Investigating Adolescents’ Critical Literacy Practices

by

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B.A., Lakehead University, 1998
B.Ed., Lakehead University, 1998

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

If today’s adolescents are not becoming critically literate, then the nearly infinite number of texts with which they engage, are being accepted blindly or simply ignored. There are adolescents who do question texts, but what are the meanings they make from them. This research focuses on the question, “How do adolescents use critical literacy to navigate/negotiate the texts in their lives?” Through classroom observation and interviews with the students as informants, I collected qualitative data that I used to develop a Critical Engagement Continuum. The Continuum provides a framework how adolescents engage with a variety of texts, from critical thinking to critical literacy. Conclusions show that most participants’ comments fell towards the critical thinking end of the continuum and few made mention of any social justice issues or transformative thinking which categorizes the critical literacy end. Recommendations are made for teachers looking to develop a critically literate classroom.
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Dedication

For my sister, Jessica.
She always thought I was a smarty pants and now she knows for sure.
Her unwavering confidence in me has given me strength throughout this degree.
Chapter 1: Introduction

I have spent my whole life asking questions. My mom told me about a time, when I was about 4 years old, when we were driving in the car and I said, out of the blue, “What happens to boys and girls who don’t wear their seat belts?” This story confirmed two things for me. One, that I was a worrier. Two, that I was a questioner, an inquirer, someone who was not satisfied until I had all the answers to all the questions I could think of. The worrying comes and goes, but what has stuck with me is the need to know. But my questions are not the mechanical how-does-this-work type. Instead they often include big issues, problems and concepts that do not have easy answers. I question what people are thinking, what might happen or why something is the way it is. I wonder about the outcomes of things that may not even happen and I am perplexed by the choices people make and question how their choices could affect me or those around me. I often think I know the answers too. My problem is that I do not, which usually leads me to more questions.

Another instance that stands out in my mind occurred many years later than the first. I was at the mall with my boyfriend and some of his male friends. I was seventeen years old, petite build, shockingly short blonde hair and full of confidence. I was feeling pretty good about myself at the time. I thought I was attractive enough, although I knew I was not going to be a cover girl for a fashion magazine and yet that day, the attention of my male friends was not directed at me. A woman had walked through the mall. Just walked. She had not done back-flips or handed out thousand dollar bills, she just walked past where we were sitting. My friends became distracted from our conversation. In fact, I found that I was talking to myself. I followed their gaze and noticed a woman. She was
taller than me, slender, had long blonde hair and very fashionable clothing. “What’s the big deal?” I asked them. “Why her, and not me?” I was perturbed. These guys were my friends, they had admitted at one time or another that I was pretty and that my boyfriend was “a lucky dude.” So why did one woman’s passing by, turn our conversation into their silence. My friends could not answer, by the way. They did not know why they were attracted to her, besides the fact that she looked like she had stepped out of one of the posters that adorned the walls in their bedrooms. But I pushed. “Why is she someone that makes you stop and look? You don’t know her. She could be mean or evil.” Still, they had no answer. I was bothered.

My friends were sometimes put off by my questions. They were used to them of course, because we spent time together. But I think it was my need to shake things up that tended to get to them. I asked big questions, deep thinking questions that made them reconsider their own thoughts about the world. I also was not afraid to be honest and share my answers, despite how against the grain they seemed. I remember the time, in Grade 10 History class when we were studying World War II. We had reviewed the causes of the war and the people involved. The class was getting riled up because we were beginning to understand the atrocities committed by Hitler and his Nazi army. I totally understood that his actions were evil, unjust and will hopefully never be repeated. But at the same time, I was quite intrigued by his rise to power from his unimpressive early life. During one discussion, I asked my classmates if they agreed that despite the horrors in which Hitler took part, could they deny he was a good leader? The reaction was somewhat predictable. Many voices were heard at once, nearly all disagreeing with me in some way or another. I had anticipated this and waited for my turn to talk. I pointed
out his rise to power, his organizational abilities, his persuasive speeches and some other leadership qualities that I felt Hitler possessed. This comment made them think. I was not suggesting he should be a model for future leaders or anything like that. I just wanted to acknowledge another side of him; a different perspective. In a way, it made him more dangerous. The question was fair and my classmates did hear me out, although I do not remember if I managed to convince anyone of my ideas.

Looking back, this kind of interaction between my peers and myself did not occur in all my classes. But, in this class our teacher had encouraged our opinions, fostered debate and allowed us to experiment with and express our ideas in a safe and public way. Because he had set up this safe environment, we took risks. This event stayed with me throughout the rest of my schooling and I still think about it today. It was such a rush to be able to challenge other people and hear them challenge me. It made me feel strong and smart. Years later, when I was teaching my own students, in History and English classes, I tried to create the same kind of safe and public space for my students as I had experienced. I wanted them to have a chance to try out their ideas in a setting that was low-risk. I wanted them to get that same rush, to feel smart and be strong. I wanted them to express their thoughts and hear the opinions of their peers so they could make up their own minds. If their questions and ideas were dismissed, hushed or not even heard, there would be little learning for them.

Asking questions, looking at things from different points of view and digging deeper into issues were skills I developed during my childhood and adolescence. It was not until university that I was exposed to the formal notion of critical thinking. It was not until I was teaching that I became aware of critical literacy and how it differs from
critical thinking by including social justice issues and connecting individuals' ideas with world views. It was not until my graduate work that I started to investigate critical literacy and its impact on my own teaching and learning, as well as how critical literacy is taken up by others.

What strikes me now, looking back at my question-filled teenage years, was that not all my friends were asking questions. Now, this bothers me. Why were they not questioning the texts they were reading? How could they simply accept the messages? Did they believe in everything they saw on television or what they heard in music lyrics? Did they not want to know whose ideas they were taking on and where those ideas came from? My propensity to question texts has helped me learn about my life and the lives of others. I do not ask questions because I am cynical, disparaging, or contemptuous; I ask them so I can become informed about the many factors contributing to the meaning making involved when reading texts.

The Purpose of this Research Study

There is a dawning realization that the Internet...is different from radio, television, and newspaper in that it is totally open, interactive technology – but with no built-in editor, publisher, censor or even filters. With one mouse click, you can wander into a Nazi beer hall or a pornographer’s library, hack the NASA computers or roam the Sorbonne library, and no one is there to stop or direct you. You interact with the network naked. The only really effective filters are the values, knowledge and judgment that your kid brings to the Web in his or her own head and heart. (Friedman, 1999, p.15-A cited in Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 193)
This research is important because there has been a shift in the past decade in the ways we communicate. New literacies are developing because of the increased advances in technology and vice versa. The lengths to which people, companies and media go to seek our attention have changed drastically, mainly because of the influence of and growing access to the Internet and information communication technologies. Lankshear and Knobel (2001) highlight Goldhaber’s (1997) idea of an attention economy; one in which the commodity is attention, not information, as thought by some. “Being able to participate in the attention economy involves knowing how to pay and receive attention” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2001, p. 4). Texts inundate readers from a plethora of sources and if readers are unable to filter out what is not important to them or how the information they are reading relates to them, the results could be overwhelming and confusing. This is why one of the central aspects of new literacies are critical literacies. “With the barrage of information available at the stroke of a single key, learners need to develop skills and strategies to determine the quality, reliability, validity, purpose, and intent of the information that they can easily access,” (McLeod and Vasinda, 2008, p. 261). As pointed out in the above quotes, if children are not given the opportunity to navigate new media and technologies with some guidelines or framework (for instance, taking a critical literacy stance when reading texts), they can very easily find themselves floundering in a sea of incomprehensible messages.

Critical media literacy not only teaches students to learn from media, to resist media manipulations, and to use media materials in constructive ways, but it is also concerned with developing skills that will help create good citizens and make
them more motivated and competent in social life. (Kellner, 2004, p. 19, emphasis added)

Using critical literacy to help children read texts challenges what I see as a protectionist view that some people hold about exposing children to certain forms of media or information. What I mean by protectionist view is that some people feel that if children are purposefully exposed to texts with content regarded as too mature for them, they will be harmed somehow by these texts and the messages within them. Content that is deemed potentially harmful could be about war, illness, death, or sexual and adult relationships. By blocking children from these texts, for instance, those about war, illness or death, we are not helping them develop ways understand or cope with this information. It is naïve to think that by denying children access to television programs or books or Internet use that they will not be exposed to these ideas and issues elsewhere. As an elementary teacher I supervised students during recess and many times I saw 6 and 7 year old children “killing” each other with pretend guns made from sticks or by pointing their fingers at each other. Denying them access to information does not stop it from existing, and there are many other places besides school that children get information. Instead, by teaching them ways to question and explore texts and the world, through critical literacy, we are enabling them to better comprehend any texts they encounter. Through questioning texts and themselves, readers can get to the “hidden influences” in behind the explicit meaning of texts. These influences include the societal ideologies that impact the author’s and the reader’s comprehension of the text, the reader’s past experiences and how the reader relates and connects to the new information that is being presented. In questioning, exploring and disrupting the many factors that
influence texts, the reader can change opinions, discover new information, and become better informed.

**Primary Research Question**

My concern is that if today’s adolescents are not asking questions and are not becoming critically literate, then the nearly infinite number of texts in their lives are being accepted blindly or simply ignored. At the same time, there are many adolescents who *are* asking questions, looking more deeply at the texts in their lives and making clear choices about the ones they read and the meanings they make from them. What are they asking and which texts are they approaching with a critical literacy stance? How developed is this stance? There have been few studies that approach critical literacy from the point of view of the students involved. I believe that in order to find out what students are doing related to critical literacy, I must go directly to them. It is for this reason that this research focuses on the students as informants, rather than studying what their teachers are doing to foster critical literacy. I also believe that critical literacy can and does occur outside the school environment and this impacts how the research is shaped, in terms of the kinds of texts that were discussed during the focus group and interviews. The main research question of this study is ‘How do adolescents use critical engagement to negotiate the texts in their lives?’
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Literacy

Literacy has traditionally been recognized as a term referring to the skills related to reading and writing that one possesses. The ability to communicate with oneself, others and unknown audiences is central to defining this term. The modes we use to communicate are ever increasing as are the reasons for communication and the definitions related to literacy needed to reflect these changes. “Instead of seeing reading and writing skills as mere preparation for work and further education, Freire understood the learner’s relationship to literacy as the origin of genuine dialogue and active participation in communication” (Endres, 2001, p. 401). It is necessary to include in the literacy definition then, that being literate means having an active role in reading, understanding, sharing and producing texts. Being active through literacy often means being political, for instance a teacher selecting a text to share with her class is making a political decision as that text has biases, a context and multiple perspectives from which it can be read and understood. The teacher’s choice also shows power over the students because they have no say in the text they have to read. Communicating information is a political endeavour within literacy as Freire and Macedo (1987) point out. They define literacy as a “set of practices that serve to either empower or disempower people” (p. 141). The power relationship between people and texts impacts the understanding one develops about the texts one reads. Teachers are set the task of making sure their students are literate. As communicating information is political, so too is teaching. The political nature of teaching and literacy is embedded within Rebecca Powell’s (1999) concept of literacy education.
If literacy education is to be part of an educational ideal of enabling learners to become full participants in a democratic society, it should:

- promote freedom of thought through encouraging diverse perspectives and welcoming productive critique;
- enhance students’ communicative competence by considering the social, cultural and hegemonic dimensions of language use;
- be consciously political;
- be taught in ways that make students aware of the power of language for transformation;
- be taught in ways that nurture a culture of compassion and care. (Powell, 1999 as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2009, p. 76.)

Powell’s definition of literacy includes the political-ness of Freire and Macedo’s ideas and connects literacy to teaching.

Literacy skills are not equally shared or accessed by all people, thus the communication of information is also not equally shared or accessed. This is explained by Kellner (2004), who writes that “literacies evolve and shift in response to social and cultural change and the interests of elites who control hegemonic institutions” (p. 17). Yet, approaches to literacy education do not seem to change because access continues to be unequal, controlled, highly political, and because literacy levels are varied among people in society. In schools, literacy levels also vary because of access; access to resources, students’ ability to read (and therefore access meaning in) texts, and access to explicit strategies that encourage questioning of texts and connecting to the world outside the classroom. Literacy is not only personal because it combines outside teaching of
particular skills with the learner’s personal unique experiences and but also because those experiences impact the understanding a learner creates about texts. Literacy is personal because the context in which the literacy skills or texts are presented influences the learner’s comprehension.

Literate practices are not merely technical means transportable unchanged across sociocultural contexts. They are specific practices manifested in the differing contexts, whose meaning are more dependent on the processes by which they were acquired than on the specific skill applied. (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 65)

Learners’ literacies are unique because it depends on how a learner obtains knowledge about literacy skills.

Even more recently the definition of literacy has expanded, changed and shifted again to encompass the many new modes of communication. Access again plays a part in the current definitions of literacy, as do social and cultural influences. “Literacy, [therefore], may be thought of as a moving target, continually changing its meaning depending on what society expects literate individuals to do” (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004, p. 11). Literacy has become a socially constructed term, with social implications for its use. The idea of just one literacy is also outdated as multiple literacies and new literacies are being created and defined to reflect the methods of communication in/with which literate people engage. Lankshear and Knobel (2007) define literacies as “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006 as cited on p. 224). For them,
literacies are about more than simply decoding a communication method. Literacies extend into meaningful interaction between people and texts. Discourse, with a capital D, is a term coined by Gee (1990), which he uses to describe the parts of language and social life that share similar aspects for particular groups of people.

Discourse is always more than just language. What is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations… Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities. (Gee, 1990, p. 3)

Coupling Discourses with literacies takes the focus off one-dimensional texts and places an emphasis on the reader’s experiences in social life and how they influence the meaning making of being many kinds of literate. Kellner (2001) also recognizes the social influence on the definition and function of literacies.

Literacies are socially constructed in educational and cultural practices involved in various institutional discourses and practices. Literary thus involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read and interpret the text of the world and to successfully navigate and negotiate its challenges, conflicts, and crises. (p. 61)

Discourses structure the meaning of literacies and the agreed upon uses within the societal framework in which they appear. This is a far cry from simply thinking of knowing how to read and write as in the traditional definition of literacy, and it takes into account Leu et al.’s (2004) idea that the meaning of literacy is not fixed or unchanging.
As well, to think of literacy today one must consider the “spacial turn” (Bearne, 2009, p. 156) it has taken. Bearne (2009) points out the shift from paper to screen and suggests that instead of thinking about “a theory about language alone [one must adopt] … a theory that can take account of different components of meaning” (p. 157). New (mostly screen-based) literacies have emerged as technology has infiltrated public and private spaces but not all people can get to those spaces, or understand what messages are provided within them. New Literacies and their connection to critical literacies will be expanded upon below. It is important to be aware of the necessity of critical literacy as a tool or filter for understanding meaning in texts, text selection and text production, regardless of the media of the text.

**Text and Meaning**

As the definition for literacy has changed to encompass the growing methods of communication and information production, the idea of text is also expanding to include multimodal and alternative outcomes/products.

Text and meaning are no longer embedded exclusively in a linear sequence of alphabetic characters combined in a logical sequence of phrase, sentence, paragraph, and narrative units dictated by author intent or formatting demands of a page or book. (Luke, 2003, p. 399).

The definition of text is expanding away from traditional books and into a realm of nearly infinite possibilities of what it can be, including “images, gestures, music, movement, animation and other representational modes” (Siegel, 2006, p. 65) as well as, “sociocultural conditions and relationships” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 12), and electronically-based ways of sharing, creating and exploring information.
The purpose of texts is to communicate information. The way that occurs is decided upon by many factors, like the author’s preferences, the importance of the text, the recipient etc… Texts do more than this though. “Texts are a means for constructing, shaping, and reshaping worlds in particular normative directions with identifiable ideological interests and consequences for individuals and communities” (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 9). Texts help to create societal norms and also break societal norms, depending on their producer, message and audience. Luke and Woods (2009) expand on the purposes of text by explaining they have two distinct functions, what texts say and what they do. Investigating how “words, grammar and textual discourse choices shape a representation or “version” of the material, natural or sociopolitical worlds” (p. 15) is based on looking at what texts say. This version represents the producer’s ideas but is not necessarily the same as the version that is understood by the reader. “How words and grammar bid to establish relations of power between authors and readers, speakers and addressees, designers and digital text users” (p. 15) is focusing on what texts do. The power relationship between reader and text is addressed by Luke and Freebody (1999) in their creation of a “3rd stance” (Luke & Freebody, 1999), a critical stance, which posits the readers as text critic. This powerful role establishes the reader as an active participant in the meaning making process that is undertaken when interacting with text.

Social influences surrounding text lead the reader to make an interpreted or negotiated meaning. “Meaning therefore does not reside within the text, but is constantly in movement… The meanings attributed to texts are what readers make of them within various contexts” (Hagood, 2002, p. 255, emphasis added). The context of a text includes the reader’s current and past experiences, the author’s current and past experiences, and
the many cultural and historical influences that add to the interpretation of the text. “The text, imbued with societal and cultural structures of race, class, and gender, marks the site of the struggle for power, knowledge, and representation” (pp. 250-51). The struggle Hagood (2002) refers to can take place publicly or privately, with others or independently. Context has a strong influence on the way a text is perceived. Readers “mediate [these] texts differently through their own lived experiences and realities and make sense of them within multiple frameworks of interpretation” (Gounari, 2009, p. 168). Depending on where, when and why a text is read, the meaning can change for each individual who is exposed to the text, because his or her individual contexts are a part of that mediation. Prior knowledge also has an effect on how the reader reads the text and how the reader responds to it. Another factor influencing reader comprehension of text is the number of exposures the reader experiences with the text, as well as with other similar texts. “Students’ understanding of the language in a text can be viewed as dynamic…as videotape that we can edit and re-edit as needed’” (Gee, 2001 as cited in McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 265). Each reading of a text can bring new meaning or help to clarify ongoing meaning.

Critical literacy encourages a broad understanding of text as well as questioning of the text’s origins. When a reader explores a text using a critical literacy stance, big questions are asked and wider influences are uncovered and hidden or implicit meanings are discovered. “By ‘reading between the lines of the message, question(ing) the intents behind them and learn(ing) how to look for alternative ways to be informed/entertained’” (Torres & Mercado, 2006 as cited in Lapp & Fisher, 2010, p. 157), readers enhance their
comprehension of text and develop their critical literacy stance. This exploration enables a stronger understanding of the text for the reader.

