

Connecting to the World: Learning about Democracy through Critical Literacy  
in High School English Language Arts

by

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### Abstract

This qualitative research is a *hermeneutic inquiry* into learning about democracy through critical literacy in high school English language arts (ELA) education. The purpose of this study was to address the need for greater understanding of *why* critical literacy should be examined in high school ELA. The literature review connects historical theoretical and praxial implications for democratic practices. Critical literacy was explored through the hermeneutic method situated in one ELA teacher's experience connected to a world view. Pivotal stages of critical literacy learning were explored in the classroom for transfer across education and democracy. Findings provide insight into the need for teachers to envision themselves as lifelong critical literacy practitioners and to engage in learning communities that explore the evolving needs of students. Essential philosophical underpinnings of the new philosophy of critical literacy education are explored; and suggestions for further professional development to increase subject knowledge are stressed. ELA educators who wish to enact a critical literacy curriculum need to work together with students to engage in discourses around issues of power in literacy practices so classroom discourse may connect to the world.

*Keywords:* critical literacy, English language arts, democracy

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## **Dedications**

I dedicate this work to my parents Larry and Christine. Thank you for your love and guidance throughout all my endeavours. I am truly grateful for all you have done for me.

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Throughout my seven years as a grade 9 through 12 English language arts educator, I have often asked myself where the connection between theory and praxis are actualized in my classroom. Through my classroom experiences, I have come to observe that there sometimes exists a dichotomy between the skills we teach our students and their abilities to actualize, utilize, and hone these skills in their everyday lives; in particular, critical literacy skills and abilities. I have taken it upon myself to encourage, model, and explore critical literacy in my classroom. I encourage my students to analyze and evaluate their thinking, with the belief that the quality of thinking I leave with my students may one day greatly impact the quality of life that they can achieve.

While teaching a class of Grade 12 students, who were anxious about graduating high school and turning 18, the topic of voting came up. Many of the students voiced that they felt very insecure about this and the other great changes ahead of them, including whether to prepare for university, to travel, to attend community college, and to live on their own. They wondered about how to vote for the first time, and why they should vote. One student stated, “There are so many expectations of us- as if we’re supposed to know what to do”. Other students noted that they were not really sure what it meant to be democratic citizens. Through a continuing dialogue with my students, it became evident that many of them had very little understanding of the political landscape and/or concepts democracy. “There isn’t a class for that,” stated a student. Although there is no specific *class* dedicated to a comprehensive study of democracy currently in Manitoba, the Grade 9 Social Studies Foundation for Implementation document does examine

democratic governance in Canada. The Grade 10 Social Studies Curriculum examines 21<sup>st</sup> Century issues in Canada, with a section dedicated to the study of geographic literacy. There is, however, no course currently offered to specifically examine democratic issues through language and literacy and the factors which influence our current democracy. Nor are there any true literacy-based approaches to interpreting these topics. Upon asking students if this was something that was of interest to them, almost all of them stated it was, but they also added that they felt unprepared to examine these issues as they had very little experience in this area of study. For these students, there were no venues for conversation about politics in the schools, exclusive of the area of social studies. It seemed to me that this is a crucial topic that should be explored in another context within the curriculum to help prepare our students for the future.

Societal changes are occurring significantly faster than amendments to curricula, and today's students are immersed in a complex world of data, politics, and literacies. Since our identities are shaped by our words and how we use them, the complexity of language must be explored and re-valued. Critical theorist Ira Shor (1999) notes, "Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us" (para.1) and we it. It is essential to value literacy beyond basic functional literacy skills; critical literacy is capable of eliciting the necessary skills and intrinsic understanding beyond simply reading and writing.

Research suggests that the ability to use critical literacy skills in English language arts encourages students to become "conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). However, understanding and examining power relations is not a straightforward endeavour. Educators must be mindful of their practices within this area of examination and become mindful of the foci of their pedagogical methods and approaches. Currently, the Manitoba Senior 4 English language arts

Curriculum Framework of Outcomes and Standards documents (Manitoba Education and Training, 2000) focus upon the process of reading and writing the English language. It seems indispensable that our students not only engage in the process themselves, but also that they also have the ability to identify and understand the power behind words; how words shape us individually, and how words shape our communities, cultures, and notions of current democracy. English language arts educators need not only be aware of democratic processes, but that they also have the ability to engage students in these conversations- the conversations of everyday life.

In addition to the current English language arts curriculum, critical literacy curricula makes it possible for an examination of how social constructions shape both educators and students, and how we shape our social constructions. In order to truly participate in this dialogue, English language arts educators must understand the theoretical foundations of their literacy practices. Through these understandings, critical dialogues can provide the opportunity for teachers to explore viewpoints and stances rooted in strong theoretical and historical underpinnings. Educators can then construct their own understanding of literacy education, and reflect on their own skills, assumptions, knowledge, beliefs, implications, consequences, and reasoning that have come to shape their pedagogical practices. As James Hoffman (1998) notes, educators must be continually reflective of their own practices to avoid undermining the scope of literacy learning in the classroom:

Each time, as classroom teachers, we offer our students only one method or approach because we know it is the best and ignore all other options, we transmit a narrow vision of learning to our students. Each time, as teacher educators, we teach a method or an approach as if it is the right

way or the only way, we set a group of future teachers on the wrong path of discovery (p. 111).

Hence, being a literacy educator requires constant reflection, research, and a solid knowledge of the breadth and depth of approaches. Critical literacy can help redefine who we are and where we are going. It breathes life into the status quo and encourages us to examine ways of reshaping society, issues of power and, above all else, our own humanity. My professional responsibility to my students as an educator, role model, and mentor highlights the imperative to prepare students to be critically literate, and to embody and practice these skills myself. If social justice and democracy are genuine goals of critical literacy, then our classrooms should reflect these goals (Behrman, 2006). Behrman (2006) also points out that much of the true struggle of actually implementing critical literacy results from a dichotomy between school and community. The following section examines the background to the problem of how critical literacy studies in schools have not blended well with the need for critical literacy skills in community life.

### **Background to the Problem**

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is a text particularly relevant to the study of critical literacy. Composed from his observations during political exile in Brazil, Freire proposed a pedagogy that examines struggles of injustice and inequity through education. This text, initially chosen as a reading requirement for one of my graduate courses during the fall of 2007, would become the basis of my initial engagement in the area of critical literacy, and ultimately led me to this study. Reading this book was a turning point for me. It encouraged me to begin reflecting upon my own practices, and led me to examine my own understandings of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. From this turning point, I began to make changes to my pedagogical approaches and methods of exploring literacy in the classroom. I reflected upon how

and, more importantly, why my students could benefit from a strong critically literate education, continually reflecting upon my own benefits of incorporating critical literacy in the classroom. While teaching a class, I told my students that I was implementing various critical literacy strategies in the classroom. I was feeling particularly confident and satisfied with my proposed notion when a student of mine questioned, “Why do we need to be critically literate?”

Such fundamental questions are not easy to answer. I gave the student three or four common points about critical literacy, but I was genuinely unsatisfied with my ability to fully answer the student’s question. Perhaps this was a situation where there was no simple answer, and where a manual on critical literacy could only provide a shallow response. I concluded that the answer was in the inquiry itself, and that one had to become critically literate. In my experience, the ability to think critically for myself had been a comfort, awareness, and responsibility. This was something I was fortunate to be privy to at a young age. My parents encouraged me to examine my own thoughts and reflect upon my life in a larger societal context. The majority of this awareness, if not almost the entirety, was encouraged and modelled by my parents. They instilled in me the necessary skills to prosper as my own person. From a young age, my exploration of literacy allowed me an outlet to confront my own philosophies and ideals, as well as examine multiple viewpoints and opinions.

Over the past three years, as I continued my studies in critical literacy and critical theory, I have come to understand that the foundations of critical literacy as principles of living are essential to understanding its role in society today. The multitude of philosophers, researchers, ethnographic studies, social justice projects, debates, and policies that this literacy has impacted is vast and essential to our world. My study of the foundations of critical literacy took me down a unique path exploring dialectics, assumptions, religions, languages, wars, democracy, and once

again to one area in particular; the role of literacy education. If literacy education is at the heart of being critically aware, the responsibility of engaging this literacy lies not only in the hands of students and educators but society as a whole. To create a dichotomy between our curricular expectations and societal expectations seems inappropriate. What should be the role of the educator in the integration of these two expectations? And, most significantly, how would we redefine the teaching of critical literacy? These questions brought me to my examination of the problem.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Significant questions in education today, related to critical literacy, are asked by Sirotnik (1991), “What are public schools for, and what *should* they be for, and for whom?” (p. 243). Although many adherents will state that there is a necessary place for critical literacy in our schools, many educators and administrators lack the theoretical foundations of critical literacy. If educators wish to engage students in critical literacy skills, then they themselves should have a strong philosophical foundation of why educators and students should participate in critical examinations in the first place. Critical literacy curriculum should not encourage passivity or uncritical and compliant literacy; it should encourage active thought and examination to understand the world around us. Joseph Kretovics (1985) states:

Critical literacy. ...points to providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices. Furthermore, critical literacy can stress the need for students to develop a collective vision of what it might be like to live in the best of all societies and how such a vision might be made practical (p. 51).

Critical literacy, however, cannot be deemed merely as a means to an end. It is very much a praxial theoretical underpinning that fosters students to think critically and gain awareness of their roles in society beyond schools or, in the case of high school, upon graduation. Critical literacy skills are skills for life, which in literacy:

helps us to move beyond. ... passive acceptance and take an active role in the reader-author relationship by questioning such issues as who wrote the text, what the author wanted us to believe, and what information the author chose to include or exclude from the text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b, p. 6).

I wish to examine the potential impact of critical literacy in English language arts classrooms, in schools as a whole, and in our current North American democracy. In summary, I believe critical literacy skills can foster the necessary awareness, action, and understanding of what it means to be truly literate as a prerequisite to democratic engagement. The need for critical literacy and its correlation to democracy is the concern that underpinned my purpose for conducting this study.

### **The Researcher**

Critical literacy is a dialogic act informed by personal context. It was imperative to create a context for this study through the hermeneutic eye of understanding the researcher - me. I realized this importance as I began this study. As I examined the literature pertaining to the foundations of critical theory, the impact of critical literacy in education and democracy, and the place of critical literacy and democracy in the current Manitoba English language arts curriculum, it became clear that these factors had an impact on how one engages in critical literacy practices. This study of critical literacy was also a study of curriculum engagement. Sirotnik (1991) defines this: “[C]urriculum includes not only the content of subject matter, but

how knowledge is organized, how teachers teach, how learners learn, and how the whole is evaluated” (p. 243). The researcher’s background is helpful in hermeneutic inquiry as it impacts on the study of curriculum and understanding the philosophical nature of critical literacy. Therefore, recorded as an important part of context, I wrote the following vignette at the time when I conducted this study.

### **Vignette**

*I am a 28 year-old Caucasian female who has been teaching English Language Arts for the past seven years at the high school level in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I grew up in another city in Manitoba - Brandon. I was raised in a middle-class home. My mother and father were both high school English language arts educators. Since my parents both worked in education, I participated in and heard dialogues about education and literacy as I was growing up. I grew up knowing something about literacy education through their experiences. It made me wonder why we study literacy in the ways that we do. Growing up in this environment allowed me to examine many of the aspects of education both as student, and as the daughter of two English language arts educators. During my post-secondary studies in the areas of Music Education and English, I had decided that I, too, wanted to be an educator. I perceived teaching as a respected profession that, when done with care, could provide many students with a strong intellectual foundation throughout their lives. I was especially drawn to my undergraduate studies in the area of education philosophy with the guidance of Dr. Wayne Bowman, a well-respected scholar, educator, and mentor. It was this class that first prompted me to examine the philosophical foundations of education, as well as my own philosophies and attitudes towards education. This was where I first came into contact with the works of Ira Shor, specifically two of his publications, *When Student’s Have Power* (1996), and *Education is Politics* (1999). Both of*

*these publications had a profound impact on my understanding of philosophy in this field. I not only wanted to become proficient as an educator of literacy, but wanted to develop a continuous exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of our current curricula. This exploration was provided through my various teaching positions and inevitably led me to readdress these questions in my graduate studies. I embraced the notions of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) believing that meaning in language is constructed within our social contexts. This notion furthers my rationale for clarifying and reflecting upon my own socially constructed understanding of critical literacy. My story, therefore, is part of this social construction. My experiences as an educator have allowed me a platform from which to begin my search for conceptual meaning in language and literacy, and the opportunity to reflect now upon these experiences.*

In reality, public school routines do not allow much time for reflection and reflection is a vital part of critical literacy. While there are many informal conceptions of reflection, I refer to reflection as an act of careful and deliberate recall of experiences and processes within everyday life. Ultimately this process leads to an increased sense of awareness and motivates exploring and attaining deepened understanding. Time to reflect is essential for educators. Busy schedules can make it difficult to find time to do so.

Today's students are multicultural, economically varied, and have immediate and often uncensored access to many types of texts. To adequately understand these texts, students require the time and space to dialogue and reflect upon these texts. If reflection is at the heart of what it means to be critical, then our classroom practices should provide time to nurture and model critical literacy. When I look back and reflect on my upbringing, I realize that there are great advantages to being immersed in critical literacy in English language arts from an early age.

## **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this thesis was to conduct a qualitative study using hermeneutic inquiry to offer a rationale for why critical literacy practices are pertinent in today's English language arts classrooms and for current democratic purposes. This hermeneutic and critical inquiry examines the foundations of critical literacy and its correlation to democratic well-being. Through the process of reviewing the literature, I examined the historical foundations of critical literacy and assessed discourses between critical literacy and its relevance in education today. For my research, I conducted a literature review of the foundations of critical literacy in order to understand the foundations of those who began the theoretical constructs of critical literacy.

An emphasis on critical literacy is apparent in the world both currently and historically. Currently, the United Nations has designated 2003-2012 the "Decade of Literacy" (Morrell, 2008, p. 2). One of these literacies is critical literacy. Several decades ago, sociocultural theorist Lev Vygotsky (1934) theorized that thought is mediated through language. Vygotsky additionally noted that language encourages thought and can cultivate learning through the process of interaction with others. Later translations of Vygotsky's work and Vygotskian scholars working on educational theory throughout the last century have shared and advanced the same notion (Wertsch, 1985). This notion endures in that the ability to communicate with others and think critically is a part of the social imperative of learning and education. Children learn long before they enter our classrooms. Their experiences, beliefs, understandings and acquisition of language are built prior to entering into school. Vygotsky stated that children have a zone of proximal development, which is the "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978, p. 86). He

argued that this zone is essential for educators to understand in order to interpret how children are developing and from which point. Key to this understanding, however, is the importance of understanding imitation. According to Vygotsky (1978), “Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under guidance of adults” (p. 88). Vygotsky (1981) argued that language enables thought and can produce learning through interaction with others. As such, the ability to communicate with others and think critically is a part of the social nature of learning in education.

Likewise, literary theorist and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) wrote that language is a social process and belongs to various realms, whether to professions or to generations. Bakhtin's theory of *dialogism* examines the axis where culture and individual consciousnesses join and shape dialogue and ideology. One aspect of literacy learning and study is the ability to understand language within various contexts in order to acknowledge the variables of which it is comprised. The contexts of culminating languages and literacies are constantly in a state of flux, and critical literacy too is perpetually shifting. It becomes pertinent to not only evaluate it within these varying contexts, but also to continually re-evaluate its role. Like many types of literacy, critical literacy can be misunderstood and/or oversimplified. What makes critical literacy an imperative study is its valuable role within education and democracy. In order for our ever-increasing world to allow for multiple literacies, it is necessary to understand the foundations of this literacy as social capital embodied in language and how language, in turn, is utilized as capital. Seen as an ideological construct influencing literacy education (Cadeiro-Kaplan, 2002), and as a theoretical attitude (Luke, 2000), the foundations of critical literacy rest on the vast and ever present functions of critical theory, education, and democracy.

## Research Questions

With the above issue and purposes in mind, I reiterate that my intent was to address the following research questions:

(1) Why should English language arts educators encourage and utilize critical literacy skills in high school English classrooms?

(2) Why is there a strong need for critical literacy skills in today's democracy?

These two questions are necessary for the development and understanding of connections between critical literacy in school and its correlation to democratic life. Through a historical overview of critical literacy, I examined its theoretical foundations essential to understanding its many roles in history and how it has come to exist in both research and education. I then examined the current role of critical literacy in English language arts education, and I identified themes that emerged between/among critical literacy and democracy.

## Significance of the Study

In this study I examined the current state of critical literacy in English language arts education and its potential for democracy in society. Through the use of *hermeneutic inquiry*, I examined the ways in which critical literacy correlates to democratic society.

Smith (1991) explains that hermeneutic inquiry is “the activity of interpreting our lives and the world around us” (p. 187), a reflective inquiry focussed upon “our entire understanding of the world and thus. ...all the various forms in which this understanding manifests itself” (Gadamer, 1976, p. 18). Since critical literacy focuses on bridging literacy education and an examination of the world around us, the hermeneutic inquiry lends itself well to the study of

critical literacy as it allows for an organic examination of what we define as the world around us, a central purpose of the critical mindset. Smith additionally notes:

Given that teachers throughout the Western world are now working in classrooms increasingly cosmopolitan in makeup, curriculum and pedagogy cast in frames and conceptions which do not address the new realities of global intercourse will be severely impoverished. The hermeneutic insistence on the articulation between whole and part in the development of understanding invites new considerations of what we mean by a “world” (1991, p. 195).

Critical literacy is, in its nature, defined as a process which “attempts to use criticism as a conceptual tool which dialectically appropriates and negates in attempting to refashion a subject on a higher conceptual plane” (Kretovics, 1985, p. 50). There is also a dichotomy to this notion. Paulo Freire (1970) describes this as the “culture of silence” (p. 30) which breeds doubt. This doubt disables the ability to recognize forms of oppression and leaves individuals unable to transform and liberate themselves from their circumstances. Beyond simply becoming aware, critical literacy requires a synthesis of “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 33). When teaching children, it can be beneficial for educators to question their own perceptions and shift continually from a standard lens (Rose, 1989). In doing so, educators can attempt to see things from the standpoints of their students, and come to a greater understanding of their students’ positions and stances. The writings of Paulo Freire and other philosophers such as Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, Colin Lankshear, Peter McLaren, Ernest Morrell, and Ira Shor have been important in popular debate regarding the subject of democratic thinking, and have therefore moved critical literacy to the forefront of

today's debates. Critical literacy affects not only curriculum but also assessment, policy and, most of all, our current democracy. Through the process of critical literacy, educators can foster socially aware and reflective students and thereby encourage students to recognize how language is affected by, and how it affects, social relations and understandings of the world.

Among the many aims of this study was the examination of the history and inherent power of language and literacy in order to understand their impact on our everyday lives. This study examined critical literacy from the standpoint of a current high school English language arts educator who sought potential new insights into the impact of this literacy in the issues facing us as citizens in the world. Ultimately, this inquiry may contribute to evaluating and clarifying the historical underpinnings and current state of critical literacy in education today, as well as addressing whether or not critical literacy skills are essential to continuing populations of students beyond simply the public school realm but further into the everyday politics of the democratic realm as well. English language arts educators can be prompted to examine some of these same questions and take initiative to incorporate a stronger critical literacy focus in their own classrooms.

The following review of literature in critical literacy sets the stage for this inquiry into critical literacy skills and critical literacy practices in today's schools. If social justice and democracy are goals of critical literacy, then the educational system needs to reflect these goals within classrooms, administrations, and policies. However, there is still a strong hierarchical relationship emphasized and sought between teacher and student. The *banking* concept in education, a metaphor used by critical philosopher Paulo Freire (1970) to describe the process of educators making deposits of information into uncritical students, undermines critical thinking. This process lacks the exploration of multi-faceted and complex issues of democratic relevance.

Critical decision-making requires democratic ends and, as such, democratic means. What educators must now reflect upon is whether or not a pedagogical structure promoting this hierarchical relationship between teacher and student will support a critical literacy education, and what significance this critical literacy education has and will have upon democratic participation for all.

### **Scope of the Study**

Due to the magnitude of researching critical literacy, the scope of this study excludes the specific examination of each of the various forms of literacies in current education practices. This study focuses for the most part, without ignoring the reality of these many forms of literacy, on the rationale of promoting critical literacy in English language arts, and the potential impact that utilizing and teaching critical literacy can have upon students as citizens going into the world with foundations in critical literacy. By educating students to be critically literate thinkers, educators may be able to encourage better understandings of political and democratic issues, encouraging empowerment and enactment of these skills, rather than passively observing current issues.

Limitations of this study include examining specific branches of critical literacy such as media literacy, as these are secondary branches of the critical literacy philosophy. This study focuses on the philosophical foundation of critical literacy first and foremost, specifically the rationale of why we should examine critical literacy, as opposed to how to enact it. By encouraging educators to examine first the foundations of this literacy, they may then make decisions as to whether or not this educational philosophy matches their own philosophy of education. This study does not examine specific approaches or implementation, but rather why the process would be approached in literacy learning and where the main themes would exist in

the incorporation of this literacy to determine why critical literacy should be examined in high school English language arts.

This study focuses on a critical application of reason and logic to examine the assumptions underlying this literacy. Moreover, this study attempts to constructively examine the proposed necessity of critical literacy in English language arts and notes how early Greek thinkers first constructed theories about the world and desired the ability to reason. From this historical point in time in written history, philosophers have continued to examine the scope and power of human reason. While these philosophical endeavours have increased methods of criticism, the attainment of new and positive human development has continued to emerge. The scope of philosophical views on this literacy remains vast. Educators, who examine philosophical foundations in their teaching, continually reflect on their own lives to theorize and derive knowledge and understanding by a process of reasoning.

The following list of terms and their corresponding definitions provide a focus for the meanings of terms that are used throughout this thesis.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Banking:* As defined by Freire (1970), refers to “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (p. 72).

*Conscientization:* This Portuguese term translates as consciousness raising or acquiring critical awareness, most commonly attributed to the writings of Paulo Freire. This is a process of

searching for clarity and understanding around issues of power inequities. This process empowers individuals to take action within social and/or political realms.

*Critical Literacy:* Refers to an examination of literacy from a critical standpoint, exploring issues of power, dissent, socio-political interests, and democracy. Ultimately, critical literacy attempts to promote action and reflection to transform inequalities in the world, often deemed as issues of social justice.

*Democracy:* Government exercised by the people through elected officials, ultimately upholding the rights and responsibilities of all citizens and ensuring social equality and fundamental human rights of individual citizens.

*Empowerment:* Refers to the process of aiding individuals to foster achievement in their personal lives. This process can further encourage individuals to make changes in their own lives, within their communities, and within society at large.

*Praxis:* A purposeful process of human conduct that becomes habituated; which is guided, in this study, by moral practice and moral action. It is ultimately a commitment to human well being, the search for truth, and respect for others.

*Professional Development:* Refers to the acquisition of various professional learning experiences which ultimately lead to increased understanding and enactment within a profession. These

experiences may be informal or formal in nature, but notwithstanding, uphold continual specialization within the chosen profession.

*Reflection:* Refers to an act of careful and deliberate recall of experiences and processes within everyday life, focussing upon areas of potential growth, insights, perceptions, conceptions, and judgements. Ultimately this process leads to an increased sense of awareness and motivates exploring and attaining deepened understanding.

*Stance:* Refers to an individual attitude, point of view, or position upon an idea or concept. While the definition of stance is typically generic in nature, this paper frames the term within the critical literacy mindset.

*Transformation and/or Transformative:* Refers to a state of change in which individuals become aware of unexamined or un-evaluated perceptions of the world around them and are directly changed in a positive aspect.

