Literacy, Standardization, and the Digital Age:
Exploring the Digital Literacy Practices of Students who failed the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test

by

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the digitally-mediated literacy practices of a group of students who have been unsuccessful with the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. More specifically, this study documents the out-of-school online literacy practices that are attractive to students who have failed to achieve dominant school literacy and explores the conditions that drive them. These practices are recognized as socially situated. Interviews were conducted at a Toronto school with 3 grade twelve students enrolled in the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course, an alternative method to fulfil the provincially mandated literacy graduation requirement. Three findings emerged: a) participants’ desire for “real” texts, defined as those that reflect their understanding of the world and connect them to the lives of others, b) the high value placed on visual and verbal semiotic resources and c) participants felt empowered by their online literacy practices but regarded in-school literacy as a site of resistance.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The proliferation of information and communication technologies, particularly mobile devices and their adaptation by youth have undeniably altered concepts of teaching and learning as traditionally understood within formal educational contexts. “Web 2.0 technologies enable hybrid learning spaces that travel across physical and cyber spaces” (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009, p. 247) and are characterized by participation, collaboration and interactivity. Students as young as 8 years old are spending over 7 hours per day with new media (Kinzer, 2010, p. 51) where they are, in some cases, authoring, consuming and re-making various texts with unprecedented agency. As a result, conceptions of literacy in many domains have evolved to account for the new literacy landscape dominated by digital influences:

definitions of literacy must acknowledge that what people read and write, as well as how they use and understand what they read in digital environments, involves more than encoding and decoding alphabetic/linguistic elements. Online texts can include audio, video, still images, various font sizes, and understanding of conventions, such as, ‘The blue underlined text is a link’. (p. 52).

Within many school systems, however, there has generally been little concerted effort to fundamentally acknowledge the ways that students are literate in contemporary times. For example, in the United States, literacy policies stemming from No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) regard literacy primarily as decontextualized reading and writing skills that remain constant, irrespective of context, audience and societal changes. This kind of literacy represents a particular kind as outlined by scholar Michelle Knobel (2001):
The conception of literary developed by means of national curricula, benchmarks and standards is *school literacy*. This encompasses those literacy skills that most often lead to success in school (e.g. correct spelling, being able to write and speak abstract texts, being able to write five-part essays, being able to write for no obvious meaningful social purpose. (p. 405)

In Ontario, the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) (EQAO, 2007), a graduation requirement for all students in the province, reflects this understanding of literacy and resists new technologies and its associated concerns of identity and power as integral components of literacy education. From this perspective, literacy is about “individuals and their internal states (and then move on to the social), whereas [a situated approach] want[s] to focus on social, political, and institutional systems (and then move on to the individual)” (Gee, 2000a, p.122). Given that literacy is inextricably bounded and shaped by these systems, this study adopts a social or situated stance to understanding literacy.

The aim of this study is to document the kinds of new digital literacy practices that students who have failed the OSSLT are voluntarily involved with outside of school and that Gunther Kress points out have “social, semiotic and epistemological” (Bearne, 2005, p. 293) consequences. In other words, this research will add to the literature that explores the literacy practices that adolescents who fail to achieve dominant literacies participate in online. ‘Digital literacy practices’, or ‘digitally-mediated literacy practices’ are used in this study to refer to students’ meaning making practices as facilitated by digital technologies and new communication channels. In addition, I am interested in how students express a sense of agency in their digitally-mediated and in-school literacy practices. Identifying these practices and the forces propelling
them creates the opportunity to re-examine modern literacy education and the function of the OSSLT in light of the new literacies re-defining the 21st century.

I focus on the OSSLT because it represents Ontario’s school-based literacy benchmarks as outlined by the Ontario Ministry of Education. It sets out not only acceptable levels of literacy achievement in the province but signals what constitutes literacy itself. That is, how it is defined by the ministry and subsequently gets carried out by administrators and teachers. The OSSLT’s purpose “is to determine whether students have the skills in reading and writing that they will need to succeed at school, at work and in daily life” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Critical to this statement is that literacy as defined by this assessment is solely the ability to read and write, without account for other skills such as speaking that facilitate real-world communication. While traditional literacy skills are undeniably essential for students to possess, this high-stakes assessment seems problematic in that it is static in the face of rapidly changing social, economic and cultural environments. This is particularly troubling as research highlights that the skills needed for today’s economy are new and different from those of the past (Boyett & Conn, 1992; Hammer, 1993).

In his study, Teenagers in New Times, scholar James Gee (2000b) argues that being literate in the “new capitalism” requires a “shape-shifting” portfolio and the ability to recruit social languages — or Discourses, as he calls it. Finding literacy too narrow a term to describe how people communicate and the ways that socially situated identities are at play in daily interactions, Gee introduced “‘discourses’ with a little ‘d’ for language in use or connected stretches of language [. . .]” (Gee, 2008, p.154) which comprises just one element of his concept of Discourses (capital d). He defines Discourses as
distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies so as to enact specifically socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities. (p.155)

More than being able to proficiently read and write in a self-contained manner, Gee demonstrates that “sociotechnical designing” skills — the most valued in the new economy — are “heavily social and contextual and semiotic, often involving manipulation of symbols of identity” (Gee, 2000b, p.414).

Similarly, influential organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have pointed out that “educational success is no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge to novel situations” (Schleicher, n.d.). The former industrial economy, characterized by standardized mass production, required individuals who could work at an assigned task, often repeatedly and conform to authority. In the new globally-connected knowledge economy, workers’ knowledge and their ability to think creatively and on a systems level, while closely collaborating with others are the keys to economic growth. Thus the emerging urgency to equip future workers with 21st century skills — communication, collaboration, critical thinking, among others — is no longer optional or secondary in importance but rather essential to giving students the best chances of life success. It is within this dynamic environment that the ability of the current OSSLT to accurately measure whether students are prepared with the necessary literacy skills to succeed beyond high school calls for a critical re-examination.
Significance of the Study

This study was largely motivated by two concerns. Firstly, while numerous studies have looked at the online literacy practices of particular student populations such as ‘girls’ (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003) and immigrants (McLean, 2010), fewer have done so from a Canadian context. Lotherington (2004), a Canadian scholar studied the digital practices of two academically successful students in Toronto. She found that these 13 year old students were involved in “sophisticated intertextual and intermodal processing” (p.314) as they used the internet, various media and an Xbox. She concluded that they possessed the “environmental and social support in their everyday lives for English language and Canadian culture, the ‘basic skills’ being tested [on the OSSLT]” (p.317) but feared for students that lack this support. By focusing on a Canadian context, particularly an Ontario one, the particularities of not only the OSSLT but its administration can be examined.

Secondly, digital technologies have revolutionized the ways youth participate and are literate in the modern world and tension between school policies and operations and their out-of-school lives is growing. For instance, there are numerous debates taking place within school boards in Ontario (and other provinces) about appropriate student technology use policies, particularly handheld devices. While safety has been a factor in the debate to permit cellphones in school, some teachers and students are also advocating for reform because of their possible educational uses. Despite these tensions and the new demands of the workplace, educational responses have routinely embraced traditional approaches to students' literacy development that omit increasingly important components, including digital and sociocultural considerations.

One of the main goals of this study is to contribute to our understanding of the online literacy practices of a group of students who struggle with Ontario’s school-based literacy standards.
While students’ out-of-school, online literacy practices are the focus of this research, new technologies such as mobile devices have made the ability to discern domains increasingly difficult. Many students are connected to the internet throughout the day despite, in many cases, opposing or ambiguous school policies, making distinctions difficult. Therefore, the concentration will be those practices that are not school-sanctioned and/or supported, rather than time of day.

**Research Questions**

To address the aforementioned concerns, the research questions guiding this study are:

- What kinds of digital literacy practices are students who have had to retake the OSSLT actively participating with in out-of-school contexts?
- What are the compelling and engaging aspects of these digitally-mediated literacy practices for students?
- How do students describe agency in their literacy practices, both in-school and online in out-of-school contexts?

Identifying the literacy practices of students and gaining a better sense of how they approach new forms of texts can contribute to educators’ consideration of pedagogical approaches and assessment reforms, particularly as it relates to students who occupy marginal positions within these institutions. By illustrating the kinds of things students enjoy and why, educators will hopefully discover new opportunities to engage with students in domains that interest them. This is not to encourage the co-opting of such spaces, but an opening where teachers can build connections with students’ interests. It is becoming increasingly apparent that traditional, lecture-style teaching is less appropriate and effective with students who have vast amounts of information at their fingertips. Connecting these classroom level insights to the OSSLT allows
for the examination of its role in shaping literacy education in the province and innovation in schools.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

New Literacy Studies

Literacy as Social Practice

This study draws on New Literacy Studies (NLS) to explore students’ digitally-mediated literacy practices in out-of-school contexts. This socio-cultural approach to literacy views it as multiple and embedded in the broader social and cultural environment. Through this lens, literacy is not discrete skills to be learned but social practices that vary from context to context (Street, 2008). First defined by Scribner and Cole (1981), practice refers to “a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge” (p.236). Literacy practice then “highlights the ways in which text fit into people’s lives and are shaped by institutions and power relations” (Shultz, 2002, p.362). Within this study, I am concerned with not only the digital literacy practices of students who have failed this school-based measure of literacy, but also in the “values, attitudes, feeling and social relationships” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, 7) rooted in these actions.