**Core Understandings of Critical Thinking and Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy encompasses the definitions of literacy but goes further in order to help create a broader understanding of reading which includes thinking about, responding to, and creating texts, moving to social action and developing an awareness of texts in relation to the larger context in which we live. “To be critically literate, readers must come to understand that texts are not ‘true’ but rather that they represent the perspectives of the writer and the socio-cultural times in which they were written” (Lapp & Fisher, 2010, p. 159). Because the times and cultures of texts vary, it is not easy to define critical literacy; nor should it be. Just as literacy’s definitions change depending on context, so do the definitions of critical literacies. Critical comes from the Greek word, ‘kriticos’, meaning the ability to argue or judge, (Luke & Woods, 2009). While there are many definitions available, they all share the concept of questioning or arguing. The idea of questioning and finding truth in text is at the root of critical thinking, which is an important foundational concept of critical literacy.

Critical thinking is a term that is mistakenly used interchangeably with critical literacy but differences do exist between them. “Critical thinking is a process whereby a person reflects upon his/her own thinking process so as to create clear, well-reasoned ideas for the benefit of him/herself and others” (Mulcahy, 2008, p. 17). Paul and Elder (2005) define a critical thinker as one who is “skilled in…analytical, evaluative and creative” thinking (as cited in Mulcahy, 2008, p. 17). Analysis and evaluation of texts are central to forming clear concepts for the individual. The goal of educating towards
critical thinking is to assist students in developing their ability to express themselves rationally and clearly about thoughts related to issues that they are considering (p. 18). A critical thinker has a “‘powerful inner voice of reason’ (Elder & Paul, 1998, p. 300)” (p. 19) so as to enable one to be aware of one’s own “inconsistencies and contradictions” (Elder & Paul, 2005, as cited in Mulcahy, 2008, p. 19). A critical thinker, then, knows her/himself well enough to notice these contradictions and be able to rationally consider how they have occurred and possibly react based on this reflection. It is important to note that critical thinking approaches issues in an “item-by-item” (Burbles & Beck, 1999, p. 55 in Mulcahy, 2008, p. 26) fashion, and the relationships and connections between issues are not emphasized. “This tends to produce a more analytical and less holistic mode of critique” (Burbles & Beck, 1999, p. 55, in Mulcahy, 2008, p. 26). Overall, critical thinking is an approach to text that uses evaluative and analytical questioning and a step-by-step approach to finding truth in text, solving problems and working through solutions in a compartmentalized manner. A critical thinker thinks locally, or individually, focusing on how texts impact him/her. The ability to think critically is very important to becoming critically literate but a clear distinction between the two approaches must be highlighted.

Critical literacy moves away from the traditional ideas of literacy, which Wesley White (2009) refers to as being hegemonic (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1993; Wallowitz, 2008), and moves towards being transformative (p. 55). Critical literacy involves an active participation from the reader, which leads to this transformation. A critical stance elevates the status of the reader from a passive recipient of the views and ideas of an author to a critical thinker who questions the
author and the text, examines information or ideas based on what is included and what is left out, and reflects upon the change that transpires within himself or herself as a result of this process. (McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 261)

The transformative effect of a critical literacy approach to reading a text is one aspect that distinguishes critical literacy from critical thinking. Hagood (2002) outlines three core beliefs of critical literacy that contribute to the transformative nature of critical literacy. First, “the influence of critical social theories such as those posed by Freire (1970/1993; 1973) and Marx (1890), which champion ideas of liberation, equity, and social justice of subordinated groups” (pp. 248-9), contributes to the way a reader responds to a text. These theories also bring the world to the text and allow the reader an opportunity to make connections between what she has read and how it relates to the experiences of others as well as her own. Behrman (2006) echoes this sentiment when he writes, “taking social action allows students to recognize literacy as a sociocultural process and to engage literacy as a vehicle for social change” (p. 495). Students begin to see the multiple messages of a text, viewing more than what is in black and white on the page. Looking for what is missing, who is missing, who has written the text, his/her background etc… sheds light on the expanse of ideas being contained in the message, and the relationship between the reader and the author. “Critical literacy challenges the status quo and clarifies the connection between knowledge and power” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Freire & Macedo, 1970, 1987 as cited in Bell Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 488). Awareness of the connection between knowledge and power, and how these concepts affect social
equity and inequities leads to reader response. It is through these responses and reactions that transformation within a reader occurs.

Second, Hagood (2002) states that literacy of any sort is influenced by “social, cultural and historical factors” (p. 249), and these influences mean a negotiation between reader experience and text is undertaken when reading. The negotiation may be conscious or unconscious as readers attempt to make sense of the text. In some cases it simply confirms prior thinking while in others it opens up new concepts that have to be carefully considered before they are easily understood. The negotiation also points out the relationship between text/language, author, reader, meaning and power. Readers are “encouraged to evaluate an author’s perspective as well as their own” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004 as cited in McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 265). By exploring texts from many angles, readers are exposed to the influences that may not be obvious at the first reading. Reading for, understanding of and responding to the relationships between concepts and issues in texts and their contexts is another way critical literacy differs from critical thinking because these relationships are not taken into account in critical thinking.

The third and final belief put forth by Hagood (2002) is the push from the influence of social theories to affect change through scrutiny of the text (p. 249), the reader’s experiences and the context of the text. When scrutinizing texts, a reader will not simply try to understand the surface meaning, but instead will go deeper into the text. She will question “the realities and particular identities produced in texts” (p. 247). Questioning texts is a common factor present in critical thinking and nearly all definitions of critical literacy. The mindset of critical literacy is adopted by the reader when her/his questions push beyond the analytical or evaluative and he/she begins to consider how
cultural ideologies and social practices of the author and of him/herself impact the meanings of the texts. Shor (1999) states, “critical literacy [thus] challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development” (p. 1). In challenging and questioning text meanings, readers are breaking down stereotypes and moving away from simple acceptance of meaning without thinking where the meaning came from, who constructed it, who is missing from it, what other possible meanings for the text are there etc… This lack of questioning relates to Wesley White’s (2009) understanding of traditional literacy being hegemonic as the reader mindlessly accepts general ideology. “Critical literacy makes the crucial step of seeing language not only in terms of explicit messages, but also hidden ones that can only be identified when language is viewed in its social context” (Endres, 2001, p. 406).

Social context can be thought of in terms of a Discourse, which differs for each readers and author. A critical literacy stance can help to uncover the Discourses that accompany a text, which can lead to deeper understandings of it as well as help to shape the response a reader has to a text. “Critical literacy involves practices that identify and critique Discourses that regulate who and what we become, individually and collectively” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2009, p. 72).

For teachers, teaching students to adopt a critical literacy stance can be both difficult and confusing as well as necessary. It is difficult because of the variety of definitions that exist for critical literacy. It is confusing because students all bring differing levels of knowledge to a text, so encouraging them to think critically and deeply based on the level at which they are reading texts means that each student may need different support and prompting in adopting this critical stance. This being said, there are
many suggestions as to what critically literate students do with texts; for instance, “students are encouraged to question, confront, criticize and adopt their own informed positions on issues affecting themselves and/or the world, and to hone their acquired skills and consciousness through imagining themselves in the lives of others” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2009, p. 69). Supporting students to approach all texts critically by assisting them to develop skills in order to do this is an easier way to teach students to be critically literate than trying to plan the critical literacy around a few key texts that they will study. More about critical literacy and schooling follows later in this chapter.

**Critical Literacy & New Literacies**

To define new literacies can be a perplexing task. This could be because, as Leu et al. (2004) suggest, literacies are deictic, meaning that depending on who uses the term, when and where it is used and in what context, the meaning changes, like the words “today” and “here” for example (p. 17). Technologies that enable communication and information sharing are emerging in non-linear ways and from different sources. One means of communication does not appear and replace another, nor do communication technologies all flow from the same source. New literacies “almost always build on foundational literacies rather than replace them” (p. 16). People access technologies for different reasons (e.g. communication, entertainment, social networking, information gathering, etc…) and have varying levels of abilities when using new technologies -- both those that are new and new to them. There is little that is fixed when considering what defines new literacies. New literacies are deictic because it is hard to pin down just which skills/understandings one needs to be a new literate.
Despite the struggle to define new literacies, Leu et al. (2004) provide a starting point for what this term means.

The new literacies of the Internet and other ICTs (information and communication technologies) include the skills, strategies and dispositions necessary to successfully use and adapt to the rapidly changing information and communication technologies and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and professional lives. These new literacies allow us to use the Internet and other ITCs to identify important questions, locate information to answer those questions, critically evaluate the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer those questions, and then communicate the answers to others. (p. 2)

This framework outlines some very important skills and understandings that one uses when working with the Internet and other ICTs. Apart from the beginning skills of actually getting on to the Internet or making the ICT device work, the bigger theme of this framework is about what you do with the information once you have found it. The idea that a reader is part of creating text, which itself can be edited, changed and ongoing, separates New Literacies from traditional literacies, which are much more fixed and finite. “Producers and interpreters of new texts [also] assume an interactive new role that defines them as active participants rather than passive meaning consumers” (Gounari, 2009, p. 149). Tapscott and Williams (2006) link the concept of passive consumers to the more active producer in coining the term “prosumer” (as cited in McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 264). The idea that readers are now participants in creating the text (and its meaning) is echoed in Lankshear and Knobel’s (2007) description of Web 2.0.
“Production is based on ‘leverage’, ‘collective participation’, ‘collaboration’, and distributed expertise and intelligence” (p. 227). They go on to point out that it “decentres authorship” (p. 227). The classroom is a natural place for text readers/producers to come together to create, understand and extend texts. Unfortunately, student collaboration is not easily evaluated and does not contribute skills that are necessary for standardized tests, so many teachers are caught between teaching students test material and enabling their students to become “prosumers” of knowledge. This is especially unfortunate because so many students are experts in reading and creating new literacy texts and possess skills far beyond those of their teachers, like publishing videos to YouTube, editing websites, contributing to blogs and creating social network identities. The nature of new literacies is that they often do come from a community that can be made up of literally anyone with an interest in the information being shared (e.g., someone with an interest in knitting can create a website/blog/wiki where she can write about her experiences and knowledge of knitting, as well as display photos or videos of her knitting. Other people who share this interest can add to her original site, ask questions and create dialogues that further the collective knowledge of anyone who visits the site.) This is an exciting aspect as well as a dangerous one. “The new technologies of communication are powerful tools that can liberate or dominate, manipulate or enlighten and it is imperative that educators teach their students how to use and critically analyze these media” (Kellner, 1995 as cited in Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 62). To contrast the differences between new literacies and traditional literacies, Tierney, Bond and Bresler (2006) provide a table (Table 1), in which they compare the two.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of the genre</th>
<th>Traditional Print Based School Literacies</th>
<th>New Multiple Literacies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text based and verbocentric</td>
<td>Multimedia- mix of print, image, video, animation and sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discrete skills</td>
<td>Envisioned possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flat and linear</td>
<td>Multidimensional and perspectival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Predictable</td>
<td>Inquiry driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Established norms and conventions</td>
<td>Differentiated and student-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transmission of knowledge</td>
<td>Generative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conventional classroom</td>
<td>Studio environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea mapping</td>
<td>Predefined knowledge</td>
<td>Situated knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text-based</td>
<td>Multiresources and hypermedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single authored</td>
<td>Collaborative or team-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single text</td>
<td>Multi- or intertextual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linear connections</td>
<td>Multilayered interfaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sequenced storyboarding</td>
<td>Sequenced and multilayered storyboarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Author-based</td>
<td>Audience-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical</td>
<td>Author or teacher constructed</td>
<td>Social practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subordinating</td>
<td>Social empowerment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Situated in academic and school-based</td>
<td>Situated in real world and work world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controlled participation</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Top-down mastery</td>
<td>Distributed and differential expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enculturation</td>
<td>Cultural defining</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. (Tierney, Bond, & Bresler, 2006, p. 365)

It is not enough to be aware of the differences; it is important for educators to engage their students in taking an active role when approaching new literacy texts.

The central question for each of us is not “How do we teach children to be literate?” Instead, the central question is “How do we teach children to continuously become literate?” That is, “How do we help children learn to learn
Critical Literacy and Schooling

Schools play a strong role in shaping the institutionalization of student thinkers. I have come across two attitudes towards critical literacy that are being incorporated into classrooms by teachers. The first is through the “critical literacy as unit of study” way of thinking. In these cases, teachers incorporate critical literacy through a unit or series of lessons being studied by the students. The idea of incorporating questioning strategies to get students to think more broadly about the topic is used. In fact, this approach is more about teaching critical thinking rather than critical literacy, as there is little or no emphasis put upon social justice issues or praxis through text investigation. As an example of a teacher trying to increase her students’ knowledge about critical thinking strategies, Cooper and White’s (2006) teachers expressed concern between taking time away from explicit skill instruction to teach critical literacy strategies. In this case, the teacher viewed critical literacy as something that happens for a certain amount of time, within certain parameters, and then is “finished” when the unit is done. The teacher involved in the study conducted 15 minute mini-lessons surrounding critical thinking activities related to reading, choosing books, why people read and similar topics. The research team and the teacher worked towards improving the students’ ability to think reflectively. In the end, the team was able to help the teacher gain a better understanding of critical literacy, although they admit there was not a lot of focus on what was missing from the curriculum or social justice issues related to topics being studied. So, by leaving out one of the main components of critical literacy, the teacher did not really gain an
understanding of critical literacy after all. The problem I have with examples like this one is that they seem to isolate critical literacy as something that is done only when formally planned into lessons and then it is left behind when the next unit begins. It is viewed as a set of strategies or skills that students need to be taught explicitly, and brought into use when the teacher says it’s time, but it is not carried over into future lessons to encourage students to integrate it into all their studies.

To truly incorporate critical literacy into the classroom, it needs to become part of everything that happens in the classroom. This is the second attitude teachers can hold. Instead of critical literacy occurring when the teacher says it will, teachers need to accept it as a *way of thinking* about the world rather than a set of skills to pass on to the students, and encourage it to be happening all the time. Critical literacy needs to be embedded into all lessons across the curriculum so it becomes a natural part of the classroom, and also so it becomes a natural mindset for the students.

A radical pedagogy movement has been suggested by Freire and Macedo (1987) as a way to bring students out of the traditional ways of learning and into a more open-minded critical literate way of being in the world. “Educators must develop radical pedagogy structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis for literacy (including the language of the student)” (p. 151). Kellner and Share (2007) hold a similar opinion. They put forth the idea that critical literacy teaching “requires a democratic pedagogy which involves teachers sharing power with students as they join together in the process of unveiling myths and challenging hegemony” (p. 62). Student choice and responsibility are key to this radical or democratic pedagogy. Teachers’ decisions impact the role students have in their classrooms as well as the
critical literacy skills students develop. Critically literate teachers are “choosing texts that represent non-dominant perspectives (Singer, 2006) and students using their knowledge and skills to understand and affect the world around them” (Wolfe, 2010, p. 371). In order for this to occur, “classrooms require democratic conditions where authentic exchange can occur around issues of moral, social and cultural significance” (Harste, Burke, & Short, 1988 as cited in Luke & Woods, 2009).

A more traditional version of schooling, which includes the one-size-fits-all curriculum, keeps students from engaging in critical thinking and critical literacy. Shor (1999) describes what seems to be the opposite of critical literacy in schooling. “Administrative rule-making and top-down curricula mean that authority is unilateral not democratic, featuring standardized tests, commercial textbooks, mandated syllabi, one-way teacher talk and fill in the blank exams” (p. 3). At issue as well is the purpose of these tasks. There is little authenticity in them and students are producing instead work that Bigum (2002) refers to as having “the fridge-door character…which is brought home from school and displayed on the fridge door for a day or two for want of an authentic audience and purpose” (Bigum, 2002 as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2009, p. 65).

Instead, Behrman (2006) offers alternatives that can be incorporated within nearly all areas of study. He insists that teachers and students need to collaborate to understand how texts work as well as what they intend to do to the world. For those teachers who are not able to break from state-imposed goals and daily mandated lesson plans, there are still ways to lead students toward adopting a critical literacy stance. Behrman suggests looking at traditional texts to see what and who is missing as well as reading multiple texts on a similar topic to compare and contrast each author’s message, so as to more
widely inform the reader about the issue. He encourages students to read from resistant perspectives -- looking at layers of meaning in texts and taking on different roles while reading to see how others may interpret the same text. Finally he believes that student involvement in what is studied is very important. Events and experiences in student lives can provide texts for study and critique. These methods are unpredictable in terms of their outcomes and direction of study, which mirrors Comber’s (2001) idea that “critical literacy needs to be continually redefined in practice” (as cited in Berhman, 2006, p. 490). The unpredictability is not a negative thing. It leads to student-centered lessons and motivated learners.

Luke (2003) dislikes the formality of traditional schooling because it moves students away from the social aspects of learning, the collaborative efforts children naturally use to get through their lives outside the classroom and the overwhelming emphasis on print-text, often referred to as “verbocentrism” (Siegel, 2006, p. 67).

…the classroom is one of the few places where formal taxonomic categories (e.g. the curriculum) and the official partitioning of time and space (e.g. the timetable) often are used to discourage children from blending, mixing, and matching knowledge drawn from diverse textual sources and communications media. (Luke, 2003, p. 398)

Critical literacy involves independent and collaborative thinking and inquisitiveness. Students need to be able to explore their own ideas and try them out. If they do not have the opportunity to investigate texts in a way that makes sense to them, they may not bother to question them at all. Questioning is/leads to learning and when teachers prevent questioning or at least, do not encourage it, students do not learn
how to learn. They are not able to think for themselves or solve problems. Instead they remain caught up in trying to figure out what the teacher wants them to do. School discourses reiterate established binaries like “popular and canonical texts, out-of-school and in-school literacies, body and mind, and pleasure and work” (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 201). Standardized tests reinforce the idea that there is only one right answer and any creativity or problem solving that does not fit the state-formulated criteria is not given any credit. Students become less comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. It seems imperative that something must be done to change this pattern. Critical literacy is one possible way that teachers are shifting traditional discourses without having to invent a totally new option to schooling. Bell Soares and Wood (2010) suggest critical literacy as an alternative because it “allows students to bring their own lived experiences into discussions, offering them opportunities for participation, engagement in higher levels of reading and discussion, and to understand the power of language” (p. 487). Their lives connect to curriculum and vice versa. They become the authentic audience for their thinking, instead of worrying how to jump through the hoops the standardized tests demand.

“Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (1989) explain that ‘critical educational theory begins with the assumption that schools are essential sites for organizing knowledge, power and desire in the service of extending individual capacities and social possibilities’” (p. XXI as cited in Endres, 2001, pp. 402-3). Enabling students to become more active in their own learning and more responsible for the texts they read and the meanings they discover brings a certain level of empowerment to them. Teaching from a
critical literacy perspective allows these concepts to become part of the curriculum.

Critical literacy is a teacher’s and a school’s responsibility.

I have reviewed the English Language Arts Grade 9 Curriculum for the province of British Columbia (BC Ministry of Education, 2007) to see how the curriculum incorporates ideas based in critical literacies. The concept of critical literacy is not mentioned explicitly very often in the document although critical thinking and aspects of critical literacies are frequently included, such as reading texts from multiple viewpoints and questioning how language has been used to create implicit and explicit messages within the text. Within the “Considerations for Program Delivery” section, becoming aware of context of text is emphasized. Following that, critical literacy … promotes the view that texts are not neutral in intention or effect. In fact, they represent specific points of view and by doing so, other points of view are silenced (Luke, 2003). Critical literacy also asks students to analyze and challenge the ways in which language and power are used in contemporary society by emphasizing the texts allow for multiple interpretations and meanings (Simon, 1992). (BC Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 20)

This description highlights the non-neutrality of text as well as the questioning stance students are encouraged to take when exploring texts. The section puts forth the idea that critical literacy-related instructional strategies share the feature that students are encouraged by teachers to adopt a stance which will allows them to look closely at the ways they communicate/represent/use language in school and compare this to they communicate/represent/use language in society. (p. 21) This section of the curriculum clearly presents some key aspects of critical literacy.
One aspect that is not presented, or mentioned in any way throughout the curriculum, is the part of critical literacy that relates to equity/transformation/social justice. Although students are, for instance, expected to “understand the perspective of others” (p. 54 Oral language-Purposes- A1) and “interpret, analyze and evaluate ideas and information from texts by identifying bias, contradictions and non-represented perspectives” (p. 57 Reading and Viewing- Thinking- B9), there is no suggestion that what students discover, learn or connect to from prior learning should lead them to action. Some teachers may know that social justice is a part of being critically literate and incorporate it into their teaching, but it is not a part of the Grade 9 English curriculum. Despite the fact that the context of a text is clearly linked to critical literacy in the early part of the curriculum document for this subject, there is little mention of how it should be explored within the Prescribed Learning Outcomes. Students are expected to become “good thinkers”, the criteria of which are outlined in the document (p. 75). Asking questions, being open-minded and thinking independently are listed in the criteria and developing these skills creates better critical thinkers, but again, there is no explicit connection made to critical literacy, nor does it outline what sorts of questions the students should be asking, or how they should become open-minded. Overall, this document has outlined, in the introduction to the Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLO), ideas related to critical literacies (except for social justice). Unfortunately, the PLOs leave the responsibility for incorporating a critical literacy approach to the teacher to incorporate into her teaching, as the curriculum does not clearly reflect the critical literacy stance.
My view of Critical Literacy

I have reviewed numerous scholars’ definitions and ideas related to critical literacy, new literacy and media literacy (see above). There are commonalities that inform my understanding of critical literacy and help shape my ideas towards how I see the critical literacy stance in my own teaching, research and life. Put simply, I look to McLaughlin (2004) who states that critical literacy is “…a way of thinking and a way of being that challenges text and life, as we know it” (as cited in Molden, 2007, p. 50, emphasis added). McLaughlin and DeVoogd provide a similar idea when they suggest that critical literacy “disrupts the commonplace by examining it from multiple perspectives” (as cited in McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 265).

Defining text as a broad term and questioning/challenging texts to develop deeper understandings are both central to my viewpoint. By adopting a critical literacy stance meanings in texts can be discovered that are no longer viewed as black or white but somewhere in between (the grey). The grey can disrupt one’s equilibrium and be uncomfortable; it is also the grey zone that promotes thought, response and in many cases, action. This is the praxis that is central to Freire’s critical pedagogy. The grey could be the background of the author, the experiences of the reader, the point of view that is missing in the text or the mode the text is presented in. Calling attention to these aspects of texts helps to expand the reader’s knowledge of what they are reading. Luke (1997) writes about a move away from “individualistic models of reading and writing towards those approaches that use sociological, cultural and discourse theory to re-conceptualize the literate subject, textual practices, and classroom pedagogy” (as cited in Cooper & White, 2006, p. 84). Collaboration, investigation and awareness of context all
contribute to the view of critical literacy I use. Added to these concepts is the idea of connections. When reading any text, connections of some sort are made. These connections help inform the reader’s understanding and in some cases adjust it to better fit the information being read.

…Critical understandings of the relations among ideas, their sources and histories, intertextual referents and consequences, areas important if not more so than mastery, reproduction, and recombination of discrete facts or units of information. The conceptual shift here is one from collection to connection, or what Bernstein (1996) might have termed curricular collection codes to what we could term connection codes. (Luke, 2003, p. 400)

Moving away from fact-acquiring to connection-making is another strong factor in my view of what critical literacy must be because the connections between texts help deepen the understanding a reader makes from them.

Social justice is another common thread running through the research I reviewed and is a central component in defining critical literacy. “Critical approaches are characterized by a commitment to reshape literacy education in the interests of marginalized groups of learners, who on the basis of gender, cultural and socioeconomic background have been excluded from access to the discourses and texts of dominant economics and cultures” (Luke, A., 1997, p. 143 as cited in Cooper and White, 2006, pp. 84-5). This subject is less of a focus in school curriculum and certainly more difficult to incorporate into daily teaching. However, its importance should not be lessened because it is difficult. Becoming aware that there are those who are missing from texts, stories that are not being heard, and/or people that are not able to access information expands the
reader’s experience with the text because it gives them a broader and deeper understanding of the messages found within the text. The intention of this strand of critical literacy is to promote action. What that action looks like may be different for each person who encounters the text because each person brings different knowledge to a text based on their prior experiences.

Although critical literacy and critical thinking are not necessarily the same thing, Luke, A. (1997) suggests that ‘shared across contemporary approaches to critical literacy is an emphasis on the need for literates to take an interventionist approach to texts and discourses of all media’ (critical literacy) and also requires ‘a commitment to the capacity to critique, transform and reconstruct dominant modes of information’ (critical thinking). (p. 150, as cited in Cooper & White, 2006, pp. 84-85)

It is transformative experiences and praxis about texts that critical literacy purports.
Chapter 3: Context, Method, Participant Introductions, & Methodology

Note: Throughout the rest of the document, any words appearing in italics are either participant or researcher quotations.

Methodology

This research is an ethnographic case study drawing on theory from critical literacy. Due to the nature of the data collection, my background in teaching and the importance of the students’ ideas being at the forefront of the study, an ethnographic approach has been selected. Ethnographic observation gives me the opportunity to view students during their lessons and interact with them in a role both they and I are familiar with (teacher’s assistant), while I observe and collect information about the way they interact with texts. “Much ethnographic research is concerned with developing theoretical ideas rather than testing out existing hypotheses” (Goldbart & Hustler, 2005, p. 18) and this also fits with my research study. I did not know how the students were interacting with texts but through my observation and interviews, I gained some understanding. What I am also aware of is that “ethnography is a constant process of decision-making and that data-gathering and data-analysis are interrelated and ongoing” (p. 18). By taking field notes I was able to keep track of text-related discussion that occurred in the class.

Semiotics informs my research because all text is made of signs, and some of the signs within text are made up of other signs. Semiotics was also helpful in informing me as I broadened the definition of text and as I was using a wide range of texts. This being said, depending on the person interpreting the sign or the context in which it is being
read/viewed, the meaning can change. “There is no escape from signs. Those who cannot understand them and the systems of which they are a part are in the greatest danger of being manipulated by those who can. In short, semiotics cannot be left to semioticians” (Siegel, 2006, p. 68). Because adolescents’ engagement with texts helps form their unique Discourse, signs/texts the participants brought to the focus group and discussed during the interviews were analyzed to see if they contribute similar or different meanings for the user, from that of popular culture or from their peers or others. The participants shared their thoughts about the texts with which they regularly interact and create. Although semiotics did not directly assist me in the categorizing and analysis of the data in this study, my awareness of how semiotics helps shape particular groups’ interactions with texts, like the adolescent participants, caused me to be better informed when I worked with the participants.

**Critical Thinking & Critical Literacy- The Development of a Continuum**

I want to explain how these terms shaped and developed my data analysis. While I read through the coding of the data, I realized that the participants were sharing their ideas about texts using different levels of thinking and responding to texts in different ways. For example, Becka (participants will be introduced to the reader later in this section and all names are pseudonyms) was frustrated with how gullible people seem and she said, “They instantly have to believe it cause like some news reporter or some journalist said so and they’re well known so they must be right cause they’re well known.” This comment stood out to me because I interpreted it as her being aware that there is bias in journalism and the media. This challenge to a cultural norm shows a tendency towards critical literacy. On the other hand, Becka also expressed her ideas
about people being paranoid about germs. “…There’s all these hand sanitizer things and everyone’s washing their hands- it’s probably cause everyone thinks they’re going to die if they don’t.” In this quotation, Becka is taking in information from her own experiences to lead her to this conclusion, which is a generalization. Thinking generally about information and connecting it to a wider conclusion is one way she demonstrates critical thinking. She is questioning the data but it is not with the same purpose as in critical literacy. Becka’s thinking is illustrated in the following that example Perkins, Allen & Hafner (1983) provide, about students not questioning information. “Students ‘tend to act as though the test of truth is that a proposition makes intuitive sense, sounds right, rings true. They see no need to criticize or revise accounts that do make sense- the intuitive feel of fit suffices,’” (as cited in Lapp & Fisher, 2010, p. 158).

When faced with many examples of participants speaking critically about texts stemming from different kinds of thinking, and with different mindsets related to how they view texts, I felt there was some kind of critical engagement continuum that needed to be developed (see Figure 1). The idea for the continuum came from listening to the participants talk about text and also from my past experience as a classroom teacher. As an effective teacher, I wanted to assist students in becoming thoughtful readers and deep thinkers about texts. I also wanted to encourage them to adopt a critical literacy stance or mind set for them to use when reading texts in and out of school. This involved students developing and moving beyond critical thinking to critical literacy. Critical thinking, as discussed earlier, has a basis in higher order thinking skills, like analysis, evaluation and application of the information from texts they encounter and produce (terms from Bloom’s Taxonomy; Krathwohl, 2002). Critical literacy embraces challenging the status
quo, reflecting about text, transforming ideas and taking action in response to texts.

**The Critical Engagement Continuum**

The critical engagement continuum has two purposes; one, to reflect the critical stances that participants demonstrated during the data collection and two, to disrupt the concept of what critical literacy is and offer alternatives as to what it could be. The first purpose will be expanded upon below while the second will be addressed in the final chapter. I will use emergent themes from the analysis to help explain not only the critical literacy approach adopted by the adolescents in the study, but also to highlight and contextualize the most important texts for the participants. Before I can begin sharing the examples from the participants, I want to further explain the labels, categories and questions found on and associated with the critical engagement continuum.

![Critical Engagement Continuum](image)

**Figure 1. Critical Engagement Continuum**

Towards one end of the continuum is critical thinking. Participants demonstrated critical thinking when they questioned texts and their questions, assumptions and thinking were done with an analytical or evaluative focus, which produces a different kind of understanding about the text than when using a critical literacy approach. See Table 2 for
examples of questions a reader asks when approaching a text using critical thinking. The more fundamental levels of thinking on Bloom’s taxonomy, such as knowledge and comprehension, can be related to the information that readers gather when thinking critically about texts. Common examples from the participants that demonstrate a critical thinking tendency include judging the text as one they liked or disliked, wondering if the text’s message was real or fake and searching for who had produced the text (its source). Also, when the participants expressed little or no reasoning for their opinions I felt they were located more towards critical thinking on the continuum, because they had not shared any deep consideration about the text. For example, Morgan was looking at the list of texts I brought to the interview (see Appendix 1) and she commented that she does not “usually read magazines or newspapers cause [she doesn’t] like some of the topics in them.” This is all she shared about the topic. This generalization about all magazines and newspapers stems from her own experience of finding topics she does not like in magazines. She has no desire to look for magazines or newspapers that may reflect her interests; instead she just avoids these kinds of texts altogether. This example represents a critical thinking (in a limited way) because Morgan is approaching the text with an uninformed evaluative perspective.

Towards the other end of the continuum is critical literacy, where the commonly held ideas about critical literacy, such as text and literacy being transformative (Wesley White, 2009), text being influenced by “social, cultural and historical factors” (Hagood 2002, p. 249), readers “interrogating textual ideologies and engaging in multiple perspectives” (Edelsky, 1999 as cited in Bell Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 489) and readers considering questions of “power, equity and fairness” (Shanklin, 2009, p. 45) are located.
As I reviewed the transcriptions of the informants’ interviews, I found examples of them adopting more of a critical literacy stance towards the texts they were sharing and discussing. These comments stood out to me as they went beyond critical thinking, by questioning social justice issues related to texts and reflecting on the effects of texts on themselves and others. Examples of these kinds of comments are included in the following chapter. The criteria outlining the critical literacy end of the continuum are listed on Table 2. It is important to note that one does not have to ask all the questions or meet all the criteria when thinking about a text in order to be taking a critical literacy approach to their reading. See Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5 for a visual explanation of the continuum, the guiding questions related to the areas on the continuum and an example from the participants which characterizes the areas on the continuum.

**Figure 2 Analyze (The Critical Engagement Continuum)**
• Do I like/dislike or agree/disagree with the message?
• Will I share this text with others?
• What is the quality of the text—how does this affect the message?
• Am I skeptical of the message?

**Chloe:**
...it depends on the **song**, cause some I appreciate the **meaning** and what it's about and that really touches me and others, its sorta just really stupid and basically just like talking about sex and alcohol. So, it’s like, then I just sort of pay attention to like the sound of the song, cause like, the beat or something will make me happy.

Figure 3 Evaluate (The Critical Engagement Continuum)

• What effect does this text have on me/others?
• What is missing from this text? (i.e. other perspectives)
• Why does the message have to be this way? (disrupt the status quo)

**Becka:**
Well, a lot of the music people listen to is **generally all about the same thing**, like sex, partying, drinking, doing drugs and whatnot. I think **that’s really pointless** to be putting into a song cause it’s kinda like thinking “I need this, this and this and I’m going to get it because I’m famous or something.” And then there’s people who write music about things that actually matter. Like, there’s songs about revolutions and world hunger—all the more important things.

Figure 4 Challenge (The Critical Engagement Continuum)
The continuum acts as a framework for which to analyze and categorize the information about texts that the participants shared. In between critical thinking and critical literacy, there is an overlap of ideas. It is not easy sometimes to distinguish between whether a participant has a critical thinking or critical literacy approach to a text – and perhaps not important. When discussing some texts, the participants moved fluidly from one end to the other and back again.

**A Word About What lies Beyond and Within the Arrows of the Continuum**

Located beyond the critical thinking end is the kind of rote memorization that occurs often in response to standardized testing and one-size-fits-all curriculum. It is fact-based teaching and learning which does not allow for critical thinking, let alone

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**Figure 5 Transform (The Critical Engagement Continuum)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Thinking</th>
<th>Critical Literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>analyze</td>
<td>transform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>challenge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Which social justice issues are addressed by this text? How?
- Collaborates with others to understand text
- Moved to act/respond
- Understanding is transformed because of this textual experience

Becky: So whenever people say like words that are meant to be offensive I'll look it up in the dictionary and I'll say you used the wrong term. And then they get all confused and I'll read out the definition for it and they're like “oh” and they just kind of shut up. Like when people call other people gay, it’s like that means that they like someone of the same gender. I don't know how that's supposed to be offensive.
critical literacy. Further past the critical literacy end is where radical pedagogy and anti-institutional thoughts and actions are found. Non-schooling and a radicalized approach to teaching and learning are the opposite extreme to the standardized education that is purported at the critical thinking end of the continuum. Within the arrows a learner or reader finds flexibility and adaptability of understanding, the encouragement to question texts and the support to create a more just society through responding to and creating texts.

As you read through the data analysis chapter, please refer to the continuum’s guiding questions/criteria to help clarify the deep and surface critical literacy being demonstrated by the participants. Also, bear in mind that I am looking to expand the idea of what critical literacy is and can be, based on the idea that the participants are, at some level, critical about all the texts with which they interact.

Table 2. Guiding Criteria to accompany the Critical Engagement Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Questioning/Response</th>
<th>Guiding Questions/Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyze</td>
<td>What is the message/meaning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is the message real/fake, or true/false?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One source used to find out more about a text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generalizes about the text’s meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where does the text come from (source)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How is the text being produced?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the purpose of the text? Why is it produced?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who is/is not involved in producing the text?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Do I like/dislike the message?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do I agree/disagree with the message?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal response with little or no reasoning provided (i.e. I like, I think…)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shares text with others (little or no reasoning given for sharing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I visited the classes of my participants to learn about the context of the school and discussed the goals of the school at length with the teacher of the two classes I drew participants from. The descriptions below come from my observations and our discussion. Participants in this study are at-risk adolescent students in two English/Social Studies Grade 9 classes at an alternative high school. These students are deemed at risk of failing in a regular high school because of various issues: academic abilities, substance abuse, emotional or physical health or bullying from other students. They attend this alternative high school that has a morning and afternoon program in place four days a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
week. Students spend time learning English and Social Studies for half the day and Math and Science the other half. On Fridays attendance is optional, although those who have missed days earlier in the week are expected to come to make up for lost time. The students are between the ages of 14 and 16 years old. The classes of approximately 20 students, with about 70% of them designated with special needs, including Aspergers syndrome, behaviour and learning disabilities, and social anxieties. The focus of these classes is to address academic and emotional needs with an emphasis on developing literacy and numeracy skills that transfer into their personal lives outside the classroom. The pedagogical philosophy is inclusion, collaborative learning, formative assessment and differentiated instruction.