In the next chapter, the background to critical literacy is discussed through the writings of the most influential scholars, researchers, and philosophers. In addition, the correlations between critical literacy in education and critical literacy in democracy are discussed.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

In this chapter, critical literacy is first defined and then examined from the standpoint of significant Western philosophers dating from the Roman Empire up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This chronological historical review is based upon the research of Ernest Morrell (2008) and serves to establish significant theories, observations, and writings which have influenced current understanding of this literacy practice. This chapter concludes with current research on critical literacy in education and democracy today. In order to understand critical literacy, it was first necessary to understand how the term initially originated. This review attempts to synthesize these understandings of critical literacy and identify the role of critical literacy within education and democracy, and explore the two underlying questions of this research. By redirecting the examination from the literal understanding of critical literacy to the philosophical, themes emerged between this literacy and its role and relevance throughout democracy. This literal understanding of the term has great significance in English language arts as the terminology and vernacular is represented in a literal form in current educational curricular documents. The philosophical significance of these documents lies in the understanding of the terms being utilized, just as the literal understanding of critical literacy impacts the understanding of the philosophical foundations.

While there are many philosophers that have impacted the field of critical literacy, this study begins by examining the most predominant Western philosophers, as examined by Morrell (2008) in his book entitled, *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation*. While many additional texts in the realm of critical theory and critical literacy explore some historical significance, this book served as a significant structure for the

exploration of critical literacy. Morrell (2008) assures, “Any contemporary theorizing of critical literacy must confront classical, modern, and contemporary literacy and cultural texts as sociohistorical markers of society’s aims, goals, and values and ongoing commentaries of the universal human condition” (p. 35). Critical literacy is first and foremost a social construct and recognizes the impact of sociocultural moments in time, and their impact upon current understanding of this literacy.

### **Defining Critical Literacy**

Critical theorist and philosopher Paulo Freire (1970) understood that words carry great significance and power. Freire noted, “to speak a true word is to transform the world” (p. 87). Additionally, Wittgenstein (1953) suggests that understanding meanings of concepts require contextualization. Critical literacy has many foundations, as well as many interpretations (Siegel & Fernandez, 2000). The mere ability to understand and utilize the language of this literacy can be difficult to chart and to describe. Authors, researchers, and educators have examined this concept, and they have reworked the language to accommodate current social changes and circumstances seen before them. While all of these interpretations vary in historical relevance and philosophical foundations, the many researchers and philosophers in this literacy acknowledge some shared goals and purposes. In order to examine the foundations of this literacy, an understanding of the term “critical literacy” is necessary.

The Manitoba English language arts Senior 1 through Senior 4 curricular documents (Manitoba Education and Training, 1996, 1998) do not include a comprehensive examination or description of critical literacy. However, in a separate document available in Ontario entitled, *Me Read? No Way!: A Practical Guide to Improving Boys’ Literacy Skills* (2004), the document contains a single definition of critical literacy:

Critical literacy, the practice of exploring and discussing the underlying assumptions in texts or works in other media, is a powerful tool for helping boys and girls “read” their world – for example, helping them become more aware of how various texts portray individuals, groups, and situations. The work involved in critical literacy makes sense to boys and appeals to their enjoyment in figuring things out. In teaching critical-literacy skills, it is essential that educators be prepared to welcome intellectual challenges. (Ontario Education, 2004, p. 33)

The foundations of critical literacy are neither currently explored nor directly identified in the Manitoba English language arts curricula. The curricula examine critical thinking but do not include explicitly an examination of critical literacy.

Foundations of critical literacy have been explored through a myriad of frameworks and models (e.g., Janks, 2000; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Shannon, 1995). Research within critical literacy is often defined as having four central dimensions: “(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focussing on socio-political issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382). It is a principle that critical literacy is not static; it shifts with the dialogic movement of language and culture. Questioning is one of its cardinal components: “Critical literacy teaching begins by problematizing the culture and knowledges in the text- putting them up for grabs, critical debate, for weighing, judging, critiquing” (Morgan, 1998, p.157). This approach to literacy practices allows for an exploration of the relationship between literacy and how literacy shapes our lives. Ira Shor and Caroline Pari (1999) explain:

Critical literacy challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for social and self development. This kind of literacy – words rethinking worlds,

self dissenting in society – connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for reinventing our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity (p. 1).

This panorama of views strikes at the core of our current understanding of what it means to understand critical literacy. Simply defining critical literacy has become a significant challenge all its own. Research suggests that critical literacy balances upon a continuum in terms of literacy movements (McDaniel, 2004) and can, for this reason, have various labels. Faith Rogow (2004) clarifies, “Different people are using different labels. This article uses the term *media literacy*. Library media specialists are calling it *information literacy*. Computer scientists are calling it *technology literacy*. Critics are calling it *cultural literacy* or *critical literacy*” (p. 33). Luce-Kapler (2004) refers to critical literacy as “critical awareness”, noting that each meaning “carries a certain weight in history” (p. 159). The key to labeling and defining these literacies is not in terms of a hierarchical structure of importance, but rather by defining the *who*, as each literacy movement is in relation to its political and social contexts.

While there is a multitude of labels for critical literacy originating from a variety of fields of study, there are also pervasive principles of what it entails. Critical literacy emphasises critical thinking, described as “reasonable and reflective thinking that is focused upon deciding what to believe or do” (Norris & Ennis, 1989, p. 1). Critical thinkers are “appropriately moved by reasons” (Siegel, 1988, p. 32). In addition, critical literacy, through critical thinking, examines power relations such as “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82).

Critical literacy proponents encourage critical thinking and decision making, empowerment, examination of values, and continual reflection among educators and students.

According to Taylor, Hawkins, and Harvey (2008):

Critical thinking is a complex of intellectual skills that are consciously, deliberately, and consistently applied by a thinker when he or she is confronted by a body of data from which a conclusion or solution must be derived or by an argument of a third party who wishes the thinker to accept a predetermined interpretation, point of view, or conclusion (p. 131).

Along with critical thinking and understanding of power, critical literacy research suggests that this practice is in itself an empowering endeavour. In the article, “Developing Students’ Critical Literacy: Exploring Identity Construction in Young Adult Fiction”(Bean & Moni, 2003), the authors examine various activities which promote critical literacy in English language arts by focusing on the decisions which writers make in constructing novels, lexical choice, and how student responses are shaped by these decisions. By placing students’ identity at the forefront of literary reflection, efferent and aesthetic responses to literature make it possible to place readers in positions of power in relation to the text. It is this power, which feeds the construction of identity itself. On this account, educators allow an intrinsic dialogue to take place in the reader’s mind and encourage continual self-discovery and reflection. The ability to approach a work with a critical stance is therefore some form of critical literacy.

While critical literacy may impart a sense of empowerment in students, it may or may not become transformative as educators may ignore students’ social capital. In doing so, students may gain an understanding of what it is to be critically literate, but still remain unable to

replicate this function in a larger context, such as through developed confidence in decision making and, ultimately, self-efficacy.

Critical literacy encourages the confrontation of our own values in the production and reception of language (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). This is certainly a noble cause, but how it is incorporated into our everyday lives is another issue. As there is no consistently applied set of instructional strategies, there appears to be no true coherent approach. Researchers have found that many students will progress through our current educational systems with very little training and/or experience in the area of critical thought. If not truly understood or incorporated into democratic society, critical literacy may not be utilized. In schools, it may simply leave students with nothing more than a temporal and/or superficial learning experience. Part of the importance then of critical literacy is determining the actual process by which educators incorporate and understand its teaching, not only within ELA, but mindful of how it may transfer into practical use.

Agee (2000) states that “narrow conceptions of literature and reading, especially those that are marked by monologic rather than dialogic practices, establish literature as a cultural icon with little room for students to develop critical interpretive skills” (p. 307). Educators, administrators, and the educational community as a whole must begin by first understanding the nature and foundations of critical literacy in order to be consistent in our approaches, and to ensure that we develop critical interpretive skills in the classroom. Our approaches and attitudes to literacy are significant: “How high school teachers approach literature sends messages to their students not only about what kinds of literature are valued but also who is valued” (Agee, 2000, p. 306). What teachers choose to teach in their classrooms may inevitably highlight what they think they must teach.

## Defining Democracy

Just as the term *critical literacy* has many historical references and multiple meanings from a sociological standpoint, so too does the term democracy. “So many political systems and ideologies claim the virtue of democracy that the word has become virtually meaningless in its everyday use; the label is used to legitimize almost every kind of political power arrangement” (Scott & Marshall, 1994, p. 143). Our current definition of democracy is derived from the Greek word *demokratia*, the combination of the word people (*demos*) and ruling (*kratos*) (Zhen & Dong, 2006). Although early historical underpinnings of democracy did not include women or slaves, today the term is governed by the belief that all people in a sovereign nation have the right to be part of a collective body. Today’s political democracy is based upon the premise that elected politicians within government represent the various beliefs and interests of their citizens. Issues are examined from a collective standpoint rather than upon individual case by case examinations. This collective approach assigns power to leaders of various political platforms (parties) to ascertain the needs of the people. Citizenship is based on fair elections, civil rights, legal rights, and the ability to choose parties, as well as become candidates. Candidates represent the parties, and parties become representations of power. This is where some of today’s concerns over power come into question. There may often be divisions between the people and their elected officials. Issues of voice come to the forefront of many of today’s great political battles. “In the modern democracies there is little consensus about just how strong the voice of the people can or should be in a constitutional democracy” (Scott & Marshall, 1994, p. 145). Democracy is tied to power relations, just as literacy is tied to power relations (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The Manitoba English language arts curriculum documents do not frame a singular definition of democracy. While there may be no direct implication without a formal definition, educators who make no clear decision on *why* they are teaching what they are teaching, may run the risk of imparting an indifferent attitude towards not only literacy but also to democracy as well. By engaging in dialogues around issues of literacy and power in our classrooms, we can examine our own identities. Although we may not have consensus in our interpretation of critical literacy or democracy, research recognizes that eliciting critical thought is a prerequisite to both education and democratic citizenship (Boler, 2004). In the next section, the timeline of how this notion of critical literacy emerged is explored.

### **The History of Critical Literacy**

In order to truly understand critical literacy, it is necessary to begin with some of the earlier critical approaches of certain philosophers and theorists. This chronological examination also provides historical perspectives which may yield insights into understandings of critical literacy.

#### **The Classical philosophers**

The use of critical examination dates back to the Sophists in Athens (500 B.C.E - 300 B.C.E). Sophists were teachers who examined rhetoric, politics, grammar, and various areas of interest popular amongst the masses. They were speculative of the phenomena of the time and differed in that they received pay from their audiences, a practice that was unconventional at the time. Considered to be a professional class throughout Greece, the Sophists' approach to education was grounded in the skills common to political life. The Sophists were unique in their particular interest of topics of politics examined with the use of rhetoric. They possessed great mastery of language and affirmed that all language was inherently rhetorical. Political life in

Greece was considered to be a noble pursuit, thus many Sophists chose to examine rhetoric in politics, as well as master the art of rhetoric themselves. However, their reputation became that of manipulators due to their ability to manipulate language. Notwithstanding, the Sophists attested that language was a cultural construct, created by the people and impacted by the people. Today's modern definition of a *sophist* is often suggestive of a sense of manipulation. While there is a great deal of research dating back to the Sophists, scholars warn of the difficulty of properly assuaging their value, as none of their writings survived, and their doctrines are now viewed as potentially unreliable (Kerferd, 1981). The Sophists asserted that language was rhetorical and could be used to critically convince as well as challenge. Philosopher Socrates (469 B.C.E - 399 B.C.E) also emphasized that it was essential to understand how language is shaped and used.

### *Socrates*

Socrates was a classical Greek philosopher most associated for the founding concepts of Western philosophy and the Socratic method of questioning. Socratic questioning draws upon an individual's stance and insight of one's philosophical understanding. This method examines reasoning, assumption, clarity, and logic. But without necessary information, it is difficult if not impossible, to think or question *socratically*. He led those who followed his teachings to be skeptical of Athenian society. He felt that if democratic citizens were unaware of information regarding issues concerning their well-being, then the ability to properly assuage their place in the world would disappear. Socrates understood the importance of critical thought. Socrates was able to encourage and model the critical mindset as both a philosopher and educator.

During this classical Greek period, language was viewed as being very powerful, and that it could be used to manipulate and forward one's own power (Robinson, 1999). Language,

politics, and power became intertwined issues of concern, as did the study of rhetoric. These topics would provide debate for centuries to follow. The study of rhetoric and the power of language to deceive became principal philosophical areas of interest as they impacted politics, and, in turn, were impacted upon by the philosophical atmosphere of the time. Rhetorical studies also refer to the teachings of the time and the examination of philosophy related to rhetoric. One drawback of the ability to utilize rhetoric as a persuasive technique is that those who possessed the ability were perceived as threatening. Hence, with this ability came great power that could threaten the good of the populace. The ability to recognize truth and reason would become increasingly problematic and so too would be the responses to those who questioned tradition. Socrates understood that language and power were interconnected.

However, Socrates had not left his own detailed account and his works would be left to Plato (429 B.C.E - 347 B.C.E) and others to take responsibility for recording Socrates' theories and philosophies. As a student of Socrates, Plato was born into a family greatly involved in politics. It is theorized that Socrates greatly influenced Plato's work, and although Plato considered becoming involved in the political life of Athens, the trial and death of Socrates ultimately led Plato to reconsider. Plato's work would, in turn, greatly influence the work of his own student, Aristotle.

### *Aristotle*

Aristotle (384 B.C.E - 322 B.C.E) theorized and examined the art of rhetoric as he experienced it in *The Art of Rhetoric and Poetics*, in which he. Rhetoric is the art of communicating or writing effectively, utilizing the principles of composition from the classical traditions. This art of ethical persuasion insists upon arranging facts, ideas, and information in a

clear and persuasive manner. Since Aristotelian times, many definitions and concepts of rhetoric have flourished from the foundations that are traced to theoretician and philosopher Aristotle.

Aristotelian rhetoric can still be seen today, whether in a legal atmosphere such as a courtroom or a political atmosphere such as during debates. In English language arts, essays, stories, or articles are just some of the written forms which still follow many of the properties and conventions inherent to rhetoric. Aristotle's concepts of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* are often utilized to effectively produce persuasive speech. Yet, many educators may no longer feel that the study of Aristotelian rhetoric belongs in the classroom. Researcher Sandra Stotsky (1991) explains that the ability to connect rhetoric and ethics to writing helps encourage critical thinking skills. Although rhetoric was studied from classical times until the turn of the twentieth century, humanistic approaches in literature have grown in popularity (Sholes, 1985). At the same time, interest in rhetoric and mastery of rhetorical devices dwindled. The Classical philosophers set the groundwork for the art of persuasion and critical thinking necessary to critical literacy. They also sought out to understand the power of oratorical skills.

Oratorical skills were utilized to communicate, as well as defend. Socrates' *Apology* is a speech in which Socrates defends himself against charges of corrupting the youth and creating new deities, as recorded by his pupil Plato (427 B.C.E - 347 B.C.E). This 'apology', which is derived from the Greek *apologia*, is Socrates' spoken defence. The *Apology* is in many ways a classical account of carefully designed and administered critical thought. What should be noted here is that Socrates' concerns with the Sophists were partly his concern that they failed to acknowledge the importance of the teacher and student relationship. The *Apology* extended beyond mere skills, and ventured to examine the political, social, and religious realms of the day. The early Classical philosophers understood the importance of education, but also the

importance of the ways in which a student's learning is elicited and enacted. Holland (1980) points out that "in wrestling with the problems that are essential in a field of study, ideas not skills are what count; and the problems get solved, or transformed, or by-passed, by the man with the profounder conception ... If there were a know-how of it all, there wouldn't be the problems" (p. 23). The ability to examine issues and carry out discourses during this time followed a careful system of questioning. Fundamental to present day understanding of the role of the Classical philosophers is the examination of the social sciences to better understand the world around us. As Kerfeld (1981) explains:

Virtually all aspects of human activity, all the social sciences can be seen to have been the sustained subjects of sophistic debate and in many cases for the first time in human history. ...What we are studying are the fragmentary remains and traditions of a great moment in human thought (p. 173-174).

While various philosophers examined and often took differing stances upon issues of great importance such as law, morals, ethics, education, and democracy, central to the philosophers of the time was the inherent necessity of critical thought and the ability to examine the world around them. Democratic practices during the Greek empire were also held in high esteem by philosophers of the time, as well as philosophers who followed. "Democracy was notoriously a form of political regime which had played a major role in the history of Ancient Greece" (Dunn, 1979, p. 6). While some historical examinations of Greek democracy highlight positive attributes of shared decision-making, many historical accounts do not. The initial concept of democracy was first introduced in 505 B.C.E in Athens, attributed to Cleisthenes. Cleisthenes increased public assembly, an aspect of what we now deem as a democratic approach. Prior to this democracy, the Greek city-states had been oligarchies ruled by the elite. Few individuals held

power and those who did were only a small margin of the population, the wealthy and powerful. The conceptual framework of democracy was to attempt to balance the power of all people rather than give power to the select few. What scholars continue to note is the importance of the role of democracy in increasing the exchange of communication and allowing a voice for individuals, no matter what their economic or social status. Early changes in approaches to politics during the Greek empire were examined by Aristotle. In his work entitled *Politics*, Aristotle stated:

Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good (Aristotle, trans. 2005).

There are two significant aspects of this description of politics according to Aristotle. The first is the emphasis upon community. In fact, community and democracy become essentially synonymous. The second is the emphasis upon the good and what the good entails. Aristotle maintained that it was the responsibility of the people to ensure the good at all levels of government and life. This belief that the highest good could be attained remains a foundational belief of the inherent power of democracy in the hands of communities. While this hermeneutic understanding of Aristotle's work is entirely based in my own underlying research, Schemeil (2000) does make a warning: "Western scientists often have a hermeneutical bias which merely replicates spiritual or ideological norms under the more secular guise of political theories and scientific assessments. Hence, we mistake ancient people's beliefs for reality" (p. 100). The dichotomy between the theoretical and the praxial understanding of how democracy and

democratic principles were truly enacted, if enacted at all, raises significant questions of bias. However, fundamental to the works of Greek philosophers was the capacity to examine the social realms of the world around them and potentially discard preconceived notions of the ideal society in lieu of a more democratic approach to political life and shared decision-making.

Greek philosophers had significant ideas and concepts, but their ability to think critically was not always met with great support. Issues of governance, religion, politics, justice, and tradition were core to their thinking and beliefs. Many philosophers such as Socrates and Plato grappled with significant issues that often led to dissent of their ideas by those in power. So too was it that many of those in power were threatened by the dissenting voices that brought them into question. They became skeptical. The term *skeptic* is a commonly used today and it originated from the Platonic worldview. Plato would ultimately be one of the many scholars left to record Socrates' philosophies, even though Plato had his own philosophies. Ancient scepticism examined the difference between belief and knowledge. Plato's Academy would set forth skepticism as an official school position, and from this notion, the art of critical examination would become central to academic learning. The accuracy of philosophical works continues to be examined from critical and skeptical standpoints. While some researchers may still argue the relevancy of these philosophical texts today, Waterfield (2009) explains, "...philosophy was above all, a practical exercise in self-improvement. These early philosophers were dealing with real issues, problems arising from real life, so their work was not futile" (p. xiii). Central to the examination of philosophy is the consideration of the direct role society played in the lives of these philosophers.

While philosophical accuracy does have significance, the philosophies of Greece play a significant role in the early examinations of language, power, and politics. Philosophers during

this time were capable of examining the power of language inherent to rhetoric, issues of politics, and philosophy, while simultaneously encouraging the populace to question and discover the world around them. While Rome would eventually rule areas Greece previously held, the works of the classic Greek philosophers would be retained by the Romans. The Romans are often referred to as the guardians of this tradition, and much of their work continued to be grounded in the philosophies of Greek philosophy. Though not as yet termed as critical literacy, the relationship between language, power, and politics became intertwined and the foundations of critical literacy began to emerge. The connections between language, power, and politics, would be further examined and practiced by the Romans.

### **The Roman Empire**

Prominent Roman philosophers of the critical mindset include Cicero (106 B.C.E - 43 B.C.E.), Lucretious (99 B.C.E - 55 B.C.E), Epictetus (50 B.C.E - 138 C.E), and Marcus Aurelius (121 C.E - 180 C.E.). These four philosophers would preserve and question Greek philosophy. Philosopher Cicero would transcribe many Greek philosophical debates into the Latin language, and, from this point, Romans could begin their own philosophical traditions (Zeyl, 1997). The ability to examine these texts in the dominant language of the time proved essential to encouraging the continued examination and retention of the Greek philosophies. Lucretius additionally had a significant impact on the thinking of his time. Zeyl (1997) notes: “He provides a general commentary on and evaluation of the reception of classical philosophical traditions in the polyglot cultural landscape of the Roman Empire. He is suspicious of the inflated value of tradition(s) in a classicizing culture” (p. 308). While the majority of his philosophies examine areas of science, his desire to question traditional stances of thought would ultimately lead him to the discovery of new and significant concepts of the world and philosophies that continue to

impact Western theory. Epictetus (50 B.C.E - 138 C.E.), a Stoic, emphasized providence (Zeyl, 1997) and educated those around him on the importance of inner good, often associated to Marcus Aurelius. The Stoic way of life emphasized the ability to understand that everything happens for a reason. In doing so, it was believed that one could reach a place of peace, no matter what the circumstances. While the Stoics may have believed in the ability to rise above one's situation, Rome was facing a debilitating feudal system and constant invasions. While church parishes and cities had decreased in population, rural living had grown. Feudalistic pressures had placed many controls on the church from which a new religious movement, Monasticism, was born.

Monasticism, which in Greek translated as "life alone", was characterized as "a movement among baptized believers who respond to Christ's call for perfection" (O'Collins & Farrugia, 1991, p. 146). Churches were now oriented inwardly rather than outwardly. Those who followed Monasticism, such as monks, took great care in preserving the remnants of the Roman Empire and salvaged scriptures and religious writings of the past. These writings were studied and the great philosophical and critical questions of the time focussed upon the understanding of God's existence. The Church was dogmatic in nature. While the ability to speak openly and critically was continually under scrutiny and rarely supported by those of the Church, the critical mindset was nonetheless, deemed as an essential skill. This was due to the moral fanaticism of the time, which elicited citizens to attempt to separate true knowledge from the partiality of the Church. This was especially difficult due to the overwhelming power of the Church since dissenting views could elicit strong negative reactions from those in power.

The Roman philosophers ensured that many of the Greek traditions would be retained, so much so, that the preservation of Greek mythology lived on, even upon the eventual fall of the

Roman Empire. In 476 C.E, non-Roman ruler Odoacer (435 – 493 C.E) overthrew ruler Romulus Augustus. The fall of the Roman Empire led to the beginning of what is referred to as the Dark Ages. This period, dating from approximately 476 C.E to 918 C.E, was part of what we now term the Middle Ages. This time in history was dominated by the Church, and there was no longer imperial authority. As Rome deteriorated, the quality of life of the Roman people deteriorated as well. Without the protection of the Church, citizens had to fend for themselves. This time is referred to as the Dark Ages, noted by its lack of recorded history, as well as the negative connotation associated with the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

The Middle Ages, often classified into three periods known as the Early, High, and Late, had significant historical impact upon the history of Europe. The High Middle Ages brought about a significant increase in population and numerous armed pilgrimages, referred to as The Crusades, which would last from approximately 1095 - 1291 C.E. Subsequently, the Late Middle Ages were troubled with famines, the Hundred Years' War, and The Black Death (1347 C.E). The Black Death plague would kill a third of the European population, mostly affecting England (Cartwright, 1991). The Black Death would mark the end of the Middle Ages and lead to a rebirth of culture and study in Europe. This rebirth in Europe would be referred to by the French as the Renaissance.

