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I, Jessica A West, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies.

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Constructing Academic Identities Through Digital Writing: A Multiple Case Study of Adolescents Deemed “At-Risk”

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Cincinnati in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of Educational Studies of the College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services

by

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ABSTRACT

Academic failure is a common problem for adolescents in the United States with more than half of fourth and eighth graders failing to achieve proficient scores on national literacy measures. This qualitative descriptive holistic multiple-case study explored the ways in which four adolescents who were deemed “at-risk” constructed academic identities through digital writing in order to understand the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context creates for adolescents. New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013) was used as a theoretical lens to interpret the learning contexts in which adolescents engaged in digital writing practices. Writer Identity theory (Ivanič, 1998) was used to analyze the identities adolescents constructed within their writing as well as the contexts in which they were writing. Gee’s (2000) framework for four ways to view identity was also used to analyze how adolescents perceived themselves, as well as how they were perceived by their teachers, within the Discourse of school. Participants included two fourth grade students and their English/language arts teacher in a suburban elementary school and two ninth grade students and their English teacher in an urban high school in Ohio. Qualitative data sources included classroom observations, digitally recorded observations of participants’ writing events, semi-structured interviews, and artifacts. Data were analyzed inductively using pattern codes and deductively using the theoretical frameworks. Findings are presented both as narrative vignettes of each adolescent’s perceptions of academic identity and experiences with digital writing, as well as a cross-case synthesis of the four individual cases. Cross-case findings suggest that possibilities for selfhood are limited or expanded by the parameters of the assignment more than the medium in which the writing takes place, and that the teacher’s positioning of students as technology experts expands their possibilities for selfhood within the classroom context. The findings of this study reaffirm
assertions made in a wealth of literature on the teaching of writing that argues for giving adolescents freedom to write about topics that genuinely matter to them. The writing events in which adolescents engaged during the study period were all directly related to preparing for the PARCC Performance-Based Assessments. This study sheds new light on how educators can work within the confines of high-stakes test preparation to continue to offer students engaging experiences with digital writing, as well as how educators can work to reconstruct identities of failure in adolescents who are at risk of leaving school because of their past experiences with schooling.

*Keywords:* digital literacies, digital writing, identity, adolescents, case study research, qualitative
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background and Nature of the Problem

Academic failure is a common problem for adolescents in America’s schools. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (2013) reported that 42% of fourth graders and 36% of eighth graders who took the assessment scored at or above the proficient level in reading, and only 27% of eighth graders scored at or above the proficient level in writing (NAEP, 2011). If we rely on these standardized measures, then we must face the fact that the majority of America’s fourth and eighth graders are failing at literacy. In analyzing similar NAEP data, Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) argue that the current state of adolescent literacy in the United States represents “an enormous human rights issue” (p. 5). When students enter middle school and high school, instruction shifts from learning to read to reading to learn. Hasselbring and Goin (2004) explain that as students move through the education system, a gap develops between good readers and poor readers in which good readers become better readers and poor readers become more frustrated with reading.

While reading achievement is regularly assessed through high stakes standardized tests, writing is less frequently assessed. However, because of both school structure and the cognitive interdependence of the reading and writing process (Shanahan, 1997, 2006), students perceive the two to be related. This means that students who do not perform well on reading assessments and identify as failures at reading are likely to also identify as failures at literacy in general, or as failures at "English class." This problem is exacerbated as adolescents get older, and more and more of their writing in school, especially in English/language arts classes, is based on what they read.
Research suggests that adolescents who have failed a high-stakes literacy assessment experience socio-emotional consequences from the failure. Kearns (2011) found that failing test results affected students’ perceptions of self and caused them to question themselves and feel inferior to students who had passed the test. She argued that experiencing failure on the literacy assessment further marginalized students by “(re)produc[ing] an inequitable separation and differentiation between and amongst students; those who pass are privileged and those who fail are named ‘illiterate’ and are marginalized by a systemic practice that treats all students the same” (p. 123). For adolescents, the experience of failing becomes a powerful source of information for identity construction during a developmental period that is characterized as a time of change in the ways they perceive themselves and the possibilities that exist for them in educational contexts (Eccles, 1999). When educational systems fail to provide instruction that addresses adolescents’ literacy needs, too many students leave school with lasting identities as poor readers and as failures (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009).

School literacy in general, and high stakes testing in particular, is largely centered on an autonomous model of literacy in which literacy is obtained through a set of skills to be mastered in neutral contexts (Street & Street, 1991). This is in contrast to emergent views of literacy that recognize literacy as a social practice that is mediated by written texts to serve broader social goals and cultural practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). For adolescents of the 21st Century, many of the social goals and cultural practices in which they engage are mediated by technology and multimedia texts. In fact, most of students' out-of-school engagements with literacy are characterized by the use of technology, while most of their in-school experiences with literacy are characterized by the use of traditional texts (Tarasiuk, 2010). This mismatch reifies the
associations between school literacy and standardized test failure that contributes to adolescents’ academic identities.

Alvermann (2008) argues that teachers, teacher educators, and researchers cannot ignore adolescents’ online literacies and the ways in which they permeate classrooms. She further argues that online literacies offer the opportunity for students to “reinvent themselves as competent learners (even rewrite their social identities)” (p. 18). In order to understand the implications online literacies have on classroom teaching and literacy research, she insists that we need to go directly to adolescents and ask them about their online literacies. This study aimed to do just that.

**Purpose and Rationale for the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the ways in which adolescents deemed “at-risk” construct academic identities through digital writing in order to understand the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context creates for adolescents. This study documented the experiences and perceptions of two fourth grade students in a suburban elementary school and two ninth grade students in an urban high school in Ohio.

Experiencing failure in academics can lead to students constructing identities of failure surrounding school. Thomas Newkirk (2009), discussing academic failure in the context of his work with boys, put it this way:

Those boys who have the experience of being behind, of not being good at literacy – and they number in the millions – soon *turn a difficulty into an identity*. They begin to believe that they are just not good at words, at least printed ones. Such an identity provides security because there is no longer a need to really try,
for any attempt just exposes a deficiency. And because we all have a stake in the identities we assume (even when they work against us), they are much more impervious to instruction. (p. 106)

Digital writing offers the potential for adolescents to reconstruct academic identities of failure surrounding traditional forms of writing by replacing the associations of failure that traditional writing contexts bring about with associations of success based on their proficiency with digital tools and media, and allowing adolescents to bring their expertise with technology into the classroom.

Writing in digital contexts creates a space for students who have previously developed negative identities as students to experiment with new ways of positioning themselves as writers and students who do not hold those negative associations. Digital literacy practices that integrate new media provide a space for adolescents to experiment with the ways in which they present themselves through writing and for “creatively constructing or performing identities” (Merchant, 2013, p. 46). Students who are able to write in digital contexts for school purposes are given the opportunity to reconstruct and perform new academic identities they otherwise might not have had an opportunity to develop. Siegel (2012) argues that literacy instruction that includes multimodal practices such as those associated with digital writing can “reframe at-risk students as learners of promise” (p. 674).

In this study, students who were considered “at-risk” because of previous academic failure were given the opportunity to engage in digital writing events by classroom teachers who used digital writing frequently and in a variety of different ways in their instruction, ranging from collaborative writing using Google Docs to the use of Web 2.0 applications and multimodal
The study explored how those students viewed themselves as learners when writing in these digital contexts.

Bickerstaff (2012) studied the writing identities of students who had previously left high school and returned to a GED program to explore the ways in which their writing lives in digital contexts out of school related to their writing lives in their GED program. However, no studies have explored how adolescents who are at risk for school failure view themselves as students and writers in relation to their experiences with digital writing. This study helps educators and researchers to better understand how four adolescents reconstructed their identities as literacy learners in particular and students in general. It also sheds new light on how educators can work to reconstruct identities of failure in adolescents who are at risk of leaving school because of their past experiences with schooling.

**Research Questions**

This study explored the following research questions:

- How do adolescents perceive their academic identities in the context of digital writing?
- How do the institutional identities ascribed to adolescents contribute to their academic identities?
- How do adolescents’ past and current writing experiences contribute to their academic identities?
- What are the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction?
Definition of Key Terms

Academic Identity

Academic identity refers to the identity a student adopts within a classroom context that can foster or impede his or her academic achievement. Academic identity has been described as “students’ sense of themselves as competent students, able to achieve success within the language arts classroom” (Carbone & Orellana, 2010, p. 295). In this study, the term academic identities is used to refer to how adolescents perceive themselves as literacy learners.

Adolescence

In this study, the period of adolescence in terms of grade ranges is identified as spanning grades 4 through 12. Beginning at approximately the ages of 10-11, children transition from the middle childhood developmental period to the early adolescence period that is characterized by biological, cognitive, and social changes (Eccles, 1999). Furthermore, fourth grade has been identified as the start of adolescence in a previous study of digital literacy (Houge & Geier, 2009). Twelfth grade was selected as the end of adolescence for the purposes of this study because graduating from high school is a culturally symbolic end to adolescence and the start of young adulthood.

At-Risk

In this study, “at-risk” refers to a label placed on students by their educational institution because they have previously experienced academic failure. As a result of past academic failure, students are considered “at-risk” of future academic failure and are, therefore, at risk of not successfully earning a high school diploma and dropping out of school. Academic failure can take the form of failure on a state administered standardized assessment, grade retention, or an overall demonstration of poor academic performance documented in students’ records. While
“at-risk” has been used in this way in the literature to refer to students who have previously experienced academic failure (Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011), it has also been used to refer to sociocultural identity factors such as race and class (Zheng, Warschauer, & Farkas, 2013). In this study, “at-risk” is not used to refer to sociocultural characteristics of students, but only to previous academic failure.

**Digital Literacy/Literacies**

Digital literacy refers to a person’s ability to know how and when to use various technologies for various purposes (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). Lankshear and Knobel (2008) use the plural “digital literacies” to account for the myriad ways in which the singular “digital literacy” has been defined in the literature, ranging from conceptual to operational definitions. Conceptual definitions focus on ideal meanings of the term, such as “digital literacy enables us to match the medium we use to the kind of information we are presenting and to the audience we are presenting to” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 3). Operational definitions focus more on the specific skills a user of technology must have in order to successfully carry out functions using the technology, such as how to edit, upload and share files. The singular and plural forms of the term are used throughout this study depending on the context of use.

**Digital Writing**

The National Writing Project (2010) defines digital writing as “*compositions created with, and often times for reading or viewing on, a computer or other device that is connected to the Internet*” (p. 7, emphasis in original). These compositions can range from basic word processing on one end of the continuum to multimodal text production using Web 2.0 interfaces on the other end. The term multimodal refers to the modes of meaning making (i.e., audio,
visual, linguistic, spatial and gestural) that are integrated to create electronic multimedia texts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Examples of digital writing include, but are not limited to, creating podcasts, creating and modifying wikis, writing and managing blogs, writing fan fiction, writing and digitally illustrating graphic novels, and creating mash-ups of existing audio, video and texts for novel purposes. Digital writing has less to do with the medium with which the writer uses to compose and more to do with the ways in which writing is changing in response to new technologies. Grabill and Hicks (2005) use the term “digital writing” to refer to a “changed writing environment” (p. 304) that is characterized by connectivity that allows writers to access and share writing via the Internet.

**Possibilities for Selfhood**

Possibilities for selfhood (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Ivanič, 1998) refers to the range of identities and ways of positioning oneself available to writers in socially constructed writing contexts. Possibilities for selfhood do not exist within the writer, but within the social space in which the writing is taking place. Possibilities for selfhood are influenced by the available and socially acceptable discourses of the writing context and can change from one act of writing to the next. These discourses are constructed according to the “ways of thinking, valuing, acting, using language and other semiotic resources, [and by] using particular tools and technologies” (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010, pp. 236-237) that are available in the social space of the writing context. The possibilities for selfhood that exist within a particular writing context shape the identity a writer can construct in a particular piece of writing.

**Positionality of the Researcher**

First and foremost, I bring my identity as a high school English teacher to this study. My seven years of experience teaching ninth grade English and working with adolescents,
professional colleagues, and student teaching interns have all shaped how I view the interactions that occur in classrooms. This brings strength to my research because I am familiar with school contexts and the various ways in which teachers and students experience writing in the classroom. I also bring my identity as a white, middle class woman to this study. My inclusion criterion for participants in the study was based solely on past academic achievement; therefore, some of the participants differed from me in terms of race, class, or gender.

I bring a constructionist worldview, or a belief that reality is constructed through social processes, to this study. Based on a constructionist view, “people have their own reasons for their actions, and researchers need to learn the reasons people use” (Neuman, 2006, p. 90). This reinforces my desire to go directly to adolescents to explore the ways in which they view themselves as students and writers in digital writing contexts. I view the participants of this study as the experts of their own experiences and positioned them as such throughout the research process. I come to this study valuing the “local particulars” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3) of each adolescent’s experiences and perceptions and believe that an in-depth understanding of these particulars can contribute greatly to our understanding of abstract phenomena.

Summary of Chapter

This chapter provided a brief overview of the nature of the research problem, the study’s purpose, the potential significance of the project, definitions of key terms, and the positionality of the researcher within the investigation. In the next chapter, I discuss the theoretical frameworks and relevant literature on which this study is based.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

In this chapter, I explicate the theories that I used to frame this study of adolescents’
academic identity construction in digital writing contexts. Then I provide a review of prior
research on digital writing with adolescents, as well as research on adolescents labeled “at-risk”
for school failure. Finally, I discuss how this review of literature informed my methodological
decisions in designing this study.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is grounded in New Literacies theory and two theories of identity, Ivanič’s
theories serve as analytical lenses through which I interpreted the classroom contexts and
participants’ perceptions and experiences.

New Literacies Theory

The first theoretical framework that grounds this study is New Literacies theory. The
emphasis in digital writing research is on the ways in which the act of writing is changing in
response to new technologies. For that reason, a study of digital writing needs to be grounded in
a theoretical framework that accounts for the ways in which new technologies influence literacy.
New Literacies represents both a field of inquiry as well as a developing theoretical perspective.
argue that the Internet creates new literacies that are distinct from traditional pencil and paper
literacies, and thus deserves its own theoretical framework that accounts for the social practices
and evolving contexts of the Internet and other Information Communication Technologies
(ICTs), such as tablets and smartphones, in order to understand these new literacies practices.
Grounded in New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1990; Street, 1995), New Literacies theory (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2013) recognizes the need to consider the social practices and contexts of literacy events, but also stresses the need to account for the “new” ways in which people engage with literacy as a result of the growing influence of the Internet on our everyday lives. Lankshear and Knobel (2011) explain that while the “New” in New Literacy Studies referenced the shift to a new paradigm that focused on sociocultural influences rather than cognitive processes, the “new” in new literacies references shifts in both the technical ways we engage with literacy as well as the changes in ethos we have toward literacy practices. Technical changes refer to post-typographic text such as the use of hypertext that integrates URLs, documents, images, sounds and video, as well as many other practices resulting from the advent of mobile phones, digital cameras, new software programs and applications. Changes in ethos refer to mindsets that value participation and collaboration over individual authorship. The influence of the New London Group’s (1996) theory of multiliteracies is also apparent in the technical changes Lankshear and Knobel (2011) illustrate. The ways in which we interact with new literacies mirror the various types of Available Designs, as linguistic, visual, and audio texts are merged within a single space, giving increased relevance to the concept of Multimodal Design.

New Literacies as a theory is still in its infancy. While suggesting that it was too early to explicate a complete theory of New Literacies, Leu et al. (2013) offer eight central principles that have been found to be common across emergent research on new literacies. Using these eight principles as a theoretical lens for understanding the contexts in which the participants of this study were writing creates the opportunity to further develop and refine this emergent theory.
The first principle states: “The Internet is this generation’s defining technology for literacy and learning within our global community” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1158). Grounding this idea in New Literacy Studies’ emphasis on the socially and culturally situated nature of literacy practices, Leu and colleagues argue that the statistics of Internet access and usage indicate that the Internet is a dominant presence in our lives; and the Internet has become the most prevalent cultural tool with which we engage with literacy.

The second principle states: “The Internet and related technologies require additional new literacies to fully access their potential” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1159). Engaging in new literacy practices requires the use of traditional literacy practices associated with reading and writing print-based texts such as decoding and encoding text, comprehending and evaluating authors’ ideas and making inferences, as well as spelling, drafting, revising, and editing. However, they argue that these literacy practices are not sufficient for taking advantage of the capabilities of the Internet and ICTs. Instead, traditional literacy practices serve as foundational practices from which new literacy practices need to be developed in order to effectively engage with and benefit from the full range of possibilities created by new technologies.

The third principle states: “New literacies are deictic” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1160). What it means to engage in new literacy practices transforms as new technologies and ICTs are developed. New technologies lead to new social practices and new literacy practices at a much quicker pace than ever before in history because of the instantaneous nature of the Internet.

The fourth principle states: “New literacies are multiple, multimodal, and multifaceted” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1160). Grounding this idea in the New London Group’s (1996) theory of multiliteracies, Leu and colleagues argue that the changing nature and affordances of texts on the Internet over traditional print texts allow for meaning to be represented through more complex
combinations of modalities. They also argue that the Internet and ICTs offer multiple tools for meaning construction, so that new literacies practices include the ability to use a variety of technology tools and to select the most appropriate tool for the context. Additionally, the Internet offers access to diverse global contexts, requiring users to develop the ability to communicate in varied social contexts with other users who hold varied perspectives.

The fifth principle states: “Critical literacies are central to new literacies” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1161). The open nature of the Internet allows for anyone to contribute content. This means that it is more important than ever before for users to learn to engage in critical thinking and analysis in order to identify the “political, economic, religious, or ideological stances that profoundly influence the nature of the information” (p. 1161) found on the Internet.

The sixth principle states: “New forms of strategic knowledge are required with new literacies” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1162). The nonlinear nature of the Internet afforded by hypertext technologies means that users must learn to negotiate multiple navigational pathways in order to access information. A complex networked environment has replaced the straightforward nature of information presentation in print-based texts and users must develop strategies for reading comprehension within this new environment. These strategies include approaching online reading tasks with a problem-solving mindset, navigating search engine results and developing criteria for determining relevance of possible online texts according to the reading purpose, and monitoring comprehension of chosen online texts and the relevance of the reading path through multiple interconnected online texts to the reading purpose (Coiro, 2011).

The seventh principle states: “New literacy practices are a central element of New Literacies” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1162). First, new digital technologies create the capabilities for new ways of constructing, sharing and accessing content that translate into the development of
new literacy practices. Second, these new literacy practices will require new social practices to be developed in classrooms, as the knowledge and expertise of these new practices will rest in the students as well as the teacher. Rather than viewing students and teachers as expert or novice technology users, this theory recognizes that each person in the classroom, student or teacher, will bring ever-developing knowledge of various technologies and ICTs. This means that new social practices involving sharing knowledge and expertise are necessary for the development of new literacy practices.

The final principle states: “Teachers become more important, though their role changes, within new literacy classrooms” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1163). Teachers are no longer dispensers of literacy skills, but now orchestrators of learning contexts. Taking on the role as a guide within the learning context of the Internet requires teachers to thoughtful planning for the ways in which students will engage with the Internet, as well as be willing to embrace the fact that some students will be more literate with certain technologies than the teacher. Their role will require active engagement with changing, complex contexts and a willingness to become learners alongside their students.

Originally published in 2004, this emergent theory is beginning to be used by researchers as a theoretical lens for studies of technology and learning (Hutchison & Beschorner, 2014; Lima & Brown, 2007; Stevens & Brown, 2011). New Literacies theory gives researchers a framework for understanding the ways the Internet and ICTs impact not only the literacy development of students, but also the social contexts of classrooms. It can also serve as a philosophical framework for learning with new technologies that can be used by teachers to structure instructional practices that use the Internet and ICTs.
In this study, I observed teachers and students engage in new literacies practices in English/language arts classrooms. In these classrooms, writing instruction was mediated through the use of the Internet and ICTs. Using New Literacies theory allowed me to better understand the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction. The eight principles described above and the ways in which they were enacted in each classroom contributed to the discourses that surrounded students’ engagement with digital writing. These discourses influenced the possibilities for selfhood that existed for students in the socially constructed contexts in which students were writing.

Identity, however, is not a central construct in New Literacies theory. For that reason, researchers working from a New Literacies framework must draw on other theories of identity when conducting research on new literacies topics and identity. In their influential book on new literacies, Lankshear and Knobel (2011) draw heavily on Gee’s (2008) work with identity and his theory of Discourses. However, little has been written from a theoretical standpoint about the intersection of identity and new literacies practices. Instead, studies and discussions of identity are often framed using theories grounded in New Literacy Studies. This makes sense given that New Literacies has historical roots in New Literacy Studies. However a need exists for more theoretical discussions of the relationship between identity and New Literacies. For this reason, I used two additional frameworks for understanding identity in this study.

**Writer Identity Theory**

The second theoretical framework that grounds this study is Writer Identity theory. Working within a New Literacy Studies framework, Ivanič (1998) proposed four aspects of “writer identity” that are useful for thinking about the relationship between identity and writing.
In explicating this theory, I will use a hypothetical example of a sixth grade student writing a narrative about her favorite vacation to illustrate the four dimensions of the theory.

The first, *autobiographic self*, refers to the identity writers bring to a piece of writing, or their sense of themselves as human beings influenced by their life experiences, interests, values, and beliefs (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). The autobiographical self is a writer’s sense of his or her life history, and it is thus constantly changing as new experiences become past experiences and contribute to this history. For the sixth grade student assigned to write about her favorite vacation, all of her past experiences traveling during the first twelve years of her life would make up the autobiographical self she brings to the writing event. If this student were asked to write on the same prompt five years later, her autobiographical self would include not only the experiences she drew from as a sixth grader, but also the traveling experiences she gained in the five years following the first writing event.

The second, *discoursal self*, refers to the impression a writer consciously or unconsciously creates about his or herself in a piece of writing. The discoursal self is the identity the writer constructs for the reader of the text, and is related to the concept of “voice” in writing in so much as it regards the way the writer “sounds” in the writing. As our fictitious student writes about her favorite vacation to Florida, she may consciously construct an identity of herself as someone who is athletic and social by writing a scene in which she and friends play beach volleyball. In the same piece of writing, she may also unconsciously construct an identity as a child from an affluent family in her descriptions of the condo her family rents for the month.

The third, *self as author*, refers to the idea that in any piece of writing, a writer views him or herself to a greater or lesser extent as an author within the text and will construct an identity within the text as an author. The self as author is the extent to which the writer is willing to
demonstrate authority over the subject matter in his or her writing. This dimension of writer identity is related to the concept of “voice” in writing as it relates to the writer’s expression of his or her position, opinions and beliefs. Through vacationing in Florida for a month, our sixth grade writer gained experiences that allowed her to speak with authority about the particular beach town she visited. This authority allowed her to not only describe the setting and beach culture, but also state an opinion on how this particular vacation town compares to others she has visited.

The three previously described aspects of writers’ identities dealt with real people writing real texts. The fourth aspect of writer identity Ivanič (1998) proposed was possibilities for selfhood, or the range of identities and ways of positioning oneself available to writers in socially constructed writing contexts. Possibilities for selfhood that are constructed according to the social context of the writing event shape the ways in which the writer views his or her autobiographical self and constructs a discoursal self. The possibilities for selfhood that exist within a writing event also contribute to the extent to which the writer is able to take on the identity of an author within the text. A writing prompt such as “tell a story about your favorite vacation,” would create numerous possibilities for selfhood for our sixth grade student who came from an affluent family that traveled to a new state each summer. This writing prompt would create fewer possibilities for selfhood for a student whose family could not afford to travel, thereby limiting the range of experiences from which the student could draw to write and speak about with authority.

Because New Literacies theory is rooted in New Literacy Studies, which emphasizes the social context of literacy events rather than the internal processes of individuals, Ivanič’s (1998) theory is useful for bridging understand between the social contexts and the individual
experiences as they relate to the construction of identity through the act of writing. This theory has been used as a theoretical lens in several studies of writing and identity construction (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006; Cadman, 2002; Carbone & Orellana, 2010; Cumming, 2013; Maguire & Graves, 2001; Spiliotopoulos & Carey, 2005; Viete & Ha, 2007). For example, in a qualitative study of academic identities, Carbone and Orellana (2010) used Ivanič’s (1998) Writer Identity theory as a framework to analyze the writing samples of middle school students and were able to identify strategies students used to develop emergent academic voices. In another qualitative study, Spiliotopoulos and Carey (2005) conducted a study with English Language Learners in Canada interacting on an electronic discussion board in order to understand the possibilities for selfhood offered by the electronic discussion board interactions. They found that the discussion board served as a stage for the learners to “play multiple roles and try on different identities” (p. 97) and that the asynchronous nature of the discussion board allowed students more opportunities for expression compared to a traditional face-to-face classroom environment.

In this study, I collected artifacts of adolescents’ writing written during observations. I used Ivanič’s (1998) Writer Identity theory to analyze the written artifacts students produced and the discussions they engaged in surrounding those artifacts. This theory served as a lens for analyzing adolescents’ literacy practices within writing events in terms of the identities adolescents constructed in each piece of writing according to their autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, as well as to analyze the writing event according to the possibilities for selfhood that existed for the adolescent. By analyzing each written artifact through the lens of this framework, I was able to conduct an in-depth analysis of the role digital writing played in academic identity construction for my adolescent participants.
Four Ways to View Identity

The third theoretical framework that grounds this study is a four-part analytical lens for understanding identity. Gee (2000) outlined four ways of viewing identity according to the Discourse in which a person is recognized as having a certain identity. According to Gee (2008), Discourses with a capital “D” are sets of behaviors in which people engage in order to take on the identity of membership within a group and legitimize one’s role within that group. As a person enacts identities within a Discourse, Gee argues that these four aspects of identity are interwoven, and multiple identities can be present and recognizable within a specific context.

*Nature-Identity* (N-Identity) is the result of a state of being that developed from forces in the biological nature of a person. This form of identity is the result of powers outside of the individual’s or society’s control. An example of a nature-identity a student might hold would be having a disability such as dyslexia. *Institution-Identity* (I-Identity) is the result of a person being designated to hold a position by authorities within an institution. This position can take the form of a label placed on the person by those who hold power over the person. Individuals fill this position to a greater or lesser extent through active participation depending on the extent to which they feel called to or imposed by the identity. For the student with dyslexia, an institution-identity placed on this student would be a “student with a disability.” *Discourse-Identity* (D-Identity) refers to an individual trait that others recognize in a person through interactions. Individuals can actively or passively enact this form of identity according to the extent to which they want to promote the identity. For the student with dyslexia, the effects of this disability might cause the student to become frustrated with reading and give up. As a result, the teacher and other students in the classroom might place a discourse-identity of laziness on the student. If the student feels embarrassed by the disability, he or she might promote the
discourse-identity of laziness in order to mask the nature-identity that is the root of the problem. Lastly, Affinity-Identity (A-Identity) is the result of experiences a person shares with other members of an affinity group. This form of identity is gained through participation with others of shared interests and affiliations. This same student with dyslexia might have a strong affinity-identity associated with an out-of-school interest, such as playing a game in which users can be successful without interacting with text, such as Minecraft (a game in which users break and place blocks in order to build structures).

With each of these four ways of viewing identity, Gee (2000) stresses that the identities must be recognized by members of the Discourse in order to be attributed to a person. He explains, “we tend to look at such identities as if they were the property of individuals and their across-the-board interactions with others at large. However, these identities, too, are ultimately rooted in recognition processes tied to specific Discourses” (p. 111). From this point of view, identity rests not in the individual, but instead in how the individual is perceived by others in specific social contexts, meaning that identity is socially constructed. It is therefore necessary for any study of identity to carefully study the Discourse in which a person’s identities are recognized.

In this study, in addition to observing the interactions between each adolescent and the teacher, I interviewed the adolescents about the ways they perceive themselves as students and writers. I also interviewed the teachers about the ways they perceive the adolescents as students and writers. Gee’s (2000) four-part framework for viewing identity allowed me to analyze the adolescents’ perceptions of themselves, as well as the ways they were perceived by their teacher in the Discourse of school. This framework is especially useful for understanding the academic identities held by and constructed for adolescents who have been deemed “at-risk” for school
failure because this institution-identity can be constructed to greater or lesser extents by both the educational institutions as well as by the adolescents. Using Gee’s framework, I was able to move beyond understandings of an adolescent’s identity based solely on the institution identities placed on him or her and develop a more complex understanding of his or her identity that considers the nature, discourse, and affinity identities that contribute to the adolescent’s sense of self as a literacy learner.

I brought together these three theories as theoretical lenses for this study in order to develop a deeper understanding of the contexts, experiences, and perceptions of my participants. Both Gee’s (2000) and Ivanič’s (1998) work is thoroughly compatible with New Literacies theory because of their shared historical roots in New Literacy Studies. By using two theories of identity, I was able to analyze the ways in which adolescents constructed identities using theories most appropriate for the context of their identity work. I used Ivanič’s (1998) theory of writer identity as a lens for understanding adolescents’ perceptions of and enactments of identity during writing events. I used Gee’s (2000) framework for ways of viewing identity as a lens for understanding the ways in which adolescents enacted identities in the larger context of the classroom. I also used this theory as an analytical tool for understanding the identities ascribed to adolescents by their teacher and larger school context.

At this point, New Literacies theory in its current iteration does not draw a strong theoretical link between New Literacies and students’ perceptions of identity while engaged in new literacies practices. Using these additional theories of identity within a New Literacies framework creates the opportunity for further development of a theory of new literacies that better takes into account the relationship between new literacies and identity.
Review of Relevant Literature

This qualitative descriptive holistic multiple-case study of the ways in which four adolescents deemed “at-risk” constructed academic identities through digital writing was informed by prior research on digital writing with adolescents, as well as research on adolescents labeled “at-risk” for school failure. In this section, I first outline the ways in which digital writing differs from traditional writing contexts. Then I review recent research of digital writing studies with adolescents. In these studies the researchers were either interested in digital writing as it relates to student motivation and engagement or in the interactions between digital writing and identity construction. Then I review recent research on adolescents labeled “at-risk” for school failure. Finally, I discuss how the existing research on digital writing informed my methodological considerations in designing this study.

Digital Writing Versus Traditional Writing Contexts

Writing in digital contexts has the potential to differ significantly from writing in traditional pencil and paper contexts, and thus, challenges narrow definitions of literacy. Whereas traditional writing is characterized by being “static, linear, individually created, and print based,” writing in digital contexts creates the potential for writing to be “fluid, dynamic, nonlinear, and often collaboratively constructed” (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013, p. 678). Even if digital writing is solely text based, text in a digital environment has the potential to be far more dynamic than just black letters on a white page. Words in a digital space can change size and color and can be animated with movements to emphasize their meaning or sustain the reader’s attention.

Furthermore, traditionally written texts differ from digitally written texts in that digital texts are shared with audiences who may further alter the text (Husbye, Buchholz, Coggin,
Powell, & Wohlwend, 2012). Lankshear and Knobel (2008) refer to the alteration of existing text, images, and audio as *remixing*. While remixing is not a new idea, it was previously only accessible to those with sophisticated training and expensive equipment. Now, with advances in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), adolescents can do it quickly and easily using the technologies they already use in their daily lives. The idea of remixing or altering existing media has transformed understandings of writing for adolescents in a way that expands the meaning of writing beyond that of most adults. Although writing for most adults refers to using letters to create words, writing for 21st Century adolescents often means also using images, sound and video in addition to letters to express their ideas (Erstad, 2008). Writing in digital spaces gives adolescents access to both existing media forms as well as applications with which to create or remix new ideas.

**Digital Writing and Motivation**

The research on digital writing with adolescents indicates that digitally mediated writing has the potential to increase students’ motivation and engagement with literacy, including students who have been labeled “at-risk.” Digital writing can influence students’ motivation and engagement with literacy by expanding notions of what counts as school literacy and creating a space for out-of-school literacies in the classroom (Callahan & King, 2011; Hughes, 2009), while also creating a context in which students who have previously struggled can experience success with literacy (Callahan & King, 2011; Hughes et al., 2011). Furthermore, digital writing on the Internet can elevate the importance of students’ written work by providing students with a real audience for whom to write (Hughes, 2009; Kelly & Safford, 2009; Wake, 2012).

Digital writing challenges old, narrowly defined notions of what counts as literacy in school. Studies of digital poetry have challenged these notions and pushed students to apply in
the classroom the ways they engage with digital writing outside of school. Hughes (2009) partnered with an eleventh grade English teacher to have students write and perform digital poems. Using grounded theory to explore the ways in which students used new media, she found students used multimodal expression including both still and video images, oral readings, original and commercial music, and static and changing text in a multi-linear authoring process. Before this digital poetry writing project, students had limited notions of what counted as literacy and did not identify the varied uses of new technology with which they engaged outside of school as literacy practices. However, at the end of the project, students’ views of literacy had expanded to include a multimodal understanding of writing. By expanding students’ views of what counted as school literacy (Street & Street, 1991), this digital writing project allowed students to access and utilize abilities they had already developed outside of school through their personal digital literacy practices to demonstrate their learning in a classroom setting.

Working with a visual poetry project that emphasized the use of remixing, Callahan and King (2011) also found that for both the students and the teachers in the study, a hierarchy existed in which “language-only texts [were] still considered intellectually superior to texts containing visuals” (Callahan & King, 2011, p. 137). In fact, it was clear to the researchers that one of the teachers had indicated to students that the poetry students created on PowerPoint was not the same as the poetry they wrote in their journals. In this study, rather than the students and the teachers embracing the affordances of new technology and expanding their notions of what counts as literacy, as was evident in Hughes (2009) work, the students and teachers demonstrated a discomfort with and resistance to working within the new digital medium. Callahan and King (2011) suggested that this tension was a result of trying to fit traditional ways of writing into a new digital medium without adapting to the new writing context.
These two studies demonstrate the importance of teaching with digital writing in a way that acknowledges that writing with technology creates a unique context that requires different skills and literacy demands compared to traditional paper and pencil writing. Rather than trying to fit old practices into a new writing space, teachers should recognize and directly address the new practices and writing strategies that are associated with writing in a virtual environment.

Digital writing also challenges preconceptions of who does and does not “do school” well. Callahan and King (2011) also found that the classroom hierarchies of who was a “good” student and who was not were challenged through the digital writing events. One student who was considered to be “very bright” was frustrated by the nonliteral nature of the project and at one point exclaimed, “I quit” and “I hate this” (p. 140). In contrast, other students who were not typically engaged in school-based literacy events and were identified by the teachers as “difficult” displayed uncharacteristic interest in the project and were given the opportunity for previously untapped abilities to be used and appreciated in the classroom. This finding challenges the notion that academic identities such as “bright” and “difficult” inherently exist within students, and instead forces teachers to recognize the social and contextual nature of identity and reconsider the labels they place on students (McCarthey & Moje, 2002).

Given the opportunity to work with the multimodalities that digital writing encompasses, students who have previously struggled with traditional writing activities may experience new opportunities for success with writing. Working specifically with students who had previously experienced academic failure or whose behavior had inhibited their ability to be successful in the classroom, Hughes and colleagues (2011) studied “at-risk” adolescents’ experiences reading and writing graphic novels. Over a period of six weeks, 12 students read two coming-of-age graphic novels and created their own sequential art panels focused on a significant event in their lives or
the event that led them to be expelled from school. The researchers found that the graphic novels effectively engaged these “at-risk” students while allowing them to develop multimodal literacy skills. The students’ engagement and growth in literacy development was especially significant given that the students held negative perceptions of their reading and writing abilities, expressed a dislike of reading, and had previously demonstrated frustration with traditional school-based literacy assignments. For these students, the experience of reading and writing graphic novels created the opportunity for them to find enjoyment and experience success with literacy.

In these studies, digital writing challenged the hierarchies that existed within the classrooms in terms of both the work that students produced, as well as the abilities the students held. Allowing students to bring their technological abilities into the classroom has the potential to allow students who have previously struggled with traditional literacy instruction to experience success. It also creates the opportunity for students who have always completed work with relative ease in school to learn how to push through a difficult task. Allowing students to use the technology skills they have developed outside of school can also remix the roles students take in the classroom when students who previously felt they did not have anything of value to contribute to the classroom are now viewed as experts, even by the students who traditionally held the role of being the “brightest” students.

Digital writing on the Internet is also motivating for students because it creates the opportunity to write for an authentic audience. Writing for an audience was found to be a motivating factor in a study of digital storytelling (Wake, 2012) that encouraged students to share their stories of life in a rural community. The researcher contended that giving students the opportunity to write for an authentic audience elevated their digital stories to “something worth sharing” (p. 35). In this study, the social context of the digital writing event increased the worth
students placed on their writing. Hughes (2009) also found that the students in her study were audience focused and demonstrated a desire to share their work on a class website or on YouTube. In each of these studies, digital writing created the opportunity for adolescents to write for real audiences and increased the social nature of writing, which in turn, created in students a stronger motivation to write.

Writing in digital contexts creates the opportunity not only for adolescents to write for a real audience, but also to receive responses from that audience. Writing with an expectation of a public, written response can elevate the perceived importance of the writing event for adolescents. Kelly and Safford (2009) studied a unit on blogging about the men’s soccer World Cup games with 11-year-old students to explore if blogging could be used to teach complex sentences. They found that students varied their sentences and wrote in different registers according to their purpose, wrote vivid phrases that fit the genre of sports commentary, and used lengthy and complex sentences spontaneously without prompting from the teacher. They noted that even an underachieving student who had previously responded apathetically to classroom writing events began making use of lengthy, complex sentences and engaged in speculative thinking. The researchers hypothesized that the complex language use demonstrated by the students was a result of the dialogic nature of the blog. While Wake (2012) found that having an authentic audience increased students’ motivation to write and share their digital stories, Kelly and Safford’s (2009) study demonstrates the power of not only having a real audience, but also the added power of writing for an audience who will not only read students’ work, but also write in response to that work.

Furthermore, the availability of publically accessible digital venues for publishing written work not only validates the writing students produce, but also reinforces students’ new
understandings of what counts as literacy. By presenting their writing to authentic, out-of-school readers, students’ notions of what writing looks like may shift from a traditional five paragraph essay to something that more closely resembles the authentic texts they encounter in their daily lives. Publishing their writing online increases students’ motivation to write and provides an opportunity to receive feedback from non-evaluative sources (i.e., not the teacher) (Kelly & Safford, 2009), which may help students to become more comfortable receiving feedback on their writing and develop more confidence as writers.

**Digital Writing and Identity Construction**

While there is variation in the ways literacy researchers view the concept of identity, Moje and Luke (2009) identified three shared assumptions held by researchers conducting literacy and identity studies. First, identity is a social construct rather than an individual construct. While identities are lived by individuals, they are constructed by and within social contexts and interactions. Second, rather than being viewed as a singular construct, researchers view identity as a fluid and dynamic compilation of multiple identities that are enacted at various times in various contexts. Third, identities exist because they are recognized by others in social contexts. These three assumptions held true for the studies Moje and Luke (2009) reviewed, and they also hold true for the studies reviewed here.

The research on digital writing and identity construction with adolescents indicates that digital writing allows adolescents to construct and maintain identities that advance both academic as well as personal goals (Bickerstaff, 2012; Buck, 2012; McLean, 2010; Merchant, 2005a, 2005b; Merchant, Dickinson, Burnett, & Myers, 2006; Wake 2012; West, 2008). Furthermore, adolescents construct these identities through sophisticated uses of language and
sophisticated metacognition surrounding language choices in digital writing contexts (Kelly & Safford 2009; Merchant, 2005a, 2005b; West, 2008).

The social nature of digital writing and the ways in which adolescents construct identities through e-correspondence, or e-mail, has been of continued interest for United Kingdom researcher Guy Merchant. In a series of qualitative studies, Merchant (2005a, 2005b) found that as online communication continued between young adolescents and researchers, the students adapted their language use as they became more familiar with their correspondence partners. The students were also aware of visual affordances of e-correspondence and began signaling their identity through screen signatures that added unique characters to the letters of their name, such as “~*Kavita*~” and used characters and emoticons to add to the verbal meaning with visual effects, such as “g☺d” (Merchant, 2005a, p. 56). In interviews in which students were asked to discuss their own written communication, students demonstrated a critical awareness of the language choices they were making and were able to reflect on the level of formality and their reasons for adding personalization to their emails as the correspondence and relationships with the researchers developed. The students’ use of metacognition in discussing their language choices demonstrates that informality in digital writing, rather than representing laziness or disrespect, represents instead purposeful decisions about language use to achieve their desired goals when communicating through a flat medium that limits expression of personality and social familiarity.

Merchant (2005a, 2005b) drew on data from e-correspondence between students and researchers from several school-based projects in order to show how students construct “anchored” and “transient” identities. He uses the term “anchored identities” to refer to identities that are rooted in sociocultural practices such as gender and religion, and the term
“transient identities” to refer to identities that are “more easily made, remade and unmade” (Merchant, 2005b, p. 304) such as identities rooted in popular culture. He found that through their e-correspondence, students performed both anchored and transient identities through the ways they described and defined themselves, the interests they shared, and the image attachments they included with their e-mails. This extended work with early adolescents’ construction of identity through digital writing has led Merchant and colleagues to question if there are “enough opportunities for pupils to explore and express 'who they are' in the current content-driven curriculum where public genres are central and the personal voice is peripheral” (Merchant et al., 2006, p. 36). They argue that schools may need to reevaluate literacy curricula to give more space for students’ voices and embrace a broader conception of what it means to be literate.

Although digital writing often takes on formats that are outside of traditional academic writing genres, digital writing still has the potential to allow students to engage in rigorous literacy work and demonstrate their skill in effectively using strategies of academic writing to communicate their ideas. West (2008) studied the language use of eleventh grade students on a class blog used for her American Literature course. She found that in writing responses to the play The Crucible, the three focal participants in the study managed to integrate the academic language of formal literary analysis with the social conventions of digital communication while managing to not alter their identity as “serious literature students.” This has important implications for classroom teachers who fear that the integration of web-based literary response will cause students to “dumb-down” their work because they are writing in the more informal digital environment.
In her study, West (2008) used Gee’s (2005) conception of socially situated identities to analyze how the students used language to construct identities through their blog responses. She found that all three students identified themselves as “serious literature students,” as well as “web-literate communicators.” Their awareness of the expectations for writing in a socially constructed, virtual environment was evident through their use of an informal style, abbreviations, and creative uses of Standard English conventions. In writing in and taking on the acceptable forms of writing in this virtual space, all three students managed to maintain their identities as “serious literature students” by still engaging in formal literary analysis and using strategies expected in an advanced literature course. This study demonstrates how writing in a virtual environment required students to engage in sophisticated language use in order to integrate the Discourses of both the literature classroom and the Internet to maintain dual identities of being both web-savvy and serious students.

Like the work of Merchant (2005a, 2005b) West’s (2008) study illustrates the purposeful nature of students’ linguistic choices when communicating online in order to represent their identity to an authentic audience. Furthermore, as seen previously in the studies that looked at engagement and motivation (Hughes, 2009; Wake, 2012), writing online with an expectation of a real audience and the possibility for genuine response contributed to students demonstrating sophisticated uses of language in the work they posted to the Internet (Kelly & Safford, 2009; West 2008).

However, as digital writing requires students to alter their notion of literacy, it may also require teachers to alter their methods of evaluation. If the audiences for whom students write become more varied and authentic as a result of students publishing their writing to the Internet, teachers must take this new writing context into account when evaluating students’ work. Rather
than dismissing students’ use of non-standard English to construct an appropriate identity and fit the literacy demands of the digital context in which students are writing, teachers need to acknowledge student’s flexibility and code-switching to fit the context. In doing so, teachers will be better preparing students to be critical rhetoricians capable of writing in the most appropriate, effective way for varied digital contexts and audiences.

When there is flexibility within a curriculum to give students freedom to write about their own lives, digital writing can create opportunities for students to explore and express who they are. Wake (2012) partnered with two teachers to study the use of digital storytelling with seventh and ninth grade students. The researcher was involved in implementing instruction and the writing process of students. Students worked in collaborative groups to create digital stories on their perceptions of being a teen in a small, rural town. Analysis of the students’ digital stories revealed that students’ stories included facts about teenagers and role identification, friends and peers, school, and community. While many of the facts participants included in their stories were typical for students of this age group across geographic locations, Wake (2012) found that many students, especially male students, identified with outdoor recreational activities, such as hunting and fishing, which she considered to be indicative of the students’ rural identity. Students also used uniquely rural terms such as “redneck,” “roper,” and “farm kid” when engaging in role identification. While some students included details in their stories that suggested limitations of living in a rural community, most students’ stories indicated pride in their communities.

The digital nature of the writing context not only allowed the students to write for an authentic audience as discussed in a previous section, but also the opportunity to use multimodal forms of expressions, such as visual images, to represent their rural identities. Identities are
multifaceted and are constructed not only through written and verbal interactions, but also through behaviors, clothing, music, etc. Digital writing that allows for multimodal forms of representation such as images, audio and video allows for a more dynamic portrayal of identities.

Interested in the writing identities of “at-risk” adolescents, Bickerstaff (2012) studied nine adolescents ranging in ages from 17-20 who had previously left high school and were enrolled in a community college-based GED program. Through observing them for a year in developmental English and composition courses and conducting interviews with them about their in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences, she found that all but one of the students reported engaging in out-of-school writing such as writing short stories, poetry, songs, in journals, as well as blogging on MySpace. She found that these experiences contributed to “robust writerly identities” (p. 59).

However, when these students returned to school, Bickerstaff found that their identities as writers were disrupted by their struggles to meet the demands of academic literacy. Their instructors emphasized college writing and placed little value on the out-of-school literacies with which the students identified. Furthermore, once students enrolled in the GED program, the time they spent on their personal out-of-school literacy practices that had previously contributed to their identities as writers dramatically decreased as they struggled to complete assignments for their courses. This led Bickerstaff (2012) to argue that the participants developed identities as writers because of, rather than in spite of, their time out of school. The students in this study adopted identities as writers and non-writers depending on their contexts. Their out-of-school contexts actually encouraged their identities as writers while their in-school contexts caused them to identify as non-writers because of the ways in which literacy was narrowly defined. For
these students, being in school actually stood in the way of their ability to continue to develop the robust writer identities they constructed out of school.

Adolescents’ need for a place to develop their individual voices and express their identities may lead them to engage in a form of digital writing practices that Mueller (2009) refers to as the digital underlife, or the non-school sanctioned communication practices of adolescents that can occur in classrooms simultaneous to school sanctioned literacy practices, often unseen by the teacher. Text messaging and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are common examples of ways in which adolescents engage in a digital underlife. These self-initiated writing events that represent the digital underlife of adolescents are often in competition with the traditional teacher-directed writing events students are asked to engage in at school.

Social networking has become a digital space for adolescents to construct multiple and varied identities through non-school sanctioned writing. Following the online activities of an undergraduate young adult for the course of two academic semesters, Buck (2012) found that her participant, Ronnie, created various personas to represent different aspects of his identity on multiple social networking sites in order to present himself in the way he felt most appropriate for the audience of the site. As a practical joke, he also created a fake girlfriend on Facebook and orchestrated a weeklong relationship in which he demonstrated his knowledge of social networking, audience, and discourse conventions in order to create a “person” whom his Facebook friends believed to be real. In some instances, the choices he made in representing his identity also reflected his concerns regarding privacy and his ownership of the information he posted online, especially on Facebook. Although Ronnie’s digital writing in this study was primarily for his own affinities and personal use, his use of digital literacy practices to construct
specific identities according to his desires and goals illustrates the potential for students to construct and reconstruct identities in the classroom through digital writing.

In a similar study of online identity construction, McLean (2010) studied the ways in which a Caribbean American teenager, Zeek, used social networking to construct her identity. Like West (2008), McLean also used a socially situated understanding of identity as a lens to view Zeek’s digital literacy practices. In this year long case study, McLean (2010) observed Zeek’s literacy practices at school and at home and found that digital media allowed her to adapt to her new home in the United States while still staying connected to her previous home. It also allowed her to construct her identity with peers in the United States while simultaneously maintaining her island identity with peers in Trinidad and Tobago.

Unlike Ronnie (Buck, 2012), who constructed his online identities based on mainly interest-based transient identities (Merchant, 2005b), Zeek (McLean, 2010) constructed her online identities as a way to deliberately redefine the identities that had been placed on her, based on anchored identities (Merchant, 2005b), and to enact multiple identities within the same virtual space. Rather than viewing identity as static and singular, these two studies illustrate the ways in which adolescents can use digital writing to construct multiple identities to meet their perceived needs. Giving students the opportunity to try on new identities through digital writing and present themselves in novel ways in the classroom has the potential to reshape adolescents’ perceptions of who they are as students.

In sum, digital writing afforded students the opportunity to construct identities according to their sociocultural affiliations (McLean, 2010; Merchant, 2005b; Wake, 2012), interest-based affiliations (Bickerstaff, 2012; Buck, 2012; Merchant, 2005b; Wake, 2012), and their perceptions of themselves as literacy learners (Bickerstaff, 2012; West, 2008). In each of these studies,
adolescents engaged in digital writing in specific social contexts, whether in a classroom setting or an out-of-school setting, that contributed to the identities they constructed. Furthermore, in each study, the researchers illustrate the fluidity and multiplicity of the identities participants constructed, reinforcing the notion that identity is not static and singular, but instead dynamic and multiple. Finally, the identities were recognized in the social contexts in which the digital writing took place, either by the other members of the social context, or by the researcher analyzing the written work of the participants.

These understandings of identity in the context of literacy research – that identity is social, fluid and recognized – are consistent with Moje and Luke’s (2009) analysis of identity and literacy studies. Understanding these characteristics of the identities adolescents construct in literacy classrooms is important not only for researchers interested in exploring the intersection of identity construction and literacy, but also for teachers who recognize and attribute identities to students in classrooms (McCarthey & Moje, 2002).

Adolescents Labeled “At-Risk” for School Failure

The identities teachers and educational institutions place on adolescents take on even more significance when the ascribed identities are predictive of whether or not the students will likely fail in school. Research suggests that students who score below grade level on reading and writing assessments are at high risk of failing academic courses and eventually dropping out of school (Sternberg, Kaplan, & Borck, 2007). These students are given a variety of labels, such as “struggling,” “reluctant,” “at-risk,” “disadvantaged,” “alienated,” “resistant,” “educationally deprived,” and “educationally underprepared” (Johannessen, 2004). The term “at-risk” is used in educational research and educational contexts to mean that a student has a higher probability of dropping out of high school than his or her peers. In a study of a school program designed
specifically for “at-risk” students, Lesley (2008) identified numerous risk factors for a student being labeled “at-risk” that qualified the student to participate in the program. These factors included both academic factors, such as: having previously failed two or more classes, being retained in a grade level, and having failed a state mandated standardized test; as well as situational factors, such as: being pregnant or a teen parent, homeless, eligible for a free lunch or temporary assistance, on probation, in a family crisis, or having an incarcerated parent.

As Alvermann (2002) points out, the “struggling reader” label is frequently used, yet highly contested in the research literature. It is often used to refer to students who have been formally diagnosed with reading disabilities; however, it is also used to describe students who are more generally perceived as “underachieving, unmotivated, disenchanted, or generally unsuccessful in school literacy tasks that involve print-based texts” (Alvermann (2002, p. 195). When students are identified as “struggling readers” this label creates an identity in the classroom that positions them in terms of what they lack rather than the strengths and ways of making meaning that they possess. In her research with eighth grade students in an urban school, Enriquez (2011) found that students’ ascribed identities as struggling readers were “felt, lived, and embodied as part of [their] daily interactions in schools […] and that they experienced a deep, internalized sense of loss, grief, and exclusion in the classroom while reading” (p. 90). As students learn from teachers that they have a “reading problem,” they are likely to develop avoidance strategies to remove themselves from activities in the classroom that might cause them embarrassment if they are asked to read aloud (Alvarez, Armstrong, Elish-Piper, Matthews, & Risko, 2009). These strategies can take the form of frequent requests to leave the classroom to visit the restroom, get a drink of water, or visit the nurse, as well as acting out in the form of engaging in disruptive behaviors to mask their status as a struggling reader.
Students who have been identified as being “at-risk” for school failure have more educational needs when compared to their mainstream peers. Given that “at-risk” learners tend to become more easily frustrated, they require additional support, encouragement and one-on-one help from teachers (Edmonds & Li, 2005). However, this should not be interpreted to mean that instruction for “at-risk” learners should take a basic “skills” approach. Too often, students who are identified as “at-risk” or “struggling readers” are subjected to drill-based memorization approaches that supplant quality instruction that recognizes their strengths and engages them in academically challenging experiences (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). This approach to teaching learners who struggle inhibits students’ opportunities to meaningfully engage with literature or produce meaningful pieces of writing, creating a learning context in which the instruction is demeaning to students and disengaging for both the students and the teacher (Johannessen, 2004).