These students’ contributions are particularly valuable to my research as they have a literacy focus in their learning, which is stated in the school’s philosophy of teaching and learning. This means that a priority of the students’ learning is on building literacy skills, rather than covering a broader range of curriculum areas. They are exposed to a variety of texts, complete assignments that are related to current events and involve student choice in how the learning is demonstrated. Because nearly all the students in these classes have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) there is more freedom for the teacher to veer away from the confines of the provincial curriculum and instead teach to the students’ abilities and needs. The teacher’s pedagogical philosophy of promoting new literacies, critical literacies and student questioning, is also closely in line with a critical literacy stance. These are students who have not found success in a regular public high school or who have needs that cannot be met through a traditional school environment. After spending time in these classes, I learned that these students do not hold back what
they have to say. They speak freely and express their opinions openly. They seem to feel comfortable and safe in their learning environment and because of this, they offer potentially insightful information about text and text use, especially since they use a variety of media as part of their day-to-day learning activities.

**Method & Qualitative Data Collection**

Data collection in this study is qualitative. Because the research question I am asking is dependent on what the small number of participants have to say about critical literacy practices in their lives, it seems an appropriate choice to use a method of data collection that has an emphasis on the individual, rather than the general, numeric translation of a large number of participants’ information.

Initially, I spent time in a classroom making ethnographic observations (field notes) related to critical literacy. These included noting what the students said about texts (both in school and out of school based texts), what they wore and listened to (as music and clothing are both forms of text) or what actions they took, like text messaging their friends or writing stories. These observations not only gave me some insight as to the important texts for these students but taking time to make these observations also allowed me to get to know them better. The visits took place over a seven-week period in which I adopted the roles of classroom assistant and researcher observer. The teacher of the class had asked that I take part in helping her students in any way that I could, whether I answer a question for one student or work to generate ideas with a small group etc… During the observation period, the teacher was aware of my topic of study and encouraged critical literacy practices from her students. These lessons included
discussions related to gender stereotypes, questioning media sources (newspaper and Internet articles), and investigating messages in movies they viewed together. The teacher of these students is a colleague and through our conversations I learned that she has adopted a critical literacy approach to her teaching. I knew that by spending time in her classroom I would be able to observe her students’ reactions and responses to her critical pedagogy.

After I had been visiting the classes for about two weeks, I invited any students who were interested to take part in a focus group related to texts and critical literacy practices. The focus group was supposed to occur with ideally 6 to 8 students who had agreed to take part. I had 5 students volunteer to be in the focus group but I could not schedule a time and place that they could all agree upon, so the focus group ended up including only 4 students, 3 from the original 5 who volunteered and one who happened to show up and decided to take part. The students were asked to bring a text to the group that was important to them, or that they wanted to discuss or that they had questions about. My intention was that the texts that the students brought with them would provide a stimulus for the discussion and this turned out to be the case. The focus group took place away from the school setting, at a local community centre. As noted in another critical literacy study that took place within a school setting, “the institution of the school functioned as a subtle but influential addressee, an unseen presence” (Lalik & Oliver, 2007, p. 64). By conducting the focus group away from the school, the students were not influenced by their surroundings to discuss only texts they engaged with at school. The focus group discussion was audio recorded to contribute to the data collection process and transcribed for analysis.
After the focus group, I spent time with each class conducting a mini-lesson about sorting texts into groups. I started the lesson by talking with the students about ways to sort items, for example, animals. This was to get them thinking about the variety of ways general items can be grouped and also to point out that there are many correct ways to sort things. For instance, students volunteered kinds of animals and then as a group we sorted them into different categories, like feathered, number of legs, etc… We sorted the animals a number of ways to reinforce the idea that when categorizing things, there is often more than one way to do it. Then I gave each pair/triad a set of small papers and on each one was written a kind text, like book, song, poem, etc… I also gave each group of students a few sticky notes to use to write the names of the categories they had created while sorting the kinds of texts. The group of texts was not inclusive of all kinds of texts, but offered a good assortment. See Figure 2 for the list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>books</th>
<th>magazines</th>
<th>newspapers</th>
<th>television</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>movies</td>
<td>radio</td>
<td>telephone</td>
<td>instant messages/chat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posters</td>
<td>billboards</td>
<td>flyers</td>
<td>CD booklet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paintings</td>
<td>websites</td>
<td>photographs</td>
<td>sculptures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dances</td>
<td>songs</td>
<td>poems</td>
<td>clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bumper stickers</td>
<td>video games</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Prompt list of texts and examples from sorting activity
I chose to create the list myself after having seen how the group responded during similar activities with their teacher. The class was not enthusiastic about helping to create a list of shared ideas and only a few students responded while the rest either remained quiet or became distracted with other activities, like checking their phones for text messages. I wanted to be sure that some non-traditional texts were included in the list. Also, the students in both classes were easily distracted and I wanted the focus of the lesson to be on their sorting, rather than generating a list of kinds of texts. In their small groups the students sorted the texts into any groupings they could think of. When the students had finished sorting their texts, I photographed the categories and we talked about how they fit each text into the categories they created. I chose to photograph the groups of texts because it is a quick and easy way to record the ways the students sorted the texts.

The main purpose of this activity was to introduce the students to a broad definition of texts and to give them a chance to interact with me directly before the interviews took place. They did not realize that texts could include dances, movies, posters etc… I wanted them to work with the examples of texts to become familiar with them, so when it came time for the students to participate in the interview portion of my research, and they were asked about texts, they would have a wide range of texts to discuss. I also wanted to spend time with the students so they would hopefully feel more comfortable with me during the interviews.

At the end of the sorting activity, I invited students to take part in individual open-ended interviews that would happen the following week. Twelve students agreed to participate in interviews. The interviews allowed me to get deeper into the ideas of each student as well as to question and clarify things that had been previously noted. My goal
was try to understand when, how and with which texts they think critically about. I wanted to offer each participant the opportunity to share their ideas about texts, including those they engaged with often and those they disliked. These interviews were supposed to take place outside the school setting, but due to scheduling issues and the students not being willing or able to give up their own time, the interviews happened during the school day. The interviews took place in a student common area, during class time. It was a quiet space that allowed enough room for me to set up my recording materials. It also was a place the students were familiar with, which, I hoped, made them feel more at ease.

I wanted the students to bring a text that was important to them when they came to the interviews. My idea was that by beginning to talk about this text, it would be a catalyst to getting the participants to open up about their textual interactions of all kinds. Unfortunately, because the interviews occurred somewhat unexpectedly, I was not able to have this happen. A number of students did not come to school one day because of the weather and with only a dozen students in class, the teacher was unable to teach her planned lessons. She told the class they would have additional time to work on some ongoing projects and then asked me if I would like to start interviewing them, since they could easily miss half an hour of class that day. I agreed, since the students with whom I was trying to schedule interviews were not willing to meet on their own time. Thus, when the interviews occurred, the students did not bring important texts with them. This impacted the interviews because it meant I had to draw out the important texts in their lives through my line of questioning, rather than having the texts present as prompts for discussion.
Once all the data had been collected (field notes, audio taped focus group transcription and interview transcriptions) I transcribed and organized it. During the transcription phase, I made notes about key ideas the participants were mentioning and this informed some of the codes I used in the initial analysis, using NVivo 9 software (QSR International, 2010), to sort the information in the interviews. It was helpful to use this software because the overwhelming amount of data I collected about many kinds of texts related to critical literacy practices seemed unorganized and messy. I coded the data by categories based on the kind of text being discussed by the participant, like “Music” and “Internet”, the thinking the participants demonstrated about the texts, like “Influences” and “Self Identity”, and the people and places that they mentioned related to the texts they discussed, like “school-related text” and “who are participants discussing texts with”. There were 67 codes created after the first read of the interviews. These initial codes gave me a way of categorizing the data from all the interviews and allowed me to review like data with like data, so as to look for deeper themes and to see the data in a new light. During the review of the coded themes, I made notes about my thinking related to the critical literacy stance the participants were taking towards texts. These notes proved to be very helpful once the Critical Engagement Continuum began to develop as a way to framework through which to view the data.

**Participant Introductions**

In order to introduce each of the 12 interview participants, I have provided a table that outlines the briefest biographical information to be used as a reference when reading future chapters. Following the table, there are short descriptions about the twelve
participants. All students were honest and helpful during our interactions and using the information I learned about them during my observations, and from what I discovered during the interviews, I have tried to highlight each participant’s identity. Included in these descriptions are a few quotations made by the participants that are related to their engagement with texts.

Table 3. Participant Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>Important Texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cody</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Television, Radio, Internet, Movies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Talking, Internet, Text Messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>XBox Live, Books, Songs,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Music, Jewelry, Clothes, Painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Phone, Internet, Facebook, Videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becka</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Music, Paintings, Sketches, Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tristan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Phone, Text Messages, Talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to Face, Music, Internet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Video Games, Sculptures, Clothes, Ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>IM, Internet, Songs, Books, Photography,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Internet, Video Chat, Songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Clothes, Text Messages, Movies,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Movies, XBox,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Important texts were defined by each participant during the interviews.)

**Cody**

Cody is a 15 year old male student, working on completing his Grade 10 year. Rather than being a member of the regular class, he worked at a computer station at the back of the room, following an online curriculum. This did not stop him from interacting with members of the class during discussions or breaks. He was in school one day a week in
order to receive guidance from the teacher I worked with. Cody was excited to be interviewed for the study and made a number of comments to me about himself during my observational period, such as, “Are you still taking observations? I am a student who loves having music while I work.” Cody’s favourite television program is The Conan O’Brian Show. He also loves to watch movies and shared his thoughts with me about what makes a movie “good”.

Lily

Lily is a 14 year old female student, working on completing her Grade 9 year. Prior to coming to this alternative high school, Lily (and her siblings, who do not attend this school) was home schooled by her mother. This was because Lily said her mother “thought we would all get picked on pretty much.” Instead of school, Lily attended numerous activities, like arts classes and drama camps. She listens to “really different music...I’m kinda a hippy. My dad raised us like that. I like the Beatles.” Lily has been dancing for about 12 years and has some opportunity to teach younger students at her dance classes.

Morgan

Morgan is a 14 year old female student, working on completing her Grade 9 year. She suffers from anxiety attacks and because of this, attendance has been a problem for her in previous years. Morgan loves books and her favourite genres are fantasy or adventure, “because I like daydreaming about things that aren’t possible...I just like the possibility of other worlds, other things happening.” She also finds those other worlds in video games. Playing on her XBox with her brother is a big part of how she spends her time. She likes the chatting features of XBox Live too. This allows her to visit with friends but
gives her the comfort of staying in her home if she is feeling anxious. Morgan is working on leaving her anxiety behind though, as she and a friend are forming a band. Although they are still in the planning stages, Morgan is excited about the songs she has written so far.

Eve

Eve is a 15 year old female student, working on completing her Grade 9 year. She is a DJ and is very knowledgeable about the techno music genre. “There’s a bunch of different sub-genres, like there’s techno and then inside techno there’s hard style, there’s dub-step, there’s glitch, there’s glitch-hop, there’s like, there’s house, electronic, there’s electronica. I can go on for a really long time. But what I listen to is like, down tempo break beat and glitch-hop.” During much of our interview, Eve played songs she had created from her iPod. She tried her best to educate me about the genre, although I must admit it all sounded very similar to me, even after her tutelage. Eve is also interested in photography, silversmithing and clothing design.

Thomas

Thomas is a 15 year old male student, working on completing his Grade 9 year. During classroom observations I noted that while Thomas was fairly popular and accepted into different social groups, he was not overly talkative to his peers. His main interests lie in participating in outdoor activities, like going dirt biking with family and friends. He uses the Internet regularly to find out information related to his hobbies and also to use Facebook.

Becka
Becka is 15 years old and is working on her Grade 9 year. She is petite in stature and grand in personality. “I want people to look at me and be like, well, she’s not like everyone else.” Becka looks different from her classmates, as she is the only one with a Mohawk hairstyle as well as being the only one with purple hair. She wears clothing with various skulls and designs on it and has decorated her bag with slogans related to Punk Rock Bands of whom she is a big fan. Becka is concerned with stereotypes people hold about teenagers and is not shy about questioning people about their opinions. “I like to argue with what people say cause, I don’t know, I like to try and prove I am right a lot.”

Tristan

Tristan had just turned 16 when we spoke for our interview. He is working on completing his Grade 9 year. He was excited to learn to drive in the near future. Tristan has owned 13 cell phones, all purchased by him. His iPhone is one of his most important possessions, and he writes between one hundred and two hundred text messages a week. He also uses MSN chat and Facebook to stay in touch with his friends.

Liam

Liam had just turned 15 when we had our interview and he is working on completing his Grade 9 year. Liam’s main interest in life is video games. He was extremely excited during my visits to the school because the new Call of Duty game, Black Ops, was being released and he couldn’t wait to get it. The day it was released in fact, Liam mentioned it at least three times during the morning break from lessons. Liam also spends a lot of time using the texting feature on his phone and figures he sends about two hundred texts a day. These are mostly to friends in another province, where he used to live and attend school and using text messages is his way of continuing the friendships.
Chloe

Chloe is 14 years old and is working on her Grade 9 year. She was at school the least number of days out of all the participants I got to know, but during our interview I felt she shared some of the most personal details. Her blonde hair was tied in a simple ponytail and she looked quite shy as she walked into the empty classroom for the interview. Once we began talking there was no shyness and the more confident she felt, the more she shared details about her life that she usually keeps hidden from other people. Chloe misses a lot of school because of her anxiety and she works with an Educational Assistant when she does attend, to help her cope with the emotional and academic issues she has. Chloe let me know that she enjoys writing stories in the fantasy genre and posts them on online websites for anonymous feedback. Her love of the fantasy genre extends to the kinds of books she reads and as she says, they have “changed who I am”, as they have influenced her beliefs about what is real in the world. Music is also really important to Chloe. She loves Death and Scream Metal and often goes to places that are restricted to those over 18 years of age because she wants access to the music and products connected to the music she likes, like clothing and books.

Rachel

Rachel is a 15 year old female student, who is working on completing her Grade 9 year. She attended most days of class although because she was living at different friends’ homes, she was often late for school. She is “not arty” and says she “can’t write worth crap,” but during my observations, I noted her excitement as she waited for her teacher to read a story she had written. The teacher commented that it was “another one” for her to read, telling me that although Rachel doubts her writing ability, she does not let it stop
her from writing for her teacher. Most of our interview was spent talking about her two sons, who she said were living in another province, with her grandmother, while she finished school.

*Jordan & Grant*

Jordan and Grant are both 14 year old male students, who are working on their Grade 9 year. They have been together in school since kindergarten and do almost everything together. They sit together in class, work together on class assignments and decided they felt comfortable being interviewed if they could both be there. It just seems right to introduce them together. These boys are into sports and rap music. They wear clothes with sports teams’ logos on them and talk about hockey and football a lot. When they are not watching sporting events on television, they enjoy playing video games on their XBox consoles. It was interesting during the interview to note that when one of them offered an idea, the other would expand on it and vice versa, so the whole explanation would come from both of them.
Chapter 4: Explaining Participants’ Textual Interactions within Critical Literacy

This chapter is divided into sections that stem from the open coding themes that arose during the data analysis process. The first four sections of this chapter deal with texts that have been produced by people other than the participants. The sections are: Important Texts, Which Texts Are Approach Critically?, What Questions are Asked about Texts?, and Social Justice Issues. These sections are related to the continuum because they represent the kind of thinking the participants demonstrated as they moved along the continuum from the critical thinking end towards the critical literacy end. The final section of this chapter is: Participant Produced Texts. This section is about critical engagement and the texts participants themselves created.

**Important Texts**

To discover the important texts in the participants’ lives, each one was asked about the texts with which he or she engages regularly and from this question, conversations ensued. All the participants were able to identify texts they use or produce on a regular basis. It was important for the participants to get to choose which texts to discuss, rather than having to address specific questions about texts that I chose because I believed that if they had the opportunity to talk about what they wanted to, they would share honestly and openly, because they had ownership of the topic of conversation. Also, if the participants chose the topic of conversation, they would be motivated to talk about it, since it reflects something they know about. During these conversations the participants’
approaches, when speaking about key texts in their lives, could be located at various points along the continuum.

**Morgan**

Morgan has a strong relationship with books. Her father owns a used bookstore and Morgan gets books for free. She “loves almost any book,” and is particularly fond of fantasy, adventure and action novels. She reads these genres because she “loves the fact that anything can happen. It’s like, you can be going downhill and then all of a sudden it changes, so positive, which is sort of what my life has done recently. So, I like books that give you an option, and like change.” Morgan’s statements about the books she reads show how the messages in the stories relate and compare to her own experiences. She connects the events in the novels to those in her own life and makes an effort to choose books that follow this pattern. She also talks about learning from those messages and applying that learning to episodes she has experienced.

Morgan also uses novels in these genres as teaching tools. She herself has learned from them. “It’s like real life...lessons that I’ve learned sometimes too along the way. Like, sure everything can go wrong but it’s gonna get -- eventually, like, I’m back in school now. You can always learn something now and not everything’s going to go the way you want it.” People relate the things that happen to them in to the books they read or the movies they watch, as a way of problem solving. Morgan reflects on the lessons in the books she reads and she acts on these lessons when she uses the books she reads to teach others about herself too. “Sometimes I will see a book and see a message that will help my parents but I can’t exactly say it myself so then sometimes- (Sarah - So do you recommend the book to them?) - Yes...sometimes I feel a longing to be in nature a lot so I
try to get them to understand that. They don’t fully understand that yet but they’re getting closer.” Sharing texts with others and using books’ messages as a way of communicating about herself are examples of how Morgan engages with books.

