This article presents a case study of development of reading identity in Angelica, a 15 year old Latina. The paper explores the literacy experiences in school that positioned Angelica as a struggling reader. It also examines the efforts of significant others in school and out-of-school contexts, as well as her own efforts, to contest this identity. In particular, it analyzes the pedagogical practices of Angelica’s ninth grade reading teacher that were pivotal in Angelica’s repositioning of her reading identity in school. Moving beyond teachers exploring with their students the broad construct of academic identity, the article argues for critical exploration of disciplinary identity as part of an academic curriculum. It offers some suggestions for doing so. The paper also advocates for building students’ academic identities in the out-of-school contexts of their lives. In departure from typical approaches, it stresses that students should take a significant role in deciding how to extend their academic learning and identities into outside-school spaces.

A group of urban adolescents have been assigned to a ninth grade reading class because they have been positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990) by standardized test scores as below grade reading level. When they talk about their identities as readers and writers, some say they “struggle” with reading and writing and others conclude that they “don’t like to read and write.” But some of these youth resist the institutionally ascribed positional identity (Holland, Lachichotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) of struggling reader and maintain that they are readers and writers despite what the test scores and reading course label imply. Their teacher, Molly, (all names are pseudonyms) agrees with this final assessment—that all her students, including those who entered her class thinking otherwise, are readers. Molly’s pedagogical practices facilitate her students’ rejection of the socially constructed label of struggling reader (McCarthey, 2001; Triplett, 2007) and the reconstruction of their academic identities as readers. This article examines the development of reading identity in Angelica, a 15 year old Latina adolescent, culled from her earliest literacy memories to her year spent in Molly’s class. The paper explores:

- Angelica’s transactions with multiple reading identities produced from her engagement in an array of literacy experiences in school and out-of-school contexts
- Molly’s pedagogical practices that scaffolded Angelica’s reconstruction of a strong identity as a reader in academic as well as out-of-school contexts.

A Theory of Identity as Socially Constructed and Positional
Identity is historically dependent, socially enacted, and culturally constructed understandings or objectifications of the self or a group (Holland et al., 1998). These self or group understandings are produced from the interaction of individuals’ personal worlds with collective spaces
and social relations (Holland et al., 1998). Holland et al. called these collective spaces figured worlds. The home, its surrounding community, and the school are distinct but overlapping figured worlds in which young people develop reading identities. Identities develop over time, are influenced by numerous social and cultural experiences, and are expressed according to social and cultural norms. Identity is neither static nor singular. Each individual possesses a number of role identities or positional identities—positions that she understands herself to occupy in and across social worlds. In positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), subject positions are always taken up in social groupings of at least dyads. If one person is positioned in a particular way then others are positioned complementarily. Thus, positional identities are not only self-ascribed but assigned to individuals by co-participants in social practices within figured worlds. For example, the relationships among teachers and students influence the positional identities that students are assigned or take up in literacy classrooms (Hall, 2005, 2007, 2009; McCarthey, 2001; Triplett, 2007). Hall (2009) studied how a teacher labeled a student as a struggling reader when the student did not participate in instructional activities in ways the teacher valued. This positioning led the teacher to withhold personalized assistance from the student further limiting the student’s opportunities for literacy development.

Institutions as socializing agents are also active in the process of individuals’ identity construction (Apple, 1980; Holland et. al, 1998; Young, 1971). Sociologists of knowledge like Young and Apple have established that school knowledge and pedagogies are selected and distributed in ways that maintain the privilege and power of dominant groups in a society while further disenfranchising marginalized groups. A long line of research has documented how these inequities challenge racial and linguistic minority youth in claiming academic identities of excellence (Anyon, 1997; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villaneuva, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). Literacy research drawing from social constructivist theories has also shown how schools construct literacy learning struggles for students who are poor or working class, or from racial and linguistic minority groups (McCarthey, 2001; Triplett, 2007). These struggles stem from curriculum and instructional approaches that discourage students from literacy learning, public labeling of students as low achievers based on standardized reading measures, and sorting students into classrooms saturated with rote instruction. The struggling readers that Hall (2005, 2007, 2009) studied recognized the difficulties they sometimes had understanding their subject-matter reading and accepted the label of struggling reader that their teachers and schools imposed on them as a consequence. She described how students intentionally enacted behaviors, such as silence or refusal to use reading strategies, to avoid signaling their reading difficulties to their teachers and peers. Such behaviors, although protecting students’ social status in the classroom, crystallized the identity of struggling reader that the students themselves wished to shed.