Rather than remediating students deemed “at-risk” with demeaning and disengaging learning experiences based on a deficit view of students’ abilities, Kamler and Comber’s (2005) research points to the possibilities of “turn-around pedagogies” (p. 121) for reconnecting students with literacy. They coined this term after studying the ways teachers in a research collective were able to design instruction that “turned around” students who previously experienced failure and disengagement. Based on their research, when teachers engaged in a process of shifting their pedagogy, curriculum, and ways of viewing students and their families, students demonstrated dramatic shifts in their literacy performance. Kamler and Comber (2005) found that “when teachers positioned students as text producers and worked hard to design new learning contexts for engagement, students changed, often turning around histories of disengagement and alienation” (p. 129). The “turn-around pedagogies” demonstrated by the
teachers involved in their research integrated technology as they redefined their curricula to capitalize on the social aspects of learning through digital, multimodal text production, and allowed students to bring their interests, strengths, and cultural practices into the classroom. It is important to emphasize that the teacher’s “turn-around” in how they viewed their students was just as instrumental as their “turn-around” in instructional practices. This is consistent with O’Brien’s (2001) argument that the negative ways we label and position adolescents as “at-risk” and “struggling” are related to a narrow view of literacy that “privileges print” (p. 1). He argues that when viewed from a perspective of multiliteracies that takes into account the ways adolescents interact with media, their capabilities and literacies can be recognized and valued in the classroom.

Research with adolescents labeled “at-risk” for school failure also highlights the importance of caring relationships with teachers for student success. In studying the effects of a summer literacy program on student performance in school the following year, Mallette, Schreiber, Caffey, Carpenter, and Hunter (2009) found that students’ success and failure was dependent on the learning context and the relationships they developed within that context. Students put forth more effort, paid more attention, were less resistant to instruction, and wanted to please adults more when they felt secure in their relationships with their teachers and tutors.

In the study reported here, students were identified as “at-risk” for school failure if they had failed the previous year’s Ohio Achievement Assessment in Reading, been previously retained in a grade, or demonstrated poor academic performance in literacy on another school-based assessment. These inclusion criteria are consistent with factors identified in previous research on adolescents labeled “at-risk” for school failure (Lesley, 2008; Sternberg, Kaplan, & Borck, 2007). These inclusion criteria are based on Institution-Identities (Gee, 2000) because I
am interested in learning how participants in this study perceive their academic identities in light of the “at-risk” identities that have been ascribed to them by those in power within their educational settings.

**Methodological Considerations**

In all of the reviewed studies, researchers studying digital writing used qualitative research methodologies to answer their research questions. In these studies text-based, visual, and multimodal artifacts were a key source of data. These data sources were collected in conjunction with other established qualitative data sources such as interviews with students and teachers as well as classroom observations. However, in some of the studies, written artifacts were the only reported data source (Hughes, et al., 2011; Kelly & Safford, 2009; Merchant, 2005b; Merchant, Dickinson, Burnett, & Myers, 2006; Wake, 2012; West, 2008). While some of the researchers argued that their use of a single data source was consistent with their use of discourse analysis as their research methodology, other researchers used written artifacts as the only data source within vaguely defined “qualitative” studies.

For instance, one of the studies that relied on artifacts as the only data source was a multiple-case study of adolescents’ experiences reading and writing graphic novels (Hughes et al., 2011). In making evaluations about the methodological decisions of the researchers, it is important to note that this research was published in a practitioner journal and gave minimal discussion to the data collection procedures and methods for data analysis. Therefore, it is possible that other data collection procedures were used, but not discussed in the article.

Other case studies on digital writing topics, however, used and carefully explicated a more robust combination of data collection procedures to understand the research phenomena. In a single case study, Buck (2012) conducted multiple interviews, collected artifacts from the
participant’s online texts, and asked the participant to write in a time-use diary and take her on a profile tour of his social networking sites in order to better understand how an undergraduate college student used social networking to construct multiple identities to meet his desired goals. Similarly, in another single case study, McLean (2010) collected data from multiple interviews, her participant’s online activity on multiple social networking sites and email correspondence, and documented observations using field notes in order to better understand how her participant used digital practices to negotiate her cultural identities associated with her new home in the United States and her old home in Trinidad. The authors of these case studies each crafted rich, detailed vignettes of their participants’ experiences, perceptions and creative and communicative work by merging the data from these varied sources. In the multiple-case study reported here, I collected a robust combination of data sources in order to craft detailed vignettes for each of the four individual cases.

Despite the focus on digital writing in the reviewed studies, there appears to be an overall lack of innovation in terms of developing new data collection practices to understand the complex phenomenon of writing in a virtual context. Studies focused on the broader topic of digital literacy have demonstrated ways that researchers in the field of literacy can use technology to collect data through emergent data collection procedures to enhance their understanding of the phenomenon and sync multiple forms of data together. While Hughes (2009) and Callahan and King (2011) reported video recording classroom interactions, no digital writing studies in this review attempted to video record participants in the process of using technology to write. Researchers in the field of digital literacy, which focuses on the ability to know how and when to use various technologies for various purposes (Greenhow et al., 2009), have used video recordings to documents students engaged in a variety of production processes.
For example, video recordings were used to document students’ media production process in a study of student filmmaking (Parker, 2013), and web cameras and microphones were used to record student teams solving math problems that were later posted to a class social networking site for feedback from peers in a study of the use of social media in math instruction (Casey, 2013). In these studies video recordings were used to capture the processes students used to construct knowledge, not just to document student and teacher interactions within a classroom.

There are two digital literacy studies that most inform the ways in which I used technology in this multiple case study of digital writing and adolescents’ academic identity construction. First, Ehret and Hollett (2013) conducted a study of how the physical mobility afforded by iPads and iPods influenced students’ literacies. They used head-mounted micro-cameras to video record students’ perspectives while engaged in mobile composing in a digital media enrichment course. The micro-cameras allowed the researchers to capture students’ points of view during their composition process. In my digital writing study, I captured participants’ points of view while engaged in digital writing by having students wear small digital cameras located in the frames of costume eyeglasses commonly sold as “spy glasses” while they were writing in class. My intention was to build on this emergent data collection procedure by blending it with a strategy Cho (2013) used to document the Internet reading strategies of accomplished high school readers. While participants were engaged in a think-aloud about their reading, screen recordings were synchronized with audio recordings to allow the researcher to document where the participants were reading and navigating on the website. In my study, participants reviewed during a subsequent interview the video recordings from the digital cameras they wore while writing. In what I am referring to as a retrospective digital writing think aloud, participants engaged in a think aloud discussion of their writing process. These
interviews were audio-recorded, which allowed me to sync the video-recorded writing event with the audio-recorded think-aloud discussion. Syncing these data sources together created a multimodal documentation of the students’ digital writing process.

In addition to the emergent data collection methods described above, I also used multiple forms of established qualitative data collection procedures to develop rich, detailed case vignettes like those of Buck (2012) and McLean (2010). In this study, I interviewed each student and teacher three times during the course of the study, once in the beginning, once in the middle, and once at the end. I conducted weekly classroom observations over a three-month period documenting the classroom interactions and writing events using field notes. Finally, like most of the digital writing studies review here, I collected written artifacts, including text-only and multimodal texts, produced by the students in traditional and digital contexts. Many of the written reports of digital writing studies included examples of participants’ writing as figures within the article to serve as examples of the writing students produced. In this report of research, I include examples of participants’ work to illustrate the ways in which they were constructing academic identities within the digital texts they created.

**Conclusion**

Nine years ago, Merchant argued for an urgent need for more classroom-based research “that explores the attitudes and practices of pupils and teachers” (2005a, p. 51) in order to understand the relationship between new technology and literacy. While there has been a proliferation of articles published in practitioner journals suggesting practices using new technologies (see Gibbons, 2010; Johnson, 2010; & Vasudevan, 2013 for examples), there is still a need for rigorous studies of adolescents’ experiences with digital writing in classroom settings.
The studies of digital writing and identity reviewed in this chapter focused on the ways students constructed and enacted their identities through digital writing. These studies focused on a variety of identities adolescents can construct through digital writing, such as anchored and transient identities (Merchant, 2005b), rural identities (Wake, 2012), interest-based identities (Buck, 2012), and cultural identities (McLean, 2010). However, only two studies specifically looked at how students constructed identities as students (Bickerstaff, 2012; West, 2008). Based on this review, there is a need for additional studies that demonstrate how adolescents labeled “at-risk” for school failure construct academic identities through engagement with digital writing.

**Summary of Chapter**

In this chapter, I explicated the three theories that I used to frame this study of adolescents’ academic identity construction in digital writing contexts. Then I provided a review of prior research on digital writing with adolescents, as well as research on adolescents labeled “at-risk” for school failure. In the next chapter, I provide a rationale for my use of a descriptive holistic multiple-case study design. Then I explain my methodological decisions regarding research sites, participants, data collection, data reduction, data analysis, and issues of quality in qualitative research.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the theories I used to frame this study of adolescents’ academic identity construction in digital writing contexts. I provide a rationale for my use of a descriptive holistic multiple-case study design given the theoretical frameworks I have selected. Then I describe my overall case study design and decisions related to research sites, participants, data collection, data reduction, data analysis, and issues of quality in qualitative research.

Overview of Theoretical Frameworks

In this study, I used New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013) as an overarching theoretical lens to interpret the learning contexts in which adolescents engaged in digital writing practices. New Literacies is an emergent theory that is historically rooted in both New Literacy Studies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Gee, 1990; Street, 1995) as well as multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996), but addresses the specific social context of the Internet, and the ways in which this new context is changing literacy practices. New Literacies theory provides a framework of eight principles that address the central nature of the Internet in literacy practices; the need for new literacy practices for students to benefit from the potentials of new technologies; the deictic and multimodal nature of new literacies; as well as the increased importance and need for critical literacy, new forms of strategic knowledge, new social practices, and the changing roles of teachers (Leu et al., 2013).

The foundation of New Literacies theory in these prior theories of literacy is evident in the appropriation of the discourses used within New Literacy Studies and multiliteracies. For this reason, I will use literacy practices to refer to the ways adolescents use written language in
their lives (Barton & Hamilton, 2000); literacy events and writing events to refer to activities in which adolescents engage with literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000); and multimodal (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) to refer to the modes of meaning making (i.e., audio, visual, linguistic, spatial and gestural) that are integrated to create electronic multimedia texts.

Because issues of identity are not a major construct of New Literacies theory, I also used two separate frameworks of identity as lenses for understanding the ways in which adolescents’ identities are enacted and perceived. The first is a framework for viewing writer identity (Ivanič, 1998) that I used to analyze adolescents’ literacy practices within writing events in terms of the ways in which they constructed their identities in a piece of writing according to their autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, as well as to analyze the writing event according to the possibilities for selfhood that existed for the adolescents. Using this framework, I conducted an in-depth analysis of the role digital writing played in academic identity construction for my adolescent participants.

The second is a framework for viewing adolescents’ identities as students in the Discourse of school (Gee, 2000) that I used to analyze how adolescents’ perceived themselves as students, as well as how they were perceived by others, such as their teacher, within the Discourse. This framework distinguishes four ways of viewing identity according to nature, institution, discourse, and affinity and analyzes the power relationships between the person whose identity is being constructed and those attributing the identity to the person. This framework is especially useful for understanding the academic identities held by and constructed for adolescents who are considered “at-risk” for school failure, because this identity can be constructed to greater or lesser extents by both the educational institutions as well as by the adolescents.
Rationale for Research Design

This study of adolescents’ academic identity construction through digital writing in classroom contexts used a descriptive holistic multiple-case study design. Case study research is well suited for classroom-based research because each student and each classroom is unique and thus not well suited for experimental research in which conditions need to be controlled. Stake (2006) explains, “qualitative case study was developed to study the experiences of real cases operating in real situations” (p. 3). Descriptive case study designs are used to describe a phenomenon, in this study academic identity construction through digital writing events, in real-world contexts (Yin, 2014). A holistic design is most appropriate for this study because each adolescent represents a single case and cannot be subdivided into smaller units of analysis (Yin, 2014). New Literacies theory is built on the premise that “social contexts have always shaped both the function and form of literate practices and been shaped by them in return” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1151). The importance of social context for literacy practices and the ways in which they develop means that literacy practices are best understood within their natural context. This is consistent with my own worldview, which emphasizes the social construction of reality and a desire to understand a phenomenon as it naturally exists within specific contexts. Therefore, research of these literacy practices should examine the context as it exists without the influence of outside interventions or controls.

Identity, Gee (2000) argues, is rooted in the process of recognition that is enacted in specific Discourses. This means that from a sociocultural standpoint, identities only exist if real people in real contexts recognize them. Therefore, a case study design in which adolescents’ identities are enacted and perceived in real classroom contexts is appropriate for studying issues of academic identity.
In broad terms, I was interested in learning how adolescents viewed themselves as students and writers and the identities they constructed as a result of their past and current writing experiences; however, I was most interested in the role digital writing experiences played in adolescents’ academic identity construction. According to Ivanič (1998), the autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial identities writers construct through the act of writing can change radically from one piece of writing to the next according to the possibilities for constructing a writer identity that exist within each writing event. In this study, I aimed to understand the academic identities adolescents deemed “at-risk” constructed through digital writing, as well as the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing creates for adolescents.

In designing this study, I made the assumption that each adolescent’s experiences and perceptions were influenced by unique contexts and circumstances that are unlikely to be representative of other adolescents in other contexts. Dyson and Genishi (2005) explain that case study research is focused on “the meaning people make of their lives in very particular contexts” (p. 5). While narrative research also has the potential to highlight the meaning people make of their experiences in unique contexts, and while I have crafted rich narratives of each participant’s experiences in the presentation of my findings in Chapter 4, the focus of this study was not solely on the individuals and their stories, but also on the phenomenon of academic identity construction through digital writing events as it was experienced by the participants. For this reason, my focus on the issue over the individual made a case study design more appropriate for my research purpose (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive holistic multiple-case study was to explore the ways in which adolescents deemed “at-risk” construct academic identities through digital writing
in order to understand the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context creates for adolescents. This study explored the following research questions:

- How do adolescents perceive their academic identities in the context of digital writing?
- How do the institutional identities ascribed to adolescents contribute to their academic identities?
- How do adolescents’ past and current writing experiences contribute to their academic identities?
- What are the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction?

In this multiple-case study, each adolescent participant represented a single case, or unit of analysis (Yin, 2014). When conducting case study research, it is necessary to distinguish the unit of analysis from the context in which the case is being studied by bounding the case. Since each case is an adolescent, the case was bound by that participant’s past and current experiences with writing both in and out of school and his or her perceptions of writing and academic identity. Each case was contextualized within the adolescent’s out-of-school and classroom contexts, but these contexts were not included as a part of the unit of analysis. Instead, the classroom context in which the study took place, as well as the insights of the classroom teacher, each served as sources of information to better understand each case, but was not the focus of inquiry in this study.

**Research Sites and Teacher Participants**

The study took place in two research sites in Ohio. Each research site was an English/language arts classroom in which the teacher and students engaged in new literacies practices and digital writing as a part of the writing curriculum. Research sites and potential
teacher participants within those sites were selected using snowball sampling (Creswell, 2012). Drawing on my relationships with “gatekeepers” (Maxwell, 2013) such as teacher leaders, retired curriculum directors, and teacher educators who have fostered relationships with teachers in area schools, I asked for recommendations for fourth and ninth grade teachers who used digital writing in their teaching. Based on those recommendations, I reached out to the potential teachers, gave them an overview of the study, and asked them to describe how they used digital writing in their teaching. Based on this information, I selected two research sites, one fourth grade and one ninth grade, in which the teachers used digital writing frequently and in a variety of different ways in their instruction, ranging from collaborative writing using Google Docs to the use of Web 2.0 applications and multimodal projects. Upon selecting the research sites, I sought permission to conduct the study within each school. At the fourth grade research site the building principal granted permission. At the ninth grade research site I submitted an application to an internal district review board that granted permission.

The fourth and ninth grade classroom teachers were asked to participate in the study. Although they do not represent cases, they were responsible for providing the digital writing context for the cases. The teachers were observed interacting with the adolescent participants and were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the cases and the identities they attributed to the cases. Each teacher was identified for possible participation in the study using snowball sampling (Creswell, 2012) as previously described during the process of selecting the research sites. The teachers were selected to participate because of the ways in which they claimed to use digital writing in their English/language arts curricula. I met individually with each teacher to answer any questions he or she had about the study. The teachers indicated their consent to
participate in the study by signing informed consent documents prior to student participant recruitment. A copy of the Informed Consent Form is provided in Appendix A.

One research site was a fourth grade English/language arts classroom in a suburban elementary school. Fourth grade was selected because historically, literacy expectations have drastically changed in fourth grade, and many teachers view fourth grade as the point when students transition from learning to read to reading to learn (Robb, 1999). In this way, fourth grade signifies a change in the Discourse of school (Gee, 2000) as the expectations for literacy both from the teacher and from the curricular materials shift the focus and purpose of reading. In addition, in Ohio, middle childhood licensure programs for teachers begin with grade four, and fourth grade has been identified as the start of early adolescence in a previous study of digital literacy (Houge & Geier, 2009).

In this particular research site, fourth grade also represents the first time technology is introduced into instruction. Prior to fourth grade, students in this elementary school used little to no technology in their daily learning. In addition, a one-to-one laptop program was being implemented this year in fourth grade at this research site. The frequency and variety of digital writing activities the teacher claimed to integrate into her instruction coupled with the implementation of daily access to laptops made this an information rich research site for exploring digital writing in a fourth grade classroom.

The research site was located in a suburban elementary school in which approximately 90% of the student body was white, 3% was Hispanic, 3% was multiracial, 2% was black and 2% was of Asian or Pacific Islander descent. Approximately 25% of the student body was identified as economically disadvantaged and 7% of students were identified as students with disabilities (Ohio Department of Education, 2013).
The second research site was a ninth grade English classroom in an urban high school. Ninth grade was selected because it represents the next major transition adolescents experience in schooling that is characterized by new academic challenges and social demands (Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000). The transition between middle and high school signifies another important change in the Discourse of school (Gee, 2000) as the expectations for students are characterized by an increase in responsibility for their own learning and achievement. In many high schools, ninth grade represents the first time in which students must earn credit for courses that are required for graduation and the penalties for failure become more severe. Prior to high school, many schools use the practice of social promotion to advance students to the next grade regardless of their academic performance.

In this particular research site, the ninth grade curriculum included remediation to help students be better prepared for the demands of high school. During the first semester of the school year, the teacher in this classroom received a laptop cart for daily access to computers for his students. This daily access, coupled with the variety of ways the teacher in this research site claimed to use digital writing to help his students grow into their new identities as high school students was expected to provide rich information for this study.

The research site was located in an urban high school in which approximately 91% of the student body was black, 4% was white, 3% was multiracial, and 1% was Hispanic. Approximately 85% of the student body was identified as economically disadvantaged and 24% of students were identified as students with disabilities (Ohio Department of Education, 2013).

Each research site was selected because it was an information-rich site for studying the academic identity construction of adolescents deemed “at-risk” for school failure. Case study research focuses on understanding the “local particulars” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3) of an
abstract experience. By selecting two research sites with contrasting demographics, the ways in which adolescents in this study experienced the phenomenon of academic identity construction through digital writing events was unique for each case. Cross-case comparisons were analyzed in light of the socioeconomic differences between the two research sites.

**Adolescent Participants**

I purposefully selected four cases for inclusion in the study. I selected two cases from the fourth grade English/language arts classroom and two cases from the ninth grade English classroom. Selecting two cases from each classroom context increased the robustness of the study (Yin, 2014) and ensured that the study could be fully executed if a participant decided to no longer participate during the course of the study. As it happened, all participants remained in the study for the full study period. In addition, Stake (2006) asserts that the benefits of multiple-case study designs are limited if fewer than four cases are selected, as selecting two or three cases limits the ability to show interactions between experiences and contexts.

I selected participants using intensity sampling (Patton, 2002) because I was interested in studying students who were identified as “at-risk” because they had previously experienced academic failure. As discussed in previous chapters, students who have failed in the past are more likely to fail in the future, making them “at-risk” of dropping out of school. Students who failed the previous year’s Ohio Achievement Assessment in Reading, were previously retained in a grade, or demonstrated below grade level academic performance in literacy on another school-based assessment were considered for inclusion in the study. Although “at-risk” also has been used in the literature to reference sociocultural identity factors such as race or class, these were not considered as inclusion criteria in this study. In establishing this study’s inclusion criteria, I recognize that I was basing inclusion in the study solely on Institution-Identities (Gee, 2000). In
doing so, I selected participants who were recognized by those in power within their academic Discourse as “failing” as students.

To protect potential participants’ privacy, the classroom teacher was asked to identify participants based on the inclusion criteria. If more than two students fit the inclusion criteria, I sought the teacher’s advice regarding selecting the two students who had high attendance records and were comfortable interacting with adults. Selecting students who fit the inclusion criteria, who were consistently at school, and who were likely to feel comfortable talking to me in interviews ensured that I could make the most of each data collection visit.

Due to the personal nature of the inclusion criteria, no printed recruitment materials were used to recruit participants so that other students in the class who were not participating in the study remained unaware of the reason the participants were selected to participate. Instead of using recruitment flyers, the classroom teacher gave a packet of information to teacher-recommended students that contained a brief cover letter to the parents and two copies of the Parent Permission Form with an envelope for them to use to return the signed Parent Permission Form to the teacher. Copies of the cover letter and Parent Permission Form are provided in Appendix B. Parents were given my telephone and email contact information in the cover letter and I offered to meet individually with the parents of students who were referred by the classroom teachers at a time and location that was convenient to each parent in order to answer any questions regarding the study. In all four instances, the parents sent the signed Parent Permission Forms back to school in sealed envelopes without contacting me for additional information.

Once the teachers informed me that the Parent Permission Forms were returned, I met with students individually in a location selected by the teacher in the school building – at a table
in a commons area outside of the fourth grade teacher’s classroom and in an empty classroom adjacent to the ninth grade teacher’s classroom. I explained the study to the students using a recruitment script, and then discussed the child/youth assent form section-by-section with the students. To ensure that the child and youth assent forms were written at appropriate reading levels for the participants at each grade level, I used the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Readability score calculated in Microsoft Word for each sentence. Copies of the recruitment script and Child and Youth Assent Forms are provided in Appendix C. Once students had the opportunity to have questions answered and read the assent document, they each signed to indicate their agreement to participate in the study.

Case Study Design

In this study I used a descriptive holistic multiple-case design (Yin, 2014). In this design each adolescent participant represented a single unit of analysis. The study is considered to use a multiple-case design because there were four cases, two fourth grade students and two ninth grade students, in two diverse classroom contexts, a fourth grade suburban classroom and an ninth grade urban classroom. Figure 3.1 illustrates the relationship between each case and the context in which it existed.

Figure 3.1. Holistic Multiple-Case Design
This design was appropriate for my research questions because it was consistent with my research goals to carefully craft a detailed case description for each adolescent participant while also exploring the ways in which their experiences and perceptions converged and diverged. Stake (2006) explains that “an important reason for doing the multiple-case study is to examine how the program or phenomenon performs in different environments” using cases that “provide diversity across contexts” (p. 23). By selecting two participants from two different grades, I was able to see the ways in which the phenomenon, namely academic identity construction through digital writing events, was experienced at different stages of adolescent development in different academic Discourses (Gee, 2000). By conducting the study in two contrasting classroom contexts, I was also able to build both a stronger understanding of the phenomenon, as well as a more compelling argument for the significance of this work to the field (Barone, 2011). The range of participants and classroom contexts in this study creates the opportunity to offer implications from the participants’ unique experiences to a broader range of teachers and stakeholders.

Rather than generalizing to populations, qualitative case study research allows researchers to generalize the findings of their studies to theories (Yin, 2014). The findings of this study build on and contribute to the emergent theory of New Literacies by drawing a stronger link between New Literacies theory and issues of identity. This descriptive holistic multiple-case design created the possibility to achieve both literal replications between the same-grade cases as well as theoretical replications across grade-level cases and diverse contexts (Yin, 2014). Literal replications are similar findings across similar cases. Theoretical replications are contrasting findings between differing cases. Therefore, in this study, I achieved literal replication when comparing the same grade students to each other. When comparing cases
between grades and classroom contexts, I found some literal replication based on shared experiences of the participants that were consistent regardless of grade and socioeconomic status, as well as theoretical replication based on the ways in which my selected theoretical frameworks operated differently at the different grade levels, developmental stages of participants, and classroom contexts.

**Data Collection**

I collected data for approximately three months during the winter of the 2014-2015 school year. Data sources included observations, interviews, retrospective digital writing think alouds, and artifacts. Copies of the data collection records for each research site are provided in Appendix D. The combination of these four data sources served to illuminate the ways in which the adolescents were able to construct identities as students and as writers during digital writing events and the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in each classroom context created for adolescents. In the following sections, I give detailed information about each type of data collected.

I intended to visit each classroom 12-16 times to collect data. However, multiple factors led to the cancellation of several scheduled visits. Figure 3.2 illustrates the frequency and timing of data collection at the fourth grade research site for each data source, and Figure 3.3 illustrates the frequency and timing of data collection at the ninth grade research site for each data source. The timing of each individual site visit and data collection event varied on account of school testing schedules, teachers’ lesson plans, weather delays and cancellations. In some instances scheduled data collection events were cancelled due to weather and building regulations that visitors not be allowed in the school during statewide test administration. Each visit to each research site was planned in conjunction with the classroom teacher.
Figure 3.2. Frequency and Timing of Data Collection – 4th Grade Research Site

Week # = indicates visit to the research site in which the data source was collected
Snow = indicates no data collection occurred due to weather cancellations
Testing = indicates that the visit to the research site was cancelled due to PARCC administration
### Figure 3.3. Frequency and Timing of Data Collection – 9th Grade Research Site

- **Week #** = indicates visit to the research site in which the data source was collected
- **Snow** = indicates no data collection occurred due to weather cancellations
- **Testing** = indicates that the visit to the research site was cancelled due to PARCC administration
- **Intercession** = indicates special week-long schedule in which regular courses do not meet; therefore no observation was possible
- **No Artifacts** = indicates that the adolescent participants did not engage in traditional or digital writing events and no artifacts were collected

#### In-Class Observations

The purpose of observing the fourth and ninth grade classrooms during their English/language arts period was to understand the ways in which the students were engaged in
digital writing during the period in their school day in which they were most likely to engage in school-based literacy practices. These observations facilitated my understanding of the possibilities for selfhood (Ivanič, 1998) that were present for the participants through classroom writing events, as well as the ways in which the participants constructed an academic identity in the classroom, and how that identity was recognized within the Discourse of the classroom (Gee, 2000).

I conducted 10 classroom observations at the fourth grade research site and 8 classroom observations at the ninth grade research site during the data collection period. Classroom observations occurred during the English/language arts class period in which the adolescent cases were enrolled. At the fourth grade research site, the period ran from approximately 9:35 am to 11:05 am each morning, so each observation documented approximately 90 minutes of instruction and engagement with literacy events. At the ninth grade research site the schedule changed more frequently, but many observations occurred from 11:20 am to 1:00 pm, so each observation documented approximately 100 minutes of instruction and engagement with literacy events. This resulted in approximately 15 hours of observations at the fourth grade research site and 13 hours of observations at the ninth grade research site.

Both participants at each research site were enrolled in the same class period and I observed them simultaneously. I documented the classroom observations by taking field notes (Hatch, 2002) and assuming the role of a non-participant observer who was busy documenting the going-ons in the classroom and thus was unable to assist (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Field notes were documented using a laptop computer for all classroom observations, with the exception of one observation at the ninth grade research site when the class traveled to the auditorium to hear a speaker. In that instance I took handwritten notes in a notebook. These
notes were later transcribed to an electronic document. The observations for each adolescent participant and for the teacher participant were all documented on the same observation protocol (See Appendix E for the Observation Protocol for Collecting Field Notes). This protocol included a column for the time of the entry, a column for a description of the observation, and a column for reflective notes. Recording reflective notes during the observation allowed me to document my interpretations of the observed events in the moment in which they occurred. In the description of the observation I included narrative descriptions of what the participants of the study were doing, and recorded verbatim salient quotes whenever possible. Soon after leaving each observation event, I wrote a reflection at the bottom of the observation protocol. In each reflection I documented my interpretations of the events in the observation, as well as my ideas for questions to ask in subsequent interviews.

During these observations, I observed the participants and their interactions with the teacher and other students in the classroom. Because I was a non-participant observer and I was not influencing the curriculum of the classroom, I observed the participants engaged in traditional pencil and paper as well as digital writing events. Although I was not participating in the delivery of classroom instruction, I did, during these observations, casually interact with the students and teacher in order to build rapport. I also interacted with the students when collecting copies of their written work, and I occasionally asked clarifying questions regarding what I observed as they were writing. More in-depth questions were documented during the observations and asked during the next interview.

**Adolescent Interviews**

The adolescent participants were interviewed three times each during the course of the study. Hatch (2002) identifies participant perspectives as a key feature of qualitative research.
The interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview protocols (Hatch, 2002) and were grounded in Seidman’s (2013) structure for three series phenomenological interviewing (See Appendix F for Adolescent Interview Protocols). This structure for in-depth interviewing is appropriate for studies in which participants are interviewed multiple times over the course of a study rather than only once. The structure Seidman (2013) offers establishes a framework for gaining knowledge from participants about their past and current experiences as well as the meaning they attribute to those experiences.

Each adolescent was interviewed three times during the study. Interviews were spread out so that one occurred in the beginning, one in the middle, and one near the end of data collection. I communicated with the teacher to select a day to conduct the retrospective digital writing think aloud (described in a following section) and interview to ensure that the participants were engaged in digital writing during class on the day of the visit to the research site. The interviews occurred at a time during the school day that was least disruptive for the student and teacher (e.g. during an advisory period or specials period) and occurred in a location selected by the teacher, such as in an empty classroom. Interviews ranged in length, but averaged approximately 16 minutes each for a total of approximately 45-50 minutes with each adolescent across the three interviews. At each research site, the length of the interviews with the adolescents was constrained because, although they were being pulled from a non-core course, they were still missing class time to talk to me.

Using Seidman’s (2013) structure, the first interview focused on the life history of the participant including previous experiences with and perceptions of writing both in and out of school in traditional and digital contexts; the second interview focused on the details of their current experiences with and perceptions of writing; and the third interview focused on
participants’ reflections of the meaning of their experiences. In addition, during the second interview, adolescent participants viewed the digitally recorded video that was created during the classroom digital writing event (retrospective digital writing think aloud) and described their thinking, decision-making process, and emotional state while they were writing.

**Teacher Interviews**

The teacher participants were interviewed three times during the study. Interviews were spread out so that one occurred in the beginning, one in the middle, and one near the end of data collection. Because the teacher interviews were meant to inform the context of the study, the structure of the teacher interviews deviated from Seidman’s (2013) structure for three series interviews (See Appendix G for Teacher Interview Protocols). Interview questions focused on giving context to the learning environment, teachers’ experiences with and perceptions of the adolescents as writers and learners in their classrooms, and their own thoughts, decision making processes and emotional states surrounding writing in traditional and digital contexts. The interviews with the teachers ranged in length, but averaged approximately 40 minutes each for a total of approximately 120 minutes with each teacher across the three interviews. These interviews facilitated my understanding of the learning context in which the adolescent participants were constructing academic identities, as well as how the teacher perceived the participants both through writing and classroom interactions, as well as the identities the teacher constructed for the participants (Gee, 2000).

All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of my record of participants’ responses. I transcribed all interviews verbatim and blinded the typewritten transcripts so that no identifying information, such as names of people or places, remained in the written transcripts. In addition to transcribing the participants’ words, I also included non-verbal information in
brackets in the transcription such as pauses, gestures, instances of laughter, and areas in which the participants looked while speaking. Both adolescent and teacher participants selected pseudonyms to be used in the data and in the written report of the study. The classroom teachers also each selected a pseudonym for the school in which the research took place. Once I reviewed transcripts for accuracy, I destroyed the audio recordings. The only audio that remains in the case study database is the audio of interviews that was synced with the retrospective digital writing think aloud videos. This audio does not contain any identifying information. I transcribed each interview before conducting the next interview with that participant so that I could draft follow-up questions in light of the information in the transcribed interview.

**Retrospective Digital Writing Think Aloud**

On the day of the second interview, the adolescent participants were asked to wear small digital cameras located in the frames of costume eyeglasses commonly sold as “spy glasses.” This was done in order to document their points of view during digital writing events in the classroom in which adolescents were producing texts (Ehret & Hollett, 2013). While I had originally planned to have the adolescent participants wear the glasses during the digital writing events prior to each of the three scheduled interviews, as it happened, they were only engaged in digital writing prior to the second interview at each research site. During the observations on the days in which the other interviews were scheduled, the teachers were either introducing new material or engaging students in other activities, and the participants were not engaged in digital writing. The adolescent participants each wore the glasses for approximately 10-15 minutes and I observed them as they wrote. I did not observe the participants touching the glasses or physically interacting with them in ways to suggest that the glasses were distracting them from their writing process.
These videos were used to elicit a think-aloud discussion of their writing process during the interview that occurred following the class period. The think-aloud discussion facilitated my understanding of the autobiographical self the participant brought to the writing event, the decisions the participant made to construct a discoursal self, and the extent to which the participant viewed his or herself as an author during the writing event (Ivanič, 1998). After the interview, I edited the video so that the audio of the adolescent’s discussion of the video during the interview was synced to the video he or she was viewing during the discussion. I also edited out images of other students that were inadvertently captured, so that the only video-recorded images that were saved in the case study database include participants who consented to participate in the study. All other images recorded in the classroom were deleted.

**Artifacts**

I requested copies of all artifacts produced by each adolescent participant during each in-class observation. Both the adolescent and teacher participants were aware that I was requesting copies of all artifacts. Most digital artifacts created by participants were created in Google Docs. The students shared their files with me and I took screen captures of their writing during or immediately after each observation in which the participants accessed the files. I took photographs of handwritten artifacts. Artifacts included all texts, including multimodal texts, produced by the student in traditional or digital contexts. As noted in Figure 3.3, there were some observations at the ninth grade research site in which students did not engage in writing and no artifacts were produced. Some of the artifacts were used during subsequent interviews to elicit additional discussion of the adolescents’ perceptions of and experiences with writing. The artifacts facilitated my understanding of how the participants constructed identities as writers (Ivanič, 1998) through the texts they created.
Protocol Questions

Case study protocol questions are the questions a researcher asks herself to keep track of the information that needs to be collected from each case and the reason the information needs to be collected to answer the research questions (Yin, 2014). During the data collection phase of this study, I asked myself the questions listed in Table 3.1 about each case to ensure that I was collecting the data needed for the study. For each question, I also outline the data sources that served as evidence to answer the question and the theoretical frameworks that informed my understanding of the question and related findings. Appendix H includes a Case Study Protocol for each adolescent case that illustrates the specific data sources that served to answer each data collection question listed below.

As I collected and analyzed data during the study period, I used the case study protocol questions to ensure that I was collecting data from multiple data sources and data collection events in order to triangulate my findings during later data analysis phases. The data collection questions also informed the questions I still needed to ask in the final interview with each participant. I used these protocols both to ensure that I had collected the data I needed prior to leaving the research sites, and also to guide my writing of the findings chapters to ensure that I was discussing key information relevant to each of the four research questions. This process allowed me to keep track of the data I collected as well as to more easily identify disconfirming data, and to ensure that I was using data that was representative of my data corpus rather than presenting an impressionistic data report (Smagorinsky, 2008).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study Protocol Data Collection Questions for Each Case</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Theoretical Frameworks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1: How do adolescents perceive their academic identities in the context of digital writing?</td>
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<td>Research Question 2: How do the institutional identities ascribed to adolescents contribute to their academic identities?</td>
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<td>Research Question 3: How do adolescents’ past and current writing experiences contribute to their academic identities?</td>
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<td>Research Question 4: What are the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 1. How is the adolescent’s academic identity reflected in the digital writing he or she produces? | • Adolescent Interviews  
• Teacher Interviews  
• In-Class Observations  
• Artifacts | • Ivanič (1998)  
• Gee (2000) |
| 2. How does the adolescent position him or her self as a student in the digital writing produced? | • Adolescent Interviews  
• Teacher Interviews  
• In-Class Observations  
• Artifacts | • Leu et al. (2013)  
• Ivanič (1998)  
• Gee (2000) |
| 3. What is the adolescent’s thought-process while engaged in digital writing? | • Retrospective Digital Writing Think Aloud  
• Adolescent Interviews | • Leu et al. (2013)  
• Ivanič (1998) |

**Data Reduction**

I used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA to electronically organize and code the data and more efficiently create a case study database. I reduced the data corpus by first organizing the data within the interview transcripts, observational field notes, retrospective digital writing think alouds, and artifacts according to each case. For the observation protocols in which data were collected for two cases per research site, I coded all data for each participant using name-based data reduction codes. This allowed me to be able to retrieve data for an individual case from the field notes based on the adolescent participant’s name. I then further reduced the data for each research question according to the topics of inquiry on which I collected data.

Topics of inquiry refer to the broad topics discussed in interviews, documented in classroom observations, and evident in artifacts. This resulted in data reduction codes such as “self as student,” “self as writer,” and “prior experiences with writing.” For instance, to address the research question: How do adolescents’ past and current writing experiences contribute to
their academic identities? I asked the interview question: “What are your earliest memories of writing in school?” Participants’ responses to this interview question were given the data reduction code “prior experiences with writing” during the initial pass through the data. All data coded as “prior experiences with writing” represent a topic of inquiry that could be retrieved using the MAXQDA program. First coding my data according to topics of inquiry facilitated more refined coding during data analysis (Richards & Morse, 2007). Once the data was reduced according to research questions and topics of inquiry, it was ready for data analysis.

Data Analysis

I analyzed data as it was collected throughout the study period using both inductive and deductive data analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). Segments of meaning in interview transcripts and field notes were coded using inductive pattern codes (Miles et al., 2013) with the aim of identifying themes related to the research questions. Pattern codes can consist of categories or themes, causes or explanations, relationships among people, or theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2013, p. 87). I used both Gee’s (2000) four ways of viewing identity – N-Identity, I-Identity, D-Identity, and A-Identity – as well as Ivanič’s (1998) four writer identities – autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for selfhood – as deductive analytical frameworks to analyze the ways in which the participants constructed identities in the classroom and through their digital writing, as well as how identities were constructed for them in the classroom context. New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013) served as a deductive analytical framework for understanding the classroom context in which the students and teacher were engaged in digital writing. These frameworks were used in conjunction with the inductive pattern codes that emerged from the data (See Appendix I for the list of codes that emerged from the data). Artifacts were imported into the MAXQDA software
program and analyzed according to Writer Identity theory (Ivanič, 1998) and Gee’s (2000) ways of viewing identity in order to understand the identities the participant constructed in each text, and to triangulate and confirm the emergent findings.

In addition to applying codes to segments of meaning found in the data corpus, I also used the MAXQDA software program to write memos about both the meaning of emergent codes, as well as my interpretations of the data, such as participants’ statements in interviews and the events documented in the observations. These memos later served to inform the interpretive writing found in the findings chapters of this report.

In the following two chapters, I present the findings of the data analysis both as narrative vignettes (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) of each adolescent’s perceptions of academic identity and experiences with digital writing, as well as a cross-case synthesis of the four individual cases (Yin, 2014). Stake (2006) offers three “tracks” or procedures to follow for cross-case analysis depending on the goals of the researcher and the characteristics of the study. The first track emphasizes case findings, the second track merges case findings, and the third track provides factors for analysis. In explicating my findings, I have decided to follow Stake’s first track to emphasize the findings of each case through rich, detailed vignettes of each adolescent’s experiences and perceptions of digital writing and their conceptions of themselves as students in Chapter 4. By emphasizing the individual case findings and offering a thick, rich description (Hatch, 2002) of their perceptions and experiences, I am honoring the voices and lived experiences of the adolescents who shared their academic and writing lives with me. Then, in Chapter 5, I explicate the results of the cross-case analysis to demonstrate which findings were replicated within and across contexts. While the individual case narratives give voice to the adolescents in this study, the cross-case analysis serves to bring their voices and lived
experiences together to better understand the possibilities for selfhood afforded by digital writing.

**Ensuring Quality in this Qualitative Research**

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as both a data collection instrument (Hatch, 2002), as well as the instrument of interpretation for the data collected. Although I refuse a positivist view that suggests that there is one inherent meaning, and instead take a constructivist view that meaning is socially constructed (Neuman, 2006), I also believe that qualitative researchers must work to ensure that their research findings are held to rigorous standards for quality. In this study, I took steps to ensure that my research findings are valid, accurate, credible, and transferable. In the following sections I explain the criteria I used to evaluate my conduct of this study in terms of these standards of quality in qualitative research.

**Validity**

I ensured construct validity by triangulating data sources for each case and seeking out convergent evidence for each finding. I created a case study database in which I organized and documented all of the data collected for each case. Although mainly a concern for explanatory case studies (Yin, 2014), internal validity was achieved in this descriptive case study by grounding all inferences in the data and being careful to consider all rival explanations and possibilities for each inference I made. For instance, over the course of several observations and interviews, I realized that what I had initially been coding as a “social distraction” for one participant could also be coded as an expression of a “discourse identity” involving her future career aspirations. This new understanding came from triangulating both her interview data as well as the observations of her in her English classroom.
By using a multiple-case design, my ability to conduct a cross-case synthesis increased the internal validity of the study. Because case studies are not designed to generalize to populations (Yin, 2014), external validity was evaluated according to the extent to which the findings of the study replicate existing theoretical propositions. Therefore, instead of making generalizations about other adolescents based on the unique experiences of the adolescents in this study, the findings of this study serve to generalize to our understandings of the teaching of digital writing in theoretical terms that can inform classroom practice.

**Accuracy**

I ensured the accuracy of my interview data by audio-recording the interviews and transcribing the interviews verbatim as previously discussed. I then double-checked the accuracy of my transcriptions by listening to the interviews again and fixing any errors in the transcriptions until the audio matched the written transcriptions exactly. Because this study is centered on understanding “at-risk” adolescents’ experiences with digital writing and the academic identities they have developed through these experiences, I was most concerned with my ability to accurately reflect my participants’ experiences and perceptions in the written report of this study.

In order to ensure the accuracy of my written report, I conducted member checks (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) with both the adolescent and teacher participants. Member checks occurred in May 2015 once a complete draft of the findings had been written. I shared with the adolescent participants the text that described them, as well as a summary of the major findings from their individual case descriptions. Because my fourth grade participants were unaccustomed to reading academic writing, I read the text relevant to their contribution to the study to them and elicited their feedback. I asked my ninth grade participants whether they would like to read the
text silently or if they would like for me to read it aloud to them. They each elected to read it silently. I watched both students track the text with their eyes and occasionally track the text with their fingers to ensure that they were reading. I also gave the teacher participants the text that described them as well as the descriptions of their teaching, classroom, and curriculum.

I asked participants to verify the accuracy of the descriptions, any direct quotes, as well as my interpretations of key classroom events that I documented in the field notes of the observations. The participants at the ninth grade research site gave the following responses after reading: “You got it all there, you got it perfect” (Chris); “There’s nothing wrong with it. I think it’s perfect” (Nicolasia); and “You captured my classroom perfectly” (Mr. Matthews). The participants at the fourth grade research site clarified a few details in the descriptions (as noted in Chapter 4). As I read each paragraph and section to Jon, he said, “correct” or laughed and said “yeah, that’s what we were doing” to indicate that I had interpreted the interaction correctly. Jessi was observed nodding as I read and said, “I like it” at the conclusion of the reading. Mrs. Jones stated, “I thought you were pretty spot on” and “I think it got at my frustration level as a classroom teacher.”

Credibility

In order to ensure the credibility of the study, I clearly articulated exactly how the research was conducted and how my data led to my findings (Smagorinsky, 2008). Being transparent (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) in reporting exactly how the study was conducted from the initial decisions that led to the research design to data collection, analysis and reporting of findings, allows readers to assess the quality of the work that led to the research findings. In addition to clearly and transparently documenting my methodological process in the writing of my research report, I also used a case study protocol as a guide for carrying out the data
collection for each case (Yin, 2014) and created a case study database in which I stored all data collected for each case. This created a clear chain of evidence (Yin, 2014) to show how the findings of the study are linked to the data. The case study database also documents that I achieved extended first-hand engagement (Hatch, 2002) with my adolescent and teacher participants and the classroom contexts that served as research sites in this study.

**Transferability**

Given the unique characteristics of each case in each unique classroom context, I facilitated readers’ ability to determine the extent to which they can transfer the findings of this study to their own unique contexts by carefully explicating the characteristics of the participants, classroom contexts, and digital writing events that contributed to the findings of the study. I use thick description in each of the four narrative vignettes and the descriptions of the classroom contexts in order to allow readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other contexts (Miles et al., 2013). I also openly discuss the limitations of generalizing the findings of this research to other classroom contexts in the discussion section of the written report and suggest other unique contexts in which the findings could be tested in future research to further explore their transferability.

**Ethical Considerations**

In order to ensure the ethical treatment of participants in this study, I submitted a study protocol to the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cincinnati and made revisions based on recommendations. To protect the privacy of potential participants, after the teachers gave informed consent to participate in the study, they distributed recruitment packets to be sent home with students who met the inclusion criteria.
I ensured the ethical treatment of the other students in the classrooms who were not participants of the study by being critically aware of the data I was collecting to ensure that I did not collect any data from any students who were not participants of the study. This included not collecting any descriptive data of classroom interactions between non-consented students that occurred during observations. If an adolescent participant or the teacher participant interacted with another student, I did not write anything about the interaction unless it was directly relevant to the research questions. If it was relevant, I only documented what the participant said or did and indicated in my observation notes only vague descriptors to give context to the participant’s actions. For instance, if a participant helped another student with her computer I would write “Jon is pointing at the screen of the student sitting next to him.”

When I explained the video-recorded retrospective digital writing think aloud to the teacher and adolescent participants, I explained that it was important to avoid capturing video of other students in the room. I reviewed all video-recordings soon after leaving the research site. When images of any other students were inadvertently captured in the video-recording, I edited out those images so that the only video-recorded images that were saved in the case study database included participants who gave consent or assent to participate in the study. All other images recorded in the classroom were deleted.

I anticipated that initially, students in each classroom would be curious about my presence in the room. I allowed the teacher to introduce me and explain my presence in whatever way he or she felt was appropriate, and I conducted in-class observations in a location that allowed me to observe the teacher and adolescent participants, but also did not draw attention to myself (e.g., in a back corner of the room rather than in the front of the room).
Visiting the classroom on a weekly basis for approximately three months allowed everyone in the room to become more accustomed to my unobtrusive presence in the classroom.

My dual identity as a university researcher who also holds an active teaching license in the state of Ohio meant that even though I am not currently teaching in a K-12 setting, I am still a mandated reporter of suspected child abuse under Ohio law. If during my classroom observations, I had witnessed anything that led me to suspect that child abuse was occurring with any student in the room, I would have been legally obligated to raise the issue with the teacher and the principal of the school and ensure that a report was made regarding the suspected abuse. Fortunately, no such issue arose during the course of the study.

In terms of foreseen risks and benefits of the study to participants, it was possible that participants could have felt minimal discomfort in being observed during class and responding to interview questions regarding their experiences as students, writers and teachers. I worked to overcome the possibility of participants feeling discomfort by drawing on my previous experiences as a classroom teacher to build rapport with both the adolescent and teacher participants. Adolescent and teacher participants were not likely to directly benefit from the study. However, adolescent participants might have indirectly benefited from being given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences as students and to interact with an adult who cared about their success. It is possible that asking adolescents questions about how they viewed themselves as students may have influenced the identities they held as students. When crafting questions regarding past and current experiences, I was careful not to ask or say anything that implied a specific identity in order to avoid influencing the identities the adolescents constructed for themselves. Teacher participants might have indirectly benefited from being given the opportunity to reflect on their teaching. Through participating in this study, they were also given
the opportunity to share their professional knowledge and teaching practices with the field through the descriptions of their teaching in the written report.

At the conclusion of the study, I gave each adolescent participant a $20 Amazon.com gift card and each teacher participant a $50 Amazon.com gift card as a thank you gift for contributing to the study. The thank you gifts were given to show the participants that I appreciated the time they devoted to participating in the study.

**Summary of Chapter**

In this chapter I provided a brief overview of the theories I used to frame this study of adolescents’ identity construction in digital writing contexts and explained the ways in which these theories were used to inform this study throughout the research process, from the design and conduct of the study to the analysis and interpretation of the findings. I argued that a descriptive holistic multiple-case study design was most appropriate for understanding the phenomenon of academic identity construction through digital writing and explained in detail my process for selecting research sites and participants, and collecting and analyzing data in order to answer the research questions that guided this study. Through this rigorous methodological approach, I have constructed a high quality, rich database of information. In the chapters that follow, I first craft detailed descriptions of each classroom context and share rich vignettes of each adolescent’s unique experiences as students and writers in Chapter 4. Then in Chapter 5, I present the cross-case analysis that suggests new ways of understanding the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context creates for adolescents.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS: INDIVIDUAL CASE DESCRIPTIONS

In this chapter I share the individual narrative case descriptions for each of the adolescents in this study in order to honor their voices and highlight the significance of their unique experiences. My goal in this chapter is to weave the data gathered through classroom observations, interviews, and artifacts, and interpreted through the lenses of New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013), Writer Identity theory (Ivanič, 1998), and Gee’s (2000) framework for viewing identity, to construct a rich description of the daily writing lives of each of my adolescent participants – Jon, Jessi, Chris, and Nicolasia. Dyson and Genishi (2005) use the metaphor of weaving a “patterned quilt” (p.111) for the process I have used here to bring together the adolescents’ accounts of their experiences and perceptions, the teachers’ insights and perceptions, the observed social interactions and writing events, and the writing the adolescents constructed in their English/language arts classrooms. Weaving together these many pieces allows for each case description crafted here to serve as the foundation for the cross-case analysis that will address the research questions and overall purpose of this study in the next chapter.

For each adolescent case, I share detailed narrative vignettes of their perceptions of their academic identities and experiences with digital writing. In each case description I explore the ways in which the adolescent perceived his or her academic identities in the context of digital writing; how the institutional identities ascribed to the adolescent contributed to his or her academic identities; and how the adolescent’s past and current writing experiences contributed to his or her academic identities. I also interpret each adolescent’s academic identity construction in the context of his or her writing through the lens of Ivanič’s (1998) Writer Identity theory and
in the context of his or her classroom interactions through the lens of Gee’s (2000) framework for ways of viewing identity.

**Fourth Grade Research Site**

In this section, I first describe the learning context of the fourth grade research site in terms of the school, the teacher, and the classroom context. My descriptions of the classroom context focus specific attention to the English/language arts (ELA) curriculum, the adolescent transitions that are characteristic of fourth grade, the approach to high-stakes assessment preparation in the school, and the technology used for literacy learning. Then I present an analysis of the learning environment through the lens of New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013). This section serves to illuminate the “local particulars” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3) of the learning environment that created the context for the academic identity construction and writing experiences of my two fourth grade participants, Jon and Jessi.

**James Madison Elementary School**

James Madison Elementary School was one of six elementary schools housing grades K-6 in a suburban public school district that served approximately 7,600 students. The school district was adjacent to the city limits of a major city and the township in which the district resides was considered to be part of the greater metropolitan area. The district was rated in the top 50 school districts in the state, and the schools were a key attraction for homebuyers moving into the greater metropolitan area. The district reported that 55% of the teaching staff had been with the district for more than ten years, and 77% of teachers had a master’s degree or higher degree.

The elementary school was nestled in the middle of a neighborhood development that was approximately 50 years old and characterized by uniformly designed brick ranch-style
homes. Many children walked to school from the neighborhood; however, district busing was provided for all students, regardless of their proximity to the elementary school. The school building was slated for renovations to update the mid-century building’s infrastructure and amenities, but these renovations had yet to start. At the time of the study, the building did not have air conditioning and two classrooms were housed in trailers.