### **The Renaissance**

The Renaissance brought about a renewed interest and examination of art, science, politics, and literature, which lead to new philosophies throughout Europe. Economic growth led to increased standards of living, as well as increased intellectual standards. The works of Classical Greek philosophers were once again discovered and pondered. Morrell (2008) explains:

Discontent with the rising corruption in the Catholic church is a leading cause of the Renaissance and the break with this hegemony. This is significant, because it shows that, even when power brokers dominate the means of knowledge production, there are still spaces for resistance, and possibilities for transformation (p. 37).

The desire to examine the role of the Church in a critical manner was further supported by a significant invention in literacy. In 1440, German goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg made his first printing press. Prior to this invention, the proliferation of print was created through individual letters which were carved into wood, types of stone, or metal, and rolled with ink or paint. This was then transferred by placing pressure onto parchment paper or vellum. Most books of the time prior to Gutenberg's invention had been carefully and difficultly hand copied by members of religious orders. This arduous task of printing one text at a time was now replaced by a new innovation. Gutenberg's creation used separate metal pieces, each of which would type a different character. The *Gutenberg Press*, as it came to be known, was capable of making many copies of a single book, becoming the first form of mass publication in European history. The Gutenberg Press was significant in that it meant that communication was readily available through the invention and use of the press. Reading and writing, the foundations of what we now deem as part of the English language arts, quickly spread throughout Europe. Although movable type had been seen in East Asia around the 700's, until this time it had not yet arrived in Europe.

With the Gutenberg Press came the availability of knowledge to the masses. Through this availability of knowledge, acquisition of information increased and the general populace could further explore issues of the time. Europeans' growing criticisms of the Church increased, at the same time as the press, and the interest in expressing one's individuality had, in turn, led to an

era of re-valuing notions of politics, language, and power. The Renaissance would ultimately lead to the increased desire to explore the world and would be credited as a time of many historical transformations and discoveries. In particular, the Renaissance would include Columbus' discovery of America (1492), the cosmology of Copernicus (1473 -1543), and Magellan's return to Spain in 1522 upon circumnavigating the globe. In the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation began in the desire to reform the Roman Catholic Church and led to divisions within the Church itself and the growth of new Christian churches. New discoveries and new theories of the world led to increasingly new philosophies and desired interest in examining other areas such as literature, aesthetics, art, music, and politics, and ultimately "enlightened" rationality. Today, critical mindsets continue to examine these conceptions of the world and lead to new understandings and philosophies, which can be in many ways best be attributed to The Enlightenment.

### **The Enlightenment**

The Enlightenment was a movement during the 17th and 18th centuries in which ideas and philosophies of God, nature, man and reason were explored by many philosophers, writers, and artists. Central to Enlightenment was the concept of reason, a power held by man to understand his place in the world and the nature of human condition. Philosopher Immanuel Kant wanted to understand and examine the Enlightenment and asserted that it was the responsibility of man to discover and understand his world. Kant emphasized the need for human consciousness:

The movement claimed the allegiance of a majority of thinkers during the 17th and 18th centuries, a period that Thomas Paine called the Age of Reason. At its heart it became a conflict between religion and the

inquiring mind that wanted to know and understand through reason based on evidence and proof (cited in Hackett, 1992, para. 1).

During The Enlightenment, a war broke out throughout Europe, elicited by religious feuds that would last for approximately a century, *The Hundred Years War*. While the desire to understand, question, and find true conviction in the words and practices of great leaders and philosophers was very popular at the time, this war would result in being one of the most destructive wars in history. Within this destructive setting, philosophers continued to examine their world from a critical standpoint. Significant to this critical mindset are the works of Immanuel Kant.

### ***Kant***

Immanuel Kant (1724 -1804) stated that criticism was necessary to attain knowledge and, that through the process of criticism; one could determine an answer based upon the ability to withstand various critical questions. This would become the acceptable way to measure validity. It was understood that morality itself required critical thought:

Without in the least teaching common reason anything new, we need only to draw its attention to its own principles, in the manner of Socrates, showing that neither science nor philosophy is needed in order to know what one has to do in order to be honest and good, and even wise and virtuous (Beck, 1959, p. 20).

Philosophers and theorists of the time hoped to “lift the darkness that fell with the Christian triumph over the virtues of classical antiquity” (Kramnick, 1995, p. ix). Immanuel Kant’s skepticism of human knowledge began to change the way that men thought. This skepticism became a foundation of critical thought and what would later be called critical literacy. His desire to question perceived truths and conduct his own way of thinking in the world has greatly

influenced critical literacy. His criticism examined knowledge and theory; he encouraged and implemented skills such as being critical, skeptical, and questioning the status quo. In his three critiques, *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, *Critique of Practical Reason* in 1788, and *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, Kant examined his own personal stances through reflection. “Only someone who had mastered the critical process would be able to separate true knowledge from the dogmatism and moral fanaticism of the day” (Morrell, 2008, p. 38). This very process is much of what is thought of as critical literacy today. The ability to question perceived beliefs and truly acknowledge other stances requires the utmost trust in individual perceptions, judgements, and principles, and additionally requires a search for true knowledge and the desire to reflect and re-evaluate preconceived notions. Kant’s contemporary, Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831), did not agree with Kant’s metaphysical dualist theory of a dichotomy between the mind and the body, but he too sought to examine how knowledge is constructed.

### *Hegel*

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770- 1831) was a German idealist who saw history as a dialectical movement. The ideals of this movement were towards truth. This could happen if an initial standpoint (*thesis*) generated a counterpoint (*the antithesis*). Each position is in relation to the other; only through *synthesis* could one reach an ultimate truth. Hegel’s beliefs were similar to those of Kant, although Kant noted that “absolute knowledge was attainable” (Morrell, 2008, p. 39). Paulo Freire supports much of this theory in his writing, believing that the final *synthesis* is that of conscientization, defined as a “process by which human beings participate critically in a transforming act” (Roberts, 2000, p. 146). Much of this is mirrored in critical philosopher Paulo Freire’s (1970) views of dialogue:

True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking – thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them – thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved (p. 92).

Hegel's thoughts on politics included the examination of reason, as well as freedom. His examination took on a social culmination of the world around him, specifically his description of the Objective Spirit, essentially the culmination of social organizations. One central philosophy to Hegel's work included his theory of dialectics, referred to as Hegelian Dialectic. This dialectic is based upon an initial standpoint (thesis) which creates a dialectical stance - the antithesis. While Hegel's form of reasoning would ultimately impact the foundations of critical theory, his work would also greatly influence sociological study and would later be acknowledged as a foundation of critical theory. While critical theory continues to be most associated with the later Frankfurt School, its early beginnings are traced back to Hegel and social theorists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

### ***Marx and Engels***

German social theorist Karl Marx (1818 -1883) has been widely regarded as a seminal philosopher and writer on class, socialism, law, and communism. While studying law in Germany, Marx became involved with a group of bohemian intellectuals of the time, who were often referred to as the Young Hegelians, and who would impact his interests in the area of philosophy. Voicing his opinions and philosophies in a paper entitled *Rheinische Zeitung*, Tsar Nicholas I of Russia came to see Marx's views as an attack on him and immediately had the

paper shut down. Much of Marx's theoretical and philosophical ideas were supported by other leading radicals of the time, including socialist Friedrich Engels (1820 -1895). Marx examined the concepts of socialism and many of the philosophies paralleling other contemporaries of the time, including the works of Adam Smith, a notable political economist. Marx published two works entitled *The Holy Family* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*. While a third manuscript entitled *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* was never published, all three texts examine the socialist traditions and question the values of capitalism. They also explore the concept of alienation and how wage-workers have no control over the production and disposal of their products. Marx went on to compose *The Theses of Fauerbach*, which stated that man is essentially the creation of his social relations. These seminal works continually emphasized issues of class and the theory that principal classes in capitalist societies create an organized division of labour. Marx referred to these classes as being bourgeoisie and proletariat. Marx's works are significant to the study of critical literacy since critical literacy also examines positions and shifts of power within various realms and areas of our society. Between forces of production, ideologies of property, and divisions of labour, Marx felt that he had indeed made a major conquest. These philosophies were published as a volume entitled *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*. Many around him found the volume too difficult to read, and it never gained the popularity he had hoped. While the theories of Marxism are mostly attributed to Marx, Engels would become Marx's theoretical contemporary.

The ideas of Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) are also at the foundations of Marxism. Although born into a relatively well-off family, Engels chose to take a critical stance against their status and align himself with Marx. Many researchers have difficulty in separating the works of both, as each man influenced the other considerably. Engels's 1845 work, entitled

*Condition of the Working Class in England*, documented close relationships between poverty, environmental deterioration, and illness due to the industrialized world. These principles are still examined today as many of his concerns are the same issues we are currently facing, such as inadequate healthcare for the masses and environmental damage from industrialization.

From the time of the classical philosophers of Greece, the birth of critical literacy began through an interrogation of language and power, and the interrelationship of these two features. The aim of philosophical inquiry was not to answer to a higher power but to elicit the truth about current issues of power affecting the poor and disenfranchised. These critical approaches of social practices and inequalities of power would culminate into new conceptualizations of both critical literacy and notions of justice. They are elements fundamental to critical theory and become the foundation for many of the philosophers and theorists associated with this literacy and, in particular, those of the Frankfurt School.

### ***The Frankfurt School***

Today, critical theory is most closely associated with the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School was composed of a collective group of philosophers and thinkers including: Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Eric Fromm, and Jürgen Habermas (Jay, 1973). The Frankfurt School was comprised of “social theorists, philosophers, economists, sociologists, and literacy theorists at the Frankfurt University’s Institute for Social Research from the mid-1920s through the late 1960s” (Morrell, 2008, p. 43). The group referred to themselves as The Frankfurt Circle, also known as the Horkheimer Circle after Max Horkheimer, since many in the group were Jewish exiles that had been forced to flee their homeland and give up their rights to teach and live. Theorist Theodor Adorno, also a notable member of the Circle, stated, “It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home” (Said, 1993, p. 120). These circumstances led those of the

Frankfurt School to attempt to seek refuge in the reflection of their existence. Jürgen Habermas (1995) further emphasized this reflection as the need to “think through the political disappointment” (p. 116). Max Horkheimer (1972) argued an uncritical society would create an “abdication of reflection” resulting in the “reification of the existing order”. There could be no genuine transformation without critical reflection and the desire for change. Critical theory emphasised the connection between knowledge and power. Therefore reason and praxis (the *practice* of the theories), were at the two poles of critical theory (Jay, 1973). In order to truly understand critical theory, one needed to acknowledge that even as a critical theorist, one was mediated by the very social constructs of one’s own life, and that the theorist him/herself could not be neutral. Yet, it would take many years for these theories to become popular concepts of social construction in North America. It was not until the 1960s that the knowledge of the Frankfurt School would come to be discussed. This was, in part, due to the fact that sociologists within education began to question the functionalist views of schooling. “We live in a conflict ridden society [and] groups who compete for control of schooling use rhetoric of societal needs to conceal the fact that it is their interests and their demands they are trying to advance” (Hurn, 1993, p. 57-58). This was supported by correspondence theorists (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) who stated that the schools were meeting the “needs of capital by mirroring the class-differentiated, alienated social relations of the workplace” (Wexler, 1987, p. 40), commonly referred to as a Marxist reaction.

The Frankfurt School did not follow the same theories of Marx, as they upheld that he did not fully explore the ideas of human consciousness. This was not a simple question of economic capital, but a question of social capital which would inherently re-shape critical theory. Social capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), is “the aggregate of the actual or potential

resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248). Current authors and researchers such as Robert Putnam have further investigated concepts of social capital. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) examines the social realms in which people are engaged, through the process of participating in informal activities. Putnam sees the decline in current social capital as the lack of involvement in social relations. This solitary approach to living is influencing the understanding and trust of social institutions.

In 1964, philosopher Herbert Marcuse introduced his book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), a critique of our industrialized world. He stated, “a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress” (p. 1). Marcuse explains that “critical theory concerns itself with preventing the loss of the truths which past knowledge labored to attain” (1968, p. 152) but that “critical theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its basis” (1968, p. 156). It becomes understandable that even those who dedicated their lives to the study of critical literacy were just as critical of their own theories as anyone else was. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer describe a similar unfreedom and shallowness throughout culture:

The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979, p. 167).

To ratify this, Shor asserts that through critical literacy skills, we “can redefine ourselves and remake society, if we choose, through alternative rhetoric and dissident projects”, and adds that

“this is where critical literacy begins, for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane” (Shor, 1999, para. 1). Although critical theory acts as a foundation for critical literacy, most philosophers believed that critical thought itself was inherent to change, that change was inevitable anyways. This examination led to a desire to examine the role of theory and the role of practicing theory, termed as praxis. Adorno (1998) held to the value of keeping theory from practice stating that “praxis is a source of power for theory, but cannot be prescribed by it” (p. 278). While the two, theory and practice, can be separated, the practical application of theory as an idea which develops into a practice, should be developed through the process. The foundations of critical literacy emphasize the importance of continual reflection, essentially as a proactive, rather than reactive, philosophy. Critical theory is a social construct that was further examined by postmodernist and post-colonialist views. Central to postmodernism are the works of Michel Foucault (1926-1984).

### ***Foucault***

Critical theory has been reshaped by postmodernism as well as by post-colonialism, which critique the Enlightenment (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998), due in part to much of the work by postmodern philosophers Michel Foucault (1926 -1984) and Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007). Foucault examined the concept of reflection and agency and stated that knowledge was a historical concept, thus knowledge is/was a social practice. This social practice is called *decentering the subject*, and these subjects were called *discourses*, and discourses were examined as historical practices. Up until this point in history (circa post WWII), rational knowledge was deemed as an engine of process, and social progress was through individual action (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). Through his research, Foucault concluded that power was diffused through all social relationships:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (Foucault, 1980, p. 119).

Foucault's discourse theory was based on the notion that discourses create our understanding of the world around us and lead us to examine what we define as knowledge and what we consider to be truth. His discourse theory of communication simultaneously reflects our own beliefs and identity and is socially impacted by power. These theories closely mirror current philosophies of critical literacy, and set the foundation for current examinations of why critical literacy is pertinent. Theories examining power and discourse would come to be examined by many philosophers and theorists including John Dewey.

### ***John Dewey***

A significant voice in the foundations of critical literacy is John Dewey (1859-1952). An American education reformer, Dewey's examination of education highlighted his philosophical stance on the relationship between education and democracy. In his seminal work entitled *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey examined how the dichotomy between classes of the elite and those of the masses were passed down from the class divisions of ancient Greece and continue to exist even today. Curriculum in ancient Greece was separated by class inequalities, and the leisure class was supported in their dismissal of activities outside of these leisurely pursuits. Regarding this dichotomy Dewey (1916) stated, "It originated, so far as conscious formulation is concerned, in Greece, and was based upon the fact that the truly human life was

lived only by a few who subsisted upon the results of the labor of others” (p. 269). Dewey saw this dichotomy as a separation of interests and emphasized that the separation of theory and praxis was no longer necessary in society. He asserted that curriculum should be reinforced in a holistic manner and that theory and philosophy could support active participation.

Additionally, Dewey noted that the absence of critical thought can undermine the conceivable potential of an individual stating, “It consequently leaves a man at the mercy of his routine habits and of the authoritative control of others, who know what they are about and who are not especially scrupulous as to their means of achievement” (1916, p. 158-159). This form of generating and supporting individual problem solving is generally referred to as *instrumentalism*, and led to theorizing about a focus on student-centered learning. Student-centered learning encourages active participation in problem solving and can be carried into later life, allowing students to have greater control over their actions and positions in the world. By placing students at the forefront of their learning and encouraging students to think for themselves, it was his conviction that students could become progressive members of society. His ideas emphasized that it was the role of education to teach students how to think, as opposed to *what* to think. Dewey (1938) highlighted the importance of continual reflective teaching focused upon “generating an experience that has educative quality with particular individuals at a particular time” (p. 44). This emphasis upon in-the-moment education would value students’ personal experiences in and outside of the classroom, and make for deeper engagement and connection to curricular outcomes.

Dewey (1938) examined experience, stating that “everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had” (p. 27). Every individual’s experience depends upon the perception of the experience, which in turn is further shaped by previous experiences. This emphasized the

importance of engagement and the dichotomy between what educators assume they are teaching and what students are actually learning; and, supported Dewey's belief that "the fundamental fallacy in methods of instruction lies in supposing that experience on the part of pupils may be assumed" (Dewey, 1916, p. 159).

Critical literacy attempts to interpret the larger societal sphere for which education prepares students. Though not yet termed as critical literacy, Dewey acknowledged this importance, "Only as we interpret school activities with reference to the larger circle of social activities to which they relate do we find any standard for judging their moral significance" (Dewey, 1909, p. 13). This idea was central to his theories. His examination of curriculum as an encompassment of social capital emphasized the need of connecting education to society through the examination of language:

When language is used simply for the repetition of lessons, it is not surprising that one of the chief difficulties of school work has come to be instruction in the mother-tongue. Since the language taught is unnatural, not growing out of the real desire to communicate vital impressions and convictions, the freedom of children in its use gradually disappears (Dewey, 1899, p. 55-56).

The concept of "progressive education" while generally attributed to his work, like critical literacy, is a term he never coined or used. Dewey's emphasis upon experience, critical thought, the role of education and the connections to everyday life continue to be foundations of critical literacy. He had great foresight into the ideals of education, and the understanding that education plays a vital role in everyday life. Dewey's theories of education continue to impact theories of critical literacy in education today. A contemporary in critical literacy would further Dewey's

theories of education and democracy, and would come to be acknowledged as a central proponent of critical literacy. That person was Paulo Freire.

### *Paulo Freire*

Many researchers view Paulo Freire (1921-1997) as a foundational thinker in the area of critical literacy. Freire was a man raised in poverty and oppression, and his philosophy of education was based upon his personal experiences living in poverty. In 1970, Freire composed his influential book entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In the introduction, Donaldo Macedo recalls his first reading of this book, describing how Freire introduced him to “a language to critically understand the tensions, contradictions, fears, doubts, hopes, and ‘deferred dreams’ that are part and parcel of living a borrowed and colonized cultural existence” (cited in Freire, 1970, p. 11). Composed in the form of a memoir, Freire outlined the various ways citizens come to accept their status quo. Freire described a direct correlation between the everyday struggles of the oppressed and disenfranchised individuals in society. This was due to an abdication of critical literacy in place of blind following. These insights opened a discourse about potential strategies and approaches that could help equip ordinary and disenfranchised citizens with the necessary skills to first confront and then possibly overcome their intrinsic and societal struggles within their current situations.

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* first examined pedagogy from a sociological perspective, followed by an educational perspective. This approach helps lead the reader through his many insights and correlations between struggles within society and struggles within education. Freire’s upbringing in poverty allowed him insights into the lives of other poor children around him. He describes a sense of solidarity, stating, “In spite of the bond that united us in our search for ways to survive – our playtime as far as the poor children were concerned, ranked us as

people from another world who happened to fall accidentally into their world” (1970, p. 13).

Early on in his career, Freire began to investigate the factors that impacted the oppressed, stating that roles in society affect the transformation of those who are oppressed. He asked, “How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?” (1970, p. 48). This, he explained, liberates individual citizens to engage in an action-based approach for changing their lives.

Freire described the power of the human spirit stating that human beings have the capacity to actively take a “limiting situation that they can transform” (1970, p. 49). He defined the term *conscientization* as the ability to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, in order to have the ability to take action. Freire stated, “In dialectical thought, world and action are intimately interdependent. But action is human only when it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation, that is, when it is not dichotomized from reflection” (1970, p. 53). Therefore, true critical literacy is only possible when one reflects upon one’s situation in a critical manner.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the objective is for the oppressed to be freed and for the oppressors to no longer oppress. In order for this transformation to occur, individuals must take action upon reflection. Freire instructs, “This conviction cannot be packaged and sold; it is reached, rather, by means of a totality of reflection and action. Only the leaders’ own involvement in reality, within an historical situation, led them to criticize this situation and to wish it to change” (p. 67). He theorized that a leader’s personal conviction is essential to change. This work holds a very significant place in of the foundations of critical literacy. Freire’s work encourages citizens to use his ideas as a philosophical framework for examining our current educational structure.

Regarding education, Freire stated, “Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object intermediates the cognitive actors-teacher on the one hand and students on the other” (1970, p. 79). This is the antithesis of what Freire describes as “banking education” (1970, p. 72) where students are not encouraged to think critically and, in turn, are unable to challenge a social or political position. They become receivers of knowledge and receive “deposits” which are absorbed without any thought or reflection. This essentially oppressive state is further perpetuated by inability to question or respond. Sadly, this impacts the views of what makes a true education. There is a correlation that the more full the container or student, the better the educator. Students who are easiest to fill are sometimes embraced as better students, and those who resist are dismissed as problematic students. Through his experiences, Freire understood that the power of voice through dialogue is the key to transcending an oppressive state:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the student-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow (1970, p. 80).

This dialogue represents “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (1970, p. 51), which Freire referred to as praxis. Freire stated that oppressed citizens are capable of questioning their world and, in doing so, can “liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” (1970, p. 44). Freire also saw dialogue as a necessity of education but cautioned:

True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking-thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them – thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved (1970, p. 92).

Freire's antithesis of dialogue is a "culture of silence" (1970, p. 12) in education. Silence breeds the "absence of doubt" (1970, p. 21), leading to an inability to actually see any oppression, and the inability to transform and liberate one's self from one's circumstances. Freire points out that awareness is a key to fighting oppression, as one must first be cognizant of their circumstances in order to shift their lives into something more meaningful. If students can be self-aware of their humanity, then they can have a voice, and voice overcomes silence. But if students are passive learners in school, then they may be passive in their communities and society will simply be replicative.

Understanding the foundations of one's world is the first step of action in challenging any social structures and this process of liberation is the embodiment of Freire's book. He concluded that it is the responsibility of all citizens, especially those in positions of power, to be reflective in their actions. In like manner, Freire described agency as the ability to use one's self as a vehicle for change. By blindly following, there is little room for self-identity to take place. It is through the education of liberation that we can begin to demythologize our status quo. Freire reminds us as readers that it is our belief and vision which creates universal hope for freedom from oppression; a reminder of the power of the human spirit and its ability to transcend the

limits of one's world. Although the works of Freire are upheld amongst many proponents of critical literacy, there are individuals who are in opposition to some of his theories regarding power. Some feminists for example, have felt that Freire's focus upon oppression as a universal term detracts from the impact of gender or race from oppression, or class (Weiler, 1991). Freire's works, nonetheless, have influenced many theorists, criticalists, and feminists throughout the world (Luke & Gore, 1992).

The history of early critical practices culminates in a variety of historical examinations, issues, cultural landscapes, and integral moments in Western history. The critical foundations date back to the Sophists, Socrates' methods of questioning, Aristotle's examinations of politics and rhetoric, along with Plato's theories of skepticism. These theories led to the importance and validity of the critical mindset. While stoic Roman philosophers Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius would retain and re-examine the Classical Greek works, advancements in science, in particular Gutenberg's printing press, would significantly change forms of communication and the reception of language and literacy forever. The criticisms of Kant and the social theories of Marx and Engel greatly shaped understandings of the social construction of critical theory. In addition, the Frankfurt School's emphasis upon critical thought played a significant role in the discourse theories of Foucault, and formed the foundations of critical-literacy practices, furthered by the seminal works of John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Current critical theorists such as Ira Shor, Allan Luke, Henry Giroux, and Michael Apple have also had significant impact on critical theory and critical literacy as it is known today. This will be explored further in the next section, *Critical Literacy in Education*.