Subject positions are prone to change from momentary interaction to interaction, across contexts, and over time (Gee, 2006; Hall, 2005, 2007, 2009; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Holland et al., 1998). In his discussion of literacy and identity, Gee also posited that identity is co-constructed and socially situated. He argued for a complex view of identity in his discussion of Discourses, with a capital “D” (Gee, 1990, 1994). Discourses are ways of thinking, speaking, feeling, valuing, and interacting that allow one to take on particular recognizable identities. All individuals belong to multiple Discourse communities and people have the ability to transfer, combine, and reshape Discourses over time. Shape-shifting portfolio people, as Gee (2006) called them, were capable of using the tools of Discourse (language, values, social interactions, etc.) to enact different social roles or identities to meet changing needs or circumstances.

In line with this conception of identity, Hall (2005, 2007, 2009) examined conflicting discursive identities in students who identified as struggling readers in some school subjects but as successful readers in other disciplines. These students enacted different discursive roles (for example, participating in classes in which they felt successful and staying silent in those in
which they struggled) to promote or protect socially desired identities of success. Also in line with positioning theory, some of the very students who are ascribed identities of struggling readers in school may see themselves, and be positioned by others, as highly literate in outside-school activities (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Bomer, 2011; Gee, 2007; Gustavson, 2007). For example, Gee documented how videogaming communities fostered pleasurable and high quality literacy learning through shared enterprise, many fluid forms of participation, distributed knowledge, and flexible roles, including leadership. He referred to these communities as affinity groups—ones in which members are affiliated by common interests, goals, and practices that cut across identity markers like race, language, gender and culture. Literate activity and identity is thus produced within group interactions.

Although youth may be more readily positioned as literate by their peers in outside-school contexts, educators, too, have sometimes positioned youth to claim strong literate identities in school. One way in which they have done so is by connecting the academic curriculum to students’ cultural backgrounds and the interests and concerns of their homes and communities (Skerrett & Bomer, 2011; Gutiérrez, 2008; Hicks, 1997, 2004; Lee, 2007; Rogers, Morrell, & Enyedy, 2007). In such projects, one goal is to assist students’ development of a particular disciplinary identity, for example, that of a literary scholar (Lee) or critical historian (Rogers et al., 2007). Rogers et al.’s work examined the ways in which students’ academic experiences were affected by their positionings as “academically incapable” individuals. They documented how, through rigorous and culturally relevant historical work, students critiqued their previous educational experiences and took on productive academic identities.

Indeed, Hicks (1997) couched multiethnic, poor, and working class students’ access to the distinctive discourses and genres of the academic disciplines as a matter of equity in education. She argued that disciplinary literacies are powerful tools for teachers to facilitate their students’ acquisition of not only academic discourses but academic identities and productive self concepts. Hall (2005, 2007, 2009) also argued for teachers paying close attention to students’ identities in developing effective content area literacy instruction for “struggling readers.” A theory of identity and agency maintains that individuals may contest the identities that others impose on them and claim other identities for themselves (Holland et al., 1998). Different forms of participation and interactions within and across figured worlds can contribute to the development of new identities. In line with this assertion, this article considers how one student’s reading identity was constructed, challenged, and remade as she participated over time in different literacy practices across various figured worlds.

Research on the Reading Practices of Adolescents

Popular views proclaiming that young people are consumed by social media and other new technologies obscure the extensive reading that youth undertake to engage in these and other significant literacy practices (Skerrett & Bomer, 2011; Bomer, 2011; Gee, 2007). Contrary to persistent myth, adolescents are indeed reading (Glenn, 2008; Hicks, 2004; Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2009; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). Young men and women read across a variety of genres and for important purposes. They read informational texts to develop their knowledge and skills in work and leisure activities. They read non-fiction works such as biographies to learn more about people they admire. They read fiction works that represent sub-cultural groups to which they belong as a way to affirm group membership. As well, they read literature about groups with which they are unfamiliar but are interested in learning more about.

Research findings encourage self-selected reading, both in and out of school, as it fosters motivation and engagement that can lead to deeper comprehension and analysis of texts (Alvermann, 2001). For example, adolescents who are negotiating salient elements of identity such as social class, race, and gender often select texts that highlight these issues. Such texts can facilitate the youths’ exploration and development of critical perspectives on their and
others’ identities (Glenn, 2008; Hicks, 2004; Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2009; Sutherland, 2008). Sutherland, who studied how black adolescent girls responded to literature that explored black girls’ development of female racialized identities, recommended using greater amounts of literature that help youth critically examine issues of race, gender, and class. Marshall et al. explored black female adolescents’ preferences for “ghetto lit” that offered portrayals of life and characters that the youth either agreed with or challenged. In an after-school program, Hicks followed working class young girls’ attraction to popular horror and romance fiction that, she learned, bore connections to the material, cultural, and psychological aspects of their lives. Understanding that “particular forms of language invoke certain identities and address specific reading audiences,” Hicks argued that these young people (and their teachers) needed to see a legitimate place for their lived experiences and voices in literature (p. 65). Reading and discussing such representations, she argued, was a vital step before marginalized youth took up the unfamiliar discourses and practices of literary reading in school.