**The Fourth Grade Teacher**

Mrs. Jones taught fourth grade language arts and social studies at James Madison Elementary School. She began teaching 28 years ago in the school and had taught there for the duration of her career. She taught sixth grade for most of her career and moved to fourth grade at the request of the administration several years ago. Recently, Mrs. Jones was awarded several local and regional Teacher of the Year awards. Mrs. Jones used a writing workshop approach to teach reading and writing. Her approach to writing instruction was heavily influenced by a weeklong internship with Nancie Atwell. As a middle school language arts teacher, Atwell (1987) wrote the book *In the Middle: Writing, Reading and Learning with Adolescents* that has been influential to the way reading and writing has been taught in middle schools since its publication, and was recently awarded the Global Teacher Prize. In 1990, Atwell founded a school named the Center for Teaching and Learning as a demonstration school in which teachers from across the country could visit to shadow Atwell’s teaching practices and learn from her through debriefing sessions. Mrs. Jones described her experiences in Atwell’s school this way:

> I just think she took every child where they were at and gave them confidence to be writers. And I remember sitting there, and what we would do is shadow behind her all the time, and we just shadowed her, shadow, shadow. We were not allowed to participate, we were not allowed to work with the students, so it was
really truly watching her be this, you know, instructor, and it was one of her last years before she handed it over to her daughter. And then we would meet and we’d talk it out and debrief and she’d give us as much time as we wanted. Five days of that, you know, and then after school and in the middle of the day, and then before school, so then three times we got to ask questions and take notes, and she had a certain way she wanted us to take notes, and we did it, and then we’d share out, and then she’d just say “ok now here’s all my stuff, take whatever you want, look at it, just bring it back tomorrow.” And then you were in a hotel next door and you just went the whole night and stayed up until you couldn’t, with books all [motioning above her head] that’s what I did anyway, I know we all did, with books all over you going “oh my gosh, just let it all soak in” and it was wonderful. It was a great experience. (Interview, Week 13)

Years later, Mrs. Jones still evaluated decisions she made in her teaching and thought, “that’s what she would do” (Interview, Week 13).

This influence was evident not only in the way Mrs. Jones structured her reading and writing workshops, but also in the way she talked with students about their writing and positioned them as writers. Mrs. Jones stated that Atwell instilled in her the idea that “everybody is a writer, you just have to tap it and you got to motivate them a little and give them the confidence” (Interview, Week 13). Mrs. Jones positioned students as writers in her classroom through the language that she used when talking to students about their writing. Throughout the study period, Mrs. Jones made various statements to show students that she viewed them as writers and to develop their own sense of themselves as writers. For instance, when explaining the purpose for looking at mentor texts to inform their own writing, Mrs. Jones stated that they
were doing the activity to “learn how to be more informative writers” (Field notes, Week 2). In her use of language surrounding writing, she also identified herself as a writer, such as in her statement “when we write it’s because we have a goal” (Field notes, Week 2). The use of the word “we” is important here because she is positioning the people in the classroom as a community of writers, rather than a community made up of a teacher and students.

The Fourth Grade Classroom Context

In this section, I describe the learning environment in Mrs. Jones’ English class at James Madison Elementary School in terms of the English/language arts curriculum, the adolescent transitions that are characteristic of fourth grade, the approach to high-stakes assessment preparation in the school, and the technology used for literacy learning. These descriptions serve as a foundation for understanding the contextual factors that contributed to Jon and Jessi’s academic identity construction.

The English/language arts curriculum. Mrs. Jones used a Daily 5 approach (Boushey & Moser, 2006) to her reading and writing workshops. Throughout the school day and twice during each language arts period, students were given the option to select “Read to Self,” “Work on Writing,” “Read to Someone,” “Listen to Reading,” and “Word Work.” However, rather than referring to students’ options as a Daily 5, she referred to their options as their “Café” time in which they were selecting options from a menu that was posted in the classroom. At the start of each Café workshop period, she called out the name of each student and he or she answered with the selected option. Mrs. Jones kept track of students’ choices on a clipboard. Each round of Café lasted approximately 20 minutes. In her interactions with students during the Café period, she referred to herself as their “coach” (Interview, Week 7) and explained that she used this term to describe her role in their writing process because she found herself helping students on various
aspects of the writing process throughout the workshop period rather than teaching one skill or strategy to every student at the same time.

When students were not engaged in independently selected workshop activities, Mrs. Jones led the class in minilessons on specific aspects of the writing process. Mrs. Jones taught strategies and skills for all stages of the writing process: planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. She frequently modeled her own writing process for students as a way of letting students hear her thinking as she was planning her writing and making explicit the reasons for the decisions she made as a writer. When students were in the early stages of researching their topics for their informational piece, Mrs. Jones projected a document for students to view that contained the following text:

I wonder how solar lights work.

- Who invented them?
- What are they made of?
- How do they work? (Field notes, Week 3)

As she read through her wonder statement and questions, she explained to students why she wrote her questions and how she might need to adjust her questions based on what she finds in her research. She wrapped up the discussion of her wonder statement and questions by saying “although these are the topics I’m thinking about, I don’t know much about solar lights. I might change two of them, I might keep all of them. But these might be great topics for my paragraphs, wouldn’t they?” (Field notes, Week 3). This discussion of her own writing process exemplifies the ways she talked about her own writing to model good writer behaviors and inform students’ thinking throughout the study period.
Mrs. Jones used a 6+1 Traits (Culham, 2003) framework for evaluating the quality of students’ writing. The categories for evaluation were ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. These words were prominently displayed on one of the walls in the classroom and Mrs. Jones pointed to them frequently when she was teaching. Although she considered presentation to be the plus one in the 6+1 Traits framework, she evaluated presentation as a separate grade from the students’ writing, and “presentation” did not appear on the evaluation rubric.

During the course of the study, I observed students in various stages of the writing process as they worked on three instructional units focused on opinion writing, informational writing, and narrative writing. When observations first began in December 2014, students were wrapping up a unit on opinion writing. Most students were finished, or close to finished, with their drafts and Mrs. Jones was displaying the 6 Traits rubric the district used for opinion writing for the students to view. She reminded students that they should use the rubric as a tool to inform their decisions as writers throughout the writing process, not just at the beginning and end.

When students returned from winter break in January, Mrs. Jones began a unit on informational writing that was the focus of instruction for most of the study period. She co-developed the unit with another fourth grade teacher who taught at another elementary school in the district. The project was inspired by Wonderopolis (http://www.wonderopolis.org), a website that aims to bridge informal and formal learning by posting a daily wonder about the world and exploring it in multiple ways. Mrs. Jones and her collaborator had previously used the website with their students as a mentor text and decided to try having students create their own website of wonders as a way to make informational writing more authentic and encourage
students to collaborate in their writing process. Students brainstormed genuine wonders they had and then selected one wonder statement to research on the Internet. They drafted their writing in Google Docs and shared their writing with their peers via email to give and receive feedback using the comment and editing functions in Google Docs. The teachers had originally planned to have the students give and receive feedback between as well as within the fourth grade classes, but the fourth grade class at the other school fell behind the progress in Mrs. Jones’ class, and Mrs. Jones chose to move her class forward rather than keeping with the pace of the other teacher’s class.

Students used the website Glogster (https://edu.glogster.com/) to create presentation posters to publish their informational writing. Glogster is a website that allows users to use existing templates, images and audiovisual media to create multimodal infographics, or informational posters. When I left the research site, Mrs. Jones was still waiting on a district technology curriculum leader to assist in transferring the Glogster posters students created onto a secure website that could be viewed by the two fourth grade classrooms. They planned to use a website creator site such as Weebly (http://www.weebly.com) to serve as the platform for the website the two classes collaboratively constructed as their own “Wonderland” website (Mrs. Jones, Interview, Week 7) modeled after the Wonderopolis website.

During the three final weeks of observations, I saw the start of a unit on historical narrative writing. Mrs. Jones led students in a whole-class read of an historical picture book and students selected historical novels to read as mentor texts in preparation for writing an historical fiction story. At the conclusion of the data collection period, students were in the process of planning their stories by identifying an historical moment to write about, making decisions regarding characters, setting, and sensory details, and developing a hook to catch their reader’s
attention in their beginning sentence. Mrs. Jones explained that once students had planned their writing using the paper graphic organizer that she provided them, they would begin drafting in Google Docs and giving and receiving feedback as they had done with their informational writing. However, there was not a plan for moving this text outside of Google Docs to any other Internet-based presentation platform.

**Adolescent transitions.** At James Madison Elementary School there was a shift in the curriculum between grades three and four in which students were expected to take on more ownership of their learning. Mrs. Jones explained that the third grade curriculum was teacher-directed, but the fourth grade curriculum required “a lot of thinking and planning on your own and having your own ideas and assimilating from a lot of different texts and from a lot of different modalities, like media and print and Internet, and they didn’t have that before” (Interview, Week 2). Mrs. Jones explained that the amount of homework that students were expected to complete increased as well as the stamina needed to complete reading and writing tasks. She explained that students were not monitored as closely in fourth grade compared to third and they were expected to read texts independently to gain information. Mrs. Jones also noted that she had observed a shift in parents’ mindsets when students enter fourth grade with increased expectations that students take more ownership of their learning and homework and rely less on parental assistance.

**Approach to test preparation.** PARCC, or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (2015), became arguably the most heard acronym in America’s schools in the 2014-2015 school year. This organization is responsible for developing the series of computer-based assessments used to assess students’ ability to meet the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Council of Chief State School Officers, & National Governors Association,
The PARCC assessments include a Performance-Based Assessment (PBA) administered in late February to early March and an End-of-Year Assessment (EOY) administered in late April to early May.

Mrs. Jones prepared her students for the PARCC assessments by aligning the writing tasks and reading tasks students were expected to master in the classroom to match those on the assessment. Mrs. Jones was adamant that the district was philosophically opposed to teaching to the test. However, she acknowledged that the expectations of CCSS and the PARCC assessments had changed the types of literacy practices and genres of reading and writing that were used in the classroom. She explained that the new Performance-Based Assessment required students to synthesize information from multiple texts and media presentations and then form ideas and write about them. Mrs. Jones stated:

It’s frustrating right now because I still believe that good teaching is good teaching and I don’t want to teach to the test, but I feel the constraints of getting several of those genres in their hands and looking at them and then writing a response and giving them feedback and going back in and doing it again.

(Interview, Week 2)

She noted that one of the most significant changes she had seen as a result of this preparation was that the curriculum had shifted to “strictly non-fiction” with fiction texts moving to the primary grades for both reading and writing.

Technology used for literacy learning in Mrs. Jones’ classroom. Mrs. Jones and her students had access to a variety of technology resources in her classroom. The 2014-2015 school
year marked the first year of implementation of a one-to-one laptop program for grades 3-6 in the elementary school. Each student was assigned a Chromebook at the start of the school year to use during the school day. While students were not allowed to take their Chromebooks home, they were allowed to carry them with them as they switched classes. In addition to the one-to-one access to computers, there was also a cabinet in the room that held a class set of iPads. However, throughout the data collection period, I only observed students use one iPad each day as a timer for the Café workshop period.

Mrs. Jones had a full size laptop computer that she used during the class period in conjunction with an LCD projector to display texts, media and presentations to students. She also had a document camera that was used during writing minilessons to display handouts and rubrics related to the texts students were crafting. Lastly, Mrs. Jones used an iPad Mini during Café workshop periods to monitor student progress and behavior using the Class Dojo app (https://www.classdojo.com), a classroom management program that allows teachers to give positive and negative feedback to students regarding their work and behavior and generates emails to parents to keep them informed.

There were many other electronic resources that Mrs. Jones and her students used in the classroom. Aside from the already mentioned websites, Google Docs, Glogster, Wonderopoli, and Class Dojo, Mrs. Jones used several other websites for writing instruction. The elementary school created a Symbaloo (http://www.symbaloo.com) page of Internet-based resources students could use for their schoolwork (See Figure 4.1). Symbaloo is a website that allows users to create a single webpage that archives links to other websites in the form of square buttons that appear very much like the app icons on a smartphone or tablet. The school’s
Symbaloo page contained over 50 links to reference materials, PARCC practice websites, math games, and links to the district’s learning management system (LMS).

![Symbaloo page screenshot](image)

*Figure 4.1. James Madison Elementary School Symbaloo Page*

In addition to the district’s LMS that was used primarily for reporting data such as attendance and grades, Mrs. Jones also used Schoology ([https://www.schoology.com](https://www.schoology.com)) as her primary LMS for assignments and virtual classroom interactions. Mrs. Jones used Schoology to serve multiple purposes throughout the day. First, when students arrived to school, they logged in to Schoology and found a morning warm up activity waiting for them on their Schoology site. Oftentimes this activity linked them to another website to work on vocabulary or practice for the PARCC assessments. Sometimes the activity directed them to complete a paper and pencil task. When asked about these warm up activities, Mrs. Jones stressed that what she assigned students on Schoology was always a review of something she had already introduced, never a new concept. Her purpose for using Schoology in this way was to get students in the mindset of “let’s do school” (Interview, Week 13). Her second use of Schoology was to differentiate instruction within students’ Café selections. Mrs. Jones explained:
It is differentiated in that depending on who you are, there’s a lot of choice there and then those activities are differentiated, so one of them is work on vocabulary […] [the students] already know [their] differentiated task for that, so when I have the Café menu of what to do, when I say “work with words,” the task is already differentiated and they know which one does what, and that took six weeks in the fall to learn. (Interview Week 13)

Mrs. Jones also used Schoology to post links to resources that she used in class that she wanted students to have access to for independent work both at school and at home. For instance, when she introduced Glogster to students, she posted several tutorial videos on Schoology for students to use to learn how to use the website in preparation for their Café workshop periods in which they would be working within the website. Mrs. Jones explained that by giving student access to resources they could watch at home, it facilitated her students who were not as “tech savvy” (Interview, Week 13) to feel more confident in working with the Internet-based tool. Mrs. Jones did not indicate the percentage of students who had Internet access at home, although the assumption throughout her discussions was that both parents and students would be able to access the materials online at home.

To manage the work that her students did in Google Docs, Mrs. Jones used Hapara Teacher Dashboard (http://hapara.com) to access, track, and interact with students’ Google Docs. Through this program, she was able to organize her students’ documents by class, and see data related to their progress, such as whether or not they accessed their documents at home. Each night, Mrs. Jones used Hapara from home to comment on students’ drafts in progress.
Mrs. Jones’ Classroom Through the Lens of New Literacies Theory

New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013) is a useful framework for understanding the ways the Internet impacts not only the literacy development of students, but also the social contexts of classrooms. In this study, I observed Mrs. Jones and her students engage in new literacies practices in a fourth grade English/language arts classroom. All writing instruction I observed was mediated at least partially through the use of the Internet throughout the study period. Using New Literacies theory as a lens for interpreting the uses of technology and the discourses surrounding that use informed my understanding of the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction. In this section, I share an analysis of the data in light of the eight principles of New Literacies theory and share examples of the ways in which they were enacted in Mrs. Jones’ classroom.

Internet as literacy technology. Mrs. Jones used the Internet as the primary means for literacy learning in her classroom. Technology use was integral to almost every activity in which students engaged. Mrs. Jones’ used the Schoology website as a central hub for all literacy-learning activities she planned for her students. Even paper and pencil tasks were explained on the class Schoology website. When students missed instruction as a result of being pulled out of the room for intervention, Mrs. Jones directed them to the Schoology website to find assignments. In addition, both adolescent participants were frequently observed referring to the Schoology website before making their selection for Café. The informational writing unit described previously demonstrates how the Internet was central to meeting Mrs. Jones’ goals of creating writing events that were authentic and collaborative through the use of Google Docs and Glogster.
The 2014-2015 school year also marked the first time that students took statewide literacy assessments using the Internet in James Madison Elementary School. Prior to the PARCC assessments, students took pencil and paper reading and writing assessments to demonstrate their mastery of literacy skills. This represents a significant shift in how literacy is assessed as new literacies practices are now tied to students’ ability to demonstrate mastery of traditional school literacy. Leu et al. (2013) argue “the Internet has become this generation’s defining technology for literacy in our global community” (p. 1159). The observational and interview data from this study demonstrates that the Internet was the defining technology for literacy learning in Mrs. Jones’ classroom community.

**Internet requires new literacies.** Using the Internet to engage in literacy events requires students to not only have foundational literacies associated with traditional reading and writing in print contexts, but also to have additional literacies related to using and interacting within the platforms of various software programs, as well as a functional understanding of the ways in which their devices work. This means that students must understand the technical aspects of using resources in order to accomplish their literacy goals. A simple act, such as logging the title and author of a book on a reading list, can require far more knowledge than before. Whereas logging this information used to mean that a student must have knowledge of the location of the piece of paper, the ability to sharpen a pencil, and the ability to print letters, now using a website such as Biblionasium ([https://www.biblionasium.com](https://www.biblionasium.com)) means a student must know how to log on to a school network, navigate to a website, log on to that website, use a search engine to find a specific title and author, and possibly manually enter in the information if it is not already in the database (Field notes, Week 11). However, this additional work comes with rewards not offered by the hand-written list of books on the sheet of paper. Using Internet resources such as
Biblionasium allows students to graphically display their reading progress and track their growth as readers through lexiles, interact within a digital space to state their opinions and reactions to books, and receive incentives for their achievements.

For students to be able to take advantage of the affordances new technologies offer, they must understand how to use the functions of the programs and be able to interpret the symbology of those programs. During the retrospective digital writing think aloud, one of the fourth grade participants was explaining to me what he tried to do while giving feedback to a peer in her Google Doc:

Jon: I tried to delete that word, that one… [pointing to screen].

Interviewer: The highlighted word that says “humans?”

Jon: yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: And what happened when you tried to do that?

Jon: It put a line through it.

Interviewer: Ok, what is, what do you think that line means?

Jon: I don’t really know.

Interviewer: Ok.

Jon: Maybe someone blocked it.

Interviewer: Oh, ok.

Jon: I don’t know. (Interview, Week 6)

This exchange suggests that Jon did not understand that when text turns red and has a line through it, it means that a feature called “track changes” is showing that he deleted the word from the document. This lack of knowledge of how track changes works inhibited Jon’s ability to take full advantage of the tools and features that Google Docs offers for revision.
New literacies are deictic. The idea that what is meant by the term “new literacies” changes as technology changes and develops was less evident in the literacy events and social interactions in Mrs. Jones’ classroom. However, there was evidence that the ways technology changes our literacy practices also changes the ways in which we use language to talk about writing. Leu et al. (2013) explain “new technologies regularly and repeatedly transform pervious literacies, continually redefining what it means to become literate” (p. 1160). As Mrs. Jones talked about writing with her students, she directly addressed the way our discussion about the writing process has changed in light of the technology she and her students used during writing events. During the first observation, when Mrs. Jones was discussing the revisions students should make to their opinion writing when evaluating their work against the 6 Traits rubric, she said “we call them drafts, but you don’t really have different papers, just several revisions” (Field notes, Week 1). Using technology to draft writing means that writers make changes to their writing on both micro and macro levels with each read through the electronic document. Therefore, rather than having a series of multiple drafts, or improved copies of the text that demonstrate changes over time, as was the case when writing was taught using only paper and pencils, students now have a “history” of individual changes within a single document that are recorded by the Google Docs program. This example demonstrates how the language we use to talk about writing must adapt to the changing nature of writing in a digital space.

New literacies are multiple, multimodal, and multifaceted. Writing in a digital context creates the opportunity for students to integrate multiple modalities of expression. When students in Mrs. Jones’ class were creating their presentation posters in Glogster, they had the option to not only include texts and two dimensional images as is common in traditional writing events, but also audio, video, and hyperlinks to other websites. Leu et al. (2013) argue that the
integration of multiple media formats “challenge[s] our traditional understandings of how information is presented and shared with others” (p. 1160-1161). Having these additional modalities for meaning expression also opens up opportunities for students to express their ideas in rich and complex ways. However, other constraints can serve to limit the modes of expression available to students. When students were working in Glogster, Mrs. Jones instructed them not to use video in their posters because all 50 files from James Madison Elementary School’s fourth grade students and all 50 files from the partner elementary school’s fourth grade students were going to be stored in the same place and there was not room to store 100 files with large sizes. This technological constraint limited the range of possibilities available to students working in Glogster in this particular writing event.

Using the Glogster platform to create these multimodal texts also required students to think about the nonlinear ways in which their writing would be read and how readers would assimilate the various forms of information they presented. This becomes increasingly important as the new PARCC assessment also requires students to assimilate information from a variety of multimodal sources on a given topic. Mrs. Jones explained her understanding of the students’ tasks on the Performance-Based Assessment in this way: “we’re seeing that they have to read from the Internet, they have to read from a magazine article, they have, in fourth grade, they have to watch a media presentation, and take all those ideas, form their own opinions or statements and then write about it” (Interview, Week 2). By having students create multimodal texts on a topic, Mrs. Jones was scaffolding students to be able to do as readers what they were learning to do as writers.

Leu et al. (2013) emphasize that in the 21st Century, literacy includes the ability to effectively select, from the numerous options available on the Internet, the tools and forms of
modality that best meet their literacy and communication needs. Mrs. Jones’ approach to instructional planning exemplifies this aspect of New Literacies theory. In discussing her decision making process working with both the other fourth grade English teacher, as well as the district technology curriculum leader, she emphasized that they did not want to choose the technology tool until they had established their goals for the informational writing instructional unit. Only after they had carefully considered their goals for the instructional unit did they start looking at available technology tools that could meet those goals. Mrs. Jones was passionate in explaining her position on selecting tools:

I totally can’t stand that, so…. And that’s always been my thing, but most people aren’t comfortable with it – it’s choose a tool first and then we’ll build our lesson around it. Well that doesn’t work for me. So when we presented to her, we were thinking of like a webpage or something, more like a…. not Moodle but…. I haven’t used it. […] I haven’t used it and I didn’t feel comfortable with it, but I was fine if that’s what she suggested. I met with her again, she happened to pop in and I was telling her “ok, now I’m getting to the point, I really want to choose my tool.” And when I showed it to her, what they were doing, she goes “I think then you’re best with Glogster.” (Interview, Week 7)

In subsequent discussions and interviews, Mrs. Jones continued to reiterate the importance of selecting the tool to fit her goals when planning instruction.

During one observation she was in the process of creating a poster of technology tools, a “Student Tool Belt” (Field notes, Week 7) that included the categories of Information Management, Content Creation/Presentation, Collaboration, and Communication with the Internet tools students had available to them, such as Schoology, Glogster, Google Docs, and
Gmail, listed under the categories. This is an example of how Mrs. Jones was modeling for students how to select the appropriate tool for their tasks—an important skill that they will need to acquire as they become more independent in their learning and are given a wider range of tools to choose from to meet their academic demands.

**Critical literacies are central.** The open nature of the Internet means that anyone can contribute information to the Internet regardless of his or her expertise or lack of expertise on the subject matter. It also means that people with highly biased perspectives can and do post biased information. Mrs. Jones used the James Madison Elementary School’s Symbaloo page to scaffold students’ use of the Internet to search for information. When students began researching topics for their informational writing, she used her laptop and the LCD projector to show students the school’s Symbaloo page (See Figure 4.1). She explained to students her purpose for having them use the Symbaloo page to conduct their Internet searches by saying “I just think there is a lot of information here to start. If you are still finding you can’t find the answers to your questions then you can extend into the Google world” (Field notes, Week 3).

Mrs. Jones also often reminded students that they must be responsible users of the Internet. She reminded students that they had signed an Acceptable Use Policy that outlined the rules for computer use at school. She also reminded students of an example of a student losing his Chromebook as a consequence for accessing an inappropriate website. Students must pay critical attention to the information they consume as well as produce on the Internet, not only to ensure that they are acquiring credible information, but also to ensure that they are being good citizens in a digital environment.

**New forms of strategic knowledge.** The idea that reading text on the Internet requires students to develop strategies to navigate hypertexted websites was not as evident in this study
that focused on adolescents’ digital writing rather than their reading in digital spaces. However, I did observe multiple instances in which both adolescent participants interacted with their Chromebooks in ways that suggested they had not developed the strategic knowledge necessary to efficiently access information and accomplish tasks using the Internet.

In one instance during a Café workshop period, the other fourth grade participant, Jessi, was observed navigating quickly between multiple websites without appearing to actually accomplish any single task. She first began by scrolling through the news feed on the class Schoology website for approximately three minutes. Then she navigated to Biblionasium for approximately 30 seconds, then she briefly went to what appeared to be a typing practice website for 20 seconds, then she went back to Schoology. A minute later she navigated back to Biblionasium and started entering information about the book resting on her desk next to her Chromebook. Three minutes later she returned to the typing website for approximately 30 seconds before navigating back to Schoology (Field notes, Week 13). In this instance, the options for independent activities coupled with the various websites used to accomplish those activities appeared to be a source of distraction for Jessi. Although she may have accomplished entering the title and author of her book into the Biblionasium website, she did not appear to make efficient use of her class time.

In several instances, Jon was observed conducting Internet searches on his topic and then interacting with the search results in a way that did not appear to accomplish his goal of finding information. After the search engine displayed the results of his search, he was observed scrolling through the results too quickly to be able to read any of the text in the results list. He then clicked to another search engine that was open in another tab and interacted with that website in a similar fashion (Field notes, Week 3). A week later, when I observed him
continuing to search for information on his topic, I observed that one search returned 706 results (Field notes, Week 4), indicating that the words he was using were retrieving more hits than he could reasonably manage to sort through. This suggests that it would be beneficial for Jon to develop more strategic knowledge of how to conduct an Internet search using specific words that will help him retrieve a manageable amount of information.

**New literacy practices are central.** Engaging in literacy events on the Internet requires students to develop new literacy practices for constructing, sharing, and accessing content in ways that have already been discussed in previous sections. It also requires students to develop new social practices and social learning strategies as they learn with technology. Rather than the teacher being the expert of all things in the classroom, learning on the Internet requires teachers to allow students to share their expertise in using the Internet and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs).

Students in Mrs. Jones’ classroom were consistently observed interacting with their peers to give and receive help. Mrs. Jones instilled this collaborative ethos in students by actively encouraging students to help each other to solve their technology problems with statements such as, “Is there anyone who would like to help [student name] with her problem with editing on Glogster?” (Field notes, Week 7) and “If you’ve successfully logged in, please help those who haven’t yet” (Field notes, Week 6). As students interacted, she also actively taught students how to give assistance in a way that facilitated positive social interactions and allowed the student receiving help to also develop new expertise from the interaction. Mrs. Jones instructed students to act as a shadow and coach the student they were helping, rather than taking over the computer and doing it for the student. During Café workshop periods in which students were assisting
each other, Mrs. Jones was heard saying “try to stay off it and try to let him do it, as a coach”
(Field notes, Week 7).

Mrs. Jones emphasized in interviews that she saw her role in the classroom as a writing
teacher, not a teacher of the technology tool being used to accomplish the writing task. She
explained her rationale for having students and technology support provide assistance to
students, rather than providing assistance herself:

Those kids who are feeling really confident and kind of jumped in ahead, I’m
using them as the peers to help other students. I have rarely helped kids with
Glogster because that is a tool, that’s not what my job is here. I’ve been still
working in Google Docs with kids, still talking 6 Traits with kids, and not talking
the tool. I refuse to talk the tool. I just… as soon as I do once, I get soaked up
into it, “oh why don’t you try this.” The frustration is… a couple of kids, the
screens are too small, I do tech help tickets, I don’t say “oh I think I can figure
that out” where a couple of years ago I would have [said] “Oh gosh, it’s not
working, what are we going to do?” and we’d all shut down [laughs] then I’d go
“I’ll figure it out for you” and then I’d go to ten people. I’m not doing that
anymore. (Interview, Week 7)

Holding strong to this stance and using the developing expertise of every student in the room as a
resource has allowed Mrs. Jones to focus her attention on students’ needs as writers during the
Cafè workshop time.

The social learning that Mrs. Jones fostered in her classroom also helped the students in
her class develop more confidence as technology users. The following exchange demonstrates
how learning in a classroom that emphasizes social learning benefited Jessi:
Interviewer: Does it look like [Glogster] will be easy to figure out how to use? Or what do you think about that?

Jessi: Yeah, it will kind of be easy for me.

Interviewer: Ok. Why do you say it will kind of be easy for you?

Jessi: Because I don’t really sometimes understand, so sometimes my friends help me. (Interview, Week 6)

Leu et al. (2013) argue “effective learning experiences will be increasingly dependent upon […] the ability of a teacher to orchestrate literacy learning opportunities between and among students who know different new literacies” (p. 1162-1163). This example demonstrates that even though Jessi recognized that she struggles to accomplish tasks in the classroom, because of the learning environment Mrs. Jones has created that emphasizes social learning, Jessi could look ahead to a new experience with technology and feel confident that she would be able to tackle it with ease.

Teacher role changes. The explanation Mrs. Jones offered in the previous section regarding her stance on offering assistance with technology tools is one example of how her role has changed in her classroom as her technology use has increased in her literacy instruction. The ways in which she used Symbaloo to orchestrate the Café portion of the literacy curriculum is also a prime example of how she acted as a guide to create ways for students to engage in literacy learning mediated by the Internet and served to coach them through those experiences.

Conclusion

Analyzing the learning context of this fourth grade classroom through the lens of New Literacies theory informed my understanding of the ways in which technology infused the literacy curriculum and daily literacy practices that occurred in Mrs. Jones’ classroom. Mrs. Jones used the Internet as the primary means for literacy learning in her classroom. Technology
use was integral to almost every activity in which students engaged. Working in Glogster created the opportunity for students to integrate multiple modalities of expression and required students to think about the nonlinear ways in which their writing would be read. Mrs. Jones instilled a collaborative ethos in her students by encouraging them to interact with their peers during their writing time to give and receive help. These classroom experiences served as the breeding ground for the academic identities that the students in this classroom constructed. Explicating the classroom context through this lens highlights the affordances of digital writing for the academic identity construction of the fourth grade adolescents, Jon and Jessi, who are described in the following sections.

**Jon**

This was the first year Jon had attended James Madison Elementary. Jon joined Mrs. Jones’ fourth grade class in October of 2014 after transferring from an elementary school in the adjoining city school district. Jon explained that he moved because his parents did not like his previous school because there were frequent fights in the school. Jon indicated that the fights did not bother him, and that his old school was more fun because they would do more activities that involved the entire student body, such as kick ball tournaments and more frequent field trips. Jon indicated that even though he changed schools, he still stayed in contact with his friends at his former school.

Jon expressed interest in playing basketball, baseball, and playing outside with friends. At the time of the study, he played on five basketball teams, but said that he was taking a break from baseball and not playing on a team this year. He also indicated that he liked to play video games and watch television. He had an Xbox and identified Call of Duty as his favorite game because “it’s for boys” and “it has a lot of action in it” (Interview, Week 6).
My first impression of Jon was that he was a quiet, mild mannered boy. He appeared to be Caucasian and wore glasses. During the consenting process he indicated that his parents had talked to him “a little” about the study and that he was interested in participating. He exhibited increased interest when I told him about the “spy glasses” that we would use to record his writing process.

As I continued to observe Jon in the classroom, I noticed that he had a small cohort of three friends whom he interacted with frequently. When he was in close proximity to his friends, he was often observed making jokes and interacting with them physically in a playful manner. In one instance, Jon was seated in the circle at the front of the room for morning meeting with a small group of boys. He was talking to a boy sitting next to him and they were touching each other’s backs. Their movements appeared as though they were pretending to shock each other, because each boy pretended to shake violently after being touched (Field notes, Week 3). This example is consistent with the jovial ways Jon was observed interacting with other boys during the study period.

The descriptions that follow share the ways in which Jon perceived his academic identity in the context of digital writing, the institutional identities Mrs. Jones ascribed to Jon and the extent to which he claimed those identities, and the past and current writing experiences that contributed to his academic identity. Jon’s perceptions of himself as a student and as a writer and Mrs. Jones’ positioning of Jon as a student and a writer are analyzed through the lens of Gee’s (2000) four ways of viewing identity. Throughout Jon’s case description, references to *nature, discourse, institution, and affinity* identities are made in the context of Gee’s framework. Artifacts of Jon’s writing collected during observations are analyzed according to Ivanič’s (1998)
Writer Identity theory; therefore, references to autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for selfhood are made in the context of Ivanič’s framework.

Academic Identity Perception

In order to explore how Jon perceived his academic identity, I asked him how he would describe himself as a student and as a writer. Then I asked him to tell me how he thought his teacher would describe him both as a student and as a writer. The findings described below are triangulated with observational data as well as artifacts collected during the study period that reinforce his descriptions of himself.

Self as student. When asked to describe himself as a student, Jon responded, “I like math. Specials. I’m a sports kid” (Interview, Week 2). When probed to explain why he liked math, he stated that you do more writing and thinking in math class. He also noted that he liked math because it was not as long as his language arts class. He further clarified that the specials he enjoyed were his art and physical education classes. At James Madison Elementary School, classes such as physical education and art met once a week during the school day.

It’s interesting to note that his affinity identity associated with sports was offered in response to being asked to describe his identity as a student. At this grade level in this school district, students play sports on teams unaffiliated with the school and sponsored by outside organizations or private businesses. As a result, it is likely that Jon played on teams that included children who were also students at James Madison Elementary School, as well as children who attended other schools in the area. His identification as a “sports kid” is likely associated with his identification of “specials” as a favorite school subject, referring to his physical education class. Mrs. Jones also noted that Jon used his identity as an athlete to insulate him socially from his academic weaknesses. She explained, “he is an athlete so he kind of can
hang with boys that can carry themselves in more disciplined [ways], and so socially they don’t notice that he can’t really write” (Interview, Week 13).

Jon reinforced this affinity identity in the classroom during a response to a morning greeting prompt late in the study period. Each morning, Mrs. Jones had students meet at the front of the room for morning meeting and engage in a greeting that changed each day. On this particular day, students were asked to state their name and then give a little known fact about them. Jon said, “I am Jon and a little known fact about me is [15 second pause] I like sports clothes” (Field notes, Week 12). Jon’s long pause seems to indicate that he had difficulty identifying a fact to share with the class. He ultimately chose to draw from his affinity identity associated with sports, even though what he told the class was something that would be well known to anyone who observed what he wore to school most days.

I asked Jon to tell me how he thought his teacher, Mrs. Jones, would describe him as a student. I asked him to tell me what he thought she would say if I asked her that question. The following is an excerpt of his response:

Jon: He’s a good student.

Interviewer: Why do you think she would say that?

Jon: Because I never get in trouble. I’m smart and not smart.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that, you’re smart and not smart?

Jon: I’m smart, and like I’m not very smart in reading, but I’m smart in math.

Interviewer: What do you think it means to be smart in reading?

Jon: Good.

Interviewer: Good, how?
Jon: [pause] Because like when you get older you’re going to have to… you have to be good at reading.

Interviewer: Ok, so how do you know if you are good at reading?

Jon: [pause] You know a lot of words, you can read big words, you read fast, you get more correct.

Interviewer: You get more correct on like homework papers or test questions?

Jon: Yeah. (Interview, Week 2)

Jon’s analysis of himself as a student from the perspective of his teacher includes both a discourse identity associated with classroom behavior, as well as a nature identity associated with his perceived levels of intelligence in math and reading. Jon’s perception of what it means to be a good reader is largely informed by aspects of reading that are frequently assessed, such as word identification, reading rate, and comprehension of the text.

Observational data collected in Jon’s fourth grade ELA classroom supports Jon’s perception that he is a “good student” in terms of behavior. Jon frequently volunteered to help other students in the classroom. In one instance, Jon got up from his seat and was standing behind and talking to a female student. He was looking at her screen, and she was using the touchpad and talking, which made it appear as though she was showing him something. Then he began touching her touchpad and typed a stream of random text quickly, then deleted it. He then left her desk and went to the girl who sat to his left. Mrs. Jones asked, “Are you coaching, Jon, or getting help?” He replied, “She has a big screen and she’s trying to figure out how to change it.” My interpretation of the event was that he was giving help to the first girl, and when he could not answer her question, he went to the second girl to get her help to solve the first girl’s problem (Field notes, Week 7). Mrs. Jones’ question seems to indicate that when she saw Jon
standing behind the girls’ chairs and moving from one to the other, it was unclear to her whether he was giving help with a technology tool as she encouraged students to do, or socializing. She did not engage in further dialogue with Jon, suggesting that she believed his response that he was offering help.

In another observation, Jon was given an award certificate for earning 50 points in the Class Dojo app. Receiving the award meant that students were also allowed to invite a friend from their class or the other fourth grade class to eat at a special guest table in the cafeteria (Field notes, Week 12). Receiving this award served to reinforce for Jon his identity as a “good student” in Mrs. Jones’ classroom.

In the final interview, when I asked Jon if there was anything else he thought I should know as I began writing about him and his fourth grade class, he told me that he wanted me to know that it was his first year in the school. I asked him if he was still getting used to being in a new school, and he answered that he was (Interview, Week 13). This seems to indicate that he was aware that he was still developing his sense of self as a student at James Madison Elementary School.

**Self as writer.** An interesting misunderstanding occurred when I asked Jon to describe himself as a writer. Early in the interview, Jon described himself as a writer in this way:

Jon: I improve my writing over the years.

Interviewer: Ok, in what ways do you improve your writing?

Jon: Nicer, writing nicer.

Interviewer: So like handwriting is nicer?

Jon: Yeah (Interview, Week 2)
With additional probing about other ways he described himself as a writer, Jon indicated that he liked to “write a lot” and that he liked to write about what he wonders about. It’s important to interpret this statement in the context of the writing activity that Jon engaged in just prior to the interview. Students were asked to brainstorm a list of wonders on a sheet of paper, and then select one wonder to write on a sticky note and post to a bulletin board in the classroom (See Figures 4.2 and 4.3). His statement that he liked to write what he wondered about occurred directly after being asked to write about his wonders. In the artifacts displayed in Figures 4.2 and 4.3, we can see Jon’s handwriting that was a significant source for his identity development as a writer.

![Figure 4.2. Jon’s List of Wonder Statements](image)

Figure 4.2. Jon’s List of Wonder Statements
Figure 4.3. Jon’s Wonder Statements for the Classroom Bulletin Board

A few minutes later in the interview, after he shared with me the wonder statements he had written on his assignment sheet and on his sticky note, I asked Jon to think about how his teacher would describe him as a writer. In this exchange, I was assuming that because we had spent some time talking about his wonder statements, and, with some encouragement, he had been successful in describing himself as a writer of ideas, not a printer of letters, the intended meaning of the word “writer” would be understood. However, Jon responded to my question in this way:

Interviewer: Ok. So how do you think your teacher would describe you as a writer?
Jon: Good, very good.
Interviewer: Why very good?
Jon: Because I love to write a lot.
Interviewer: You love to write a lot?
Jon: I’m not awesome at it, but I’m pretty good at it.
Interviewer: What sorts of things do you do when you write that make you think you’re pretty good at it?
Jon: [pause] Because like how not my mom writes it?
Interviewer: Because of how your mom writes it?

Jon: Yeah, like adults write it.

Interviewer: That you write kind of how adults write?

Jon: Yeah, but not in cursive.  (Interview, Week 2)

Early in the exchange, I thought that Jon was answering the question in terms of his abilities as a writer of ideas, but by the end I realized that his descriptions of himself as “very good” and loving to write were all said regarding Jon’s handwriting.

Given that Mrs. Jones was frequently heard calling the students in her class “writers” throughout the study period, I was surprised that Jon understood my questions in this way. His responses also led me to question the ways in which he interpreted Mrs. Jones’ instruction when she made statements such as “write your conclusion based on what you know good writers do” (Field notes, Week 5). When Mrs. Jones made statements such as this, she was asking students to activate their knowledge of the 6+1 Traits framework that she expected students to use to evaluate the quality of their writing. However, it is possible, given his response to these questions, that this framework was not being activated for Jon in the way she expected.

At this point in the interview, I realized I needed to be more explicit about how I was using the word “writing.” Once I explained the way I wanted him to think about the word, he was better able to access the framework that Mrs. Jones expected when she talked about writing in her classroom, as the following exchange indicates:

Interviewer: Ok, so when I say writing, are you thinking about handwriting?

[pause] Or what about writing on your Chromebook where the handwriting doesn’t matter?

Jon: Or typing on the Chromebook.
Interviewer: Or typing on the Chromebook, Yeah. So when I’m talking about writing I’m talking about the writing that you, the things that you write in class more so than handwriting or typing. So how do you think your teacher would describe the writing that you produce in class?

Jon: Um. [pause] The organizations…

Interviewer: The organization. What do you think your teacher might like about your organization?

Jon: How I number my paragraphs.

Interviewer: Ok

Jon: how I put my, how I write in paragraphs.

Interviewer: Ok, those are really great things. Anything else?

Jon: Ideas. [Looks across the room at 6 Traits wall.]

Interviewer: Ok, what about your ideas?

Jon: Um [pause] random ideas, like just pop up in my head.

Interviewer: Ok, so you write about the random ideas that pop up in your head?

Jon: Um hmm

Interviewer: Ok, and why do you think she would like that?

Jon: Because she might not know that, she never heard of it. (Interview, Week 2)

Once Jon understood the meaning of the word “writing” that I was using, he chose to talk about the aspects of writing that were evaluated for quality in his ELA classroom, and Jon described himself as a writer using those terms. An early draft of Jon’s informational writing piece that he wrote in Google Docs approximately one month after the interview illustrates that he did organize his writing by writing in paragraphs that each addressed a different topic. He also
included details that he found in his research that reinforced his own ideas and experiences with his topic (See Figure 4.4).

![Figure 4.4. Jon’s Informational Writing Draft from Week 6](image)

However, as the interview went on, our shared understanding of the word “writing” was short lived. The very next question I asked Jon after this exchange was to tell me about his first memory writing in school. He responded in this way:

Jon: [In Kindergarten] we had to write, like, what did you get for Christmas, how much Halloween candy did you get, and my handwriting was pretty good.

Interviewer: Your handwriting was pretty good? Can you remember anything about the ideas you wrote about?
Jon: No.

Interviewer: Can you remember anything about what the teacher said about your writing?

Jon: Yeah. Well [pause] at the end of the year, my teacher said “you were one of the best handwriting kids in our whole class.” (Interview, Week 2)

Despite my repeated efforts to encourage Jon to talk about himself as a writer of ideas, he continued to describe himself in terms of his handwriting abilities. This suggests that when Jon hears the words “writer” or “writing” he thinks in terms of utilizing his fine motor skills rather than his cognitive abilities. The ways in which he interpreted these words throughout the interview suggests that he views writing as something that is done with a person’s hands rather than with a person’s mind. As such, Jon’s identity as a writer rests in his physical abilities rather than his mental abilities.

It was especially interesting that in the second exchange quoted above, Jon corrected my language when I asked him about writing on the Chromebook. His replacement of the word “typing” for “writing” seems to indicate that in Jon’s mind, a person does not “write” on a computer, they “type” on a computer, because the word “writing” is reserved to mean printing text on a piece of paper, again reinforcing Jon’s understanding of writing as an act of the hands, not of the mind. Jon’s understanding of writing in this way seems to limit his ability to construct an identity as a writer in a digital environment.

Ascribed Institutional Identities

Ascribed institutional identities are the identities that others who are in positions of power place on a person. In an educational setting, teachers, intervention specialists, and administrators place identities on students to greater or lesser extents both formally through the
ways in which they document students’ performance, identified disabilities, and educational
needs in school records, and informally through the ways in which they position and describe the
students. The idea of an institutional identity is rooted in Gee’s (2000) conception of institution
identities.

In order to understand the extent to which the institutional identities ascribed to Jon
ccontributed to the academic identity he constructed for himself as a student at James Madison
Elementary School, I asked his teacher, Mrs. Jones, to explain the reason why he was considered
“at-risk” for school failure, and to describe Jon both as a student and as a writer. The findings in
this section are triangulated with observational data that reinforces the ways in which Jon was
positioned in the classroom as a student, and with artifacts of comments Mrs. Jones left in Jon’s
Google Docs that illustrate the ways in which he was positioned as a writer.

Source of “at-risk” label. Jon was considered for inclusion in the study because he had
previously failed fourth grade at his former school and enrolled at James Madison Elementary
School as a repeat fourth grader. Although Mrs. Jones did not speak to specific data regarding
his failure at the former school, she did identify some characteristics that she believed
contributed to his lack of success in school. She explained:

He came to me as a reluctant writer and reader, but very compliant, very
appreciative, values education, so does his family, and he moved in and just
melted right in here, like he had been here all year. And that’s why I still
considered him for the study, because I really feel he had a good foundation, but I
felt that he would show, show I guess. Growth or not growth. But would give us
good evidence. Viable evidence that would be reliable because he is, he has that
stamina and he has that drive that a lot of our reluctant readers and writers don’t
have in them either from home or internally, but he still has huge gaps. He reads, but he chooses to read above his level independently. (Interview, Week 2)

In a later interview, Mrs. Jones expressed that as she got to know Jon better, she realized there was not as much “follow through at home” (Interview, Week 13) as she had initially assumed there to be when he first arrived in her classroom.

To address Jon’s “gaps,” he was pulled out daily for intervention. The decision to pull Jon out of class was a direct result of the “at-risk” label ascribed to Jon by the school. The purpose of intervention was to provide additional support in reading so that Jon could make progress toward closing the gaps that caused him to initially fail the fourth grade. Although I was not given access to Jon’s educational records, the fact that Jon was pulled out of the room to work with an Intervention Specialist and the Speech Language Pathologist, as well as the teacher’s informal references to “goals,” suggest that Jon had been formally identified as a student with a disability or learning disorder and placed on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan, or that he was in the Response-to-Intervention process used for identification.

**Portrait of Jon as a student.** Early in the study, Mrs. Jones positioned Jon as a positive addition to her classroom:

He’s all boy. He’s accepted by everybody. Again, just slipped in like he’s been here since Kindergarten. Such a nice transition, which doesn’t always happen. And he really is, he accepts teacher directives very well, and at least attempts things. He’s not always successful. In his mind he is. And he’s very positive. He’s just very positive about learning, I mean he hasn’t given up, even in fourth grade it’s sad to say some have. He just perseveres. And I’ve really liked that, and working with him. (Interview, Week 2).
The discourse identities Mrs. Jones placed on Jon, such as being positive, not giving up and persevering, are consistent with Jon’s identification of himself as a “good student” in Mrs. Jones’ classroom. Her identification of Jon using the nature identity of being “all boy” may have been informed by his expressions of his affinity identity of being a “sports kid” (Jon, Interview, Week 2) which is a stereotypically masculine identity, as well as the discourse identities he expressed in the ways in which he playfully interacted with the other boys in the classroom.

During this initial interview, Mrs. Jones identified the biggest challenge standing in Jon’s way of being successful as an inability to recognize when he did not understand a concept:

He doesn’t recognize it. At all. So he can’t ask questions, he can’t inquire, he can’t ask for some clarification, he thinks, he always just thinks he’s got it. And so he can’t work through it, unless you sit down with him, and then, and really show him. […] We don’t move forward until I recognize it for him in a class of 25 and, you know, kind of rally the troops and bring him. So that is a big stumbling block for him. (Interview, Week 2)

Mrs. Jones explained that she had tried to work with Jon to develop additional strategies, approaches and models to help him make connections between the lessons she taught and his literacy practices, but stated, “I don’t know if that connection is still made all of the time for him” (Interview, Week 2). As she spoke about Jon’s inability to engage in metacognitive processes in learning, she used phrases such as “that connection doesn’t happen” (Interview, Week 2) that may suggest that she viewed this as an aspect of Jon’s nature, of which he had no control.

In the final interview, Mrs. Jones shared that she had come to know Jon better over the course of the three months since we first talked, and realized that what she first recognized as a
drive to learn when he arrived in her classroom in October, was what she now realized was excitement to be at a new school. She noted, “He really takes a backseat now and lets the teacher lead him” (Interview, Week 13). In these comments, it seemed that she was pulling back from her initial assessment of Jon as being positive, not giving up and persevering (Interview, Week 2) that had informed the discourse identity she had constructed for him in her classroom at the start of the study.

In one observation, late in the study when students were planning their historical narrative writing, I observed Mrs. Jones approach Jon after teaching a minilesson on character development to remind him to have his notebook out so that he could refer to the notes about characters. Once he opened the notebook to the page on which he had just taken notes from her minilesson, she told him to write down the things that the character would show about themselves through their actions, and to write down traits and background information about his characters. Everything she said to him one on one was almost verbatim what she had just explained to the whole class in the context of the minilesson (Field notes, Week 12). This exemplified the types of reinforcements Mrs. Jones gave Jon throughout the study period. Mrs. Jones used observational information from working with Jon to construct an identity for him as a student who was unable to recognize when he had not understood something. Her responses to him as a learner in her classroom were informed by this ascribed identity.

**Portrait of Jon as a writer.** When I first asked Mrs. Jones to describe Jon as a writer, she commented that “Jon struggles getting started with ideas, and he just struggles with the writing process of doing anything more than teacher initiated, teacher driven. He cannot do it on his own” (Interview, Week 2). She noted that his vocabulary was very basic, and his spelling was “atrocious” and made it difficult for her to “glean any meaning from what he writes”
(Interview, Week 2). She explained that his spelling coupled with his lack of word attack strategies caused him to write with very basic vocabulary. Mrs. Jones again emphasized the problems that arose from Jon not being able to recognize when he was struggling or when he did not know how to do something. She noted that he did not recognize full sentences and did not express himself using full sentences in his writing. She also noted that he accepted coaching when she offered it, but he did not recognize when he needed it and did not ask for help. I asked Mrs. Jones whether or not she thought Jon identified as a writer. She shared that she did not think it was important to him. She thought he seemed “self-defeated about it,” and that he didn’t try as hard anymore because “he doesn’t see it as [a] strength of his so he doesn’t give it much effort” (Interview, Week 2).

After Jon spent most of the study period working on his informational writing piece in Google Docs and Glogster, Mrs. Jones noted some areas in which Jon developed knowledge about the writing process and himself as a writer. First, she noted that “he realized the importance of research, the importance of preplanning and, since it was informational, realizing that he had to read resources and he couldn’t just come up with ideas off his head” (Interview, Week 13). This comment was interesting in juxtaposition with Jon’s reflection that he thought his teacher would like that he wrote about ideas that “just pop up in [his] head” (Jon, Interview, Week 2).

An analysis of the comments Mrs. Jones left in Jon’s Google Doc shows that she encouraged Jon to move beyond his own experiences and observations and seek out resources to support his ideas in his informational writing. Early in Jon’s drafting, Mrs. Jones encouraged Jon by writing, “continue with the story about your dog and how you believe he communicates” (Artifact, Week 7), and pushed him to replace a detail he had written about dogs “sniffing butts”
with other ways dogs communicate that he had “learned about in [his] research” (Artifact, Week 7) (See Figure 4.5 for Mrs. Jones’ full comment in Jon’s document).

![Figure 4.5. Mrs. Jones’ Comment on Jon’s Draft from Week 7](image)

Through working with Jon on this piece of writing, Mrs. Jones learned more about Jon as a writer:

I work with him every Monday in here on writing more, and when we look at other students’ models or the models I give them, having those models, he realized he is supposed to be kind of adopting some of those things from them. And again before that, I didn’t have him a lot for writing because he is new, but it seemed like he just didn’t have anything, any scaffold to do his planning on, or his thoughts, and although I don’t think he’s mastered it, I think he realizes the importance of it. (Interview, Week 13)

Mrs. Jones statements regarding the use of other texts as models is consistent with observational data in which students were asked to use text authors as mentors whenever they read in Mrs. Jones’ class. Class activities were structured so that students read through the lens of being writers and were encouraged to actively learn from the decisions authors made in their writing to inform the decisions they would later make in their own writing.
In evaluating his final product Mrs. Jones noted, “There was a lot of growth there in the importance of the planning part” (Interview, Week 13). She explained that by coming to her class in October, he had missed the instruction the other students received in planning writing, organizing their thoughts and using graphic organizers to assist in creating an organization for their writing. She recognized that Jon was working through growing as a writer in a process of writing that her other students had developed earlier in the year.

According to Mrs. Jones, Jon’s next steps as a writer were to focus on the main idea when he writes and elaborate on that main idea with related details. She observed that Jon “gives very brief statements, very brief sentences and does not elaborate at all, and doesn’t want to go any further” (Interview, Week 13). In her closing assessment of Jon, Mrs. Jones explained:

He is still a very reluctant writer. I do think he’s not as scared to write as much anymore being in a writing workshop room, he’s not as inhibited. I don’t think he did a lot of writing before, and I didn’t know that. (Interview, Week 13)

Jon’s description of the writing he did at his previous school supports Mrs. Jones’ observation that he had not had the amount of writing instruction that she had previously assumed.