Brian Street, commonly credited as one of the founders of NLS, exemplifies the notion of practice in his seminal anthropological research in Iran in the 1970s. By carefully examining and participating in village life, Street (1984) was able to identify three distinct forms of literacy employed by individuals that corresponded with different facets of their lives. Rather than being “illiterate” as they had been characterized by government agencies, they engaged with what he called maktab literacy, practices associated with religious studies; commercial literacy, used for fruit sales; and school literacy, with ties to state schools. Each of these literacies was characterized by particular ways of doing things that were grounded in particular social, economic, and political contexts and histories.
Similarly, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) in her seminal, multi-year ethnographic study of two Southern American communities — Trackton, a black working-class community and Roadville, a white working-class community — documented children’s language acquisition and development in each setting. She found that

[. . .] in Roadville and Trackton the different ways children learned to use language were dependent on the ways in which each community structure[d] their families, defined the roles that community members could assume, and played out their concepts of childhood that guided child socialization. (p.11)

Looking across both of these communities, Heath also illustrated how their respective literacy practices differently prepared children for their schooling experiences (especially when compared to Maintown students, a group of middle class children) and in particular how this contributed to the school difficulties faced by both communities.

The participants of this study have also been characterized as challenged with literacy based on the results of an assessment grounded in an essay-text form of literacy. This conceptualization of reading and writing involves a mainstream pattern as described by Heath (1982):

In each individual reading episode in the primary years of schooling, children must move through what-explanations before they can provide reason-explanations or affective commentaries. [. . .] Throughout the primary grade levels, what-explanations predominate, reason-explanations come with increasing frequency in the upper grades, and affective comments most often come in the extra-credit portions of the reading workbook or at the end of the list of suggested activities in text books across grade levels. This sequence characterized the total school career. (original emphasis, p.78)
This understanding of literacy represents just one kind – a school-based one – and the literacy practices that youth are immersed in outside of this domain, according to researchers, vary greatly and follow different norms and conventions. Researchers have documented the new literacy practices mediated by digital technologies that students are enthusiastically investing themselves in. These include blogging and journaling (Bortree, 2005), zining (Guzzetti, & Gamboa, 2004; Knobel & Lankshear, 2001), instant messaging (Lee, 2007; Lewis & Fabos, 2005) and creating online fanfiction (Black, 2007).

Recently, a ‘digital turn’, a pun on Gee’s (1999) ‘social turn’ - which describes when in the 1980s many disciplines, including literacy studies, reacted against notions of individual cognition and instead focused on how people are shaped by, and in turn shape, their environments – has been noted within NLS. Researcher Kathy Ann Mills (2010) notes that owing to globalization and the growing selection of technologies for communication, “research in the New Literacy Studies has similarly reflected the changing emphasis from research of print based reading and writing practices to include new textual practices that are mediated by digital technologies” (p. 247). These studies have highlighted the importance of affinity spaces and communities of practice for students as they engage in various Discourses, pursue niche interests and develop transnational relationships formed around various types of texts.

For example, Guzzett and Gamboa (2005) explored the new literacy practice of online journaling with two adolescent girls. While these participants used Live Journal, an online personal publishing tool differently, they were both motivated to write by media, including rock and roll music and various websites; engaged in DIY ethic; and formed social connections that provided emotional and writing support. These interactions were facilitated by the social features of Live Journal such as the ‘comments’ and ‘friends’ features so that journalers’ entries can be linked to
other people’s thoughts, ideas and experiences. Users can browse others’ journals, respond to them, or create their own” (p.172). Additionally, there are options for indicating the type of music they were listening to and mood they were in as they posted to their journal. These features allowed friends, including virtual ones and readers the opportunities to connect and relate to each other about the various works they had authored, including the conditions that help foster them.

More recently, Lam (2009) documented the literacy practices of immigrant students who used digital media to connect with friends, family and information from their respective country of origins and build new social networks within their host country, the United States. This mixed-method study illustrated that “digital networks allow[ed] the youth to develop types of linguistic dispositions that are expressed in multilingual literacies and learning, as well as perspectives on events and life situations that draw from diverse cultural and societal sources” (p.187). Students, through websites such as Cyworld.com (a popular Korean networking site), diasporic chatrooms, instant messaging, and foreign news sources used these tools to: improve their English-language skills and maintain their native language; regularly read news from their country of origin and consequently gain comparative perspectives with local media; and engage in critical textual exchanges. Lam suggested educators leverage the criticalness gained through students’ bifocality and transnational connections to add diversity to classroom experiences for all students.

The potential spaces of literacy, as exemplified by the above studies, have been reconceptualised by researchers drawing on New Literacy Studies and include practices beyond those that are school sanctioned. And in aiming to account for the various dimensions that constitute students’ literate lives, this study will examine the range of digitally-mediated literacy practices of a group
of adolescents across home and community contexts. Street (1995) points to the importance of this acknowledgement:

[. . ] to study adolescents only in school as students suggests that they have no life outside of schools. Because schools are often the site of marginalization for some youth, to study young people only in school is to know them only as marginalized beings. (Guzzetti, & Gamoba, 2004, p. 207)

The students of this study will likely have faced at least some academic struggle and by failing the OSSLT are “at-risk” of not earning their high school diploma. However, by expanding the lens of literacy to include activities outside of ‘school’ literacy, students’ interests, habits and desires can be seen as valuable, in their own right but also for what they can contribute to the teaching and learning process.

*Power and Ideology*

Street’s (2008) work foregrounds one of the major tenets of this theoretical perspective — the inseparable role of ideology and power to literacy. He claims that

literacy [. . .] is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always ideological; they are always rooted in a particular world-view often accompanied by a desire, conscious or unconscious, for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others. (p. 4)

He makes a distinction between two models of literacy which he terms: the “autonomous” and “ideological”. The autonomous model, on which standardized tests such as the OSSLT are based, works “from the assumption that literacy in itself, autonomously, will have effects on other social
and cognitive practices” (p. 4). This view, Street argues, positions itself as neutral (and natural) and in doing so denies its epistemological roots. Conversely, the ideological model understands literacy as inextricable connected to “conceptions of knowledge, identity and being” (p. 4) that manifest themselves differently in various contexts, and which must be accounted for in literacy education.

Research in NLS additionally seeks to identify how power and ideology manifest within and across particular environments. Researchers have shown that the digitally-mediated literacy practices that students are avid participants of are often designated as marginal in schools. This has been accounted to a lack of professional development for teacher/administrators on the technologies driving these literacies, curriculum driven by high-stakes testing, limited resources, including ongoing IT support, among other reasons (Rosen & Weil, 1995; Winnans & Brown, 1992). NLS calls such practices into question by complicating the often taken for granted ideological neutrality associated with schooling.

**New Literacies and Multimodality: Students’ Out-of-School Literate Lives**

Literacy has traditionally been associated with formal schooling, but during the last 20 years, researchers have increasingly looked beyond to the literate activities children and adolescents perform in the authentic non-school settings that comprise their lives (Alvermann, 1999; Cole, 1996; Heath, 1993; Shultz, 2002). Such studies have been fundamental to many of the theoretical advances within the field and have widened conceptions of literacy to include various contexts including work, home and afterschool programs. In the digital environment, “the space of literacies is not necessarily linked to any one location or modality, and the context for literacy practices may exist across multiple time spaces” (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009, p. 329). With students engaged in new practices in virtual environments that cross time zones and shrink space,
literacy opportunities (and challenges) unimaginable even a few years ago, are being created and demand real educational attention.

New Literacies

Significant advancements in computer hardware/software and web-based resources have greatly expanded the ways that students can, and do, engage in innovative literate traditions outside of formal schooling. Tools that were once predominately only available to professionals engaging in particular industries – the “specialist” of a field – are now ubiquitous. Lankshear & Knobel (2007) note:

> Relatively unsophisticated desktop publishing software can generate text and image effects that the best printers often could not manage under typographic conditions, and ‘publishing’ now is no longer limited to print or images on paper but can include additional media such as voice recordings, music files, 2D and 3D animations, video, paintshopped images, scanned images of paper-based artworks, etc. (p.8)

With youth embracing various new media and technologies quickly and fully, they have positioned themselves as multimedia creators and storytellers (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Ranker, 2008), writers (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003) and web designers (Tobin, 1998). Many have very naturally adapted to the affordances of new digital technologies and accomplish tasks they couldn’t previously do, and are still restricted from leveraging within many school settings. Importantly, students who have historically faced literacy difficulties are amongst those youth creating new processes and practices that are helping to fuel new social practices.