Texts reflecting the experiences and discourses of students’ lives require critical literacy pedagogy (Behrman, 2006; Glenn, 2008; Hicks, 2004; Lalik & Oliver, 2007). Critical literacy involves questioning the reader and the text. Such an approach helps youth identify and critique the reasons for their preferences for particular texts. It helps youth examine how their identities both influence and are influenced by the meanings they make out of texts and how others who are similar and different from them may respond to a literary work. Critical literacy further assists young people in apprehending authorial purpose and intended as well as un-intended audiences (Behrman; Glenn; Lalik & Oliver; Marshall et al.; 2009; Sutherland, 2008).

For example, Glenn (2008) examined how some young adult literature portrays popular teens as those who consume expensive goods and belong to social networks of wealthy and physically attractive peers. In keeping with Gee (2006), in these texts, these youth use material and social resources as tools to create and display identities that are valued by their peer groups. Glenn called for using a critical pedagogy with adolescents who read such texts to assist them in apprehending the identities and worldviews that they value and wish to adopt, and those they eschew. Critical literacy pedagogy calls for diverse literature that reflects students’ lived experiences, instructional approaches that emphasize discussion and reflection, and caring relationships among teachers and students. It aligns with Hicks’ (2004) conception of “pedagogies that are responsive to marginalized lives and voices, and yet reflexive and critical in that they invite students (and their teachers) to speak in new voices and develop new forms of consciousness” (2004, p. 65). This paper considers how Angelica’s experiences with reading in and out of school aligned with this body of research on adolescents’ reading lives.

Methods
I draw from a study in which a team of language and literacy researchers explored the literate lives of adolescents in and out of school and how knowledge about those lives might inform official teaching and learning in a reading classroom. The research team included two university faculty (one of whom is the author of this article) and graduate students who assisted with data collection. We collected data over a period of one year in a ninth grade reading classroom in a diverse high school and in the surrounding community in a southwestern state. The reading teacher and 13 of the 16 students in the class participated in the study. Additionally, within the student group, seven focal students undertook deeper exploration of their literacy practices. The students were Latina/o and African American and most were from working class backgrounds. Their teacher, Molly, was a white middle class woman. We invited Molly to participate in the study because she was knowledgeable about adolescent literacy research, having recently completed her Masters degree in language and literacy studies. We enjoyed a strong professional relationship and were mutually interested in exploring ways in which a teacher could apply knowledge of adolescent literacy in her
We used case study methods (Dyson & Genishi, 2007) in this project. I held three semi-structured in-depth interviews with Angelica, each lasting about an hour. I audio recorded these conversations and took detailed notes as well. In these interviews, I asked Angelica to discuss her life experiences with reading, writing, language, and other literacy practices in school, at home, and in other out-of-school contexts. I also invited Angelica to discuss how she was experiencing Molly’s curriculum. My interviews of Molly were more frequent and of shorter duration, occurring primarily after each class session I observed. I also audio recorded these conversations and wrote reflective notes afterwards. In these conversations, I focused on the ways in which Molly was drawing on her growing knowledge and understanding of her students’ literate lives in designing her curriculum. Additionally, Molly and I exchanged emails each week regarding her curriculum and instruction plans.

I observed the reading classroom twice a week and I audio-taped these observations and took detailed notes. Furthermore, I collected documents and artifacts related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment produced by Molly and Angelica. Additionally, I visited Angelica at home to learn more about how she and her family used language and literacy. I also attended a soccer game in which Angelica played and was honored to accept her family’s invitation to her Quinceanera. I wrote detailed field notes during the home visit, video recorded the soccer game, and wrote reflective notes after the Quinceanera.

My data corpus included transcribed interview data, observational and reflective notes of classroom and out-of-school events, and literacy artifacts produced by Molly and Angelica. I analyzed the data through a process of iterative reading and progressive focusing (Glaser & Strauss, 2006) to reduce the data to portions related to Angelica’s experiences with reading in school and out-of-school contexts over time. I highlighted these relevant data and took extensive notes in the margins of text. I undertook open coding to identify emerging themes which I used to generate broad categories for the data (Dyson & Genishi, 2007). Molly’s Class and Reading Preferences are two examples of categories I created. I employed more focused coding to create subcategories. For instance, under the category of Molly’s Class, I wrote focused codes such as Invitation to Read, Talk about Texts, and Sharing Stories. Under Reading Preferences, I created focused codes such as Stories that are Real, People Around, and Alone. I also wrote analytic memos to develop case bound propositions about how Angelica transacted with reading identity over time across multiple contexts of literacy practice. Thereafter, I generated more general assertions from Angelica’s case and considered implications of these findings in relation to educational opportunities for youth like her.

**Findings**

*Development of Early Reading Identity*

“I really didn’t like to read as much because it would be really boring and stuff...”