**Extent to which Jon claimed institutional identities.** There was little evidence to suggest that Jon was aware of the identities ascribed to him by Mrs. Jones and his elementary school. As someone whose institutional identity as a student receiving intervention is exposed to other students and outside observers each time he is pulled from the classroom, Jon did not appear to show any visible signs of emotional response to these occasions. He was aware of the times when he needed to leave the room for intervention and did so without prompting or reaction. At no point in any interview did Jon directly identify as having a disability or learning disorder.
Mrs. Jones’ observation that Jon did not seem to be aware when he struggled was consistent with the observational and interview data collected for Jon. The only time I observed Jon recognize he was struggling was an instance described in more detail in a later section in which he lost his work in Glogster because he did not know how to save. He consistently enacted the identity of a “good student” in the classroom. However, when Jon described himself as “not very smart in reading” (Interview, Week 2) that identity may have been influenced by the amount of direct intervention he received from Mrs. Jones, the Intervention Specialist, and the Speech Language Pathologist to remediate his reading skills. Although Jon claimed the identity of not being “very smart” in reading, it was unclear whether he held that identity because he felt difficulty during reading events, or if this identity was informed by the amount of intervention he received in reading.

Jon’s identification as a writer in terms of his handwriting rather than in terms of his ability to construct meaning with words may have insulated Jon from claiming the identity of being one of Mrs. Jones’ “lowest writers” (Interview, Week 7). He seemed largely unaware of the deficits ascribed to him as a writer. Mrs. Jones’ observation that Jon did not recognize when he did not understand a concept might also have insulated Jon from taking on the identity of a struggling writer to the point of ceasing to attempt to write in future writing events.

**Past and Current Writing Experiences**

In order to understand how Jon’s past and current writing experiences contributed to his academic identity, I asked him to tell me about his experiences writing in and out of school. I also observed Jon engaged in traditional and digital writing events in Mrs. Jones’ fourth grade classroom. The findings described below are also triangulated with artifacts of Jon’s writing collected during observations.
Past writing events. When asked about his past experiences with writing in school, Jon shared several memories with me. Jon identified his first memory of writing in school to be writing about holidays in Kindergarten. He also shared with me the first time he remembered feeling successful with writing in school. He explained that in second or third grade at his former school, he had to do a project in which he wrote a full page of text, and he remembered receiving a 98% on the assignment. His assignment was to write about technology and the reasons that we need technology in our lives. The reasons he remembered identifying in his writing were “to call people, play games, and make school easier” (Interview, Week 2). To get a sense of the writing Jon was engaged in at his former school prior to changing schools in the middle of this academic year, I asked Jon to tell me the kinds of writing he did at that school. He replied that they wrote letters to people. When probed if they did any other kinds of writing, he answered “No. We did have stairs at that school though” (Interview, Week 13). This response seems to suggest that his memories of the school were not largely centered on his writing experiences.

The primary way in which Jon engaged in writing outside of school was in the diary he had kept since he was eight years old. He explained that he used a laptop he had at home to keep a diary in Google Docs where he wrote about the things that he did. When I asked him why he decided to start writing in a diary, he replied, “To remember what I did when I was a kid” (Interview, Week 6). Jon told me that he often shared this diary with his friends in his neighborhood who still attended his old school as a way of staying connected to them. Jon liked to write in his diary when he came home from school because, he said “it’s just me writing, and no one’s home” (Interview Week 6). When asked how he feels during these digital writing events, Jon responded that he felt confident. This statement represents one of the few discourse
identities surrounding writing as an act of his mind, rather than an act of his hands, that Jon expressed during the course of the study.

**Current writing events.** Most of Jon’s current writing experiences in school occurred in the context of Mrs. Jones’ fourth grade ELA classroom. Jon received direct intervention from both Mrs. Jones and a Speech Language Pathologist who visited Mrs. Jones’ classroom to work with Jon during the ELA period. Mrs. Jones also worked one on one with Jon and another student for an additional half hour each Monday while the rest of the class attended elective specials classes, such as yoga or orchestra. Mrs. Jones described Jon and the other boy as two of her “lowest writers” (Interview, Week 7) and explained that this additional intervention time was valuable because it allowed her to accomplish more with them than she was able to during the ELA class time.

There was also a Speech Language Pathologist who provided services to Jon in the classroom during the second half of the ELA period each day. She worked with Jon on his reading goals and helped him take notes on his informational writing topic and stay organized. During several observations, Jon worked with her to organize his folders and find papers that were needed to accomplish the tasks Mrs. Jones had assigned him. She also worked with him on vocabulary and monitored his independent work by encouraging him to stay on task.

Jon was also pulled out of the classroom for intervention during the first half of the ELA period, and as a result, consistently missed most of the first round of the Café workshop time. Because this study is bound by the writing that occurred in Mrs. Jones’ classroom, I remained there during observations and documented the instruction that Jon missed. I observed that most of the direct instruction related to preparing to take the PARCC assessments occurred in the first half of the ELA class period in which Jon was pulled for intervention. During one observation,
students practiced taking a sample PARCC test using their Chromebooks in preparation for the computer-based Performance Based Assessment they would take in the coming weeks (Field notes, Week 6). It was unclear whether or not Jon had another opportunity during the school day to engage in this practice.

As Mrs. Jones guided students through the informational writing unit, she initially thought that Jon would be working on his writing during his intervention time, as well as with her. At the end of the study, she spoke about the work that Jon did with the Intervention Specialist:

I wasn’t aware how little writing they do since he’s been pulled out down there. That is, again in my mind, I thought that he would be doing almost as much down there with them as me, so I thought he was going to get double the amount, and all I’m finding is if it’s not me, it’s not happening. And I don’t mean that critically, I just mean the plan, they see reading, and maybe some writing response, but not even much writing down there to come back to me, it’s more doing what I do here. I would have thought he’d have more writing reinforcement all through his day, I guess is what I want to say. (Interview, Week 13)

Mrs. Jones also noted that using the Hapara software she could see each time Jon accessed his Google Docs. Based on that information, she could see that not only was he not accessing his documents during intervention, he also was not accessing his documents at home as many other students in her class did. Mrs. Jones’ reflection on the limited extent to which Jon had opportunities to engage in writing outside of her classroom reinforced the finding that most of
his writing occurred in the context of her classroom. In the next section, I present an analysis of Jon’s engagement during the writing events that occurred in Mrs. Jones’ classroom.

**Engagement during writing events.** Observational data show that even though Jon might not have always used his time effectively, he was engaged in writing during times in which he was expected to work on his writing in Mrs. Jones’ class. I observed Jon in various stages of writing his informational writing piece beginning with selecting a topic, researching that topic, drafting and revising in Google Docs, and publishing in Glogster.

After Mrs. Jones conferenced with Jon on his topic, Jon changed his topic from the two ideas that he wrote on his sticky note: “Why is there time to tell?” and “Why do bird ley eggs?” (See Figure 4.3) to “How do dogs communicate?” – a topic that Mrs. Jones thought he could more easily research and write about for the assignment. Although Mrs. Jones guided Jon towards this topic, he still drew on his autobiographical self by pulling his schema of knowledge on the ways in which his own dogs communicated with him.

The first paragraph of Figure 4.4 above shows an example of how Jon related the information he found in his research to his own experiences with his dog. To answer his guiding question of how dogs communicate, Jon first shared two ways that he observed his own dog communicate, by sniffing other dogs and barking. From his research, Jon learned that when dogs rapidly bark repeatedly it means that someone is close by and the dog is alerting the owner of the other person’s presence. He used this new knowledge to explain the behavior he had observed in his own dog and brought to the writing event.

Jon revised his writing based on the feedback he received from both his peers and his teacher. In Figure 4.4 we see that the second sentence reads, “one way is they sniff other butts to say hello” (Artifact, Week 6). After receiving a suggestion from Mrs. Jones to not start off with

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this specific detail (See Figure 4.5), Jon removed the sentence from his first paragraph and wrote “When a dog comes up to you, he smells you to see if you are a stranger” (Artifact, Week 11) in a separate paragraph devoted to dog’s senses. Figure 4.6 shows his revised draft and new placement for this idea.

**communication**

How do dogs communicate? This is what my dog does. He likes to rapidly bark over and over. That means someone is near by. Did you know the first species to live so close to a human was a dog? Between 13,500 and 100,000 years dogs developed a unique way to communicate.

| senses |

A dog’s sense of smell is better than its hearing and tasting. When a dog comes up to you, he smells you to see if you are a stranger. Dogs also have a strong sense of touch. How they touch is they rub up against you.

*Figure 4.6. Jon’s Informational Writing Draft from Week 11*

The revision history on Jon’s Google Doc showed numerous revisions that Jon, his peers, and Mrs. Jones made to his document through the course of his drafting and revision process.

When Jon began working in Glogster, he did not copy the text that had been improved over the course of a month through revision and feedback in Google Docs to his Glogster poster. Instead, he recomposed text in the Glogster text editor. Through observational field notes, I documented his composing process. Jon did not access his Google Doc during the writing event and did not have his Google Drive account open in a tab of his web browser. All text he added to his Glogster either came from his handwritten research notes or was composed on the spot. From my vantage point, I could see Jon add the following text:
games/behavior. I have one game it is called bow that means the dog wants the person to chase him. When the dog gets what it wants the signal gets reinforced. (Field notes, Week 7)

In an early draft of his writing, Jon had a paragraph titled “behavior/games” but the final draft he submitted to Mrs. Jones for evaluation did not have this section. I discuss Jon’s decision to remove this paragraph from his final draft of the Google Doc in more detail in the next chapter.

As I watched Jon recompose his writing after spending a month on revising his text in Google Docs, I wondered if Jon understood the fundamental connection between the work he was doing in the Google Doc and the work he was doing in Glogster. The fact that he was re-entering text from his handwritten notes seemed to indicate that he did not recognize the value of the peer editing and teacher feedback that he had received throughout his writing process.

In the final interview, I asked Mrs. Jones about Jon’s process for composing in Glogster and she replied that some students did copy and paste from Google Docs, but not all. She explained that she “wanted him to maybe almost look at it as another step in the writing process for him” (Interview, Week 13). From her perspective, working in the medium of Glogster gave students an additional opportunity to revise their writing to more effectively work in a different space and take advantage of the features for meaning creation that were not available to them when working in Google Docs.

As it turned out, Jon recomposed multiple times in Glogster. At the end of the class period in which I first observed him recomposing, I approached Jon and asked if there was a way that he could share with me what he had accomplished on his Glogster that day. He told me that when he shut his computer it did not save and he lost everything he had done. He showed me a new Glogster poster he was creating that just had a speech bubble in the center with no text.
(during member checks, Jon clarified that he did add new text in the speech bubble). The Speech Language Pathologist overheard our conversation and sat down next to him and commented to me that she did not know what a Glogster was. Jon replied, “I don’t either” (Field notes, Week 7). This was the only time I observed Jon grappling with frustration in his writing process. In this instance, Jon’s lack of knowledge of the technology tool caused him to lose a day of work on his writing and experience a setback that had the potential to affect his motivation to continue working on the piece of writing.

Much of Jon’s engagement with writing in Mrs. Jones’ classroom was mediated through interactions with peers. Although there were instances in which Jon, like every other student, used writing workshop time to socialize with peers, most of Jon’s interactions with peers were related to giving and receiving assistance on writing and technology topics. Peer collaboration was a valued aspect of the writing process in Mrs. Jones’ classroom and observational data indicates that peer collaboration allowed Jon to push through difficulty with peer support to accomplish tasks.

Talking about his writing with peers also allowed Jon to feel successful as a writer. When Jon was planning his historical narrative piece, he shared his ideas for his story with another student in the class. In the following excerpt, Jon discussed the experience of talking about his writing with a peer:

Interviewer: What does it feel like when you talk about your story with other students, not just with the teacher?

Jon: [pause] It feels like they’re going to laugh sometimes.

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Jon: Because I already told the story to one person and he laughed.
Interviewer: Hmmm. How did that make you feel?

Jon: Not sad.

Interviewer: Not sad?

Jon: No

Interviewer: No?

Jon: No, because I laughed with him.

Interviewer: So did he think something was funny in your story or was he laughing at your story?

Jon: He was laughing at something in my story that was funny.

Interviewer: Ok, can you tell me what it was that he was laughing at, can you remember?

Jon: I haven’t finished it, but I have an idea. So at the end there’s this part where… so the tornado comes back and they have to get shelter of course, and when they’re in the shelter it comes by and it sucks a person up and, do you know the eye of the tornado?

Interviewer: Uh huh

Jon: Well that person goes in the eye of the tornado and she’s just floating like this [mimes a calm, laid back person] “yeah”

Interviewer: You know that is really funny…

Jon: and then she falls back

Interviewer: So when you said that your friend laughed about your story…

Jon: Yeah
Interviewer: … and it was that part, as a writer when you were planning that part did you hope that readers would laugh?
Jon: Yeah
Interviewer: Ok, so your friend was sort of doing the thing that you hoped they would do?
Jon: Yeah.
Interviewer: Well that’s cool. I’d say that’s a pretty good success for you as a writer then.
Jon: Yeah. I didn’t tell him to laugh. (Interview, Week 13)

At first, in the beginning of this exchange, I thought Jon was telling me that a peer was laughing at him for his ideas. As we continued to talk he helped me understand that the student he was talking to was laughing because Jon was telling him a funny scene he planned to add to his story. The student’s reaction to his ideas reinforced for Jon his ability to effectively elicit a desired response from a reader.

Conclusion

As a new student, Jon was still developing his academic identity within a new school environment. Jon perceived himself as a good student who was stronger in math than in reading. His affinity for sports also permeated his academic identity and allowed him to construct an identity as an athlete in the classroom, which helped to mask his academic weaknesses. Jon viewed writing as something that is done with a person’s hands rather than with a person’s mind. For this reason, Jon’s identity as a writer rested largely in the fine motor skills he used to print text by hand, rather than in his cognitive abilities to create meaning using words. Jon seemed unaware of the institutional identity Mrs. Jones ascribed to him as a reluctant reader and writer,
although he acknowledged that he was “not very smart in reading.” Jon’s identification as a writer in terms of his handwriting rather than in terms of his ability to construct meaning with words may have insulated Jon from claiming the identity of being a reluctant writer. Jon’s experiences writing in a diary he kept in Google Docs outside of school helped him construct a discourse identity as a confident writer. Jon’s experiences writing in school were mediated through social interactions that allowed him to push through difficulty to accomplish tasks. Jon’s interactions with peers also served to reinforce his decisions as a writer and help him build confidence.

Jessi

Jessi has attended James Madison Elementary School since Kindergarten. When I asked her what she thought of her school, she replied “It’s really fun because you get to do gym and learn a lot of stuff in class” (Interview, Week 13). Jessi is the youngest in her family with six older brothers and two older sisters. She also shared that she has several nieces and nephews. Mrs. Jones indicated that Jessi’s mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, but was doing very well and was almost finished with all of her treatment. Mrs. Jones explained that she had frequently observed Jessi worrying about her mom during class.

Jessi expressed interest in drawing and playing with friends. She also indicated that she liked sports, especially soccer and basketball. At the end of the study period, Jessi was looking forward to joining a basketball team and beginning to take gymnastics classes. She also noted that she was beginning to read more at home and found pleasure in doing that. At home she used an iPad after school to play games.

My first impression of Jessi was that she was a kind, cheerful girl. She appeared to be African American and wore glasses. She was visibly excited at the prospect of being in the
study. Each time I asked her if she was interested or if it sounded like something she would like
to do, she eagerly indicated that she was. She smiled a lot and was chatty with the other students
sitting near her. She also socially interacted with the adults in the room, showing interest in
them not only as teachers, but also as people.

The descriptions that follow share the ways in which Jessi perceived her academic
identity in the context of digital writing, the institutional identities Mrs. Jones ascribed to Jessi
and the extent to which she claimed those identities, and the past and current writing experiences
that contributed to her academic identity. Jessi’s perceptions of herself as a student and as a
writer and Mrs. Jones’ positioning of Jessi as a student and a writer are analyzed through the lens
of Gee’s (2000) four ways of viewing identity. Throughout Jessi’s case description, references
to nature, discourse, institution, and affinity identities are made in the context of Gee’s
framework. Artifacts of Jessi’s writing collected during observations are analyzed according to
Ivanič’s (1998) Writer Identity theory; therefore, references to autobiographical self, discoursal
self, self as author, and possibilities for selfhood are made in the context of Ivanič’s framework.

**Academic Identity Perception**

In order to explore how Jessi perceived her academic identity, I asked her how she would
describe herself as a student and as a writer. Then I asked her to tell me how she thought her
teacher would describe her both as a student and as a writer. The findings described below are
triangulated with observational data as well as artifacts collected during the study period that
reinforce her descriptions of herself.

**Self as student.** When asked to describe herself as a student, Jessi responded, “Really,
good. Really, really good. […] Really good. I struggle sometimes, but I do pretty good”
(Interview, Week 2). Jessi explained that she liked her math and science class that she had with
another teacher, because they played games and used the TenMarks
(https://www.tenmarks.com/) program for differentiated math reinforcement. Jessi’s
identification as a “good student” can be interpreted both in terms of classroom behavior as well
as academic performance. Her acknowledgement that she “struggles sometimes” but that she did
“pretty good” suggests that she was not just identifying as “good” only in terms of behavior, but
also in terms of her academic performance in school. Observational data confirms that Jessi
enacted the discourse identity of a good student in the classroom. In one instance, Mrs. Jones
was addressing the whole class to give instructions and students were talking over her. Mrs.
Jones said, “I’ll wait.” Jessi immediately raised her hand to give the quiet signal (holding up two
fingers). Mrs. Jones looked at Jessi and said, “Thank you, Jessi” (Field notes, Week 3). Jessi
was observed giving the quiet signal two additional times during this observation to assist Mrs.
Jones in quieting the class and to show Mrs. Jones that she was listening. During another
observation, Jessi was observed shushing a student sitting next to her when Mrs. Jones was
talking (Field notes, Week 4).

Students in Mrs. Jones class were rewarded for behaviors such as these with positive
points in the Class Dojo app. On one occasion, Mrs. Jones was transitioning from a Café
workshop session to a minilesson and commented to students, “I still see a lot of screens; they
should be closed” (Field notes, Week 7). Jessi still had her Chromebook open and was logging
into Class Dojo to check her progress. She had her screen only partially open and appeared to be
sneaking glances at her screen while trying to prevent Mrs. Jones from noticing. This behavior
reinforced the interpretation that she knew she was not supposed to be on her Chromebook. This
particular enactment of her identity as a good student is interesting because she was defying her
teacher in order to check to see if she had been rewarded for good behavior.
I asked Jessi to tell me how she thought her teacher, Mrs. Jones, would describe her as a student. She responded, “she would probably say, ‘she likes school’ yeah I do like school. ‘She likes playing outside. She likes working in a group.’ All of that. She might say that [laughs]” (Interview, Week 2). Jessi’s analysis of herself as a student from the perspective of her teacher includes three affinity identities – liking school, liking to play outside, and liking to work in groups. It is interesting, though, that after strongly identifying as a “good student,” Jessi did not choose to offer this discourse identity when analyzing herself from her teacher’s perspective.

In the final interview, I asked Jessi if there was anything she wished her teachers knew or understood better about her. The following is an excerpt of her response:

Jessi: [pause] Probably that, like, I’m a really good student. Yeah. And that I love, love, love gymnastics and like other sports too.

Interviewer: You said that you wished that they knew you were a really good student…

Jessi: Yeah

Interviewer: Do you think that they think that now?

Jessi: Yeah. I think, I do. (Interview, Week 13)

This exchange seems to indicate that while Jessi consciously worked to enact the discourse identity of a “good student” in Mrs. Jones’ classroom, she did not feel confident that her teachers recognized and attributed this identity to her.

**Self as writer.** I conducted my first interview with Jessi immediately following my interview with Jon. In order to avoid the misunderstanding that occurred during his interview in which he interpreted my use of the word “writing” to mean “handwriting,” I was more explicit
about my meaning of the word during my interview with Jessi. The following exchange illustrates Jessi’s response when I asked her to describe herself as a writer:

Interviewer: So can you tell me a little bit about yourself as a writer, and when I say writer I don’t mean like handwriting, I mean like somebody who makes pieces of writing. Tell me a little bit about yourself in that way.

Jessi: I do like to write about my dog.

Interviewer: ok.

Jessi: Birthday parties. Playing outside with my friends. I like to do all of those, but one thing mostly I care about when I write about is school probably because I love to write, so yeah.

Interviewer: ok. Why do you love to write? What is it about writing that you love?

Jessi: Because it’s fun. You get to put the letters in colors, you get to write about other people and I like it. (Interview, Week 2)

Jessi’s description of herself as a writer is based on her affinity identities – her dog, birthday parties, playing with friends – which she claimed to be the sources for her writing. When Jessi completed the activity in which she was asked to brainstorm a list of wonders on a sheet of paper, and then select one wonder to write on a sticky note and post to a bulletin board in the classroom (See Figure 4.7), she initially selected a topic on which she could write about an affinity, her dog, and draw on her background knowledge gained from owning a dog.
Jessi also indicated that one of the reasons she loved to write was because she could put the “letters in colors.” Although this could be interpreted to mean that she could use different colored writing utensils, another explanation of this statement is that when she said she loved to write, she was imagining writing on a computer in which the user can easily change the color of the font. During member checks, I asked Jessi to clarify how she meant this phrase, and she explained that she thought it was fun to click on “font” in the tool bar of Google Docs and select from the range of available colors that she could make her text. Her use of the words “fun” and “I like it” suggest that digital writing was a source of enjoyment for Jessi.

When I asked Jessi to tell me how she thought her teacher would describe her as a writer, she chose to tell me the types of responses her teacher would give her writing, rather than using words to represent her discoursal writing identity. Jessi shared that she thought her teacher might say, “you missed this word and you forgot to put a capital” (Interview, Week 2). Then she told me that her teacher would highlight the errors in her Google Doc and send it back to her to fix the errors. I asked Jessi to think about how she felt when this happened:

Interviewer: What do you think about getting feedback like that?

Jessi: [pause] I don’t know.
Interviewer: Like how do you… when you get those… that pops up in your Google file, right, you get to see all those comments and things? How does it make you feel when you see the feedback?

Jessi: Mostly pretty good because it tells me, “You missed this word and you need to fix it” and… it doesn’t make me feel sad, it just makes me feel good because you have to fix it. (Interview, Week 2)

Although Jessi did not offer a description of herself as a writer from her teacher’s perspective, she did offer examples of some of her perceived weaknesses in her writing. This exchange seems to suggest that Jessi perceived her teacher’s focus in Jessi’s writing to be on correctness and Jessi saw her job as a writer to achieve that correctness. Although she recognized that she made errors in her writing, she remained optimistic about the prospect of receiving help from her teacher to revise her writing to make improvements.

**Ascribed Institutional Identities**

In order to understand the extent to which the institutional identities ascribed to Jessi contributed to the academic identity she constructed for herself as a student at James Madison Elementary School, I asked her teacher, Mrs. Jones, to explain the reason why Jessi was considered “at-risk” for school failure, and to describe her both as a student and as a writer. The findings in this section are triangulated with observational data that reinforces the ways in which Jessi was positioned in the classroom as a student, as well as artifacts of comments Mrs. Jones left in Jessi’s Google Docs that illustrate the ways in which she was positioned as a writer.

**Source of “at-risk” label.** Jessi was considered for inclusion in the study because she read two grade levels below her same age peers. That means that instead of reading on the fourth grade level, she read on a second grade level. Mrs. Jones noted that Jessi was one of the
few students in the fourth grade who still needed direct instruction in phonics using the Orton Gillingham program. Mrs. Jones shared that Jessi had struggled with reading since kindergarten, and explained, “we’re trying to close that gap, obviously none of us have found an answer of why she’s two years behind, so […] we’ll keep on trying to close that gap, but other gaps are going to open up” (Interview, Week 13). To address Jessi’s “gap,” she was pulled out daily for intervention. Like Jon, I was not given access to Jessi’s educational records. However, the implication was that she also had been formally identified as a student with a disability or learning disorder and placed on an IEP or 504 Plan. The decision to pull Jessi out of class for intervention was a direct result of the “at-risk” label ascribed to Jessi by the school due to the discrepancy between the level on which she read and the level on which she was expected to read. The hope was that by pulling her out for intervention, she would close her reading level gap and be able to read on the same level as her same age peers.

**Portrait of Jessi as a student.** Early in the study, Mrs. Jones positioned Jessi as a student who did not value learning. From Mrs. Jones’ perspective, “[learning was] just not important to her at all, she could just sit right here all day and not read and not write and leave and think she’d had a great day at school” (Interview, Week 2). Mrs. Jones explained that Jessi seemed to value her family over school, even though Mrs. Jones’ interactions with Jessi’s mother made Mrs. Jones believe that education was valued in Jessi’s home.

Mrs. Jones also positioned Jessi as a student who was immature in comparison to her same age peers. She described Jessi in this way:

She’s kind of stunted, like a five year old, [pause] and so you can work with her on things and she’s very appreciative, but that foundation isn’t there, never the
enrichment part of it, the language, and so she… she doesn’t have much to grab onto. (Interview, Week 2)

She also explained that Jessi had an affinity for reading “very female, princessy, very immature books,” and commented that her interests were centered on “cute things that she likes to see and wear and […] not about living life and learning and growing as a learner or into an adult” (Interview, Week 2). In these descriptions, it seems Mrs. Jones was ascribing to Jessi a nature identity of being “stunted” that was the cause of an affinity identity associated with reading books that were, in Mrs. Jones’ opinion, too young for her age.

Rather than describing Jessi as a “good student” as Jessi would have hoped, Mrs. Jones ascribed to Jessi the discourse identity of a “teacher pleaser” (Interviews, Week 2; Week 7; Week 13). In each of the three interviews, Mrs. Jones came back to this phrase again and again to describe Jessi’s behavior in her classroom. For Mrs. Jones, being a “teacher pleaser” was not a positive quality. She explained, “she’s a teacher pleaser, terrible teacher pleaser, to almost her disadvantage because she just, it’s not intrinsic, so to tell her to do her best, or to go home and work on something would never happen” (Interview, Week 2). Mrs. Jones also noted that Jessi’s desire to please the teacher affected the work she produced:

She’s a pleaser, please by amount or by effort, is far more for her than the quality that’s going to come out of it, or the message, or the main idea. And for me I want the main idea [laughs], I want the message. (Interview, Week 13)

According to Mrs. Jones, Jessi was “totally teacher driven” (Interview, Week 2) and was more concerned with giving the impression that she was a good student than actually learning from the instruction and activities Mrs. Jones orchestrated for her.
Observational data supports that Jessi engaged in behaviors in the classroom to enact the identity of a “good student.” The instances described in a previous section in which Jessi raised her hand to show Mrs. Jones that she was listening can also be interpreted as instances in which Jessi was engaging in behaviors that Mrs. Jones would perceive to reinforce the identity she ascribed to Jessi as a “teacher pleaser.” In addition to the previously described examples, there was also one instance in which Jessi got up from her seat to ask Mrs. Jones if she was allergic to chocolate. Jessi told her that she wanted to bring in something for her for Valentine’s Day, and she wanted to make sure that Mrs. Jones was not allergic to chocolate (Field notes, Week 7). Behaviors such as this reinforced for Mrs. Jones’ Jessi’s desire to please her as the teacher.

Mrs. Jones also positioned Jessi as a student who had developed avoidance strategies to cope in the classroom. She explained: “she’s very passive and very sneaky about, you know, takes a lot of bathroom breaks, right when it’s a critical time, or when I’m going to check in or work with her. She’s just developed those skills so much” (Interview, Week 2). Observational data supports that Jessi did indeed engage in behaviors that could be interpreted as avoidance strategies. Over the course of ten observations, Jessi took seven restroom breaks, always occurring during the second Café workshop session in which she was expected to engage in independent work. Using the restroom during work time appeared to be a part of her daily routine. However, it’s important to note that this occurred within minutes of Jessi returning to the classroom from working with the Intervention Specialist, and this time might have been the first time in her school day when she felt she had the liberty to go to the restroom. In another instance, I observed Jessi and another girl stand at the back of the room and blow their noses for a full two minutes (Field notes, Week 13), which could be interpreted by a teacher to be an
excessive amount of time to spend on blowing one’s nose, resulting in the teacher interpreting this behavior as an avoidance strategy.

By the end of the study, Mrs. Jones began positioning Jessi in more positive ways. In contrast to her earlier statement that Jessi did not value learning, when I asked Mrs. Jones to think about Jessi as she moved into middle school and high school she commented, “I see her valuing education huge, so she’s not going to quit, she’ll get through high school and graduate and be a productive person” (Interview, Week 13). Mrs. Jones explained that over the course of the three months of the study she noticed a change in Jessi’s attitude toward learning. She explained:

Now, and this may be age and development a little bit, she now sees, “ok well I’m on my way, I’m not going to get there the way everybody else does and it’s going to take me a little longer, but I’m not going to give up, and I don’t need to be led all the time.” (Interview, Week 13)

Given the extent to which Mrs. Jones’ positioned Jessi as “teacher driven” and being a “teacher pleaser” earlier in the study, this new way of positioning Jessi is especially significant. In observing Mrs. Jones’ classroom once a week for ten weeks over the course of approximately three months, I did not perceive a notable difference in the ways in which Jessi interacted in the classroom. However, Mrs. Jones’ perceptions of Jessi as a student had changed based on her observations during the course of the study.

**Portrait of Jessi as a writer.** When I first asked Mrs. Jones to describe Jessi as a writer, she commented, “Her spelling skills are very weak. Attention to detail is not there at all” (Interview, Week 2). Mrs. Jones had developed the sense that Jessi did not seem to have
developed background knowledge on topics that she could draw from for her writing. She explained:

Because she doesn’t have a lot of background knowledge she can’t pull from things and form her own ideas, so it’s a struggle to get anything started. I have to kind of front-load her with ideas. She takes a lot of planning ahead of time. Considerable more planning than the average student to prepare or to preplan or to feed her with ideas, and preview vocabulary before she starts, previewing everything with her before she starts anything, frontloading her really, a lot more models. [….] I can only see that for her even more in fifth and sixth because she doesn’t have those things to connect with or to give examples of or to describe, she doesn’t have those, she doesn’t go beyond herself very much or the other world, like herself to the world, she just doesn’t, that hasn’t been made yet.

( Interview, Week 2)

Mrs. Jones interpreted Jessi’s perceived lack of background knowledge as a significant barrier to writing. This observation is likely related to Mrs. Jones’ perception of Jessi’s lack of interest in “living life and learning and growing as a learner or into an adult” (Interview, Week 2). As a result, Mrs. Jones felt that she needed to provide more scaffolding for Jessi on writing assignments than she did for her other fourth grade students.

Early in the study, Mrs. Jones ascribed to Jessi the identity of a “reluctant writer” (Interviews, Week 2) who “wouldn’t [write] unless she was asked to do it” (Interview, Week 2). This goes back to Mrs. Jones’ perception of Jessi as a “teacher pleaser” who wrote for extrinsic attention from the teacher rather than an intrinsic desire to write. Despite this reluctance, Mrs.
Jones noted, “She doesn’t have a low self-esteem about herself at all, doesn’t not share, she’ll share her writing, just with everybody else, and it’s not even on topic” (Interview, Week 2).

Later in the study, Mrs. Jones continued to identify Jessi as a “reluctant writer,” and referred to her using that phrase throughout the study (Interviews, Week 2; Week 7; Week 13) even though Jessi was engaging in writing behaviors that were counter to those of a “reluctant writer.” Her descriptions of Jessi show that Mrs. Jones recognized that Jessi’s writing behaviors were not consistent with her “other reluctant writers.” Mrs. Jones explained Jessi’s writing behaviors this way:

Well she does want to revise, she doesn’t mind revising and going back into it, whereas some kids, a lot of reluctant writers never want to look back at it again, and I don’t know why, not that she fixes them well, but she’s very eager to go in. She also liked publishing it and getting to that publishing phase. That was really enticing for her to go to put pictures in and to take it to that next level. So she wanted, she wanted to share it, she really did. I mean she would get up and read it like it was the best piece, where other reluctant writers hide and won’t want to read it like the others. (Interview, Week 13)

Jessi’s willingness to return to writing she had produced to revise and share that writing with an audience shows that she was not reluctant to write. Mrs. Jones’ continued use of the phrase “reluctant writer” when describing Jessi suggests that Mrs. Jones was having difficulty letting go of the identity that she had ascribed to Jessi, even though Jessi’s writing behaviors indicated that she did not fit the characteristics of a “reluctant writer” in the way that Mrs. Jones classified this type of writer.
As Jessi worked on her informational writing draft, Mrs. Jones noticed that Jessi was asserting more independence in her writing process. During an interview, Mrs. Jones described a conversation she had with Jessi in a writing conference about writing her conclusion. She explained to me that she had taught students to use a method called RSQ (Restate the Question) when writing informational paragraphs. She retold the conversation in this way:

I said, “Your conclusion could really start RSQ your question and then pick three things that really stood out to you when you read about it or learned about it in your conclusion.” She was like, “Oh I can RSQ it and do it” and I go “would you like help?” “Nope I know how to RSQ.” I’m not sure she does, but she said she did and I like the confidence, but she knew what her next plan was going to be tomorrow for writing, and I didn’t always feel that. (Interview, Week 7)

This exchange suggests that Jessi was moving away from engaging in the attention-seeking behaviors that Mrs. Jones interpreted to be a result of her “teacher pleaser” identity and moving toward working independently to achieve her own goals.

An analysis of artifacts shows that Jessi also declined the help Mrs. Jones offered in the comments of her Google Doc. Figure 4.8 shows a comment thread in which Mrs. Jones offered to help Jessi revise her sentences in an early draft of her informational piece. Jessi replied that she would work on the revisions with the Intervention Specialist. Although she was choosing to still receive help from another adult, her decision to work with the Intervention Specialist required her to initiate a request for help with her writing, a behavior that is not characteristic of a reluctant writer.
By the end of the study, Mrs. Jones observed that Jessi was self-initiating writing using technology for the purpose of social interaction with her peers. She explained that Jessi began using her phone to text other students in the class and that she had seen Jessi “blossom in that” (Interview, Week 13). She explained:

If I had to pick one person who’s the communication queen in here online or in our discussion, well I wouldn’t call them discussions, but you can go in Schoology and put a comment, or she is one of the first ones to do that. […] I see that being a way for her to communicate in junior high and high school, she’s going to jump on, she’s already jumped on that, and seen that “I can do it other ways,” and communicate and so I [pause] I just see her being more tech savvy and going that way and not writing. (Interview, Week 13)

During my observations, I documented Jessi frequently scrolling through the Schoology feed when she returned to the classroom after being pulled for intervention. It seemed that she was
using the LMS website as a means to reconnect with the classroom and find out the activities as well as the digital interactions she had missed while she was out of the room.

An analysis of artifacts also shows that Jessi used the comment feature of Google Docs to communicate socially with her peers. In one comment thread (See Figure 4.9), Jessi used her study buddy’s praise of her writing as a catalyst to reinforce their social relationship. After Jessi’s study buddy wrote “I think you did awesome with voice,” Jessi replied “thak you you are my bff” (Artifact, Week 11). After she used the comment thread to initiate a social exchange a day later, Jessi and her study buddy proceeded to say “hi” and “hey” to each other numerous times in the course of several minutes (these are the replies that are collapsed in Figure 4.9 and marked as “Show all 11 replies”). At the end of this exchange, Jessi’s study buddy brought the conversation back to writing by saying, “I love the conventions you have!!!!!” to which Jessi replied with the compliment, “i do to i really love yours.”

Several days later, Mrs. Jones posted: “Please keep comments to 6 Traits in writing pieces. There are other places to socialize” (Artifact, Week 11). Although she corrected Jessi and her study buddy for inappropriately using the comment thread, Mrs. Jones identified this as a positive behavior for Jessi in a subsequent interview.
In evaluating Jessi’s final product, Mrs. Jones thought that Jessi had done a nice job picking a question to investigate – “Why are clownfish so colorful?” - but despite repeated efforts to help Jessi revise, she never answered this question. Instead, Mrs. Jones noted, “she had lots of details, just about things she read about the clownfish and almost never mentioned the color. I think only with my prompting did she get anything about color even in there, and that was laborious, really laborious” (Interview, Week 13). As Jessi’s writing teacher, Mrs. Jones expressed frustration that Jessi “can touch on some really good points and never really say anything” (Interview, Week 13). She suggested that Jessi’s next steps as a writer should be to stick to her main idea when she writes and work on developing her main idea.
Mrs. Jones’ evaluation of Jessi’s tendency to stray from her topic was consistent with my analysis of an early draft of her informational writing (See Figure 4.10).

Figure 4.10. Jessi’s Informational Writing Draft Excerpt from Week 6

In the final sentences of a paragraph about clownfish, Jessi wrote:

Because they are like different kinds of clownfish i love clownfish ever since i look them up it is so cool I can’t. Want to sead it to the other kids at [school name] i hope they like my story and i will like their story.  (Artifact, Week 6)

Jessi moved from writing about her love of clownfish to writing about her response to researching clownfish, and then finally to writing about her excitement at the prospect of sharing her writing with the other fourth grade students who were also writing about their wonders. Not only does this illustrate a deviation from the topic of her writing, it also indicates that she wrote her thoughts as she thought them, even when her thoughts were her response to the writing event in which she was engaged instead of the information she wanted to present to her readers.

Extent to which Jessi claimed institutional identities. There was little evidence to suggest that Jessi was aware of the identities ascribed to her by Mrs. Jones and her elementary school. As was the case with Jon, Jessi did not appear to show any visible signs of emotional response to leaving and returning to the classroom for intervention. At no point in any interview did Jessi directly identify as having a disability or learning disorder.
Although Jessi was likely not aware of the discourse identity of immaturity that Mrs. Jones’ ascribed to her based on her reading preferences, observational data supports that Jessi selected books with magical elements for independent reading. During one class period, Jessi was observed reading a book titled *Ashley the Dragon Fairy* (Meadows, 2012) that depicted an African American girl with fairy wings and a wand on the cover. In reading this book, she was in some ways claiming the discourse identity of a female reader interested in fantasy books written for young girls.

Although Mrs. Jones’ ascribed to Jessi an identity as a reluctant writer who was not willing or interested in self-initiating writing, Jessi indicated that she loved to write (Interview, Week 2) and offered favorite topics for writing (such as her dog, birthday parties, playing with friends). Because these topics existed outside of the possibilities for selfhood created by Jessi’s school assignments, in order to write about these topics, she would have to self-initiate writing outside of school. Rather than claiming an identity as a reluctant writer, Jessi claimed the identity of a writer who writes about her affinities based on her life experiences and social relationships.

While Jessi claimed the discourse identity of a “good student,” Mrs. Jones’ ascribed to Jessi the discourse identity of a “teacher pleaser.” It’s interesting that the same observational data can be used to support both discourse identities. In Jessi’s mind, her classroom behaviors were an attempt to actively reinforce the identity she wanted to construct in Mrs. Jones’ classroom of being a “good student.” However, because Jessi did not fully understand the expectations for independence and intrinsic motivation that Mrs. Jones’ held for “good students,” Mrs. Jones interpreted Jessi’s behaviors as expressions of the identity of a “teacher pleaser.”
Past and Current Writing Experiences

In order to understand how Jessi’s past and current writing experiences contributed to her academic identity, I asked her to tell me about her past experiences writing in and out of school, as well as the ways in which she wrote out of school during the study period. I also observed Jessi engaged in traditional and digital writing events in Mrs. Jones’ fourth grade ELA classroom. The findings described below are also triangulated with artifacts of Jessi’s writing collected during observations.

**Past writing events.** The past experiences in which Jessi remembered engaging in writing all centered on writing about topics in which she could bring her autobiographical self to the writing event or write about topics associated with her affinity identities. I also asked Jessi to tell me her memories of writing on a computer before coming to fourth grade. The following is her description of what she remembered writing:

I liked to write about my dog a lot because he’s so pretty and playful, so I’ll write:

“My dog is playful… super excited when I come home… and he’ll just jump on me and like bark.” So… it’s really fun to write about my dog and my family.

(Interview, Week 2)

Writing about her dog allows Jessi to draw on her affinity identity associated with her love of dogs, as well as her autobiographical self that has been informed by her experiences as a dog owner.

Jessi also shared that she remembered in earlier grades writing stories about books that she had read. She said she enjoyed writing stories about her favorite books in which she could write about “what’s going on, what’s going to happen next, what’s going to happen at the end” (Interview, Week 2). When I asked her why those memories stood out to her, she responded not
about the topics she selected, but about the expectations for using technology that she knew would exist for her when she reached fourth grade:

Jessi: Because I knew that when we get in fourth grade you’re going to have to write on the computer and on your own Google document, and I was like, “hmmm we’re probably going to have our own document.”

Interviewer: And you didn’t have that in third grade?

Jessi: No.

Interviewer: Ok, so this is new then this year?

Jessi: Yeah. (Interview, Week 2)

Although there seems to be a disconnect between her memories of writing about her favorite books and writing because she knew she would have to use technology in fourth grade when she claimed to have not used computers for writing in third grade, Mrs. Jones explained that the previous year she took some of her students down to the third grade classrooms and helped them learn to use Google Docs (Interview, Week 2). It is possible that the writing events Jessi was remembering occurred during the practice activities she engaged in on Google Docs in third grade with the support of Mrs. Jones’ fourth grade students.

**Current writing events.** Like Jon, most of Jessi’s current writing experiences in school occurred in the context of Mrs. Jones’ fourth grade ELA classroom. Jessi also received direct intervention from Mrs. Jones in the classroom and from an Intervention Specialist when she was pulled out of the classroom during the first round of the Café workshop period. Again, because this study is bound by the writing that occurred in Mrs. Jones’ classroom, I remained there during observations and documented the instruction that Jessi missed. Therefore, my only understanding of the instruction, or lack of instruction, in writing that occurred during
intervention came from Mrs. Jones’ perspective shared previously about the imbalance in attention paid to reading over writing. Like Jon, Jessi’s absence from the classroom during the first round of Café caused her to miss direct instruction related to taking the PARCC assessments.

Mrs. Jones also shared that Jessi missed class time at the beginning of the school day, when they did the morning meeting, to meet with a counselor to help her deal emotionally with her mother’s cancer (Field notes, Week 3). Mrs. Jones acknowledged the impact of consistently missing class time, “she’s pulled out a lot for a lot of different intervention groups here and I think to some… you know we have to because she’s so much lower than the other students, but it also gives her big gaps” (Interview, Week 2).

Despite missing a significant amount of writing time in Mrs. Jones’ classroom, Jessi shared that her memories of feeling successful in school occurred with Mrs. Jones. She explained:

Jessi: Probably in here because I get proud of myself when I write a really long paragraph of my story. Some, mostly, I write one big one all the way down to the bottom, and it might be short or it might be long, but I can write a lot. I can write a lot of words, but sometimes I will write in cursive, it’s like we have this thing and you can put it in cursive, so I’ll write in cursive.

Interviewer: Oh, the cursive font? You like to do that?
Jessi: yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. So you said that you feel really successful when you’re able to write a lot?
Jessi: Yeah. (Interview, Week 2)
Jessi’s feelings of success as a result of being able to “write a lot of words” is consistent with Mrs. Jones’ perception of Jessi valuing quantity over quality in her writing. Although the quality might not be where Mrs. Jones would have liked it to be at that point in the school year, Jessi’s feelings of success surrounding her accomplishment contributed to her willingness to continue writing for the assignments in Mrs. Jones’ class both at school and at home.

Jessi indicated that she worked on her writing for Mrs. Jones’ class at home. She shared that she accessed her Google Docs on a computer at home, and that she sometimes read and edited her writing there. Jessi also shared that her mom, dad and brother helped her with her writing at home (Interview, Week 6). She explained that they helped her make changes by telling her, “you have to edit that, you have to edit this, you have to edit that,” and then she said they “read it all together and then if they still like it, we read it again” (Interview, Week 6). This suggests that Jessi not only had support for her writing development at home, but also had the social aspects of writing that were encouraged in Mrs. Jones’ classroom reinforced through social engagement surrounding her writing at home.

**Engagement during writing events.** When Jessi was in Mrs. Jones’ classroom, she engaged in writing activities during times in which she was expected to work on her writing. However, as noted previously, in addition to being formally pulled for interventions, Jessi also missed opportunities to write as a result of the avoidance strategies Mrs. Jones identified, such as taking frequent restroom breaks. I observed Jessi in various stages of writing her informational writing piece beginning with selecting a topic, researching that topic, drafting and revising in Google Docs, and publishing in Glogster.

As illustrated in Figure 4.7 above, the first topic Jessi selected for her informational writing assignment was “Why do dogs jump and bark?” In selecting this topic, she was drawing
on both her affinity for dogs, as well as her experiences with her own dog that had shaped the autobiographical self she would have brought to the writing event. She began drafting in Google Docs about her dog jumping and barking when her parents came home, but she struggled to find information on the Internet to answer her question of why dogs engage in this behavior (See Figure 4.11).

![Figure 4.11. Jessi’s Informational Writing Draft Excerpt from Week 3](image)

Although the possibilities for selfhood inherent in the assignment were wide enough to allow Jessi to bring her autobiographical self to the writing event, her struggle to find information to answer her question led her to select a different topic – “Why are clownfish so colorful?” When she decided to change her topic, rather than drawing on her own past experiences or affinities, she said that she used Fact Monster ([http://www.factmonster.com](http://www.factmonster.com)) to help her select the topic.

However, she also shared that she might go to Disney World later in the year and thought she might swim in the ocean and see clownfish on the shore (Interview, Week 6). While she was able to find more information about this new topic than her previous topic through Internet research, her statements about Disney World being close to an ocean and clownfish being on a shore suggest that her opportunities to bring her autobiographical self to this piece of writing were more limited than if she had written about her dog.

In fact, an analysis of an early draft of the first paragraph she wrote on her new topic shows that she strictly reported facts about clownfish, without bringing herself into the piece of writing (See Figure 4.12). In this draft we see no evidence of either the autobiographical self
Jessi brought to the writing event, or a discoursal construction of herself within the text.

However, because Jessi was reporting facts about clownfish that she found on the Internet, she constructed a voice for herself as an author that read authoritatively, as she took on and echoed the voices of the authors she was reading in her research.

![Figure 4.12. Jessi’s Informational Writing Draft Excerpt from Week 5](image)

When Jessi began working in Glogster, she used the features within the program to tailor her poster to match her affinity identities. Observational data shows that Jessi spent a significant amount of time adjusting the visual features of her Glogster, such as the size, color and style of the font, and the arrangement of speech bubbles (Field notes, Week 7). Mrs. Jones explained that she always gave students an opportunity to explore a new technology tool prior to using it, but that she observed Jessi “starting over, picking the colors, each day was picking the colors and the background and looking at the choices and looking at the choices and looking at the choices [laughs]” (Interview, Week 13), even at the point when she should have turned her attention to moving beyond exploration and working with the tool to create her final product.

An analysis of Jessi’s final Glogster reveals that, although her topic was clownfish, she selected a background image associated with her affinity for dogs (See Figure 4.13). This move as a writer suggests that Jessi was more focused on her poster representing her own affinity identities than the topic of her writing. Rather than considering what her poster said about clownfish, she was focused on what her poster said about Jessi.
Figure 4.13. Jessi’s Final Glogster Poster (includes copyrighted image owned by http://www.visualphotos.com)

When viewed on the Internet, readers are able to scroll through the text in the speech bubble. Reading further, Jessi’s Glogster reveals text from her Google Doc to indicate that she may have copied and pasted her revised text, as well as the parenthetical note: “(reread and see if you need this information)” (Artifact, Week 13) placed in the body of her first paragraph. The inclusion of this text along with her text about clownfish suggests that when transferring her writing from Google Docs to Glogster, Jessi was not critically discerning which text should be imported, and which text was not appropriate for her poster, such as the feedback she received from her teacher and peers.

Like Jon, much of Jessi’s engagement with writing in Mrs. Jones’ classroom was mediated through interactions with peers. The fact that Mrs. Jones valued peer collaboration and talking in the writing process, rather than insisting that students work in silence, allowed Jessi to
access a strong support network in order to accomplish her goals. Observational data confirms that Jessi frequently used her peers as resources when she encountered difficulty. Most often, Jessi asked her study buddy whose comments we saw previously in Figure 4.9, and who also sat next to her, when she needed assistance. In some instances, her study buddy engaged in reteaching of concepts that Jessi missed as a result of being pulled out of the classroom. For instance, before Jessi began working in Glogster, her study buddy gave Jessi a mini-tutorial of all of the Glogster features (Field notes, Week 7). It was peer collaboration and peer support such as this that allowed Jessi to feel confident that working in Glogster would be “easy” even though she recognized that she did not “really sometimes understand” (Interview, Week 6).

**Conclusion**

Jessi perceived herself as a good student in the context of digital writing, as well as in the larger context of Mrs. Jones’ classroom. Her identity as a writer was largely centered on her affinity identities. Jessi seemed unaware of the institutional identities ascribed to her both informally by her teacher, as well as formally by the school. Although, Mrs. Jones’ deemed Jessi a “teacher pleaser,” Jessi claimed the identity of a “good student” and actively worked to reinforce this identity in Mrs. Jones’ classroom. Lastly, Jessi’s past and current experiences with digital writing contributed to her identity as a writer who drew on her affinities in her writing process and persevered through difficulty by relying on the support of her peers.

**Ninth Grade Research Site**

In this section, I first describe the learning context of the ninth grade research site in terms of the school, the teacher, and the classroom context. My descriptions of the classroom context focus specific attention to the English curriculum, the adolescent transitions that are characteristic of ninth grade, the approach to high-stakes assessment preparation in the school,
and the technology used for literacy learning. Then I present an analysis of the learning environment through the lens of New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013). This section serves to illuminate the “local particulars” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3) of the learning environment that created the context for the academic identity construction and writing experiences of my two ninth grade participants, Chris and Nicolasia.

Central High School

Central High School was one of twelve high schools housing grades 7-12 in an urban public school district serving approximately 33,000 students. The school district served residents living inside the city limits of a major metropolitan city as well as pockets of adjacent communities. The school district serviced a wide range of communities within the city, ranging from high poverty areas to very affluent neighborhoods. Overall, 72% of the students enrolled in the district were from economically disadvantaged families. The Department of Education reported that teachers in the district had an average of 18 years of experience teaching and 68% of the teaching staff had a master’s degree or higher (Ohio Department of Education, 2013).

The high school was located in an historic area of the city in close proximity to a public university. Central High School was a magnet school for students interested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The school building was built in the mid-1800s and renovations were completed in 2010 to update the classrooms, amenities, and technology resources for 21st Century learning. The high school had numerous partnerships with the neighboring public university, including a partnership with the school of education. As a result, undergraduate and graduate education students frequently observed instruction in the high school.
Students in the high school wore uniforms that consisted of khaki pants and a solid black polo or long sleeve shirt. Students were not permitted to wear hooded sweatshirts. The uniforms distinguished the high school students from the university students both in the school building, as well as after school on the sidewalks and in the restaurants and stores in the surrounding neighborhood that was shared between the college students and local residents.

**The Ninth Grade English Teacher**

Mr. Matthews taught ninth grade English at Central High School. He was in his twenty-fifth year of teaching at the time of the study. Throughout his career, all his teaching placements were in “high needs, low income schools” (Interview, Week 1) in the same city school district. He taught in a middle school for nine years, then moved to an international high school for ten years, then moved to Central High School six years ago. In addition to teaching English, he had also taught journalism and technology courses. He explained, “I’ve taught reading, I’ve taught writing, newspaper, yearbook, journalism, website design, technology, but to me they all center around literacy and communicating, either expressive or receptive” (Interview, Week 1).

Mr. Matthews attributed his approach to writing instruction to his experiences with the Ohio Writing Project that operates a program affiliated with the National Writing Project at an area university. The Ohio Writing Project offers summer workshops for practicing teachers as well as a master’s degree program focused on the teaching of writing. Mr. Matthews explained, “Nothing can teach me how to be as patient as I need to be in order to do it, but learning about how to teach students the writing process and the value of that was because of the Ohio Writing Project” (Interview, Week 12). This influence was evident in the extended workshop time Mr. Matthews gave students in class for drafting and revision of their writing.
In addition, Mr. Matthews recently earned a Ph.D. in education from a local university. He conducted his research on the relationships teachers developed with each other at Central High School. Although Mr. Matthews earned his Ph.D., when I asked him to identify a pseudonym for use in the written report of the study, he stated “Mr. Matthews” (Interview, Week 12) not Dr. Matthews. For this reason, I am referring to him as Mr. Matthews at his request. Although the school staff members, such as the secretaries in the building, referred to him as Dr. Matthews, students were not observed using the title when addressing him in the classroom.