What is important about the improved and increasingly accessible tools is the expanded communication options that transform formerly solitary activities to ones shared with people
worldwide with similar niche interests. For example, children and adults have a long history of producing works of fanfiction (Jenkins, 1992) but these have been mostly private endeavours with limited audience reach. Rebecca Black (2005) points out in the introduction to her study on English-language learners in an online fanfiction community, that the internet has allowed “countless other people across the globe who had been writing paper fiction for years [. . .][to] meet online to share, review and build on one another’s fictions” (p.118).

Her study showcases the many hours adolescents spent creating, reading and supporting each other on fanfiction.net, a popular affinity space. They created hybridized texts, conducted proof-reading and peer review duties and in some cases acted as “cultural consultants” (p.123). As a result of these “interest-driven” activities, the kinds of textual experiences students are having in these out-of-school contexts can be sophisticated and textual creations can be of high quality after being worked and re-worked in consultation with peers of varying levels of expertise.

While there have been questions about what actually constitute “new” literacies (Street, 1993), within this study it is used as articulated by Lankshear and Knobel (2007): literacies that consists of new “technical stuff” and new “ethos stuff”. In other words, for a literacy to be called “new” it must encompass new digital technologies and their various applications, plus new ways of thinking about being in the world. This definition distinguishes between two groups of new literacies as defined by these scholars. The first, paradigm cases of new literacies enlists the aforementioned definition while the second group, peripheral cases of new literacies, do not necessarily include a new mentality, or “ethos” in the use of new technological options. Kevin Leander’s (2007) examination of Ridgeview Academy, an all-girls school with a new wireless laptop program typifies peripheral cases. He draws attention to how this school adapted a new technological tool (laptops for all students) while simultaneously refusing to adjust the traditional
control values and policies and resultantly created a “contradiction of social spaces” (p.25) fuelled by duelling discourse and pedagogical positions.

The ethos emphasis of new literacies underscores this study’s particular interest in the human relationships or social aspects involved in students’ online literate lives. For it is important to note that:

What is central to new literacies is not the fact that we can now ‘look up information online’ or write essays using a new processor rather than a pen or typewriter [. . .] but, rather, that they mobilize very different kinds of values and priorities and sensibilities than the literacies we are familiar with. (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p.7)

It breaks from conceptions of traditional literacy — authority-driven, individualistic, etc. — and has resulted in two mindsets about the contemporary world according to Lankshear and Knobel (2007).

The first mindset assumes “the world basically operates on physical/material and industrial principles and logics. The world is ‘centered’ and ‘hierarchical’” (p. 11). Many schools and education systems have continued to fundamentally adhere to such principles with teacher-centred instruction and school policies designed to encourage rote memorization and normalization. The second mindset assumes “the world increasingly operates on non-material (i.e. cyberspatial) and post-industrial principles and logics. The world is ‘decentered’ and ‘flat’” (p. 11). Youth today have grown up in a world that has become increasingly organized around the second mindset.
Multimodality

The integration of new digital technologies across all domains of life has brought to the forefront the wide variety of modes that people have available to express themselves and make meaning. While students have always engaged in multimodal communication practices – using modes such as image, writing, gesture, speech and gaze — “the use of technologies certainly enables modes to be configured, be circulated and get recycled in different ways” (Jewitt, 2009, p. 1). As a result, an “inversion of semiotic power” (Kress, 2003, p. 7) is occurring. “The former constellation of medium of book and mode of writing is giving way, and in many domains has already given way, to the new constellation of medium of screen and mode of image (Original emphasis, p. 7). To be clear, this is not to argue that paper books or printed writing are obsolete as traditional literacy skills are still critical ones. Rather recent changes have allowed for the use of other modes more conveniently than in the past and the need for education systems to recognize this, and adapt accordingly, is tremendous.

These changes to semiotic possibilities spurred by new technologies present a challenge to the modal preferences and hierarchy of many Western societies which have predominately relied on, and consequently given priority to, the written word. The prioritization of print-based texts is reflected in structural schooling systems that consequently marginalize other modes (and the tools conducive to them) and de-skill students and teachers. For example in the UK, Marsh (2004), a researcher at Sheffield University points out how the UK’s

[...] National Literacy Strategy Framework privileges particular types of texts and producers of texts. All references to producers of text use the words “writer”, “author” or “poet”, and there is no mention of producers, directors, or creators. It could be argued that
the term “author” is used in a generic sense to include authorship of televisual and media texts, but the word is most frequently used in conjunction with terms that relate to the written word. [. . .] [. . .] [There] is a clear prioritisation of print-based texts, with media texts used merely to support children’s understanding of the former. (Street, 2008, p. 12)

Similarly, the OSSLT, grounded in the Ontario Curriculum up to the end of grade 9, states its interest only in students’ reading and writing skills as a measure of literacy. This has undeniable implications for which literacy skills are emphasised by teachers, including which modes become marginal to this high-stakes graduation requirement and how school resources are allocated.

Multimodality offers approaches for investigating the texts that students are producing and consuming that extend beyond written language and utilize a wide range of semiotic modes. It can refer to a field of application or, as Kress (2009) noted, can indicate “a domain of inquiry” that can be brought to various academic disciplines (p. 54). More than just adding images or audio to text, Hull and Nelson (2005) through their experience at a West Oakland, California technology centre argue that the youth were a part of creating new forms of meaning. Through close and nuanced analysis of “Lyfe-N-Rhyme” — the digital story of one of their most acclaimed participants, Randy — they claim multimodal composition through “a process of braiding (Mitchell, 2004) or orchestration (Kress & van Leewen, 2001) [. . .] can create a different system of signification, one that transcends the collective contribution of its constituents parts” (p. 225). It points to the fundamental changes in the way stories and ideas can be represented and also highlights the importance of process in literacy designing (The New London Group, 1996).
The Digital Divides

This seems an appropriate juncture to acknowledge that while many youth are avid participants of 21st century technologies, and are a part of the youth cultures driving new literacies, a substantial technological gap exists between those who have access to the tools revolutionizing the way humans live, and those who do not. Paul Attwell (2001) points out that “these disparities in access are driven, in large part, by income inequality and/or educational differences [...]” (p. 253). Even while gradually lowered prices have allowed tools such as laptops and tablets to become more accessible, “if computer ownership continues its rapid spread among middle-income families, as seems likely, the digital divide will shift to the bottom fifth of the income distribution, demarcating families with incomes below $15,000 from the rest of our society” (p. 253).

A recent study of media use of children 0-8 years old has advanced the digital divide conversation and identified an "App Gap" - the growing disparity between children who are exposed to mobile devices and their accompanying applications, and those who are not (Common Sense Media, 2011). The research illustrated that children from lower income homes are far less likely to have parents who can enable technological practices. For example, "only 14% of lower-income parents have ever downloaded apps for their children to use, compared to 47% of higher-income parents" (p. 10). Also striking was that "thirty-eight percent of lower-income parents say they don’t even know what an app is, compared to just 3% of higher-income parents” (p. 10). As more youth have access to technology, the literature on the digital divide has progressed from looking at an access gap and has focused on the social difference in usage of the internet and other information technologies (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001).
Standardized Testing: The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test

The Education Quality Accountability Office and Large Scale Testing

Prior to the 1990s, the province of Ontario did not have a strong tradition of large scale, standardized tests (Earl and Torrance, 2000). In the 1950s and 1960s, students wrote standardized Grade 13 exit exams (known as “the departmentals”) which formed the sole basis for entry to university, but by the late 1960s, the exams were discontinued and teachers’ marks became the sole criteria for entrance to university. This change was made in part because it was learned that teacher’s marks predicted university achievement as well as the exams (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the provincial government resisted following other school systems, including numerous Canadian jurisdictions that were implementing various types of standardized testing programs designed to gauge the effectiveness of programs and curriculum, evaluate teaching practices and/or measure what students know (Raptis & Fleming, 2006). However in the early 1990s, things began to change in Ontario. Various political regimes, including the Progressive Conservatives and New Democratic Party, became increasingly concerned with “accountability” and “quality” in education. This connected to a global discourse of the time in many English speaking countries that emphasised government accountability to taxpayers and panic over preparing youth for increasing global competition (Goldberg, 1989; Lesko, 2001).

In 1994, the Province of Ontario’s Royal Commission on Learning released an extensive report based on conversations held across the province with parents, teachers, and other stakeholders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994). The report was highly influential and set out a new vision for education in the province. Among its 167 recommendations for responding to educational
demands, it cautiously listed provincial testing as one possible strategy to strengthen education (Chapter 11). It was within this context that the EQAO was created in 1995, as an arms-length agency of the government of Ontario, with a mandate of:

> enhancing the quality and accountability of the education system in Ontario and to work with the education community. This will be achieved through student assessments that produce objective, reliable information, through the public release of this information and through the profiling of the value and use of the EQAO data across the province (EQAO, n.d.a).

Today, the EQAO administers reading, writing and mathematics tests to grade 3 and 6 students; at the secondary level it administers the high-stakes literacy test and a mathematics test to grade 9 students. Based on the EQAO’s 2009-2010 Annual Report, it received $33 million that year from the Ministry of Education (EQAO, 2010) to carry out its mandate. Further, the data collected through EQAO testing has become quite influential and forms the basis of much of the educational comparisons made both domestically and internationally.