Angelica nostalgically recounted her earliest reading memory—reading a Junie B. Jones book (a series by author Barbara Park) to herself at school in the second grade. “I really loved that series when I was small.” She also remembered details of her early literacy education such as her fifth grade teacher reading *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2002) and *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) to her class, “every other day,” and being assigned 30 minutes of nightly reading, which she completed. In her own words, most of her early reading was in and for school. “I really just read in school.” Yet in interviews with Angelica, and in conversations with her mother, both attested that mom made efforts over the years to get Angelica more interested in reading beyond school and school tasks. Her mother encouraged family literacy activities but
explained that being a single working mom limited the time she had to read with her children at home. Angelica recalled how

Sometimes, it was really rarely, but my mom would like one night...tell my little brother to pick a book and then the next day it would be my sister and then the next would be my brother and the next would be me and the next day my other brother. And she would read the book to us.

Appropriating the school-sponsored forms of literacy that she desired her children to acquire, in round robin fashion, “mom would start off the book and she would read the paragraph. And my little brother would read a sentence and I would read like two sentences and stuff. So we would pass the book around and we would read.” These family literacy events occurred about once a month while Angelica was in the second and third grades.

Angelica’s mom also enrolled her in a public library summer reading program from the third to sixth grades. This program represented an opportunity for Angelica to join an affinity group that coalesced around a shared passion (Gee, 2007) for reading. The social, cultural, and material resources of that space served as available tools for Angelica to take on the Discourse (Gee, 1990) of a particular identity of reader. However, when she entered seventh grade, the family began planning an interstate move and Angelica explained that “it was really busy...we just packed throughout the year,” essentially ending her participation in the program.

Angelica’s mother’s efforts to strengthen her daughter’s reading identity aligned with positioning theory’s assertion that people can be offered or assigned new subject positions by co-participants in social worlds (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Nonetheless, both Angelica and her mother evaluated these early efforts to position Angelica as an avid reader as having limited success. Significantly, Angelica was not involved in making these decisions about the outside-school reading contexts in which she would participate or how her involvement in them would unfold.

Throughout childhood, Angelica’s mom had also bought her and her siblings various genres of books—pre-teen novels, magazines, and Spanish-language books (to help them maintain their native Spanish)—to see what might pique their interests. But Angelica was not drawn to these texts. “My mom had a few books at home for us but I really didn’t read them. And they were probably like little kids books, like they were too easy for me when I was in second grade.” Later, when she was in the fifth grade, her mother bought her the Babysitter Club book series (by author Ann Martin). “My mom gave them to me...She goes, ‘You better read them.’” But Angelica confessed, “I’ve never really been interested in those books. They just looked boring to me.” She concluded after reading each book’s back cover that, “This looks like this is not my type and I really don’t care for this one.” Angelica’s commentary that these books neither reflected her social worlds and interests, nor invited her into new worlds in which she was interested, verifies the importance of offering youth texts that meet such criteria. Her comments further confirm the significance of having youth select the texts they wish to read (Alvermann, 2001; Hicks, 2004; Marshall et al., 2009). As these books were supplied to Angelica and, furthermore, did not interest her, she was unable to use them as material resources for crafting an identity of reader (Gee, 2006).

Positioning and Repositioning of Institutional Reading Identity

“I feel like trying now. I’m tired of being in these reading classes.”

For seven of her nine years of formal schooling, Angelica had been placed in a reading class and ascribed an institutional positional identity of struggling reader (Hall, 2005, 2007, 2009; McCarthey, 2001; Triplet, 2007). Within this time period, for four consecutive years, Angelica had taken and failed the standardized reading tests of both states in which she had lived. A number of institutional practices constructed Angelica as a struggling reader. This included
the evaluation of students’ reading ability on standardized measures, the tracking of students into differentiated reading groups, and the public nature of this labeling and sorting (McCarthey, 2001; Triplett, 2007). Angelica pointed to some of these factors in explaining her poor performance on standardized reading tests. She noted, for example, how the design of these tests—that stripped her of agency to choose what, when, and how she read—contributed to her withholding of effort to pass them: “I would read the stories and I wouldn’t pay attention to the stories. And I would read the questions and I would, just from what I remembered, I would pick the answer. And I would never go back to the story.” She further identified how her own self-positioning as a reluctant reader (she distinguished between her ability to read and her motivation to read) contributed to her dismissal of these tests: “I just really wasn’t into reading.”