The Ninth Grade Classroom Context

In this section, I describe the learning environment in Mr. Matthews’ English class at Central High School in terms of the English curriculum, the adolescent transitions that are characteristic of ninth grade, the approach to high-stakes assessment preparation in the school, and the technology used for literacy learning. These descriptions serve as a foundation for understanding the contextual factors that contributed to Chris and Nicolasia’s academic identity construction.

The English curriculum. Because his students came to him as ninth graders from a variety of different schools, Mr. Matthews’ did not make assumptions about what they knew. Therefore, his writing curriculum was based on the assumption that his students were coming to him with limited backgrounds in writing. Mr. Matthews shared:

You can’t start teaching writing in the ninth grade and expect them to master it in one year. So that’s why I have to step back and really think about baby steps and looking for any, any, amount of progress, any measure of growth that I can, because what a normal person would see as a reasonable expectation is not reasonable. (Interview, Week 12)
Mr. Matthews found that he changes his approach to writing instruction each year based on his reflections on the aspects of writing that his students were successful with and the areas in which they struggled. He explained:

I started trying to teach the writing process, that assumed a lot of things about what they knew before they came to me. And so three years ago, or two years ago, when I really started talking to the students about their writing, in like a metacognitive conversation, I said, [...] I can’t just talk to them about an essay, I really need to talk to them about paragraphs. And then last year, I realized that, no, you can’t write a paragraph successfully if you don’t understand about sentences, so then we took it back to the sentence level. Even still, we had “what’s an adjective?” When you say describe and you don’t know what an adjective is, it’s hard, you know, so this year we are taking it down to the parts of speech. (Interview, Week 1)

Prior to the start of the study, Mr. Matthews explained that he and his students spent first semester focusing on narratives. They read a variety of stories and learned about plot structures, such as exposition, rising action, conflict and resolution. Then in second semester, he planned to focus on explanatory and persuasive writing. Although Mr. Matthews had planned to do extensive reviews of parts of speech, sentences and paragraphs during the first six weeks of the study, his plans changed as a result of the approaching PARCC assessments as described in a later section. Therefore, rather than being able to structure his writing curriculum so that his review of parts of speech led into a review of sentence structures, which led into a review of writing paragraphs, Mr. Matthews had to begin units on essay writing two weeks after this
interview. This inhibited his ability to scaffold his writing instruction in the ways he had planned.

During the course of the study, I observed students writing an argumentative essay, a literary analysis essay, and an informative essay. All of the essays were written as practice essays in preparation for the PARCC exam as described in a later section. During the fourth quarter of the school year, after the conclusion of the study, Mr. Matthews planned to engage students in a cross-curricular research paper project on the Harlem Renaissance in conjunction with the students’ social studies course. In this unit he planned to focus on evaluating Internet sources, MLA formatting, and continuing to organize and develop their writing from initial notes, to an outline, to a completed essay.

At the end of the study, Mr. Matthews explained that over the course of the school year, his students had learned the expectations for writing that they were held to not only in English, but also in their other high school courses. He explained:

They understand that nothing we ask them to write is going to be less than five paragraphs because they already know how to write short things, they don’t know how to write longer things, and that the paragraphs should be at least five sentences. That you know, doesn’t seem like a lot, but all of those things are things that they came to me not doing. (Interview, Week 12)

Mr. Matthews facilitated this progress by modeling writing for students, giving them examples that they could access on the Internet, and providing print resources that took them step by step through the writing process, from planning to revision.

As Mr. Matthews reflected on changes to his writing curriculum he might make for next year, he said he wanted to make more meaningful connections between having students write
about their own interests and beliefs and preparing for the PARCC assessments. He shared, “I think I’m going to start next year out trying to find [something] that they can write about, tricking them into writing about something that they’re interested in or feel strongly about, and then maybe that will get the juices flowing, we’ll see [laughs]” (Interview, Week 12).

**Adolescent transitions.** Although Central High School housed grades 7-12, the seventh and eighth grade students were in a separate area of the building with little contact with the rest of the high school students. Mr. Matthews explained that the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade is “the hardest [transition] because of a lot of reasons” (Interview, Week 1). According to Mr. Matthews, the practice of social promotion, in which students are promoted to the next grade with their same age peers regardless of their academic performance, has caused a significant number of freshmen to be unprepared for high school level work. Not only do students not have the background to understand the high school level material, they also lack the experience of having been held accountable for their learning. As a result of the practice of social promotion, students moved through the middle grades without being held accountable for failing grades, and entered a learning environment in which for the first time in their lives, they must earn credits to move on to the next grade level. Mr. Matthews explained:

> We have classrooms full of students right now that when you look at their report cards for grades seven and eight, which is what we have access to, it’s all F’s and D’s. And there was no retention. They just moved them right on. And even if you’re not one of those people, you’re still in an environment where no one’s ever really, I can’t really say that they’ve been challenged if they’ve been allowed to move from grade to grade without doing work. And then at ninth grade everything changes, because ninth grade all the sudden you’re not going to move
on to the next grade unless you’ve done work and we can show that you’ve made progress, and that you’re functioning at a certain level. That’s never been the case before and that’s a big shocker. And a lot of kids don’t know where that’s coming from, and it doesn’t logically make sense to them. (Interview, Week 5).

The other reason that ninth grade is the hardest academic transition for students, according to Mr. Matthews, is because of the way writing was assessed on statewide high-stakes assessments that were used prior to the implementation of the PARCC assessments. He explained that the writing tests, when writing was tested at all, focused on easily assessable skills, so “if you could assess a skill through a bubble on a scan sheet, then that’s what you were assessing” (Interview, Week 1).

Because writing was not as frequently assessed on standardized assessments, and because that assessment was limited to assessing discrete skills rather than more complex aspects of writing, Mr. Matthews believed that there was a lack of focus on writing instruction in the middle grades. Mr. Matthews passionately explained the impact of testing on writing instruction:

> When you take the funding away from writing assessment and remove writing assessment from the battery of tests that we give students, then it becomes something that teachers aren’t going to teach, not because they don’t want to, but because of the pressure from outside the school, and from the district and from the state [saying] you have to raise your test scores. Writing isn’t on the test, therefore, you need to spend your time on what’s on the test, not what you think might be helpful to students. (Interview, Week 1)

As a result, Mr. Matthews explained that students arrived in his class without having any writing instruction to prepare them for high school level writing. Although he shared that some students might have come from “higher performing, or private schools, or parochial schools” that taught
writing, or might have been taught by “an old school English teacher who refused to stop
teaching writing,” Mr. Matthews estimated that “well over 50% [of his students], have arrived in
the ninth grade with no writing instruction what so ever” (Interview, Week 1). This presents
significant challenges not only for the students who have entered high school unprepared for the
academic demands, but also for the freshmen teachers who are expected to remediate years of
missed learning in a single year in order for students to develop into successful high school
students.

**Approach to test preparation.** Because the study took place in the months leading up to
the PARCC Performance Based Assessment, every class activity I observed in Mr. Matthews’
classroom was related to preparing students to take the PARCC assessments. Students engaged
in weekly PARCC vocabulary activities and quizzes, and the essays students wrote were
mediated by a PARCC workbook that was designed to prepare students to write essays on the
PARCC assessment. Mr. Matthews was frustrated by the loss of instructional time as a result of
the test preparation. He lamented, “Quarter three was nothing, the whole entire quarter was
nothing but prep for the test” (Interview, Week 12).

Students were given a consumable workbook to use to practice writing essays for
PARCC. Mr. Matthews explained that the school district purchasing books for students to use
and consume was a rare practice in this school, and because students had “so little access to texts
to start with, that when [they] actually do get them, it’s not like they have a lot of organized
behavior to inform how they’re supposed to interact with the text” (Interview, Week 12).
Therefore, even though the books were structured so that students were guided through the
suggested steps to write the PARCC essays, Mr. Matthews did not think that the students were
willing to go through the process to use the books as intended to gain the benefit of the structured practice.

There was only one observation prior to the administration of the PARCC assessments in which students were not engaged in test preparation. On a Thursday in February, just weeks before the testing began, the school brought in a spoken word poet to talk to the freshmen class. Now a college student, this performer gained fame for his slam poetry that he began writing in high school. As an African American young adult who grew up in urban Chicago, he branded himself as an “at-risk” youth who survived his circumstances and had taken on the role of being the voice of hope for “at-risk” youth of color. In one of his poems, he shared that his grade point average was 1.9, but that he earned a 25 on the ACT after getting drunk, indicating that it is likely that he would have met the definition of “at-risk” used in this study based on his classroom performance. The message he delivered to the freshmen students at Central High School was that they have the power to shape their futures and the ways they are perceived by others. He encouraged them to make their voices heard to empower themselves. Although he never once said anything to suggest that they could empower themselves by doing well on the upcoming PARCC assessments, he did share, through his poetry, that he did well on the ACT despite his grades, circumstances, and poor choices (Field notes, Week 5). The timing of this motivational speaker in relation to the upcoming assessments may have, at least in part, been considered by the school administration as an opportunity to motivate students to perform well on the PARCC.

**Technology used for literacy learning in Mr. Matthews’ classroom.** Mr. Matthews and his students had access to a variety of technology resources in his classroom. Like the fourth grade research site, the 2014-2015 school year also marked for Central High School the first year of implementation of what Mr. Matthews referred to as a “defacto one-to-one program”
Interview, Week 1), in which he was given a laptop cart with enough laptop computers for each student in the classroom. Students signed out a computer to use in Mr. Matthews class and return at the end of the period. He explained that this was different from an official one-to-one program in which each student is assigned a computer to be used throughout the school day. In addition to the cart of laptops, there were also ten Mac desktop computers lining two walls of the classroom. Throughout the study, students were observed choosing to use these computers instead of, and sometimes in addition to, the laptop computers that were available for use.

Mr. Matthews had both a Mac desktop computer and a PC desktop computer that he often used simultaneously on an L-shaped desk. His Mac desktop computer was connected to an LCD projector that displayed texts, media and presentations to students on the white marker board at the front of the room. Although Mr. Matthews indicated that he had access to a SMARTBoard, it was not mounted in his classroom and he did not use an interactive white board during the study period.

Mr. Matthews used several electronic resources in the course of conducting his writing instruction and classroom management. Like the students in the fourth grade classroom, students in Mr. Matthews’ classroom used Google Docs for all of their essay writing. However, I did not observe the collaborative features for giving feedback used during the course of the study. Once students finished an assignment, they put the document in an electronic folder that Mr. Matthews could view in order to assess their writing. Mr. Matthews shared that as he began thinking about the research project planned for fourth quarter, he hoped to find a plug in for Google Docs that would allow students to keep track of their references. He shared that he used the citation manager built into Microsoft Word when he was writing his dissertation, and he hoped to find a similar tool for students to use in Google Docs. He also planned to use the Online Writing Lab
(OWL) sponsored by the English Department at Purdue University (https://owl.english.purdue.edu) to help students learn how to write using correct MLA formatting and citations for their research papers.

The district used a progress-monitoring program called PowerSchool (http://www.pearsonschoolsystems.com/products/powerschool/) to manage student data, and Blackboard (http://www.blackboard.com) as the learning management system for individual courses. Mr. Matthews frequently referred to writing resources and sample essays that he posted to Blackboard for students to use during their writing process. In the second half of the study, Mr. Matthews was observed using a program on his Mac desktop computer to monitor the screens of the laptop computers students in his classroom were using. Frequently, this program was running on his Mac desktop, while he used his PC desktop to access the PowerSchool and Blackboard websites.

To engage students in literacy learning, Mr. Matthews used a website called Flocabulary (https://www.flocabulary.com) that is a database of educational hip-hop videos that teach concepts in language arts, math, science and social studies. He also used a digital flashcard website, Quizlet (https://quizlet.com) to help students study for their weekly PARCC vocabulary words. In addition to this website, students self-initiated the use of Google searches, Dictionary.com (http://dictionary.reference.com), and the Apple Dictionary program on the Mac desktop computers to conduct definition searches for assigned vocabulary words.

Mr. Matthews also used technology as an assessment tool. After students took their vocabulary quizzes each week, students used a website called GradeCam (http://www.gradecam.com) to score their quizzes using the webcam of one of the desktop computers in the classroom. When students held their papers up to the webcam, they were
informed of their score in terms of a percentage value, and the grade was automatically logged in Mr. Matthews’ electronic grade book in PowerSchool.

**Mr. Matthews’ Classroom Through the Lens of New Literacies Theory**

New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013) is a useful framework for understanding the ways the Internet impacts not only the literacy development of students, but also the social contexts of classrooms. In this study, I observed Mr. Matthews and his students engage in new literacies practices in a ninth grade English classroom. All writing instruction I observed was mediated at least partially through the use of the Internet throughout the study period. Using New Literacies theory as a lens for interpreting the uses of technology and the discourses surrounding that use informed my understanding of the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction in this study. In this section, I share an analysis of the data in light of the eight principles of New Literacies theory and share examples of the ways in which they were enacted in Mr. Matthews’ classroom.

**Internet as literacy technology.** Mr. Matthews used the Internet as the primary means of literacy engagement in his classroom. All writing students produced during the study period was composed in Google Docs. The only assignments written by hand were the PARCC vocabulary definitions and sentences that were completed each week. Mr. Matthews also used Blackboard as a mode of communication and remediation for students. Students could access announcements Mr. Matthews posted, as well as resources for completing assignments, such as model essays.

However, although most schools were administering the PARCC assessments electronically, the students in Central High School did not use computers to take the tests. Mr. Matthews explained:
We do not have the technology infrastructure for them to do significant testing online at this point, even though PARCC assessment is supposed to be done online, this first year it’s going to be on paper because we just absolutely do not know if our infrastructure will support it, and based on what I’ve seen we’re not to that point yet. (Interview, Week 1)

This means that while students were practicing for the PARCC assessments by writing in Google Docs on their laptops, they took the high-stakes assessments using a traditional test booklet and answer booklet method. Therefore, although the Internet was the primary means of literacy engagement in Mr. Matthews classroom, the lack of infrastructure in the building to support the administration of the high-stakes assessments meant that students’ literacy skills were assessed using a tradition pencil and paper approach. This means that students did not have access to the electronic tools and resources they had become accustomed to in their practice as writers when they were formally assessed on their literacy skills.

**Internet requires new literacies.** Most of the websites students used for literacy learning in Mr. Matthews’ classroom were password-protected websites that required unique usernames and passwords to access the activities and information. In a single class period, students might have to remember and correctly enter four sets of credentials, first logging onto the school network, then logging onto PowerSchool, then logging onto Blackboard, and finally logging onto Google Docs to finally be able to begin working. This is much more cognitively challenging than tearing a sheet of paper from a notebook as students did in traditional writing classrooms. Mr. Matthews explained that even though the technology department tried to keep students’ credentials consistent across applications, their usernames were “always going to be a little different and some of the systems allow them to change their passwords (Interview, Week
1). In the past, if a student was unable to find a piece of paper, Mr. Matthews could easily supply one. Now, if a student forgets a username or password, it becomes more cognitively challenging for the teacher to solve the problem as well.

Observational data also shows that students were required to remember which websites were compatible with which web browsers in order to be able to successfully use the features of the website. In multiple instances, Mr. Matthews was observed reminding students that they were in the wrong browser for a specific web application and that they needed to close their current browser and reopen the website in a different browser (Field notes, Week 10; Week 11). This means that the student had to go through the same log in process in a different browser to get back to where they were in their writing process when they began experiencing difficulty.

New literacies are deictic. The idea that what is meant by the term “new literacies” changes as technology changes and develops was not evident in the literacy events and social interactions in Mr. Matthews’ classroom. However, in discussing this principle of their theory, Leu et al. (2013) discussed the concept of envisionments that “take place when individuals imagine new possibilities for literacy and learning” (p. 1160). Mr. Matthews shared ideas he had for the use of text analysis tools to help students analyze their own writing in terms of sentence level and complexity that he hoped to try out during fourth quarter after the administration of the PARCC assessments (Interview, Week 5). This is an example of an envisionment for changing the nature of writing revision based on access to new technology tools.

New literacies are multiple, multimodal, and multifaceted. Because students used Google Docs strictly for word processing, and because they were engaged in writing practice essays for the PARCC assessments, which required a very structured writing style, there was little evidence of this principle observed in this classroom context. The strict requirements for
the writing students produced did not allow for the integration of multiple modalities of expression. Furthermore, students were not given options to select from multiple technology tools to accomplish their writing goals. Google Docs was used as the sole program for text production and students did not move their text into any other platform for presentation purposes.

However, Mr. Matthews did speak of a hope to use Google Sites in the Harlem Renaissance project he was planning:

They can actually take their learning and put it up in a more publically accessible forum. I don’t know if the sites are actually available outside of the [district] network, but at least for their peers within the network, […] they could share the results of whatever research that they would do. (Interview, Week 5)

The affordances of working within Google Sites to share their research would create more opportunities for students to draw on a wider range of modalities of meaning making, such as audio, video, and hyperlinks to other websites, to express their learning in rich and complex ways. However, this planned activity occurred after the study period, so I am not aware of whether or not students were given the opportunity to write using this medium.

Critical literacies are central. Giving students access to texts outside the classroom walls presents challenges for teachers who are responsible for the activities and behaviors of students in the classroom. In order to monitor the websites students accessed, Mr. Matthews was given a program that allowed him to view thumbnails of each of his students’ computer screens. He explained that prior to having access to this software, there were instances of some students accessing inappropriate websites:
Now honestly the percentage of students who are off-task is pretty low, but when you give them the computer and you can’t see what’s on their screen, they can be off-task. And we’ve had some students accessing inappropriate content, even though we have a firewall up to block all of that, they still find like marginally inappropriate things to be on, and really any time that I say to get on Blackboard and you’re not, you’re on an inappropriate site, whether it’s… you know the latest thing is like animated porn, you know like cartoon characters… it’s really weird. So I think, you know, but that’s… It’s teenagers, it’s teenagers. (Interview, Week 1)

The use of this computer program facilitated Mr. Matthews’ ability to monitor students’ behavior to ensure that they were adhering to the social expectations for responsible behavior in the classroom. However, it also tethered him to his desk and limited the extent to which he could interact with individual students to support their writing process.

**New forms of strategic knowledge.** Like in the fourth grade classroom, the idea that reading text on the Internet requires students to develop strategies to navigate hypertexted websites was not evident in observations of Mr. Matthews’ classroom. However, I did observe several instances in which one of the participants, Nicolasia, made adjustments to the formatting of her Google Doc without apparent reason or purpose. In the middle of drafting her argumentative essay, she changed the alignment of her document from left aligned to center aligned. Then after a few minutes, she changed it back to left aligned. Later in the observation, she changed her font multiple times. Drafting on a computer gives students far more formatting options than writing using a pencil and paper method, but students must learn to be strategic in using these added features in ways that are appropriate for the writing task. In the final
interview, Mr. Matthews opened one of Nicolasia’s essays to review before talking about her as a writer. When he saw that she had submitted her essay in a cursive font, he commented that it was a challenge to get them to use appropriate formatting, and explained that students “want to use all these fancy fonts, and then when you have to read a hundred and fifty of them it gets to be really difficult” (Interview, Week 12). This means that students must also develop strategic knowledge of the purposes for and meanings associated with various options available to them when writing digitally.

**New literacy practices are central.** Social interaction permeated everything students did in Mr. Matthews’ classroom, regardless of whether or not the interactions were sanctioned by the teacher. While students were observed interacting with their peers to give and receive technology help, they were also observed engaging in interactions that were counter to accomplishing the goals that Mr. Matthews established for each class period. For the most part, Mr. Matthews did not encourage a collaborative ethos in students’ writing process in the ways that Mrs. Jones did. It’s important to note that Mr. Matthews was attempting to structure the class writing time to mirror the environment in which they would write on the PARCC assessment. Therefore, he emphasized that students were “expected to work independently and quietly” (Field notes, Week 3). However, throughout the observations, students engaged in social interactions during their writing process, and for the most part, Mr. Matthews allowed students to talk as they wrote or selectively ignored social interactions as long as they were not disruptive to the rest of the class.

There were two instances in which Mr. Matthews directly elicited the technology expertise of a student who was finished with his essays to help other students accomplish a technology-related task. First, Mr. Matthews asked a student to help another student who was
absent earlier in the week to create a folder in Google Docs (Field notes, Week 8). Then, a few weeks later, Mr. Matthews asked a student to help Nicolasia adjust the brightness of her screen on her laptop so that she could more easily view it (Field notes, Week 10). In this last instance, Mr. Matthews coached the student giving help when his first attempt failed to solve the problem, using it as an opportunity to teach both students how to make adjustments to the brightness of the laptop screen.

**Teacher role changes.** Mr. Matthews’ assertion of authority and management in his classroom was mediated through the use of technology. There were several instances in which he interacted with students through technology rather than face-to-face. For instance, when Mr. Matthews was using the software program to monitor the students’ computer use by viewing thumbnails of the laptop screens, he saw that one student had activated the webcam of her laptop. He opened a chat window and sent her a message to redirect her behavior rather than calling across the room to her or physically getting up from his seat and walking to her desk to speak to her (Field notes, Week 8). At another point later in the period, there was a group of students who were off-task. Mr. Matthews said to the students, “I would suggest you check your grades in PowerSchool” (Field notes, Week 8). In this instance, he used the electronic grade book as a means of redirecting students back to the assigned task. Finally, it appeared that teachers at Central High School used texting as a form of communication for the purpose of managing students and keeping track of where students were when they were out of their assigned classroom (Field notes, Week 6).

**Conclusion**

Analyzing the learning context of this ninth grade English classroom through the lens of New Literacies theory informed my understanding of the ways in which technology infused the
literacy curriculum and daily literacy practices that Mr. Matthews structured for his students. Mr. Matthews used the Internet as the primary means of literacy engagement in his classroom. However, the strict requirements for the writing students produced to prepare for the PARCC assessments did not allow for the integration of multiple modalities of expression that are an affordance of Internet-based writing. Social interaction permeated everything students did in Mr. Matthews’ classroom even though Mr. Matthews encouraged quiet, independent writing in order to mirror the environment in which students would write on the PARCC assessment. These classroom experiences served as the breeding ground for the academic identities that the students in this classroom constructed. Explicating the classroom context through this lens highlights the affordances of digital writing for the academic identity construction of the ninth grade adolescents, Chris and Nicolasia, who are described in the following sections.

Chris

This was the second year Chris had attended Central High School. Prior to attending Central High School he attended both a Catholic high school, as well as another public high school in the city school district. Chris shared that the multiple moves were related to finding a school that could handle his medical needs related to his diabetes. Chris explained that he was happy to be at Central High School now, because he said, “I think it fits me, I think it fits me […] I’m happy where I’m at and it’s satisfied me” (Interview, Week 10).

During the study period, Chris had been hired to be a tour guide at a local black history museum and was being trained to give tours of the various installments at the museum (Interview, Week 6). Chris also participated in a youth training program conducted by the city police department for high school students who were interested in careers in law enforcement and criminal justice. He explained that the program taught students what they needed to know to
enter a police academy and begin a career in law enforcement. When I asked Chris about his decision to pursue this career path, he explained:

Like you know when I was growing up as a kid, you know just seeing where places where I lived wasn’t right, just to see how the streets is and how’s that, how is that going to affect our youth and our generation, you know I kind of want to pay it forward and make a change for that [….] So I kind of got interested in that, because before I wanted to join the police force I wanted to join the Marines, but like with my health condition, it’s going to be difficult, so I thought do something more close by and in a city, so the police force, it was a good idea for me. (Interview, Week 10)

When Chris was not at school, working at the museum, or training with the police department, he shared that he enjoyed “hanging out” (Interview, Week 10) with friends and family and walking his dog, a Doberman Pinscher. He also shared that he liked exercising, playing sports and playing chess. Chris also traveled with his family to states such as Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Virginia to visit relatives and take vacations.

My first impression of Chris was that he was a mature, quiet teenage boy. He appeared to be African American. When talking to Chris one on one, he was very soft spoken and seemed comfortable interacting with me, as an adult outsider. As I continued to observe Chris in the classroom, I noticed that he was soft spoken in most of his interactions with peers, and was most frequently observed interacting in a dyad with just one other peer rather than in large groups.

The descriptions that follow share the ways in which Chris perceived his academic identity in the context of digital writing, the institutional identities Mr. Matthews ascribed to Chris and the extent to which he claimed those identities, and the past and current writing
experiences that contributed to his academic identity. Chris’ perceptions of himself as a student and as a writer and Mr. Matthews’ positioning of Chris as a student and a writer are analyzed through the lens of Gee’s (2000) four ways of viewing identity. Throughout Chris’ case description, references to nature, discourse, institution, and affinity identities are made in the context of Gee’s framework. Artifacts of Chris’ writing collected during observations are analyzed according to Ivanič’s (1998) Writer Identity theory; therefore, references to autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for selfhood are made in the context of Ivanič’s framework.

**Academic Identity Perception**

In order to explore how Chris perceived his academic identity, I asked him how he would describe himself as a student and as a writer. Then I asked him to tell me how he thought his teacher would describe him both as a student and as a writer. The findings described below are triangulated with observational data as well as artifacts collected during the study period that reinforce his descriptions of himself.

**Self as student.** When asked to describe himself as a student, Chris responded, “Well, I would use confident, intelligent… I’m trying to think of another word for open-minded, creative, I guess kind of… let’s see kind of hardheaded” (Interview, Week 3). Most of the words Chris selected to describe himself represented discourse identities, such as confident, open-minded, creative, and hardheaded, that he could enact to greater or lesser extents in the classroom. He explained that he considered himself to be confident, because he said, “Everything I do, I don’t have any regrets or fears, like if I put my mind to it, most likely it’s going to be done, like 99%” (Interview, Week 3). He explained that he considered himself “hardheaded” because he said, “If I’ve got my mind set up on something, it’s kind of hard to...
back me down from it” (Interview, Week 3). Chris also added that he considered himself to be “respectful” because he showed respect to adults and peers.

The one nature identity he used to represent himself was intelligent. Chris explained, “I’m very well in math, during testing I scored higher than a senior, because I was advanced” (Interview, Week 3). Chris later reported that he attended seventh grade in the city’s public high school known for the most rigorous college preparatory curriculum. To gain admittance into this high school, students must earn a threshold score on a standardized achievement test. He explained:

I did real well on the test, my reading was normal, my math I was like a couple points from being advanced, but like if… I heard it got hard, but if I had a chance, you know I would go back and I’d just have to be real, real focused, real determined. (Interview, Week 10)

In this statement, Chris acknowledged that in order to be successful at this particular high school, it would require him to enact the discourse identities of being focused and determined, in addition to holding his nature identity of being intelligent.

I asked Chris to tell me how he thought his teacher, Mr. Matthews, would describe him as a student. The following is an excerpt of his response:

Chris: Respectful, hardworking and confident, and intelligent too.

Interviewer: Why do you think those qualities are the ones he would choose?

Chris: Well my teacher has told me previous times. (Interview, Week 10)

Chris’ analysis of himself as a student from the perspective of his teacher includes three of the same discourse identities he used to identify himself as a student, as well as the nature identity of being intelligent. This analysis suggests that Chris believes his teacher’s perceptions of him as a
student are consistent with his own perceptions of himself as a student. His comment that his teacher has told him he thought of Chris in these terms is significant because it suggests that Chris’ own perceptions may have been influenced by the discourse identities his teacher identified in him and chose to share with him.

Observational data collected in Chris’ ninth grade English classroom supports Chris’ perception that he is respectful. In one instance, Chris came into the classroom and was talking to two girls who were seated in the back row of seats. They had previously returned to the classroom after being asked to leave another classroom because of their behavior. Mr. Matthews directed a warning to the two girls: “If you’re in time out and you’re talking you will get two Thursday night schools.” Chris asked, “Are they in timeout?” When Mr. Matthews said that they were, Chris replied, “I’m sorry” (Field notes, Week 10). Chris was also observed waiting patiently to talk to Mr. Matthews and thanking him when he answered Chris’ questions. These are all behaviors that represent Chris’ enactments of respectful behavior in the classroom.

Observational data also supports that Chris engaged in behaviors such as being highly engaged in a lesson as a way to reinforce his identity of intelligence. When Mr. Matthews called on Chris to answer his questions, Chris gave thoughtful responses and Mr. Matthews was observed praising him with “very good” as a response to Chris’ contribution to the discussion (Field notes, Week 3). Chris was also observed asking questions during Mr. Matthews’ lessons. In one instance, because Chris had been the last student to ask a question, Mr. Matthews was observed directing his subsequent discussion of the text directly to Chris. Chris maintained eye contact with Mr. Matthews as he spoke, even though the discussion was actually targeted to the whole class (Field notes, Week 3).
However, observational data also suggests that Chris did not always enact the discourse identity of being hardworking in Mr. Matthews’ classroom. Later in this same period, after Mr. Matthews gave students time to work independently, Chris was observed putting his head down when he was supposed to be reading and completing activities in the workbook. Approximately 14 minutes later, Chris raised his head and looked around the room. Then he put his arms inside of his shirt, making it impossible to use his hands to turn pages in the text or write in the book to complete the activities (Field notes, Week 3). This behavior was counter to the ways in which he described himself as a student and the ways he behaved during Mr. Matthews’ whole group instruction. It appeared that Chris more actively enacted his identities as a student during structured learning activities and was less focused on enacting these identities during time devoted to independent work.

**Self as writer.** I also asked Chris to describe himself as a writer. The following is an excerpt of his response:

Chris: As a writer, I would say I express myself, again I would like to say creative, very open-minded, and I just express how I feel when I write, so…

Interviewer: Ok. Is that the same at school and at home, or is there any difference?

Chris: There’s no difference. I’m also honest, so about what I write about and how I feel. (Interview, Week 3)

Chris’ description of himself as a writer is based on discourse identities, being creative and open-minded, that are identical to the discourse identities he claimed when describing himself as a student. In addition, he also identified that as a writer, he expresses how he feels and is honest in that expression. In a later interview, I asked Chris to think about the role writing played in his
His response focused on the importance of using writing as a way to express one’s sense of self. He explained:

Like to me, when you write you can express yourself, you know, give your opinion on what you think. You can be very open, and most of the time nobody judge you because it’s your thought and you don’t judge no one else on theirs because it’s from two different standpoints, or it can be from a lot of different standpoints, it depends on how many people writing, but you can be very open, you can express yourself, and you can say what you really want to say instead of acting it or being fake. You need to be open and you can… I want to say, I don’t want to say trust, ‘cause I mean… but you can really express how you feel or what you want to say. (Interview, Week 10)

Chris’ description of the role writing plays in his life is significant because, for Chris, writing represents an opportunity to express his thoughts and feelings to an audience whom he perceives to be nonjudgmental. This implies that Chris may view writing as a safer mode of expression for sharing his thoughts and feelings than others, such as interpersonal interactions.

Although Chris perceived writing as a way of expressing himself to an audience, the artifacts collected during the study period suggest that he had limited opportunities to express himself in his writing, or bring his autobiographical self to the writing events in Mr. Matthews’ classroom. Because students were required to write essays on prompts designed to prepare them for the PARCC assessments, the possibilities for selfhood inherit in these assignments were extremely limited. Figure 4.14 below shows the first two paragraphs of Chris’ informative essay about Egyptian and Mayan pyramids. The required topic of the essay did not allow for Chris to
integrate his own thoughts and feelings into the text. Therefore, there were little opportunities for Chris to construct a self in the text for this particular assignment.

**Egyptian & Mayan Pyramids**

The pyramid you are going to be learning about today is the pyramids of the Giza and the Mayans. These Pyramids have a lot in common and have a lot of differences.

The Giza Pyramids were designed as an monumental tomb for pharaohs of Egypt. To house their bodies after their death and to help them achieve eternal life in the afterworld. Each was made by and for a different pharaoh. King Khufu built the Great Pyramid, the first around 2550 BC the second pyramid around 2520 BC and King Menkaura built the third pyramid around 2490 BC.

*Figure 4.14. Chris’ Informative Writing Essay*

Despite the fact that Chris was given limited opportunities to use writing to express himself in Mr. Matthews’ class because of the constraints of the practice PARCC essays, when I asked him to tell me how he thought his teacher would describe him as a writer, Chris responded, “open minded and honest” (Interview, Week 3). It is important to note that in my interpretations, I only had access to artifacts of Chris’ writing that were completed during the observational period. It’s possible that Chris was given other opportunities to write in Mr. Matthews’ class that more closely matched Chris’ perceived purposes for writing prior to the start of the study, and that he was drawing on these experiences when explaining how he thought his teacher perceived him as a writer. Again, the discourse identities he thought his teacher would attribute to him are identical to the discourse identities he claimed for himself as a writer. This reinforces that Chris believed his teacher’s perceptions of him as a writer were consistent with his own perceptions of himself as a writer.
Ascribed Institutional Identities

In order to understand the extent to which the institutional identities ascribed to Chris contributed to the academic identity he constructed for himself as a student at Central High School, I asked his teacher, Mr. Matthews, to explain the reason why Chris was considered “at-risk” for school failure, and to describe him both as a student and as a writer. The findings in this section are triangulated with observational data that reinforces the ways in which Chris was positioned in the classroom.

Source of “at-risk” label. Chris was considered for inclusion in the study because he had previously failed ninth grade and was retaking his freshmen level courses during the study period. Mr. Matthews explained that Chris did not begin his freshmen year the previous year at Central High School, but instead transferred in from a charter school during second semester. Mr. Matthews shared that Central High School did not receive a record of Chris’ academic progress from his former school. Mr. Matthews explained the factors that led to Chris needing to repeat the ninth grade:

I mean some of it was an incomplete transcript, but that wouldn’t be the only one.

I mean I think the only one would be what we are seeing now, which is just an avoidance of completing work, not complete avoidance, but certainly a disconnection from the level of work that is going to allow you to be successful for the next four years. (Interview, Week 5)

In a later interview, Mr. Matthews again stated that changing schools during his freshman year was related to his inability to earn credit in his freshman level courses, but also indicated that his health condition required him to spend a significant amount of time out of class. Mr. Matthews
suggested that this limited the extent to which he could be productive in class (Interview, Week 12).

According to Mr. Matthews, Chris was unlike most of the failing students he encountered in his classroom. He explained:

Many of our repeating students, we’ve put in, kind of independent study courses, because their profile wasn’t one that would allow them to have any chance of success for this school year. So, for example, there are some students who were behavioral issues, and because of their behavior they were frequently suspended from school, and those suspensions are basically the equivalent of absences, and so it’s hard to tell whether they were failing because they weren’t able to do the work [or] because they weren’t here and made no effort to make it up. So those students were assigned to basically a virtual classroom, so that when they come here they can do work at their own pace and pick up where they left off, but if they would be in a traditional class, there would be no way to keep up. With Chris, and just a very small few number of other students, maybe no more than five on our team, we decided to keep them in regular courses for the next year, as opposed to put them in that other environment, because you know Chris is not going to be a management issue and his attendance is good, so that combination, we felt like, you know, we can make progress. (Interview, Week 5)

However, as Chris’ second year in freshmen level courses went on, Mr. Matthews indicated that he was beginning to see “the person that [he] saw toward the end of last year” (Interview, Week 5). He reiterated that the behaviors that led Chris to not pass last year were “not completing work and not turning in work. Simple as that. I mean it… very, very, very basic. Not
completing work and not turning in work. Any work that he completes and turns in is at least passing” (Interview, Week 5). These statements indicate that Mr. Matthews believed that Chris was capable of completing freshmen level work, but lacked the motivation required to follow through on assignments.

In addition to meeting the inclusion criteria as a result of being retained in a grade, Mr. Matthews also indicated that Chris was “not too far off his grade level compared to some other students, [and] certainly performs below grade level in his classroom activities and his testing, but […] just there’s not that passion for learning there” (Interview, Week 5). This statement suggests that Mr. Matthews saw a discrepancy between Chris’ ability level and performance level that was also negatively impacting his ability to be successful in school.

Chris also spoke of the reasons he was repeating the ninth grade. Chris explained that he changed schools in the middle of the year because the school, which he identified as a Catholic school that was “a new school in the making” (Interview, Week 10), could not adequately handle his medical needs related to his diabetes, and Chris’ mother decided to transfer him to Central High School because she believed it would be better able to accommodate his needs. Chris also shared that there was a gap in time between leaving his old school and enrolling in and attending his new school, which he believed attributed to his inability to earn credits for his courses the first time.

Rather than being upset that he was a repeat ninth grader, Chris told me that he was now in the grade he was supposed to be in according to his age. He shared that when he was in elementary school he was “real advanced” and skipped a grade (Interview, Week 10). As a result, he had been one of the youngest students in his class, up until this year. Chris was optimistic that he was going to be successful in school from this point forward. He said, “I’m
going to do what I got to do so I don’t have to repeat anything or…and move on” (Interview, Week 10). Chris spoke of the experience of failing in positive terms. He explained:

I will say that I’m better at it than I was last year, I learned how to be better than I was last year, because, you know, I’m doing it again so… like I will understand it better and I can, you know, explain it to others better than I could before.

(Interview, Week 10)

This continued optimism that permeated his responses suggests that Chris saw the experience of failing as an opportunity to grow as a learner.

Although Chris was retained in the ninth grade, he was still required to be assessed according to the academic year in which he first entered the ninth grade. Therefore, although most of Chris’ instructional time in English was devoted to preparing for the PARCC assessments, Chris was required to take the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT). Chris commented that even though he would not take the PARCC assessments, he believed that the preparation he was doing in writing the practice essays would help him on the extended response portions and the writing section of the OGT (Interview, Week 6).

**Portrait of Chris as a student.** Early in the study, Mr. Matthews ascribed several positive discourse identities to Chris. He described Chris as being well adjusted and able to maintain positive relationships with peers and adults (Interview, Week 5). He also described Chris as a “nice kid” (Interview, Week 5). Mr. Matthews indicated that Chris’ lack of success as a student was not a result of his classroom behavior or ability to interact interpersonally with peers or adults. Mr. Matthews also indicated that he recognized a resiliency in Chris to not give up in the face of difficulty or when he became frustrated. Mr. Matthews shared that Chris would
take a break, and come back to what he was working on and “give it another shot” (Interview, Week 5).

However, Mr. Matthews positioned Chris as having returned to the characteristics that caused him to fail the ninth grade the previous year. He explained that at the beginning of this year, he had perceived Chris to be “really motivated to earn his credits so that he could be in the tenth grade next year” (Interview, Week 5), but he thought that motivation had tapered off.

Mr. Matthews also positioned Chris as a student who was easily distracted by “the social world around him” (Interview, Week 5) and estimated that Chris spent approximately 70% of his class time on task and the other 30% socializing with his peers. When Mr. Matthews discussed the adolescent transitions that he associated with entering ninth grade, he shared that he did not see Chris as “one of those people who did absolutely no work for years and years leading up to high school” but he noted that Chris was growing as a student “in an environment where that was accepted” (Interview, Week 5). Although Chris was observed socializing for short periods of time throughout the study period, his level of engagement with the assigned tasks appeared to be higher than most of his peers in the classroom. Therefore, I was surprised to hear that Mr. Matthews perceived Chris to be more distracted by the social aspects of the classroom when compared to the other students in the room.

Chris was observed missing a significant amount of instruction as a result of his medical condition. Depending on the schedule of a given day, Chris often had to miss class to check his blood sugar level because of the relationship between his fifth bell class period and the lunch period. There were instances in which Chris did not come to class until after Mr. Matthews had taught the lesson that would facilitate students’ work for the class period and given the instructions for the assignments (Field notes, Week 4; Week 6). In these instances, Chris had to
rely on peers to fill him in on what he had missed and what was expected of him. This relates to Mr. Matthews’ observation that “[Chris] gets to a point where he’s missing enough work that he feels disconnected when he returns to class, or comes late, and then doesn’t really connect to get the work done, so stays disengaged” (Interview, Week 5).

Later in the study, when Mr. Matthews further described Chris in an interview, he returned to the discourse identity of niceness and reiterated, “he’s a really nice kid, […] whether it’s one on one or in a group, […] he’s polite, he’s respectful, he’s kind to other people. He has a lot of good qualities about him” (Interview, Week 12). Academically, Mr. Matthews indicated that he did not believe Chris was aware of how far behind he was in terms of his progress in his courses. He explained:

He will go to the tenth grade next year, but it took him two years to get there. He can’t take two years to do every grade, but right now at the pace I see him going, he is on track to take two years to do the tenth grade. The pace and the rate at which he completed assignments and the engagement level I saw him with this year, the ease with which he was distracted by anything going on in the classroom, he’ll get to the eleventh grade but it will take him two years in the tenth grade to do it. (Interview, Week 12)

Mr. Matthews indicated that the only way Chris could avoid this dilemma was to become “more mature” over the summer and be more willing to “buckle down and try to catch up” (Interview, Week 12). Mr. Matthews shared that he guided students through the process of interpreting their assessment scores and looking at their transcripts to plan for graduation. He said he hoped that activities such as this would help Chris better understand where he was academically and what he needed to do to get back on track to graduate.
Observational data supports that Mr. Matthews perceived Chris as needing his attention redirected away from social interactions and back onto the completion of assignments. In one instance, Chris was standing behind another student looking at his screen. Mr. Matthews asked, “Chris, what are you working on?” Chris responded, “My last essay.” In response, Mr. Matthews said, “Will you sit down and work on it?” (Field notes, Week 8). Mr. Matthews also redirected Chris away from requests to leave the classroom and back to the completion of his work. Later in the same class period, Chris approached Mr. Matthews’ desk. In response to Chris, Mr. Matthews replied, “You can’t go anywhere out of this room. There are too many people out, so no. […] You’ve already been out today” (Field notes, Week 8). In these instances, Mr. Matthews’ tone of voice was far more authoritative than in other observed interactions with Chris.

These interactions were even more significant, because one of the strengths Mr. Matthews identified in Chris was his ability to relate well to adults. In the previously described instances, there was a clear power differential associated with the teacher student relationship. However, in most interactions, Chris attempted to relate on a more equal level with his teachers. Mr. Matthews explained:

Well I think the strengths that I see in him as a student [are] his ability to connect with adults, and so teachers in the building, he seems to want to have an individual connection to them, and I think that’s always important to a person’s success. Respecting and understanding that relationship there, as opposed to other students who may be in his situation, and their sole focus is on the child’s world, you know their social world as kids. (Interview, Week 5)
Mr. Matthews went on to suggest that he perceived most of Chris’ motivation for learning as coming from his connectedness to teachers. Mr. Matthews even noted that he had observed Chris become frustrated in class when his peers were engaged in disruptive behavior because, Mr. Matthews said, “I feel like he wants the teacher to be able to have a productive class, and so I’ve seen him sometimes get frustrated with his peers who are less engaged than he is” (Interview, Week 5). Mr. Matthews’ comments seemed to suggest that the relationships Chris developed with his teachers were integral to his academic success.

**Portrait of Chris as a writer.** When I asked Mr. Matthews to describe Chris as a writer, he commented that Chris was “definitely below average for his grade level” (Interview, Week 5). Mr. Matthews noted that there were some inconsistencies in Chris’ apparent motivation to write and noted that he did not think Chris understood the importance of the writing he was asked to do on the first semester exam and did not efficiently develop his topic. Mr. Matthews suggested that this inconsistency in motivation and effort across writing events was related to a lack of maturity. He explained, “He’s not mature enough really to identify the situations where it’s really important to put forth the very best effort that he has, because I don’t think that I’ve seen his best ever consistently” (Interview, Week 5).

I asked Mr. Matthews whether or not he thought Chris identified as a writer. He shared that he did not think that he would characterize it as a strong quality, and thought that Chris would identify as a better reader than writer. Mr. Matthews described Chris as a “functional writer” and noted that there were students at Central High School who were “much worse off than he is, much, much worse off than he is” (Interview, Week 5). Mr. Matthews identified several areas of weakness in Chris’ writing that kept him from being an effective writer. He explained:
First of all, an unwillingness to plan for writing before doing writing, again not unique to him. An unwillingness to put the level of detail by using examples and concrete specifics […] [and] not including descriptive language. Those would be three big ones right there. (Interview, Week 5)

Mr. Matthews’ use of the word “unwillingness” goes back to his discussion of Chris’ motivation in writing. He did not say that Chris was unable or incapable of doing these things; just that he was not willing to do them.

At the end of the study period, Mr. Matthews reviewed Chris’ three essays during our final interview. He noted that the writing lacked descriptive language and included “really basic grammar mechanics type errors” (Interview, Week 12). Overall, Mr. Matthews noted that Chris had made some progress in his writing, but was concerned by the amount of text that appeared to be plagiarized due to the complexity of the sentences. Mr. Matthews explained, “So I’m seeing paragraphs where part of the sentences look original and then part looks not” (Interview, Week 12).

Although Mr. Matthews identified Chris as being unwilling to plan his writing, he also noted that the teacher who administered the OGT to Chris sent Mr. Matthews a text message to let him know that Chris did a basic prewriting outline before writing his OGT essay. Mr. Matthews considered this a small victory in his writing instruction with Chris (Interview, Week 12). According to Mr. Matthews, Chris’ next steps as a writer were to do more complex prewriting that included details and examples in order to prepare him to write more developed paragraphs (Interview, Week 12). He also shared that Chris needed to be “willing to avoid the trap of just copying and pasting things” (Interview, Week 12). Mr. Matthews thought that engaging in more writing would be beneficial to Chris, and suggested that “maybe writing about
something [he’s] actually interested in” (Interview, Week 12) would help him further develop as a writer.

**Extent to which Chris claimed institutional identities.** There was little evidence to suggest that Chris was aware of the identities ascribed to him by Mr. Matthews and his high school. Although Chris acknowledged that he had previously failed his ninth grade year, he believed that his academic failure was in the past and that he was on track to be successful. Chris claimed the discourse identity Mr. Matthews placed on him in terms of his valuing of his relationships with his teachers. However, Chris perceived his relationships with his teachers as the unique consequence of being a student who repeated a grade and had the benefit of having the same teachers two years in a row. He explained:

> I’m kind of familiar with my teachers, you know and we have… me and my teachers we have kind of a different relationship than they do with most other students. So like we can probably get along more, they probably understand me better, where I probably like talk to them in a different way or whatever. It’s because of that relationship over that amount of time. (Interview, Week 10)

Mr. Matthews acknowledged that he knew Chris better than most of his students because he had the benefit of having him in class two years in a row. As you will see in the following case description, Mr. Matthews was far more limited in his ability to offer insight into a student who had only been in his classroom as a first time freshman.

In our final interview, I asked Chris to share with me anything he wished his teachers knew about him. Chris said that he spoke “for a lot of students” when he said that he thought there was a big gap between the teachers and students because they did not understand the things that adolescents do. He explained, “I mean sometimes we do stuff that don’t make sense, to be
honest, and we can be confusing in that time, but I mean I think, I mean everyone has a purpose for doing something” (Interview, Week 10). He also said that he wished his teachers would show more respect to students. He explained, “I know we younger and stuff, but […] show us some respect and try to understand where we’re coming from. I can’t really speak too much on that because I don’t understand where they come from or what they did” (Interview, Week 10). These statements were interesting, given that both Chris and Mr. Matthews agreed that Chris had a more mature relationship with his teachers than most other students.

There was a significant mismatch between the ways Chris believed his teacher would describe him as a writer, as open-minded and honest, and the ways his teacher described him, as below average and having inconsistent motivation. It was clear in our discussions that Chris was largely unaware of the criteria with which Mr. Matthews judged the quality of students’ writing. Unlike Mrs. Jones’ classroom, I did not observe any instance in which students were given criteria against which to judge the quality of their writing or explicit expectations (i.e. in the form of a rubric or other evaluation criteria) for the writing they were producing.

There was one instance in which Chris seemed to make a conscious choice to align himself academically with a writer identity that he believed Mr. Matthews would favor. When Mr. Matthews was first explaining the practice essay they would write, he said: “In PARCC Land they call it your claim. In the real world we call it a thesis” (Field notes, Week 4). Later in the class period, when Chris began drafting his consensus essay in Google Docs, prior to beginning to write his essay he wrote: “Thesis (My Claim): Reaching a consensus can be difficult and be good” (Artifact, Week 4). By placing the language of PARCC in the parenthetical and using the word “thesis,” Chris was privileging the language of writers that Mr. Matthews used over the language of the test.
Past and Current Writing Experiences

In order to understand how Chris’ past and current writing experiences contributed to his academic identity, I asked him to tell me about his experiences writing in and out of school. I also observed Chris engaged in traditional and digital writing events in Mr. Matthews’ ninth grade English classroom. The findings described below are also triangulated with artifacts of Chris’ writing collected during observations.

Past writing events. When asked about his past experiences with writing in school, Chris shared several memories with me. He identified his first memory of writing in school as a time in first or second grade in which he wrote a story about his family and the things they did, such as taking vacations. When I asked him why that particular memory stood out, he explained, “like a lot of things that involve my family, I try to memorize it and or frame the stuff, I try to memorize, especially the good times” (Interview, Week 3). When I probed him to elaborate on what he meant, he explained that he liked to think back on memories with his family to remember “the good times, so it keeps me in a good mood, so I try to memorize the good things and not think on the negatives” (Interview, Week 3). Chris’ statements suggested that he remembered this particular writing event because it allowed him to capture something that was intrinsically important to him – his good memories with his family.

I also asked Chris to describe a time when he felt successful with writing in school. He shared that he wrote a story in fourth or fifth grade and received an award for it from his school. He said that he could not remember for certain what the story was about, but he thought it had to do with what he wanted to be when he grew up. When I asked him why this memory of feeling successful stood out to him, he explained, “I’m more of a numbers and technology, science person, so like English and writing, just to have an award and being privileged kind of stands out
to me [....] I felt kind of special, I felt good” (Interview, Week 3). Even though he did not seem to strongly identify as a writer, during this writing event, the fact that he received an award from his school that acknowledged his accomplishments contributed to Chris’ sense of self as a writer.

In order to understand times when Chris struggled with writing, I also asked him to describe a time when he felt frustrated with writing. He shared that he experienced frustration in his writing when he had difficulty identifying a topic to write about, or when he did not feel in the mood to write about an assigned topic but was required to write about it. He explained that this was the thing that most frustrated him because, “if you can’t think of nothing, then how are you going to get it done?” (Interview, Week 3). These statements suggest that the pressure Chris felt to write on specific topics to meet specific deadlines was a source of anxiety for him as a writer.

Outside of school, Chris shared that he used to write in a journal about the things that he did or how his day went. It was in this context that he again emphasized that the role writing played in his life was to serve as a safe space to express his feelings without judgment. He explained:

You could tell the truth and be open and tell them how you really feel and how things really went instead of saying “oh my day was good” and you know just telling all the good things because you thinking somebody going to judge you if you say it was kind of rough and stuff. (Interview, Week 10)

This statement, along with his previous statements, suggests that when Chris was allowed to write for his own purposes, he viewed writing primarily as a means to express his thoughts and feelings.
I also asked Chris to share the extent to which he has used his phone to engage in digital writing in the form of social media interactions. He shared that social media was “getting old” because he used to use Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) and Twitter (http://www.twitter.com), but he had since chosen to no longer participate on those websites and now preferred to “speak to people face to face” because “social media can get you in a lot of trouble” and leads to the spreading of rumors. He explained, “I mean there’s some things you can tell people but I think there’s things you shouldn’t tell people, so like I just tried to remove myself away from that” (Interview, Week 10). Chris’ statements demonstrate that he was engaging in critical evaluation of the ways adolescents’ represent themselves through social media and made a conscious decision to not identify with or participate in this social context.

**Current writing events.** Most of Chris’ in-school writing experiences during the study period centered on preparing for the PARCC assessments, a series of tests that he was not required to take because he was a repeat ninth grader and participated in a different assessment program. The required topics of the essays allowed little room for Chris to engage in writing for the purposes he believed writing played in his life – to express his thoughts and feelings. With the exception of the argumentative essay, which required that he take a stand on the topic of consensus and choose one of two view points, Chris’ thoughts and feelings were largely irrelevant to the purposes of the writing that occurred in his English classroom. Although Chris was allowed to state a position, within a narrow range of options, in his consensus essay, the writing event did not allow him to bring details of his autobiographical self to the writing event in order to inform the discoursal self he constructed in the text. Figure 4.15 shows the concluding paragraph Chris wrote for his essay. In this paragraph, and throughout his essay, he
stated his position in broad, abstract terms rather than grounding his argument in specific examples or evidence derived from his life or his knowledge of the world around him.

