, list where you did this activity. Circle S for school, H for home, L for library, and O for Other. If you circle O, write what the other place is.
2. If you did the activity in a language other than English, circle L in the next column and specify the language. Also, list where you did this activity. Circle S for school, H for home, L for library, and O for Other. If you circle O, write what the other place is.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
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<th>Once or Twice a Month</th>
<th>Once or Twice a Week</th>
<th>Every Day</th>
<th>I wrote this in English</th>
<th>Where did you usually write this?</th>
<th>I wrote this in another language</th>
<th>Where did you usually write this?</th>
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<td>Art, drawing &amp; cartoons</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S, H, L, O</td>
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<td>Descriptions</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S, H, L, O</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S, H, L, O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S, H, L, O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A journal or diary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S, H, L, O</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructions</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>S, H, L, O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letters and postcards</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Notes to self or others</td>
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<td>Poems, songs &amp; lyrics</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text messaging (Phone)</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Tell us what it is: .....)</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Tell us what it is: .....)</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td>ENG</td>
<td>SHE, O.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G
Transcription Conventions

Courier New font: direct speech

Participants: IV = anonymous interviewer (graduate research assistants for ALTUR); J = Jennifer (me); Initials used for participants’ pseudonyms.

(x): Some words could not be heard clearly; (x) = one unclear word, (xx) = two unclear words, etc.

Underlined words: spoken with emphasis.

Double parentheses: researcher’s comments, such as ((laughs)).

Colon: sound or syllable is lengthened, generally for emphasis; “so: addictive”

Plus sign (+): untimed pause

Ellipsis in brackets […]: irrelevant information, like a digression, has been left out

(based on Duff, 2008, p. 157)