While the EQAO publicly releases school, board and provincial results it takes the following stance on school ranking:

> The EQAO is opposed to the ranking of schools or school boards. Rankings tell us nothing about why scores are high or low. They invite simplistic and misleading comparisons that ignore the particular circumstances affecting achievement in each school. Ranking tends to distract people from addressing the critical issue of how to improve learning for all students. (EQAO, n.d.b)
Contrary to this sentiment, The Fraser Institute, a conservative Canadian public policy think tank, uses the results to publish an annual School Report Card; its website helps you find “good” schools in your neighborhood. Clearly then, one of the pitfalls of the EQAO’s mandate of publicly releasing student achievement data is the way it facilitates public sorting of schools (and consequently students). Certain jurisdictions, namely the Province of Manitoba, address this issue by using the test results for curriculum planning purposes without releasing the information publicly.

Recently, an Action Canada Task Force released a report that studied standardized testing in the Canadian education system in light of shifting economic and social realities (Després, Kuhn, Ngirumpatse & Parent, 2013). The Ontario education system served a case study. After conducting their analysis, the authors of the report recommended that the government follow through on a review of standardized testing in Ontario as outlined in the original, influential 1995 Royal Commission on Learning:

> Nearly two decades ago, the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning recommended the introduction of standardized testing for Ontario, while expressing reservations about its widespread adoption. As a safeguard, and indicating that “it is entirely plausible that its responsibilities might need to be revised,” the Commission recommended a review of the mandate of the EQAO and standardized testing after five years to ensure that standardized testing was appropriately designed and implemented and that the Commission’s reservations did not come to pass. […] As such, there is value in conducting a follow-up review as proposed by the 1995 Commission. (p.8)
In particular, it recommends that an independent panel of diverse experts examine: 1. “The structure of the tests relative to its objectives (as set out in Ontario’s *Education Act*)”; 2. “The impact of testing within the classroom”; 3. “The validity of test results”; 4. “Public reporting and use of test results” (p. 8)

As the Action Canada report notes, there has been considerable outcry in various provinces from those concerned about the use and direction of provincial testing. Opponents point to issues like the powerful role of student context in determining achievement, the consequence of a narrower curriculum and the use of considerable classroom time, among other reasons. Among these voices are the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, n.d.) and the Ontario Teacher’s Federation (OTF). The OTF’s (2011) *A New Vision for Large Scale Testing in Ontario* points out that the current testing regime in Ontario has moved away from its original mandate which proposed “sample-based assessment, not universal, extensive and expensive testing” and “tests that would act as a check on the effectiveness of the curriculum, not as a means of sorting students, or ranking schools – for example, ‘shopping’ for schools” (p. 2). Standardized tests particularly high-stakes ones such as the OSSLT, operate under the idea that when administered in a “controlled” fashion to students who have been subjected to particular curricula, produce fair and accurate data. In reality, numerous research has pointed to the many variables at play in education and in schools that complicate this logic.

For example, there is an abundance of evidence that indicates students have differing, vastly in some cases, educational opportunities and experiences. In Ontario, urban/suburban schools are underfunded and some lack the essential services required for their increasingly diverse student population. People for Education (2008) point to the fact that “Urban and suburban boards receive, on average, $920 less per student for operations than their non-urban counterparts, a
figure that has grown by 75% from $525 in 2003. The resulting funding gap averages out to well over $500 million” (p. 14). Compounding this is the fact that urban/suburban schools are home to the majority of new immigrants and students that require additional support such as ESL services. Most importantly, students’ personal attributes, such as SES, family education and occupation are the most important factors in predicting student achievement, so ESL learners, students from low SES backgrounds, and particular minority groups predictably do the worst and are most adversely affected by the potential negative impacts of wide-scale, standardized testing (Klinger, 2006; Kohn, 2000; Roos, 2006; Snow, 2003; Wright, 2002).

The acknowledgement that the curriculum narrows with the introduction of standardized testing is nearly unanimous. Linda McNeil (2000) notes

> a technical curriculum designed to be testable by ‘objective’ measures and represented by numerical indicators, does more than omit the diverse cultural content of the students’ lived experience . . . A technical test-driven curriculum closes out the stories children bring to school. (Ricci, 2004, p.355)

These omitted experiences also include students’ digital lives and interests which are typically dismissed as marginal to the 'real' learning that occurs in classrooms and a distraction from the strategies that revolve around test preparation.

Another inadvertent consequence of large-scale testing is the amount of classroom time required to prepare students and administer the test. Further to the notion that equity is promoted through such assessments, students in urban and/or low income schools experience some of the greatest classroom disruptions, as they are more likely to be seen as requiring extra coaching for success. Scholar Carlo Ricci (2004) through research at one Ontario school found that the introduction of
the OSSLT meant teachers spent substantial time on tasks unrelated to true learning. In one instance, teachers who spent over a month coaching students for the OSSLT during Ricci’s study, received notices “to explain [to students] that the session planned for the next few weeks are NOT designed to make students literate! . . . Emphasize that these . . . sessions ARE designed to . . . improve their test-taking skills” (original emphasis, p. 352).

Despite these and other concerns about standardized testing, the undeniable influence of digital technology has resulted in test makers and governments seeking ways to measure students’ new literacies skills before many educators have even been given the tools to adequately support and leverage such skills in schools. An examination of the small number of education systems that have responded to this growing pressure point to a familiar trend: to attempt to fit the skills required of a 21st century learner into preexisting, traditional test frameworks. Marlene Asselin’s (2005) study of the ways Ministries of Education in Canada have responded to new literacies in province-wide assessments revealed that one of seven participating provinces and territories account for concerns of new technologies and literacies in their evaluations. Province 1, as it is referred to in the study, included as a part of the grade 6 and 9 reading and writing assessments, test items that focused on “comprehension and evaluation of online information”, “visual literacy” and “media literacy”. Students completed these tasks using printed images of websites. “For example, in the grade-6 reading assessment, students identified the distinctive features of web pages and how this text form differs from traditional print or book forms” (p. 811).

At the higher education level, Education Testing Service (ETS), the world’s largest private testing institution, has created a digital literacy assessment called iSkills. This one-hour exam purports to “evaluate students' level of critical thinking skills in a digital environment” (Education Testing Service, n.d.) and is completed in a simulated digital environment. While
both these approaches attempt to meet the demands of accountability (via standardized testing) and those of a changing society, the current direction remains firmly rooted in traditional conceptualizations of measuring knowledge and competency. Therefore, while schools and their districts can claim to account for the 21st century skills essential for learners by embracing such approaches, the existing frameworks, policies, procedures and formats (of the test) remain largely intact.

The OSSLT

The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) is Ontario’s sole high-stakes assessment administered to all grade 10 students. It was first implemented in the 1999-2000 school year and became a graduation requirement the following year for those working towards an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). In the 2011-2012 school year just over 23,500 first-time test takers in Ontario failed to prove satisfactorily that they possessed these skills (EQAO, 2012, p. 65). Students generally have two opportunities to write the assessment — grade 10 and 11 — and as a final option, can take the grade 12 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) to fulfil the literacy requirement for the OSSD.

The EQAO defines literacy for the purposes of the OSSLT as reading comprehension and writing skills. The test takes place over two 75-minute sessions. In the 2011-2012 version of the test, students demonstrated their reading abilities by engaging with reading selections that included informational, narrative and graphic selections. According to the EQAO, “students are asked to demonstrate their understanding of explicit (directly stated) and implicit (indirectly stated) meanings as well as to connect their understanding of the text to their personal experience and
knowledge” (EQAO, 2007, p. 10). Students are asked to do this through both multiple choice and open-response questions.

In the writing section, the OSSLT aims to test 3 writing skills which include: “developing a main idea with sufficient supporting details”, “organizing information and ideas in a coherent manner”, and “using conventions (spelling, grammar, punctuation) in a manner that does not distract from clear communication” (p. 15). Students are asked to exhibit these skills through two short and one long writing task, in addition to multiple choice questions. The type of writing students can realistically produce on the test, given the limited time and resources, represents again only one small part of the writing process that students are expected to master in school. The EQAO states: “Since writing on large-scale assessments does not allow for a complete revision and refinement process, written work on the OSSLT is scored as first-draft (unpolished) writing” (p.10).