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**Figure 4.15. Chris’s Argumentative Essay Conclusion**

It is likely that Chris had knowledge of, or experienced first hand, instances in which people were manipulated into an agreement either by a mistreatment of power or a lack of information, two details he offered in Figure 4.15. However, the fact that Chris did not draw on specific examples suggests that he may not have perceived this writing event as an appropriate opportunity to express his honest thoughts and feelings, thus limited the possibilities for selfhood that existed in the writing event for Chris.

The primary ways in which Chris engaged in writing outside of school was in the form of taking notes for the training programs he was involved in. Chris explained that he jots down notes about the installments at the museum to prepare the talks he will give as a tour guide. He also shared that he used writing to keep track of information he requests from another person. Chris shared that if someone gives him feedback, or tells him something he did wrong, he will “write it down to fix it or to use it or try it out to see if the outcome is different” (Interview, Week 10). For the police department program, Chris shared that trainees study prior situations that have happened, such as the Boston bombing, and evaluate the details of the situation in order to identify potential threats in new situations (Interview, Week 6). For Chris, his out-of-school
writing was largely centered on helping him be successful in two training programs that represent his affinity identities. These affinity identities are not only potential sources of income, but also sources for the potential identities he will develop in adulthood.

**Engagement during writing events.** Observational data show that Chris was partially engaged in writing during the times in which he was expected to work on his writing in Mr. Matthews’ English class. I observed Chris in various stages of writing three essays in preparation for the PARCC assessments. I also observed Chris use a workbook to scaffold his writing of the essays.

Although Chris was observed engaging in social interactions with peers that were often counter to his academic goals in the classroom, his social interactions were not any more frequent than the other social interactions observed in the classroom. In fact, it was more often a total absence from the classroom, or a complete disengagement from the task as a result of behaviors such as sleeping (which may have been related to his medical condition), that kept him from accomplishing his goals rather than interactions with peers (Field notes, Week 3).

Chris was very clear about the purposes he perceived for the assignments he was given in school. In talking about another class in which he was asked to write a biography, he explained “it’s mostly for grades, and like to keep us busy” (Interview, Week 10). This statement suggests that Chris did not see a significant purpose for the writing events that were structured for him at school. Observational data supports the notion that Chris perceived writing in school to be for the purpose of earning a grade. Late in the study period, Chris approached Mr. Matthews and told him that he had written two of his essays and asked if that would bring up his grade (Field notes, Week 8). This question also suggests that Chris was aware that his grades were falling, as
Mr. Matthews had alluded to in the interviews, and that he was trying to take steps to improve his grade by completing the writing assignments in Mr. Matthews’ class.

Conclusion

As a repeat ninth grader, Chris perceived himself as having a special relationship with his teachers compared to his classmates who had not had the opportunity to spend as much time in their teachers’ classrooms. He perceived himself as a confident, open-minded, creative, and hardheaded student who was also intelligent and respectful. Although he never explicitly stated that he believed he was more mature than his ninth grade peers, his discussions of his past academic failure implied that he had developed maturity from the experience that would benefit him academically in the future. As such, Chris seemed largely unaware of the ascribed identity of immaturity placed on him by his teacher. Although Chris identified as a creative, open-minded, and honest writer, he had few opportunities to enact these writer identities in the context of the writing that was assigned in his English class because of the emphasis on preparation for the PARCC assessments. Chris’ affinity identities were centered on his after school responsibilities with the museum and police department that were positioning him to further his preparation toward a career outside of high school and his status within his community. Lastly, Chris’ engagement in writing events illustrated the disengagement that Chris experienced as a writer asked to write in a context in which he perceived little intrinsic motivation to write.

Nicolasia

This was the first year Nicolasia had attended Central High School. Prior to enrolling at Central, she attended a K-8 public school that used a Paideia method of teaching, focusing on didactic instruction, coaching, and Socratic seminars. She explained that she mostly did the same activities in and out of school. When she was not doing homework at home, Nicolasia
shared that she liked to sing and listen to music. She also indicated that she liked to draw and remembered drawing a self-portrait that looked like her (Interview, Week 6). At home, Nicolasia used technology to read books online and interact socially with her friends. She identified Snapchat (https://www.snapchat.com) and Facebook as the websites that she used to connect with her friends. She explained that she used her phone to access these websites because her computer broke and her mom had to throw it away. She hoped to be able to buy a new one soon.

When Nicolasia graduates from high school, she has a dream of being a successful vocal artist. However, she has also selected a career in cosmetology as a back up plan. She expressed that she realized being “famous” was something that “can happen, even though it might not” (Interview, Week 11), so she wanted to have another career plan in addition to singing. Nicolasia shared that she learned how to fix people’s hair by learning from her mother and her sisters and that she grew up learning how to do it. In order to achieve her dream of being a singer, Nicolasia enrolled in an intercession course (a one week elective course at Central High School offered prior to spring break) about music. She also noted that there were several schools in the city that she could attend to get her cosmetology license. Observational data supports Nicolasia’s interest in fixing other people’s hair. On several occasions, I observed her braiding the hair of several students in class (Field notes, Week 8). After Nicolasia shared this career aspiration with me, I began to recognize these instances as an expression of her affinity identity that might later develop into a professional identity, rather than just social distractions that occurred in the classroom.

My first impression of Nicolasia was that she was a quiet teenage girl. She appeared to be African American. The more I observed Nicolasia in Mr. Matthews’ classroom, the more I
noticed that she thrived on social interactions. Her network of friends within the classroom was well developed, and when she interacted with her peers, she was vibrant and animated.

The descriptions that follow share the ways in which Nicolasia perceived her academic identity in the context of digital writing, the institutional identities Mr. Matthews ascribed to Nicolasia and the extent to which she claimed those identities, and the past and current writing experiences that contributed to her academic identity. Nicolasia’s perceptions of herself as a student and as a writer and Mr. Matthews’ positioning of Nicolasia as a student and a writer are analyzed through the lens of Gee’s (2000) four ways of viewing identity. Throughout Nicolasia’s case description, references to nature, discourse, institution, and affinity identities are made in the context of Gee’s framework. Artifacts of Nicolasia’s writing collected during observations are analyzed according to Ivanič’s (1998) Writer Identity theory; therefore, references to autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for selfhood are made in the context of Ivanič’s framework.

Academic Identity Perception

In order to explore how Nicolasia perceived her academic identity, I asked her how she would describe herself as a student and as a writer. Then I asked her to tell me how she thought her teacher would describe her both as a student and as a writer. The findings described below are triangulated with observational data as well as artifacts collected during the study period that reinforce her descriptions of herself.

**Self as student.** When asked to describe herself as a student, Nicolasia responded, “I’m kind of shy, like if there’s a question and I know the answer, I might not answer it, just because I don’t want to be wrong” (Interview, Week 3). Nicolasia attributed this “problem” as a result of
differences in teaching styles between her previous school and Central High School. She explained:

I do answer the questions sometimes, but it’s like, I never really had to […] when I was younger at school they didn’t make us, like they didn’t just, like sometimes here, they pick us, they pick us out, but they didn’t really do that, they just… if you answered the questions, you answered it […] I mean that’s what, that’s the problem… that’s most likely what I am. (Interview, Week 3)

In this description of herself, Nicolasia claimed the discourse identity of a shy student who felt anxiety related to answering questions in the classroom. She identified this characteristic as a “problem,” and her conclusion, “that’s most likely what I am,” suggests that this problem is central to her perception of herself as a student.

Nicolasia continued to claim this identity when I asked her how she thought her teacher, Mr. Matthews, would describe her as a student. The following is an excerpt of her response:

Nicolasia: Quiet. I don’t really say much. When we read… when there’s like, regarding questions, like if you ask me, I’ll try to answer it if I know it, if I don’t, I might just say I don’t know it.

Interviewer: Ok, so other than answering questions, what might be some other things you think your teacher would say to describe you?

Nicolasia: [pause] I don’t know. I would hope that he would say I was smart. Respectful. [pause] and that’s all I can think of right now. (Interview, Week 3)

Nicolasia’s analysis of herself as a student from the perspective of her teacher includes a discourse identity of being quiet that corresponds to the discourse identity of shyness that she already claimed. She also expressed that she “hoped” her teacher would attribute to her the
nature identity of being smart. She also hoped that her teacher would consider her to be respectful, another discourse identity.

Observational data collected in Nicolasia’s ninth grade English classroom supports Nicolasia’s analysis of herself as shy and quiet. She was often observed sitting quietly at her desk while Mr. Matthews gave instructions for assignments and led the class in structured activities. During times in which Mr. Matthews was actively teaching, she interacted minimally with her peers and did not participate in the discussions (Field notes, Week 3; Week 5). Her social interactions with peers appeared to increase significantly when she transitioned from quietly listening and passively observing the structured activities Mr. Matthews engaged the class in and independent work in which she was required to be an active participant. At no point was Nicolasia observed answering a question Mr. Matthews asked the class; however, in one instance she was observed raising her hand to ask Mr. Matthews a question about an assignment in the PARCC workbook (Field notes, Week 3).

Observational data also supports that Nicolasia enacted the discourse identity of being respectful in Mr. Matthews’ classroom. During the class period in which the slam poet spoke to the freshmen, Mr. Matthews prepared the students for the presentation by sharing with them YouTube videos of the performer. Between videos, students were talking and Mr. Matthews raised his hand to indicate a request for them to be quiet. Nicolasia was one of the first students in the room to raise her hand as a signal to show she was listening. Most other students raised their hands after she did (Field notes, Week 5). During the time in which Mr. Matthews expected students to work on their writing, Nicolasia frequently interacted with her peers in ways that supported her writing as well as in ways that limited her ability to accomplish her goals.
However, there were no observed instances in which her social interactions were an enactment of being overtly disrespectful to her teacher.

**Self as writer.** I also asked Nicolasia to describe herself as a writer. The following was her response:

When I write at home, I’m more like… I just write what I think. Here […] if we had something to write in Mr. Matthews’ class, like we had to write like a “Monkey’s Paw,” but I couldn’t think of what to write, I couldn’t think of anything because it was like a specific type of story. Like you had to write something about that, I couldn’t find nothing to write about. But at home when I write, it’s just like whatever I feel like writing, I just write that.” (Interview, Week 3)

Nicolasia perceived writing as an opportunity to express her thoughts. Writing at home allowed Nicolasia to write for her own purposes and on topics that interested her. For Nicolasia, writing at school seems to represent writing about required topics in required genres, which seems to be a source of anxiety and frustration for her. In the context of the practice essays written in preparation for the PARCC assessments, Nicolasia was not given opportunities to select her topics for writing or genres for expressing her ideas. In this description, Nicolasia did not use any words that represent identities associated with writing. Instead, she focused on the contexts in which she wrote and the extent to which she felt she had freedom to make her own choices in the writing event.

When I asked Nicolasia to describe how her teacher, Mr. Matthews, would describe her as a writer, she replied “I don’t write that much” (Interview, Week 3). Her response seems to suggest that from her perspective, she had not written enough for Mr. Matthews to be able to
describe her as a writer. When I probed her to go on, she explained that she had not written the “Monkey’s Paw” assignment that she mentioned earlier in the interview because, she said, “I still didn’t find nothing to write about yet” (Interview, Week 3). Nicolasia gave this example to explain why she did not “write that much” in Mr. Matthews’ class.

Ascribed Institutional Identities

In order to understand the extent to which the institutional identities ascribed to Nicolasia contributed to the academic identity she constructed for herself as a student at Central High School, I asked her teacher, Mr. Matthews, to explain the reason why she was considered “at-risk” for school failure, and to describe Nicolasia both as a student and as a writer. The findings in this section are triangulated with observational data that reinforces the ways in which Nicolasia was positioned in the classroom.

Source of “at-risk” label. Nicolasia was considered for inclusion in the study because she was reading below grade level and Mr. Matthews considered her to be performing below her ability level. He explained:

I feel like she falls into that category of underachieving. I think that she probably is functioning on a good day better than Chris is if I were to compare the two of them, but […] looking at her in respect to the class that she’s in and thinking, if… I think I would characterize her as the kind of person that if she were in a class full of people who were all smarter than her, she would rise to the occasion, and that she would step her game up as long as she had enough support, and that she would make progress. (Interview, Week 5)

Mr. Matthews’ description of Nicolasia suggests that he considered her to be “at-risk,” at least in part, because of her learning environment. Even though she was reading below grade level, Mr.
Matthews mentioned several times in interviews that on average his students were reading between a fifth and sixth grade level, meaning that compared to her same age peers within her school, she was not reading at a level below her peers.

Just as Mr. Matthews suggested that the learning environment was a factor in the extent to which Nicolasia was “at-risk” for academic failure, the stories Nicolasia shared of her past experiences in school suggest that the learning environment was a key factor in her past academic failure. She shared that she received high grades in science up until eighth grade when she had a teacher who graded “hard” and made it difficult for students to pass her class. In the following excerpt, Nicolasia compares the grading practices and attitudes of her seventh and eighth grade teachers and her perceptions of her experiences in their classrooms:

Nicolasia: So I used to get all good grades in science up to like when I was in like eighth grade, my science teacher like, she graded us hard, like she did our grading really hard, so it was really hard to pass her class. But like in seventh grade I used to get good grades in science because I actually thought about the question and answered it fully and my teacher said that that was the way that you needed to answer questions, and not just in science, in other subjects. You have to think about it, not just write down anything.

Interviewer: So you said that in eighth grade your teacher graded really hard, were you still doing the things that your seventh grade teacher asked you to do in eighth grade?

Nicolasia: Yes, but like she, my teacher, like she wasn’t, she didn’t use, like go easier on us, like my seventh teacher went easy like, she’d give us like, if we missed like one question, she’ll let us redo it or something. My eighth grade
teacher she used to be like “you have to try and try harder” like you can’t just think that every teacher is going to give you another chance and another chance back to back. So she like basically prepared us, she was preparing us for high school, like you can’t just think that “oh, I’m not going to do this so they doing to let me do it again” you know, that’s not what’s going to happen. So that, I think that’s why it was harder to pass her class because sometimes we didn’t finish our work, and like it was easier when we thought that we could just do what we wanted and just not finish, not do this, but I guess it helps now because in high school it’s not just a joke. (Interview, Week 3)

I asked Nicolasia to think about how she felt about herself as a student in each of the two classrooms she described:

Nicolasia: In that classroom I felt actually smart because like it wasn’t that I used to just push back my papers just because, “oh I can redo it again” I actually tried and like do more just because I wanted a good grade, and it’s not actually the same as any other grades, like you can’t just, just because you try harder, you might get a good grade, but sometimes you might not.

Interviewer: So then in that eighth grade class, where the teacher was a lot more strict with her grading, how did you feel about yourself as a student?

Nicolasia: I didn’t feel like I was doing my best, like I could have did better, I could of like, an F could have been an A if I would have tried harder. But I didn’t try as hard as I should have.

Interviewer: Why do you think you didn’t?
Nicolasia: I don’t know, I think that when somebody pushes me harder, I try but I don’t try as much because I like to be at my own pace […] and I don’t like to always have to hurry up and do this – “You have to get this much done in this amount of time” – because I don’t work that fast. Like I try to take my time to read and fully understand the question, but like you don’t have that much time in a day to actually take your time. (Interview, Week 3)

The experiences Nicolasia shared suggest that she was able to thrive in a classroom in which she perceived the teacher to be supportive and encouraging, but she struggled in a classroom in which the teacher held students to stricter expectations. Nicolasia acknowledged that she did not try as hard as she thought she should have in her eighth grade class, and she recognized that she was not performing at her best. As a result, she stated that she earned failing grades in this teacher’s class that could have been As if she had put forth more effort. However, she stated that she “felt actually smart” in her seventh grade class because she was given the opportunity to redo her work until she got it correct. The teacher’s support and encouragement to keep trying until she did the work correctly motivated her to work harder.

**Portrait of Nicolasia as a student.** Early in the study, Mr. Matthews explained that because Nicolasia was a first time ninth grader, he would not be able to give the level of detail about her that he gave about Chris, a student he had known for almost two years. He explained:

She’s also a quieter student and so I haven’t had as much direct interaction with her, but the reason why I suggested you work with her is because she does have a very nice personality, she’s respected by her peers and by the adults on the team, and I feel like she falls into that category of underachieving. (Interview, Week 5)
Mr. Matthews ascribed the discourse identity of being quiet to Nicolasia as an explanation for not having many interactions with her to inform his knowledge of her as a student. However, he did attribute several other positive discourse identities related to her personality and the respect she had earned from her peers and teachers. He also shared that he perceived Nicolasia to be someone who did not give up easily. He said, “I think she’s got some tenacity there, and I think that’s a strong characteristic of hers” (Interview, Week 5). It is likely this ascribed discourse identity that made him believe that if she were placed in a classroom with higher performing peers, she would rise to meet their academic level.

Mr. Matthews also raised concerns about the effect of her quiet nature on her learning. He explained:

She’s not as outspoken, and so I think she doesn’t always ask questions when she doesn’t understand things, and so I think […] she’s not seeking help as often as maybe she should, or not advocating for herself quite as much. (Interview, Week 5)

During one observation, Mr. Matthews sent students from his class to work in various areas of the building around his classroom in order to give them more space to focus on their writing and resist distractions by their peers. Because I was observing both Chris and Nicolasia, he sent both of them to an empty classroom next to his classroom to work. I observed both students collaborating on their consensus essay and working together to understand the expectations. Each time they had a question, Chris was the student who left the room to ask Mr. Matthews. Nicolasia waited quietly in the room, often without adding any new text or making changes to her document, until Chris returned with Mr. Matthews’ answer (Field notes, Week 4). This
instance raises the question whether or not Nicolasia would have sought out the answers to her questions if Chris were not available or willing to serve as her proxy.

At the end of the study period, Mr. Matthews was optimistic regarding Nicolasia’s future as a student. He explained that the district administers a standardized assessment in addition to the state-mandated assessments to help students understand “where they are in relationship to every other ninth grader in the country in terms of their skills” (Interview, Week 12). Although he did not share the assessment results with me, he perceived Nicolasia’s response to seeing her test scores as “receptive” and noted “she’s shown a willingness to put forth more sustained effort, and so I expect her to be successful as long as she continues to work as hard as she has been” (Interview, Week 12). In this last statement, it seems that Mr. Matthews was suggesting that putting forth effort and hard work will allow Nicolasia to overcome any deficits she may have in comparison to her same age peers on a national level.

**Portrait of Nicolasia as a writer.** When I asked Mr. Matthews to describe Nicolasia as a writer, he commented that Nicolasia had “the foundations of writing down pretty well” (Interview, Week 5). He explained that in her first semester exam response, which was the most recent piece of Nicolasia’s writing he had evaluated at the time of the interview, she was “using paragraphs and sentences and capital letters and punctuation and, you know, those mechanical things that we think of as adults as pretty straightforward and automatic, but aren’t for a lot of our kids” (Interview, Week 5). In this description of her as a writer, Mr. Matthews relied on the mechanical and structural aspects of her writing as evidence that she understood the foundations of writing.

Despite having a foundational understanding of writing, Mr. Matthews noted that Nicolasia struggled to develop a richer and fuller argument. He explained:
We just did argumentative or persuasive writing, and so she would list things, but the level of detail that is with them, was not you know, what you would ideally want. Some of it’s there, but I again I think by being around people who are, overall, not on, the average is well below grade level, I think that she doesn’t see a normal kind of response. Like everything is kind of lower, and so if she… I think she would respond if she saw people writing in a way that was very close to grade level and she realized “Oh this is what would be expected” then she would be more likely to do that. But that’s not, you know, the school that’s she in or the environment that she’s in. (Interview, Week 5)

Again, Mr. Matthews attributed the level of writing Nicolasia was producing to be a casualty of the learning environment in which she was writing. From Mr. Matthews’ perspective, if Nicolasia saw her peers producing higher quality writing, she would raise the overall quality of her writing. Observational data supports that Nicolasia was actively engaged in social interactions during her independent writing time, so it is reasonable to assume that she observed the writing of her peers during these interactions; however, there were no observed instances of structured peer collaboration or instances in which students actively read or responded to each other’s writing to suggest that she was intentionally reading her peer’s writing from an evaluative or reflective stance.

I asked Mr. Matthews whether or not he thought Nicolasia identified as a writer. He shared that he thought she had the potential to see herself as a strong writer, but that he did not think she did at this point. He also noted that he did not think she saw herself as a weak writer. He shared, “She might actually see her writing ability as a little bit higher than her reading ability, but… I think she has the potential to be a strong writer” (Interview, Week 5). One thing
that Mr. Matthews believed stood in the way of Nicolasia’s ability to develop into a strong writer was her engagement with non-formal text, such as text messaging. He explained that she, along with most of his students, used words “all the time” to communicate with friends, but “they don’t make any effort to use any sense of grammar whatsoever when they’re doing that.” He believed that this made it more difficult for students to transition their use of text to formal writing events in which they are expected to “standardize their English to fit you know what [the district] has called Market Place English, you know basically proper English as opposed to text English or you know a dialect or whatever” (Interview, Week 12).

Mr. Matthews reviewed Nicolasia’s three practice essays in our final interview to identify next steps for Nicolasia as a writer. He noted that she needed to tighten up her paragraphs and focus on developing her topic sentences. He observed that when he gave her a sample essay or an outline for the essay, her topic sentences were more effective than when she was working without a model. He explained:

She was able to have that first sentence be an indicator of what was to come in the paragraph […] but then there’s a few paragraphs where you look at that first sentence, and you really aren’t […] sure what the point of that paragraph is. So I think tightening up her writing so that each paragraph has a topic sentence and that each topic sentence, in a different way, supports the thesis in the introductory paragraph. I think that is going to be the most important thing for her to work on.

(Interview, Week 12)

Mr. Matthews’ final assessment of Nicolasia as a student and as a writer was positive. He commented, “as long as she continues as she’s going and makes progress, I think she’s going to be fine” (Interview, Week 12).
**Extent to which Nicolasia claimed institutional identities.** In terms of the identities ascribed to her by her teacher and her school, Nicolasia was most aware of how she was perceived as a student compared to the other participants. She expressed that she hoped her teacher would describe her as smart and respectful. Mr. Matthews’ attributed the discourse identity of being respected by peers and adults to Nicolasia. Mr. Matthews also indicated on multiple occasions that he believed she would be capable of producing higher quality work if she were in a different learning environment, suggesting that the weaknesses he observed in her were not a product of her level of intelligence or abilities.

In terms of the identities ascribed to Nicolasia as a writer, she seemed largely unaware of the ways in which Mr. Matthews would describe her because during the initial interview, she did not believe she had written enough in Mr. Matthews’ class for him to form an opinion of her as a writer. It’s important to note that Nicolasia perceived writing as an opportunity to express her thoughts and saw little opportunities to do so in the context of her English class because of the strict requirements surrounding the writing events. Her statement that she didn’t “write that much” in Mr. Matthews class, even though Mr. Matthews drew on past texts she had written to inform his description of her, raises the question whether she perceived those writing events as instances of writing or as assignments to complete.

In our final interview, I asked Nicolasia to share with me anything she wished her teachers knew or understood better about her. She explained:

It’s like some people get extra time to do work. Me, I don’t because they think I can like just handle it and be with the rest of the class. Like sometimes it takes me longer to do stuff like in math class, like today I didn’t get finished with my second warm up because I was still on… I was just now getting finished with the
first one. But we all had the same amount of time unless you was in like IEP or something and get more time, but I don’t. (Interview, Week 11)

The portraits Mr. Matthews painted of Nicolasia, both as a student and as a writer, acknowledged little struggle on her part. Instead of attributing her past failures and weaknesses as a quality within her, Mr. Matthews blamed her learning environment, over which no one seemed to have any control. Nicolasia seemed to be expressing here that she knew her teachers did not perceive her as struggling, and rather than masking the identity as a struggling student, she wanted her teachers to recognize that she needed help and additional time so that she could be successful. Her statements here suggest that she wanted to claim the identity of a struggling student and have that identity formally recognized by those within her educational institution.

**Past and Current Writing Experiences**

In order to understand how Nicolasia’s past and current writing experiences contributed to her academic identity, I asked her to tell me about her experiences writing in and out of school. I also observed Nicolasia engaged in traditional and digital writing events in Mr. Matthews’ ninth grade English classroom. The findings described below are also triangulated with artifacts of Nicolasia’s writing collected during observations.

**Past writing events.** When asked about her past experiences with writing in school, Nicolasia shared several memories with me. She identified her first memory of writing in school as occurring in fifth grade. She shared that her teacher gave students a photograph and they were asked to write a story about what was happening. She remembered that the picture she wrote about showed “a car inside of a window, like somebody drove into a restaurant” and she wrote a “real funny story about somebody driving into a McDonalds’ window” (Interview, Week 3).
She shared that her teacher told her that her story was the best in the class because it was interesting and funny. The following is an excerpt of her reflection on this writing event:

Nicolasia: … and he was like, “that was so interesting because they still like got the food at the end.”

Interviewer: [laughs]

Nicolasia: You know, it’s like, and I just thought that. I just thought that and I wrote it down.

Interviewer: Yeah, so why do you think that memory stands out to you, why does that come to your head first?

Nicolasia: Because [pause] it was like usually, like I write something, but like it wouldn’t be like an A, or nothing, but I had an A on that paper. Other ones are probably like not as good grades, and I liked it that I had a good grade on that paper.

Interviewer: Yeah, so how did it make you feel when you got that A, you said you liked it, but did you have any other feelings?

Nicolasia: I was actually happy because I had to go… I went home to show my mom, I was like “I got a good grade on my paper,” like she read it and she laughed, and like she was proud and [pause] she just wanted me to keep doing stuff like that.

Interviewer: Ok. Have you written any other stories, because that was your earliest memory, but have you written anything else since fifth grade that kind of gave you that same feeling?

Nicolasia: No. Not really. (Interview, Week 3)
Nicolasia’s memory of this writing event was largely focused on her teacher’s positive response to her writing. The fact that she could not identify a single school-based writing event since fifth grade in which she felt the same sense of pride based on a teacher’s response to her writing is disheartening. The memory, coupled with her perception that Mr. Matthews would not be able to describe her as a writer because she did not write much suggests that she may not have received much feedback from teachers on her writing over the course of her writing instruction in school.

When I asked Nicolasia to share a time when she felt successful writing in school, she described her seventh grade science teacher, as mentioned in a previous section. Again, in this instance, the source of Nicolasia’s feelings of success with her writing was based on her teacher’s response to her writing. She shared that she received “good grades” in her seventh grade science class because, she said, “I actually thought about the question and answered it fully.” Her teacher responded to her writing by telling her that the way she was writing was “the way that you needed to answer questions and not just in science in other subjects. You have to think about it, not just write down anything” (Interview, Week 3). Later in the interview, Nicolasia shared that she felt smart in this teacher’s class because of the responses to her work that she received from her teacher.

I also asked Nicolasia to describe a time when she felt frustrated with writing in school. Although I expected her to draw on the anxiety she described previously surrounding writing about required topics in required genres, she shared a story of a teacher losing a piece of writing on which she had spent a significant amount of time working. She explained that the teacher accused her of not turning in the paper, and did not believe Nicolasia when she said that she put it in the appropriate place on the teacher’s desk to turn it in. She explained, “It was really like
bothering me that she thought that I lost it but I never did. I did not lose it. She had it in her hand. It was on her desk” (Interview, Week 3). Nicolasia then said that her teacher later found the paper, but because the loss of the paper occurred at the end of a grading period, the grades had already been submitted and it was too late to include her grade on the assignment in her grade calculation. This understandably angered Nicolasia and caused her to feel mistrust toward her teacher. The following is an excerpt of her reflection on this experience:

Interviewer: So what was it about that that was so frustrating, like if you had to point your finger on the thing about that that made you so upset, what is it?

Nicolasia: How much time I spent on it, and how much effort I put into it and for you just to lose it and not find it in time, like my mom thought that I didn’t do none of my work, but I actually was, I just didn’t have the paper.

Interviewer: So when you wrote in that class after that experience, can you tell me what you felt, or what you thought whenever you were writing?

Nicolasia: I thought that she was going to lose my paper again.

[…]

Interviewer: So the first paper you said that you put in a lot of effort and you worked really hard, did you continue to put in that same amount of effort after that?

Nicolasia: After that… yeah kind of, not as much but not…. I didn’t like totally stop putting in that much effort, like it just probably went down a little bit. Like if I got tired I’d just stop writing, and then like probably go to sleep then try to get back to where I was the day before. Like I didn’t try as hard but I still tried.

(Interview, Week 3)
Again, the feelings Nicolasia experienced surrounding writing were largely informed by her teacher’s response to or behaviors surrounding the writing event, rather than on her own perceptions of her writing or experiences during the writing event.

Like Nicolasia’s first memory of writing in school, Nicolasia also mentioned her mother’s response to the situation. In fifth grade, she was able to bring her story home to her mother and she shared that her mother was proud of her and encouraged her to keep writing. In this instance, because her teacher accused her of not turning in her writing, her mother also believed that Nicolasia did not complete her work. The fact that Nicolasia mentioned her mother’s response to the writing events in both instances suggests that her mother’s response to her writing is also a source of motivation for her.

Out of school, Nicolasia shared that in seventh or eighth grade she and her friends wrote stories in a notebook. She explained that when she was “bored at home” she would frequently write in the notebook. She explained their writing process this way:

We let each other read it, and then we’d switch it, like if I have it, I write a story, and she read it, and then she’ll write a story, like and then my best friend write a story, like it was three of us. (Interview, Week 6)

Nicolasia said that she no longer wrote in the notebook because she did not know where it was. Although Nicolasia did not go into detail, given that there are 12 high schools in the school district, many of which are magnet schools, and her friends attended her K-8 elementary school, it is possible that she no longer attended school with these two other girls and her face to face contact with these friends was now more limited. In these writing events, Nicolasia was able to express her thoughts through writing for an authentic audience that extended beyond her teacher to her peer group.
Current writing events. Most of Nicolasia’s writing experiences during the study period centered on preparing for the PARCC assessments. The required topics of the essays allowed little room for Nicolasia to express her thoughts. Like Chris, Nicolasia was only able to state her thoughts within a limited range of options in the argumentative essay she wrote on consensus. However, an analysis of the artifacts shows that even though she was able to state her opinion, which was that “consensus are sometimes good and sometimes bad” (Artifact, Week 11), she was not able to meaningfully draw on her autobiographical self to lend support to her argument. Her introductory paragraph (See Figure 4.16) began to draw on past experiences she may have held involving group work in her school, but the rest of the essay focuses primarily on consensus in the work place and the discussions of interactions between co-workers and bosses – relationships that, based on the interview data, she had yet to develop.

Using consensus are sometimes not a good idea. Have you ever had to work in a group and decide on an topic or group names and you didn’t like it? or you didn’t like the outcome of the choices that your group made? This is what happens sometimes when using consensus. Consensus is what you do when you have to agree with others but keeping eachothers idea’s in the project.

Figure 4.16. Nicolasia’s Introductory Paragraph to her Consensus Essay

Because Nicolasia was a first time ninth grader, she was required to take the PARCC assessments and shared her experience with me. The following is an excerpt of her response:

Nicolasia: It was so confusing because I didn’t even know what I was reading. I was so confused, like we all had like different like reading selections, so like [my
friends] was talking about what they was reading, and I was like, "What? I don’t even know what I, how to pronounce my title."

Interviewer: Yeah, how did that feel?

Nicolasia: Like when I was reading, I was like, “What, what, what is that?” Like, I couldn’t even pronounce it, like I’m just like… and then I’m over here reading something I don’t even know how to pronounce the title on, I’m reading and I don’t know what I’m reading about. So then I was all confused. So like if my test scores come back wrong, or like bad, that’s because I didn’t know what I was doing. I did not.

Interviewer: Yeah, how do you feel about getting those test scores?

Nicolasia: I mean I don’t want my test scores to be low, so I’m kind of like scared about it, like I want them to be as good as they can possibly be, but like if they are bad, I mean they would like… that’ll help me like know I need to do better, and like read until like, read over and over and not rush through it because I think I don’t have that much time. (Interview, Week 11)

On the assessment, Nicolasia was required to synthesize information from multiple sources and then write an analytical essay based on that synthesis. According to her account of her experience, she struggled to read the texts that were meant to inform her written response. Although she did not directly address the writing she produced on the test, it is clear that she was concerned about the score she would receive based on her writing because of her inability to read and understand the passages.

Out of school, Nicolasia used her phone to write. She shared, “I just write whatever I think about, so it’s like not like stressful, I just like, ‘Ok, whatever I’m thinking about, let me just
She used Wattpad (http://www.wattpad.com/home), which is a blogging and self-publishing website that incorporates a strong social networking component. Users can post stories and comment on other users’ stories. Nicolasia described her use of the website in the following excerpt:

Nicolasia: You can write, you can read other people’s writings and all that.

Interviewer: Ok, and so you, do you have certain people that you share your writing with or is it just open to the public?

Nicolasia: It’s open to the public.

Interviewer: Yeah, do you get a lot of responses from people?

Nicolasia: If I post anything.

Interviewer: If you post on there. Ok. So what makes you pick that app, I know there’s a lot of different apps where you can write things down, what do you like about that app?

Nicolasia: It’s like, it’s not like you don’t have to categorize your things, like you can write about anything you want to write about. You don’t have to write about oh like educational things, you can write about having fun and everything, whatever you want to do, you can just write about it.

Interviewer: Yeah, can you give me an example of something you’ve written recently, just what it was about or what you said?

Nicolasia: I haven’t wrote, I haven’t written in there in a [while] but I think the last thing I wrote was like, it was about me and my friends, but [pause] we were like outside one day and like we were just like having fun. There wasn’t that much to it. (Interview, Week 11)
After Nicolasia shared with me her participation on this writing website, I conducted a search to see if any of her writing was publically available. I found two stories that she had shared on the website. One story had 5,900 views, 83 likes and 19 comments. The other story had 1,700 views, 32 likes and 18 comments. Earlier in Nicolasia’s experiences as a writer, she wrote in a notebook to share her stories about her thoughts and experiences with an audience of two other friends. Now, using the Internet, she was able to share her stories with a wider audience and receive more feedback and validation of her writing.

**Engagement during writing events.** Observational data show that Nicolasia was somewhat engaged in writing during the times in which she was expected to work on her writing in Mr. Matthews’ class. I observed Nicolasia in various stages of writing three essays in preparation for the PARCC assessments. I also observed her use a workbook to scaffold her writing of the essays.

Social interaction permeated everything Nicolasia did in Mr. Matthews’ class during unstructured time given for independent work. Although Nicolasia was observed as behaving quietly and passively during structured activities, she was actively engaged in social interactions that were often counter to her academic goals in the classroom. These social interactions included talking to peers seated in close proximity to her (Field notes, Week 3; Week 4; Week 6; Week 8), getting up from her seat and walking to other areas of the room in which peers were seated to stand next to them to talk (Field notes, Week 4; Week 6; Week 8; Week 10), or using the chat feature in Google Docs to communicate (Field notes, Week 6; Week 8). During one observation, Mr. Matthews sent half of the class to another classroom and spread the remaining students out to different seats in the room to limit their ability to socialize. Nicolasia was seated at a desk in the front row of the classroom with her peers who were still in the room seated...
behind her. Despite Mr. Matthews’ efforts, Nicolasia still managed to find ways to interact with her peers by frequently getting up from her seat to throw away a piece of paper, retrieve her workbook or a tissue (Field notes, Week 10).

However, not all instances in which Nicolasia interacted with her peers were off task. During the observation in which she was seated with Chris to work on her consensus essay, the majority of their interactions that I could hear were focused on the writing assignment (Field notes, Week 4). During the class period in which Mr. Matthews separated the students in the classroom to limit social interactions, Nicolasia was observed providing assistance to another girl who was working in Google Docs. Nicolasia pointed to the girl’s screen and referred to the workbook as she offered help (Field notes, Week 10). Although she was observed frequently interacting with her peers during time devoted to independent writing, she successfully completed the practice essays and vocabulary activities that Mr. Matthews assigned.

**Conclusion**

Nicolasia perceived herself as a shy student who was timid to answer questions or ask for help from her teachers. Like Chris, Nicolasia perceived writing as an opportunity to express her thoughts, but had little opportunities to do so in the context of the practice essays written in preparation for the PARCC assessments. The responses to her writing that Nicolasia received served as strong sources of motivation for her as a writer. Outside of school, Nicolasia used writing in years past to stay connected with her friends by writing stories in a notebook that they passed back and forth, and now used social media to stay connected to her friends. Nicolasia also developed a writer identity through sharing her stories on the Internet. Lastly, an analysis of Nicolasia’s engagement during classroom writing events demonstrates that social interactions permeated her writing process.
Summary of Chapter

In this chapter I crafted in-depth case descriptions of the four adolescent participants in this study, Jon, Jessi, Chris, and Nicolasia, and situated their experiences in the unique learning contexts of their classrooms. The fourth grade research site was an upper-middle class suburban elementary school, and the English/language arts teacher, Mrs. Jones, used a writing workshop approach that was heavily influenced by her experiences learning from Nancie Atwell. The use of technology was integral to all aspects of literacy instruction in this classroom. Mrs. Jones valued collaboration in all aspects of the writing process and positioned her students as technology experts, which freed her to focus her attention on writing instruction. Jon, a repeat fourth grader in Mrs. Jones’ class, perceived himself as a good student and held a strong affinity for athletics. Mrs. Jones positioned Jon as a reluctant reader and writer in her class, but Jon did not claim this identity. Jon’s in-school writing experiences were mediated through social interactions that allowed him to accomplish his academic tasks. His classmate, Jessi also perceived herself as a good student and her identity as a writer was largely centered on writing about her affinity identities. Mrs. Jones’ positioned Jessi as a reluctant reader and writer, even though Jessi was eager to write and share her writing with others. Like Jon, Jessi also relied on the support of her peers to persevere through difficult academic tasks.

The ninth grade research site was an urban high school with a high proportion of economically disadvantaged students. The English teacher, Mr. Matthews, was required to use a workbook to guide students through writing practice essays in preparation for the PARCC assessments, which limited the extent to which he could apply his training in writing instruction developed through his work with the Ohio Writing Project. Because students were preparing for an assessment in which they would work independently, Mr. Matthews discouraged social
interactions during students’ writing process in order to more closely mirror the writing conditions of the test. Chris, a repeat freshman in Mr. Matthews’ class, perceived himself as a confident, creative, and intelligent student who had a special relationship with his teachers as a result of repeating the ninth grade. Mr. Matthews positioned Chris as an immature student who struggled to follow through to accomplish academic tasks. Chris was largely disengaged with the writing events that occurred in his English class, but claimed a stronger writing identity associated with his roles out of school as an employee of a black history museum and trainee in a police department program for youth interested in criminal justice. His classmate, Nicolasia, perceived herself as a shy student who struggled more than her teachers realized. Mr. Matthews positioned Nicolasia as performing below her potential and attributed her “at-riskness” as a product of her learning environment. Nicolasia, however, claimed the identity of a struggling student and expressed a desire to have this identity recognized by her teachers.

These narrative case descriptions served as the basis for the cross-case analysis presented in the next chapter. The cross-case analysis answers the four research questions that guided this study and explore more broadly the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context created for these four adolescents.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

In the previous chapter, I shared detailed narrative vignettes of Jon, Jessi, Chris, and Nicolasia. These in-depth case descriptions served to explain the adolescent participants’ perceptions of their academic identities and experiences with digital writing, and were informed by the perceptions of their English/language arts teachers and observational data and artifacts collected in their classrooms.

In this chapter, I present the findings of the cross-case analysis to answer each of the four research questions that guided this study. Through investigating these questions, I explored the ways in which the adolescents perceived their academic identities in the context of digital writing; how the institutional identities ascribed to adolescents contributed to their academic identities; and how their past and current writing experiences contributed to their academic identities. Then I present themes that emerged from the analysis of the full dataset to more broadly explore the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context created for the four adolescent participants. The purpose of the cross-case analysis is to highlight the ways in which the adolescents’ experiences and perceptions converged and diverged and the extent to which the individual case findings were replicated within and across contexts.

Academic Identity Perception

The first research question guiding this study explored the ways in which adolescents perceived their academic identities in the context of digital writing. All writing instruction I observed at both research sites was mediated through the use of the Internet. Most of the writing the adolescent participants produced was composed directly in Google Docs. However, in interviews, participants drew on experiences that involved traditional pencil and paper writing
events as well as digital writing events to describe themselves as students and writers. Therefore, writing events that occurred in both traditional and digital writing contexts informed the identities they constructed in their descriptions of themselves. In this section, the adolescents’ perceptions of themselves as students and as writers are analyzed through the lens of Gee’s (2000) four ways of viewing identity. Throughout this section, references to nature, discourse, institution, and affinity identities are made in the context of Gee’s framework. The adolescents claimed discourse and nature identities that are generally considered positive identities to hold as students, as well as identities that are generally considered less desirable to hold as students. They also claimed affinity identities that served to advance their social goals in the classroom. Figure 5.1 illustrates the relationship between Gee’s four aspects of identity as they contributed to the academic identities of the adolescents. Although institution identities are included in the figure because they are one of the four types of identities Gee offers, these identities will be discussed in more detail in the analysis of data that answered the second research question.

*Figure 5.1. Relationship between Academic Identities and Gee’s Framework for Identities*
Overall, three of the four adolescent participants held positive identities as students. They drew on discourse identities such as good, respectful, confident, open-minded, and creative that could be recognized and enacted in the classroom. They also claimed nature identities such as smart and intelligent, but sometimes differentiated their level of intelligence in reading and math. As a new student, Jon was still developing his academic identity within a new school environment, but perceived himself as a good student who was stronger in math than in reading. Jessi’s identification as a good student referred both to her classroom behavior, as well as her academic performance. As a repeat ninth grader, Chris perceived himself as having a special relationship with his teachers compared to his classmates. He perceived himself as a confident, open-minded, and creative student who was also intelligent and respectful. In addition, Chris described himself as hardheaded, but portrayed this discourse identity as a positive attribute that led to his ability to accomplish tasks. Nicolasia was the only adolescent who did not claim a positive identity as a student, although she expressed hope that her teacher would attribute positive identities to her, such as being smart and respectful.

There were instances in which the adolescent participants also claimed identities that are not generally perceived as desirable. Nicolasia perceived herself as a shy student who was timid to answer questions or ask for help from her teachers. She indicated that this identity was problematic because it kept her from seeking help. Although Jon claimed the identity of being smart in math, he also claimed the identity of not being smart in reading. In describing herself as a student, Jessi indicated that she sometimes struggled, but still considered herself a good student. Nicolasia claimed the identity of a struggling student as well.

The adolescents also expressed affinity identities that permeated their academic identities in the classroom. Jon’s affinity for sports allowed him to construct an identity as an athlete in
the classroom, which helped to mask his academic weaknesses. Jessi’s analysis of herself as a student from her teacher’s perspective included three affinity identities that she believed she enacted in the classroom – liking school, liking to play outside, and liking to work in groups. Nicolasia enacted her identity as someone who was skilled at doing hair through her social interactions with peers that involved her braiding her friends’ hair during class time.

However, not all of the participants’ affinity identities were enacted in the classroom. Chris’ affinity identities were centered on his after school responsibilities with the black history museum and the police department. Although Chris’ identity as a participant in a police training program may eventually become his academic identity if he continues to pursue this line of education, there were no instances in which Chris overtly enacted this identity in the classroom. However, during the presentation given by the slam poet, Chris seemed disengaged with the speaker. He was observed folding his arms across his chest, and averting his attention away from the performer, either by looking down or closing his eyes (Field notes, Week 5). One of the themes the performer returned to throughout his presentation was the current issue of police brutality against African Americans. As I observed him, I wondered if, as an African American youth whose identity was informed by his participation in a police training program, he may not have shared the same beliefs as the speaker and may have felt resistant to the speaker’s message.

The adolescent participants expressed their identities as writers using a wide range of descriptions that drew on various types of identities. They also held different perspectives about what it means to be a writer. Jon viewed writing as something that is done with a person’s hands rather than with a person’s mind. For this reason, Jon’s identity as a writer rested largely in the fine motor skills he used to print text by hand, rather than in his cognitive abilities to create meaning using words. Jessi’s identity as a writer was largely centered on her affinity identities,
such as her dog, birthday parties, playing with friends – which she claimed to be the sources for her writing. Chris’ description of himself as a writer was based on discourse identities, being creative and open-minded, that were identical to the discourse identities he claimed when describing himself as a student. He also identified that as a writer, he expressed how he felt and was honest in that expression. Like Chris, Nicolasia perceived writing as an opportunity to express her thoughts, but both Chris and Nicolasia had little opportunities to do so in the context of the practice essays written in preparation for the PARCC assessments. Nicolasia did not use any words that represented identities associated with writing, instead focusing on the contexts in which she wrote and the extent to which she felt she had freedom to make her own choices in the writing event.

The adolescent participants each believed, or expressed hope, that their English/language arts teacher perceived them in positive ways. They believed that their teacher would ascribe to them discourse identities such as good, smart, respectful, hardworking, and confident. They also believed their teacher would ascribe to them the nature identity of being intelligent. In many instances, the identities the adolescents believed their teacher would attribute to them were the same identities they claimed for themselves, suggesting that they believed their teachers perceive them in the same ways that they perceived themselves. However, while Jessi consciously worked to enact the discourse identity of a good student in Mrs. Jones’ classroom, she did not feel confident that her teacher recognized and attributed this identity to her. Nicolasia did not believe that her teacher could describe her as a writer because she did not perceive herself to have written enough in his class for him to form an opinion of her. However, she did express hope that her teacher would describe her as respectful and smart, even though she did not claim these identities for herself.
Ascribed Institutional Identities

The second research question guiding this study explored the extent to which institutional identities ascribed to the adolescent participants contributed to their academic identities. Most of the instances in which the teachers ascribed institutional identities occurred in the form of attributing discourse identities to their students based on their interactions and experiences with the students in their classrooms. Both teachers also drew on their knowledge of prototypical types of students such as “reluctant” or “repeating” that informed the institutional identities they ascribed to the adolescent participants in this study. The ways in which the teacher participants positioned the adolescent participants as students and as writers are analyzed through the lens of Gee’s (2000) four ways of viewing identity. Throughout this section, references to nature, discourse, institution, and affinity identities are made in the context of Gee’s framework.

Figure 5.2 illustrates the relationship between the identities teachers ascribed to the adolescents and the identities that adolescents claimed in relation to the adolescents’ academic identities. Gee’s institution identity only refers to identities attributed to students that are labels that exist within an educational institution, such as “repeating,” “economically disadvantaged,” or “student with a disability.” Most of the identities the teachers ascribed to adolescents in this study fell into one of the other three categories, nature, discourse, or affinity. In this section, I use the word “institutional” rather than “institution” as an umbrella category for all of the identities the teachers ascribed to the adolescents, regardless of the type of identity it represents. Therefore, the word “ascribed” indicates in this figure that it is an institutional identity that teachers ascribe to adolescents. This figure also illustrates that the adolescents only claimed (and in many instances were only aware of) some of the identities that were ascribed to them. It also
illustrates that the ascribed identities only made up part of the identities that they claimed for themselves.

Figure 5.2. Relationship between Academic Identities, Claimed Identities, and Ascribed Identities in the Context of Gee’s Framework

Across cases, the participants were largely unaware of the institutional identities their English/language arts teachers ascribed to them both as students and as writers. This was especially true for less desirable identities, such as reluctant or immature. However, there were instances in which the adolescent and the teacher claimed or ascribed similar positive discourse identities, such as good or respectful. Jon seemed unaware of the institutional identity Mrs. Jones ascribed to him as a reluctant reader and writer, although he acknowledged that he was “not very smart in reading.” Jon’s identification as a writer in terms of his handwriting rather than in terms of his ability to construct meaning with words may have insulated Jon from claiming the identity of being a reluctant writer. Jessi seemed unaware of the institutional
identities ascribed to her both informally by her teacher, as well as formally by the school. Although, Mrs. Jones’ deemed Jessi a “teacher pleaser,” Jessi claimed the identity of a “good student” and actively worked to reinforce this identity in Mrs. Jones’ classroom; however, the ways in which Jessi worked to enact her identity as a “good student” served to reinforce the identity Mrs. Jones attributed to Jessi of being a “teacher pleaser.” Chris seemed largely unaware of the ascribed identity of immaturity placed on him by his teacher, and claimed an identity of being more mature than his peers as a result of repeating ninth grade. Nicolasia was most aware of how she was perceived as a student compared to the other participants; however, she was unaware that Mr. Matthews had constructed an identity for her as a writer.

In terms of the sources of the “at-risk” label attributed to the participants, both Jon and Chris were considered “at-risk” because they had previously failed and were currently repeating the grade they had failed. Both Jessi and Nicolasia were considered “at-risk” because they were reading below grade level. However, while Mrs. Jones’ attributed Jessi’s reading deficits to a quality within Jessi, Mr. Matthews attributed Nicolasia’s reading deficits to her learning environment. Both Jessi and Jon were receiving formalized direct intervention administered by Intervention Specialists to remediate their literacy skills in the hopes of closing gaps in their academic performance. Neither Chris nor Nicolasia were receiving direct intervention, but Nicolasia claimed the identity of a struggling student and expressed the desire to receive more intervention and accommodations to help her be successful with her schoolwork.

**Past and Current Writing Experiences**

The third research question guiding this study explored how the adolescent participants’ past and current writing experiences contributed to their academic identities. The participants shared with me their past experiences writing both in school and out of school. The adolescents’
memories of writing in school centered on writing events in which they could draw on their autobiographical selves to write about their personal experiences, affinities, or creative ideas. They all claimed identities as writers out of school, and used writing for a variety of purposes, such as documenting their personal experiences and sharing their creative works with a public audience. I also explored the nature of the adolescents’ engagement during digital writing events in their English/language arts classrooms. The majority of the writing events that I observed in both classrooms occurred in the context of preparing for the PARCC Performance-Based Assessments. There was a contrast in the extent to which peer collaboration in the writing process was valued between the fourth grade and ninth grade research sites in the context of preparing for the PARCC assessments.

The ways in which the adolescents engaged with digital writing in the classroom are analyzed through the lens of Gee’s (2000) four ways of viewing identity. Throughout this section, references to nature, discourse, institution, and affinity identities are made in the context of Gee’s framework. Artifacts of the adolescents’ writing collected during observations as well as the context of the writing events are analyzed according to Ivanič’s (1998) Writer Identity theory. Throughout this section, references to autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for selfhood are made in the context of Ivanič’s framework.

Figure 5.3 illustrates the contributions of the adolescents’ past experiences with writing and their out-of-school writing experiences on their academic identities in the context of their current writing events that occurred in their English/language arts classroom. The figure also shows the intersection of peer collaboration with their academic identities, digital writing events, and the classroom context. The size of the peer collaboration circle varied in each classroom context.
The adolescents shared memories of writing in school that centered on writing events in which they could draw on their autobiographical selves to write about their personal experiences, affinities, or creative ideas. All of these memories occurred in elementary school ranging from Kindergarten to fifth grade. Jon’s first memories of writing in school involved writing about holidays, such as Halloween and Christmas. Jessi’s identity as a writer was largely centered on her affinities, and her memories of writing were ones in which she was given the opportunity to write about the things that were important to her life. Chris remembered writing about his family and shared that writing about his family was important to him because it helped him remember good memories. Nicolasia’s first memory of writing was a creative story in response to a
photograph. For Nicolasia, the memory stood out because of her teacher’s positive response to her writing and the pride her mother felt in her when she brought her story home.

The adolescents all claimed identities as writers out of school. Their purposes for writing ranged from documenting their memories for their own personal reflection to sharing their creative works with a public audience. Again, in these writing events the adolescents drew heavily on their autobiographical selves as they wrote for their own purposes and for audiences of their own selection. Jon’s experiences writing in a diary he kept in Google Docs outside of school helped him construct a discourse identity as a confident writer. His purpose for writing in his diary was to document his childhood experiences in order to look back on them when he grew older. Jessi did not discuss writing for her own purposes at home in detail, other than to say that she liked to write about her dog, but she did explain that she worked on her writing for Mrs. Jones’ class at home and received assistance from her parents and her siblings. Chris shared that he used to write in a journal about the things that he did or how his day went. At the time of the study, Chris primarily engaged in writing out of school to accomplish tasks related to the training programs he was involved in. Nicolasia used writing in years past to stay connected with her friends by writing creative stories in a notebook that they passed back and forth, and now used social media to stay connected to her friends. Nicolasia also developed a writer identity and her sense of self as an author through sharing her creative stories with a public audience using the website Wattpad.