## Critical Literacy in Education

Critical literacy research has brought many difficult and pressing issues to the forefront of literacy education. In an article for the Foundation for Critical Thinking, Richard Paul (1995) asks, “How can we cultivate morality and character in our students without indoctrinating them, without systematically rewarding them merely because they express our moral beliefs and espouse our moral perspective?” (para. 7). Paul suggests “putting critical thinking into the heart of the ethical curriculum” (para. 7). The ethical curriculum emphasizes praxis over banking, the exploration of identity and stance, and examines the role of dominant and functional literacies. Moreover, critical literacy research emphasizes that educators examine how students are being prepared to enter the global workforce.

Critical literacy depends upon multiple intellectual strands. According to Janks (2000), there are four orientations to critical literacy education. Each orientation is based upon a varying perspective between language and power. The first orientation is the *domination perspective* in which language and signs are positions of social and political domination. The second is the *access perspective*, which creates access to the dominant forms of language without compromising the non-dominant forms. The third is the *diversity perspective* which examines how language can create social identity. Lastly is the *design perspective* which requires a selection from various semiotic signs. Janks (2000) explains that these four perspectives are linked together “in complex moves” (p. 179). These orientations impact the way students approach texts and encourage both students and educators to understand how these texts function in today’s society. However, a major challenge of this literacy approach is the ability to turn theory into practice and simultaneously meet curricular outcomes.

## Curriculum

Criticism is essential to our understanding of culture and curriculum. “Culture is only true when implicitly critical...criticism is an indispensable element of culture” (Adorno, 1967, p. 22). Therefore, how we explore culture in the classroom will impact our understandings of culture. Essential to exploring these understandings is the role of the educator. Giroux (1993) explains that the role of the educator is to “provide students with a sense of place, worth, and identity. In doing so, they offer students selected representations, skills, social relations, and values that presuppose particular histories and ways of being in the world” (p. 372). Giroux (1993) further explores this concept of curriculum by asking a significant question: “Whose history, story, and experiences prevail in the school setting?” (p. 373). While the answer will vary from educator to educator, Giroux’s question emphasizes the importance of reflective teaching and careful decision-making. Schools are culturally impacted by the way curricular goals are enacted and met. Curricula throughout North America continue to be under increasing scrutiny. This has led to many educational reforms over the past years. Some of these reforms have been referred to as a “back to basics” approach as they emphasize improving student’s basic literacy skills (Levin, 1998). This resurgence upon the foundations of literacy is political in nature and research suggests that educators are often intimidated by official policies (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998), placing importance on educators’ understanding that they have a necessary role and voice when it comes to curriculum policy.

How we utilize and approach literacy in our classrooms is impacted by many factors and ultimately requires us to confront our own stances on literacy and curriculum. Louise Rosenblatt (1989) pointed out, “Many current teaching practices - the kinds of questions asked, the way

assignments are phrased, the types of tests given, the atmosphere created in the classroom-counteract the very processes presumably being taught and foster manipulations of empty abstractions” (p. 172). It is essential for educators to examine continually how they approach literacy in the classroom to ensure that they are not counteracting the curricular outcomes. However, there have been many debates as to whether or not critical literacy should become a part of the curriculum. Allan Luke (2000) has had a significant impact on critical literacy research and defines critical literacy as “an educational project that engages with critique of the worlds of work, community life, media and popular and traditional cultures” (p. 459). Luke cautions against a “formula for ‘doing’ critical literacy in the classroom”(p. 453), and questions the value of a state-mandated curriculum policy supporting critical literacy. Instead, he envisions an organic approach to critical literacy wherein teachers and students invent critical literacies in the classroom. He suggested that enacting a widespread practice may simply create “a watered down version of educational progressivism” (1997, p. 449). This is to some degree the great conundrum of the critical literacy education.

Another issue within critical literacy and curriculum is the concept of a democratic curriculum. In the book *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education* (2007), Michael Apple and James Beane note that while there is growing cultural diversity within today’s schools, there is considerable pressure “to keep the curriculum within the narrow boundaries of the Western cultural tradition” (p. 4). They state that there is a need for a democratic curriculum that, like democracy, involves informed consent and the right to varied opinions. However, this democratic approach has been dissolving in schools (Apple, 1986). Apple and Beane stress that educators and students must exercise their right to be acknowledged and heard in the

development of curricula. However, Apple and Beane also raise a valid argument for the dismissal of a democratic curriculum:

...that young people might contribute their own questions and concerns to the curriculum raises the threat of touching on issues that reveal the ethical and political contradictions that permeate our society and of detracting from the values this society says it upholds (2007, p. 19)

The implementation of this type of democratic curriculum naturally upholds the goals of outcomes of critical literacy by inviting students and educators to engage in their own learning. However, there is a fear among those in the field that if widely implemented into curricular documents and mandated through policy and procedures, that critical literacy may cease to exist.

McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004a) warn that critical literacy practices should not be simply transferred from one classroom to another without any adaptations and Comber (2001b) emphasizes that critical literacy should be continually redefined in the classroom. Continual reflection can ensure that educators bridge the gap between student performance and pedagogic intention. Wilner (2005) affirms that by reflecting upon this gap, educators can determine the skills necessary for students to be able to complete assignments successfully. This reflection is vital to ensuring that critical literacy skills are being enacted, since reflective teaching directly impacts the delivery of pedagogic intentions. Critical literacy research identifies two differing pedagogical approaches: (1) banking; and (2) praxis.

### **Banking and dialogue**

Critical literacy is not a methodology but rather a praxial approach to exploring power in literacy and “is usually described as a theory with implications for practice rather than as an instructional methodology” (Behrman, 2006, p. 490). However, in many schools, teaching

practices promote students to simply find the correct answer as defined by the teacher. The result is that many students are instilled with a habit of adhering to institutional beliefs while simultaneously devaluing their own stance and opinions (Apol, 1998). This concept is referred to as *banking*. Coined by Freire (1970), he states, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 72). This approach creates and fosters a passive learning environment.

In “Critical Literacy: A Questioning Stance and the Possibility for Change”, Cynthia McDaniel (2004) explains how the roles of teachers and students should be examined, “Instead of treating students as passive receptacles of information, teachers would encourage students to question their worlds, focussing on the use of authentic dialogue in which educators speak *with* not *for*, the students” (p. 474). Contrary to the banking approach, Freire (1970) sees dialogue as the essential step to developing genuine awareness and understanding: “Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (p. 88). Benjamin Endres (2001) at the Department of Educational Studies, SUNY New Paltz, points out that “with texts, the reader/interpreter/translator has more responsibility for reaching understanding, but the relation is mutual in that it requires an interaction and reconciliation between the perspective of the reader and that of the text” (p. 401). While exploring perspectives in texts is an imperative process in literacy education, it also functions as exploration of perspectives in everyday life. These perspectives shape the dialogues we engage in. Freire (1970) explains that dialogue is a necessity in both schools and life:

Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this

dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another; nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants (p. 88-89).

In turn, true dialogue counteracts the dichotomy between the teacher and student where students are merely *consumers*. Students are no longer recipients of facts and information but engage in the process of attaining facts and information with the educator. Classroom dialogues likewise encourage students to reflect upon their own lives and experiences. Freire makes the connection that if students are taught to be passive learners in school, then they will probably be passive learners and participants in their community and in society. However, Freire also expresses the view that engaged learners can become engaged citizens and become transformative in their own lives. Bonwell and Eison (1991) further the concept of engaged dialogue stating that it is crucial for students to do more than just listen. Students require opportunities to engage in problem solving and higher order critical thinking and questioning. This engagement can help students to "politicize themselves and engage in action aimed at challenging existing structures of inequality and oppression" (Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p. 23). However, examining structures of inequality and oppression requires the ability to address difficult issues in the classroom.

### **Addressing issues**

Critical literacy theorists state that if students can be self-aware of their own humanity, then they can have a voice to counteract forms of oppression. Since critical literacy has foundations in the sociocultural theory of language and power (Gee, 1996), this literacy examines authors' intentions. In doing so, students can explore sociocultural influences. In addition, Pearson (2001) suggests that students can understand these sociocultural influences with a critical edge. However, sociocultural issues are not always easily explored. Much of the

difficulty in exploring critical literacy in the classroom is the sensitivity of the topics explored. A study by Evans, Avery, and Pederson (1999) determined “a system of taboo topics” (p. 222) which guides text selection. The study showed that the closer the topic was to the students’ lives, the more meaningful it was to the students. However, they also noted that these topics were generally considered to be taboo in the classroom environment. Even though we may find these ‘taboo’ topics examined and magnified in mainstream media, educators are still less likely to approach them. Avoidance is often associated with concerns over difficult content, and the question of what we can and cannot teach in schools. As a consequence, students often avoid reading from a critical stance and are unable to raise questions about whose voices are represented and whose voices are missing (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004a). Kohl’s (1995) book entitled, *Should We Burn Babar? Essays on Children’s Literature and the Power of Stories*, pointed out that “there is no way to avoid having your children exposed to many objectionable or problematic aspects of our culture. ...children have to develop critical attitudes towards them. These attitudes will not develop through avoidance” (1995, p. 15). The critical approach to literacy is first and foremost to understand concepts of identity.

McGregor (2000) points out that if our education system is indeed serious about encouraging critical literacy, then those who “administer schools and those who teach students must begin to rethink their reactions to students who ‘talk back’” (p. 222). In the end, the true role of critical discourses is to clarify ideological orientations (Fairclough, 2003) and galvanize readers’ power to envision alternate ways of viewing the topics and issue. This reflects what Durrant and Green (2001) describe as “a situated social practice model of language, literacy, and technology learning...authentic learning and cultural apprenticeships within a critical-sociocultural view of discourse and practice” (p. 151). Critical literacy research further suggests

that this authentic learning experience requires opportunities for students to question as well, “In order to redefine a problem, a student has to have the option of defining the problem in the first place. Only rarely do schools give students this luxury” (Sternberg & Lubart, 1991, p. 609).

Luann Wright, the president and founder of NoIndoctrination.org (a non-profit for academic freedom), discusses the place for controversial issues in education:

The study of controversial topics and unpopular ideas certainly has a place in academia – but ‘thought reform’ and mandated ‘group think’ do not. Blatant and oppressive bias (regardless of the perspective) dishonours the teaching profession, undermines the open search for truth, and has predictable consequences: student anger, frustration, and intimidation (Wright, 2002, para. 1).

An aim of critical literacy is the search for truth in our examination of power, while ensuring that educators and students are actively engaged through the process. Researchers describe this as 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, 1997, p. 143).

Critical literacy practices ensure that students are enlightened by a myriad of stances and viewpoints within texts, which mirror our own diversity of stances and positions. These multiple meanings emphasize the importance of eliciting dialogue-based approaches (Luke & Freebody, 1997). In doing so, teachers can encourage students to examine literacy from a critical standpoint and further develop a critical stance. The process of deepened self-awareness is commonly referred to as praxis (Langer, 1994).

## **Praxis**

The term praxis first originated in the ancient Greek works of Aristotle. The concept of praxis would later become associated with other philosophers such as Karl Marx, Georg Lukács, and Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) examines this concept, stating “action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action” (p. 125). From an educational standpoint, Freire is referring to the participatory nature of critical literacy. Critical literacy practices engage students through a process of questioning and reflecting and encouragement for them to think about their roles as students and as citizens in the world. Educators are also involved in this process by embodying and modeling the theoretical foundations. In doing so, educators can help students explore and understand literacy from a critical standpoint. Apol (1998) notes, “The starting point for helping students to be critical readers is for teachers themselves to be critical readers” (p. 36). An imperative aspect of supporting critical literacy is to have appropriate forms of modeling, grounded in notions of praxis, in classrooms. This requires educators to reflect upon their teaching methods and approaches. Through this continual action and reflection, educators can come to understand the educational process and the philosophical foundations behind their teaching. Educators are not teaching as a means to an end but instead in a praxial manner, where learning is an engaging and reflective process.

A tenet of critical literacy is to provide students with forms of dissonance by creating opportunities to learn through the process of problem solving (Bean, 1996). By creating questions that, require students to think critically or having students create their own questions,

they can then use these same skills and apply them to their everyday lives. And since critical literacy focuses on identity, much of what creates the distinction between adulthood and adolescence is a matter of our cultural expectations and restrictions, not merely our intrinsic psychological characteristics (Moshman, 1999). When classrooms explore culture, identity, and stance, students can explore their own positions and stances on various issues, opportunities essential to critical literacy learning.

### **Identity and stance**

Much of the research in critical literacy emphasizes the importance of exploring identity and stance. Critical literacy practices value individual identity and encourage the examination of identity, “Those who, in learning, to read and write, come to a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves” (Freire, 1970, p. 29). Self-awareness can be achieved by engaging in reflective learning. Research suggests that without incorporating critical literacy skills in the classroom students lose opportunities to examine differing perspectives. These varying perspectives are helpful to developing a stance on issues and subjects. Topping and Trickey (2007) found that children benefit from forms of collaborative inquiry. However, without opportunities to gain new awareness, students will furthermore lack opportunities to explore their own insights and positions on issues of importance.

Critical literacy skills are fundamental to becoming a competent and critically literate citizen, but appropriate curricular goals and outcomes are required in order for these skills to be realized. While language is not necessarily neutral, critical literacy education allows students to confront their own values in the production and reception of language (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Through this process, students are able to create a stance. Rosenblatt (1994) emphasized

the importance of allowing students to create a stance since this ability to relate to texts is an indication of functioning critical literacy skills. Developing stance can lead to increasing self-awareness and interpretation. Rosenblatt (2002) noted that no reading experience is purely aesthetic or purely efferent, but rather that readers are constantly making choices about their thinking and examining varying positions in a transaction of textual interpretation. Students can find deeper meaning within literature by exploring and raising questions of a works' stance. Rosenblatt (1994) also emphasizes, that while a stance is in direct relationship to a given text, the reader's self-awareness is necessary to elicit a critical perspective. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004a) discuss Rosenblatt's theory based upon the notion that stance is an aspect of consciousness. They determined that readers can participate fully in an intrinsic dialogue between the aesthetic and efferent stance of written works. The aesthetic stance is considered much more of an emotional perspective, while the efferent is a factual stance.

Aside from constructing stances towards texts, critical reading can allow for multiple layers of response (Booth, 1998; Elbow, 1986) and allow the reader to shift from a standard lens of perception (Rose, 1989). Peter Elbow (1995) further emphasizes that writing is generally more effective when the issue demanding response is of interest and meaningful. Therefore, meaning is best attained through works that students can engage in and associate with. Bartholomae (1995) explains that critical reading is something that students need to be instructed in education. If critical literacy only takes place within one class or within one novel study, it is quite understandable why educators and students are unable to replicate the skills in other areas of their lives. Instead, Houser (2001) states that the development of social and cultural understanding can be more beneficial than textbooks. His rationale is based upon his belief that many of the books which we currently use in schools today are essentially devoid of multiple

perspectives. Bean and Moni (2003) argue that literature may be used to stimulate discussions of larger societal conflicts and may be used to raise significant social issues such as racial discrimination. Educators may also use works of nonfiction by influential leaders such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi or Nelson Mandela to help students understand how language shapes our thoughts (Sisk, 2002).

Lesley (2002) suggests that teaching reading as a complex analysis, even to remediated populations of students, yields positive gains in student literacy skills. However, this embodiment is affected by varying understandings and cultural norms. Researchers state that society, at any one time, is comprised of unequal discourses (Luke & Freebody, 1997) which critical literacy can highlight and examine. Multiple stances and discourses can make the teaching of critical literacy challenging but also enrich the context of study. Developing sophistication for this type of teaching may be developed through knowledge about dominant and functional literacy.

### **Dominant and functional literacy**

Throughout critical literacy research, there is a continual concern over what is thought as a *dominant literacy*. Dominant literacies are essentially literacies perceived as the most dominant from a cultural perspective. Some researchers suggest that what we gauge as successful language and literacy achievement is simply a measure of how well students assume society's dominant literacy. Others suggest that successful literacy education is often nothing more than an act of assimilation (Taylor, 1997). Laureau (2000) furthers this notion in a book entitled *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*. He found that parents with dominant literacies act as strong advocates for their own children. In order for educators to examine the impact of dominant literacies upon educational practices, they must

first attempt to integrate multiple literacies. In doing so, they may be able to dissolve student beliefs that a dominant literacy is a hierarchical gauge of what our society connotes as culturally significant. Since classrooms vary in sociocultural backgrounds, the praxial approach to education ensures that educators examine the world around them, rather than simply what they may *assume* as dominant in the world: “Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (Freire, 1970, p. 81). Critical literacy practices emphasize this world view in education and encourage educators to model and enact this appropriate behaviour. Through the process of reflecting upon what happens in educator’s classrooms, there is a distancing from engagement which allows the ability to see the bigger picture and develop new understandings (Short & Burke, 1996). By gauging roles and responsibilities in the classroom, educators can re-evaluate their own roles and examine how a dominant literacy influences their teaching practices. Researchers such as James Gee declare that educators have a significant role when it comes to dominant literacy. Gee (2008) explains:

Teachers have always been gatekeepers in some sense – whether we begin with the Sophists in Greece, exposing the political class to their techniques of linguistic manipulation, or with the various priestly castes and their initiations and catechisms – throughout history, we see education making the most powerful discourses available to some people, and simultaneously closing active discursive power to others (para 1).

Interpretations of research suggest that there exist levels of inequality within many levels of education. In addition to dominant literacy, our understanding of functional literacy also impacts

literacy education. Unlike critical literacy, conceptualizations of functional literacy may encourage passivity and acceptance amongst students to be uncritical and overtly compliant. According to Hyslop-Margison and Pinto (2007), “from an ideological perspective, functional literacy also insulates the social structure from critique by naturalizing the established social, economic, and political context” (p. 197). This ‘naturalization’ becomes a process. Emphasis upon the technical side of literacy education can impart a sense of following. Students are no longer taking action and, therefore, have no intrinsic sense of, or desire for, responsibility. Students may come to accept that many of the issues in the world are not of importance to them directly and therefore require little care or concern from their perspective. This perspective is often associated with research into civic responsibility and participation among today’s youth. Research suggests that continual decreases in social activities such as community halls, sports teams, and volunteerism are contributing to student passivity. Many of today’s youth can only find social activities in their school classrooms. Unlike some traditional forms of literacy education, critical literacy “provides students with a vehicle for existential and social transformation” (Hyslop-Margison & Pinto, 2007, p. 198), encouraging students to engage in literacy education, rather than simply absorb literacy education. According to Colin Lankshear (1993), there are significant differences between functional and critical literacy:

Functional literacy reduces persons to the status of mere objects and means, rather than confirming and exalting them as ends in themselves. It aims to equip illiterate with just those skills and knowledge – no more – which ensure competence to function at the lowest levels of mechanical performance, as workers and citizens in a print dominated society (p. 91).

Many researchers, including Robert Putnam (2000), have noted a decline in civic and political engagement among the young adult population. It is helpful to begin thinking about our roles not only within classrooms, but also in our communities. The role of educational institutions is to help prepare students for their civic and democratic roles in society, not only their roles in the workforce. Educators have an influential role in critical literacy as they help facilitate student's examination of power, oppression, and most of all, the world. Through their critical learning process, students would examine the ways in "which people understand themselves and the ways in which they engage others and their environment" (Giroux, 1992a, p. 3). Luce-Kapler (2004) avoids the term critical literacy, and instead refers to it as "critical awareness", stating that critical literacy can have many meanings and that "each of those meanings carries a certain weight in history" (p. 159). Critical literacy is a praxial approach to examining issues of dominance and power in literacy. Educators play a significant role in this process. Educators can make the difference between classrooms that encourage dialogue as opposed to those who do not, and thus how educators are preparing students for the future.

### **Workforce**

Some researchers have suggested that students' ability to think critically has declined dramatically (Benderson, 1984) and it is possible for students to finish twelve years of education without becoming competent thinkers (Nickerson, 1991). Research additionally suggests that what takes place in our classrooms are the very same behaviours and approaches that students carry into the workplace, and into the rest of their lives. According to Luke and Carrington (2001) the job market for students who are not choosing to continue into higher education is disappearing. For some students, high school classrooms can offer a safe and supportive setting for engagement in critical literacy practices. Likewise, in the book *Schooling in Capitalist*

*America*, Bowles and Gintis (1976) state that social relationships in our classrooms are reproduced in the workplace. They emphasize that what students learn, whether directly or implicitly, manifest themselves in the very skills, values, and identities that occupy their positions in industrial society. Literacy in the classroom should be approached, to some degree, like many social constructions in our society - democratically. This does not mean that educators lose any sense of control or ability to be goal oriented, only that critical literacy in the classroom is the examination of the social construction of literacy (Cook-Gumperz, 1993). This examination can help educators reconstruct their own educational beliefs and values and reflect on their own philosophies of education.

Beyond preparing students for the workplace, educators are now examining how they are preparing students for the globalized world. Globalization requires a new perspective on the goals of literacy education:

Global markets, global manufacturers and purveyors of knowledge, and global consumers, already either horizontal in shape or lacking any physical shape at all, have arrived as new participants. ... They move inexorably across global space and time without respect to physical geography, political frontiers, or night and day (Langhorne, 2001, p. 39).

Given the current state of globalization, education is at the forefront of preparing students for the workforce and global society. However, preparation varies from country to country. For instance, in contrast to the United States, teachers in Australia generally present texts to students with an emphasis upon critical reading and analysis in the classroom (Luke, 2000; Morgan, 1997).

Critical literacy researchers point out the importance of examining various approaches to critical literacy globally:

Increasing globalization is a two-edged sword. On the one hand it is quite obvious that it removes competence from the national context and that it undermines the institutions which civil society and the democratic public hitherto have used for communication. On the other hand globalization opens up new possibilities for democratic influence on essential common issues which by their nature are about the notion of the nation state (Mayo, 1999, p. 175).

Today's students need guidance to understand and examine issues faced in our current democracy. Being capable of thinking for oneself and being prepared for a globalized workforce are necessities, and literacy skills impact significantly more than solely in the workplace. Studies regarding sociocultural and socioeconomic outcomes have concluded that students capable of acquiring strong literacy skills have a greater likelihood of being able to attend universities and acquire higher paying jobs (Morrell, 2008, p. 2). Where are these skills elicited and fostered in education? Critical literacy educators assert that education practices should support students' desires to expand their thinking and become aware of varying diverse beliefs and positions (McLaughlin, 2001). To examine issues in democracy, we must first understand what the research correlates to the study of democracy in education. How we integrate issues of democracy into our classrooms is essential to the implementation of critical literacy in English language arts.

### **Critical Literacy and Democracy**

In 1909, Woodrow Wilson presented a speech to the Federation of High School Teachers. In his speech he stated: "We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want

another class of persons, a very much larger class of necessity in every society, to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks” (cited in Lapham, 2004, p. 104). During the Wilson era, there were fears that a well-educated electorate could cause social unrest. Today, we must ask ourselves if the same attitudes exist. Literacy educators continue to strive for programs and approaches that can meet the needs of all students. Critical literacy practitioners nurture the ability to be critical, an ability which was founded in a theory which is “critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its basis” (Marcuse, 1968, p.156). This literacy practice examines our social constructs, educational approaches, and conceptualizations of democracy.

To help students participate in democratic affairs, it is first essential that students prepare to and do engage in democratic dialogue. In mediated atmospheres, such as high school classrooms, students can learn the dilemmas inherent in democratic issues and concerns while simultaneously building their own voice and stance on these issues. Critical literacy can prepare “students with a vehicle for existential and social transformation” (Hyslop-Margison & Pinto, 2007, p. 198). While understanding politics can be a complex process, research suggests that there is a need to examine democratic affairs in schools in order to avoid an “exit from politics and withdrawal behind the fortified walls of the private” (Bauman, 2000, p. 214). Civic, social, and political engagement must be taught (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003). Issues of democracy require educators to examine their responsibility of encouraging civic engagement and civic participation such as voting and engaging students to examine these issues in the classroom. A role of educational institutes is to help prepare students for their civic and democratic roles in society rather than solely preparing them for their roles in the classroom. However, many initiatives fail to reach this outcome:

A strikingly large number of school-based programs embrace a vision of citizenship devoid of politics. This is particularly true of the community service and character education initiatives that have garnered so much recent attention. These programs aim to promote service and good character, but not democracy (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003, p. 36).