While the OSSLT is based on the reading and writing expectations of the Ontario Curriculum across subjects up to, and including, grade 9, its narrow conceptualization of literacy – as merely reading comprehension and writing proficiency — breaks from the stated approach to literacy offered in curriculum documents. The Ontario English Curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education. 2007) states that literacy is: “knowledge and skills in the areas of listening and speaking, reading, writing, and viewing and representing” (p. 3). Additionally, this document lays out the definition used by UNESCO: “Literacy is about more than reading or writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture” (p. 3). According to the curriculum, students successful with language learning can:
communicate — that is, read, listen, view, speak, write, and represent—effectively and with confidence”; “make meaningful connections between themselves, what they encounter in texts”; “understand that all texts advance a particular point of view that must be recognized, questioned, assessed, and evaluated”; “use language to interact and connect with individuals and communities, for personal growth, and for active participation as world citizens and the world around them”. (p. 4)

These approaches to literacy learning are qualitatively different from the content and form that comprise the OSSLT. Yet despite overlooking literacies crucial for success in the knowledge economy — speaking, listening and visual, for example — the EQAO claims to be current with 21st century skills such as communication and critical thinking and problem solving (EQAO, 2011). For example, it identifies being able to “communicate clearly and correctly in different written forms” as a 21st century skill that is measured “in the writing component of the test [when] students are given multiple-choice questions and are asked to write two short responses, a series of paragraphs expressing an opinion and a news report” (p. 3). Strikingly, students’ writing tasks are generic and do not attempt to acknowledge new writing forms such as email writing that follow particular conventions or address how written forms, such as news reports, have been transformed over time.

Equally troubling is the absence of other crucial 21st century skills such as creativity, innovation and collaboration, which don’t lend themselves well to this format of assessment. Scholar Douglas Reeves (2010) sees standardized assessments, such as the OSSLT, as inherently contradictory to the 21st century skills schools are attempting to promote. He notes that “[. . .] the nature of testing — with its standardized conditions, secrecy and individual results — is the antithetical to the understanding, exploration, creativity and sharing that are the hallmarks of a
new framework for assessment” (p. 306). But even these hallmarks are socially constructed and subject to the particularities of place and space. If schooling systems are to progress with the times, in terms of technologies and sensibilities, alternative methods of providing accountability and assessing students’ capabilities must be envisioned.

This study will closely explore the types of digital literacies that “literacy-challenged” students are seeking out and actively re-making. These students occupy a unique space because while they have shown challenges with school-based literacy assessments such as the OSSLT, many of them successfully engage in innovative literate practices in their daily lives. The work of New Literacy Studies will provide a theoretical framework that allows these practices to be seen as situated and various, taking into account the conditions of students’ lives. Further a new literacies lens highlights the ways that digital technologies and their use by students are embedded in particular contexts and accordingly get taken up in different ways. These activities are increasingly complex, and involve various modes of representation. This contribution to the ongoing dialogue attempts to illuminate the online literacy activities of students and create paths for inviting struggling students into literacy programs and curriculum.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Methods

This study employs phenomenology to examine a group of students’ experiences with digital technology and literacy in contexts outside of school. As a research approach, phenomenology as described by van Manen (1990) aims to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (a ‘grasp of the very nature of the thing,’) (Creswell, 2006, p. 58). Accordingly, this research through face-to-face interviews seeks to uncover and lay bare students’ impressions and interpretations of what it means to experience literacy in schools during this transitional period where the digital is overtaking print in many domains and the accompanying values of these modes are increasingly conflicting. How are students traversing the modal and value dichotomies of school literacy and the literacies of their lives? In other words, how do they understand moving between reading de-contextualized passages (of the OSSLT, for instance) and answering true and false questions, with out of school, digital experiences where they have vast opportunities to pursue an array of texts, both as consumers and creators?

One of the main philosophical perspectives in phenomenology is the idea of intentionality of consciousness, as articulated by Edmund Husserl and those who subsequently expanded on his work. “The idea is that consciousness is always directed towards an object. Reality of an object, then, is inextricably related to one’s consciousness of it” (Creswell, 2006, p. 59). From this perspective, researchers are interested in how individuals experience things, and seek firsthand accounts from those who have lived through the relevant phenomenon. It is students’ subjective voices, as recorded through their interviews that will provide the most valuable ideas on what
implications their digitally-mediated literacy practices have on in-school experiences and how educators can best incorporate and capitalize on these out-of-school experiences.

Some branches of phenomenology, namely the interpretative approach emphasis the concept of epoche or bracketing where researchers set aside their personal notions of the phenomenon of study and “everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Adopting an interpretive approach to phenomenology here and believing it impossible to suspend one’s thoughts completely, I instead choose to engage in reflective practice. In aiming to articulate what I know, my research agenda and how my social, economic and cultural histories inform my work, I maintained a research journal. Additionally, I made notes in the journal during the interviews with students and recorded observations on the time I spent in the school environment. As a female researcher of colour, who has attended schools in low-income neighborhoods such as the one where this research took place, some of the issues discussed in this space were both familiar and new to me. By beginning to record my thoughts prior to collecting data and continuing to do so throughout the research process, I was better equipped to enter students’ field of understanding while being more conscious of my own thoughts.

**Participants**

Participants were recruited during April 2013. I sought participants enrolled in the grade 12 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) at a secondary school in the Greater Toronto Area. I was particularly interested in students enrolled in the OSSLC because by its very nature they would be more likely to have had a range of school-based literacy difficulties and thus be able to provide informed perspectives. The OSSLC was developed to provide students who have been unsuccessful on the test [at least once and
have been eligible to write it at least twice] with intensive support in achieving the
required reading and writing competencies, and with an alternative means of
demonstrating their literacy skills. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 3)

It is often the last opportunity for students to fulfil the literacy graduation requirement, as was
the case with each of this study’s participants.

Using purposive sampling, I selected 3 diverse, ‘information-rich’ student-participants. All met
the criteria of: being unsuccessful with the OSSLT at least once, using technology to engage
with texts (including images and video) at least once daily and a willingness to discuss these
practices with me. The participants were all grade 12 students enrolled in the same second
semester class. They had all written the OSSLT initially in grade 10 and then again in grade 11
and were unsuccessful with both attempts, and thus were enrolled in the course. Each of the
participants were either enrolled simultaneously in a college or university English course, or had
completed one in the immediate preceding semester (fall semester) thus they were able to reflect
on, and speak to recent and grade appropriate in-school literacy experiences.

The 3 participants were all males between 17-18 years old. For this study, it was important that
participants represented a diverse range of linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds, technology
interests and usage. Daniel was the group’s only ESL student. He was born in Japan, moved to
India with his family when he was young and then immigrated to Canada 9 years ago. He was
highly interested in online Japanese manga. Steven was also born outside of Canada, in the
United States. His parents are originally from Eretria and they moved from the US to Canada
when Steven was a baby. Steven’s literacy interests were driven by his identification with, and
interest in rapping and urban arts. The study’s final participant was Tony who was born in
Canada to parents originally from Sri Lanka. His interests were based on crime and his enjoyment of images and photography.

**Interviews**

Data for this study were collected through one-hour private, face-to-face interviews with each participant. All of the interviews took place in May 2013 during regular school hours in the school library. The interviews consisted of a semi-structured, open-ended question format which allowed students the opportunity to offer new information and ideas that relate to their experiences with fewer constraints. The questions asked participants to describe their online activities related to various texts, what the important parts of those activities were for them and how agency was expressed in their literacy practices, both in-school and out. All interviews were audio-recorded as no student indicated a discomfort with this. To address routine privacy concerns, pseudonyms are used to replace all student names.

**Context of the Research**

The research involved participants who all attended a multicultural, urban school in the Greater Toronto Area with a student population of over 800. ESL students comprised approximately 35% of the student population. The average income of parents is approximately $31,000 per year, reflecting the lower range socioeconomic circumstances of the surrounding neighborhood. The participant school offers various programs including the International Baccalaureate Programme and Steps to University program. Further, I observed a free breakfast program offered to all students. The school library, in which the interviews took place, is renovated and provides students with access to over 30 desktop computers. It serves as a hub for teachers that require whole class participation in activities that use computers. I also observed students enter the
library space during “free” periods and lunch to use the computers (Field notes, May 2 and May 7, 2013).

In terms of literacy, all students participate daily in the DEAR program – Drop Everything And Read – where they read uninterrupted for 20 minutes. As the OSSLT nears each year, this practice transforms to DEAP – Drop Everything and Prepare – signalling the assessment’s preparation as a classroom priority. It includes daily after school support programs offered to students who require additional assistance, particularly as it relates to the format of the test, notes the school principal (Field notes, April 9, 2013). Every year, not only do grade 10 students complete the OSSLT, but grade 9 students also write a mock test that stimulates the real thing, from preparation to test-taking conditions. The principal notes that the aim of this participation for grade 9 students is to get them accustomed to the stress involved, as this can be partly the reason students don’t do as well as they can (Field notes, April 9, 2013).

**Data analysis**

The analysis of participant data was an ongoing and iterative process as recommended by qualitative scholars (Lichtman, 2006). I began the analysis phase by transcribing the audio files of student interviews into text data. After conducting a preliminary exploratory analysis of the transcripts, I carefully read and re-read the text, coding the broad emerging themes. Once a satisfactory list of codes was created, I reviewed the codes once again and combined overlapping and/or redundant ones before returning to the text to look for further support for the reduced list of concepts and to identify new ones (Creswell, 2002, p. 238). Finally, this work resulted in themes and patterns that relate to the essence of the student experience as it relates to the study’s research questions.
Chapter 4: Findings

Three grade 12 students — Daniel, Steven and Tony — were interviewed about their online literacy practices. Each had been unsuccessful with the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test and was an active online user who engaged in digitally-mediated literacy practices. These students exercise various technology-mediated literacy skills in their daily lives, are members of social networking sites and video sharing platforms and seek out various texts ranging from manga to hip-hop. Based on the data, three essential elements emerged: participants’ desire for “real” texts, as indicated by their emotional connections; the high value placed on visual and verbal semiotic resources in their activities; and that participants felt enabled in their online literacy practices but expressed in-school literacy as a site of resistance. The following are the study’s findings organized by major themes.