When pressed about why she disengaged from the tests she answered, “Because I always thought, ‘Man this isn’t really that important if I do anything.’” Thus Angelica perceived standardized testing as an inauthentic literacy practice that contained little present or future value. Her critique illustrates that it was the very nature of these tests that constructed a literacy struggle for her (McCarthey, 2001; Triplett, 2007). The consequence of her resistance was that “every year since third grade I’ve been in a reading class…and I had to read for like an hour every single day. And I was just like really bored with it because reading was my life practically back then.” The literacy instruction to which Angelica was consigned due to her performance on these tests yoked her to instructional practices that created even greater literacy struggles for her. For “an hour every single day,” she was required to read passages from past standardized tests and answer multiple choice questions. Angelica’s ironic evaluation was that, “We didn’t even read in that class… [The teacher] would just talk about like making sure we go back to the passage when we take the [state standardized] test and everything like that.” Angelica’s comments suggested that this teacher held a largely cognitive and print-centric view of literacy that could not wholly account for students’ rejection of literacy instruction that failed to address the socially-situated nature of reading identities (Hall, 2005, 2007, 2009). Moreover, glaringly absent from this classroom were the elements of choice from an array of literature, talk about texts, and relationships so central to constructing productive reading identity (Alvermann, 2001; Hicks, 2004; McCarthey, 2001; Triplett, 2007).

After years of these enervating experiences, Angelica exercised agency in claiming for herself a new institutional identity as a successful reader. She recounted internal influences on this turnaround. “I’m just like, ‘I feel like trying now. I’m tired of being in these reading classes.’ And like I just got really bored of them and then I started trying more in my reading and stuff.” Angelica’s resolution suggested her capability to be a shape-shifting portfolio person who could assume membership in a new Discourse community (Gee, 1990, 2006), someone who could agentively reposition her identity (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as a reader. When asked about her specific efforts to improve her reading engagement, she elaborated, “If I didn’t like the story I would still try my hardest to pay attention to the stories that I would read.”

Angelica’s mom was also supportive in helping her daughter claim a new institutional reading identity. Recreating school forms of literacy at home, “My mom always made sure I would read every day because she would make me read. And she’d make me write a page in a composition notebook of what the book was about.” During this time period when Angelica has purposed to reposition her reading identity, her mother’s arrangement of the home as another figured world in which Angelica could foster academic identity is significant. It portrays how adolescents can be the primary agents of their literate lives with adults playing a supportive role. In addition to her desperation to break out of reading class, Angelica’s revised self-positioning was also attributable to impending external changes in her social context. Angelica and her family began planning to move to a new state where she would complete the seventh grade and she resolved that “when I moved here... I wanted it to be a new
start for me and for me to actually try.” Hence, Angelica apprehended that new figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998), both in and out of school, would present her with opportunities to reposition herself as a reader. She intended to recruit new social spaces as tools with which to reshape her reading identity (Gee, 2006).

Students often self-identify as particular kinds of readers based on their publicized performance on standardized tests (Hall, 2005, 2007, 2009; McCarthey, 2001; Triplett, 2007). Unsurprisingly, then, because schools had long constructed her reading identity based on her test scores, Angelica described the success of her improvement efforts in those terms. “When I took the reading test in seventh grade I was two questions off to pass … And compared to all the other times I was like 15 or 10 questions off…and then last year I passed it.” Angelica’s repositioning of her reading identity testifies to the dubiousness of institutional labels that proclaim students cannot read well based on their performance on standardized tests. Yet while she had rejected the institutional identity of struggling reader, her new school nonetheless situated her according to this historical positioning. “But they still put me in the reading class. I don’t know why.” She gave an official account of passing the reading test. “They said that on the reading thing. They said I passed my math, I failed my science, I passed my social studies and I passed my reading.” Demonstrating how difficult it can be to step out of positional roles that occur in social groupings (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), Angelica reflected on her history-in-person (Holland et al., 1998): “I don’t know. I guess since I’ve been in the reading class all my life, I guess they just thought it was regular for me. I don’t know. …I don’t know why they put me in a reading class this year if I passed the test last year.” Angelica’s story condemns institutional practices that permanently label and position students based on their historical ways of participating in school.

Outside of school, Angelica also strengthened her newly claimed reading identity. It was in her seventh grade year that she first selected her own books. In the past, others had always chosen for her. In another effort to strengthen her academic identity, her mother had enrolled her in Big Brothers, Big Sisters. Angelica recalled her Big Sister taking her to a bookstore and the following exchange between them.

So we went to [a bookstore] and she goes, “Pick out some books.” And I’m just like, “You’re really going to buy me some books? I’m probably not even going to read them.” She goes, “I don’t care, just pick out books that you would probably like because your mom wants you to start reading.” So I picked out the Forever (Blume, 1989) one. I picked out Perfect (Friend, 2004) and I picked out that Gossip Girls [series by author Cecily Von Ziegesar] one and I ended up reading two out of three and I haven’t read the third one yet. Forever, I really liked it. I liked it a lot. And the Perfect one I also liked. It was really good.

In this exchange, Angelica was positioned as an agent of her literate life. She was compelled to consider the genres and topics she might find interesting and select texts that she was likely to read. That she completed two of the three books she chose implied her growing knowledge of herself as a reader (Alvermann, 2001; Bomer, 2011; Hicks, 2004).