There was a contrast in the extent to which peer collaboration in the writing process was valued between the fourth grade and ninth grade research sites. While Mrs. Jones valued and encouraged a collaborative ethos in her students that was an integral part of their writing process, Mr. Matthews established a writing environment in which students were expected to write
independently and quietly. Jon’s experiences writing in school were mediated through social interactions that allowed him to push through difficulty to accomplish tasks, and also served to reinforce his decisions as a writer and helped him build confidence. Jessi persevered through difficulty by relying on the support of her peers, especially her study buddy who was seated in close proximity to her. For Jon and Jessi, peer support and collaboration occurred in both face-to-face as well as digitally within Google Docs. In contrast, Chris’ engagement in writing events illustrated the disengagement that he experienced as a writer asked to write in a context in which he perceived little intrinsic motivation to write. While he was observed engaging in social interactions with peers that were often counter to his academic goals in the classroom, he was also observed collaborating with Nicolasia when they were sent to another classroom and allowed to write in an environment that offered more freedom to work in their own ways. Despite writing in an environment that emphasized writing as a solitary act, social interactions permeated Nicolasia’s writing process in ways that subverted Mr. Matthews’ expectation that students work independently.

Affordances of Digital Writing

To explore the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction, I had participants wear a small digital camera located in the frames of costume eyeglasses commonly sold as “spy glasses.” This was done in order to document their point of view during a digital writing event in which they were producing text. Each participant and I viewed the video together in an interview immediately following the writing event to elicit a think-aloud discussion of his or her writing process. I also interviewed participants about their preferences for writing using traditional pencil and paper processes compared to working on a computer. In this section I discuss participants’ perceived affordances of writing with
technology, as well as the barriers they encountered when using technology during writing events. I also share the ways in which participants were observed integrating their use of technology and paper during digital writing events.

Within each section I also share the classroom teachers’ observations and interpretations of participants’ experiences writing with technology. Artifacts of participants’ writing collected during observations and the retrospective digital writing think aloud (RDWTA) are used throughout this section to illustrate the findings. As in previous sections, references to nature, discourse, institution, and affinity identities are made in the context of Gee’s (2000) framework and references to autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for selfhood are made in the context of Ivanič’s (1998) framework.

Figure 5.4 illustrates the major findings of the cross-case analysis in terms of the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction. The “digital writing events” circle at the center of the figure is the same as the “digital writing events” circle in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.4. Affordances of Digital Writing for Academic Identity Construction
Perceived Affordances of Writing with Technology

When I asked each of the four adolescent participants what their preference would be if they were given the choice to write with paper and pencil or with technology, they all indicated that they preferred writing on a computer. The affordances they identified for writing with technology included the level of enjoyment and ease they experienced while writing, the features they believed provided support to help them accomplish tasks, and the features built into the digital programs that facilitated peer collaboration.

First, the adolescent participants in this study preferred writing with technology because they perceived the experience to be more enjoyable and easier than writing with pencil and paper. For these participants who have been deemed “at-risk” because of their prior academic performance, and for the fourth grade participants who have been labeled as “reluctant” writers, identifying a medium through which they can write as easy and fun is an important step toward developing positive identities as writers and as students.

When I asked Jon why he preferred writing on a computer, he said, because “it’s more fun” (Interview, Week 13). He explained that using technology makes school easier because “It’s just not as hard as on paper” (Interview Week 2), but he would not elaborate on reasons to support this claim. He also expressed a preference for a computer over a tablet, such as an iPad, for working in Google Docs because on a computer “it just has it right here” (Interview, Week 13). He explained that it was easier to type on a keyboard and be able to look at the screen than to type on the screen of a tablet that is used both as a screen and a keyboard simultaneously.

Chris also perceived writing in Google Docs to be easier than writing on paper because he believed that it allowed him to keep his writing more organized. He explained:
With the laptops and stuff it make it better so, ‘cause like writing can be difficult for some people, […] but typing it helps me keep organized and then I can go back and make corrections instead of erasing and making all these marks on my paper […] and having it all messy. (Interview, Week 6)

For Chris, the ease computers offered for writing centered on the ability to organize and retrieve files and the ability to make corrections without negatively affecting the appearance of the document.

Jessi also preferred writing on computers because, she explained, “It’s pretty fun […] and you can like look up the dictionary or [pause] YouTube or videos” (Interview, Week 2). In a later interview, Jessi explained that what she liked most about writing with technology was that she was able to “learn about new things and you get to write what you really want to write” (Interview, Week 13). Jessi’s comments seemed to suggest that because the computer offered her a broader range of information than what was available in print in her classroom, it also afforded her a broader scope for selecting topics that she cared to write about.

Second, the adolescent participants in this study preferred writing with technology because they believed the technology tools provided them additional support to help them accomplish tasks beyond what was possible in traditional pencil and paper writing events. The teachers also identified resources that they believed facilitated the writing process for students who struggle with writing. The use of these resources has the potential to help adolescents who have struggled with writing in traditional writing events experience success as writers in a digital context.

The availability of resources such as spell check can allow students who struggle with spelling to develop their voices as writers by allowing them to use the words they want to use
instead of relying solely on the words they feel confident they know how to spell. Nicolasia explained, “What I like most about writing with technology is I can’t really spell anything wrong because there’s autocorrect there, and because you can always like go back and just delete instead of erase” (Interview, Week 11). Jessi also indicated that it was “fun” to edit on a computer because “they tell you the right words” (Interview, Week 2). When Jessi was wearing the video-recording eyeglasses in preparation for the retrospective digital writing think aloud, the camera captured the Google Docs program highlight a misspelled word in red (see Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5. Jessi’s RDWTA Screenshot Showing a Misspelled Word Highlighted in Red

Within seconds of the program highlighting the typed word in red, the movement of the video camera and the captured images indicates that Jessi moved her focus to the right of the screen where suggested spellings were offered for the misspelled word (See Figure 5.6).
During the retrospective digital writing think aloud, we watched the video together, and I asked Jessi questions about what the camera in the eyeglasses she wore recorded. I asked Jessi to tell me what she was doing on the right side of the screen. She explained, “That was our tools and there’s spelling in it and it tells you the right words, what to write” (RDWTA, Week 6).

For Nicolasia and Jessi, rather than seeing the instances in which the computer program identified errors in their writing as negative experiences, they perceived the instances as beneficial supports that helped them communicate their ideas. It is possible that the ease with which the programs allow for errors to be fixed makes the error itself less permanent and less likely to negatively affect the adolescents’ identity as a writer. Given that both Nicolasia and Jessi also placed significant emphasis on their teachers’ responses to their writing and, for Jessi her teacher’s perception of her as a student, having a technology tool that fixes errors before they are recognized by a teacher evaluating the writing is likely a significant benefit for these two adolescents.

In discussing Jon’s use of technology in her class throughout the year, Mrs. Jones also noted that engaging in digital writing allowed Jon to attempt words that he would not have
attempted before because of his limited spelling vocabulary. She also noted that working in
Google Docs made his writing more legible (Interview, Week 2). This comment was especially
interesting given Jon’s strong identity regarding his handwriting.

In addition to the benefits of the revision tools, Chris identified the organizational
structure of Google Docs as an important support for him as a writer. He explained:

Chris: Keep it organized. I really don’t have no dislikes about it ‘cause like it’s
real like supportive. I mean but sometimes, the only probably disadvantage is like
if you don’t title your documents, like you can get them confused and mixed up
and it can be a messy situation, but like, if you smart enough to keep it titled and
everything, and keep it in the correct folder, then yeah, it kind of helps
organization.

Interviewer: You said that it was supportive, what do you mean by that?

Chris: Like as far as supporting what I mean, like it kind of goes with the
organization, like it support, it like supports you to keep it organized, like you
need to keep all your stuff organized, you put it in one folder for one class, and
then you change it and put it in another folder for another class. It’s real
supportive. (Interview, Week 6)

Given that Mr. Matthews indicated that turning in assignments was one of the issues he
perceived to be standing in Chris’ way of being successful as a student, being able to easily
organize and locate assignments that have been started and completed is an important resource
for Chris. Feeling confident in his ability to organize his work also has the potential to help
Chris develop a positive perception of himself as a student.
The teachers also indicated that the technology tools provided them additional support to help their students accomplish tasks beyond what was possible in traditional pencil and paper writing events. Mrs. Jones indicated that she used the revision history tool in Google Docs to track the changes her students made to their writing. She explained that this allowed her to see how students integrated the feedback she had given them on drafts in progress and to determine any additional feedback she might need to give based on the revisions (Interview, Week 7).

Mr. Matthews explained that when students completed assignments on paper, he often had instances in which students forgot to write their names on their papers and, therefore, did not receive credit for work that they completed. When students submit assignments through Google Docs, he explained, “At least with Google Docs I don’t have to wonder whose paper it is. Now I still have to get on them about not putting it on their paper, but at least it’s tied electronically to their name” (Interview, Week 12). For students who are “at-risk,” not receiving credit for work that was completed can serve to further damage their identities as students and negatively impact the effort they are willing to put forth in future writing events. This was evident in the experience Nicolasia shared about her teacher losing her writing and then finding it after it was too late for the grade to count.

Third, the adolescent participants in this study preferred writing with technology because of the features built into the programs that allowed for peer collaboration. For the two fourth grade participants writing in a classroom in which the interactive features were used as an integral part of the writing process, the ability to receive feedback within their documents from their peers was an important source of support and motivation for these adolescents. Jon indicated that he received support from his peers in Mrs. Jones’ classroom both in the comments left in his Google Docs, as well as through Gmail when peers sent “some ideas to help” him
(Interview, Week 2). During the retrospective digital writing think aloud, Jon demonstrated the way he and his peers in Mrs. Jones’ class used Gmail to send other students access to their Google Docs for peer feedback. During the writing event, he reviewed comments written by his peers and marked them as resolved after making changes to his document. He also opened documents emailed to him by his peers and reviewed their writing. Figure 5.7 shows the video recording of Jon’s screen as he began to email his document to another student in Mrs. Jones’ class.

![Figure 5.7. Jon’s RDWTA Screenshot Showing Jon Sharing his Writing](image)

Mrs. Jones identified the use of technology as a motivating factor in Jon’s perseverance with the informational writing unit. She explained that working in Glogster “pushed him to want to do more and elaborate a little bit more because he wanted to show through the technology that he knew more than he put down in text” (Interview, Week 13). As illustrated in Jon’s individual case description, receiving a positive response to his writing from an audience of his peers was a strong motivating factor for Jon. By using the features in Google Docs for peer collaboration, students in Mrs. Jones’ class had the opportunity to receive feedback from their peers throughout the writing process to sustain that motivation.
Barriers for Participants When Writing with Technology

As the adolescent participants and I discussed the affordances of digital writing they also mentioned what they perceived to be minor barriers to accomplishing their academic tasks when writing with technology. These barriers were mostly associated with technical aspects of using the technology tools. However, during the observations in the fourth grade language arts classroom, I observed a more significant barrier for Jon’s expression of his meaning in his informational writing draft.

As previously mentioned, Chris did not perceive many disadvantages to writing with technology. However, he did mention the importance of titling documents in order to avoid getting “them confused and mixed up” and resulting in “a messy situation” (Interview, Week 6). When I asked Nicolasia what she liked least about writing with technology, she identified experiencing frustration when the computer “freezes” or does not respond appropriately to the commands she enters. She explained:

Like I think it was yesterday, I was in class and I was trying to go back so I could like write my definitions for my vocabulary list, I was trying to go back and it was like “EHH,” like, “EHH, nope” it stayed on the page, like so I had to retype something in and go back and it kept doing it over and over again. (Interview, Week 11)

Similarly, Jon expressed experiencing frustration in instances when he would hit a letter on the keyboard, such as the letter “D” but the computer would type a different letter, such as “S” (Interview, Week 13). In all of the situations described above, the technology barriers the adolescents experienced were minimal compared to the perceived affordances they shared in the interviews. Even with probing, Jessi did not identify anything that she disliked about writing
with technology or anything that caused her to feel frustrated while writing with technology (Interview, Week 13).

Over the course of several observations and analysis of artifacts, I noted that the spell check feature in Google Docs created a significant barrier to Jon’s ability to express meaning in his writing. When Jon was researching his topic on dogs’ communication, he took handwritten notes from the websites he used as sources of information. Figure 5.8 shows the notes he took in preparation to write a paragraph about behaviors and games.

![Figure 5.8. Jon’s Behavior/Games Notes](image)

The last sentence reads, “when the dog get whant whats the signal behavior gets renforced” (Artifact, Week 5). When Jon began drafting in Google Docs we can see that some of the spelling errors in the sentence were fixed, either as a result of Jon typing the words correctly when he entered them into the Google Doc, or as a result of the spell check feature offering suggestions to fix the errors. However, as you can see in Figure 5.9, one of the misspelled words, “renforced” was replaced with “rainforest.”

![Figure 5.9. Jon’s Behavior/Games Paragraph from Week 6](image)
When I returned to Mrs. Jones’ classroom a week later, this paragraph had been removed from the document and a paragraph on behaviors and games never reappeared in his Google Doc. When Jon recomposed his writing in Glogster, the details about reinforced behavior resurfaced. He wrote: “when the dog gets what it wants the behavior gets renforesd” (Artifact, Week 13). Although the word was spelled incorrectly, the sentence retained it meaning, unlike in the early Google Doc draft.

Although working in Glogster gave Jon an additional opportunity to compose text to construct meaning about his topic of dogs’ communication, the incident of him losing his work as a result of not understanding how to save in Glogster, as described in Chapter 4, is also an example of the types of frustrations that students experience when writing using technology and not having a solid understanding of how to use that technology. The teacher indicated that she did not help with the technology tool, and relied on other students to provide support. However, the loss of his work on the day I observed was based on Jon not understanding how to save. Experiences such as this could have serious consequences for Jon’s motivation to write using technology in the future.

Integration of Technology and Paper during Writing Events

Even in digital writing events in which the adolescent participants were composing in Google Docs, the use of paper still played an integral role in their writing process. I observed all four adolescent participants refer to both notes they had taken during their research process, as well as printed resources as they composed in Google Docs. As they were writing on their computers, they were all physically manipulating paper during the writing event.

For all of the participants, the papers were sources of information for the texts they were composing in Google Docs. Jessi and Chris were often observed referring to either handwritten
notes or printed resources that they placed on the desk to the right of their laptop computers. In field notes, I frequently documented this interaction by writing statements such as, “Jessi has hands resting on keyboard and is typing/glancing/typing/glancing at her notes” (Field Notes, Week 5). When Chris was wearing the video-recording eyeglasses in preparation for the retrospective digital writing think aloud, the camera captured Chris looking back and forth between his PARCC workbook and his laptop screen. Figures 5.10 and 5.11 show where Chris focused his attention during the writing event.

![Figure 5.10. Chris’ RDWTA Screenshot Showing Chris’ Attention on his Essay](image1)

*Figure 5.10. Chris’ RDWTA Screenshot Showing Chris’ Attention on his Essay*

![Figure 5.11. Chris’ RDWTA Screenshot Showing Chris’ Attention on his Workbook](image2)

*Figure 5.11. Chris’ RDWTA Screenshot Showing Chris’ Attention on his Workbook*
During the retrospective digital writing think aloud, I commented to Chris that I noticed he was looking at his workbook (McDougal, 2015) as he was writing, and I asked him to explain how the book was helping him write his essay. He explained:

Chris: The book, like the reason I… what I was looking at was the disadvantages and the advantages, and that is what my whole essay is about, so that was kind of a biggy to help me out. And I was looking at the reasons and like the disadvantages, like what, what can be a disadvantage and what can be an advantage and I was adjusting it in my paragraphs.

Interviewer: So that paper in your book, it’s like a list of advantages and disadvantages that you could use to get ideas?

Chris: Yes, right.

Interviewer: Ok.

Chris: And I just put them in my own words on the computer. (RDWTA, Week 6)

Chris was using the workbook as source material to write about a topic on which he had limited personal experience. The extent to which Chris successfully integrated the ideas from the workbook into his own authentic text composed in Google Docs is discussed in more detail in the following section.

Jon also referred to handwritten notes while composing in Google Docs. During one observation, Jon’s table was the “table of the week” so the students seated at the table were given the privilege of working during their writing time anywhere in the classroom, including the couch at the front of the room. Jon was seated in the middle of the couch with several other students. While working on the couch with other students facilitated peer collaboration, it made
the process of referring to his handwritten notes more difficult for Jon. For instance, at one point I wrote, “Jon is now looking at papers, then holding them with his chin against his chest while typing” (Field Notes, Week 5). Later in the period, I wrote “Jon is looking through papers, holding some with his mouth and stuffing others behind him on the couch. His Chromebook is open on his lap” (Field Notes, Week 5).

In an interview, Jessi expressed the belief that the paper she used while she wrote on her computer was key to her ability to “write a lot.” She explained:

Interviewer: What do you think makes it so that you can write a lot? What helps you be able to write a lot?
Jessi: Probably if I write all my stuff down on the paper, on a piece of paper, and then I’ll copy it on my computer on my Google Document.
Interviewer: Ok, so do you write on paper first before you write on your Google Doc?
Jessi: Sometimes, but not all of the time.
Interviewer: Ok. Which do you like better?
Jessi: I think writing on a piece of paper and then copying it on the computer.
Interviewer: Ok. Why do you think you like that better?
Jessi: Because when you’re writing it first on the computer you like think about it, you don’t know what to write. So I like doing that.
Interviewer: So the paper helps you think about what to write first?
Jessi: Yeah. (Interview, Week 13)

Jessi’s comments seem to suggest that she had an easier time developing her initial ideas for writing on paper compared to on the computer. Given that she was observed typing slowly, it is
possible that the hunt and peck method she used to type on the computer slowed down her thought process and thus inhibited her ability to compose fluently on the computer.

Jessi’s teacher, Mrs. Jones, held similar beliefs regarding the role of handwritten notes in her students’ writing process when composing electronically. She explained that she expected students to use pencil and paper to take notes from the resources they found on the Internet because, she explained “I didn’t think they could organize themselves very well in here [points to computer]. That’s when they got to go to Google Docs when they assimilated all those notes” (Interview, Week 2). She went on to share that she had tried to have students use Google Docs to take notes on the Internet resources they found in their research, but she found that students did not access the documents they created electronically as frequently during their composing process as when they took their notes on paper (Interview, Week 2).

During the last observation in which Mrs. Jones was out of the classroom and a substitute teacher was teaching her class, it was clear that the students understood the roles of handwritten work and technology-mediated work in the writing process Mrs. Jones’ expected them to use. At one point, a question came up about whether or not students should be doing their writing for their historical narratives in Google Docs. One of the students in the class raised her hand and explained that she did not think they should be working in Google Docs yet because their planning packets needed to be completed first (Field notes, Week 13). This instance reinforces that, even though students composed in Google Docs, the use of paper was still an integral aspect of the writing process for students in Mrs. Jones’ classroom.

As previously mentioned, students in Mr. Matthews prepared to write the essays for the PARCC assessments in Google Docs, but then were required to take a pencil and paper version of the assessments due to a lack of infrastructure in their high school building to support
electronic administration of the tests. Nicolasia explained what her experience was like to transition from writing with technology to writing only with pencil and paper on the PARCC assessments:

Interviewer: Now when you took the test, was that on a computer or were you writing it by hand?
Nicolasia: Writing by hand.
Interviewer: You were writing by hand. Now when you practiced you were writing on the computer?
Nicolasia: Yeah
Interviewer: Did that feel different or did that feel the same?
Nicolasia: Yeah like ‘cause like when we like typing it, like we have a book sitting with us, like so we read it. Like we don’t have to like flip back pages to write, like flip back. So I get confused on what I’m writing, where I’m at. But on a computer you just type look, type look. You don’t have to keep flip, flip, flip. That’s irritating.
Interviewer: So when you took the test then, you did kind of have something to read and then you were writing about that? So you were having to flip back and forth in the test booklet?
Nicolasia: Uh huh
Interviewer: Yeah, I remember you talking about that before, like going back and forth between tabs was something you didn’t like to do.
Nicolasia: Um hmm. And it was so confusing because I didn’t even know what I was reading. (Interview, Week 11)
Nicolasia’s comments suggest that it was easier for her to refer back and forth between a printed text on her desk and a computer screen than to refer to multiple pages in a text booklet.

The practice experience of looking at a workbook and then writing in a digital context, such as Google Docs, was not authentic to either of the two possible testing contexts. The PARCC assessment was administered either entirely electronically with students reading the passages and clicking between passages then writing a response electronically, or entirely on paper with students reading passages in a test booklet and flipping between passages then writing a response on paper. It is clear that Nicolasia’s preference for writing was to refer to printed resources and then compose on a computer, but this was not one of the options for administering the assessments. During my observations of Nicolasia’s writing process in class, I noticed that when she was writing her consensus essay, she had multiple tabs open in her browser and I documented in the field notes, “She refers to the sample essay [posted in Blackboard] each time she begins a phrase in her sentence” (Week 4). This observation suggests that Nicolasia might have been more comfortable taking the electronic version of the assessment, as it mirrored more closely part of the writing process she used in Mr. Matthews’ English class compared to the pencil and paper version.

In this section I discussed the adolescent participants’ perceived affordances of writing with technology, as well as the barriers they encountered when using technology during writing events. I also shared the ways in which participants were observed integrating their use of technology and paper during digital writing events. In the next section, I present findings that emerged from the full dataset to more broadly explore the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context created for the four adolescent participants.
Possibilities for Selfhood in Digital Writing

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which adolescents deemed “at-risk” constructed academic identities through digital writing in order to understand the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context creates for adolescents. This study was guided by four research questions that focused on the ways in which the adolescents perceived their academic identities in the context of digital writing; how the institutional identities ascribed to them contributed to their academic identities; how their past and current writing experiences contributed to their academic identities; and the affordances of digital writing for their academic identity construction. To explore these research questions, I have presented in-depth case descriptions for each adolescent participant in this study, and explained the findings that emerged across cases.

In this section, I present themes that emerged in the analysis of the full dataset to more broadly explore the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context created for the four adolescent participants. Findings that emerged from this study suggest that possibilities for selfhood are limited or expanded by the parameters of the assignment more than the medium in which the writing takes place, and the teacher’s positioning of students as technology experts expands their possibilities for selfhood within the classroom context.

Parameters of Assignment Limit or Expand Possibilities for Selfhood

Possibilities for selfhood are limited or expanded by the parameters of the assignment more than the medium in which the writing takes place. Ivanič (1998) explains that possibilities for selfhood are the “abstract, prototypical identities available in the sociocultural context of writing” (p. 23). In a classroom setting, the sociocultural context might include the parameters of the assignment, the roles and expectations of the teacher and students in the classroom, the
mediums through which the students engage in writing, and the social interactions that surround the writing events. In explicating this aspect of her theory, Ivanič (1998) describes possibilities for selfhood as being the range of social identities available to writers in a given writing context, and clarifies that these possibilities do not belong to the individual writer. Instead, she explains “the constraints and possibilities open to the particular writer interact with the constraints on and possibilities for self-hood which are opened up by a particular occasion for writing” (p. 28).

Thus, the sociocultural context of the writing event determines the extent to which the individual writer is able to construct a self within the text from the range of abstract selves that are available. This theory suggests that the sociocultural context has the potential to either limit or expand these possibilities for selfhood. Figure 5.12 illustrates the factors that contributed to the sociocultural context of the writing events influencing the possibilities for selfhood that existed for the adolescents in this study.

*Figure 5.12. Factors contributing to the Sociocultural Context of the Writing Events*
Through analysis of classroom observations, interviews with the teacher and adolescent participants, and review of the artifacts, it has become clear that of all of the factors that contributed to the sociocultural context of the writing events in these two classrooms, the parameters of the assignment, or the range of topics and ways of writing about those topics, influenced the possibilities for selfhood that existed for the adolescents more than whether they were composing in traditional or digital writing environments. In the previous section, I illustrated the affordances for digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction. There were clear benefits to using technology in writing for these adolescents that had the potential to help them develop a more positive sense of self as students and as writers within the classroom. However, the data indicated that when looking at the abstract possibilities for selfhood that existed in the writing events observed in this study, what seemed to matter the most for the potential for adolescents to construct a self within the text was the assignment, not the digital environment in which they wrote.

The writing events that took place in the fourth and ninth grade classrooms during the study period were largely influenced by the upcoming PARCC assessments. Therefore, the possibilities for selfhood that I observed during the study period mostly existed within writing events designed to prepare students to take a standardized high-stakes assessment. However, the approach to writing instruction in the context of preparing for the PARCC assessments contrasted sharply between classrooms. Mrs. Jones believed that the assessments should not drive teaching and learning, and even though she acknowledged that the expectations of CCSS and the PARCC assessments had changed the types of literacy practices and genres of reading and writing that were used in her classroom, she still moved forward with the “Wonderland” project as originally planned as a means of authentically engaging students in informational
writing. Students were asked to brainstorm questions about their world that they genuinely wondered about, used the Internet to find the answers, and then created a multimedia poster to share their learning with their peers. Through their writing process, Mrs. Jones’ students met the CCSS standards for informational writing. They synthesized information from multiple sources and engaged in writing similar to the writing they would produce on the PARCC assessments. However, it is important to note that Mrs. Jones was teaching in a historically high-performing district and may not have felt as concerned about her students’ performance on the tests.

Alternatively, Mr. Matthews was teaching in a historically low-performing district and, regardless of his professional beliefs, felt more constraints and pressure to stop his planned instruction to teach to the test. Almost all of the instruction I observed, from the practice essays to the weekly vocabulary activities, was identified by name as related to PARCC. Students were studying “PARCC vocabulary” words and writing “PARCC practice essays.” To write the practice essays, students worked through a series of steps in a consumable workbook. When Mr. Matthews first introduced the workbooks and practice essays to his students, he explained to them that instead of writing about a topic “out of [their] heads” (Field Notes, Week 3) they were expected to read some passages and then write essays based on the texts they were given. The topics for all three of the practice essays were predetermined for students by the writing units in the workbook. The topic of the argumentative essay was the concept of consensus; the topic of the informative essay was a comparison of Mayan and Egyptian pyramids; and the topic of the literary analysis essay was irony in Julius Caesar (Field Notes, Week 6). The workbook was designed to ensure that students met the CCSS standards for all three types of writing and engaged in writing events that matched the writing they were expected to do on the assessments.
Whereas the predetermined topics of the PARCC practice essays constrained the possibilities for selfhood within the writing events in the ninth grade classroom, the authentic questions that guided the topic selection process in the “Wonderland” assignment opened up the possibilities for selfhood within the writing events in the fourth grade classroom. The broader range of topic choices afforded students in the fourth grade classroom allowed students to bring their autobiographical selves to the writing event, where as the predetermined topics almost entirely ensured that students would have limited personal experiences to bring to the writing events. Mr. Matthews held strong professional beliefs about the shift in writing assessment in the new assessments:

I think it has a pretty negative impact both in terms of what we are forced to do in terms of the test prep, but then also the fact that it’s eliminating student voice from their writing because all they’re doing is analytical stuff, you know analyze this piece of text, analyze that piece of text, but never tell us what you think or tell us a story about something that happened in your life, this shift… and you know in the, when I’m reading the literature about this test and why they do these things, the claim from the test makers is they’re trying to level the playing field, “we know students come from different kinds of backgrounds and experiences, so we’re just not going to ask them about drawing on their backgrounds and experiences, and that’s going to level the playing field” well it does just the opposite. It makes it more uneven because about the only thing, if a kid is a struggling reader or writer and you’re asking them to struggle to read something that is three or four or five grade levels beyond what they are capable of reading, and then read it and analyze it, that’s making them look even worse than […] how
we’re already doing it. So I don’t think it’s the right direction. (Interview, Week 12)

Regardless of whether the writing events occur in the context of an assessment or classroom-based assignment, the extent to which students were allowed to draw on their background knowledge and experiences directly informed the identities they were capable of constructing within the text.

When the students were not able to draw on their own background knowledge and experiences in a writing event, they were left with few options not just for constructing an identity within the text, but also for constructing the text at all. Mr. Matthews noted that because the PARCC assessment focuses on text analysis, “very little of what they are asked to do is original” (Interview, Week 12). One of the concerns Mr. Matthews raised at the end of the study was that both Chris and Nicolasia plagiarized their essays to greater or lesser extents. Looking at the artifacts of their essays, it is evident that the only choice they had in completing the assignment was to draw from the words of the authors in the texts they were reading in the workbook to construct their essays. Figure 5.13 shows a paragraph from Nicolasia’s essay on the pyramids.

The limestone blocks fell or were stripped to build mosques and houses in Cairo nearby. The Giza pyramids have been astonishing humanity for more than 4,500 years. Travelers, invaders, and explorers have come across them and marveled, even in Egyptian times the Giza pyramids were antiquities. The largest pyramid at Giza is one of the seven wonders of the ancient world that remains, to this day it amazes all who see it.

Figure 5.13. Nicolasia’s Informative Writing Draft Excerpt
In analyzing the words Nicolasia used, we can assume that the following words and phrases were taken from the source materials provided to her in the workbook to construct her response:

- Limestone blocks
- Mosques
- Cairo
- Giza pyramids
- Astonishing humanity
- 4,500 years
- Travelers
- Invaders
- Explorers
- Marveled
- Egyptian times
- Antiques
- Seven wonders of the ancient world

After removing these words from Nicolasia’s text, all that is left are articles, verbs, prepositions, and a few basic nouns. Because of her lack of background knowledge on the similarities and differences in the Mayan and Egyptian pyramids, she would not have been able to contribute any new meaningful content to the text no matter how skillfully she rearranged the words from the source materials to actively avoid plagiarism in her writing. By limiting the extent to which Nicolasia could bring her autobiographical self to the writing event, the extent to which she could develop a discoursal self within the text was also limited when the only words Nicolasia could rely on to construct a voice within the text were not her own. As such, this also has the
potential to limit the extent to which she could assert her authority over her topic to construct an identity as an author in a text in which she was unable to bring any of her own meaningful knowledge or language to the writing event.

Rather than viewing Nicolasia’s writing as an act of plagiarism, I suggest that we recognize her work as an attempt to appropriate the language existing in the source materials, language that was provided for Nicolasia to supplant any actual knowledge of the topic on her part, in order to construct an identity as a writer the best she could. Ivanič (1998) offered the idea of “actual intertextuality” (p. 48) to build on Fairclough’s (1992) use of the term “manifest intertextuality” (p. 85) referring to words in a text that can be traced back to another source. For instance, in this paragraph, when I cite the specific terms these theorists used in their writing, it is an example of actual intertextuality. Ivanič (1998) suggested that using the term “actual intertextuality” more clearly “captures the idea that it is an actual text that is being drawn upon” (p. 48 emphasis in original) in the new text being constructed.

We see in the excerpt of Nicolasia’s writing that she was drawing on the source materials in the workbook to construct her essay. When the writing event disallowed her to assert her autobiographical self developed through her prior experiences and background knowledge, she had limited options for constructing a discoursal self or self as author within the text. Because she felt she had to rely on the words of others rather than being allowed to contribute her own ideas to the text, she was unable to craft a strong voice in the text to assert her own ideas, beliefs and authority as an author. Viewed in this way, her text is an example of actual intertextuality that resulted from the narrow parameters of the assignment rather than an overt act of plagiarism in which she was claiming the ideas of other authors as her own.
Chris also relied on actual intertextuality to construct his consensus essay. If you refer back to Figures 5.10 and 5.11 from the retrospective digital writing think aloud, you can see in Figure 5.11 a list of statements that identify advantages and disadvantages to consensus that were presented in the workbook. You can also see the ways those statements were integrated into Chris’ argument in Figure 5.10. For instance, one of the reasons reaching consensus may be difficult stated in the workbook reads: “the group has not worked together before or is too large” (McDougal, 2015, p. 12). In his essay, Chris wrote: “The group could be too large or not have worked together before” (Artifact, Week 4). The presentation of the ideas in the workbook appear to be given to the student users of the book with the expectation that they were meant to serve as the basis for their essays. In transferring the ideas in the list to his essay, Chris likely believed that he was demonstrating that he understood the source materials and was using them appropriately to construct his essay. Therefore, I argue that when comparing the text in Chris’ essay with the text in the workbook, we recognize it as an example of actual intertextuality in which Chris was trying to work within the parameters of the assignment rather than an act of plagiarism in which he was trying to steal the intellectual property of another author.

We can also see examples of actual intertextuality in Jessi’s writing. Figure 5.14 shows the handwritten notes Jessi took while conducting research on her topic of clownfish using the Internet. Figure 5.15 shows Jessi’s final draft of her informational writing in Google Docs.
In comparing the two artifacts it is clear that actual text from Jessi’s notes appear in her final draft. What is unclear is the extent to which Jessi paraphrased the text she found on the Internet as she was taking notes. In her final draft, Jessi wrote: “Did you know that clownfish live in different places? clownfish live in warm water in the pacific ocean indian ocean or in the red sea” (Artifact, Week 11). Her research notes include the details that clownfish live in the Pacific
and Indian oceans, as well as home aquariums. Although Jessi did not bring personal knowledge of clownfish to the writing event, she did bring a genuine interest in the topic of her text, which allowed her to assert her authority as a writer who was actively engaged in learning about clownfish. In addition to including details that she found in her research, she also included phrases not found in her notes, such as “did you know,” that work to construct her identity as an author in the text.

Although the students in both classes were composing electronically in Google Docs, the use of the collaborative tools for giving and receiving feedback opened up the possibilities for selfhood within the writing events for the fourth grade students. In addition to constructing an identity within their texts, the students in Mrs. Jones’ class also had the opportunity to construct an extratextual identity in relation to the text. We saw this in Chapter 4 as Jessi corresponded with her study buddy, praising her friend’s use of writing conventions and using her draft of her informational writing as an opportunity to solidify her identity as her study buddy’s “BFF” (Artifact, Week 11). The use of the Schoology website and the newsfeed feature that allowed students to post comments also afforded Jessi the opportunity to maintain her identity as an actively participating student in Mrs. Jones’ classroom despite frequently being pulled out of the classroom for intervention.

At this point, I must make an important distinction between the identities adolescents construct within the texts they create in school and the identities they claim and enact as students and writers outside of their writing. I argue that while the possibilities for selfhood are more influenced by the assignment, the affordances of digital writing have the potential to allow adolescents to construct positive identities as students and as writers even when their possibilities for selfhood are limited within a specific writing event.
Positioning Students as Technology Experts

Teachers’ positioning of students as technology experts expands students’ possibilities for selfhood within the classroom context. In this section, I argue that the concept of possibilities for selfhood influenced by the social-cultural context of writing events can apply to the identities adolescents construct as students and writers outside of the text in addition to the identities they construct within the text. An important finding that emerged from the data in this study suggests that when teachers position students as technology experts, this has the potential to expand the range of identities as students and as writers that individual students can claim in the classroom. Students who are labeled as “reluctant readers and writers” or “struggling students,” and students who recognize their own weaknesses in literacy, can claim identities as experts who have meaningful knowledge they can contribute to help their peers and their teacher. When Mrs. Jones and Mr. Matthews invited students in their classrooms to be experts in technology, they expanded the range of identities, or possibilities for selfhood, that students could claim.

In every observation, students in Mrs. Jones classroom were positioned as resources for literacy and technology learning. Mrs. Jones encouraged the students in her classroom to interact with their peers during their writing workshop time to give and receive help. Because Mrs. Jones refused to “teach the tool” (Interview, Week 6), she expected, and therefore gave space for, students to collaborate to solve their technology problems. She was frequently heard making statements such as “Is there anyone who would like to help [student name] with her problem with [technology tool]?” (Field notes, Week 7). Mrs. Jones also actively taught students how to give assistance in a way that facilitated positive social interactions and allowed the student receiving help to also develop new expertise with the technology.
Even for students who lack technology expertise, working in a classroom in which many peers hold expertise using various technology tools opens up the possibility for struggling students to solve their problems and successfully accomplish their tasks using technology. When I asked Jon how he learned to use the different options and features in Google Docs he identified both “friends” and “me learning,” which he later clarified to mean “learning by myself” (Interview, Week 6). When Jessi found herself unable to do something on her computer or on the iPad, instead of giving up as some “reluctant” or “struggling” students are often characterized as doing, she asked someone sitting near her (Field Notes, Week 7), or got up from her seat and approached another student who she believed knew how to solve her problem (Field Notes, Week 13). Each student in Mrs. Jones’ class seemed to hold expertise in using the technology tools to greater or lesser extents. Even the students who appeared to identify as strong technology experts were still observed receiving help from students such as Jon who had a more limited range of expertise. This collaborative ethos allowed for everyone’s knowledge in the classroom to be valued and created the potential for all students to develop positive identities as students.

There were fewer instances of students collaborating to give and receive help with technology in Mr. Matthews’ classroom. However, most of the instances in which students were interacting with peers in a constructive, rather than a distracting, way involved sharing knowledge of the assignment or the technology tools. For instance, Nicolasia positioned herself as both the expert of the assignment because she was further along in her essay than her friend, as well as the expert of working in Google Docs because she was not experiencing the difficulties that her friend was experiencing (Field notes, Week 10). However, these interactions were not formally sanctioned by the teacher as a part of the writing process. When he first set up
the working context for the PARCC practice essays, he explained to students that because he was trying to simulate the testing environment they would experience in a few weeks, they were expected to work independently and quietly. He told them, “You have support, but you have to pretend like it’s the real thing” (Field Notes, Week 3). By structuring the writing environment to conform to the testing environment, the extent to which students could be positioned as technology experts and share their expertise with other students in the classroom was limited. This limited the range of identities they could enact in the classroom as students, as well as the number of social resources they had to help them persevere through difficulty using the technology to accomplish their literacy goals.

**Summary of Chapter**

In this chapter I presented the findings that emerged from the cross case analysis to answer each of the four research questions that guided this study. In terms of their academic identity perceptions, I found that three of the four adolescents generally held positive identities as students. They mostly drew on discourse identities to describe themselves and many of these discourse identities were enacted within the classroom during the study period. They were also willing to claim academic identities that they perceived to impede their academic success. The identities the adolescents constructed as writers were wider ranging and tended to focus on specific writing events and purposes for writing.

In terms of the ascribed institutional identities, I found that the adolescent participants each believed that their English/language arts teachers perceived them in positive ways. While each teacher was willing to ascribe at least one positive discourse identity to the adolescents with which they worked, they also ascribed both discourse and nature identities to the participants that they believed stood in the way of the adolescents’ academic success and were the root of their
academic failure. All four of the adolescents were largely unaware of the less desirable institutional identities ascribed to them by their teacher.

In terms of their past and current writing experiences, I found that the adolescents’ memories of writing in school centered on writing events in which they could draw on their autobiographical selves to write about their personal experiences. Each of the adolescents claimed identities as writers out of school. In these contexts, the adolescents also drew heavily on their autobiographical selves as they wrote for their own purposes and self-selected audiences. The majority of the writing events observed in their English/language arts classrooms occurred in the context of preparing for the PARCC Performance-Based Assessments and was mediated by the use of laptops. The fourth grade teacher actively encouraged a collaborative ethos among students, while the ninth grade teacher expected students to work independently in order to better simulate the testing environment in which they would later be writing.

In terms of the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction, I found that all four of the adolescents preferred writing in digital contexts compared to traditional paper and pencil contexts. They identified the level of enjoyment and ease they experienced while writing, the features they believed provided support to help them accomplish tasks, and the features built into the digital programs that facilitated peer collaboration as affordances of digital writing. The adolescent participants also identified minor barriers created by digital writing that related to technical aspects of using technology tools. Despite these barriers, the affordances they identified contributed to their ability to successfully accomplish writing tasks in their English/language arts classrooms, which allowed them to construct and maintain positive academic identities.
Finally, two overarching themes emerged from the full dataset that contribute to our understandings of the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in classroom context creates for adolescents. First, the data collected in this study suggests that possibilities for selfhood are limited or expanded by the parameters of the assignment more than the medium in which the writing takes place. However, the affordances of digital writing have the potential to allow adolescents to construct positive academic identities even when their possibilities for selfhood are limited within a specific writing event. Second, the data collected in this study suggests that teachers’ positioning of students as technology experts expands their possibilities for selfhood within the classroom context. When teachers position students as technology experts, this has the potential to expand the range of identities as students and as writers, or possibilities for selfhood, that individual students can claim in the classroom.

In the next chapter, I discuss the findings of this study in light of the literature on digital writing and adolescents’ identity construction and offer implications of the research findings for researchers and practitioners. I also discuss the limitations of the study and suggest future directions for research on adolescents’ academic identity construction in digital writing contexts.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I first provide a summary of the major findings. Then I reflect on and interpret the findings of this study in light of the literature on digital writing and adolescents’ identity construction and the literature on adolescents labeled “at-risk” for school failure. I then discuss the effectiveness of the three theories that framed this study, and argue for how the findings of this study contribute to the developing theory of New Literacies to better take into account adolescents’ identity construction. I also discuss the limitations of the study and suggest future directions for research on adolescents’ academic identity construction in digital writing contexts. Finally, I offer implications of the findings for research and classroom practice.

Summary of the Major Findings

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the ways in which adolescents deemed “at-risk” constructed academic identities through digital writing in order to understand the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom context creates for adolescents. This study documented the experiences and perceptions of two fourth grade students in a suburban elementary school and two ninth grade students in an urban high school in Ohio.

At the onset of the study, I had hoped to see the adolescents engage in a variety of digital writing events during classroom observations. However, the need to prepare for the upcoming PARCC assessments constrained to greater and lesser extents the range of writing experiences in which the teachers in this study could engage students. Although the adolescent participants in both learning contexts wrote almost exclusively in digital contexts, there were limited instances in which the adolescents had opportunities to engage in multimodal text production. Because the
teachers were preparing their students to take a high-stakes literacy assessment that required students to write essays to demonstrate their understanding of reading selections, the instruction in both classrooms privileged text over other forms of representation within the context of their digital writing.

Through classroom observations, interviews, analysis of artifacts, and video-recorded writing events that served as the basis for a retrospective digital writing think aloud, several findings emerged from this study. Here I review the classroom contexts and summarize the key characteristics for each adolescent case. Then I summarize the findings according to the four research questions that guided this study. Finally, I review the two cross-case findings that emerged through an analysis of the full dataset to address the larger purpose of the study.

Fourth Grade Research Site and Participants

The fourth grade research site, James Madison Elementary School, was an upper-middle class suburban elementary school, and the English/language arts teacher, Mrs. Jones, used a writing workshop approach that was heavily influenced by Nancie Atwell’s pedagogical approaches to literacy instruction. The use of technology was integral to all aspects of learning in this classroom. Mrs. Jones valued collaboration in the writing process and positioned her students as technology experts, which freed her to focus her attention on writing instruction during the class time that was devoted to writing.

Jon, a repeat fourth grader in Mrs. Jones’ class, perceived himself as a good student and held a strong affinity for athletics. He had recently moved into the district and was still developing his identity as a student at his new school. Jon identified as a writer in terms of his handwriting abilities, rather than in terms of his ability to make meaning with words. Mrs. Jones’ positioned Jon as a reluctant reader and writer in her class, but Jon did not claim this
Jon’s in-class writing experiences were mediated through social interactions that allowed him to accomplish his academic tasks. Jon missed a significant amount of class time as a result of being pulled from Mrs. Jones’ classroom for intervention. Out of school, Jon developed an identity as a confident writer through writing in a diary in Google Docs.

His classmate, Jessi also perceived herself as a good student and her identity as a writer was largely centered on writing about her affinity identities. She enacted her identity as a good student in the classroom in ways that her teacher, Mrs. Jones, perceived to be enactments of a “teacher pleaser.” Mrs. Jones positioned Jessi as a reluctant reader and writer, even though Jessi was eager to write and share her writing with others. Like Jon, Jessi also relied on the support of her peers to persevere through difficult academic tasks. Her in-class writing was mediated by social interactions that scaffolded her ability to keep up with the other students despite missing a significant amount of class time as a result of being pulled from Mrs. Jones’ classroom for intervention. She also used writing in digital contexts, such as Google Docs and Schoology, to stay connected with her peers and solidify her social relationships in Mrs. Jones’ classroom.

**Ninth Grade Research Site and Participants**

The ninth grade research site, Central High School, was an urban high school with a high proportion of economically disadvantaged students. The English teacher, Mr. Matthews, was expected to focus all instruction during third quarter on preparing students for the PARCC assessments. As a result, the writing instruction during the study period was constrained by the use of a workbook the district purchased to guide students through writing practice essays in preparation for the PARCC assessments. The use of this required resource limited the extent to which he could apply his training in writing instruction developed through his work with the Ohio Writing Project. However, Mr. Matthews did provide electronic resources for students,
such as model essays, on his class learning management system to further scaffold their writing beyond the workbook. Because students were preparing for an assessment in which they would write independently, Mr. Matthews discouraged social interactions during students’ writing process in order to more closely mirror the writing conditions of the test.

Chris, a repeat freshman in Mr. Matthews’ class, perceived himself as a confident, creative, and intelligent student who had a special relationship with his teachers as a result of repeating the ninth grade. Chris enrolled at Central High School in the second half of his first attempt at his freshman year. His need to repeat the ninth grade was partially a result of his academic performance once he arrived at Central High School, but also the result of his transcripts being withheld by his former high school. Mr. Matthews positioned Chris as an immature student who struggled to follow through to accomplish academic tasks. However, outside of school, Chris was taking steps to further himself by training for a job as a tour guide at a local black history museum and participating in a training program with the city police department for youth interested in careers in law enforcement and criminal justice. As a result of his diabetes, Chris missed significant amounts of instructional time and often came into Mr. Matthews’ classroom after the formal instruction had ended and time for independent work had begun. Chris was largely disengaged with the writing events that occurred in his English class.

His classmate, Nicolasia, perceived herself as a shy student who struggled more than her teachers realized. Mr. Matthews positioned Nicolasia as performing below her potential and attributed her “at-riskness” as a product of her learning environment. Nicolasia, however, claimed the identity of a struggling student and expressed a desire to have this identity recognized by her teachers. Nicolasia was highly engaged in social interactions in Mr. Matthews’ classroom. These social interactions often distracted her from accomplishing her
academic tasks, but sometimes allowed her to express an identity as an expert both in terms of the writing assignments, as well as the technology she and her peers were using. She also expressed her affinity identity for doing hair, an identity that she claimed to be a possible career aspiration, by frequently braiding and fixing the hair of her peers during time that Mr. Matthews expected students to be writing.

**Academic Identity Perception**

Through exploring the ways in which the adolescents perceived their academic identities in the context of digital writing, I found that three of the four adolescent participants held positive identities as students. They drew on discourse identities to express their perceptions of themselves and enacted these discourse identities within the classroom. The adolescents were also willing to claim academic identities that they perceived to impede their academic success, such as being shy, not smart, and struggling. The identities the adolescents constructed as writers were wider ranging and tended to focus on specific writing events and purposes for writing.

**Ascribed Institutional Identities**

Through exploring how the institutional identities ascribed to adolescents contributed to their academic identities, I found that, although the adolescent participants each believed, or expressed hope, that their English/language arts teachers perceived them in positive ways, this was not always the case. Although each teacher was willing to ascribe at least one positive discourse identity to the adolescent participants with whom they worked, they also ascribed both discourse and nature identities to the participants that they believed stood in the way of the adolescents’ academic success and were the root of their academic failure. All four of the adolescents were largely unaware of the institutional identities ascribed to them by their teacher.
However, they were more likely to be aware of, and enact in the classroom, the positive identities ascribed to them, and less likely to be aware of the less desirable identities.

**Past and Current Writing Experiences**

Through exploring how their past and current writing experiences contributed to their academic identities, I found that the adolescents tended to share memories of writing in school that centered on writing events in which they could draw on their autobiographical selves to write about their personal experiences. Each of the adolescents claimed identities as writers out of school. Like their memories of writing in school, in their out-of-school writing, the adolescents drew heavily on their autobiographical selves as they wrote for their own purposes and self-selected audiences. Both Jon and Chris claimed to write in either a diary or journal out of school in order to write about their experiences, thoughts and feelings. Jessi claimed to write stories on paper about her affinities, such as her dog and friends, and Nicolasia explained that she and her friends used to write stories in a shared notebook. She has since moved to sharing her creative stories with a wider audience using the website Wattpad.

In terms of their current in-school writing experiences, the majority of the writing events observed in their English/language arts classrooms occurred in the context of preparing for the PARCC Performance-Based Assessments and was mediated by the use of laptops. All participants composed their writing in Google Docs. In terms of the extent to which peer collaboration in the writing process was valued, the fourth grade teacher actively encouraged a collaborative ethos among students, while the ninth grade teacher expected students to work independently in order to better simulate the testing environment in which they would later be writing.
Affordances of Digital Writing

Through exploring the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction, I found that all four of the participants indicated that they preferred writing in digital contexts compared to traditional paper and pencil contexts. The affordances they identified for writing with technology included the level of enjoyment and ease they experienced while writing, the features they believed provided support to help them accomplish tasks, and the features built into the digital programs that facilitated peer collaboration. The adolescent participants also identified minor barriers created by digital writing that related to technical aspects of using technology tools, such as forgetting to name files correctly and glitches in the operation of programs. I also observed the spellcheck feature in Google Docs inhibit Jon’s ability to express meaning in his draft. However, the barriers the adolescents identified were minimal compared to the affordances they believed came with writing with technology. Most importantly, the affordances they identified contributed to their ability to successfully accomplish writing tasks in their English/language arts classrooms, which allowed them to construct and maintain positive academic identities. In addition, the observational and interview data suggests that the adolescent participants preferred, and in some cases, perceived themselves to be most successful when they were able to manipulate paper resources as they composed in Google Docs, rather than working entirely in an electronic environment.

Possibilities for Selfhood

Finally, two overarching themes emerged from the full dataset that contribute to our understandings of the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in classroom context creates for adolescents. First, the data suggest that possibilities for selfhood are limited or expanded by the parameters of the assignment more than the medium in which the writing takes place.
However, the affordances of digital writing have the potential to support adolescents to construct positive academic identities even when their possibilities for selfhood are limited within a specific writing event. Second, the data suggest that teachers’ positioning of students as technology experts expands students’ possibilities for selfhood within the classroom context. While Ivanič (1998) used the phrase “possibilities for selfhood” to refer to the available abstract identities possible for writers to construct within a text in a specific sociocultural context, I contend that the concept can also apply to the range of available identities adolescents can construct as students and writers outside of the text in the larger context of the classroom. When teachers position students as technology experts, this has the potential to expand the range of identities as students and as writers, or possibilities for selfhood, that individual students can claim in the classroom.

**Interpretation of Findings**

In this section, I interpret the findings of this study in light of the literature on digital writing and identity construction and the literature on adolescents labeled “at-risk” for school failure. I also discuss the findings of this study in terms of the impact high-stakes testing preparation had on the literacy instruction adolescents received in the English/language arts classrooms in this study. Throughout this discussion I also offer my own reflections on the findings both as a literacy researcher and a former English teacher.

**Digital Writing and Adolescents’ Identity Construction**

In many cases the findings of this study support the findings of previous studies of digital writing and adolescents’ identity construction. Prior research suggests that digital writing on the Internet can elevate the importance of students’ written work by providing students with an authentic audience for whom to write (Hughes, 2009; Kelly & Safford, 2009; Wake, 2012). This
is consistent with the analysis of Jessi’s Google Docs draft in which she switched from writing about her topic, clownfish, to writing about her excitement at the prospect of sharing her writing with the other fourth grade students at the partner elementary school. Although it is unclear whether the prospect of sharing her writing with her same-age peers elevated her perceived importance of the writing event, it is evident that her audience was actively on her mind as she was writing.

Like the participants in Bickerstaff’s (2012) study, the adolescents in this study claimed to write out of school. Bickerstaff found that the adolescents in her study adopted identities as writers according to their contexts. She found that the participants’ out-of-school contexts served to encourage their identities as writers more so than their in-school contexts because of the narrow definitions of literacy that existed in the GED program. Similarly, all of the adolescents in this study claimed to write for their own purposes outside of school and associated more freedom in terms of their abilities to write for their own purposes out of school compared to in school. In the study reported here, the narrow range of possibilities for selfhood created by the influence of the PARCC preparation on the writing events in their classrooms inhibited the adolescents’ writer identities in similar ways as the GED program inhibited the range of writer identities available within the educational context in Bickerstaff’s study.