**Chloe**

Morgan said she enjoys reading fantasy and adventure novels because she “like[s] daydreaming about things that aren’t possible... I just like the possibility of other worlds, other things happening. I just like thinking about it.” Chloe feels the same way. She enjoys reading dark fantasy romance novels. Her relationship with books is also very strong and it has had a big impact on her. “It’s sort of consumed most of my life and changed who I am. I didn’t really start reading Fantasy until sixth grade and, um, since then my beliefs have changed a lot....it’s sort of made me believe in things that I didn’t believe before. It’s embarrassing to talk about.” Chloe’s comments show she reflects on what she reads and how the messages in those texts influence her. She is going beyond liking a book because it has a good story and has been moved to act because of the stories she reads. “Well, the fantasy books sorta made me believe in, that more of a possibility that there are, in fact, some sort of mythical creatures out there and, or like, people that can read minds. So, I’m always watching what I think now cause I’m afraid that there might be someone that can read my mind.” She reads fictional tales as well as books that are about the theories surrounding vampires as she investigates and engages in texts on this subject. What is important to note is that she is using research skills she has been taught in school to further her own understanding about this topic. Chloe is motivated to do this research because she is studying something she believes in, on a topic that she chose and she is allowed to express her findings in her own way; and she does. Her
approach to books about this topic moves from being initially one of critical thinking to one slightly more towards the critical literacy end of the continuum because of the transformative nature of the messages in the texts Chloe reads. Chloe does not just read dark fantasy novels, she also writes her own stories in this genre. This will be discussed in the Participant Produced Texts section later in this chapter.

Another important text for Chloe is music. She often wore headphones during class and admits “music influences who [she is] a lot.” She listens to “death metal and scream metal and emo and techno and house and electronic and pretty much anything that ends in core.” I wanted to know if it was the sound of the music or the lyrics that draws her to these styles, or if she was just listening to it because her friends were. This was not the case as she commented that most of her friends are “metal heads.” She said “it depends on the song, cause some I appreciate the meaning and what it’s about and that really touches me and others, its sorta just really stupid and basically just like talking about sex and alcohol. So, it’s like, then I just sort of pay attention to like the sound of the song, cause like, the beat or something will make me happy…” Chloe demonstrates critical thinking as she evaluates the songs she listens to; realizing that songs have meaning because of how they sound as well as what they say. She acknowledges that some songs have lyrics she doesn’t like but because there are other aspects of the song she does like, she keeps listening. Because a continuum involves movement, I was able to see how Chloe’s ideas about music could be placed at different points on the line. When she talked about how the music she likes “takes her places [she] usually wouldn’t go cause [she’s] usually be more afraid to go…” Chloe is challenging how she views the music she listens to in comparison to other activities in which she is involved. In this statement,
Chloe is talking about the places she goes to purchase merchandise related to the bands she listens to. She said there are often creepy places with “metal heads and stuff” there but because she really wants t-shirts and CDs of the groups she likes, she is taking steps to go to new places. Chloe’s discussion about music was particularly insightful because she was able to explain how the music she listens to has changed her behaviour and her thinking about people like “metal heads”. Because she chose this text to discuss, the conversation went in a direction in which she felt comfortable.

**Becka**

Like Chloe, music is a major part of Becka’s identity. She states that “some music influences the way I think and the way I act -- kind of the way I look.” Becka’s favourite kind of music is punk rock. This was no surprise to me as Becka often arrived to class with her hair styled in a purple Mohawk and a backpack covered in slogans and symbols that reflect punk rock music influences. Looking at Becka I knew that she was committed to punk and that she looked a certain way because she wanted other people to realize she was different and also because she wanted people to know that punk rock music has a big influence on her life. Having observed Becka in her class I knew she was opinionated and enjoyed questioning her peers about their ideas. I was anxious to hear her reasons for liking punk rock and metal music. “They actually write music about things that matter...like, there’s this one song that’s about -- there’s a group a long time ago that tried to kill off all the Black people in Philadelphia and they write songs about events like that. And they write songs about 9-11, terrorists.” Becka’s comments about punk rock music demonstrate her awareness of social justice issues within this genre of text. She considers the messages in the songs and how they affect her. She believes songs about
social justice are important and not only is she listening to this kind of music, she is letting other people know she does by looking a certain way and acting a certain way that reflects what punk rock is about. The social justice issues that are brought up in the lyrics of the songs she listens to impact how she thinks about different groups of people, which she shared with me during the interview.

Cody

Cody was interested in being interviewed to help with my research but did not get excited about much during the interview as was demonstrated by his relaxed attitude towards my questions. When I asked him about how texts help him in his life he answered, “I feel they keep you connected, right? Like the radio and the Internet keep you connected and the TV keeps me updated on things that are happening in the world. It’s nice to be knowing what’s going on in certain areas that you’re not at.” This answer is thoughtful, as it compares multiple kinds of texts’ purposes with each other but it is also one sided. Cody did not go further with this line of thinking or expand on the general examples he gave for instance, there was no mention of how we can learn from texts, how they bring us joy or help set the tone or mood to an event.

Our discussion turned to music (he likes all kinds but no one genre stands out for him), the Internet (he uses it to check his email, banking and Facebook—once in a while), and finally television. Cody enjoys comedy programs and his “show of the year so far” is The Conan O’Brien Show. The jokes and the comedian’s personality make this show amusing for Cody but he did not elaborate on his thinking. What he did say was that even if Conan did make a joke or do a skit about something Cody disagreed with, he would not be bothered by it and would continue to watch. He believes that if you watch a comedy
show you need accept the fact that not all jokes will appeal to you but you are not watching it to be serious. He is not willing to change his viewing habits or question the appropriateness of the jokes even if he does not agree with the opinions being expressed. Instead he just keeps watching and knows that if Conan does go too far, “he’ll probably get yelled at by his producers anyway so…it’s their job.”

**Liam**

I have chosen Liam as the final informant in this section because the critical approach he takes toward texts creates tension in me. (Liam’s thinking about this game also caused some tension for him and this will be examined in the section: Which Texts Are Approached Critically?). Liam spends a lot of time playing video games. In fact, during one visit I made to his class, he mentioned a new video game that was being released that day, not once but four times in about half an hour. It was clear to me that video games are a very important text for Liam. I have been involved in another study about literacy and video games with adolescent participants and I felt that this experience gave me some key background knowledge going into this particular interview. These other participants with whom I had interacted shared ideas that are on the critical engagement continuum and I was interested in seeing where Liam’s comments would fit.

I asked Liam if there were messages in the games that he plays that he does not agree with or if there were any things that bothered him in those games. He mentioned that he agrees with Call of Duty, and “how it has 19-, about World War I, so that was about 19…30 something.” I shared the correct years of the First World War with Liam. He went on to explain that having a historical background of something that really happened is one of the things he really likes about the game. I had to remind myself that
he is an adolescent playing a game so knowing the correct dates of World War I may not
matter or effect his play or enjoyment of the game. I wanted to know if he liked the game
because it is based on real events or because he liked learning from the game. He
answered, “Mostly learning from it. It’s not like, the only fiction part about the game is
basically how it’s a video game but most of it is not. Most of it is non-fiction, because of
the war and all that, but it also has the names of all the veterans inside it.” This is where
I found myself feeling confused about Liam’s statements. From our conversation I knew
that Liam’s grandfather fought in World War II. I know he was playing the game to learn
more about his grandfather’s experiences but I was somewhat bothered that he was not
learning the information accurately. He also was confusing fiction and non-fiction.

I discovered that Liam made comments during the interview that fit in multiple
places on the continuum. At times he seemed to be analyzing the game from a critical
thinking standpoint like when he said the high quality of the game comes from the real-
life events that it is based on. He knows that the purpose of the game is to have fun and
also learn. He makes connections between his family and the game and discusses his
awareness for veterans’ affairs. Liam was also confused about the facts and was not
questioning other aspects of the game, such as the historical accuracy or the violence of
the storyline, which indicates that he would benefit from further consideration and
research about these aspects of the game. And yet, when we spoke about this game he
told me many details about it, and how many hours he put into trying to win. His focus
and commitment to the game were obvious. Herein lies the tension I felt; Liam spoke
about the game with statements that can be located at the critical thinking end of the
continuum and his deep understanding of some aspects of the game was obvious, but he
was still missing some key ideas related to the game. If Liam had been guided to
question the game with a critical literacy stance, I believe he would gain the information
he is missing (i.e. whether game is factual or fictitious and how the game affects him and
his peers).

Because I asked the participants about texts they wanted to talk about, they shared
what I believe to be genuine thoughts and experiences because they were in charge of
choosing the texts we discussed. The examples above demonstrate that there is no
shortage of critical engagement being done with the important texts that they identified.
At times, the participants’ comments about one text could be placed on multiple locations
on the continuum, sometimes focusing on more evaluative statements and other times
beginning to challenge the norms with which they have become accustomed to.
Acknowledging and accepting this movement is important in helping students further
their understanding about texts and their awareness of a critical literacy approach. It is
also important in helping teachers understand that students do engage with texts that they
deem important, in situations they create, not just while they are at school. This
engagement occurs across the continuum depending on the text, its context and the
student.

Which Texts Are Approached Critically?
The participants in this study were shown a list of texts to help prompt their
thinking about the texts they use and create (see Figure 2, page 48). They were not
limited to speaking only about the texts on the list, nor did they have to speak about each
one that was listed. Many texts were mentioned during the 12 interviews and there were
some forms of text that arose in numerous conversations, in which the participants shared their ideas about how they consider the texts they were discussing. In this section the forms of texts that are included are: music, video games, magazines, television advertising and television news. These texts are included because multiple participants made comments about them, and these comments can be plotted in various locations on the critical engagement continuum.

**Music- Created by Others**

Every participant had something to say about music and every participant discussed music with some kind of critical perspective. Often they were simply making a decision about whether they like a song or not, however some participants expressed more than like or dislike for a song. For instance, Rachel has very strong opinions about the kind of lyrics she finds offensive and stated “if I hear a song that I don’t like and I don’t want to hear- I turn it off... My friends get mad at me cause I’ll hear a song that I don’t want to listen to so I’ll turn it off...It’s my house. I find it irritating and I don’t want to hear it.”

Her feelings towards some songs are strong enough to cause her to turn off the music rather than listen to it. Her friends either do not share her feelings for the dislike of a song or they are not moved to act. I asked Rachel what kind of music does she not want to hear. She replied, “All guys going on ‘I’m going to fuck this chick tonight’ blah, blah, blah.[sic] You know what? You think you are so cool, go, go die in a hole. I hate guys like that.” She is angered by the lyrics she hears and is moved to act by turning off the music. She is frustrated that people choose to express themselves in song about this topic. She also disliked the way women are portrayed in music, which I learned during a conversation we had while I was observing in her class. It is interesting to note that she
connects the singers in the songs with people she knows. For instance, in the same conversation about the music, she mentions how bothered she is by a classmate who often shares the sexual activities in which he has been involved. Rachel is definitely considering the effect that the songs she hears have on her and those around her.

Becka also discusses music perspicaciously. She is not just listening for the correct notes or to decide if she likes a song or not. Becka is concerned with the messages in songs, like Rachel, which demonstrates her critical thinking about the music she listens to. I asked her to share with me what she would like to see more of in music. “Well, a lot of the music people listen to is generally all about the same thing, like sex, partying, drinking, doing drugs and whatnot. I think that’s really pointless to be putting into a song cause it’s kinda like thinking like ‘I need this, this and this and I’m going to get it because I’m famous’ or something. And then there’s people who write music about things that actually matter. Like, there are songs written about like revolutions and world hunger -- all the more important things. Not just little things that people want.” Becka is comparing the kinds of music she hears. She is connecting the lyrics with events in the world and how messages about those events can be shared through song. She feels strongly that music can be used to share messages about “the more important things.” This is an example of how Becka is moving towards the critical literacy end of the continuum because she sees music and lyrics as being about more than entertainment. She considers the multiple purposes of music and questions music that other people create as well as how it can include messages related to social justice.

**Video Games**

Video games proved to be a common text that many of the participants spoke
about. During their breaks from class they discussed the quality of certain games and also shared strategies about game play. Jordan and Grant play a few video games, like Halo, Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty. They like the fact that these games are entertaining, have good graphics and that the games give them “something to do”. Jordan commented that playing the games is “kinda real life” and Grant explained that in Call of Duty, “it’s actually like you’re in the army. It makes you sorta somewhat think.” The participants make connections between the game and real life and how the game affects them. Their opinion of the game is about more than its appearance or graphics. They find enjoyment in the realistic aspects of the games they play. Jordan said he had learned from “the storyline [in Call of Duty]...about the JFK assassination and stuff like that.” As an assignment for school he chose to write a story about this topic because he had learned about it in the game. He also wanted to ensure his facts were accurate so he spent time looking up information related to the assassination on the Internet. He continued his thinking about the text with which he was interacting beyond its initial purpose.

Liam also really likes Call of Duty and was impressed that the company who makes this game, Treyarch, has taken the time to get actual stories from veterans who fought in various wars and incorporate them into the storyline of the game. When I questioned how Liam knew the stories are from veterans and whether or not they are true, he was a little taken aback. He recommended I check the company’s website. “And it shows, it’ll have, like, all the names built inside there were from people they worked with in the army and they just went down the list and asked them if they could put them inside the game - so they put them in.” As an afterthought he added, “Well I assume they asked them. That wouldn’t be very nice to just randomly put their names in there.” This echoes the tension
Based on my observations of him in class, Liam is very sure that he is Internet-savvy, knowing that he cannot believe everything he reads on the Internet. He is also very loyal to this game and the company as he enjoys the game very much. The confusion that arose in his thinking when he realized that the company may not have actually asked the veterans for permission to use their names brought to his attention that he may not able to be as trusting as he once was. I prompted him to share with me how he knew the names were from real veterans and he said, “I can tell because I know in the history, some of the names, especially my family too. They were in World War I and II so I can see some of their names.” In this game, when you are playing, you have the view of the person you are “being” in the game. You see what he sees. When you move your gaze around the screen, the names of the other players and characters in the game show up, hovering just over their heads. Liam’s last name is Brown, and he has seen characters in the game that share his name. This evidence, coupled with the fact that his parents and grandparents have told him stories of his family members who fought in the wars, give him reason to believe that veterans really did contribute to the making of this video game. His research into its background, the connections he makes to his own life and his awareness of the multiple reasons he thinks this game is effective all show how he looks for analytical information about the game and then moves into the evaluative section on the continuum. Liam is engaged in finding out all he can about this text. His motivation comes from the personal connection he feels to the game as well as the fact that he is choosing to look more closely at it, rather than being told by someone that he has to do this kind of research.
Magazines

When thinking about magazines, many kinds come to mind. I often buy photography related magazines that include articles about how to improve my techniques and offer suggestions of places to visit to take better pictures. I also think about crafting magazines, like those about knitting, crocheting, scrap booking etc…, and cooking magazines. My adolescent participants comments centred more on those magazines about celebrities’ lives, fashion and music. None of the participants mentioned magazines as texts they regularly read. Only two of them had opinions to share. Both comments reflect critical engagement with magazines but are located at different places on the continuum.

Rachel is not a fan of magazines. “I don’t read magazines because they gossip too much. I don’t want drama in my life.” Rachel has experienced a number of traumatic events in her life and is trying to get herself to a stable and healthy state of mind. She feels that reading magazines that promote gossip would not support her in her goals. As she commented during the focus group session, “I don’t worry about what’s not my business.” She does not explain her ideas about magazines nor does she elaborate on how magazines could add drama to her life. Her approach to magazines comes from Rachel’s outlook on life and she is not interested in reading texts that do not appeal to her. It is possible that Rachel does think more deeply about magazines but based on our conversations, and the information she shared with me about them, the statements she made demonstrate her critical thinking about this form of text.

Morgan also dislikes magazines about celebrities. “They make people want to be like them.” She is concerned about the affects of these texts on herself and other people. “By doing that, you’re like, locking yourself up. It’s like you try to be more like them
instead of being you. Like your thoughts, your voice, your actions - it’s like their actions, their voice, their thoughts in your head.” Truth in texts is important to Morgan. Morgan takes an approach toward magazines that is further along the continuum towards critical literacy than Rachel. She is not comfortable with the messages people are given in magazines or how they act and react because of the messages. She challenges the messages she sees in magazines and is concerned with how these affect her and those around her.

The reactions of Rachel and Morgan to this form of text shows them in the role of text critic, created by Luke and Freebody, (1999) as introduced in Chapter 2. “…the power of information is not held solely by the author because critical readers assume a powerful role as well in deciding how this text will affect them personally,” (Australian Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002 as cited in McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 262). Rachel and Morgan have considered the influences of magazines and other texts on themselves and choose not to read them or participate in discussions about them.

**Television- Advertising**

Tristan knows he is influenced by commercials on television. They help him decide which restaurants to eat at or which stores to shop at. Commercials that influence him are “not cheesy” and the makers of the commercial must have “put effort into it.” I asked Tristan how he knows a commercial has effort put into it. “If it doesn’t look like it was done in like, five seconds and also if they, um, like if all the actors were happy and everything.” Tristan uses his own judgment and criteria to decide if a commercial is good or not. What a commercial that is done in “like, five seconds” appears like, is not explained. During our conversation, Tristan did not consider other aspects of
commercials besides the quality of them. Examples of these aspects include the purpose of the commercial, who is represented, whose voice is missing and what possible meanings are in what is being viewed.

Chloe’s comments about commercials show that her thinking falls closer to the critical literacy end of the continuum than Tristan’s. She dislikes violence but realizes that it is used to “get people to look at stuff…it makes all advertisements and stuff like that really shallow- like with no depth whatsoever.” Chloe sees beyond the advertising campaign and understands that there are calculated reasons for why many commercials look they way they do. We talked about some of the advertisers’ tricks that are used to make products look effective, like digitally editing photographs in “before and after” shots of weight-loss models, and using professional make-up artists to make up the model for the “after” shot. She thinks, “it’s just really obvious how hard they’re trying.” Chloe admits she and her friends “are pretty sceptical about it and… we sort of poke fun at it.” Sharing her opinions with her peers and talking about how the commercials are “stupid” demonstrate that Chloe is thinking about these texts in deeper ways than simply reading and believing their messages.