Examinations of democratic issues in classrooms require educators to ensure that these issues receive careful examination; and furthermore, ensure that understanding is met. Harold Rugg (1995) emphasizes, “To guarantee maximum understanding, the very foundation of education must be the study of the actual problems and controversial issues of our people” (p. 171).

Through critical literacy, students may examine these issues to understand better, conceptualizations of democracy. Giroux (1992b) warns that “public schools need to be justified as places in which students are educated in the principles and practices of democracy, not in a version of democracy cleansed of vision, possibility, or struggle” (p. 8). Complexity in examining issues of democracy in the classroom can simultaneously explore larger conceptual frameworks but require a deductive scope of examination. Neil Postman (1983) wrote, “For in order to describe things one must draw the general from the specific; one must select, compare, think” (p. 312). The process of thinking will ultimately depend upon the ability to understand the conventional language of democracy.

### **The language of democracy**

John Dewey’s ideas have been significant to the continual examination of the discourse between education and democracy in critical literacy. His research and its philosophical underpinnings supported his belief that “a democracy could function poorly and that it was capable of acting abominably, e.g., as in its treatment of minorities in the South and elsewhere”

(Hook, 1966, p. 144). Dewey believed that it is the “responsibility of the democratic high school to develop in each person the ability to shape him or herself and society toward ever higher ends” (Tanner & Tanner, 1980, p. 289). In his words, “education is not preparation for life, it is life itself.” Fundamental to Dewey’s belief is that education is life, rather than the preparation for life. In his book, *Democracy and Education*, (1916) Dewey asserts, “...the only ultimate value which can be set up is just the process of living itself” (p. 281). Beyond the works of John Dewey and many philosophers and researchers within educational research, ongoing discussions to determine how to best advance democracy have been long debated (Kaestle, 2000). While Dewey shaped many theories between education and democracy, philosopher Paulo Freire’s writings would produce resurgence in educational and democratic interest in critical literacy. Freire believed that oppression is a common variable throughout education. Freire furthered this notion with the belief that the inability to examine these issues from an educative standpoint is an impediment in genuine educational practices. His critique of educational practices that ignore the oppressive nature of society would come to shape not only educators but also democratic citizens.

Critical literacy practices support the examination of language, communication, and the factors that impact it, among them, issues of power through voice. Freire explains that the examination of democracy and politics has a significant role in schools, explaining, “In order to communicate effectively, educator and politician must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed” (Freire, 1970, p. 96). Freire’s emphasis upon the conditions of thought and language emphasizes the importance of firstly understanding the impact of oppressive forces in literacy education. A desired skill within critical literacy is the ability to examine the missing voices, voices that may not appear in the

standard literacy practices we explore. These voices may be referred to as the *oppressed* or *dissenting*.

### **The oppressed**

Freire discusses the sensitivity of those in power. He warns those in power to avoid systematically oppressing by creating a hierarchy of power where the oppressed simply follow. Although Freire's concepts of oppression were about the disenfranchised peoples of the world, his words apply to the same constraints that everyday North Americans face when attempting to have their own opinions and voices heard. "In a free and open society, people are supposed to decide for themselves what they mean by freedom and democracy and not simply follow America's lead" (Soros, 2004, p. 12). Critical dialogue can help to determine what we envision as freedom in today's democracy.

Central to Freire's philosophical argument was the concept that education is always a political act, a "tool of submersion" (1970, p. 2) which serves to maintain the interests of the status quo while suppressing awareness of the masses and their realities, or suppressing the need to bring about transformation and social change. Freire defined three essential stages of transformation. The first of these stages is referred to as "semi-intransitive consciousness", where individuals are unable to challenge the world, and are uncritical in nature. He theorized that semi-intransitive consciousness is a state of limited perception where interests are focused upon survival rather than transitive consciousness, or an examination of the entire scope of their world. The second stage is that of "naive transitivity" where issues are simply over-simplified, with a disinterest and lack of investigation. While this stage is never irrevocably surpassed, by engaging in this stage, critical thought and reflection remain a lifelong goal. The third and final stage is "critical transitivity". This stage is characterized by an understanding of issues and

problems, the ability to reconstruct one's thoughts and perceived reflections, analyzing issues, while simultaneously rejecting passivity for opportunity to participate in dialogues, thus becoming enlightened, empowered and open to change, or in an oppressed state, freedom. Freire pointed out that this requires a praxial approach; informed action created through a balance of theory and practice. Freire (1970) explained that freedom is not something given freely, but is instead a quest:

Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion (p. 47).

While notions of what freedom entails may vary within current democracy, the emphasis upon individual roles and responsibilities to attain and maintain freedom is the key.

Oppressed cultures have always existed. Citizens of the world have been witness to the destructive results of oppressive states. During the Holocaust, the mass murder of Jews resulted from a false sense of danger imparted by Hitler to appeal "to the German's sense of victimization" (Soros, 2004, p. 20). Hitler was able to convince his followers that they were the oppressed, "Whether or not the Germans' sense of victimization was truly imaginary, there is no doubt that the Jews were victims in the most literal sense" (Soros, 2004, p. 20). This appeal to victimization is what Freire asserts can impact an oppressive cycle. Freire (1970) clarifies:

Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual's ontological and historical

vocation to be more fully human. With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has already begun. Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed (1970, p. 55).

Humanization is not simply about taking care of those less fortunate, but truly understanding the complexities of how language can be used to manipulate or favour one's views over another's, leading to a dehumanized and oppressive state.

### **The dissenting**

While critical literacy can examine issues of oppression, critical literacy can also be used to examine issues of dissent. As Giroux (2004) comments, "One of the more significant marks of an authoritarian society is its willingness to distort the truth while simultaneously suppressing dissent" (para. 1). In *The Bubble of American Supremacy: Correcting the Misuse of Power in America*, Soros (2004) recognizes a "contradiction with the principles of an open society because it claims possession of ultimate truth. It postulates that because we are stronger than others, we must know better and we must have right on our side" (p. 10). Lapham (2004) furthers this idea by stating that the focus upon etiquette and political correctness in regards to language, is used to counteract the critical minds of its citizens, ruling criticisms as "inappropriate" or "dissenting". During the war in Iraq, some media reporters had never inquired about details regarding casualties, as it would be deemed inappropriate. Between the appropriateness of questioning certain issues or the use of semantics and rhetoric, citizens require a capacity and knowledge of language in order to manoeuvre the use of language in politics. By employing critical literacy skills, citizens can examine how language is used, as well as getting to the heart of major democratic issues:

Yet in my mind, when a nation and its government and major institutions do not deliver on their promises and on the sets of values they officially profess in education and elsewhere, then substantive criticism is the ultimate act of patriotism. Such criticism says that ‘We are not just passing through. This is our country and our institutions as well, built by the labour of millions of people such as ourselves. We take the values in our founding documents seriously and demand that you do so too (Apple, 2008, p. 241).

While understanding the power of language is not inherent to understanding democracy, the process of exploring issues such as dissent have a viable place in literacy education. While critical literacy research refers to dissent and oppressions, missing voices are often explored as the silent voices. Critical literacy researchers note that texts can represent many voices, but will often silence other viewpoints (Freire, 1970; Luke & Freebody, 1997). In some cases these voices are nonexistent due to the perception of a threat which elicits fear.

### **Fear**

The structural conditions in which language is used in political spheres can impact our sense of fear. An example of this includes reactions following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack in the United States. There was a discontinuity in American foreign policy. Through his words, President George W. Bush emphasized a sense of emergency. Soros (2004) explains:

Violations of American standards of behaviour that would have been considered objectionable in normal times came to be accepted as appropriate to the circumstances, and the president has become immune to

criticism, because it would be unpatriotic to criticize him when the nation is at war with terrorism (p. 14).

Soros, along with many leading researchers and political advocates, states that great injustices can be conceived through language. In the article *What's in a Name? How to Fight Terrorism*, author Michael Howard (2002) examines how words impact our understanding of exigency, explaining, "To declare that one is at war is immediately to create a war psychosis that may be totally counter-productive for the objective being sought" (p. 9). He adds, "War is a false and misleading metaphor in the context of combating terrorism. Treating the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> as crimes against humanity would have been more appropriate" (p. 9).

Critical literacy is not only an examination of how language is utilized, but also elicits a source of empowerment for students and educators to realize their own thoughts and views on democratic issues through critical dialogue. Critical dialogue around democratic issues raises issues of power, oppression, and dissent. While there are numerous examples of dehumanization in history, this highlights the need for a critically literate society. What may be a principal feature, from a critically literate standpoint, are the insidious ways in which the very act of dissent can undermine inherent and obvious traits of oppressed turned oppressors. From a theoretical standpoint, Soros (2004) explains that following the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, America became a victim of a crime and in order to dismantle the pain of the event, the United States went to war in Afghanistan, therefore becoming oppressor.

Actions by individuals, leaders, and countries can threaten personal as well as national security. Following the attacks of 9/11, the American people became the followers of a strong rationale for safety and dissenting voices became prevalent throughout much of North America. Canada, too, felt the need to unite with the United States and join in sending troops to protect

national security. Although there have always been those in opposition to war theoretically, our country did not resist to participate in the war in Afghanistan nonetheless. “By turning the hunt for terrorists into a war, we are bound to create some innocent victims. The more innocent victims there are, the greater the resentment and the better the chances that some victims will turn perpetrators” (Soros, 2004, p. 19). But when waging war, there is a strong resistance against critical inquiry because this reflective process may be viewed as time consuming. However, this lack of time, or apparent lack of time, can lead to uncritical actions that may in the long run prove devastating to all parties involved. Much of these hasty actions can be implemented by increasing fear in others. In “Dealing with the Danger of Fear: The Role of Risk Communication”, authors George M. Gray and David P. Ropeik (2002) examine the impact that fear can have on our ability to communicate.

How can we keep the public alert and cautious as we try to increase our physical safety and at the same time help people keep their perception of risk in some kind of reasonable perspective, so they make wiser and healthier choices for themselves and demand appropriate government protection from the greatest risks? The answer lies in understanding the fear itself and in using that understanding to empower more effective risk communication (p. 108).

Currently, Canada is one of the allies with the United States in the military war in Afghanistan, raising the question of Canada’s role upon the 2011 deadline for US military withdrawal. Nel Noddings, an educational philosopher, argues that issues such as war should be examined in schools where students may begin to think critically about their attitudes towards issues of great democratic importance:

A question that needs closest examination is the one usually avoided: What makes war so attractive? It is not honest to cover over with layers of propaganda extolling the virtues of “our heroes” who sacrifice willingly for “our freedom”. Such sacrifice is indeed part of the story, and should not be denied or mocked. But simply acknowledging sacrifice does not face up to the fact that many people – both soldiers and civilians – are excited by war (Noddings, 2004, p. 490).

Dialogue around areas such as war can potentially encourage and promote other areas of critical thought, such as issues of political engagement. Others may complain that this type of dialogue may discourage youth from joining the military or even participating in civic conversations.

### **Civic participation**

Robert Putnam (2000) has noted a decline in civic and political engagement by today’s youth. Economists and politicians question the efficiency of representative democracy as there is the potential for the irrational voter to make uncritical choices when voting. And often, many voters are highly uninformed about the details of many political issues. These uncritical voters may carry a strong bias about few issues on which they are fairly knowledgeable. Likewise, they may be easily swayed by media coverage. Giroux explains:

Civic engagement appears increasingly difficult, if not impotent, as public space is privatized, the language of individualization obscures public issues, specific racial, religious, or sexual identities are criminalized, and a manufactured fatalism hides the complex network of social forces waging a fundamental assault upon the very conditions that make politics possible (cited in Olson & Worsham, p. vi).

Upon high school graduation, students will reach the legal age of voting, yet many will choose not to vote. According to Elections Canada, the voter turnout in 2008 dropped to the lowest percentage of registered voters ever recorded for a national election in Canada. Among the reasons for the voter decline were policy issues, the global financial crisis, the Thanksgiving long weekend which immediately preceded Election Day, and the difficulty with the new voter identification rules and incorrect ID at the polls. According to Elections Canada's *Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group at the 38th Federal General Election (June 28, 2004)*:

The results show that, among the 18–21½ year-olds who were eligible to vote federally for the first time in 2004, turnout was estimated at 39%. Interestingly, this was 4% higher than the estimated turnout rate for the next group (21½–24 year-olds), although the difference falls below the margin of error for this study. The turnout rate increased steadily with each age group, reaching its highest at 75% among 58–67 year-olds (Elections Canada, 2005).

In 2002, Elections Canada commissioned a major study entitled “*Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections*” in which researchers Jon Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc found that just over 25% of eligible 18–24 year-olds had voted in the 2000 federal election based on self-reported voting behaviours. To combat low voter turnout amongst the youth, Elections Canada came up with various new initiatives. Among the various initiatives, Elections Canada began a mainstream advertising campaign with a message, “speak up when everyone is listening”. Canadian television channels MuchMusic and MusiquePlus, also began a program called “Your Vote ...Your Voice”, aimed to challenge high school students across Canada to create public service announcements informing other students of why democracy is far-reaching

and why it is essential to vote. Research into voter turnout and statistics indicate that the general trend consists of a linear relationship between age and participation, consistent with the patterns traditionally observed using other research methods. However, the results showed one interesting exception to this relationship – for the youngest group of electors (18–21½ year-olds) for whom June 28, 2004, was the first federal general election in which they were eligible to vote, the turnout rate was 4 points higher than for the next oldest group (21½–24 year-olds).

Giroux (1992b) asserts that examinations of civic engagement and participation are essential parts of schooling stating, “Democracy is both a discourse and a practice that produces particular narratives and identities informed by the principles of freedom, equality and social justice” (p. 5). Part of the importance then of critical literacy is determining and participating in the actual process and incorporating and understanding the role of critical literacy within our classrooms and schools, and our world. Some researchers state that this issue is due in part to the way we attempt to isolate literacy from everyday life. Rockhill (1987) claims that, “literacy is treated as though it is outside the social and political relations, ideological practices, and symbolic meaning structures in which it is embedded” (p. 158). In order to first understand the role of literacy, there must be an understanding of the role of literacy. Educators must examine the role of literacy and its pertinence to our everyday lives. Critical literacy is in essence a way of exploring the role of literacy in the world (Gee, 1992). In “Educating for Well-Being and Autonomy”, authors Stefaan E. Cuypers and Ishtiyaque Haji (2008) maintain that “a person’s welfare or well-being concerns what makes his life intrinsically good for *him*” (p. 72). Identity and autonomy are closely related to the examinations of democratic issues in education.

### **Identity and autonomy**

Promoting autonomy allows citizens to develop into individuals who are self-governing in the conduct of their lives. In Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, a publication released in 1776 which helped to promote the American Revolution, he stated, "I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, or by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church" [Capitalization is as per original text] (Lapham, 2004, p. 16). Thomas Paine's work was acknowledged amongst researchers as a significant influence counteracting dissent. However, Paine's criticisms had led to his unemployment, and politicians of the time had described the work as "democratic dribble" (Lapham, 2004, p. 131). Notwithstanding, his publication entitled *The Rights of Man*, was a plan for social change eventually adopted by Franklin Roosevelt 150 years later. Although many individuals could not understand Paine's influence at the time, his works have come to be viewed by present day scholars as revolutionary to concepts of freedom. And freedom requires us, as individuals, to make choices. Peters (1973) notes:

In education, however, we are usually concerned with more than just preserving the capacity for choice; we are also concerned with the ideal of personal autonomy, which is a development of some of the potentialities inherent in the notion of man as a chooser (p. 125).

Peters also stresses that autonomy is something that is created rather than imposed upon and set out by those with authority or power:

There is . . . a gradation of conditions implicit in the idea of autonomy. The first basic condition is that of authenticity, of adopting a code or way of life that is one's own as distinct from one dictated by others. The second

condition of rational reflection on rules is one espoused by most believers in autonomy (1973, p. 125).

By encouraging citizens to be aware of these conditions, they may come to reflect and think critically about issues of significance and recognize their individual potential. “To be a chooser is not enough for autonomy,” Benn (1976) remarks, “for a competent chooser may still be a slave to convention, choosing by standards he has accepted quite uncritically from his milieu” (p. 123). Benn could hardly have seen how the milieu was going to shift with the intense globalization brought on through the Internet.

### **Globalization**

Globalization is defined as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Held, 1991, p. 9). According to Langhorne (2001) in *The Coming of Globalization: Its Evolution and Contemporary Consequences*, dramatic world changes, specifically globalization of markets, require citizens to re-evaluate long-established ideologies and values in their daily lives. Combined with media’s strong grasp over identity development, governments throughout the world are simultaneously reinforcing the monopolies held by large media syndicates in their own countries’ systems of communication. Our democracy stands in the balance of governments with more laws limiting individual freedom, and fewer laws restraining the freedoms of properties. From the easing of environmental regulations to tort reforms, which make the process of class-action lawsuits against corporate malfeasance almost impossible, critical literacy is now more necessary than ever. As generations continue to become expectant capitalists, we ourselves have become much more passive to the status quo and have become uncritical thinkers, consumers, and citizens. The position of education is changing to

match the needs of the civic body. Students enter into the global market as consumers where information and literacy are fast, bold, immediate, and unchartered. Much of the difficulty in examining the goals and values of today's generation is the context of material wealth. Capitalist democracies always include a marginalized group. Educators must ask themselves if the goal of government and civic responsibility is simply to help the marginalized survive or to become equal.

Examining issues of democracy often require an examination of economy. North American marketplaces can take advantage of uncritical consumers. The danger is that if education systems become based upon economic systems, rather than upon democratic or philosophical ideals, the system will promote mindsets necessary to the preservation of the system itself. The economic crash of 2008 is a prime example of the impact economies place upon their education systems. The United States vowed to improve schools, but also planned to cut 20,000 teaching positions by the end of 2009. Whether we like it or not, our economy impacts our education system. As gaps in social class continue to widen within mass education (Hershey, 1996) and generations continue to become expectant capitalists, citizens have become much more passive about the status quo and have become uncritical thinkers, consumers, and citizens. Brandt (1998) clarifies:

. ...everybody's literacy practices are operating in differential economies, which supply different access routes, different degrees of sponsoring power, and different scales of monetary worth to the practices in use. In fact, the interviews I conducted are filled with examples of how economic and political forces, some of them originating in quite distant corporate and

government policies, affect people's day-to-day ability to seek out and practice literacy (p. 172).

From a sociological perspective, Freire (1970) questioned capitalist theories, stating “material oppression and the affective investments that tie oppressed groups to the logic of domination cannot be grasped in all of their complexity within a singular logic of class struggle” (p. 3). Freire explained that class struggle is an inherent aspect of life, capable of impacting social and material class structures, respecting the vast “complexity of multifactor analyses while never underestimating the role of class” (1970, p. 14). Freire described how oppressors do not view their own monopolies as being dehumanizing and the impact of material wealth on their well being. Class struggles can impact perceptions of wealth, as well as their potential threats:

If others do not have more, it is because they are incompetent and lazy, and worst of all is their unjustifiable ingratitude toward the “generous gestures” of the dominant class. Precisely because they are “ungrateful” and “envious”, the oppressed are regarded as potential enemies who must be watched (1970, p. 59).

Postcolonial theorist and philosopher Homi Bhabha described critical literacy as being “intimately connected to the question of democratic representation” (Olson & Worsham, 2007, p. 127). His research was structured around the notion that the concept of agency and critical literacy are closely linked to theory, and that the role of theory is to “break the continuity and the consensus of common sense” (p. 127). Critical literacy can encourage educators and students to welcome the diversity of stances around them and to find new ways of thinking about the issues they face each day.

If we believe that social justice and democracy should be areas explored within education, then our classrooms should acknowledge and value these areas of critical engagement. Throughout many classroom practices, there still remains a strong hierarchical relationship emphasized and sought after between teacher and student, allowing for a clearly defined decision-making process in the hands of the educators and administrators. Classrooms must engage in the languages of democratic issues and power for the oppressed. Critical literacy examines how eliciting fear can impact dissent, while encouraging active civic participation, autonomy, and the examination of culture. Adorno states that, “culture is only true when implicitly critical. ... criticism is an indispensable element of culture” (Adorno, 1967, p.22). In the words of Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1982), “Caminante, no hay camino, Se hace el camino al andar”: Traveler, there is no road. The road is made as you walk (p. 142). This praxial approach to education emphasizes the importance of allowing for issues of democracy to be examined in classroom practices. Critical literacy encourages educators to recognizing the importance of successful critical thinking skills, strategies, and the importance of careful and reflective implementation.

### **Conclusion**

The rationale for this study was to examine why critical literacy should be taught in high school English language arts. Ira Shor (1997) points out that forward thinking developments in education coexist with a regressive dominance of grammar and work books. He states that issues such as standardized testing are quickly mandating our goals and hopes for the future. This structure places educators in an uncomfortable compromise since top-down authoritarian structures are the antithesis of praxis. Sadly the need for reflection and agency is replaced by predetermined means which undermine the essence of critical literacy itself. There is, however,

another possible solution. If critical literacy is used not as a method to an end of sorts but rather as a social practice, the classroom structure can disappear and students' critical thinking may begin to move freely between the set curriculum and their everyday lives.

Hull and Schultz's (2001) research emphasizes the need to continue study in this area. They explain that additional research within the study of critical literacy can help educators think about literacy teaching and learning beyond the classroom. They add that as this gap between students who excel in school and those who do not widens, this is the perfect opportunity for critical theorists and researchers to direct their research to forward-thinking investigations regarding relationships between classrooms, the schools, and their communities. Coles' (1993) "call to service" is a reminder to educators and students that they can be civic participants capable of transforming the world. This transformation requires an examination of the role of literacy learning and the need to understand the relationship between critical literacy learning and democracy. These researchers emphasize, along with many theorists within critical literacy, a need to understand the value of critical literacy in education. The next chapter will explore how the literature review was studied for the purpose of this thesis.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **Methodology**

This chapter outlines the research method used to examine the potential need for critical literacy in high school English language arts and why there is a strong need for critical literacy in today's democracy. The chapter begins with providing a rationale for using qualitative research as the methodological approach in this study. Next, the method of inquiry is described and the criterion of this method is outlined.

#### **Approach to the questions**

The approach to the questions was to conduct a qualitative study using critical hermeneutic inquiry to examine why critical literacy practices are pertinent in today's classrooms toward democratic purposes. By choosing hermeneutics, essentially critical literacy was used to study critical literacy. This hermeneutic critical inquiry examines the foundations, role, and value of critical literacy in relation to democratic well-being. The initial historical foundations of critical literacy were assessed in a deductive manner to theorize the relevance of critical literacy in English language arts education today. The literature review was intended as essential ground for the research methodology in this thesis.

This study is in the form of a hermeneutic inquiry, which allows for multiple theoretical interpretations emphasizing new interpretations as opposed to that of empirical authentication (Ricoeur, 1971) and relies upon interpretation to bring forth meaning from texts (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, this form of inquiry also encourages questioning the concern for *how* to proceed pedagogically and democratically upon sorting the findings of this study. This study was predominantly shaped by Jürgen Habermas' conceptualization of the hermeneutic method. He stated, "Hermeneutics refers to an 'ability' we acquire to the extent to which we learn to 'master'

a natural language: the art of understanding linguistically communicable meaning and to render it comprehensible in cases of distorted communication” (cited in Ormiston & Schrift, 1990, p. 245).