Identity develops within and across contexts of social practice and relationships (Holland et al., 1998). Angelica’s reconstruction of reading identity within and across school and out-of-school settings demonstrates the importance of adolescents’ participation in multiple contexts of literacy practice. Additionally, the support provided to Angelica by her mother and Big Sister points to the importance of the encouragement, guidance, as well as freedom that youth need to participate as agents in their own literacy development. Through these experiences, Angelica began to learn about herself as a reader and could articulate the characteristics of books that would sustain her interest and prove satisfying. “I guess it’s the fact that they were like teen issues, that like they were real stuff that could actually happen to
you... how to deal with the conflict or what to do when I have a conflict and how to solve it…”

In a classic portrayal of an avid reader completely enraptured in the world of the text, she depicted her experience reading *Forever* (Blume, 1989).

I would stay up all night reading that book. My mom would come in my room, “Aren’t you supposed to be in bed already?” And I’m like, “Hold on, let me finish this chapter.” And she’d come in like three chapters later and I’d still be reading the book and I think it was like two and a half hours.

*Repositioning of Reading and Readers in Molly’s Classroom*

“...but now that I see there’s different books to read and different types of genres and everything, I like them now. I think it’s fun.”

Angelica’s out-of-school and in-school reading identities presented a paradox. Outside school, she was a self-directed and enthusiastic reader. In school, she read dutifully and received little joy from that institutionalized literacy practice. Entering yet another reading class in her ninth grade year, Angelica expected her typical experience: boredom and lack of agency, albeit under the guidance of a “cool” teacher. “I thought at first that Miss [Molly] was going to be really cool and everything but the class is going to be really boring. I thought [that] because I saw all these books and I’m just like ‘great, it’s another reading class.’” But Angelica’s low expectations that these were boring books that she would be forced to read were quickly banished.

The myth that individuals have a stable reading or literate identity (Barton et al., 2000; Gee, 1990; Hall, 2005, 2007, 2009) was deconstructed in Molly’s class. Molly placed the construct of reader into relationship with the many factors contributing to a particular reading identity. She emphasized that one’s reading identity could change from moment to moment and across different figured worlds or literacy practices. Molly’s initial project in the beginning weeks of the school year was to help students recognize and claim their already existing identities as readers. To do so, she offered a range of invitations in the forms of class activities, discussion and writing prompts, and homework assignments designed to engage students with their literate lives as subject matter and to provoke reflection on those lives. Shorter assignments and students’ thinking during discussions and other experiences were staged such that they contributed content to a more extended reflective paper at the end of the first marking period: “a paper on who you are as a reader.”

The invitations also included an initial discussion of the wide variety of forms of literacy the students had in their lives—from journals, to online social networking sites, from tagging to tattoos. Molly affirmed the highly literate qualities of these practices, for instance, by asking students to think about the extensive reading and writing they undertook to engage in these activities in their affinity groups (Gee, 2007). Each student was invited to name forms of literacy on individual sticky notes, which then the class aggregated onto a poster to develop categories. Molly reviewed their findings and asked them to “write on a post-it what you are thinking about this, finding literacy everywhere in your lives. Do you think differently about whether you are a reader or writer?” Molly also encouraged connections among the thinking, reading, and writing that students did with the cultural texts in their homes and communities and the academic skills they needed to develop (Skerrett & Bomer, 2011; Lee, 2007). She did so by asking frequently how students’ interactions with everyday texts of their lives like television shows, movies, and music, are like reading.

One day, Molly set up stations around the room corresponding to different ages—age 0–5, grades 1–3, 4–6, and 7–9. She stipulated that the point was “to talk more about our life histories and how they make you a reader and writer today.” In each station, she placed artifacts from her own literate life and books she thought typical of those ages to aid students’ memories. Students went to the stations in groups and were asked to reminisce about how literacy occurred in their
lives at different times. In a whole class discussion after these explorations, she asked the students how the things from their past connected to their reading today. Molly explained to students that these memories were important because they could provide clues about what sorts of books would interest them. In alignment with research on fostering adolescents’ reading lives (Alvermann, 2001; Hicks, 2004), Molly, after ascertaining some of the topics her students cared about, made available diverse genres on a range of relevant topics from which students could choose. These texts included teen romances set in urban communities; graphic novels and cartoons reflective of the TV shows students watched; poetry; biographies of rappers, historical figures, and athletes students admired; science fiction; and low rider and sports magazines. These texts required a critical literacy pedagogy (Hicks, 2004; Lalik & Oliver, 2007)—discussions of racism, poverty, physical and emotional abuse, sexuality, and controversial choices characters had made under pressing circumstances. Discussing these issues meant inviting, examining and critiquing a range of experiences and viewpoints that students held. Molly worked tirelessly with her students to create and maintain such a community.