Television- News

Becka brought up the news when I asked her if there were texts that have messages with which she disagrees. “Well, I disagree with like, all the negativity that you hear, like when you watch the news or something. It’s all someone died, life will give you cancer. Like, it’s all just negative, negative, negative and then there will be one positive thing and like ten negative things.” She does not trust what she hears on the news and is frustrated by people who are “so gullible.” “They instantly have to believe it cause like some news
reporter or some journalist said so and they’re well known so they must be right, cause they’re well known.” She questions the source of the news she hears and also is aware that you cannot believe everything you hear on television. She does not explain why she is distrustful, instead just reiterating her skepticism. The comments Becka made about this text show how her thinking moves between evaluative thinking and challenging the text.

Eve is also skeptical of the news. She explained that raves have gotten a bad reputation because of the belief that they are all about drugs. She insists that people at raves are good people, who are “going to help you,” if you need it. I asked her where she feels that bad reputation has come from. “A little while ago this girl got raped at a rave. She got date raped and then five guys raped her and posted on Facebook…but they make it sound so…” I wanted to clarify who “they” were, and Eve agreed that it was the media telling the story about this incident. She went on to question their version of events. “…they say the chick was date raped and then got raped. But the way I am thinking about it, it was probably some stupid 14 year old girl, wearing fishnets at a rave, begging for sex and then just got raped. That’s how I honestly think it went down. I do not think it happened like that [referring to the media story]. But think about it. She was probably high out of her mind on ecstasy, begging for sex. That’s probably how it went down.”

Eve’s version of events surprised and shocked me. I was familiar with the story she recounted. My reaction to the story was not one of disbelief, but of outrage that someone thought posting this on Facebook was a good idea. I did not ever question that this attack had occurred on the girl in the video. I wanted to know why Eve was so sure that things happened her way. “Cause I go to raves and I see the stupid people there sometimes,
wearing fishnets and like, bras. "I’m a stupid little G, sleep with me!"” Eve’s own experiences override the media recount of this event. Despite the fact that the news stories and the photographs do not support Eve’s idea of “how it went down,” she is convinced that her story is correct. There is a disconnect between Eve’s life experiences and the text which represents them. This causes her to challenge the messages the texts put forth. She is certain the media story is untrue and has her own experience at raves to support her thinking. She questions the messages she hears in the news. Her statement, “I go to raves…” demonstrates the doubts she has about the people reporting on the story having been to raves themselves. She questions their authority to report on a story with which she believes they have no experience. At times she generalizes about all people thinking raves are just about drugs and when she contradicts herself by declaring that this girl who was raped must have been high out of her mind on ecstasy. At other times, thinking more deeply about the texts, she makes connections to her own experiences and questions the source of the texts.

Which texts do participants approach critically? All of them. The examples in this section illustrate that each text a participant mentions is coupled with their opinions, ideas and understandings from and about it. The participants commented on texts that were important to them as well as ones with which they took offence to or disagreed. The levels of critical engagement about texts varied, depending on the text and the participant. Where the comments can be located on the continuum also varies. The shifts in thinking that the participants shared during the interviews confirmed to me that their views about texts are not solidified and in order for these participants to continue engaging with texts, they need to be flexible in how they understand them. This allows for the contradictions
that arose within some participants’ comments to exist without being challenged.

**What Questions are Asked about Texts?**

The participants in this study shared information about the texts that they interact with on a regular basis. They talked about which ones they liked, disliked, wanted more of and the ones to which they paid no attention. During the conversations, the participants also expressed their concerns about certain texts, for instance television commercials and songs. As I analyzed the interviews, I found participants asking questions about the texts with which they interact. The questions were sometimes explicit and sometimes embedded in their comments about the texts about which we were speaking, through their inquisitiveness or doubt that they expressed. This questioning demonstrates their critical engagement with texts. If they were not asking questions, they would not be expanding their understanding about texts. The critical engagement continuum is helpful here in categorizing and understanding the kinds of questions that are being shared. Each participant made comments that were located on various parts of the continuum.

**Analytical and Evaluative Questioning (Towards Critical Thinking)**

Tristan provided examples of questions about media messages during the focus group and later in our interview. I asked him if he ever questioned what he sees on television or in movies, or in advertisements or posters. He replied “all the time.” I wanted to know what kinds of questions he asks. “Is this real? Is this happening?” I asked him to clarify what he meant by “real” and he said, “Like, is it fake? Is it accurate? That type of stuff.” Tristan’s questions show he understands that he cannot believe everything he reads/views/hears, because he doubts the authenticity and accuracy of the information he is presented. His responses also point to the fact that he is frequently
thinking about the messages he is shown, since he questions things “all the time.” These questions demonstrate Tristan’s analytical thinking because they deal with finding out if the information is true or false, fact or fiction. He does not explain what he does when he finds out the answers to his questions, for instance to stop watching a television program or not buy a product.

Liam’s questions about his friend’s video game purchasing habits are another example of analytical thinking about texts, although Tristan is concerned with finding truth in the information he reads whereas Liam, as you will see, is concerned with truth in the texts he interacts with as well as how these texts can affect his peer’s decisions. This being said, neither of these two participants is moved to act or share a transformative moment they have experienced, based on what they conclude about the messages they read. Liam and I had been discussing how commercials often suggest the newest products are the best products. He shared a story about how his friend, Nick, often gets his parents to buy video games for him based on the fact that it “looks pretty sweet” or “it says it’s gonna be really fun” in the commercials and trailers for the games. Liam does not always believe these statements but insists his friend does. This prompted Liam to ask Nick questions like, “Was it worth it to get that? Just because it’s the newest thing?” Liam’s questions show he is not always convinced of the truth in the messages he receives from texts. He understands that just because a commercial states a video game is going to be the best one ever, it does not mean that this it true.

Grant admitted that he thinks about the messages in the music that he listens to “sometimes.” We had been talking about the artists he and Jordan prefer and why. Jordan mentioned the rapper Andre Nickatina and that he liked him because of his “nutty
rhymes,” which I clarified as meaning great lyrics. I asked Grant if the messages he hears in the songs he listens to stay with him and make him think. He answered that they do sometimes and it would depend “on what song and everything and like, if I could relate to it.” This statement shows Grant’s tendency to make statements that can be found towards the critical thinking end of the continuum. Grant is only questioning the texts’ messages out of personal interest -- do I like this music and what it says? But he is looking for music that he can relate and connect to and this shows he is considering the messages more seriously, which is an evaluative approach towards this text.

**Challenging and Transformative Questions (Towards Critical Literacy)**

Eve is an artist as well as a DJ. She enjoys painting, dancing, and making jewelry. We spoke about how she knows when texts are good or bad and she knew “stuff that people put a lot of effort into” was good. Eve’s statement shows she is questioning the process of producing a text as well as how it looks when it is finished. “Like, I know a couple of people on the coast that silversmith too and they like, they would just make a single band wrapped around as a ring and they’d sell it like for a hundred and fifty bucks. Which is stupid, because do you know how easy it is to make a silver band as a ring? Pretty easy.” Eve then commented on her own ring, which she made herself. “It took me like, a whole day to make this… I had to like, torch the balls and file them and then like, chip the rock off and get it to like, not be chunky and stuff.” Eve’s emphasis on effort and process impact how she views the final product’s worth in her experience in making jewellery. Her initial evaluative comments about artists’ work being good or bad seem to indicate she is concerned with only the final product, but as she expanded on her thinking and her questioning about how much effort has gone into making a ring, she
shares her criteria for making those judgments. Her concerns lay with not only the people making the texts but also how they sell their work to people. Because she makes jewellery too, her “insider” view (Gee, 1997 as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2007) allows her to critique other people’s texts.

Becka, like Eve, also enjoys art. She creates her own paintings, sketches and writes her own poetry. She brought up painting when I asked her about finding the meanings in the artistic texts she reads/views. When considering an artist’s painting she knows that “sometimes you can tell by like, the harshness of like, the colours and the types of colours that they’ve used, like how they were feeling when they made it.” Like Eve, Becka has “insider” (Gee, 1997 as cited in Lankshear and Knobel, 2007) knowledge that enables her to view this form of text differently than someone who does not paint. She questions the way a painter uses colour as well as the colours that are used in determining the meaning in the work. She considers the voice of the artist through her/his choices of colour and techniques. This example shows that Becka is thinking about more than if she likes or dislikes a painting. She is also thinking about the painter and how her/his choices impact her understanding of the work. Like Eve, she is also a painter and her insider view provides her with a certain expertise or knowledge that allow her to think deeply about the paintings she views.

Becka’s thoughtfulness towards texts does not stop at paintings. She also made comments that can be located closer to the critical literacy end of the continuum during a conversation with her peers. Her teacher was conducting a discussion about gender stereotypes related to appearance and behaviour. The class shared their ideas of what makes someone manly or womanly. The topic turned to stereotypes about homosexuals
and then to relationships. One student cautioned the others by stating that if they were to have sex with a girl who is thirteen years old then her cervical walls will be ruined and she won’t be able to get pregnant. Becka responded right away by asking, “Do you have any proof?” The student replied that his “buddy had told him.” Becka questioned this reply. “Proof? Based on two people?” I’ve included this as an example because I think it shows Becka’s ability to look beyond the information she is hearing in the text and question the source and its validity. Her skepticism towards this information and her demand for proof demonstrate that she is thinking about it more deeply than if she were to have simply denied it as being true.

Later in our interview Becka confessed that she likes questioning what people say, to find out what they mean. When I asked if she questions information people tell her or rather their opinions, she said that it is usually information related things -- like facts about health for instance. “I’d probably ask things like do you have anything to back this up, like do you have any proof? Or did someone just tell you it?” Becka is skeptical of where people find out their information. She is aware that the sources producing texts can impact text meaning.

Chloe and I discussed the kinds of texts that bother her as well as what specifically made her uncomfortable. “Well, in a lot of action movies and stuff, they seem to sort of condone violence and, as if it’s all fine. And like, in superhero movies and such, it seems like they’re trying to say if you do hurt someone, even if it’s, as long as it’s for good, it’s fine, which I don’t agree with I guess, cause I don’t really think violence is good at all.” Chloe is viewing the messages certain genres of movies put forth and finding them to be in opposition to her personal beliefs. She is making connections between what she views
in the movies and how they make her feel and think about violence. I asked her if she dislikes movies that show these violent messages, and if she stops watching them because of the violence. “Well, no. I’d still watch it cause it’s sort of interesting. I don’t really agree with exactly what it’s doing but I don’t really, really care that much.” This created a tension for me as we spoke. Knowing how Chloe feels about violence and knowing that she also does not care enough to act when she is confronted with violence put me in a difficult position. I did not want to offend her by pointing out her contradicting opinions but I could tell, during the interview, that she was finished speaking about this topic.

These examples demonstrate how the adolescents quickly changed their minds or ignored ideas that did not fit with their current train of thought. Chloe does question texts, like all the other participants, and the questions she asks sometimes help to clarify her thinking while at other times cause conflicting opinions. It is important for teachers to help adolescent students work through this tension and learn about the options that are available to them when responding to text messages. The analytical and evaluative comments the participants made highlight the ways they often engage with text. Teachers can capitalize on this knowledge by building this kind of thinking into their lessons, as the adolescents are already approaching texts this way. The less frequent challenges the participants made about the texts show me that they are thinking about texts as they are presented and usually with only one meaning rather than from a more critically literate perspective.

**Critical Literacy: Transformative Understandings and Social Justice**

“Critical literacy offers an important strategic, practical alternative that allows teachers and students to reconnect with everyday life and with education that entails
debate, argument and action over social, cultural and economic issues that matter” (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 16). This description of critical literacy gets to the heart of the social justice issues that were raised by four participants in this study. The participants raised concerns about “issues that matter.” The four interview segments below are included to highlight the participants’ ability to make connections between texts, their own lives and the lives of those around them, often coming from oppressed groups. They are included as interview transcript segments, as opposed to being written into the text because I feel it is important to see the conversation as a whole, to show how my questions and prompts did or did not garner responses from the students.

The participants in this study are able to think beyond their classroom and themselves and develop insight into the meaning in the texts they read that affect others. This happens on their own and also with prompting and support from their classroom teacher. They demonstrated varying levels of understanding of social justice issues through their comments about messages in text dealing with abuse, oppression and fairness.

(Please note: In each interview, the student’s words are shown after the letter of their first name and my words come after an S, for Sarah.)

**Tristan**

*S- Um, let me think. Is there anything that bothers you about the texts that you use? Like Facebook or MSN or text messaging?*

*T- Yes- cyber bullying.*

*S- Cyber bullying, does that, is that something that you see going on around you or to you or-*

*T- Ah, both.*

*S- Oh, really?*

*T- But it hasn’t happened to me lately, so...*
S- When that sort of thing happens, do you think it’s because – why do you think it happens?
T- Because they’re insecure about themselves, and –
S- The bullies who are doing it?
T- Yeah.
S- Are the insecure ones?
T- Yeah, and they need to find a way to express their feelings.
S- Do you find that people who are involved in cyber bullying are also doing face to face bullying?
T- Yes.
S- Or is that a different kind of person?
T- Um, some people yes and some people no.
S- Why is there a difference?
T- Um, because some people are afraid of doing it face to face, when texting or M- MSN or Facebook chat or whatever…
S- Yeah, is easier because yeah…
T- Yeah, is easier because yeah…
S- So it’s easier because there’s kind of like a barrier-
T- Yeah.
S- So you’re a little more protected-
T- Yeah.
S- So you’re a little distanced from the person. I see.

Our conversation above relates to social justice but it is not necessarily about a traditionally oppressed group of people. Tristan is concerned with people who are cyber bullied. Cyber bullying is done using online or electronic methods of intimidation and threats, rather than bullying someone face to face. This form of abuse is one that Tristan has been subjected to in the past. His own experiences influence how he reads texts because he is more aware of the injustices in them. He comments elsewhere in the interview that he wishes he “saw more of um, like people standing up for other people.”
He sees it as a problem in “a lot of music…and music videos.” Tristan’s critical literacy stance provides him with a framework to view texts from. He connects his own experiences related to oppression with texts he reads in his life. His thinking about them is influenced by what has happened in his past. This kind of critical literacy approach to texts is an example of how Tristan is connecting messages in texts with his own life experiences as well as with other people who are affected by this issue.

**Becka**

*B*- Or when famous people say things like they don’t have enough money or they don’t have enough stuff and it’s the same when people are really picky with food and they’ll be given free food or something and they’ll be like “Oh, I don’t want it” and they throw half of it out. I always think like, there could be starving people around on the streets that could gladly eat that, whether they liked it or not.

*S*- So they’re not taking into account the big picture, right?

*B*- Yeah. Same with when people are like “Oh, my life is so hard.” It’s like, as hard as you think your life is, there’s someone who’s got it so much worse.

*S*- Puts things in perspective right?

*B*- Yeah.

Becka’s comments demonstrate her beliefs about justice and equity for all people. She had previously spoken with me about the importance of the messages in the Punk Rock songs she listens to and how they are about “things that matter”. As seen in the above example, her critical literacy stance is applied to texts beyond the music she likes.

**Liam**

*S*- So one final question, are there any things, on here or that we’ve talked about or that you’ve talked about in class with [your teacher], in terms of asking questions about texts, that you want to comment on?

*L*- So like stuff she’s shown us?

*S*- Could be anything? Could be anything that you want to just add to let me know.
L- Songs.
S- What about songs?
L- She chooses random songs and some movies too, like but they have a good base to it but still it’s like, -
S- What do you mean by a good base?
L- Songs were talking about racism and sexism and then one of the songs was “Stand Tall” and it had this midget and he was being made fun of by different people and all these people were ganging up on him and burned his house down.
S- Is that the song by John Cougar Mellencamp?
L- Yup.
S- Yeah.
L- So yeah, it had a good base but it was kind of like, random, I think.
S- And did- so when you were studying- were you studying that song or did she say “Hey-look at this!”
L- No, we’re studying it.
S- Did that make you think of any other songs and the messages in them? Not necessarily songs about midgets who were being made fun of but… just in general the messages in songs that you listen to? Or did you do that already?
L- Well, no I have the main message is in a lot of songs, but I can’t just name them on top of my head.
S- But you think of those messages as you’re listening to the song?
L- Um hum.
S- Do you ever kind of think “Oh, I really like the beat of this song but the message I don’t really agree with.” Does that happen to you sometimes?
L- Uh hum. (Nods)
S- Can you think of an example or that’s kind of putting you on the spot?
L- Mostly, Eminem- I like the beats of the music but I can’t go along with the words cause it’s too fast. Cause he’s just free-styling so you never know what he’s going to say, so basically that and it’s way too fast.
S- So you like the music but it’s sometimes hard to get the message.
L- Yeah.
S- Yeah. Are there songs that you’ve heard that you don’t agree with? People play them in class or Devon’s brought them or you just hear them on the radio?
L- Not really. I mostly agree with all of them.

This discussion with Liam left me feeling unsettled again. This is because, to me, he does not seem to approach texts, or even that same text, with a consistent mindset. At times he would make comments that highlighted his critical thinking abilities and then at other times his comments seemed so naïve that I could not believe he had thought at all about the messages in the texts he was accepting. Initially he brings up songs that his teacher introduces to the class, because of the messages in the lyrics of the music. He comments that they have a “good base” and I believe this to mean they are worth talking about. Liam identifies the main character in the song as a “midget” and talks about the abuse he suffers in the story of the song. His teacher’s choice of which song to study introduce social justice issues into the discussions he has taken part in during his English class. Then, he moves away from the critical literacy end of the continuum, when he comments about other music he listens to and the fact that he does not understand the main messages in it, because the rapper speaks too quickly in the songs. He is no longer thinking about the message in the song, but instead is critiquing the method of how the song lyrics are presented. Finally, Liam states, “I mostly agree with all of them,” referring to all the music to which he listens. This movement along the continuum shows Liam is still experimenting with and learning to be critically literate about the texts with which he engages.

Morgan
S- Um, is there anything else, when you look at this list or when you think about what we’ve talked about just now, that you want to add to that? Is there anything you feel you
want to share with me about questioning texts or thinking critically about them or making
texts?

M- Well, some people take them too seriously.

S- What do you mean by that?

M- Like you can be judged on your clothes and you might not have enough money to buy
clothes that you actually like. They’re just things you wear.

S- Yeah. So, you think other people...

M- Can judge you on your appearance, because-

S- I see.