While the hermeneutic method of inquiry was greatly impacted by previous theorists, including Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer; Habermas believed that hermeneutics needed to be examined from a critical standpoint of society. Opposed to Gadamer’s overt focus upon tradition, Habermas nonetheless believed that the hermeneutic method upheld social liberation. Habermas’ view is best described as critical hermeneutics, the method chosen for this study. Critical hermeneutics attempt to uncover various societal contradictions. This study attempted to uncover contradictions between the potential outcomes of an English language arts curriculum and its relationship to democracy. The hermeneutic method of inquiry lends itself well to uncovering potential faults through critical examination and was thus the appropriate choice for this particular thesis.

The researcher’s experience as a classroom teacher was placed at the forefront of this thesis. As such, misaligned definitions, conceptions, and theories of critical literacy were uncovered, and the roles of critical literacy in current educational practices were examined. Through the examination of literature in the field, and the researcher’s own experiences educating, incorporating, and training in this literacy, the critical method could be applied towards new discoveries of potential flaws in current conceptions of critical literacy.

While critical hermeneutics allow for unidentified and identified issues to surface, this method is complex in nature. By examining the two research question in an inductive manner, this study began by critically examining the early accounts of the critical tradition, to uncover its growth to its current state today. This allowed for broad generalizations to surface. By first

determining specific research addressing critical literacy, patterns emerged and formulated a hypothesis, and develop a theory of critical literacy in English language arts education.

Additionally, the need to be objective was difficult as much of the desire to examine this very area was based upon personal perceptions, experiences, and perceived notions of the area.

### **Research Method**

Qualitative methods were used and represent a constructivist approach (Creswell, 2003). The value of this study was to uncover new insights into critical literacy that emerge throughout this qualitative research study. This study examines the historical underpinnings of critical literacy as well as the behaviours and outcomes inherent to critical literacy. This study examines the selected texts in light of present critical literacy with the intent of gaining new understanding about the correlation between critical literacy and democracy and offer suggested changes and alterations of education practices and outcomes. Since meaning is created as the interpreter seeks to mediate differing perspectives (Gadamer, 1976), the research was interpreted as it was studied. The final conclusions of the study allow for a holistic view of critical literacy as it pertains to a current English language arts educator.

In his book entitled *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry* (1991), Edmund C. Short surveys various approaches to curriculum inquiry, acknowledging the need for varied approaches to increasingly new questions and areas of study in curriculum inquiry. The 17 forms of curriculum inquiry examined in his book are relevant to the nature of my research question, and to the resulting inquiry. The variety of strategies being employed by various researchers emphasizes the need for individual viability. Short (1991) comments that the “book not only surveys a wide range of different forms of curriculum inquiry; it also makes the case that multiple forms of

inquiry are necessary if curriculum questions are to be adequately addressed” (p. x). This statement is a significant aspect of curriculum inquiry.

Critical literacy is a social construct which examines human phenomena and cannot exclusively be measured quantitatively. Qualitative research approaches have been accepted as another way to discover knowledge. Critical literacy research includes informal learning activities for which quantitative approaches would be difficult to quantify since they are not categorically defined. Philosophical studies do not allow for events to be observed directly and therefore measured in quantitative ways. Qualitative methodology, on the other hand, can highlight new understandings that have not yet been observed. For these reasons, a qualitative research approach was the most appropriate method for this research.

While many forms of curriculum inquiry allow a broad examination of various realms, hermeneutic inquiry lends itself to an examination of critical literacy from a broader perspective, to envision the big picture as well as the parts. As critical literacy is itself a social construct, it was important to examine this area from a social perspective. By examining this area in an authentic way, it allowed a greater breadth of the impact this literacy has in education and democracy. Additionally, the desire for an authentic examination, combined with the researcher’s aspiration to improve professional growth in the area, naturally led towards a qualitative approach. The desire was to map out not only some of the historical relevance of critical literacy but to seek its pertinence specifically in the area of English language arts education and to view this from various stances.

There are significant merits of qualitative research in the area of critical literacy. First, the collective approach to seeking an answer to the question of why critical literacy should be examined in English language arts allows the researcher to map new and emerging rationales,

which may not have been previously uncovered. Second, this systematic approach to the area of critical literacy encompasses past and present conceptualizations of the role of this literacy. The study additionally examines the growth and evolution of the role of critical literacy. Third, the results may produce findings that can move beyond simply addressing this one area of research, potentially impacting other aspects of curriculum, including education training, policy, and curricular outcomes. Above all, the desire to approach this area from a qualitative standpoint was impacted by the researcher's personal motivation to create a meaningful and professionally relevant study.

This research attempted to gauge personal assumptions and create an atmosphere that was open to new ideas. This methodology was designed to carefully and rigorously interpret current research in the area of critical literacy while simultaneously acknowledging and questioning the researcher's own understanding. In this case, the personal subjectivity on the matter is an aspect of this study and every attempt was made to avoid being unidirectional.

### **Guiding Principles of the Inquiry**

The guiding principles in this inquiry were to: (1) Sort emerging themes from the history of critical literacy; (2) Examine these themes in correlation to issues of democracy; (3) Establish where each of the themes would occur when examined in the English language arts classroom; (4) Synthesize these themes into a working model of critical literacy in the classroom; and (5) Identify and examine the foundations for this implementation to occur. The following is a breakdown of this process.

After completing a thorough examination of the literature, emerging themes were addressed and compiled to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter I. This inquiry identified the various factors that contribute to what current research reveals about critical

literacy, as well as its connection to the future of democracy. Through this inquiry, there was a developed understanding of the historical underpinnings of critical literacy, its current role in schools, and connections between critical literacy and democracy. The goal of this thesis was to provide a comprehensive inquiry into the nature of current thinking on the subject of critical literacy in English language arts education and to find new ground for educational thought through this inquiry process. Hermeneutic inquiry was used as a “commitment to generativity and rejuvenation and to the question of how we can go on together in the midst of constraints and difficulties that constantly threaten to foreclose on the future” (Smith, 1991, p. 199). Critiques of education and educational scholarship require a large scope and vision to identify potential variables at play.

### **Hermeneutic Inquiry**

Hermeneutic inquiry, as explained by Smith (1991) is a process which:

. ...throws open the challenge to inquire into what we mean then we use words like curriculum, research, and pedagogy. We are challenged to ask what makes it possible for us to speak, think, and act in the ways we do (p. 188).

This approach to curriculum inquiry is foundational as it opens the doors to multiple perspectives and acknowledges what many researchers have conducted and purported in their research. Tony Brown (1991) notes:

Any notion of a correct universal meaning does not arise within hermeneutic understanding. The way in which an expression is seen and used is always in a state of flux, being modified as the life experience of the individual affects the contexts in which it is seen as being appropriate (p. 476).

One aspect of hermeneutic inquiry which seems essential to this specific area is that hermeneutics is not approached using a pre-determined approach. This is a much more organic approach to the area: one which allows flux in the examination of why critical literacy should be examined in the area of English language arts. This research was narrowed to focus upon English language arts educators and suggests that critical literacy is an imperative part of education as a whole. In regards to hermeneutic inquiry, Smith (1991) defines “a clear split between subjective thinking and objective thinking is ridiculous because my subjectivity gets its bearings from the very world that I take as my object” (p. 192). While this research applies to all educators, the researcher remains a significant role in the interpretation of the findings.

Hermeneutic inquiry was an effective inquiry method to this study. There was also a need to support this form of inquiry with a historical examination, given the historical nature of the topic. Revealing the past contributions of researchers in critical literacy uncovers new ideas about the significance of critical literacy in English language arts.

### **Application to Critical Literacy**

Through this research, it became increasingly evident that critical literacy education has a valid place in English language arts education. Rather than simply making a place for this literacy in the realm of education alone, English language arts educators can potentially come to exemplify and examine why they need critical literacy skills, especially in connection to modern society. While there are many foundational, philosophical, historical, and temporal rationales in support of critical literacy, this examination highlights the most substantial themes which developed through the research. Part of the reasoning for doing so, was to establish a model, one which represents not only a hermeneutic standpoint of critical literacy, but the impact of educators and students throughout the process. This concludes with various rationales for why

educators should not only incorporate this literacy in their classrooms, and also why there is an urgency to incorporate this literacy. These foundations, which were explored, are based upon: (a) the substantial research indicating merit in these areas; (b) the long standing historical importance of these foundations; and (c) the essential areas which are at the heart of what it means to be critically literate in today's North American society. This thesis examines the views of prominent philosophers and researchers.

The key to this literacy is not only an understanding of the roles that play into current educational practices, but the theoretical and philosophical foundations that create the platform on which all thought is mediated. While many researchers focus on the processes involved, in order to understand the true value of critical literacy skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there must first be an examination of the necessary conditions in which to carry out this goal. Issues of what and how things are examined in schools still remain a high priority.

This research attempts to apply the purpose and methodology of hermeneutic inquiry to the area of critical literacy. This is done by examining the many facets of critical literacy as they are constructed today since this construction varies across social contexts. Furthermore, many new phenomena of why critical literacy should be part of the English language arts classroom have evolved and led to new, initially unseen, questions that needed to be examined prior to answering this question. Smith (1991) emphasizes that "the mark of good interpretive research is not in the degree to which it follows a specified methodological agenda, but in the degree to which it can show understanding of what it is that is being investigated" (p. 201). This study attempts to involve the researcher's personal interpretations on this subject. Secondly, the research was impacted by the reading of Henry Giroux's *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (1988), which first introduced the works of John Dewey

(1977/1904), credited with defining educators as “transformative intellectuals”. This concept of the “transformative intellectual” is at the heart of this research in critical literacy. While many studies have examined various aspects of critical literacy, this topic emerged out of the desire to create a wider and more defined concept of not only what critical literacy is and how it is being used today, but also why it is necessary. By raising this notion, by asking the question of why critical literacy should be explored in the English language arts classroom, this question may become the reason for teachers to explore this issue and reflect on their own stance.

### **Procedures**

The research was first examined for word repetition. In *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, Roy D'Andrade (1995) stated that the “most direct indication of schematic organization in naturalistic discourse is the repetition of associative linkages” (p. 294). Throughout the research, many texts, journals, and books were analyzed for the terms *critical literacy*, as well as *critical pedagogy*, and *critical thinking*. These three terms are often synonymous with similar aspects of the critical literacy process; it was useful to incorporate these studies within the research to determine potentially unnoticed associative linkages. This was especially indispensable in this particular study as it examines the apparent misunderstanding of the term *critical literacy* with that of the term *critical*. Upon completing the initial research of texts which incorporated these themes, research then focused solely upon the texts which correlated to historical contexts and constructs of critical literacy. Significant in the literature around the historical foundations of critical literacy was Ernest Morrell’s book *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation* (2007). While many authors examine aspects of these historical foundations, Morrell’s text gives one of the most cohesive chronological examinations of the historical foundations of critical literacy. Upon

completing this historical research around that of Ernest Morrell's model, literature focused on research relating critical literacy to education was explored.

Utilizing historical research was a logical method of choice for this thesis given the chronology of the topic. By revealing the past contributions of researchers in the area of critical literacy, new ideas about the importance of critical literacy in English language arts could emerge. This study may also reshape the need for critical literacy in not only the high school curriculum but in the broader area of language study in English language arts. In this study, an understanding of the history of critical literacy is demonstrated through the background section provided in Chapter I and through the historical overview provided in the review of the literature. Knowledge of the factors, or in this research, the influences affecting events, ideas and people, is an integral part of this study's conceptual framework. Demonstrated knowledge and consideration of the influences is shown throughout the findings and discussion chapters. Interest in the area of critical literacy is shown through a strong personal interest as a current English language arts educator.

In the area of critical literacy, it seemed most fitting to use a hermeneutic and critical inquiry to answer my proposed question. This model allows for a subjective approach on the part of the researcher. While subjectivity may be viewed negatively in some research instances, in this case, the situated practitioner is the focus of the inquiry as well as the formula for this inquiry. Specific approaches and methods that guided this study include a study of the historical underpinnings of critical literacy research, connections between critical literacy study and current English language arts practices, as well as connections between critical literacy and democracy. This research follows four procedures and is analyzed through a series of chapters intended to respond to the following inquiry:

- 1) Uncover the fundamental historical underpinnings of critical literacy as it is known today;
- 2) Outline what current research has to say about critical literacy in English language arts education;
- 3) Examine the connections, disconnections, and problems encountered between critical literacy study in English language arts and the future of democracy;
- 4) Discuss issues that connect critical literacy and understanding democracy in public school education.

This inquiry began in the fall of 2007. First, the research was examined from a historical perspective, attempting to trace chronologically the history of critical literacy as it is known today, specifically looking into the many theories and philosophies which have shaped this literacy. Morrell (2007) offered a significant framework. This framework was explored to determine the specific philosophers and historical contexts associated to critical theory and critical literacy. This included many books, as well as searching through various databases. These databases included, in no order of significance, Academic Search Premier, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) via CSA Illumina, Education: A SAGE Full-Text Collection, and Journal Storage (JSTOR). This culmination of various journals allowed for a preliminary examination of studies that have been conducted in the area of critical literacy. Second, the current role of critical literacy in the English language arts classroom was examined and from this point, major themes were determined. Following this, emergent themes within critical literacy research were examined. They were then culminated into a process chart which illustrates where each of these themes emerge through the application and reception of critical literacy in the English language arts classroom. While this model approximates where each of

these themes emerge, the social constructivist nature of critical literacy implies that this process may emerge differently from classroom to classroom. Third, the research was examined to correlate specific and general relationships between critical literacy skills and democratic and civic responsibility. This examination of democratic affairs also incorporated past historical events which were impacted by critical and non-critical literacy skills. Fourth, upon determining the major themes which arose in the areas of education and democracy, these themes were then synthesized to clearly articulate commonalities between critical literacy and democracy. This final examination led to the completion of a process diagram which highlights how critical literacy and democracy are linked through critical literacy education practices.

### **Initial Themes**

To determine any new themes correlating critical literacy to issues of democracy, as well as ensure that all themes were carefully explored, works of authors in the area of critical literacy and democracy were found through the following process. This process led to determining the emergent themes of this study.

### **Initial Search**

#### **Weeks 1-9:**

- 1) Prior to the examination of emergent themes, and upon completion of the historical timeline, the researcher searched for documents exploring critical literacy through the use of Academic Search Premier, ERIC via CSA Illumina, Education: A SAGE Full-Text Collection, and JSTOR.
- 2) Documents were found utilizing combinations of the following words: *critical*, *literacy*, *pedagogy*, and *theory*. While this study focused upon present utilization of

- critical literacy, the need for incorporating documents examining critical theory was necessary to the initial literature review.
- 3) These documents were scanned for relevance, then printed, and subsequently, read for viable information. While reading these documents, the key words and statements were highlighted to aid in potential future referencing.
  - 4) A list of emerging authors was additionally recorded at the top of each document for easy reference. This was to aid in determining the key figures, researchers, and authors which most commonly emerged. The references of these documents were examined for additional studies exploring critical literacy.

#### **Weeks 9-14**

- 5) From this point, 133 studies were printed and re-read for their relevance to this particular area of research.
- 6) The titles and authors of these documents were typed and printed into a master list to ensure that no secondary copies were printed. This list also aided in re-affirming the most predominant researchers in the area, and to ensure that they would be included in this study.
- 7) These hard copies were then placed into 4 initial piles/categories: (1) documents exploring the term critical literacy, (2) documents exploring critical literacy in the classroom, (3) documents exploring a specific type of critical literacy (i.e., media literacy, technological literacy, etc.) and (4) documents which explored issues of democracy and /or social justice.

#### **Secondary Search**

#### **Weeks 14-19**

- 8) A secondary search was created to find studies which examined issues of democracy and critical literacy. These were found using combinations of the following search words, words generally explored within the domain of politics or democracy: *critical literacy* with *civic, power, democracy, democratic, politics, and social justice*.
- 9) Texts which in fact explored viable aspects of critical literacy were printed and carefully read and examined. Those which included adequate information to this research study remained as part of the research study.
- 10) From this point, 71 documents were printed. They were then organized into three initial piles/categories: (1) documents exploring concepts of dissent or silence, (2) document exploring civics or civic participation, and (3) documents exploring social justice.

### **Compiling the Research**

#### **Weeks 19-25**

- 11) 204 documents were found. Each was examined for the most prominent themes. These themes were recorded at the top of each document, specifically, their overall summary and/or position of the role of critical literacy.
- 12) These summaries were then typed to record their overall positions on the topic. From these summaries, 9 themes emerged. These 9 themes emerged as the most commonly defined terms and areas of focus within the literature. The 204 documents focussed upon one theme, combinations of 2-8 themes or all of the 9 themes. These were recorded by returning to the summaries recorded throughout the previous readings. These themes included, in no order, (1) role of educators, (2) defining critical literacy,

(3) issues of power, (4) empowerment, (5) role of students, (6) identity, (7) stance, (8) community (local and global), and (9) issues of democracy, including social justice.

The following chapter explores the interpretation of these themes. These interpretations of the research literature, combined with the researcher's personal experiences, lead to new understandings that would not have been accomplished without a hermeneutic and critical inquiry approach.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Critical Literacy Hermeneutic Inquiry

This chapter examines the themes which emerged in the critical literacy research and how these themes are pertinent to the process of English language arts education.

Upon determining the themes by recording summaries and combinations of recurring terminology, the themes were then categorized and compiled into a list of statements. The statements began as broad ideas or emerging truths, such as *empowerment is good*, to more precise statements such as, *critical literacy empowers students to make changes in their local community*. These statements were then organized according to the person with whom the statement applies to (educators and/or students). These statements allowed for the construction of seven dominant categories: defining critical literacy, the role of educators, the role of students, examining identity, creating stance, connecting to community, and connecting to the world. These statements were placed into sub- categories and then situated in the construction of a *Critical Literacy in the English Language Arts Classroom* model. From this process, the following were the most prominent statements, and served as the basis for the critical literacy model in this study:

- 1) Critical literacy emphasizes the importance of examining issues around us
- 2) Critical literacy can increase understanding and engagement around the discussion of social and democratic issues in our classrooms
- 3) Critical literacy is constructed in our classrooms
- 4) Critical literacy encourages educators and students to confront various stances and values, specifically, their own

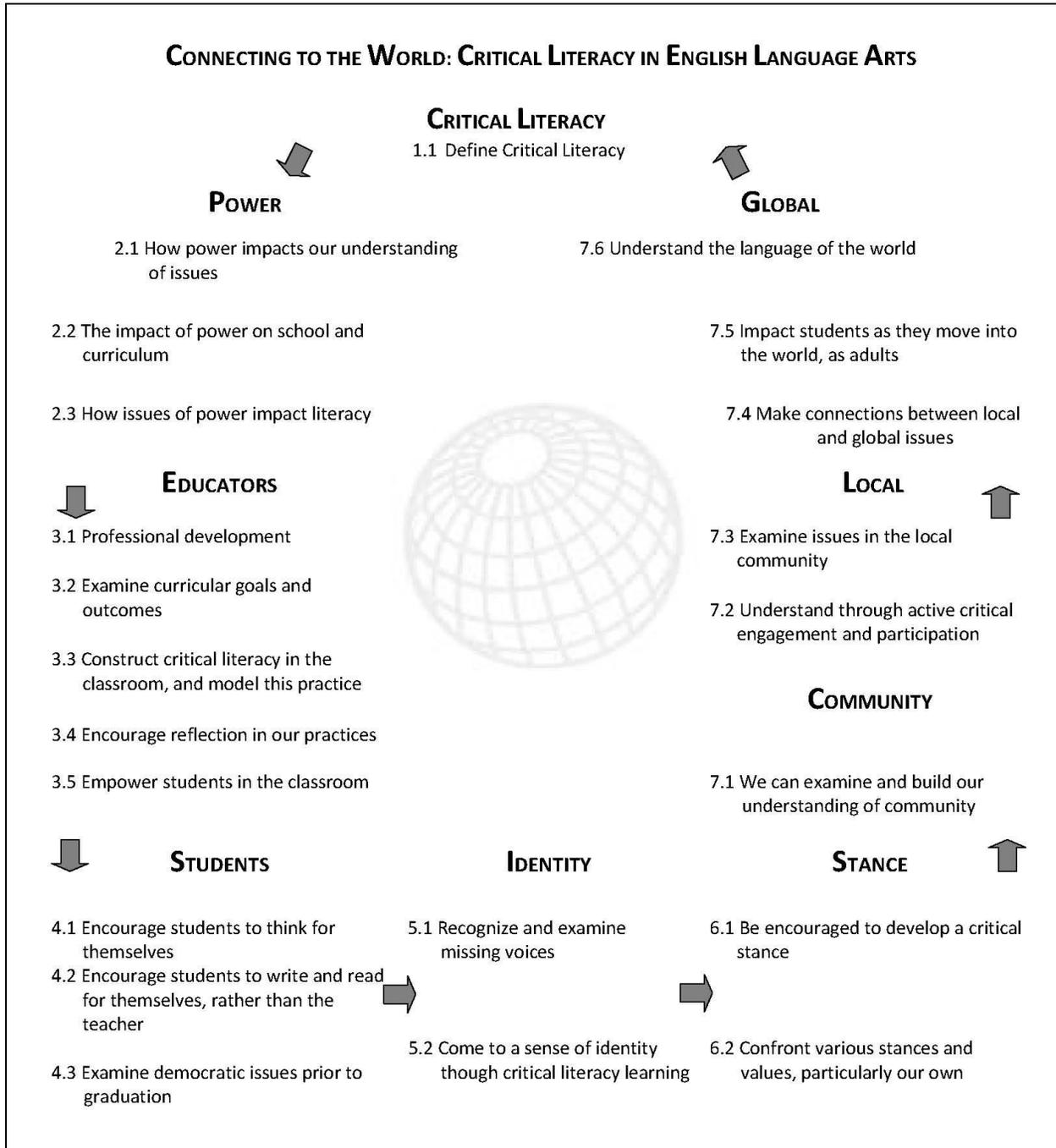
- 5) Critical literacy helps students to examine current democratic issues and concerns prior to leaving high school
- 6) Critical literacy can help our students become critical thinkers as they move out into the world, and help them as adults
- 7) Critical literacy engages students in the language of the world
- 8) Critical literacy in English language arts can strengthen our understanding and engagement in community
- 9) Critical literacy allows us to examine community through our examination of language
- 10) Critical literacy emphasizes the importance of understanding how we communicate with one another
- 11) Critical literacy can help us connect national and international (global) issues to local (glocal) issues
- 12) Critical literacy empowers students to make changes in their local community
- 13) Critical literacy brings the *world* into the school
- 14) Critical literacy encourages active participants in the classroom, potentially increasing their likelihood of becoming active participants in their communities
- 15) Critical literacy recognizes and examines missing or dissenting voices
- 16) Critical literacy focuses on an understanding language, which requires an understanding of powers behind it
- 17) Critical literacy allows us to understand power structures and how these power structures impact our democracy
- 18) Critical literacy examines issues of power and can help us understand issues of social justice and human rights

- 19) Critical literacy requires a critical stance
- 20) Critical literacy examines the impact of power on school and curriculum
- 21) Critical literacy encourages students to think for themselves
- 22) Critical literacy can be a source of empowerment for educators and students
- 23) Critical literacy prepares educators and students to take action
- 24) Critical literacy requires reflection of our professional development as educators
- 25) Critical literacy is a reflective practice
- 26) Critical literacy encourages us to take a stance
- 27) Critical literacy encourages students to write for themselves, rather than to the teacher
- 28) Critical literacy encourages English language arts educators to examine curriculum goals and outcomes
- 29) Critical literacy requires individuals to examine their own identities and stances

### **A Critical Literacy Model in English Language Arts**

English language arts educators are the mediators and models of critical literacy practices. Educators hold the power to incorporate critical literacy and if done successfully, outcomes can be reached. The main features of the literature review are based upon the most common themes which emerged from the research. Themes emerged from the foundations of definitions and historical constructs of critical literacy, common-sense constructions of appropriate educative objectives, and my own theoretical and personal research into critical literacy education. In order to examine the common themes which emerged, a visual representation of these themes was created in the form of a model. This allows one to deduce where each of these themes is relevant in the critical literacy process. Figure 1 below, shows the connections between and among the themes that emerged.