Participants’ digital practices are driven by their perceived emotional connections and/or by the social and economic realities of their lives.

The participants made distinctions between what they perceive as legitimate, or relevant literacy activities and texts and those that were unrelated and usually imposed on them. These attitudes shaped their reception and willingness to engage wholeheartedly with literacy activities. The texts that students sought are those that reflect their understanding of the world and that connect them to the lives of others in a way that allowed for empathy and comfort in a common struggle.

Steven’s online literacy activities are rooted in his interests in hip-hop, street life and urban drama. He described himself as being interested in “what people are saying or chatting” and is an avid user of Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and worldstarhiphop.com. While many of these sites are well-known, worldstarhiphop.com is mostly video-driven and is the no.1 online space for hip-hop audiences with over 1 million unique visitors a day (“WorldStarHipHop”, n.d.). It is
these sites that Steven visits and discovers texts — articles, music videos, and images — that keep him informed on topics in which he is deeply invested. When asked about what he enjoys most about using social networking sites, he said:

They're real. Because when people tweet I can tell it's really them or how they feel at the moment. Through Facebook and Twitter I can see nice picture of them. Like WorldStar[hiphop.com] I know it's real 'cause usually when they're rapping or fighting, I can see that it real you know just by looking at the video, so I'm usually into real stuff. I'm not into that fake stuff like miniclip or something like that.

Steven’s description of what “real” means to him highlights his preference for texts that are authentically about people who he is connected to such as friends on social networking sites but also to those who he has shared understandings such as his favorite rap artists. Through social media and online platforms, the sharing of images, stories, and videos connects him with the texts of others’ lives. Similarly, Tony revealed the empathy that such texts can elicit:

I read posts on Facebook like if there's a story posted about a person, I read it and I understand it and depending, I might feel bad for them.

Tony is an avid reader of crime related texts. He expressed an interest in “real crime”, that is in actual crime stories from national and international contexts. His interest in crime stems from his desire to work in law enforcement, a goal he developed after taking a law course. But he expressed doubt in achieving this goal:

I wanted to be a cop but they said I needed like 20/20 vision but I don’t know what I want to do next year but I know that I'm interested in like criminology and stuff. I know in university you have to write essays and I just hate writing.
While Tony expressed reticence at a writing practice that has dominated his in-school literacy experiences (essay writing), and helped form negative associations, he nonetheless is able to pursue his interest in crime online. In addition to using Google to search for details about news stories, he uses Facebook as a launch pad:

[...] And I'm interested in crime so if I see something like that, I'll just search it up and I'll just read it. Just like thief, killing, murder this kind of stuff. I like to know how they did it.

Crimes such as the ones Tony described are daily instances in the surrounding school neighborhood where poverty and its associated issues of drugs and gang activity are ever-present.

While Daniel is also an avid social media user, his digitally-mediated literacy practices revolve around his reading of the serialized manga *Naruto*, one of the most popular in Japan. It is a reading and viewing practice that he shares with his brother and friends. He revealed, I “sometimes read it with my brother” and when asked about how he responds to the text, he said that “after or sometimes during the reading” he discusses it with his friends and brother or he “just thinks”. It is the story of Naruto Uzumaki, “an adolescent ninja who constantly searches for recognition and dreams to become the Hokage, the ninja in his village who is acknowledged as the leader and the strongest of all” (Naruto, n.d.). In addition to the “fighting” and trying to detect “Naruto’s clones”, Daniel enjoys the scenes where “Naruto tries to find his friend Sasuke and make him do good”. *Naruto* is also a *shonen*, a manga designed to appeal to young males and encourage camaraderie.
Participants choose texts and platforms that value visual and verbal resources just as much as, or in many cases, more than the written word.

In their online literacy practices, participants revealed no allegiance to particular modes and in their daily lives move seamlessly between watching videos, viewing images and reading written texts in the form of digital news articles, shared electronic documents, and postings on blogs and social media websites. Their choice of medium is based on how well it delivers the information they seek. However many of the most used platforms and applications were multimodal and predominately visually-based.

As a fan of the Naruto series, Daniel reads the manga online. As a text that conveys meaning through a complex use of modes, “manga readers are likely to attend to graphical information at the same hierarchical level as the printed text” (Schwartz & Rubenstein-Avila, 2006, p. 41). This is a distinction from its roots as Japanese communication, being in the high context culture, relies more on contextual cues such as facial expressions, gestures, eye glances, length and timing of silence, tone of voice, and grunts, all of which can be expressed in manga very eloquently. (Ito, 2005, p. 457)

In addition to reading the series online, Daniel also watches the anime series of the same name on Youtube. Beyond the manga and anime series, popular Naruto products include several movies, games, CDs and trading cards.

Tony is a self-described “visual person” and avid user of Instagram. Instagram is an online video and image sharing platform that allows individuals to easily apply filters and other effects and share these texts across media platforms. However, discussing his use of the platform, Tony revealed that it involves more than just shooting images. While Instagram is primarily an image
and video platform that describes itself as a “fast, beautiful and fun way to share your life with friends and family” (www.instagram.com), through metadata such as captions and other written descriptors, powerfully connects people’s ideas and images from around the world. Speaking about writing captions for this application he said:

[ . . .] so if I have to take a picture, I want to know what caption to use. Like I have to think about it. I usually think of one and then I ask my friends what they think. If it's not good they say no, and I would listen to their idea and I would like combine them or just see which is better.

While Tony acknowledged the pleasure he felt while shooting images, he and Steven both hinted at the power of video to transform not only how one understands but also the feelings, attitudes and opinions formed as a result. Like many others, Tony enjoys watching movies and in describing the multimodal review process he uses to gather information to make a decision, suggests the power of its affordances:

I would read overall what it’s about and then if I like it I'll watch a trailer and then actually watch the movie online. I think the trailer tells you more than you read because it actually shows you what they are doing, and you can tell if it’s funny or not. You can’t get that from reading. You're not gonna laugh at whatever you read.

Similarly, Steven illustrates the power of video to transform one’s understanding. When asked about his primary method of finding information he said:

YouTube, because I just recently started liking, like I said before Chief Keef, and before that I hated those guys because of the people they have a rap beef with. When those people died, I just found out what happened so I didn't know a lot about it but I was
interested in it. So I started looking it up on YouTube. They had videos about it. So I just looked at it over and over, at the scene and all those kinds of stuff.

Steven described how he used video to discover the news and circumstances of the death of rappers he admired and bear witness to the scene of the crime. Through watching Youtube videos, Steven gained a new understanding of those involved and ultimately moves beyond his dislike for Chief Keef and actually begins to enjoy him as an artist (as exemplified through his engagement on social media).

Steven utilizes an intertextual, multiplatform process to get an insider perspective on current music and industry news. By following the updates of his new favorite rappers, Chief Keef and Lil Reese – two American artists who at 17 years old earned music recording contracts – across platforms, he attempts to decode particular cultural texts. On twitter, he reads their tweets, which he describes as sometimes covert on topics ranging from music to rival artists. Then he visits Youtube and worldstarhiphop.com to connect the conversations to the lyrics and music videos of these same artists’. He reported:

Because [. . .] when they rap it's just not always talking, there is always meaning behind everything. 'Cause like when I see Chief Keef or Lil Reese rap, I know who it is about, I can tell what they did or what they’re saying. Once you get into them, like I'm interested in them so I follow them on Twitter and they usually have these conversations with each other, like do this or that. And I'd know who they’re talking about.
He continued:

And usually they talk about it a lot, but no one would recognize it. It's like the chorus of the guy's song really means what they did to someone, who they hurt or something like that. That’s why it gets so interesting 'cause I'm into that kind of stuff.

Steven’s pursuit of hip-hop and rap music results in deep textual engagement where he listens for allusions, ponders figurative language and detects the moods present in songs and in conversations.

**Participants feel empowered by their online literacy practices but regarded in-school literacy as a site of resistance.**

Students reported feeling a sense of agency with their online literacy practices as a result of the ease they felt with the various user-friendly technologies and applications they use and the accessibility of vast amounts of information they felt had the power to improve their futures. Daniel speaking of how simple it is to read online said:

It’s technology, you don’t need to turn the page with just one click you can do that.

For Tony, conducting research was also made easier by online resources:

[...] when I type I can think more and when I, like, write it on paper I think oh what am I going to write now. Like if I was on a computer, I can get ideas online and put it in my own words and write. Even if the teacher says to get ideas from articles, I don't like printing and reading them and finding information in there. It just makes it much harder.