M- Like the homeless could-

S- Like they don’t know the whole story or something?

M- Could have been really prosperous at one time, and they could of just had a bad time
and don’t have enough money to actually be what they want.

S- Okay.

M- And they don’t have enough opportunities anymore.

Morgan is very sensitive. She is easily affected by violence and acts of injustice
and she suffers from anxiety attacks when she is overwhelmed by the texts she
views/reads. In this discussion about texts in general, she brings up the fact that people
take texts too seriously. She is bothered when people are judged on their appearances
alone and as she points out, clothes are “just things you wear.” Morgan gives people the
benefit of the doubt and finds reasons to explain why groups of people, like the homeless,
may be in the situations they are in, which lead them to be treated unfairly. Her approach
to texts in this conversation demonstrates she is moving towards the critical literacy end
of the curriculum.

Social justice issues are part of the lives of these students. They feel defensive
about people who are being oppressed and abused. When they read/view/hear texts that
include injustices, they respond to them in different ways; talking about them with their peers or refusing to continue to read or view them. As far as I am aware, none of these students have taken action to help end the injustices about which they spoke. A teacher’s guidance could prove to be really valuable for these students to help them make the link between being aware of oppression and taking action against it in order to create a more just world for themselves and others.

**Participant Produced Texts**

The first four sections of this chapter focus on the participants’ interactions with texts produced by other people. In this section, I discuss the participants’ texts that they created themselves. Ten of the twelve participants were involved in some kind of creative experience, writing stories, designing clothes, painting pictures etc… The two participants who did not participate in this kind of creative work did, however still produce their own texts, through writing in school and on online outlets like Facebook chat for instance. They also wrote text messages, had conversations by phone and in person with many people and these exchanges of information are all considered texts. Therefore, every participant is producing texts, although not all for the same reason or with the same level of critical engagement.

Just as the participants approach texts produced by other people with some level of critical engagement, so do they approach their own texts to help them understand what they are creating and why. The continuum can be employed to help describe how these adolescents are viewing the texts they create. I did have to explain to a few of the participants that the texts they create were, in fact, texts. Accepting that books and songs are texts was not difficult for the participants but, when I pointed out that things like
dances, clothes, text messages and Facebook chat conversations were also texts, a few of the participants needed some convincing. I reminded the participants that the way I define text is very broad, encompassing “images, gestures, music, movement, animation and other representational modes” (Siegal, 2006, p. 65), as well as, “sociocultural conditions and relationships” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004 as cited in McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 264). I used phrases like “things that give you meaning” and “methods of communicating information” to help the students understand what could be considered text. I have chosen five examples of texts that are produced by the participants to include in this section. These five texts are important to the participants because they are proud of their accomplishments and they are also important to this study, as each one gives some insight as to how the participants are critically engaged with the texts they create.

Videos

Thomas enjoys spending time outside and says he has a lot of “outdoor toys,” like, “dirt bikes, quads, [and] all-wheels.” He watches programs on television and videos on the Internet about activities involving these things. When I asked if there were any ways that he produces texts, to communicate messages with other people he mentioned the different websites he visits that are about dirt biking. I asked if he ever posts things to the websites about his own experiences and he said, “Yeah. Cause when I go dirt biking sometimes I have a camera on top of my helmet to show people where I go…and sometimes I’ll put videos on websites, like YouTube or whatever, and people will comment on them, like ask where I’ve been and you just tell them and all that.” For Thomas, posting his videos about dirt biking and being involved in sharing information with people around the world is not a big deal. It is one more way of being engaged in the
production of text, stemming from his original bike ride. It is also fairly natural for Thomas to be contributing to the collective knowledge about dirt biking in the region that he lives in, despite the fact that he is a teenager, rather than an adult. His expertise comes from his own experiences and this gives him the confidence to upload his videos to places like YouTube for other people to learn from and enjoy.

Thomas creates videos for multiple purposes: to share his experiences, to teach/inform others about where he goes dirt biking and also to contribute to the growing amount of information about dirt biking in his local area. He engages in dialogue with others about the texts he creates, through online chat functions and posts about his videos. He uses other texts as examples and models on which to shape his own text. These aspects of Thomas’ text production can all be located on various parts of the continuum.

**Music**

Becka, Eve and Morgan are all creating music and/or song lyrics. Becka and Eve are both producing techno music and Morgan is writing songs for the band that she and a friend have formed. Becka was the first participant to share her music with me. During a class observation visit she came over at the break to play one of the techno songs that she had composed the night before. She used a computer and linked to her song on YouTube to play the music for me. In our interview I asked her about how she goes about creating the songs and what kinds of motivation or purposes she is considering when she is creating. She said it is important for, “people to like, find the music like, kinda easy to, like dance to, or something.” I asked when do other people have a chance to listen to her music and she replied, “Well, I put it on YouTube so everyone can kinda listen to it.” I wanted to know if she received any feedback on it. “Yeah, a lot of people say it’s good.”
Eve also produces techno music and being a DJ, she has spent hours and hours listening to other people’s songs as well as creating her own. She is influenced by what she hears at the raves she attends, as well as what her own tastes are. One thing that she has in common with Becka is that they both create music with their audience in mind. Eve said she hates Justin Timberlake because of, “the way his voice is.” But she included his singing in one of her mixes. The reason for that was because she was thinking about who would be hearing the song. “I wanted to, when I wanted to make this mix, I thought about playing it in front of people and I thought if there’s, like 100 people there, some of them would like Justin Timberlake, cause it’s so popular. So, I put him in.” In putting together the mix that was playing while we spoke, Eve took time to figure out what her listeners might want to hear. She elaborated on the mix later in the interview when Justin Timberlake’s part started playing. “I changed the background and added his voice in. See, like and I chopped his voice up…cause he’s got a really high voice. I don’t really like it but I thought everyone would.” When I asked why is was important for her to create her music for her listeners and not the way she would have liked it, she answered that she is trying to get her name around, to become known as a DJ.

Becka and Eve are clearly invested in the texts they produce. They think about it during its production and what they can do with their music when it is completed. They both consider for whom they are making the music and what the purpose of the music is. They want to create music that people enjoy and to which they can dance. They are making sure they share their music in public ways so they become known for what they are making. Also, both participants are interested in the feedback they receive about their songs so they can improve their creations in the future.
Morgan approaches her music creation quite differently. She and her friend are just starting their band so the first thing she told me was that her songs don’t have any music to them yet. In other words, she’s written lyrics. I wanted to know what Morgan’s songs were about, where she got her ideas for her songs and how she approached writing them. She said her songs were usually about what she was feeling at that moment. “I remember walking home from school [and] I’d start singing about my feelings, about random things that had happened during the day that I liked or disliked in different ways...so I started writing those down. How I feel.” Morgan is not concerned about her audience during the creation process, unlike Becka and Eve. She is focused on the messages in her songs rather than what other people will think of them. Her approach to song writing starts with her own ideas and feelings and then builds from there. She is not thinking about her audience or what they want to hear. The song writing is personal at the moment is not shared with other people, except the one friend who is in the band with her. Morgan’s process and products contrast those of Becka and Eve, because she focuses on how the songs make her feel, but there is still a strong level of investment from her, as there is with the other two participants.

**Clothing**

Clothing is really important for many adolescents. It is a way for them to express who they are or what groups they are connected with in a visual way for everyone to see. During our interview, Eve mentioned two symbols that she puts on her clothing. The first example is about the logo that Eve has created to go on her clothes. It is on a t-shirt a friend made her. She shows me and I mistakenly identify an octopus. “It’s a squid!” was the response from Eve. She was slightly hurt I think, by my mistake. I was struggling to
make a connection between Eve and this logo. She said she put it on all her clothes but did not explain it’s importance to her or why it was chosen. The text Eve created has personal meaning but it is kept secret from the audience. She is sharing the text with the world through placing it on her clothes for everyone to see but she is not making any sort of effort to help people understand her image.

The second symbol Eve shows me is a skull with the word “pirated” printed under it. The symbol has a story behind it. “Well, me and my dad and all of my friends up there [The Sunshine Coast] started -- we made a bunch of cards that had pirated on it. Like that symbol. And we’d go to my friends’ houses and we’d steal little stuff from them. Like, we all had little pirate flags everywhere and we’d like, steal their pirate flags or we’d like, steal their bag of grapes or something and leave a pirate card. It was just this whole joke that we have on the Sunshine Coast. Then we started putting it on our clothing, cause we’re the pirates of the coast.” This gave the symbol meaning for me but unless Eve tells all the people viewing the pirated symbol about how it originated, her intended meaning of this text is still secret.

Writing

Chloe likes to write stories and poems. She writes fantasy stories but they are not fan fiction, which she considers to be mostly stupid. I asked Chloe who reads her stories and poems and she said apart from her best friend, no one that she knows personally. She is “not really comfortable…it’s more easy to share your creations with strangers, than people that you know, cause you don’t really care about the opinions of strangers.” She shares her writing online, on a website that hosts stories which have been written by amateur writers. And although she says she does not care about the opinion of strangers,
she does like the feedback you can get because, “it sorta gives you more confidence if people like what you are doing.”

Chloe is mindful of her own text as well as of the text other people share with her in the form of their feedback. She wants her own writing to be good, (not stupid, like fan fiction) and she is looking for feedback to help improve her skills. She shares her writing publicly but not in a personal way. She is critical of her writing and judges the quality of it, although she does not share the criteria with which she uses to judge it.

**Photographs**

Chloe’s artistic endeavors do not end at writing poetry and stories. She also likes photography. A few of the other participants mentioned that they liked taking photos but they did not elaborate on this activity. Chloe, on the other hand, thinks deeply about photography and the meanings within the photos she makes. “It helps you look at things in a, pretty much a whole different way. It’s like, if you see a rock on the side of the road, it’s not really anything at all. But, if you, when you take a picture of it perfectly, like, it’s in a whole new definition and like, it looks so much more like a miracle than like, it looks, like just if you’re walking down the road.” Chloe is aware that when making a picture, what you exclude effects the outcome as much as what you include. She is also pointing out the fact that looking at things from a different perspective can change their meaning or how you understand them. One photograph may draw out deep and even emotional responses while another may be completely overlooked. Chloe’s insightful comments about photography demonstrate how engaged she is in thinking about and creating this form of visual text.

All the participants’ ideas about texts in this section show their critical literacy
stance. These examples focus on their creative products. When being creative, you are usually thinking carefully and purposefully about the process and product that you are making, whereas when you are creating texts that are not as creative, like an instant message reply or a text to a friend about where to meet for dinner, there could be less forethought. The continuum suggests that participants move from deep critical thinking to critical literacy about all the texts with which they are interacting. The continuum is a place where the participants can shift from one part to another, and be able to do this over and over.

**Initial Discussion**

![Critical Engagement Continuum](image)

**Figure 1.** Critical Engagement Continuum (a reminder)

**Important Texts**

In this section I included five participants’ comments about four important kinds of texts: books, music, television and video games. Each text was identified by the participants as being important to them and in some cases information about specific texts of the genre was shared. None of the texts are the regular canon that is found in schools. The distance between what the participants are interested in and the content they are required to learn according to the provincial curriculum seems very far apart indeed.
The majority of the comments reflect the analytical and evaluative thinking of the participants (See Figure 1 above). A few participants told me about the criteria they use when evaluating texts and gave details for their opinions. Two participants talked about the texts they challenged, but this challenging was done to texts they dislike, never to ones they enjoyed or preferred. None of the participants made comments about their important texts that could be located on the critical literacy end of the continuum.

**Which Texts Are Approached Critically?**

When I asked the participants about the texts that they disagreed with, disliked, found fault with or generally steered away from they were all able to answer without much hesitation. I included examples that relate to five genres of texts: music, video games, magazines, television advertising and television news. The participants often mentioned whether they believed a text or not and when I pushed to know why, quite a few talked about how truth and realism play an important role in their like of a text. The participants also shared their skepticism of texts with me, especially related to television advertising. They challenged the messages they saw in texts by looking for ways to prove the texts’ messages were fake or untrue. This seemed to give the participants more strength for their dislike of the texts. Liam and Eve spoke about how they were concerned about how other people, mainly their friends, were affected by the messages they received from texts. They had two approaches to dealing with this. Liam would question his friend about the text and whether it was really going to be as good as advertised and Eve chose to avoid the texts that bothered her. She also talked with her friends about them to help them see the negative influences particular texts have on them. None of the
participants really looked deeply into the messages of texts by questioning the source, the voices that were missing from the text, and the way various groups were portrayed in texts.

**What Questions are Asked about Texts?**

The participants asked explicit and implicit questions related to the texts that were being discussed. “*Is it real? Can I relate to it? Is it true?*” are three common explicit questions that they asked about texts. The participants often asked these questions while talking about the texts from an analytical or evaluative point of view. They wanted to know more about the texts so they could form their opinions about them. Implicit questions and queries I drew from comments about the effect texts have on the participants and their peers. Things like “How does this text affect me? How do other people relate and respond to this text? What is the source or proof of this message?” are examples of questions I inferred from the comments the participants made. These happened less often. These kinds of questions can be located in the middle of the continuum. The participants are thinking about the ways texts impact them. Frequently there was movement along the continuum as participant comments went from critically thinking about texts to more personal and evaluative comments towards the middle of the continuum. I also noticed a number of participants making contradictions during our conversations, which they did not seem to be aware of. For instance, Chloe mentioned she dislikes violence but will watch violent movies because they are interesting.

**Critical Literacy: Transformative Understandings and Social Justice**
As I reviewed the comments participants made related to social justice I noticed their emotions came out more strongly when they spoke about texts that included social justice issues, such as music/songs and commercials. They expressed their dislike for oppression and were upset and concerned that texts’ messages focused on such unjust actions. Not one of the participants mentioned any action they had taken related to social justice issues, although I would not be surprised of some of the song writers were to include the topics in their lyrics. Eve commented that she writes about her life and how she is feeling and from our conversation I inferred that unfair behaviour and inequality were things she often considered. As for where the comments about social justice fit on the continuum, they are mostly located towards the critical literacy end. I believe with more prompting and guidance, whether from teachers, parents or peers, these students can easily move from talking about unfairness to taking action to prevent it.

**Participant Produced Texts**

After speaking with the participants about the texts they produce, it was clear that the messages in the texts were of the utmost importance to them. The texts they produce, whether they are stories, videos, songs, clothing or photographs, all came from practiced creators with calculated and thoughtful intent. Some participants shared the texts they made with friends or family while others chose to share their work anonymously through the Internet. A few participants mentioned that receiving feedback was important as it gave them confidence and helped them improve their texts the next time. The audience was important to some participants while others were not taking the audience’s needs or wants into consideration; instead choosing to focus on their own feelings and letting them guide the creative process. The critical engagement continuum can be used in a similar
fashion when considering comments made about participant produced texts as when thinking about comments the participants made about other people’s texts. Many of the comments made by the participants about their own work reflected the purpose and intent of the text (analytical) as well as their evaluation of it. There were very few comments that could be located towards the critical literacy end of the continuum, although approaching one’s own text from a critical literacy viewpoint is a difficult thing. These participants had little experience with adopting a critical literacy approach for other people’s texts, so their lack of critical literacy seems to make sense.
Chapter 5: Analysis

By developing the continuum and using it to categorize and group the information from the participants I was able to identify certain areas that suggest there are places on the continuum where students are not spending much time. I want to return to the participants’ words to show how they can help teachers’ understanding of how these adolescents engage critically with text and also how teachers can aid their students to move freely on the continuum and better understand the texts with which they engage. As I analyzed the data I collected, my research question remained forefront in my mind:

**How do adolescents use critical engagement to negotiate texts in their lives?**

**Adolescents are critical.**

Adolescents are critically engaging with texts on a regular basis. This occurs with and without teacher support. I learned from the participants that they are critically engaging with texts. They often look for the purpose and the messages in texts and then evaluate them. They do this, I think, because reading texts for this kind of information brings a stronger understanding of the texts. The participants also spoke about sharing their ideas about texts with their peers so they are collaboratively critically engaging with text. This discourse around texts between adolescents happens naturally and it contributes to the deeper understanding they develop about texts. The discussion between peers is mostly evaluative in nature, relating to why one text is better than another or why one person loves a text and another hates it. Adolescents sharing texts with each other exposes them to new texts as well as different ways of reading/learning about/thinking about texts, as they see their peers demonstrating a variety of ways of engaging with
texts.

What this says to me is that the adult versions or definitions of critical engagement or critical literacy may not be the same for adolescents. Critical engagement and critical literacy are not stagnant but shifting, just like literacy, as stated previously in the literature review, “Literacy, [therefore], may be thought of as a moving target, continually changing its meaning depending on what society expects literate individuals to do” (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004, p. 11). There are many ways to be critically engaged with texts and I think it is important for teachers to uncover the kinds of critical engagement that may be happening for their students that might be overlooked or ignored. By becoming aware of the way students engage with text, teachers can inform their practice and improve the text-related activities they present to their students. This knowledge would then give them the opportunity to include the discussion, debating, questioning and sharing of text that their students do naturally with each other into their lessons. Students could then be guided to further their thinking by challenging the texts enabling the students to naturally move further along the continuum towards the critical literacy end.

**Adolescents are engaging with a huge variety of texts.**

The variety of texts the participants mentioned shows me that they have access to many forms of text. The popular cultural myth that teens only engage with screens was certainly not the case for the participants I interviewed. Technological texts were certainly a big part of the texts that were important to the participants but all of them mentioned other forms, including books, music, painting, photography, sculpture, woodcarving, poetry, and songs. A key discovery was that the participants expressed
interest mainly in texts that are not valued in school. This lack of value and recognition of student-selected texts will fluctuate because it is dependant on each teacher’s interpretations of the curriculum. Students are expected to be exposed to and taught from a variety of texts but because many teachers do not ask for their students’ input in selecting which texts they will be studying, many of the texts that adolescents find engaging and entertaining are left out. It is also important to note that each reader can find meanings in texts that will vary from not only their peers’ ideas but from the teacher’s as well. Each reader will “mediate [these] texts differently through their own lived experiences and realities and make sense of them within multiple frameworks of interpretation” (Gounari, 2009, p. 168). A teacher cannot guarantee that what they want their students to learn is, in fact, exactly what they learn. The more texts that students are exposed to, the more opportunities they have to explore multiple meanings of those texts and through that process expand their learning.