Through daily opportunities to read, write, and talk about literature in a close-knit classroom community, Molly constructed a literacy environment that enabled her students to claim strong academic identities. As Angelica described it, “we would read for a few minutes and then write in our notebooks for a few minutes and we’d talk as a class for a few minutes and partner share. So we did all this stuff that was really different from middle school and from the Read 180 class.” This classroom community bore the features of affinity groups—shared passions and goals, flexible roles, and distributed knowledge (Gee, 2007). Students’ reading processes were often assisted by sticky notes on which they wrote about themselves as readers. They noted how they felt about reading on that particular day and why they thought that might be; places where they got engaged, disinterested, or confused in the text; the strategies they used to keep going; and evaluations of the successes of these efforts. In this way, students’ development of and transactions with their academic identity of reader became official curriculum, content into which they critically inquired throughout the year.

Molly combined social constructivist as well as cognitive theories of reading in her instruction and paid particular attention to her students’ transactions with multiple reading identities (Hall, 2005, 2007, 2009). Students considered how their emotional states, social and instructional interactions with their peers and teacher, the features of their texts, and their applications of cognitive and metacognitive skills positioned them, from moment to moment (Davies & Harré, 1990), as a particular kind of reader. Hence, as Hicks’ (1997) work described, disciplinary identity in relation to the content of this reading course, and not just a general notion of academic identity, was a core component of the curriculum. Students studied critically this identity of reader.

Angelica’s reading identity had flourished from this exposure to a broad range of texts, increasing agency to read in her areas of interest, and strategies for successfully and critically reading texts as well as her readings of them.

Miss [Molly] was showing me all these books that are really good. I’m like, “Okay, I’ll try and read them.” And I got interested in one book. I was just like, “This book is really good. Is there a different series to it?” And so I would read that one. And she showed me Tyrell (Booth, 2007) and Tyrell was really good. And I’m like, “Wow, there’s a lot of books in this world that are really my type of books and I’m pretty sure that I would like them.”

Indeed, Angelica read and enjoyed “a whole bunch of books” in her ninth grade year. She talked about the first book she read in terms of the agency Molly encouraged in students to select their reading materials.

I don’t think she [Molly] showed me a book when I first read it. I think I found it myself. And it was called Someone to Love Me (Schraff, 2007) and that was the first book that I read. And I’m just like, “This book was so good.” And I really liked it. And then it ended
up being that there’s a whole series to it and I’m like, “I want to read the other one.” But the second one that I read wasn’t as good as the first one. And she only had two books from that series. And then after that I read Child Called It (Pelzer, 1995) and then I read Diary of a Wimpy Kid (Kinney, 2007) and then I read…

Above, Angelica portrayed her newfound resilience as a reader. She was able to overcome the disappointment of the second book in the series not being “as good as the first one,” and then a secondary setback of not having access to additional titles in the series. Angelica instead located another book that also interested her. She further demonstrated reading competence by articulating her preferred way of reading books. For instance, she explained how, even after stumbling upon another book in the Bluford High Series by Schraff, she decided to complete her current book before returning to the series. “I found one today… but I didn’t want to read it because I was still reading Bleed (Stolarz, 2008). I’m still reading Bleed and I wanted to finish that book before I started another one.” Angelica portrayed a vibrant literate identity in this discussion of how she selected and designed particular strategies and preferences for managing her reading life (Bomer, 2011).

At the end of the school year, Molly’s final exam provided an opportunity for students to reflect on their growth as readers and writers. Angelica and another focal student, Kandace, completed a joint power point presentation for this final project. In documenting her growth as a reader, Angelica wrote that she had learned “How To Pick Great Books To Read, I Learned How [to write with] Details, How To Get Info From The Texts, To Go Deep ☺.” In response to a prompt in which Molly asked students to talk about what they had improved on, Angelica stated that she improved on “Reading, Writing, Going Deep And Writing With Details.” On one power point slide, the two girls inserted an image of a chicken breaking out of its shell to depict the birth of their academic identities as readers and writers in Molly’s class. Under the image they inserted the caption, “This Reminds Us About When We First Got Here And We Hatched In This Class.” On the subsequent slide they wrote in large font, “We Don’t Think Reading And Writing Is BORING☺!!!”