Participants saw the success of their futures as tied to their use of digital tools. Tony remarked:
I’d say being able to like read the news every day, or any type of media would help you in your future 'cause you know what's happened around and maybe you can then change something, so you don't want to become that person or you want to do what they do.

Similarly Steven said:

But, with the computer I can find the things I need to get where I need to be or what I need to do.

For 2 of the participants, communicating online allows them to overcome personal traits such as shyness that can inhibit some in-person communication:

Daniel noted:

Well, when online you’re just like saying your mind, you just talk. When you're online you kind of feel good or something, now I want to say something and when I talk with my friends in person, I'm kind of shy.

Similarly, Tony noted:

I don't really like to talk too much to people I’m like the quiet type. But on Facebook I would talk to everyone because we're not really in person.

In contrast to these experiences facilitated by digital technologies, participants did not feel like they could be active participants in the construction of their school-based literacy practices. They expressed a great sense of powerlessness and frustration.

When asked about how he feels about the last English course he completed (in the previous semester), Steven revealed how he believes success is evaluated in his class. It comes not from
the skills he has developed or the texts he has encountered but by how well he is able to conform
to the demands of the teacher:

Yes, [I was successful] because I handed in everything that needs to be handed in and just
did what he said.

Additionally he expressed:

I hate reading things I don’t want to read. You know like reading for school. When I’m
supposed to read because the teacher said so, I want to do the opposite. When I'm forced
to that's when I lose my interest, but when I want to read something then I’m very
interested.

Equally, Tony disclosed just how far removed he feels from the decision making process and the
texts that comprised this experience:

And they're just teaching what they know, say like most teachers will teach Shakespeare
like as a book, maybe they should change Shakespeare into something else that's more
interesting and ask the class, ‘what would you guys like to read?’” instead of just picking
what they want. I think all four years I didn't know Shakespeare even till now, I don't
know any of the stories. I just sit there. Cause I just think it's boring and they use words
like thus. They use a different English and I just don't understand it.

Tony clearly believes that English class is a place where in addition to not having a say, not
much changes. The English canon doesn’t appeal to him because he literally cannot relate to the
literature he encounters. In fact, Tony revealed that he believes he was unsuccessful on the
OSSLT because he wrote outside of the lines of the test booklet and was penalized for this action:

I think I was unsuccessful because I didn't listen to the instructions because I found out this year that they don't read past the lines I think you're supposed to do it inside the lines, like the lines they've given you. So if you write outside it, it doesn't count. I've done it twice and I got the same mark. So I got like a 295, they couldn't even give me five marks so I could pass.

The feeling of not having much control of their school-based literacy activities resulted in expressions of indifference to classes and/or a strong defiance toward school-based texts and activities. Tony attempts to exercise some limited power by doing as little as possible at times:

[. . .] I think I probably never opened a book since grade seven (laughs) or actually finished a book. Even in English class if the teacher says oh can you read the chapter in class I would read that, but taking it home to finish the rest, I probably wouldn’t do. I’d just look at the summary online.

Unfortunately, two of the participants expressed negative self-perceptions based on their school-based literacy. Tony revealed:

[. . .] I wouldn't consider myself as a good writer though because I have to think and I'm not really like, I don’t know how do I say it, like I know it's gonna be right, but I’m always concerned I’m going to be wrong.
Later he said:

Okay, say I'm in a university course, I’ll feel like my paper is like kindergarten or college level, so I feel like the outcast.

Similarly, Daniel noted that his writing skills are “not good”:

Because I compare to other people and they have better writing than mine.

When asked why he thinks this, he said:

Just other people are better than me in the end.

The findings of this study highlight that students, who have failed the OSSLT and have consequently been identified as challenged with literacy, have strong general interests and desires to engage with texts. They seek out manga, hip-hop, crime articles, Youtube videos, among other texts and communicate ideas on twitter, Instagram and Facebook. The various forms of these texts — combinations of words and images, audio and video — boldly outline the growth of meaning making capabilities spurred by digital technology. Through friendship and interest-driven online activities, participants are reflecting who they are, and also learning about who they want to become in the world. With the ease students expressed with using the technology and the connections it enabled, both human and information, it is expected that they many resist school spaces that were mostly devoid of their interests.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This study describes some of the digitally-mediated literacy practices of students who have failed the OSSLT. Based on the findings, participants: engage in digital literacy practices that are based on their emotional connections and on the particular conditions of their lives; they employ various modes but choose platforms that highly value visual and verbal resources; and view online literacy as empowering, and school literacy as a site of resistance. These findings, alongside other research, have implications for literacy education. This section begins with a discussion of the study’s three findings and then proposes implications for the classroom and policy levels.

Participants are motivated to engage in online literacy practices that make connections to their lives, hopes and dreams. As a result, they are avid social media users and on a daily basis, view the texts that compose the lives of friends and acquaintances in the form of pictures, short video clips and posts on daily happenings. Steven and Tony’s passions for hip-hop and crime respectively, motivated them to constantly seek out information from sources such as Google and speciality sites like worldstarhiphop.com. They read online news articles and music videos and demonstrated an ability to engage in deep reading of texts, particularly Steven’s practice of decoding hip-hop texts across platforms. These issues of crime and poverty, the same ones discussed in much hip-hop and rap are common fixtures in the lives of those living in the low-income school neighborhood. Participants’ connections are also cultural like Daniel’s online manga reading practice which he shares with other adolescences, mainly Japanese males in his life including his brother.

Two participants expressed frustration at the way the “classics” or texts from the English canon took precedence in English class. In order for students to move beyond the idea that teachers
“just teach what they know” as Tony reflected, student engagement must be a crucial component of learning. This is reflected in the textual choices teachers make because “in post-modernist times, text production and consumption can no longer be represented as enterprises concerned with promoting incontrovertible truths or with asserting and sustaining singular, fixed realities” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2000, p.1). Students interests and “funds of knowledge” — the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household and individual functioning and wellbeing” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133) — can be tapped into for this information and can drive classroom activities and discussions.

For instance, all of the participants expressed enjoying music, with Steven and Tony indicating they were particularly interested in hip-hop/rap. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2005) noticing this interest in their own students at a California high school, explored “how teaching hip-hop music as literacy genre could help scaffold and develop the literacies of youth who have been labelled as “non-academic” or semi-literate”” (p. 247). These teachers developed a “[. . .] unit [that] reflected basic tenets of critical pedagogy in that it was situated in the experiences of the students, called for critical dialogue, critical engagement with texts, and related the focus texts to larger social and political issues” (p. 265).

At the same time, participants of this study are deeply invested in visual and verbal resources for making meaning and representation in their daily lives. Youtube.com was the primary search tool for Steven and both Tony and Daniel were daily users of the site. In addition, participants used Instagram, worldstarhiphop.com and social media sites that facilitated the distribution of non-print texts like audio and images. In addition,
The ability to download videos and browse sites such as YouTube means that youth can view media at times and in locations that are convenient and social, providing they have access to high-speed Internet. These practices have become part and parcel of sociability in youth culture and, in turn, central to identity formation among youth. (Ito et al., 2008, p. 14)

Tony and Steven highlighted the potential impact of video on the modern world to bring about new understandings. It is the affordances offered by video that have propelled it into the consciousness of individuals like never before. Concurring with Tony’s point about the ability of video (in this case movie trailers) to sometimes provide a better preview than say a written review, Hull and Nelson draw on Kress (2003) to note:

‘[. .] the world narrated’ is a different world to ‘the world depicted and displayed’ (pp. 1-4), making the point that although different semiotic modes may seem to encode the same content, they are nonetheless conveyors of qualitatively different kinds of messages. More specifically, the meaning in images is apprehended by the viewer in accordance with an ordering principle that is spatial and simultaneous, whereas language, particularly oral language, is organized and apprehended temporally and sequentially. (Hull and Nelson, 2005, p. 229)

The semiotic resources that dominate participants’ out-of-school lives are various and reflect the tremendous growth of video on the internet and in the public domain generally. For teachers, this shift offers a tremendous opportunity to present material in new and exciting ways.

These texts, while having educational value, don’t lend themselves well to standardization, or in other words to the principles that have traditionally characterized literacy in schools such as sole
authorship (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). While the EQAO claims that the OSSLT promotes 21st century skills, there are noticeable contradictions of values. We cannot claim to inspire creativity and collaboration while employing high stakes assessments that drive teachers and administrators to demand uniformity and standard thinking from students. Nor can this claim be made when the OSSLT operates on a definition of literacy that contrasts even with the understanding promoted in curriculum documents as complex, socially-based practices.