Through the Glogster project, students in Mrs. Jones’ English/language arts classroom were given some opportunity to use multimodal forms of expressions, such as visual images, in their digital writing. Wake (2012) found that digital writing that allows for multimodal forms of representation, such as images, audio and video, allows for a more dynamic portrayal of identities. Wake’s participants were engaging in digital writing to express their rural identities through topics related to their own personal experiences. Jessi’s Glogster poster demonstrates
the power of an image, puppies, to represent her affinity identity in the context of a piece of writing focused on a topic outside of Jessi’s own personal experiences. Despite writing about clownfish, Jessi chose to use a background image of puppies to express her own identity as a dog lover rather than an image that represented the topic of her writing.

The research on digital writing and identity construction with adolescents indicates that digital writing allows adolescents to construct and maintain identities that advance both academic as well as personal goals (Bickerstaff, 2012; Buck, 2012; McLean, 2010; Merchant, 2005a, 2005b; Merchant, Dickinson, Burnett, & Myers, 2006; Wake 2012; West, 2008). In Chris’ consensus essay, when he used the word “thesis” and placed the word “claim” in the parenthetical, Chris chose to align himself with the discourse of writers rather than the discourse of the test. Ivanič (1998) explains that through writing, people align themselves with the possibilities for selfhood that are available to reproduce or challenge “dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs and interests which they embody” (p. 32). This act can also be viewed as an advancement of Chris’ academic identity that drew heavily on his relationships with teachers as a way to align himself with Mr. Matthews’ beliefs about writing.

The analysis of artifacts in this study does not advance previous findings from other studies of identity construction in digital contexts that suggested that adolescents construct identities through sophisticated uses of language and sophisticated metacognition surrounding language choices in digital writing contexts (Kelly & Safford 2009; Merchant, 2005a, 2005b; West, 2008). In these studies, the participants were using language to actively shape their writing according to their purpose and audience in digital contexts. Although the fourth grade participants in this study knew they were writing for an authentic audience, they never had an opportunity during the study period to see their writing shared with that audience or read the
writing of students in their partner elementary school. Mrs. Jones explained that they were still working to figure out how to share the Glogster posters electronically between schools. Had the students been able to experience this sharing process and then engaged in additional digital writing with the same audience in mind, it is possible that their writing might have shown more sophisticated uses of language as a result of the sharing experience; however, this was not evident during the observation period. The participants in Mr. Matthews’ class were writing for a single audience, the teacher. Because they were writing in preparation for the PARCC assessments, in which the focus of the writing was on text analysis rather than expression of their own ideas, there were limited opportunities or motivation within the writing events to engage in the sophisticated uses of language seen in previous studies on digital writing.

The various ways in which the participants in this study understood the word “writing” was fascinating. Jon’s continued interpretation of the word “writing” to mean handwriting and the instance in which he corrected my words to replace the word “writing” with “typing” in the context of using his Chromebook suggests that as students transition from traditional pencil and paper writing contexts to digital writing contexts their understandings of what writing is and how to talk about it are changing.

**Adolescents Labeled “At-Risk” for School Failure**

The research on digital writing with adolescents suggests that digital writing has the potential to increase students’ motivation and engagement with literacy, including students who have been labeled “at-risk” (Callahan & King, 2011; Hughes, 2009; Hughes et al., 2011). Mrs. Jones believed that for her “reluctant writers” in general, and Jon and Jessi in particular, working in Google Docs and Glogster sustained their motivation and willingness to go back into their writing to revise more than if they had been writing in a traditional pencil and paper context.
However, despite being engaged in the digital writing events, there were still instances in which all four adolescent participants engaged in avoidance strategies similar to those identified by Alvarez and colleagues (2009), such as getting up to get a tissue, throwing away a piece of paper, or leaving the room to go to the restroom, a locker, or to visit the school nurse.

Unlike the participants in Enriquez’s (2011) study who actively felt their identities as “struggling readers” in their daily interactions in school, the adolescents in this study were largely unaware of the identities ascribed to them as writers. However, several of the participants claimed identities of “struggling” with reading. The differences in the nature of writing instruction and reading instruction might insulate students from the identities their teachers ascribe to them as writers compared to readers. Perhaps students’ weaknesses in writing are less likely to be made public in the classroom when compared to students’ weaknesses in reading in classrooms in which reading aloud is expected. The complex nature of writing also allows teachers to identify strengths in students’ writing in addition to the weaknesses. This may allow students to walk away from receiving feedback from their teacher, either written or during a writing conference, believing their teacher perceives them as a “good” writer.

Three of the four adolescent participants in this study missed a significant amount of instructional time in their English/language arts class due to being pulled out of the class for intervention or for medical reasons. Given that the inclusion criteria for this study of adolescents deemed “at-risk” for school failure is similar to the criteria used to identify students in need of special education services, I was not surprised that two of the participants were receiving individualized services from intervention specialists. For Jon and Jessi, the need to pull them out of class for remediation to meet their individual goals in reading negatively impacted their development as writers. As a result of missing their teacher’s writing instruction, they were both
heavily reliant on their peers to get caught up on the instruction they missed. Although Chris was not being pulled out for intervention, he did miss a significant amount of instructional time as a result of monitoring his diabetes condition. Oftentimes he returned to the classroom after Mr. Matthews had finished giving the formal instruction for the period and appeared to have difficulty getting engaged in the independent work without the benefit of the initial explanations and directions Mr. Matthews offered the other students at the start of the class period.

**Impact of High-Stakes Testing on Literacy Instruction**

The extent to which the writing events documented in this study were driven by preparation for standardized assessments raises concerns that echo Merchant and colleagues (2006) who questioned the extent to which students’ personal voices are marginalized in the writing they produce for school. In this study, the deliberateness with which writing events were positioned as test preparation was directly related to the extent to which students’ voices were marginalized not only in their writing, but also in the context of their writing process in their English/language arts classroom.

To be clear, neither of the classrooms I observed in this study was quiet. As a former high school English teacher, I can attest that adolescents are naturally going to socially interact with their peers. In Mrs. Jones’ classroom, most of the social interactions were directly related to the writing students were producing and the technology tools they were using because Mrs. Jones encouraged collaboration in their writing process. Even though students in Mrs. Jones class were assessed during the administration of PARCC in a quiet, independent writing environment, she still encouraged students to communicate about their writing in her classroom. She gave students something to talk about. In Mr. Matthews’ classroom, most of the social interactions were unrelated to their academic tasks because they were expected to work on those
tasks independently in order to more closely match the conditions of the test. As a result, the social interactions pulled students’ attention away from their writing process instead of contributing to their development of it.

Although most of Chris’ instructional time in English was devoted to preparing for the PARCC assessments, Chris was required to take the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT). This was a direct consequence of the fact that Chris was retained in the ninth grade. According to state law, students are assessed according to the assessment program in place when they first enter the ninth grade. Therefore, Chris was required to take the OGT with students who were currently enrolled in tenth grade English, even though he was not afforded the opportunity to learn from the tenth grade curriculum. Chris did not seem to see this issue as problematic. He believed that writing the practice essays for PARCC would help prepare him for the extended response and writing portions of the OGT.

Based on my own experiences as an English teacher who taught a short-term OGT prep course for seven years in an Ohio high school, the experiences of writing practice essays for the PARCC assessments did not effectively prepare Chris to take the writing portion of the OGT. Unlike the PARCC essays, in which the focus is purely text analysis and there is no expectation of the writer bringing an autobiographical self to the text, the OGT requires students to draw on their background knowledge to construct their responses. Because Chris was on a different testing track compared to his peers in Mr. Matthews’ English class, he was not afforded the opportunity to practice integrating his autobiographical self in his writing or practice developing a discoursal self in an academic text that draws on his own life experiences. This is further problematized by the fact that Mr. Matthews indicated that he wanted to teach writing in a way
that allowed students to bring their autobiographical selves to the text, but the required PARCC preparation inhibited his ability to do that.

**Contribution of Findings to Existing Theories**

In this section, I evaluate the usefulness of each of the three theoretical frameworks, Gee’s (2000) framework for four ways to view identity, Ivanič’s (1998) Writing Identity theory, and New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013), I used as analytical lenses through which I interpreted the classroom contexts and participants’ perceptions and experiences with digital writing. Then I share the ways in which I extended the ideas within these theories in the analysis and writing phases of this study to meet my research goals.

**Four Ways to View Identity**

Gee’s (2000) framework for four ways to view identity was a useful way to interpret the identities the adolescents claimed and enacted in this study and the institutional identities the teachers ascribed to them. This framework allowed me to understand the identities that adolescents constructed and the identities that were constructed for them by their teachers in the classroom context. Analyzing the adolescents’ academic identities through this four-part lens encouraged me to develop a more complex understanding of the adolescents’ academic identities that went beyond the factors that contributed to their being deemed “at-risk.”

Although Gee delineated “Institution-Identity” as a separate type of identity to mean the labels placed on students by those in power within the educational institution, I found that most of the identities the teachers ascribed to the adolescent participants took the form of the other three types of identities Gee offered. So while there were occasional instances in which the teachers used an institution identity to describe a student, such as when Mr. Matthews ascribed an institution identity of being a “repeat ninth grader” to Chris, most of the identities the teachers
attributed to the students were discourse, affinity, or nature identities. However, these three types of identities were still ascribed to the students by someone who was in power within the educational institution. For that reason, in this study, I found it useful to label all of the identities that the teachers attributed to students as *institutional identities* because the person in power in the classroom was ascribing these identities to the students. Therefore, I used this term as an umbrella category for all of the identities the teachers attributed to students. Then I used Gee’s framework to further analyze the types of identities the teachers were ascribing according to whether they were examples of discourse, affinity, institution, or nature identities. Using these terms in this specific way allowed for a more careful analysis of the extent to which the adolescents claimed and enacted the various types of identities that their teachers ascribed to them.

**Writer Identity Theory**

Ivanič’s (1998) Writer Identity theory was an effective lens for interpreting the ways in which the adolescents constructed identities within their writing. It also allowed me to explore the relationship between the conditions of the writing events and the identities the adolescents were able to construct in their writing. Although I did not initiate this research with the intention of evaluating the influence of PARCC preparation on the identities adolescents can construct in digital writing events, Ivanič’s concepts of an autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for selfhood were integral to my understanding of the limitations of the types of writing the PARCC assessments require in relation to adolescents’ abilities to construct identities within their writing.

Although Ivanič uses these four concepts exclusively in the context of written texts, I argue that this framework can be extended to apply to the academic identities adolescents
construct within classrooms. In this extension, the autobiographical self is made up of the past experiences with schooling that a student brings to a classroom. The discoursal self is the identity that the student enacts in the classroom to position him or herself in ways that meet desired social and academic goals. The self as writer construct can be extended to “self as student” to refer to the extent to which the student is willing to take up the identity as a student in the classroom. Most important to my application of this extension of Ivanič’s theory is the use of the construct of possibilities for selfhood to refer to the range of abstract identities that are available for students to claim within a specific classroom context. These possibilities for selfhood are directly related to the ways in which the teacher positions students and creates opportunities for students to claim identities that further their academic goals. Although I only used the extension of the possibilities for selfhood construct in the findings of this study, it is worth considering how this extension of the full framework could apply in other classroom-based studies.

**New Literacies Theory**

New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013) was a useful framework for evaluating the applications of technology in literacy instruction in each of the English/language arts classrooms. Leu and colleagues emphasized that this is an emergent theory that is still under development. This study demonstrates that the principles they put forth were effective for analyzing a learning context mediated by technology. By analyzing the classroom contexts according to each of the eight principles, I was able to develop a rich description that facilitated readers’ understandings of the learning environments in which the adolescents’ literacy experiences occurred in this study. I was also able to identify important differences between contexts in terms of the ways in which technology-usage mediated the literacy instruction in each learning environment.
Although this theory has been used by researchers as a theoretical lens for studies of technology and learning (Hutchison & Beschorner, 2014; Lima & Brown, 2007; Stevens & Brown, 2011), I was unable to identify any published studies in which a learning environment was explicitly analyzed according to each of the eight principles within the report of the study.

In conducting this analysis, I found that the principles of this theory were generally consistent with what I observed in each classroom. For instance, the Internet was the primary means of literacy engagement in both English/language arts classrooms, and using the Internet required students to develop new literacies in order to take full advantage of the affordances of their Internet-mediated literacy practices. There was also evidence that the influence of technology on writing instruction was changing the language that Mrs. Jones used to talk about the writing process and the options for revision using technology tools that Mr. Matthews hoped to use with his students. However, rather than being able to make the blanket claim that new literacies practices are inherently multimodal, I found that the extent to which the new literacies practices students engaged in were multimodal was largely informed by the parameters of the writing assignments students were completing within the digital environment. The adolescents in the study demonstrated various levels of engagement in critical literacy practices, with the ninth grade students demonstrating more reflection on critical literacy issues, such as, in Chris’ case, the extent to which personal information should be shared through social media. Finally, the use of technology in writing instruction caused the teacher’s role to change in both the fourth and ninth grade classrooms.

However, based on the findings of this study, there are two extensions of the theory that I believe would advance the application to a broader range of literacy contexts and draw a stronger link between New Literacies theory and academic identity development. First, Leu and
colleagues explained, “New forms of strategic knowledge are required with new literacies” (2013, p. 1162). In their explication of this principle, the focus is primarily on the strategic knowledge readers need to navigate hypertexted websites in order to comprehend texts in a complex networked reading environment. In my analysis of the writing events of the participants in this study, I found that this principle could also be applied to the Internet-mediated behaviors of writers. There were multiple instances in which the adolescent participants interacted with their laptops in ways that suggested they had not developed the strategic knowledge necessary to efficiently access information and accomplish tasks using the Internet to inform the texts they were producing. I also found that the adolescents would have benefited from developing additional strategic knowledge of the purposes for and meanings associated with various options available to them when writing digitally. There were several instances in which the adolescents made adjustments to the formatting of their Google Docs without apparent reason or purpose, and in the case of Niclasia, her formatting decisions negatively impacted Mr. Matthews’ perception of her as a writer. Further explicating this principle of the theory to consider the strategic knowledge of writers would serve to expand the range of research contexts in which the theory could be applied.

Second, at this point, New Literacies theory (Leu et al., 2013) in its current iteration does not draw a strong theoretical link between New Literacies and students’ perceptions of identity while engaged in new literacies practices. The findings of this study draw a stronger link between new literacies and identity and offer further understandings of the principle of New Literacies theory that states “New literacy practices are a central element of New Literacies” (Leu et al., 2013, p. 1162). Leu and his colleagues (2013) explained that new literacy practices will require new social practices in the classroom that view students and teachers as both experts
and novices depending on the specific technology tools they are using. The findings of this study suggest that when teachers position students as technology experts, their possibilities for selfhood expand in the classroom. Leu et al. (2013) argue that sharing expertise between the teacher and students is necessary for learners to accomplish their literacy goals in technology-mediated classrooms. I argue that this collaborative ethos also has important implications for helping adolescents who are “at-risk” for academic failure reconstruct their academic identities.

**Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations to this study related to the span of the data collection period, and the data that I was able to collect. First, I intended to observe each classroom 12-16 times over a four-month period during the fall of 2014. The start of data collection was postponed due to a delay in approval of the study by the Institutional Review Board of my university. Therefore, data collection began in December at the fourth grade research site and January at the ninth grade research site (because the high school exam schedule prohibited the study starting the week prior to winter break). Conducting the study during the winter months resulted in several observations being cancelled at each research site due to inclement weather, as well as the administration of the PARCC assessments. When possible I rescheduled observations, but the cancellations resulted in only ten observations at the fourth grade research site and eight observations at the ninth grade research site. This limited the amount of extended first hand engagement I was able to achieve at each research site (Hatch, 2002). However, conducting the study during the winter months also allowed me to observe the classrooms in the context of their preparation for the PARCC assessments, which became an important contextual factor in the findings of the study.
Second, I had originally intended to have the adolescent participants wear the eyeglasses to record their digital writing events and conduct the retrospective digital writing think aloud three times in the course of the study, during the observation prior to each adolescent interview. However, during the observations in which the first and third interviews were scheduled at each research site, the students were not engaged in digital writing. This meant that I was only able to collect a video recording and engage each participant in the retrospective digital writing think aloud once instead of three times as planned.

Third, the interviews with the adolescent participants had to be scheduled during the school day, meaning that the students had to be pulled out of their classes in order to talk to me. This created time constraints during the interview that kept me from being able to probe as much as I would have liked. Given that observational data showed that three of the four participants already missed a significant amount of class time as a result of being pulled out of the classroom for intervention or leaving the classroom for medical reasons, I was consciously aware throughout the interviews of the fact that the participants were missing instruction during the interviews.

Fourth, I only collected data from the adolescent participants’ school contexts and relied on them to self-report their experiences with digital writing out of school. Therefore, I only had access to artifacts of the writing participants created in school. Although Nicolasia referenced her writing on the Wattpad website, I did not feel it would be ethical to collect and analyze the writing she publically posted to the website because it was outside of the parameters of data collection. Therefore, I was only able to vaguely discuss the public statistical information displayed on her page to give a general sense of her engagement with writing on the website.
Finally, I expect that there was rich data on Mrs. Jones’ Schoology website that would have further strengthened the findings of this study in relation to the role of peer collaboration on the academic identity construction of the participants. However, because only two of the students in Mrs. Jones’ class were participants in the study, and I did not have informed assent and parental permission from the other students in the class, it would have been unethical for me to gain access to the website and collect artifacts. Therefore all data related to the use of Schoology is based on interview reports and observations in the context of the classroom with limited views of the adolescent participants’ computer screens. This limited the claims I was able to make regarding the ways in which participants engaged in writing within a learning management system to construct an academic identity.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest several avenues of future research in the fields of adolescent literacy and digital writing. The adolescents in this study all held generally positive academic identities despite being deemed “at-risk” for academic failure. Researchers interested in the identity construction of “at-risk” adolescents who hold more negative academic identities should consider first using a survey during the recruitment process to identify potential participants who are labeled “at-risk” and also hold negative perceptions of themselves as students.

The findings of this study also suggest that the adolescents were less aware of the identities their teachers ascribed to them as writers compared to a previous study (Enriquez, 2011) in which the participants were acutely aware of the identities ascribed to them as readers. Future research should explore more broadly the extent to which adolescents are in tune with the identities their teachers ascribe to them both as readers and writers and the observed factors.
during reading and writing instruction and teacher and student interactions that contribute to both the identities that are ascribed and the identities that are claimed.

As previously mentioned, the writing events in this study were mostly centered on preparing students for the upcoming PARCC assessments. This contributed to a major finding of the study that the parameters of the assignment contributed to the possibilities for selfhood existing in the writing event more than the medium with which the adolescents were writing. Future researchers should conduct a study similar to this study either during the first semester of the academic year when test preparation is not as likely to be the focus of instruction, or in a school in which students are not required to take high-stakes standardized assessments. Removing or limiting this contextual factor has the potential to allow other findings to emerge related to the possibilities for selfhood that exist in digital writing contexts for adolescents deemed “at-risk.”

The ways in which the adolescent participants in this study interacted with both paper and technology during their writing process was fascinating. It also appeared to have important implications for the working process they brought with them to testing environments in which they were not afforded access to both mediums. Future research should explore the integration of paper and technology in authentic writing events. If additional research findings suggest that there are benefits to allowing students to use both paper and digital resources in their composing processes surrounding writing that incorporates sources, then high-stakes assessments, such as the PARCC assessments, need to allow students to have access to both the electronic and paper materials that support their writing process in ways that allow them the best opportunity for demonstrating their literacy abilities.
Lastly, future research in digital writing needs to examine the ways in which writers perceive the concept of writing in digital contexts. Jon viewed writing as an act of the hands rather than an act of the mind. I was taken by surprise by his understanding of the word “writing” and later found that each participant interpreted the word “writing” to mean “handwriting” at least once each in interviews. Future research should explore if perceiving writing as an act of the hands rather than an act of the mind influences the ways in which writers understand and enact their writing process and the identities adolescents construct for themselves as writers.

**Implications for Research Methodology**

I found that the combination of data sources and the theoretical frameworks I used to analyze the data collected in this study worked well for developing an understanding of the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in classroom context creates for adolescents. However, I found that it was difficult to gain access to students for in-depth interviews because of scheduling constraints and suggest that researchers interested in conducting interviews with students in school-based research plan for multiple interviews over the course of the study period to address all of their questions. Had I only planned for one interview with the participants instead of three, I would not have had sufficient data to answer the research questions.

In this study I intentionally selected two diverse research sites in order to maximize the range of experiences participants brought to the study and to see how the findings were replicated across differing classroom contexts. However, based on the descriptions the adolescent participants gave in interviews, I found that the socioeconomic differences between research sites had little impact on the findings. Each participant had access to some form of technology used for writing outside of school, and the experiences the adolescent participants
shared in terms of their in-school and out-of-school experiences were largely universal experiences associated with childhood and adolescence. The largest difference in terms of the research contexts was the teachers’ perceptions of the overall abilities of the students and the extent to which test preparation was the focus of instruction, which may have been influenced by the socioeconomic factors within the school environment. However, as I analyzed the interview data, I wondered about the extent to which the adolescents’ descriptions of their experiences truly captured the nuances of those experiences that might have illuminated more variation across cases. Using a data collection practice such as photovoice (Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998) in which participants take photographs that represent their out-of-school writing and then discuss them in elicitation interviews might have served to uncover some of the subtleties of their out-of-school writing experiences to further advance the findings of this study.

In this study, I combined data collection practices described in a previous research study in which participants wore head-mounted micro-cameras to video record students’ perspectives while engaged in mobile composing in a digital media enrichment course (Ehret & Hollett, 2013) and in a previous research study in which participants engaged in a think-aloud about their reading while screen-recordings were synchronized with audio-recordings to allow the researcher to document where the participants were reading and navigating on the website (Cho, 2013). This combination resulted in the retrospective digital writing think aloud in which I captured participants’ point of view while engaged in digital writing by having students wear small digital cameras located in the frames of costume eyeglasses while they were writing in class, and then having participants review the video-recording and engage in a think-aloud discussion of their writing process.
I found that the eyeglasses were an effective means of documenting the physical locations that the participants focused their attention during their writing process. This was more effective than using screen-recordings or eye-tracking software during the digital writing event because the eyeglasses captured the physical spaces outside of the electronic environment on which participants focused their attention. However, I suggest that researchers interested in using this emergent data collection practice consider using screen-recording software to record the participants’ voice during the think-aloud rather than an audio-recorder. I found it to be extremely time consuming to sync the audio file with the video file that the participant viewed while their voice was recorded. Using screen capture software would allow for audio and video to be automatically synced. However, there is the possibility that important audio could be lost if segments of video must be deleted to protect the privacy of individuals in the classroom who were not participants of the study. Based on my experiences in this study, there is potential for this emergent data collection practice to be an effective means of understanding students’ writing processes when composing in digital contexts, but it is worth exploring how other forms of technology can enhance the ease and practicalities of the retrospective digital writing think aloud process.

**Implications for Classroom Practice**

The findings of this study suggest several implications for classroom practice for teachers teaching writing mediated by technology with adolescents. First, the finding that possibilities for selfhood are limited or expanded by the parameters of the assignment more than the medium in which the writing takes place reaffirms assertions made in a wealth of literature on the teaching of writing that argues for giving adolescents freedom to write about topics that genuinely matter to them (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Kittle, 2008; Newkirk, 2009; Robb, 2010; Romano, 1987). This is
clearly not a new idea. When we constrain the range of topics on which we ask students to write, we constrain the extent to which they are able to bring their own experiences to their writing to assert their own voices in the writing they produce.

If we want students to care about writing we have to allow them to write about topics they care about. Giving students narrow or pre-assigned topics forces most students to write outside of their bank of interests, experiences, and knowledge and unfairly privileges those few students who might have developed background knowledge on the assigned topic. What is new about this finding is that this fundamental belief about teaching writing holds true no matter the medium in which students write. Engaging students in digital writing, and giving them access to the affordances of technology tools for developing positive identities as writers does not replace writing instruction that values student voice and the knowledge they bring to the writing event.

Second, all of the adolescents in this study who were deemed “at-risk” for school failure claimed identities as writers out of school. Both Jon and Chris indicated that they wrote in diaries and journals at home to document their experiences, thoughts and feelings. These writing experiences served to help Jon develop an identity as a confident writer at home, and Chris viewed his out-of-school writing as a space for expressing his ideas without the fear of judgment. However, both Jon and Chris were considered reluctant writers in the context of the classroom. These findings suggest that teachers need to recognize that the writing identities students enact in classrooms may not mirror the writing identities they enact outside of the classroom. Viewing our students’ writing identities in more complex and multifaceted ways can open up opportunities for engaging students with writing in school. Had Jon and Chris been given opportunities to engage in reflective writing in the classroom, they may have developed stronger identities as writers within the context of school. Given that both of the participants who
claimed to write in diaries and journals were boys, this finding also suggests that we should not make gendered assumptions about the writing behaviors of our students.

Third, this study supports the implications of prior research that demonstrate the importance of teaching digital writing in a way that acknowledges that writing with technology creates a unique context that requires different skills and literacy demands compared to traditional paper and pencil writing (Callahan & King, 2011; Hughes, 2009). Rather than trying to fit old practices into a new writing space, teachers should recognize and directly address the new practices and writing strategies that are associated with writing in a virtual environment. The ways in which Mrs. Jones talked about the revision process and the concept of “drafts” in relation to digital writing exemplifies the ways our conversations with students about writing need to shift in response to writing within a digital space. We must acknowledge the changing landscape of teaching writing with technology tools and embrace the affordances these tools offer rather than insisting on using practices and language to describe students’ writing process that no longer fit in digital environments.

Fourth, the findings of this study also demonstrate the importance of peer collaboration both in the writing process and in classrooms mediated by technology. I am reminded of something a teacher I met while I was student teaching once said: “If I wanted to work where everyone was silent, I’d work in a cemetery.” Yes, there are times where students need a quiet environment to focus, but writers also need to talk with other writers. Students need to feel that their voices are valued both in their writing, as well as in the classroom in which they are writing. By positioning students as technology experts, teachers can expand the possibilities for selfhood that exist for them within the classroom context. In order to do this, teachers have to
become comfortable teaching in classrooms in which students are engaging in social interactions that allow them to demonstrate this expertise and build confidence as learners.

Finally, the findings of this study also suggest that missing instruction to address the individual needs of students creates new educational needs. There does not appear to be an easy solution to this problem as there are a finite number of hours in the school day; but teachers, intervention specialists, and school administrators need to be critically aware of what instruction students miss when they are pulled for intervention and make careful, strategic choices about how to structure time for students who need intervention in order to maximize their instructional time in literacy classrooms.

**Conclusion**

At the time of this writing, there are no published studies of classroom-based research found in the ERIC database that focused on the implementation of the PARCC assessments. This is not surprising, given that the 2014-2015 school year was the first year that PARCC was administered. Although it was not the planned intention of this study to evaluate the preparation practices of literacy teachers for the PARCC assessments, this became the most significant contextual factor in each of the classroom contexts in which this study took place. It also means that this study is one of the first classroom-based studies in the field of literacy to take place in the context of implementing the PARCC assessments.

There is no question that the PARCC assessments directly influenced the findings of this study. Although I had not expected this study of digital writing to focus so heavily on PARCC, navigating high-stakes assessments is a reality in public schools that is unlikely to go away any time soon. Therefore, this study informs our understandings of adolescents’ academic identity construction through digital writing events in classrooms in which teachers are negotiating the
balance between orchestrating quality digital writing events for students while also meeting the demands placed on them by school administrators and legislators to assess students in ways that may be counter to what teachers know to be true and fundamentally believe about teaching writing.

The findings of this study support the argument that even in writing events in which both the teacher and the students have little control over the parameters of the assignment, digital writing can be used to promote the construction of positive academic identities in students deemed “at-risk” of school failure. The affordances of digital writing identified by the adolescent participants in this study have the potential to help adolescents to construct positive identities as students and as writers even when their possibilities for selfhood are limited within a specific writing event.

Finally, the findings of this study suggest that teachers’ positioning of students as technology experts expands their possibilities for selfhood within the classroom context. Prior research supports that the use of technology challenges the hierarchies that exist in classrooms (Callahan & King; 2011; Hughes et al., 2011). By allowing students to bring their knowledge of and adeptness with technology into the classroom, and valuing them as experts who can offer assistance to their peers, teachers can position students considered “at-risk” as valuable resources in the classroom who have important knowledge and skills to contribute to their peers and the teacher. Learning in a classroom context in which they are recognized as having valued skills can positively contribute to their academic identities and expand the possibilities for selfhood that exist for them as students in the classroom.
References


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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form for Teachers

Adult Consent Form for Research
University of Cincinnati
Department: Educational Studies
Principal Investigator: Jessica Wertz
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Chet Laine

Title of Study: Constructing Academic Identities through Digital Writing: A Multiple Case Study of Adolescents Labeled “At-Risk”

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Who is doing this research study?
The person in charge of this research study is Jessica Wertz of the University of Cincinnati (UC) Department of Educational Studies. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Chet Laine.

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how adolescents who have been labeled “at-risk” construct academic identities through digital writing. I am conducting this study in order to understand the possibilities for selfhood that digital writing in a classroom-context creates for adolescents.

Who will be in this research study?
About six people will take part in this study, two teachers and 4 students. You may be in this study if you are a 4th or 9th grade English/language arts teacher.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
You will be asked to:

• Participate in three interviews, one at the start of the study, one in the middle and one at the end. With your permission, interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Each interview will take about 45-60 minutes to complete.
• Be observed teaching and interacting with the student participants once a week for 12-16 weeks.

The research will take place in your classroom and will not require travel on your part. You may choose to not take part in any of the activities described above.

Are there any risks to being in this research study?
You will not be asked to do anything that exposes you to risks beyond those of everyday life.
Are there any benefits from being in this research study?
Because of participating in this study, you might gain additional insight regarding some of your students and benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your teaching and students’ learning in your classroom.

What will you get because of being in this research study?
At the end of the study you will be given a $50 Amazon.com gift card as a thank you gift for participating in the study.

Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?
If you do not want to take part in this research study you do not have to participate. You may choose whether or not interviews may be audio-recorded.

How will your research information be kept confidential?
Information about you will be kept confidential by using a self-selected pseudonym to identify you on all documents related to the study except this informed consent document. Information that does not identify you may be kept after the study is finished. It might be useful in future research.

Your identifying information will be kept private in a locked filing cabinet or stored on a password-protected computer for three years as required by federal regulations. After that it will be shredded by Jessica Wertz. The data from this research study may be published; but you will not be identified by name.

Agents of the University of Cincinnati may inspect study records for audit or quality assurance purposes.

If you chose to correspond with the researchers regarding this study electronically, they cannot promise that information sent by the Internet or email will be private.

What are your legal rights in this research study?
Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

What if you have questions about this research study?
If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Jessica Wertz at XXX-XXX-XXXX. Or, you may contact Dr. Chet Laine XXX-XXX-XXXX.

The UC Institutional Review Board reviews all research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the UC IRB at (513) 558-5259. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman
Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?
No one has to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have. You may skip any interview questions that you don’t want to answer and you can choose to not give the researchers any course assignments or other requested items as outlined above. You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop being in the study, you should tell the researcher in person or by calling Jessica Wertz at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Agreement:
I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

Participant Name (please print) ________________________________

Participant Signature ________________________________ Date _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _______________________ Date _____
APPENDIX B

Cover Letter and Parent Permission Form

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a researcher from the University of Cincinnati conducting a study in your child’s classroom. I am looking for two students who have previously struggled with reading and writing in school to be involved in a research study. I am interested in learning about how students feel about themselves as students when writing with technology. My goals for the research are to learn how using digital writing in school can help students feel more successful.

I will be observing students in their English/language arts classroom once a week for about four months, interviewing the students three times, and collecting copies of students’ writing. Your child’s teacher thinks your child would be a good fit for this study.

In this packet you will find two copies of the Parent Permission Form. If you would like for your child to participate in the study, please sign one copy, seal it in the enclosed envelope, and return it to your child’s teacher. Please retain the second copy for your records. I am also available to meet with you in person to explain the Parent Permission form and answer any questions you may have.

If you are interested in letting your son/daughter participate and you would like additional information, please contact me at [redacted] or wertzjc@mail.uc.edu.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Jessica A. Wertz
PhD Candidate, Educational Studies
University of Cincinnati
Title of Study: Constructing Academic Identities through Digital Writing: A Multiple Case Study of Adolescents

Introduction:
You are being asked to allow your child to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Who is doing this research study?
The person in charge of this research study is Jessica Wertz of the University of Cincinnati (UC) Department of Educational Studies. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Chet Laine.

What is the purpose of this research study?
In this study we want to know how students who have received low scores on tests feel about themselves when writing with a computer. This will help us understand how using computers to teach writing in school can help students feel more successful.

Who will be in this research study?
About 4 children will take part in this study. Your child may be in this study if he or she has previously struggled with reading and writing in school.

What will your child be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
Your child will be asked to:
• Participate in three interviews, one at the start of the study, one in the middle and one at the end. With your permission, interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Each interview will take about 30 minutes to complete.
• Be observed in his or her English/language arts classroom once a week for 12-16 weeks.
• Share copies of his or her writing during observations with the researcher.
• Wear a small video camera that will record his or her writing process in class on the three days that he or she is interviewed.
The research will take place at school and will not require travel on your part. You may choose to not allow your child to take part in any of the activities described above.

Are there any risks to being in this research study?
Your child will not be asked to do anything that exposes him or her to risks beyond those of everyday life.
Are there any benefits from being in this research study?
Your child will probably not get any benefit from taking part in this study, beyond the opportunity to reflect on his or her learning. But, being in this study may help teachers better understand how to help other students feel more successful as students and writers.

What will your child get because of being in this research study?
At the end of the study your child will be given a $20 Amazon.com or Barnes and Nobles gift card as a thank you gift for participating in the study.

Does your child have choices about taking part in this research study?
If you do not want your child to take part in this research study he or she does not have to participate. Your child’s grades will not be affected by participation in this study and he or she will continue to receive all regular instruction. You may choose whether or not your child’s interviews may be audio-recorded.

How will your child’s research information be kept confidential?
Information about your child will be kept private. A pseudonym will be used to identify you on all documents related to the study except this document. Information that does not identify your child may be kept after the study is finished. It might be useful in future research.

Your child’s identifying information will be kept private in a locked filing cabinet or stored on a password-protected computer for three years as required by federal regulations. After that it will be shredded by Jessica Wertz. The data from this research study may be published but your child will not be identified by name.

Agents of the University of Cincinnati may inspect study records for audit or quality assurance purposes.

You may email the researchers. However, they cannot promise that information sent by the Internet will be private.

What are your and your child’s legal rights in this research study?
Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you or your child may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

What if you or your child has questions about this research study?
If you or your child has any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Jessica Wertz XXX-XXX-XXXX. Or, you may contact Dr. Chet Laine at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

The UC Institutional Review Board reviews all research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you have questions about your child’s rights as a participant or complaints about the
study, you may contact the UC IRB at (513) 558-5259. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

**Does your child HAVE to take part in this research study?**
No one has to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have. Your child may skip any interview questions that he or she doesn’t want to answer and your child can choose to not give the researcher any pieces of writing he or she writes during observations. You may give your permission and then change your mind and take your child out of this study at any time. To take your child out of the study, you should tell Jessica Wertz at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Your child will be asked if he or she wants to take part in this research study. Even if you say yes, your child may still say no.

**Agreement:**
I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my permission for my child to participate in this research study. I will sign one copy of this form and return it to my child’s teacher in the attached envelope. I will keep the other copy of this form for future reference.

You Child’s Name (please print) __________________________________________

Your Child’s Date of Birth ___________ (Month / Day / Year)

Parent/Legal Guardian’s Signature ___________________________ Date _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Permission ______________________ Date _____
APPENDIX C

Recruitment Script and Child and Youth Assent Forms

Recruitment Script

Hello ________.

My name is Jessica Wertz. I am a researcher from UC. I am conducting a research project in your class. I am looking for two students who have previously struggled with reading and writing in school. I want to learn how students feel about themselves as students when writing with technology. My goal for the project is to learn how using digital writing in school can help students feel more successful.

If you help with the project, I will observe you in your English/language arts classroom once a week for about four months. I will interview you three times. I will collect copies of your writing. Your teacher thinks that you would be a good fit for this study.

Does this sound like something you would like to do?
Child Assent Form for Research (Ages 8-11 Years)  
University of Cincinnati  
Department: Educational Studies  
Principal Investigator: Jessica Wertz  
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Chet Laine

Title of Study: Constructing Academic Identities through Digital Writing: A Multiple Case Study of Adolescents

You are being asked to do a learning project. You may ask questions about it. You do not have to say yes. If you do not want to be in this learning project, you can say no.

This project might help teachers. They will learn how writing on a computer makes you feel.

About 4 children will help out with this project. It will take about four months. You will be asked questions three times – in the beginning, in the middle and at the end. Jessica Wertz will watch your class 12-16 times. When she is there, she will ask for copies of the writing you wrote in class. You will also be asked to wear a small camera to record your writing in class three times. In the spring, you can check the things Jessica writes about your conversations.

If you are in the project you will be given a $20 gift card. The card will be good at Amazon.com or Barnes and Nobles. The card is a thank you gift for helping.

If you have any questions you can ask Jessica Wertz.

You do not have to be in this learning project. You may start and then change your mind and you can stop at any time. No one will be upset with you. You may skip any interview questions that you don’t want to answer. You can choose to not give Jessica your writing when she is in your class. To stop being in the learning project, you should tell Jessica Wertz.

If you want to be in this learning project, write your name and birthday. If you do not want to be in this learning project, leave the lines blank.

Your Name (please print) ________________________________
Your Birthday ____________ (Month / Day / Year)
Your Signature ____________________________ Date _______
Signature of Person Obtaining Assent ________________ Date _______
Title of Study: Constructing Academic Identities through Digital Writing: A Multiple Case Study of Adolescents

Introduction:
You are being asked to be in a research study. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand.

Who is doing this research study?
The people in charge of this research study are Jessica Wertz and Dr. Chet Laine.

What is the purpose of this research study?
In this study we want to know how students who have received low scores on tests feel about themselves when writing with a computer. This will help us understand how using computers to teach writing in school can help students feel more successful.

Who will be in this research study?
About 6 people will take part in this study, 2 teachers and 4 students. You may be in this study if you have previously struggled with reading and writing in school.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
You will be asked to:
- Participate in three interviews, one at the start of the study, one in the middle and one at the end. With your permission, interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Each interview will take about 30 minutes to complete.
- Be observed in your English/language arts classroom once a week for 12-16 weeks.
- Share copies of anything you write during observations with the researcher.
- Wear a small video camera that will record your writing process in class on the three days that you are interviewed.

The research will take place at school and will not require travel on your part. You may choose to not take part in any of the activities described above. In the spring, you will be able to check the accuracy of the parts of the written report of the study that relate to your participation.

Are there any risks to being in this research study?
You will not be asked to do anything that exposes you to risks beyond those of everyday life.

Are there any benefits from being in this research study?
You will probably not get any benefit from being in this study, beyond the chance to reflect on your learning. But, being in this study may help teachers better understand how to help other students feel more successful as students.

**What will you get because of being in this research study?**
At the end of the study you will be given a $20 Amazon.com or Barnes and Nobles gift card as a thank you gift for participating in the study.

**Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?**
If you do not want to take part in this research study you do not have to participate. Your grades will not be affected by participation in this study and you will continue to receive all regular instruction. You may choose whether or not your interviews may be audio-recorded.

**How will your research information be kept confidential?**
Information about you will be kept private. A pseudonym will be used to identify you on all documents related to the study except this document. Information that does not identify you may be kept after the study is finished. It might be useful in future research.

Your identifying information will be kept private in a locked filing cabinet or stored on a password-protected computer for three years as required by federal regulations. After that it will be shredded by Jessica Wertz. The data from this research study may be published but you will not be identified by name.

Agents of the University of Cincinnati may inspect study records for audit or quality assurance purposes.

You may email the researchers. However, they cannot promise that information sent by the Internet will be private.

**What are your legal rights in this research study?**
Nothing in this assent form takes away your rights.

**What if you have questions about this research study?**
If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Jessica Wertz XXX-XXX-XXXX. Or, you may contact Dr. Chet Laine at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

**Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?**
No one has to be in this research study. You will not get in any trouble if you say no. You may skip any questions that you don't want to answer and you can choose to not give the researcher your writing during observations. You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop being in the study, you should tell Jessica Wertz at XXX-XXX-XXXX.
**Agreement:** I have read this information. I want to be in this research study.

Your Name (please print) __________________________________________

Your Date of Birth ___________ (Month / Day / Year)

Your Signature _______________________________ Date ________

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent ________________________ Date ________
## Data Collection Record – 4th Grade Research Site

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<th>Jon Interview</th>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>3</td>
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APPENDIX E

Observation Protocol for Collecting Field Notes

Setting: _______________________
Observer: _______________________
Role of Observer: ________________
Time and Date: _________________
Length of Observation: ___________
Focal research question for observation:

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<th>Description of observation:</th>
<th>Reflective notes:</th>
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</table>
APPENDIX F

Adolescent Interview Protocol

Interviewee ID: ____________________________________________
Interviewer: ______________________________________________
Location: _________________________________________________
Date: _____________________________________________________
Time: _____________________________________________________

Introduction:
Hello [insert name]. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today about your experiences with writing and being in school. Before we begin, I want to remind you that this interview is being conducted as a part of a [“study” for 9th graders & “learning project” for 4th graders] on digital writing with adolescents. Your name will not be included on any documentation of this interview.

I would like to record our conversation to be sure I obtain an accurate account. Do I have your permission to make the audio recording?

[Note response] ____________

I want to assure you that I will keep your name private so no one will know that you were the person I talked to. I will be asking you several questions so please feel free to discuss your ideas and views. Are you ready to begin?

Examples of the types of questions I plan to ask are on the following page. Additional questions and probing will occur in response to the interviewee’s comments, but all questions will focus on the interviewee’s experiences and perceptions of writing and schooling. Wording will be adjusted if the 4th grade students have difficulty answering the questions as written, (e.g. use the word “computer” if the student is confused by “technology”).

Interview Questions (These questions will span 3 interviews and will include additional follow up questions from previous interviews as well as questions related to artifacts collected between interviews):
1. First, tell me a little about yourself as a student.
   a. As a writer?

2. How do you think your teacher would describe you as a student?
   a. As a writer?
3. What is your earliest memory of writing in school?
   a. Why do you think this memory stands out in your mind?

4. Describe a time when you felt successful writing in school.

5. Describe a time when you felt frustrated with writing in school.

6. In what ways do you use technology at school?
   a. Can you give me an example?
   b. How do you use technology when writing at school?

7. In what ways do you use technology at home?
   a. Can you give me an example?
   b. How do you use technology when writing at home?

8. What do you like most about writing with technology?
   a. What do you like least?

9. Digital Writing Protocol Question: As you watch the video clip, tell me what you were thinking as you were writing.
   a. I’m curious why you decided to ______. Can you tell me more about that?

10. Is there anything else related to these topics that you would like to share?

Thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me today. Your time and insights are greatly appreciated.
APPENDIX G

Teacher Interview Protocol

Interviewee ID: ________________________________
Interviewer: ___________________________________
Location: ______________________________________
Date: _________________________________________
Time: _________________________________________

Introduction:

Hello [insert name]. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today about your classroom and your experiences with [insert participant #1’s name] and [insert participants #2’s name]. Before we begin, I want to remind you that this interview is being conducted as a part of a study on digital writing with adolescents. Your name will not be included on any documentation of this interview.

I am planning to record our conversation to be sure I obtain an accurate account. Do I have your permission to make the audio recording?

[Note response] ___________

I want to assure you that I will keep your identity confidential. I will be asking you several questions so please feel free to discuss your ideas and views. Are you ready to begin?

Examples of the types of questions I plan to ask are on the following page. Additional questions and probing will occur in response to the interviewee's comments, but all questions will focus on the interviewee’s experiences and perceptions of working with the participants in his or her classroom and teaching in general.

Interview Questions (These questions will span 3 interviews and will include follow up questions from previous interviews and observations between interviews):

1. First, tell me a little about your background teaching.

2. In what ways do you use technology in your teaching?
   a. Can you give me an example?
   b. How do you use technology when teaching writing?

3. What were your reasons for deciding to integrate technology into your writing instruction?

4. What challenges have you faced in implementing technology in your writing instruction?

5. How would you describe [insert participant #1’s name] as a student?
   a. As a writer?
b. Based on your experiences working with [insert participant #1’s name], what is the biggest struggle [he/she] faces in being successful in school?

c. What is [his/her] biggest struggle as a writer?

d. Based on your experiences working with [insert participant #1’s name], what is [his/her] greatest strength as a student?

e. What is [his/her] greatest strength as a writer?

6. How would you describe [insert participant #2’s name] as a student?

a. As a writer?

b. Based on your experiences working with [insert participant #2’s name], what is the biggest struggle [he/she] faces in being successful in school?

c. What is [his/her] biggest struggle as a writer?

d. Based on your experiences working with [insert participant #2’s name], what is [his/her] greatest strength as a student?

e. What is [his/her] greatest strength as a writer?

7. Is there anything else related to these topics that you would like to share?

Thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me today. Your time and insights are greatly appreciated.
## Research Question 1: How do adolescents perceive their academic identities in the context of digital writing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protocol Question</th>
<th>Interview #1</th>
<th>Interview #2 / DWP</th>
<th>Interview #3</th>
<th>Teacher Interview #1</th>
<th>Teacher Interview #2</th>
<th>Teacher Interview #3</th>
<th>Interview #3</th>
<th>Obs #1</th>
<th>Obs #2</th>
<th>Obs #3</th>
<th>Obs #4</th>
<th>Obs #5</th>
<th>Obs #6</th>
<th>Obs #7</th>
<th>Obs #8</th>
<th>Obs #9</th>
<th>Obs #10</th>
<th>Artifacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How does the adolescent view writing?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. How does the adolescent describe himself or herself as a student? As a writer?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

## Research Question 2: How do the institutional identities ascribed to adolescents contribute to their academic identities?

| Protocol Question                                                                 | Interview #1 | Interview #2 / DWP | Interview #3 | Teacher Interview #1 | Teacher Interview #2 | Teacher Interview #3 | Interview #3 | Obs #1 | Obs #2 | Obs #3 | Obs #4 | Obs #5 | Obs #6 | Obs #7 | Obs #8 | Obs #9 | Obs #10 | Artifacts |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| 1. How do classroom writing events position the adolescent as a writer and student? | X            | X                  | X            | X                   | X                   | X                   | X            | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     | X       |        |
| 2. How does the teacher describe the adolescent as a student? As a writer?        |              |                    | X            | X                   |                     |                     |              |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |        |        |
| Protocol Question                                                                 | Interview #1 | Interview #2/ DWP | Interview #3 | Teacher Interview #1 | Teacher Interview #2 | Teacher Interview #3 | Obs #1 | Obs #2 | Obs #3 | Obs #4 | Obs #5 | Obs #6 | Obs #7 | Obs #8 | Obs #9 | Obs #10 | Artifacts |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. What are the adolescent’s past experiences with writing in school?            | X            | X                 | X            | X                    | X                    |                      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| 2. What are the adolescent’s past experiences with writing out of school?       | X            | X                 |              |                      |                      |                      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| 3. What past experiences resulted in the adolescent experiencing academic failure? |              |                   | X            | X                    |                      |                      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| 4. What is the nature of the adolescent’s participation and engagement during digital writing events? | X            | X                 | X            | X                    | X                    | X                    | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |        |
## Research Question 4: What are the affordances of digital writing for adolescents’ academic identity construction?

| Protocol Question | Interview #1 | Interview #2/ DWP | Interview #3 | Teacher Interview #1 | Teacher Interview #2 | Teacher Interview #3 | Obs #1 | Obs #2 | Obs #3 | Obs #4 | Obs #5 | Obs #6 | Obs #7 | Obs #8 | Obs #9 | Obs #10 | Artifacts |
|-------------------|--------------|---------------------|--------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| 1. How is the adolescent’s academic identity reflected in the digital writing he or she produces? | X | X | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X |
| 2. How does the adolescent position him or her self as a student in the digital writing produced? | X | X | X | X | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | X |
| 3. What is the adolescent’s thought-process while engaged in digital writing? | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
## Research Question 1: How do adolescents perceive their academic identities in the context of digital writing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protocol Question</th>
<th>Interview #1</th>
<th>Interview #2 / DWP</th>
<th>Interview #3</th>
<th>Teacher Interview #1</th>
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<td>1. How does the adolescent view writing?</td>
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<td>2. How does the adolescent describe himself or herself as a student? As a writer?</td>
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## Research Question 2: How do the institutional identities ascribed to adolescents contribute to their academic identities?

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<tr>
<th>Protocol Question</th>
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<th>Interview #2 / DWP</th>
<th>Interview #3</th>
<th>Teacher Interview #1</th>
<th>Teacher Interview #2</th>
<th>Teacher Interview #3</th>
<th>Obs #1</th>
<th>Obs #2</th>
<th>Obs #3</th>
<th>Obs #4</th>
<th>Obs #5</th>
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**Research Question 3: How do adolescents’ past and current writing experiences contribute to their academic identities?**

<p>| Protocol Question                                                                 | Interview #1 | Interview #2/ Day | Teacher Interview #1 | Teacher Interview #2 | Teacher Interview #3 | Obs #1 | Obs #2 | Obs #3 | Obs #4 | Obs #5 | Obs #6 | Obs #7 | Obs #8 | Obs #9 | Obs #10 | Artifacts |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|----------|
| 1. What are the adolescent’s past experiences with writing in school?            | X            |                   | X                    | X                    | X                    |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |         |
| 2. What are the adolescent’s past experiences with writing out of school?       | X            |                   |                      |                      |                      |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |         |
| 3. What past experiences resulted in the adolescent experiencing academic failure? | X            |                   |                      |                      |                      |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |         |
| 4. What is the nature of the adolescent’s participation and engagement during digital writing events? | X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X |</p>
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APPENDIX I

List of Codes Used In Data Analysis

**Deductive Theory Codes**
- Four Ways of Viewing Identity - Gee (2000)
  - Nature-Identity
  - Institution-Identity
  - Discourse-Identity
  - Affinity-Identity
  - Autobiographical Self
  - Discoursal Self
  - Self as Author
  - Possibilities for Selfhood
  - Internet as Literacy Technology
  - Internet Requires New Literacies
  - New Literacies Deictic
  - NL Multiple, Multimodal, Multifaceted
  - Critical Literacies Central
  - New Forms Strategic Knowledge
  - New Literacy Practices Central
  - Teacher Role Changes

**Inductive Individual Case Codes**
- Academic Identity Perception
  - Future Aspirations
  - Self as Student
  - Self as Writer
- Ascribed Institutional Identities
  - Source of "At Risk" Label
  - Reluctant Readers and Writers
  - Teacher Positioning of Student
    - Student as Technology User
  - Portrait of Student as a Writer
    - Teacher Response to Writing
    - Plagiarism
- Past and Current Writing Experiences
  - Past Writing Events
    - Past Experiences Using Technology
    - Assessment of Writing
    - Writing Out of School
    - Success with Writing
    - Frustration with Writing
  - Current Instruction
    - Writing Process
Text Authors as Mentors
Positioned as Writers
PARCC
Missed Instruction
Direct Intervention
Choice to Write

Purposes for Writing
- Writing to Remember
- Writing as Social Activity
- Writing as Expression of Truth
- Writing as Self Improvement

Engagement during Digital Writing
- Peer Collaboration
- Use of Time
- Social Distractions
- Choice to Use Technology
- Avoidance Strategy

Contexts
- Home Environment
  - Relationships
  - Academic Support
  - Available Technology - Home
- Learning Environment
  - Available Technology
  - Resources - Electronic
  - Resources - Print
  - Teacher as Technology Learner/Facilitator
  - Teacher as Writer/Writing Teacher
- Enrichment Experiences

Adolescent Transitions

**Inductive Cross Case Codes**

Affordances of Digital Writing
- Benefits of Writing with Technology
- Barriers to Digital Writing
- Tech Paper Integration

Possibilities for Selfhood in Digital Writing
- Students Valued as Resources
- Possibilities for Selfhood Exist in Parameters of Assignment
  - Intertextuality

PARCC