Figure 1. Connecting to the World: Critical Literacy in English Language Arts



There are many studies which examined the benefits of educating for critical literacy skills (e.g., Boler, 2001; Freire, 1970; Morgan, 1998; Shor, 1999; Taylor et al, 2008,), as well as the disadvantage associated with the lack of educating critical literacy skills (e.g., Agee, 2000; Apol, 1998; Freire, 1970; Hoffman, 1998; McDaniel, 2004). Each of these themes has a significant place in education and certain features of this system are dependent upon the successful and adequate examination of the previous stages. The following is the analysis of these stages.

### **Analysis**

Throughout much of history and, in particular, central to the Enlightenment, was the conceptualization of reason. Reason was and has continued to be a pre-eminent aspect of our humanity. Understanding our place in the world helps to centre us nationally, philosophically, emotionally, as well as intellectually. Our motivations, fears, and passions impact our ability to understand the choices we make. These choices shape who we are and impact the future of what we do. Authors Hicks and Holden (1995) state that it is the responsibility of educators to prepare their students for the future. Consequently, today's youth require critical literacy skills to not only function in society but to independently apply these skills to their own lives.

Putnam's (2000) notice of declining civic and political engagement by today's youth is something educators must be aware of. It is imperative that schools think not only about their responsibility in imparting skills but also in engaging students in the examination of how to utilize these skills, in particular how language shapes their philosophical beliefs around democratic affairs. Lankshear and McLaren (1993) state that critical literacy exists only "where concerted efforts are being made to understand and practice reading and writing in ways that enhance the quest for democratic emancipation, for empowerment of the subordinated, the

marginalized other” (p. xviii). Furthermore, one significant role of educational institutions is to guide students through dialogue around their civic and democratic roles and responsibilities in society. Educators can empower and encourage student dialogue and examinations of power, oppression and identify areas of change through literacy education.

Central to the high school experience is the opportunity for students to develop into responsible young adults. Educators spend countless hours examining this development and what impact educators’ roles have in the classroom. Educators act as the mediators of classroom practices; and therefore their curricular choices, approaches, and stances should be carefully and reflectively applied. Critical literacy, while viewed at times as being overtly questioning of major progress in education, can provide advantages to those who understand and utilize its principles. While this literacy is essentially an examination of power, it is empowering in its own right. Reflection, understanding, and deconstruction and reconstruction of major concepts and ideologies are what critical literacy skills empower us to do. Through this literacy, we can essentially deconstruct and reconstruct our knowledge and understanding as the world changes. The foundations of critical literacy recognize the importance of looking to the past and simultaneously encouraging us to examine the present, reflect on where we are, and envision the future with our students as active, empowered participants.

Research correlating the decline of critical thinking and critical literacy in schools (Benderson, 1984) emphasizes the need for improving the implementation of critical literacy in high school. Additionally, the belief that students may graduate without competent thinking skills (Nickerson, 1991) furthers this need. Through the employment of critical literacy practices in English language arts, students can become competent and reflective and critical thinkers in their daily lives. The aim is to encourage in our students and ourselves “reasonable and reflective

thinking that is focused upon deciding what to believe or do” (Norris & Ennis, 1989, p. 1) and confront our personal values in the production and reception of language (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

### ***Critical literacy***

#### *1.1 Defining and understanding critical literacy.*

The concept of critical literacy, which includes critical thinking, is a popular and important term today. In the United States, President Barack Obama has launched *Race to the Top*, an educational initiative directed to increase student achievement. This \$4.3 billion dollar reform is designed to help students in the future global workforce. As President Obama comments, “The future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens” (Clark, 2010, p. 25) and researchers within the field note that this assessment should be based upon “harder-to-test, but more important skills, such as critical thinking” (Clark, 2010, p. 29).

The term critical literacy is often misunderstood. The word critical and literacy have multiple meanings in various areas of research. Perhaps a better term for this literacy, such as *power literacy*, is required since critical literacy is an examination of power and the struggle for power. This new term may help clarify critical literacy for those who continue to misuse, misunderstand, and misinterpret this term. Part of this difficulty may be due to the immediacy of learning new terminology without subsequent understanding of how it began. The application may overrule the theoretical foundations in significance and, as such, the foundations and clarity are distorted along the way. Even upon initially entering this field of study, I recognized my own misunderstanding of the term due to a lack of professional development in the area. Additionally, the most predominant researchers tend to surface, and assumptions are made regarding the

vastness of a concept. In this case, those with whom I discussed my research commonly assumed that critical literacy is really a discussion of the works of Paulo Freire. While he is a seminal architect of this literacy, the wealth of other researchers in this field cannot be overestimated. My research in critical literacy has in fact ascertained a need to ensure that the terminology I use in my profession and in my classrooms is accurate and upholds the breadth of research in the field.

### ***Examining power***

#### *2.1 How power impacts our understanding of issues and our democracy.*

Issues of power are not only at the heart of democracy but also at the heart of critical literacy. While critical literacy itself is not a means to an end, it helps us to examine issues of power. In today's schools we may not spend a great deal of time exploring the realms of politics and democracy. However, considering that our very thoughts, viewpoints, ideologies, and beliefs are socially constructed, it becomes unfathomable how educators can examine critical literacy in the classroom without encouraging the examination of power and democracy as well. If democracy indeed depends upon the collective of our populace, then the individual voices of every citizen must be provided the opportunity to be heard. Perhaps the examination requires more use of explicit language, and a raising of awareness. Allan Luke (2000) describes critical literacy as "an educational project that engages with critique of the worlds of work, community life, media and popular and traditional cultures" (p. 459). The idea of criticism is essential to culture. In support of this idea, theorist Theodor Adorno (1967) of the Frankfurt School reminds us that "culture is only true when implicitly critical" (p. 22). The examination of literacy from a critical literacy standpoint requires an acknowledgement of culture and an examination into how literacy shapes culture and culture shapes literacy.

McLaren (1988) states that individuals “inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege” (p.175). By understanding these contradictions and asymmetries, we can gain insight into how literacy is shaped, and acknowledge issues of power and privilege. The examination of power and power relations can therefore help us better understand various reasons and stances around issues of social justice and human rights.

Beyond the exploration of power relations, we can examine what we consider to be just (Comber, 2001a). Terms such as “just” or “fair” require an understanding of what we profess to be fair or just. It brings up issues of accountability and responsibility. It acknowledges the importance and impact of policies, as well as implementation and legislation, all of which can be recognized as issues of democracy. One might note critically that many of the beliefs around the meaning of justice in our society originate in what is considered the political left. In politics, this leftist approach emphasizes equal rights movements. It is generally in support of concepts such as anti-discrimination laws and programs, and is developed to ensure equal opportunity programs favour taxation to financially aid in programs providing equality. Current education practices in Canada are modeled upon this stance. In education, this position upholds equality beyond discrepancies of class, gender, race, or economic status, and ostensibly results in a system designed to empower all children in public education. While many are in support of this leftist approach, there are those who are opposed to it. For example, since government- run social justice-related programs require funding, financial needs are often met through increased taxation. Some of those in higher income brackets of the country inevitably argue that this practice is in itself unjust. Thus, issues of power continue to impact various realms, and as such, require ample critical examination. While I cannot provide a clear answer to how these democratic issues are remedied, the importance of these issues rests in our abilities to critically

examine them in the first place. Without foregrounding adequate skills in utilizing these critical thinking skills, we may not develop the ability to develop a critical stance on these issues.

By examining and engaging in dialogue around these kinds of issues in the classroom, students can come to understand issues of social justice become issues of democracy. However, educators often take a distanced approach to examining these issues. Themed units around concerns of various social justice related topics also requires an understanding of power. Through this process, students can appreciate the complexity of an issue versus a sole position or stance. Students also come to deeper philosophical appreciation around issues such as social justice. Can we view all people as inherently equal and entitled to the same rights and privileges? These questions of power lend themselves to critical thinking by acknowledging our positions and stances and the validity of each of our positions. Literacy emphasizing issues of underlying power can allow students to explore the vast positions and philosophies behind many of today's issues of social justice.

### *2.2 Examine the impact of power on school and curriculum.*

Dewey and Freire often examined power as a social construct. Education is also a social construct. It is pivotal that educators and students understand the impact of how power shapes literacy and is vice versa shaped. To be critically literate requires a desire to analyze and reflect upon literacy and to analyze and reflect upon how we examine literacy. Through these critical skills, we become intrinsically aware of information around us and, in turn, become empowered by our sense of awareness. Literacy in today's world is no longer simply about accessibility or simply about understanding, but both. Emphasis upon not only comprehension but critical understandings of literacy can help those in English language arts to engage in literacy from a

critical standpoint. In doing so, we can recognize and utilize the empowering properties of literacy education which emphasizes the ability to recognize the importance of citizenship and social development, and collaboratively seek solutions to issues in today's world (Hinchey, 1998).

Edelsky (1999) argues that educators sometimes lack understanding of power relations that exist when they are teaching. It is essential that educators understand the identities, stances, and social injustices that may impact their classrooms and their students. Cadiero-Kaplan (2002) notes that schools are often capable of maintaining power relations by focusing on the economic and political interests of a country. Text choice, dominant mainstream cultural norms, and interpretations of texts that mirror dominant cultural ideologies all reflect aspects of dominant illiteracies (Comber & Nixon, 1999). School literacy practices such as reading, writing, listening, speaking are generally based on Western ideologies of literacy (Meek, 1992). Schools become "cultural arenas where heterogeneity of ideological and social forms often collide in an unremitting struggle for dominance" (McLaren, 1988, p.168). Critical literacy encourages educators to examine these power relations and encourages care and concern for everyone's needs rather than the select few. By teaching from a critical standpoint, educators can become more reflective of how their classroom teaching, approaches, and the system itself, meet the demands of all students.

### *2.3 Understanding how issues of power impact literacy.*

Our language and literacy is shaped by our social realms. Rogers (2002) illustrates that language is "shot through with power- social, cultural, and ideological -that constructs and is constructed by daily interactions" (p. 774). Through critical literacy in English language arts education, we can come to recognize and assess how this is done, as well as how our literacy

choices and practices shape our understanding of the world. In order to do so, it becomes essential that the literature we choose to examine represents a broad range of cultural and social viewpoints. Too often in literacy education, we examine literature from standpoints which ignore the individual. For example, students' personal stories and histories are not acknowledged. From this standpoint, students become observers of literacy practices, rather than participants.

Literacy practices in English language arts vary and some literacies are more dominant than others (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The concept of dominant literacies should be explored in the classroom to ensure that students have access to different literacies. Barton and Hamilton (1998) further explain, "Ideas about lifelong learning, flexible and open learning and notions of critical pedagogy with consider the role of formal education within its broader cultural and political context all have implications for the study of literacy" (p.21). It becomes essential for educators to understand the impact of power structures, specifically how these structures affect their teaching practices. The social construction of our classrooms and schools requires educators to confront these issues and to understand that not all students are part of the same dominant discourse:

Children from some language socialization backgrounds will know these forms of discourse better than other forms such as dialogue or other types of language uses which do not sustain focus on either a single topic or incorporate questions about the form and future direction of a narrative (Heath, 1986, p. 169).

Many researchers in the field of education are pointing to the significance of critical literacy and critical thinking skills and that these skills are too often not being taught in most public high schools, some universities, and most teacher training programs in North America. If so, then

where are educators learning of this research and these skills? This is an important question to examine in the area of critical literacy.

When examining critical literacy in English language arts, it is important to understand the efferent and aesthetic stances. The aesthetic stance is considered to be much more of an emotional perspective whereas the efferent stance is deemed factual (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). While both of these stances are inherently different, no reading experience is ever purely aesthetic or purely efferent and, throughout the reading process, readers are making choices about their thinking in order to find deeper meaning in the text (Rosenblatt, 2002). Both the aesthetic and efferent stances shift continually as does our connection to the text. In order to engage students in texts that examine issues of power we must choose texts that incorporate both aesthetic and efferent stances.

Classrooms that incorporate various forms of literature may potentially better succeed at examining stance as they examine issues from multiple perspectives. This can include texts that are narrative, analytical, descriptive, informational, procedural, discussion-based, anecdotal and media-based. In turn, students not only become acquainted with these various forms of writing but become acquainted with the multiple forms of perspective and stance delivered through various forms of writing. Through comparative methods, readers can question whose voices are represented or missing. By continually introducing new forms of texts, readers have new opportunities to explore multiple viewpoints (Luke & Freebody, 1997) and share notable contrasted perspectives (Tomasello, 1999). Critical literacy requires educators and students to explore multiple forms of reading and writing through their efferent and aesthetic responses to texts in a safe and mutually constructed classroom setting. This can be achieved by including a breadth of texts, authors, and currently released literature on issues of power. By engaging

students through a literature which examines current issues of power, students can place themselves within current social and political contexts, and may achieve a greater sense of understanding of issues currently existing today.

### ***Educators***

#### *3.1 Professional development.*

While reflection is an important aspect in determining the growth of educational standards and areas of improvement, pedagogical reflection also recognizes the importance of continued professional development. This is the first step for educators to teach critical literacy as they require a solid foundation in the area first. Richard Stanley Peters (1966) notes in *Ethics and Education*:

Members of a profession must therefore keep in active touch with the centres of teaching and research from which their specialist knowledge emanates, and they must have effective machinery at both the local and central level for keeping in touch with each other and for making and implementing their collective decisions...In this way they are able to keep abreast of the development of knowledge, and there is a built-in source of change, development and fresh ideas (p. 309-310).

Educators may attempt to continue reflective practices by eliciting available sources of new research and new methods of teaching. These opportunities can lead to great advancements in one's teaching. Yet, research in critical literacy points to a dichotomy between what educators perceive as thorough progress in their professional development around critical literacy and what simply appears as critical literacy. Professional development, however, can be as simple as

educators picking up a new text on a study and exploring some new ideas on our own. Additionally, professional development can involve sitting in on a colleague's class and discussing some of his or her curricular approaches. Professional development is an attitudinal response to how we reflect upon our practices. This does not have to constitute long hours after work, or reinventing what we are already doing in the classroom. Critical literacy is not focussed upon one sole way of teaching this literacy, but on how each of us as individuals, can teach this literacy to the best of our abilities. Critical literacy and the teaching of it, is organic in nature. Educators, who insist that critical literacy is in fact an essential part of English language arts, must make a continual effort to ensure that their professional development in this area is supplemented by research in this literacy and reflection upon their own instructional practices. O'Hanlon (1994) discusses this notion:

PhD and other researchers need to engage in personal reflection to understand themselves in relationship to the world and to deliberate and reconstruct their values in relation to everyday situations, which constantly demand their judgements and their actions. In conceptually reshaping the situation they are researching they are therefore involved in a reflexive dimension (p. 282).

This statement, while in relation to researchers, is at the heart of reflection in educational practices. The dichotomy between educational practices and research in universities must be bridged. It is essential that researchers and educators alike have opportunities to share and examine their work. This way, research within various academic communities is strengthened by reciprocal relations. Additionally, understanding that educator's personal and professional lives come in to the classroom, is something many theorists are attempting to stress in current

research, stating that “neither pedagogical practice nor personal experience can be assumed to be unmediated by theoretical standpoints” (Pennycook, 1999, p. 342). Who we are, what we choose to instruct, and how we choose to instruct it, are all mediated by our own personal and social contexts as educators. Frank Serafini (2003) reminds educators that “regardless of whether teachers can explicitly articulate their theoretical perspectives, their beliefs play a dominant role in the resources they choose, the instructional practices they employ, and the environment they create in their classrooms” (para.13 ). Professional development can ensure that our practices are more likely to be founded upon theoretical foundations.

Giroux (1996) believes that critical pedagogy “provides the conditions for a set of ideological and social relations which engender diverse possibilities for students to produce rather than to simply acquire knowledge” (p. 38). Giroux’s belief that a broader concept of education is one which encourages active participation and thought is fundamental to what it means to be the “transformative intellectual”, where educators are reflective. In *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning*, Giroux (1988) notes that it is “important to stress that teachers must take active responsibility for raising serious questions about what they teach, how they teach, and what the larger goals are for which they are striving” (p. 126). This concept of the transformative educator is essential to critical pedagogy and critical literacy. In *Ideology, Culture and the Process of Schooling*, Giroux (1981) emphasizes that educators must be transformative in their approaches, capable of “recognizing that reproduction is a complex phenomenon that not only serves the interest of domination but also contains the seeds of conflict and transformation.” (p. 109). To be transformative requires educators to first recognize areas where they can improve or master their teaching. Professional development

therefore requires a desire by the educator, first and foremost, to take responsibility for his or her own learning, and focus on the transformative nature of pedagogy.

Engagement is the key, but, without the essential skills and foundations of critical literacy, teaching students to think critically may not exist. This has been the fear of some researchers and critical literacy theorists of today. While attempting to ensure that these skills are being met, teachers may never successfully attain this skill without professional development in the area.

### *3.2 Examine curricular goals and outcomes.*

One aspect of critical literacy which is essential to English language arts educators is the emphasis upon literacy as communication. Competencies in high school English language arts (listening, speaking, viewing, writing, representing, and reading) need continual support and emphasis. Through the culmination of these skills, students can develop and increase their abilities to communicate effectively. In order to do so, English language arts educators must ensure that students are provided with and encouraged to hone these skills in an empowering environment that continually expands their understanding of language. Halliday's (1975) notion that language developed out of the need to communicate between individuals is still at the heart of English language arts education. We learn language through our interaction and communication with others (Wells, 1986).

While the current English language arts curriculum acknowledges the importance of critical literacy skills, it is the role of educators to ensure that acquiring, processing, and functioning in these skills is activated. This can result in an increased ability to engage and participate in discussions around issues of power, dominance, and social justice. It is the choice of individuals to determine the extent in which they proceed in their engagement of these issues,

the opportunity to participate must be in schools. Luke (1998) makes a critical note in regards to choice:

Many of us working from sociological and cultural perspectives on literacy education have tried to change the subject of the great debate, to shift sideways. We have argued that there is no “right” way of teaching reading and writing, but that different curricular approaches – and their textbooks, classroom events, assessment instruments and adjunct materials – shape literacy as social practices differently. The ways that literacies are shaped have uneven benefits for particular communities (p. 305).

Understanding the impact of our curricular choices is a necessary professional responsibility as English language arts educators.

Curricular outcomes shape the focus of what we teach each day. Educators cannot only be knowledgeable on current curricular goals and outcomes as mandated by provincial curriculums, but can also knowledgeable of the rationales for *why* these outcomes are determined and for what purposes.

Of the five general learning outcomes for the English language arts in Manitoba, one of the outcomes is that students will “comprehend and respond personally and critically to oral, print and other media texts”. In the Senior 4 English Language Arts Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes and Senior 4 Standards under “*Connect Self, Texts, and Culture (2.2.2)*”, Grade 10 through 12 students should be able to “respond personally and critically to perspectives and styles of a variety of Canadian and international texts” (2000, p. 31).

Under the English language arts focus, students can take three different streams of English language arts. Senior 4 English Language Arts Comprehensive Focus equally addresses

pragmatic and aesthetic focus, the Senior 4 English Language Arts Literary Focus is a 70% aesthetic and 30% pragmatic focus, and the Senior 4 English Language Arts Transactional Focus is a 30% aesthetic and 70% pragmatic focus. The Manitoba curricular guide for the English Language Arts Comprehensive Focus reads:

Discussion of texts often prompts students to generate their own texts in response, as a way to learn about a form is to imitate it. Greater awareness of forms and techniques increases students' skill in reading critically, enhances their appreciation of texts, and adds to the repertoire of approaches they use in their own work. Students' skill in listening to, reading, and viewing texts is fundamental to their success in all subject areas, to their effective participation in society, and to the lifelong enrichment they will gain through literacy (Manitoba Education and Training, 2000, p. 27).

The transactional focus is slightly altered, stating that "greater awareness of the forms and techniques writers and producers use increases students' skill in reading critically and adds to the repertoire of forms and techniques they may use confidently in their own work" (p. 163). Under this outcome, the differentiating feature is the repertoire of approaches versus the repertoire of forms and techniques. What each focus alludes to is that of *effective participation in society, and to the lifelong enrichment, they will gain through literacy*. This document clearly outlines the minimum requirements of literacy education; functional literacy should not be the end of citizenship. Critical literacy approaches go beyond effective; the approaches highlight the advancement and increased participation in society. Currently, the Manitoba curriculum notes that through the six language arts:

Students develop knowledge of and skill in their use of the language arts as they listen, speak, read, write, view, and represent in a wide variety of contexts and for a range of purposes-expressive, aesthetic, and pragmatic. Students study the language arts in order to function in their communities and cultures: to appreciate, enjoy, communicate, interact, solve problems, think critically, and make informed choices that will enhance the quality of their lives. Many language elements (e.g., patterns, mood, symbolism, symmetry, transitions, focus, tone, emphasis) are similar in oral, print, and visual texts. (Manitoba Education and Training, 2000, p. 28)

In the second sentence which focuses on functioning in community and with culture, it seems important to me that this include critical inquiry and, essentially, critical literacy. The idea of *functioning* in current society is an important goal, but so is the ability to knowledgably understand and recognize power inequalities, injustices, and future needs of our society for negotiating our path. If we think of the document itself as a text for analysis, we realize that it is not as important where we are but where we are going. Policy documents, such as these, require close scrutiny because of what they imply. This is not in order to dismantle any current system but to be certain that our classroom goals and objectives truly match these provincial goals. If not, then this document loses its worth as a document in practice. The statement to ‘think critically’ requires a specific context and approach to text. Critical educators understand the worthiness of this issue, as well as significance of critical thinking as a skill.

The second part of this statement is in regards to current affairs. The current curriculum acts as a model of what teachers are to teach and is applied within each classroom context. Teachers themselves develop the context through their personalities. When they share stories,

personal accounts, humour, beliefs, interests, knowledge on or about a particular area, they share their identities with students. As individuals, we are shaped by our social contexts. We are shaped by our knowledge and understanding of the world around us. It remains essential that educators move forward in their own thinking and are capable of truly modeling critical literacy with the reward of being heard by students who respect the knowledge and social connection to the educator.

### *3.3 Construct critical literacy in the classroom, and model this practice.*

Educators often describe their literacy practices as mirrors of the same practices they engaged in as young children when they were in school. In fact, many educators still teach the literature that they learned as children. While there may be a benefit for supporting pedagogy, which elicited positive feelings and associations from current educators, educators must nonetheless continually strive to re-address their literature selection, curricular scope, and their teaching approaches to literacy in the classroom. Because today's classrooms are composed of numerous cultures, races, ethnicities, and beliefs, educators must also take into account students with minority status. Minority students require academically demanding educators to help them operate successfully in mainstream and dominant societies (Ladson-Billings, 1992). By envisioning literacy practices that meet current individual and social needs, educators are more likely to stay current in practice and approach.

English language arts classrooms offer a unique context to look at issues critically. While students can examine issues in their own social spheres, Bean and Moni (2003) note that they do not necessarily learn the behaviours inherent to critical literacy, stating that in the "fluid, postmodern world, external devices rather than people now monitor behaviour and regulate social action" (p. 641). Educators cannot only incorporate critical literacy practices, but should

strive to embody them within themselves. This is part of the role of the educator – to become critical literate in their own teaching.