Finally, Angelica took purposeful action to extend her newfound academic identity as a reader into out-of-school contexts. She spearheaded an affinity group (Gee, 2007), inviting friends from outside-school figured worlds to participate in a shared reading life. Doing so enabled Angelica to claim a stronger group identity (Holland et al., 1998) of reader. “I just started talking to my other friend because I didn’t know she liked to read but I guess she likes to read because she found a book that it’s a lot [like] her life.” In a poignant example of how she had encouraged shape-shifting (Gee, 2006) in friends who claimed the Discourse of reluctant reader, Angelica recounted how

…my friend, she told me once, she goes, “I’ve never read a book in my life because I figure …if it’s a good book then they’re going to make a movie of it.” And I’m just like “that’s not true because I’ve read tons of books this year that are really good books.” …so I recommended her the book Forever (Blume, 1989) and she said she finished it in like two days. And I was like, “See, I told you that book was really good.” And she goes, “Yeah.” And I’m like I have another book, the Perfect (Friend, 2004) book. And she just returned it to me two days ago and she said that it was really good too. And so I’m just like, “Now you like to read?” She goes, “Yeah, I like, I guess, the books that you like to read.” I’m just like, “There you go.”

Discussion and Implications

Calls for teachers and students to take critical approaches to the curriculum are increasingly familiar (Behrman, 2006). Additionally, there is a growing body of research on disciplinary literacy (Hicks, 1997; Moje, 2007; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) that considers how to build students’ academic knowledge, dispositions, and skills in relation to a specific academic discipline. This analysis asserts that attached to these approaches is a need for teachers and
students to take a critical approach to the construct of academic identity in relation to the specific academic discipline that students are learning. It has demonstrated how, in Molly’s class, students took a critical lens not just to the curriculum, but to the construct of academic identity. In relation to the content of this reading course, they specifically focused on the academic identity of struggling reader that had largely determined their educational experiences and, in structural terms, accounted for the creation of this class and their placement in it. This identity was taken up as part of official study as students daily reflected, wrote, and discussed with others their attitudes toward reading, the ways in which they were engaging with or disengaging from texts, why, and with what effects. As such, students apprehended how this particular disciplinary identity of struggling reader was constructed and transacted with over time, even from moment to moment, and across contexts (Barton et al., 2000; Hall, 2005, 2007, 2009). They realized that they could claim and maintain strong identities as readers while critically exploring the factors that supported or threatened this identity.

Discourses are ways of thinking, speaking, valuing, feeling and being (Gee, 1990). Furthermore, social, cultural, and material resources serve as tools for creating, displaying, and reinforcing identities (Gee, 2006; Holland et al., 2008). Accordingly, across subject areas, fruitful questions for exploring disciplinary identity may include the following: What does it mean to be a student of this discipline? Are there different ways to be a student of this discipline? Who decides? What are the various skills, knowledge, and attitudes that comprise this disciplinary identity? Which of these am I more or less willing to take up and why? Which do I find reasonable and which do I find challenging? How does my willingness to adopt this disciplinary identity change over time and across contexts? What are the characteristics of the tools—such as texts, learning activities, or relationships—that best facilitate or greatly frustrate my entrance into this identity? How does my academic identity in this particular discipline affect my broader identity as a student? How might multiple disciplinary identities productively inform a more general academic identity? Students may develop stronger disciplinary identities, knowledge, and skills by continuously reflecting on these questions as they study a given discipline.

The second assertion of this analysis is that youth may strengthen their academic identities and learning by determining outside-school contexts into which they can extend them. This proposal aligns with other research documenting how students’ voluntary participation in sophisticated literacy practices in outside-school contexts generates affinity, identity, and learning (Skerrett & Bomer, 2011; Bomer, 2011; Gee, 2007; Gustavson, 2007). Although Molly’s classroom was a pivotal context for Angelica’s refiguring of her reading identity, this analysis also demonstrates the potential of offering youth opportunities for academic learning in interlaced in- and out-of-school spaces. It has shown how Angelica’s mother steered her into multiple and overlapping social contexts of literacy practice over time and brokered relationships with people who positioned Angelica as a reader. Recruiting young people’s participation in multiple figured worlds of substantive literacy learning—home, church, community programs, friendship networks, private lives—provides numerous opportunities to foster academic identities.

Schools and teachers, as one aspect of their curriculum, can help youth identify and build other meaningful contexts, practices, and relationships into which they can extend their academic learning and identities. This implication moves beyond established educational practices such as academic apprenticeships and mentoring. Students, rather than adults, should be positioned as the primary agents who determine and pursue the most relevant, substantive, and fulfilling avenues for making these connections. Moreover, youth may choose from among a variety of figured worlds—for example, private, social, or civic—in which to deepen their academic understandings and identities. In such endeavors, the role of adults is to provide support for youth in identifying and engaging productively in literate activity. Such an approach aligns with how youth already participate in self-sponsored literacy
practices on their own terms (Bomer, 2011; Gee, 2007; Gustavson, 2007). However its goal is to facilitate youth’s development of the academic literacies and identities that are important for and beyond school. The possibility of youth taking on such work is illustrated in Angelica’s self-propelled recruitment of her peers to participate in an out-of-school reading network upon her claiming of a strong identity as a reader. Rather than hatching in just one class, cross-germination may generate even more robust academic identities that students consciously and critically develop over time and across contexts.

References


**Literature Cited**