Participants were aware of this contradiction and perceived a lack of power in their literacy education. Clearly some of the benefits that students identified as promoting agency in their online practices such as the user-friendlessness of technologies and the shield it offers for shy, or otherwise reticent students are important for teachers to consider. Equally important is the way educators have the ability through pedagogical and content choice to share the power inherent in the role as teacher with their students. For if “assessing is a political act – an act of power – that is usually carried out by gatekeepers who define and codify knowledge” (Burke & Hammett, 2009, p. 7), then Tony’s suggestion that teachers ask the class, “what would you guys like to read?” is a simple but crucial point in that process. For students are aware, to varying degrees, that
texts — be they the standardized, grade-level specific books so beloved by school systems, or the novels, trade books, and alternative materials that teachers either use to supplement these books or simply to replace them — are part of a complex story of cultural politics. (Apple, 2000, p. 59)
Implications for Policy

Schools cannot continue, to varying degrees, to operate in silos that deem activities that don’t fit historical definitions of literary, texts and assessments as irrelevant, or that treat literacy as devoid of context. However, in order to see meaningful changes, educational action and cooperation must occur at both the policy and school levels. By definitions outlined in the curriculum, the OSSLT fails to provide information crucial for determining students’ literacy readiness to graduate. While some argue that all that comprises literacy cannot be measured on such a test, I suggest then that it is time to break from traditional means of assessment that no longer serve our needs rather than attempting to work from within their confines. For “in order for assessment to represent the multimodalities characteristic of outside-school literacies, and ultimately represent the type of textual engagements characteristic of youth culture, we need to move away from snapshots of achievement and move towards a more nuanced understanding of youth’s practices and development of texts” (Burke & Hammett, 2009, p. 7). The OSSLT must end due to its inability to measure what counts as literacy today.

In addition to missing the literacies students have demonstrated they possess in this study, the OSSLT puts tremendous pressure on teachers and administrators to prioritize reading and writing at the expense of other skills. These results serve to determine their “public worthiness” and ranking and thus naturally take precedence in classrooms and schools. If educators are to be allowed to truly be invested in increasing students’ life chances, then structural barriers like that OSSLT that inhibit teachers from innovating, or engaging “in formative experiments of novel classroom practice” (Morrell, 2004, p. 90) must be removed. Teachers attempting to integrate new literacies into their practice can be handicapped by the large amounts of classroom time (in
addition to enormous administrative time and effort) and education resources spent on preparing
for the OSSLT.

To allow the room for teachers to attend to the fluid nature of literacy, funding must be provided
for professional development that will support the growth of their technical skills and knowledge
of appropriate pedagogy that will allow them to comfortably scaffold student learning and
divergent interests. Study after study has highlighted the fact that teachers are just not
comfortable using technology in their classrooms, especially in low-income schools (Gray,
Thomas & Lewis, 2010). The primary goal is not necessarily for teachers to become experts in
any particular technology, as that is not the important part, but rather to encourage them to adopt
an “inquiry stance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) that posits interests such as the ones Tony,
Steven and Daniel discussed as important starting points in the learning and teaching process.

Communities of practice are effective ways for educators to share and build on their experiences
and knowledge. On a nationwide scale and in collaboration with ministries of education in other
provinces, creating a nationwide educational technology repository as a hub could be an effective
strategy for teachers to be involved in a large and potentially strong network of educators. Such
an initiative could be managed by the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC), an
intergovernmental agency that has as one of its mandates to act as “a mechanism through which
to undertake activities, projects, and initiatives in areas of mutual interest
(http://www.cmec.ca/11/About.html).

**Implications for Classrooms**

Teachers have a role to play in student’s literate lives, whether on or offline and can resist the
assimilative function of school (Dewey, 1966). More than providing students with access to
computers and technologies – as this has mostly been accomplished – the focus must now be on their use. That is, integrating it into classrooms in meaningful ways that takes into account who students are, and how texts fit into their lives. This includes “[. . .] view[ing] children’s resistance to stories and /or instruction as being indicative of ‘their expanding interests and capabilities in their more general life experiences’” (Gregory & Cahill, 2009, p. 9). This is not to suggest co-opting students’ online spaces but working with students to create new school literacy practices mediated by digital technologies. As noted, at the core of all of this change for educators is not the technology itself or even the information now widely available but as this study confirms, it is the human relationships, we are in the midst of a "relationship revolution" (Schrage, 2001, p. 1). It is accurate then “that the real value of a medium lies less in the information that it carries than in the communities it creates” (p. 2).

Critical literacy provides an important instructional approach to engage students, especially those who occupy marginal literacy positions in schools. Linda Christensen (1999) notes that:

Creating a critical literacy classroom still means teaching students to read and write. But instead of only asking students to write essays that demonstrate a close reading of a novel or engaging in a literacy evaluation of the text critical literacy creates spaces for students to tackle larger social issues that have urgent meaning in their lives. (p. 62)

Critical literacy, as an explicitly political endeavour, has grown out of the work of Paulo Freire, who believed that “reading the world” as he is now famously quoted as saying, “precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world” (Freire, 1987, p. 5). Luke and Freebody (1997) have described teachers that adopt this approach as “[. . .] committed to engaging with the possibilities that the technologies
of writing and other modes of inscription offer for social change, cultural diversity, economic equity, and political enfranchisement” (p. 1).

Limitations and Further Research

This phenomenological study involved three grade 12 students. As with most research, it involved some limitations that I outline along with suggestions for further investigation. One of the limitations of this study is the small, all male sample size. While the goal of this study was not to make generalizations, a larger group that includes female students might reveal interesting patterns. Are female students who are unsuccessful with the OSSLT engaging in similar practices? A second limitation is that this is a local study that included students from one school site, a similar study in another contexts could be insightful. Lastly, while the focus was on participants’ experiences, future research could complicate the findings further with the inclusion of the perspectives of teachers, administrators and/or parents.

Education in the 21st century is more complex, and interrelated than it has ever been. With digital technology permitting students access to information and people in unprecedented ways and the ability to engage with various textual forms with ease, policymakers and educators must react collectively and bravely. These changes are fundamental and calls for “back-to-basics” education simply do not do justice to the multimodal abilities of students who have embraced new technologies. By learning from students and with them, educators can create classroom communities that utilize images and videos alongside printed text, are connected to the knowledge youth bring to class and reflect a social, economic and political context that is ever evolving.
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Appendix A: Letter to Parents/Guardians of Potential Participant

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Lotoya Jackson and I am pursing a Master of Education degree at OISE, University of Toronto. I am doing research into the out-of-school, online literacy practices of students who are or have been required to re-write the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, in order to identify literacy needs which may not currently be met by schools.

I will be interviewing 4-6 students to learn about their attitudes and experiences using technology to participate in reading and writing activities. I am inviting your child to participate in this research. The total participation time will be 1 hour, and the interview will take place at your child’s school. Students will receive a $10 gift card as a token of appreciation. Once I have completed the interviews and written the report, your child will be invited to view it at a meeting that will take place at their school. I can be reached at 000-000-0000.

The following page is a consent form. Please read it carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have (see above for phone number). By signing you agree to allow your child to participate based on the points outlined.

Sincerely,

Lotoya Jackson
Researcher

Dr. Rob Simon
Thesis Supervisor
Appendix B: Letter of Participant and Parental Informed Consent

I have been informed that my child, as a participant in this research, has the following rights:

1) I understand that my child has the right to confidentiality and their name, the name of their school and board will not appear in any report. A pseudonym will be used instead.

2) I am aware that my child's participation in this study is voluntary and that he/she will receive a gift card of $10 even if they withdraw early, if done in good faith.

3) My child has the right to withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason. He/she does not have to share the reason(s) with the researcher.

4) My child has the right to refuse to answer any questions asked of him/her, for any reason. He/she does not have to share the reason(s) with the researcher.

5) I am aware that my child's participation will last 1 hour and involve an interview and collection of online artifacts such as urls to blogs.

6) I am aware that the individual interview will be audio recorded. I have been informed that the interviews and transcripts will be destroyed 5 years after collection.

7) On behalf of my child, I will keep a copy of this Consent Form and can request a copy of the results.

I give consent for my child to participate in the interview: Yes____         No_____

My child consents to participate in the interview:                 Yes____         No_____

My child consents to be audio-recorded:                               Yes_____       No _____

Signature of Parent:       Date:

Name of Participant, printed:

Signature of Participant:     Date:

Signature of Researcher:     Date:
Appendix C: Letter of Assent to Participate

Dear Student: My name is Lotoya Jackson and I am pursing a Master of Education degree at OISE, University of Toronto. I am doing research into the online literacy activities that students who are required to re-write the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, participate in. This includes writing/commenting on blogs, using social media in substantive ways, contributing to wikis, etc. at least once a day. By participating you may help identify literacy needs not currently met by your school. Your total participation will include a 1 hour individual interview and you will receive a $10 gift card as appreciation for your time.

I have been informed that, if I chose to participate, I have certain rights. I understand that my name will not be used in any way in the study and that my participation is voluntary and that I may stop the interview at any time and for any reason. I can refuse to answer any question, for any reason and I do not have to explain why I chose not to answer. I have been told that the interview will be approximately one hour.

By signing this letter, I understand that during the interview I will be asked questions about my online literacy experiences. I understand that the interview is part of a research project being completed by Lotoya Jackson, who is a student at OISE, University of Toronto.

I, ________________ assent to participate in this research project.

Signature of Participant: ________________ Date: ________________

Signature of Researcher: ________________ Date: ________________