There are also limitations to the kinds of texts adolescents are asked to create in school. These limitations come from teachers’ expectations, provincial curriculum, the availability of resources in the school, and expertise of those involved in creating the texts. Multimodal texts are often harder to assess and collaborative texts also make individual student evaluation difficult for teachers, as it is often hard to identify which student has demonstrated their learning of each particular curriculum expectation. Teachers need to be aware of these limitations and look to each other for assistance in how they can change their assessment practices to better value the texts their students are capable of producing. They should also go to their students for input on how they want to be assessed.
**Adolescents are influenced by and influence their families and their peers.**

The adolescents in this study demonstrated that their families shape some of the ways they interact with texts. Morgan stated she spends time discussing books about history with her father and learning gaming strategies for the online video games she plays from her brother. Liam noticed his family name in a video game he plays and searched for more information about his family history from his parents and grandparents. Eve learned her craft of making techno music from her father and joins him at raves for pleasure and to learn from other DJs about their music. Lily’s mother’s fear of bullying caused her to keep Lily and her siblings out of public school until the eighth grade. This has a profound effect on which texts Lily was exposed to as well as how she socialized with other students, about texts and in general. Her father’s preference for “hippy-music” has also influenced Lily’s musical taste. These examples of participants’ interactions with their families around texts came out of general conversation about texts. I did not specifically ask the participants how they engage in texts with their families, but even in these examples it is clear that family values and ideals shape how the participants read and create texts.

The participants in this study are also influenced by and try to influence their peers through text-based events. Chloe writes Dark Romantic Fiction stories and her friend “makes” her write more because she enjoys them. She also spends time in places she said she wouldn’t normally go in order to gain access to texts she would otherwise not be able to get. Rachel argues with her peers about the texts she engages with, especially about music. She also demonstrated this challenging behaviour during class discussions around movies, historical events and personal stories being told by her peers. Becka spends time
with peers who also love punk rock music, which influences her. She works hard at influencing her classmates about equality and social justice issues.

The importance of these observations is that there is a wealth of information that each student brings to a classroom of which the teacher needs to be aware. Knowing about students’ family values and peer influences can aid a teacher in designing lessons that encourage influences. Taking advantage of how adolescents interact with one another around texts when they want to and then reproducing that within a classroom setting could lead to more motivated learners. It would put the teacher in a position of learner and allow the students to be the expert voice for a change.

**Adolescents engage seriously in the world.**

One of the commonalities in each interview was that when I asked the participants which texts were important to them and which ones they would like to talk about there was no hesitation. They all spoke about a variety of texts with great detail and made comments ranging from being very superficial to very meaningful. They took the interview with me seriously and also took their discussions about texts seriously, regardless of whether they happened during class or on breaks. Whether they were talking with me about a commercial on television or about the way women are portrayed in some video games during a class discussion, there was genuineness to their comments. The participants expressed their dislike for texts that offered fake acting or shoddy products and also placed effort as an important way to judge texts. The importance of this realization is that by allowing the participants’ voices to be central to my study, I discovered just how much the students in this class had to say. When I questioned some of the participants about their comments, they stood by them and explained them further
to me. The opportunity to share about texts that they chose seemed to be welcomed by them.

Teachers need to take advantage of this sincere attitude. Making students’ voices a central part of the lesson and creating a safe and encouraging environment for students to express themselves gives them a place to be heard and also to practice voicing their ideas. Valuing the texts that adolescents regard as important invites them to become more actively involved in their literacy learning. It is much easier to demonstrate critical engagement about texts when the texts are ones the students actually care about.

**Adolescents are not transformed by texts.**

In the explanation about the critical engagement continuum I associated transformative thinking as being an indicator of critical literacy. As I read and reread the interview transcripts I could not find any examples of the participants referring to any kinds of changes in their thinking related to texts. This does not mean they are not experiencing transformative thinking, but I found no evidence of it in our discussions. This lead me to wonder if the participants recognize what transformative thinking is and if they can, are they able to communicate about it? Are they even aware that someone can be so strongly affected by a text or experience that it can lead them to alter their thinking about a topic completely? What is the teacher’s role in teaching about this kind of experience? Can you teach someone to be transformed by something? How does one do this? What texts do you use? Knowing that what one person’s meaning is of a text is not necessarily the same as another’s makes it even harder to select texts that can act as catalysts in the transformative process. Can adolescents’ thinking be transformed if they are not even aware that it is a possibility? Can adolescents’ thinking be transformed if
they are not conscious that the hegemonic norms that they believe to be true are not the only truths to be known? I struggle with this as I have felt confusion with my own transformative processes because I did not know what I did not know. I was simply aware that I was lacking information but how to get it and what it was were unclear to me. Can teachers take on the job of creating catalytic experiences for their students through texts and bring them to transformational moments while at the same time meeting curricular expectations and evaluating the students on their demonstrations of learning? And if teachers do not, are they failing at teaching their students to approach texts from a critically literate perspective?

**Adolescents spend little time talking about social justice issues.**

Throughout the interviews and classroom observations I was always listening for the participants to mention social justice issues and it rarely happened. I’ve highlighted the few examples that came out of the interviews (see above) but overall, social justice issues were not usually part of discussions related to texts, or otherwise for that matter. If teaching students to approach texts and life from a critical literacy perspective is a goal of educators, then social justice issues must be included in that teaching. So where should this happen? How does it get inserted into the curriculum? Perhaps the focus of teachers needs to change. Instead of looking at how the curriculum can be shifted and manipulated to include social justice issues, I believe that by starting with social justice issues at the centre of education makes more sense. The curriculum can be made to fit social justice teaching, not the other way around. But how do teachers do this? Where do they learn about social justice issues? What support are they given when trying to change the way things have happened in their schools for years? Who decides which issues should be
focused on? These questions do not have simple answers. Just as approaching life with a
critical literacy perspective is a conscious change, so must be the conversion in thinking
for a teacher who takes on the responsibility of teaching from a critically literate
standpoint. Adopting a critically literacy approach is not necessarily an easy adjustment
to make and it certainly has many complex issues associated with it, but when the end
good is educating students to create a better and more just society, it is hard to not choose
this approach.
Chapter 6: Considerations, Tensions, Implications & Conclusions

Tensions and Considerations:

During the interviews there were some questions that I did not ask, which in hindsight I wish I had. These questions were about power and texts, what the dominant perspective was in the text being discussed, the participants’ views on school based texts and if/how they experienced critical literacy in school. I feel that these questions may have garnered some important information to further my understanding about how the participants became critically engaged with texts. The responses could have informed me about the position the students felt they were in at school related to their peers and their teachers. This positioning affects how they approach their learning and thinking about school based texts. The participants did not bring up these issues either so what does this say about how they perceive the power relationship between themselves and their teacher, or themselves and me, the researcher? Although the participants seemed to display a fairly high level of comfort while talking with me, in that they did not seem overly nervous and they shared personal stories with me, I still feel that they saw me in a position of power. They waited for me to ask questions rather than introducing their own topics of discussion and a couple of them asked for confirmation that what they had said was correct. As for their relationship with their teacher, I think that students are conditioned to be subversive to adults/teachers from a young age when they enter school. The participants’ teacher did encourage them to ask questions and challenge ideas and a few times this occurred but usually they just went along with what they were being presented.
Another consideration in relation to the findings of this study is that the participants did not read their interview transcriptions to verify them, so no member check was completed. When the interviews finished it was almost time for school to break for the December holidays. During that time and most of January the interviews were transcribed. I did not have a chance to visit the classes once the interviews were ready. I do believe that getting the transcriptions read by the participants would have been a big struggle. It was quite difficult to schedule interviews in the first place and many agreed only because they could participate during the school day, instead of on their own time. Unless I could ensure that reviewing the transcripts happened during class time, which I could not, I imagine many of the participants would not have read them. I did ensure that the participants had my phone number and email should they have wanted to change or withdraw any comments they made during the interviews or focus group.

I discovered another issue, which also became a place of tension, during the interview process. When a comment was made that surprised or shocked me, I was not sure how to proceed with the discussion. For instance, when Eve shared her opinion about how the rape incident really occurred, I was at a loss for words. On the one hand, I felt that my role as a researcher was first and foremost and I should continue to ask questions. The trouble was I was not sure how to ask questions without offending Eve, as I was concerned that if I questioned her opinion she would get defensive and the interview would be over. I was especially cautious, as I had seen her withdraw during class discussions when things were not going her way. But on the other hand, as a teacher and adult and a woman, I felt really uncomfortable listening to a young woman talk about rape in a matter-of-fact way that held the victim responsible for the actions that
occurred. I wanted to impress upon Eve the seriousness of the event, and offer ideas as to how to protect herself from a similar fate. I also realized that by sharing her ideas about this, she was exploring her identity as a woman, rave-attendee and teenager. In the end, I just let Eve keep talking and tried to steer the conversation back to texts and their meaning. As I re-listen to this segment of the interview, I am disappointed with my response, but I still do not know what I could have said differently. My re-considerations of these kinds of moments during the interviews are important to this research because the responses I gave or didn’t give had some impact on the interviews. These experiences have also been helpful for me in my learning about research and interviews, as I have already benefited from this learning in interviews I conducted this past spring on a different research project.

A tension that came to light for me was the fact that even though aspects of a text may not fit with their beliefs, the participants still include it as text they enjoy or use. It could be a music video that they don’t like, but they still enjoy the song or, like Chloe who hates violence, but who will continue to watch an action movie because “it’s not that bad”. This led me to consider how form impacts one’s understanding of text, and also how it contributes to one’s preferences for texts. Future research may include this idea—how does form impact critical engagement with texts?

**Conclusions and Implications:**

The purpose of this study was to explore adolescents’ critical engagement practices with texts. The review of the data collected from my observations, the focus group and open-ended interviews has brought me to a few conclusions, each with serious implications for pedagogical practices.
For each participant, the comments they made about their interactions with texts could be located somewhere on the Critical Engagement Continuum. Being within the arrows brings students to a place where they can receive encouragement to question texts, guidance about the kinds of questions to be asking and examples of how to work towards a more just society through thoughtful action. At the same time, each participant’s critical approach was unique and changing. This is because, for each participant, the definition of critical engagement and their experiences with critical literacy are dependent on multiple factors: their prior experiences with thinking critically, the variety of texts they have been exposed to and how they have been encouraged to share their thinking about texts. Multiple definitions of critical literacy must exist in order to encompass the variety of forms of texts that exist, as well as the variety of approaches each reader may take towards the texts with which they interact or produce. The implications for having multiple definitions and personal connections to critical thinking and critical literacy seriously call in to question what teaching with a critical literacy approach looks like. Critical pedagogy is often discussed with regards to critical literacy and a similarity between the two is that neither has a finite and concrete definition. Both depend on the teacher and well as the students to help set parameters of what can be taught. this being said, just because it is not easy to define, does not lessen it’s importance. “Critical literacy is no longer an optional, but now it must be viewed as a fundamental ability for all students” (McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 260).

As an interviewer, my technique developed as I gained experience. In early interviews I found myself doing most of the talking. Instead of leaving the questions open ended, I would provide choices for the participants to pick from, privileging my ideas and
my voice over theirs.

*I need to improve my questions as they often don’t make sense and then I give lots of examples, trying to explain them, which means the participants just agree or pick one instead of coming up with their own ideas. It’s hard to get them to expand or go deeper in their answers too, because of this.*” (Jan. 14. 11, personal journal notes about interviews)

The reason for including this as a key conclusion from this research is because I believe it is a model for what happens in many classrooms; the teacher’s voice and ideas are given priority over their students’ voices and ideas. The instances when the participants provided me with insightful comments came when I stopped talking and started listening. Once I made this realization, I found that I could prompt discussion and elaboration about topics the participants had selected by limiting what I had to say about a topic and giving them a chance to speak. Centering students’ voices and working to make connections between their ideas and curriculum are two ways that enable critical pedagogy: to teach about critical literacy and also teach from a critical literacy stance.

I often started my interviews by asking the participants which texts they wanted to talk about. I wanted to hear about the texts that were important to them and that they had some experience with, or expertise about. Questioning the participants about their preferred texts focuses the topic of discussion on to one which they selected, about which they are knowledgeable and comfortable talking. Our discussions would build from there. This has strong implications for teaching through critical literacy because it shifts thinking about which texts are in the class and which texts could be allowed in. As Becka told me, “*We can’t listen to my music (heavy metal or punk rock) in class. It always gets*
“I later learned that there are numerous examples of social justice issues in the lyrics of the songs Becka listens to. Because she is not allowed to bring this music into her class, the opportunity to think critically about them is lost.

Positioning the participants’ choice of text as the starting point of our interviews also caused me to view the relationship between us differently. I do not ride dirt bikes, make videos, go to raves or listen to punk rock music. These texts proved to be the media through which my participants became my teacher, and me their student. This shift in role opened my eyes to the understanding the participants had about the texts they were talking about. It allowed me to become a student-centered teacher/researcher.

Towards the end of writing this thesis, I had the opportunity to revisit the class where my research data was collected. I brought with me a presentation about my findings based on the observations and interviews I had conducted with them. Sharing my conclusions with the participant group was important for me because it gave me a chance to really show the participants how valuable their participation had been for my research. I wanted them to know I really listened to what they had to say. I think sharing my findings with the participants was important for them because it made my reason for being in their classroom more concrete. They also got to see their words in the presentation (on the PowerPoint slides) and I hope, feel as though they really had a voice and played a central role in my research. Their insider view towards adolescent text use exposed me all kinds of information I could never have discovered simply through observing them in their classroom. I wanted to share my ideas with their teachers in the hopes that they would continue to add to their knowledge of critical literacy. Finally, I also wanted the participants to think about texts differently once they had been exposed
to the critical engagement continuum.

For teachers using a critical literacy stance in their teaching, this shift in roles highlights the aspect of critical literacy that encourages the reader to look for and value the missing voice in a text. The student voice is often silenced, or unheard, but by creating a space where they can express their knowledge and extend their ideas, their voices become not only heard by the rest of the class and the teacher, but central to the lesson. Teaching with a critical literacy stance means valuing all voices in the classroom.

Being critically literate means that during the reading transaction readers question this contextual frame as a way to position or see themselves and others as enabling or defying the particular situation or belief being posited by the author, the situation or themselves.” (Lapp & Fisher, 2010, p. 157)

Teachers cannot always and only be the voice that is heard speaking about the text or choosing the text. As in the quotation above, students must put themselves in the position of considering the text. If they do not have this opportunity, they cannot begin the transformative action that critical literacy can bring out of a text for a reader.

Using a variety of perspectives to view and consider texts is one of the key aspects of critical literacy. Acknowledging the experiences students bring to class and assisting them in developing connections between their experiences, those of their peers and texts can do this. I also learned from my participants that the more “insider knowledge” (Gee, 1997, as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2007), they possess about a text or topic, the more questions they ask about texts related to that topic. They develop a confidence that allows them to become skeptical and question different aspects of the text, like it’s source, form,
production, etc… rather than questioning the truth in the meaning or evaluating their like or dislike of it. Students’ knowledge of text can be a missing voice in classrooms.

Teachers need to acknowledge not only which texts are important to students but also their knowledge about them. Shifting roles also allows for teachers to reconsider what their role should/can be in the class, in order to facilitate their students’ success in deep understanding of texts. Part of this rethinking what a teacher’s role is, includes thinking about how to access the knowledge of her/his students, in ways that are connected to curriculum while still remaining relevant to the students.

The adolescents in this study are all critically engaging with texts to some degree. They demonstrated a variety of literacy skills during my observation of them and in the interviews. They read a multitude of texts, in varying ways, with many reasons motivating them to do so. What I have learned from this research is that in order to assist these adolescents in moving beyond the critical thinking end of the continuum, certain steps need to be taken by their teacher. These recommendations are applicable for all teachers of all students. These suggestions will support a critically literate classroom.

• **Teachers who want to teach from a critical literacy stance must be aware of the multiple definitions of critical literacy.** The definition of literacy has changed over time with the ever-increasing number of texts people use to communicate, thus the definitions of critical literacy must be changing too. The critical engagement with which we read texts must reflect the renewing definitions. The critical engagement continuum is a tool with which teachers can help their students to see the kinds of thinking they do about texts, as well as the kinds of thinking they are not doing. This tool is
purposefully a continuum to allow for movement along it as shifts in thinking are made by the student as they engage with texts.

• **Teachers must honour their students’ experiences, voices and expression within their classes.** In order to do this, a teacher must be willing to accept and adopt multiple roles for herself within the classroom. The teacher needs to allow the students opportunities to be the leaders and teachers of their peers and support the student in that role. The teacher also needs to accept the role of student when the students have taken on the role of teacher. As well as taking of various roles, the teacher must ensure a safe and comfortable environment in which students to feel comfortable voicing their ideas and experiences. Finally the teacher must show the students’ ideas and opinions and texts have value in her classroom.

• **Teachers must invite texts that are relevant to students into their classrooms.** The teacher must open up the boundaries of what are considered “acceptable” texts to include those texts that students view as important and relevant. Making multimodal texts a normal part of the teaching process demonstrates the value the teacher hold in the texts the students find important. Teaching about, with and through these texts brings motivation for those students who get a voice in what they are learning. It also invites reading and understanding of the text from multiple viewpoints as well as comparison between traditional canonical texts and those the students pick.

• **Teachers must realize that critical literacy is always going on for them**
and their students and what it looks like may differ for each of them.

Just as a text’s meaning is influenced by many factors, like the context in which it is read, the reader’s prior experiences, the author’s choices of what to include and exclude, etc…, so to is critical literacy. The approach a reader takes towards a text depends on his purpose for reading, the situation in which the text is read, the experiences the reader has had with similar texts, etc… Critical literacy is a perspective through with one can view all texts, but all texts cannot be viewed using the same critical literacy perspective.

The Critical Engagement Continuum can be used with students to help them become more knowledgeable about their critical approach towards texts. Using the Critical Engagement Continuum to explore to which lengths students are being critically literate will assist teachers in creating a space where their students come to know and understand texts more deeply, and in turn know more about themselves.
Bibliography


Appendix

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Appendix 1. Prompt list of texts and examples from sorting activity