Giroux and McLaren (1989) stated that educational practice which “aims at developing critical citizens and reconstructing community life by extending the principles of social justice to all spheres of economic, political, and cultural life” (p. xxii) is also constructed in the classroom. Because learning is a socially constructed process mediated by language (Rogers, 2002), we construct the learning environment in our classes every day. From this mindset, educators can have tremendous impact on the social construction of education today. Our classrooms represent the varied cultures and identities inherent to everyday life. English language arts educators can model and emphasize successful critical thinking skills and strategies and push to incorporate them into their classrooms (Slavin, 1998). By taking a proactive stance to acknowledge and understand our differentiating circumstances through critical literacy, we come to a better understanding of one another and our understanding of ourselves within society. This understanding of our society is in part modeled around the belief that political participation is impacted by curriculum design, influencing political participation of our students (Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999). The critical literacy perspective in our teaching not only examines how education impacts issues of democracy, but how issues of democracy impact education. The understanding and continued reflection of curricular practices is the key.

Educators need to be the process themselves in order to model what it is to be critically literate. Too often, educators are unable to think critically in their own lives so it becomes almost impossible to practice these traits and processes. “The starting point for helping students to be critical readers is for teachers themselves to be critical readers” (Apol, 1998, p. 36) and establish their own model of critical literacy to build varied perspectives in their own teaching (Herbeck &

Beier, 2003). Critical literacy modelling can also highlight many forms of democratic responsibilities and freedoms, from encouraging and exploring volunteerism, to creating associations such as clubs after school programs. These kinds of programming can be great opportunities for educators to model skills such as understanding the needs of others, learning how to resolve conflicts, and understanding how to work within a group dynamic.

Aside from modelling, training in critical literacy is important. Critical reading is an area where students need instruction (Bartholomae, 1995). Teacher training often allows very little space for open and unmediated dialogue; and, teaching in the moment may be misinterpreted as an unorganized approach to teaching. Over emphasis upon very specific lesson plans and outcomes, while valuable in regards to meeting specific curricular goals, may simultaneously devalue the importance of organic, in-the-moment teaching. Additionally, students may come to assume that the teacher knows best. Ultimately, they may believe that their own internal ideas and beliefs are irrelevant or inconsequential.

Teacher-centered approaches within English language arts are certainly much easier than engaging in difficult student-centered dialogue that may move against the grain of an educator's beliefs and ideals. But education is for society as a whole, not simply for school divisions or administrators. The entire process of teaching highlights behaviours and approaches that greatly impact students. According to Bowles and Gintis (1976), social relationships in our classrooms are reproduced in the workplace. Bowles and Gintis further emphasize that what students learn, whether directly or implicitly, manifests in the identities our students create and are often carried for the rest of their lives. By ensuring that classrooms acknowledge each student, teachers can encourage students to be creative participants.

An important aspect of supporting critical literacy in the classrooms is to have appropriate forms of modeling in place, not only within the schools, but in communities as well. By cultivating the idea of a community of learning, educators and students can work more closely with those in their communities and foster open dialogue between the home and school. Parents can dialogue with school leaders to understand how their role at home can mirror some of the practices happening in classrooms. This communal approach to education can ensure that behaviours and skills sought out in the classroom are reflected by the actions of adults in students' everyday lives. Critical literacy especially requires appropriate modelling by educators. In order for educators to model this behaviour, they must first enact the appropriate behaviours; they must examine their own beliefs about education. By gauging their own stances, educators can re-evaluate their roles as educators. For instance, when students are reading, there can be an overt emphasis upon "learning to read" as opposed to "learning to learn" (Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002). What this research brings to the heart of teaching is the importance of constant reflection, careful modelling, and conscientious understanding of curriculum and curricular approaches on the part of all educators. Additionally, this focus fosters the concept of lifelong learning.

The educators' role is very important in the process of developing and establishing stances through critical literacy. Educators must provide students with the platform to speak from an individualized stance (Wilner, 2005), which can then lead to self-awareness and understanding (Rosenblatt, 1994). Accordingly, listening to students is a key aspect of critical literacy. Students will mirror many of the same behaviors we take toward other students' stances. Educators have to ensure that students understand the importance of respect and proper behaviour to support these dialogues. Genuine critical literacy can only occur in a classroom that

is guided by mutual respect. The process will rarely be genuine when students feel that their peers will negatively criticize them. The term critical is not a venue to undermine or criticize other's opinions, but a process by which to examine how we determine these opinions. The 'platform' that Wilner (2005) described must be inherently ethical and grounded in mutual consideration and support.

### *3.4 Encourage reflection in our practices.*

Since various literacy practices can differ from mainstream practices (Purcell- Gates, 1996), educators should strive to re-examine literacy practices for applicability, effectiveness, and breadth. The difficulty with this notion is the issue of adequate opportunities for reflection. Educators have many professional responsibilities in their daily practices and, too often, they can feel overwhelmed by the number of issues that arise in classroom teaching. The concept of time, or lack thereof, is an important issue within education. Educators work in carefully predetermined instructional periods, teach various courses and levels simultaneously, and dedicate extracurricular hours to the continual assessment of student work, the issues of time and having enough time to continually increase professional development can be an issue. Within these structured periods, good educators continually change their approaches and behaviours to meet the continually changing landscapes of their classrooms. The moment-to-moment conceptualization of teaching requires opportunities to reflect and decide upon which educational practices are most appropriate to each varying classroom dynamic. How educators fit in time to reflect will vary but is a co-requisite to critical literacy.

What educators deem as reflection is a retrospective examination of what they do. Reflective practice is recursive and ongoing; it operates at a multitude of various levels within any given time frame (Copeland, Birmingham, De La Cruz, & Lewin, 1993). John Dewey (1933)

describes reflection as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (p. 9). By creating a reflective stance, educators can be better aware of what happens in their classrooms, and how to accommodate continual changes. Critical literacy emphasizes a reflective stance and operates on an in-the-moment context. Reflection can incite educators to gain great insight into their own teaching by incorporating a critical stance of their own teaching. As Pollard and Tann (1993) noted, this dynamic process leads educators through a successive cycle of reflection which can lead to a higher quality of teaching. As well, it can allow for a distanced engagement from our practice to examine the bigger picture and develop new understandings (Short & Burke, 1996). The reflective cycle moves between the individual to the larger societal context, allowing for concepts of identity and stance to be constructed in the process.

Critical literacy supports reflection and reflection supports critical literacy. This relationship highlights classrooms as dynamic organisms continually in flux. From a critical literacy standpoint, this is necessary in order to keep learning within the context of current events, issues, and particularly issues of social significance. This reflection necessitates students’ sense of empowerment.

### *3.5 Empower students in the classroom.*

By empowering students to examine inherent power structures in literacy, students can become empowered thereby ultimately creating their own sense of authority:

Becoming an authority, seeing oneself as capable of this and having a valid standpoint from which to deal with others, to evaluate and challenge other authorities, is the key to becoming a critical user of literacy, to using literacy in an empowering way (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 245)

Language is power and power affects language. Attempting to exclude issues of power from literacy practices also excludes issues of democracy from literacy practices. It is difficult to examine literacy from a strong pedagogical standpoint without exploring the world around us. To participate genuinely in politics and democracy requires the understanding of the power shifts which impact policy and governance in our countries. If language and the ability to utilize and attain the language are never connected to the praxial reasoning for using language, then the ability to communicate accurately and effectively is lost. Political dialogues are spoken with words – which words we use, why we use them, and for that reason, require a close and careful examination.

Freire's philosophical work in the area of critical literacy has highlighted many important issues educators must face. As long as people are kept unaware of the causes of their conditions, they may accept their current situations (Freire, 1970). This is not to say that all situations are negative, as many people are quite content with the current state of their lives. Without an opportunity for reflection or self-actualization, individuals may never experience the pursuit of something more than what they have. Which is why Paulo Freire, like many other critical theorists, also desired to overturn cycles of oppression through actualization and careful reflection. Freire refers to the concept of problem-posing in which educators critically engage in dialogue with their students in order for students to consider and examine various stances. In the process, both educators and students engage in dialogue. This creates the distinction between *banking* and that of problem-posing in educational practices. In "Authorizing Students' Perspectives: Toward Trust, Dialogue, and Change in Education", Cook-Sather (2002) states that when students feel they are being acknowledged by those in education, they become inspired as active participants in their learning:

When students have the opportunity to articulate their perspectives on school, they not only offer insights into that schooling that are valuable for educators. They also have an opportunity to hone their own thinking – to think metacognitively and critically about their educational experiences. And as a result of this newly gained perspective and investment, students not only feel more engaged but are also inclined to take more responsibility for their education because it is no longer something being done to them but rather something they do (p. 10).

Elicited through a sense of responsibility and interest, students have the ability to create and identify their own perceptions around issues of social significance. This allows students to make judgments, determine ethical positions, make decisions, and create insightful opinions and stances. A critical approach gives students a sense of empowerment for examining and creating stances, as well as reflecting upon their own sense of identity. As defined by Kreisberg (1992), empowerment is “a process of individual *and* group transformation in which individuals and groups come to develop “mastery of their lives” and “control of valued resources” and to develop skills in “interpersonal influence” and “participatory competence” through group problem solving and collective action” (p. 20). The nature of empowerment, however, requires a clear personal inventory of identity. In fact, much of adulthood and adolescence is in fact a matter of identity. Our identity is often a culmination of cultural expectations and restrictions instead of intrinsic psychological characteristics (Moshman, 1999). Since identity is a social construct (Alvermann, 2001), both educators and students are constantly changing in relationship to their social negotiations. A goal of education should be to help further this idea of

development through empowering classroom practices. Teachers are not simply educating as a means to an end, but as citizens who are constantly learning throughout their lives.

Much of what differentiates critical literacy from other literacies is its ability to keep students at the center of literacy focus; to maintain student-centered learning. Students must be empowered to explore literacies from a personal standpoint, strive to be self-reliant, and to become critical thinkers. Many students grow up to be passive receivers, fearing to ask questions and simply accepting the status quo. In some ways, that is the very thing that many teachers do in the education system as well, as many of them are unaware of the importance of striving for change. If change is inherently political, it should encourage citizens to be subversive to replication. There must be a balance between autonomy and connectedness. We need this balance in our everyday lives and especially in education. “Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist humanly, is to *name* the world, change it” (Freire, 1970, p. 88). The ultimate role of a critical literacy education becomes one of engagement and empowerment to transform the world.

When we build students’ knowledge and sense of identity, we also build their confidence. This knowledge requires work. It requires the desire to push ourselves emotionally and intellectually. Too often, educators fall short. I have many times allowed myself to provide a student an answer, a response, or essentially what to think as opposed to letting them discover their position in their own time. This is not empowering; it is enabling. As students move on from high school, their lives become much more complex as the expectation for them to be politically and ethically responsible increases. Students will make life-changing decisions. In my personal experience, many grade 12 students confess that they may not, in fact, feel ready for the

‘real world’. And so often they note that this feeling is due to the reliance upon their parents and educators to help them out when they fall short. We all have been in these situations when we realize that our efforts have failed us, or we have simply fallen short due to disinterest, irresponsibility, or even a sense of being overwhelmed. To undermine the importance of encouraging and modeling students to think for themselves and to think critically is a great deterrent of long-term success in any facet of life, and irresponsibility on the part of educators.

### *Students*

#### *4.1 Students thinking for themselves.*

English language arts educators can strive to have students *think for themselves*. Giroux (1993) stated that the role of educators is to:

Provide students with a sense of place, worth, and identity. In doing so, they offer students selected representations skills, social relations, and values that presuppose particular histories and ways of being in the world. The moral and political dimension at work here is revealed in the question: Whose history, story, and experiences prevail in the school setting? (p. 372-373).

Critical literacy skills have great relevance today; these skills are in themselves an act of empowerment which value individual differences. Part of the relevance of critical literacy skills is the emphasis upon empowering students to think for themselves and value independent thought. This lies at the heart of critical literacy education. Adolescent students often struggle to construct their own identities, especially within literacies. Although high schools encompass a wide demographic of student identities, there is a fairly narrow view of the world that takes place in a school. And since many students will attend a single high school for the majority of the very important transformative process, it requires teachers and parents to encourage and support

individualized thinking in students. By incorporating critical literacy skills in the classroom, students learn and appreciate the benefits of examining their own standpoints. This is a skill set that will always prove beneficial to students not only as they are currently part of a democracy in the school, but later as well as in our larger social democracy. Applebee, Gamoran, Langer, and Nystrand (2003) found that “when students' classroom experiences emphasize high academic demands and discussion-based approaches to the development of understanding, students internalize the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in challenging literacy tasks on their own” (p. 723). Incorporating critical discussions in the classroom can both empower students and educators to examine and internalize skills deemed essential in literacy education. This form of self-confidence can ultimately manifest itself into other areas of students' lives including their roles as citizens.

#### *4.2 Encourage students to write and read for themselves, rather than the teacher*

In classrooms throughout the country, literature and reading practices work in close proximity to writing. Peter Elbow in, *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (1995) states that while students may have multiple purposes for writing, they generally write *to* the teacher: “The basic subtext in a piece of student writing is likely to be, ‘Is this okay?’ In contrast to students, the basic subtext in a writer's text is likely to be, ‘Listen to me, I have something to tell you’” (p. 81). In order to successfully participate in true critical literacy practices, students need to feel a sense of comfort in responding to texts from their own intrinsic stance and not in order to simply meet the expectations of the teacher. Often times, students are simply writing to the teacher in order to meet grades or gain acknowledgement in mirroring the teacher's stance. By writing to the teacher, students lose the intrinsic motivation of writing for themselves. This is contrary to the very philosophy of critical reading and writing.

After all, texts can be interpreted from various positions and viewpoints, including the invited, author-centered view and the resistant, world-centered view (Alford, 2001). Creating counter argumentative texts, personal response journals, or attempting to create resistant stances in written forms, can invite students to apply their critical literacy skills not only to in-class dialogue based approaches, but within written texts as well. English language arts educators can choose to reflect upon whether or not a pedagogy that promotes this hierarchical relationship between a teacher and a student can support the development of critical stances in literacy practices.

### *3.5 Examine democratic issues prior to graduation.*

Critical literacy allows an exploration of social, historical, cultural, and economic forces which impact interactions with literacy. By examining these realms, we are able to examine socially constructed norms and concepts through critically literate mindsets with the ability to understand issues of power and social justice while simultaneously making reading relevant to today's generation (Harste, Breau, Leland, Lewison, Ociepka, & Vasquez, 2000). Discussions about social justice lend themselves to a cultural stance.

In order to examine social justice, global issues must be examined in the classroom. There are many factors which impact issues of social justice, from the realms of political oppression, to strong religious differences, economic turmoil, or war. Beyond simply addressing issues, it is important to examine the circumstances which led to the issues, since many global issues are essential to the understanding of social justice. Additionally, issues of social justice examine issues of injustice; hence the concept of what we deem just must be explored as well. While current global practices, including the process of globalization, have allowed Canadians to interact internationally between countries, governments, economies, and individuals,

globalization has also greatly impacted international trade throughout the world. Concepts of globalization have existed in various forms for many years, but of late, the impact of technology and policy have greatly changed the ways countries do business with foreign markets. There are varying views on the advantages of global markets. Some researchers emphasize that globalized trade can raise poverty levels and oppression. Others believe that the Western markets have taken advantage of local, unindustrialized cultures and countries. While these two sides of globalization raise significant issues, they also invite many important questions, questions that can be explored from a critical literacy standpoint.

With the increased emphasis upon global connections and globalization in markets, it becomes essential that today's generation understands the changing landscape of the job market, one which according to Luke and Carrington (2001), has little place for students who do not pursue higher education. Langhorne (2001) furthers this notion, emphasizing that the global markets have no bounds, and "move inexorably across global space and time without respect to physical geography, political frontiers, or night and day" (p. 39). Trends in globalization and markets require careful understanding and consideration from an educative standpoint. Some studies also correlate strong literacy skills to the acquisition of higher paying employment (Morrell, 2008). This examination of globalization requires English language arts educators to ask themselves some essential questions: What are we preparing are students for?; What skills will they need in the future?; and What will be the greatest demands placed upon them? Education stands at the forefront of preparing students for not only the workforce but for these aspects of democratic society as well. As educators, we have the means, opportunity, and, above all else, the time to commit to the pursuit of a strong democracy impacted by globalization.

### ***Exploring identity***

#### *5.1 Recognize and examine missing voices.*

The fear of being viewed as a dissenter can be used to silence those who are critical. Freire discusses this in great detail in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire (1970) explains, “In their political activities, the dominant elite utilize the banking concept to encourage passivity in the oppressed, corresponding with the latter’s “submerged state of consciousness, and take advantage of that passivity to “fill” that consciousness with slogans which create even more fear of freedom”(p. 95). The ability to question is a fundamental skill in improving our understanding of democratic issues. This ability is also an essential aspect of education. Educational philosophers have understood the need to evaluate critically our circumstances, in order to attain not only understanding and clarification but to determine areas of need for increased focus and concern. Though critical literacy, educators can encourage “human society to go on questioning itself and preventing that questioning from ever stalling or being declared finished” (Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 4). Just as critical literacy is a praxial approach to education, critical thinking is a praxial approach to democracy.

By examining literacy from various standpoints, we can often come to realize that there appear to be missing voices. Furthermore, history tells us that many of those who do find a voice are often viewed as dissenters (Lapham, 2004). An understanding of a concept such as dissent is an essential aspect of critical literacy education. Simply encouraging students to speak openly of their world is naive. Human reactions to voices construed as dissenting are not always met with approval. Potential fear of being viewed as dissenting can also be used to silence those who are critical. Freire (1970) discusses this in great detail in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

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In order to ensure that critical literacy skills are in fact imparted accurately, successfully, and deliberately, critical literacy trained educators are required in the profession. Some opposition has been met regarding the role of critical. There has been a misconception that critical literacy acts as a replacement of content area knowledge. Critical literacy builds upon content area outcomes and encourages a refinement of critical awareness within content area learning. Thus, critical literacy skills are not replacements for any other skills or outcomes, but rather an ability to infuse these skills with multiple views and perspectives.

Critical literacy can be an exciting area to study; it examines major philosophical issues, as well as moral and ethical dilemmas, and issues pertaining to aspects of social injustice. Critical literacy proponents desire classrooms that invite students to explore collectively some of these important issues in the world. The role of the educator becomes that of a mediator. The educator invites students into critical and philosophical issues by examining and connecting these issues to major philosophical, political, and ideological constructs. The classroom therefore becomes exploratory in nature. The role of the educator must be carefully assessed and educators should be careful to deal with issues that are of close personal meaning to them. We might also explore many of these issues in hypothetical contexts as well such as in debates or even argument. Dennis Lynch describes argument as a "means of coming to decisions, a way of getting things done in the world that includes moments of agnostic dispute, moments of inquiry,

moments of confrontation, and moments of cooperation” (1997, p. 84). Because critical literacy requires the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct our thinking, it requires us to re-evaluate our stances on often long held beliefs. In doing so, educators and students can examine and potentially solve social problems (Finn, 1999). This disturbance of the familiar however can be difficult. To consciously change one’s frame of thought requires careful guidance. Concerns over simply mandating curricular practices upon critical literacy are not highly endorsed as critical literacy requires well-researched critical pedagogical stances.

One aspect of critical literacy that is often overlooked is the importance of understanding that moral and ethical standpoints inevitably shape the nature of how we teach, why we teach, and what we teach. One of the notable aspects of critical literacy is the ability to examine issues and philosophies through literature. Our literatures provide context to examine and recognize various standpoints and compare and contrast them to our own. By synthesizing current local and global issues with philosophical issues, students can examine some of the most difficult concepts of our time within a smaller frame of context. Entering into critical dialogue around issues of societal importance is necessary to promote new ways of thinking within critical literacy. If critical thinking is an important skill in life, then our English classrooms should recognize and promote an environment to explore and promote this kind of thinking in literacy.

Questioning is part of democracy. This is an essential aspect of both democracy and education. Educational philosophers have understood the need to critically evaluate our circumstances in order to attain not only understanding and clarification but to determine areas where we need increased focus or concern. Though critical literacy, educators can encourage “human society to go on questioning itself and preventing that questioning from ever stalling or being declared finished” (Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 4) and to address the multiple voices,

including those that are silenced (Powell, Cantrell, & Adams, 2001). In order to think critically, we must often move out of the norms in which we feel most comfortable. For some students, the mere idea of vocalizing a thought in the classroom can render fear. This can be remedied through careful understanding of the behavioural realities of critical thought. Critical thought, in many ways, is in fact creative thought. It is the ability to manipulate preconceived notions to re-think our thinking, but creativity is something that must be nurtured, often requiring the suspension of judgement at critical standpoints.

It is important to allow students to reflect critically on their personal moral and political assumptions. This can be a very exciting process since students can explore their own philosophies on various issues. This includes problem posing to access beliefs. But simply engaging in these conversations is not simply enough. As Luke (1997) reminds us, we must make 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” (p. 143). Educators who are committed to including and acknowledging these various backgrounds in classroom discussions are essential role models of cooperative and empathetic roles in society.

### *5.2 Come to a sense of identity through critical literacy learning.*

While various literacies appeal and reflect aspects of our lives, critical literacy practices emphasize active examination of the issues around texts and uphold the breadth and depth of our individuality. This approach “places in the foreground issues of power and explicitly attends to differences across race, class, gender, sexual orientation and so on” (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001, p. 9). The critical literacy classroom becomes one of understanding and acceptance, and students are encouraged and supported in their personal beliefs and

understandings of literacy as well as their personal senses of identity. In doing so, we come to understand how language is used, for what purpose and, above all else, whose voice is represented and whose voice is missing.

James Gee (2000) defines four ways to view identity as: “(1) Nature identity, developed from forces of nature; (2) Institution identity, authorized by authorities within institutions; (3) Discourse identity, which is recognized in discourse dialogue with ‘rational’ individuals, and (4) Affinity-identity experiences, which are shared within affinity groups” (p. 100). Gee explains that we move from stage to stage through our acknowledgement of others in a system where each of these ways of viewing identity coexists. Our identities are in constant states of flux and are impacted in multiple ways.

Today’s students are coming into contact with various forms of media at earlier ages (Freebody & Luke, 1990). Educators systematically trace students’ thought-processes through dialogic debate in order to help students determine their own thoughts on an idea. This helps students examine their own identities and trace their own reasoning. In English language arts, teachers may focus on the process of student writing, but may not entirely examine the process of student’s thinking. Often times, students simply get off track in some aspect of their thinking and come to believe that they do not possess the ability to think from a critical stance. To engage students in understanding how critical stances can develop, educators can begin by exploring hypothetical questions. Using this approach can help students recognize that many hypothetical questions can have equally distributed outcomes in that some choices result in a clear split of opinions and stances. Additionally hypothetical questions examine our own moral and ethical stances, whether we know it or not. The ability to isolate and track our own thinking can greatly impact the way we understand ourselves. Very often students who disengage otherwise become

immediately transformed when the issues are related to greater world issues. This activity is no longer overtly simplistic but is actually a compressed version of some of the great philosophical questions of our time. Issues that involve individuals are always examinations of our own morals and ethics. How we go about solving questions is often based on our experiences; but, in many cases, they are simply the moral and ethical standpoints we have been taught since we were young. The complexity of exploring these questions in the classroom ensures reflection and the ability to articulate our positions upon various issues. Teachers engage in critical thought and practice of many of the six English language arts skills simultaneously.

Many aspects of critical standpoints are naturally complex in nature. This complexity is what allows us to re-examine our positions. Educators who genuinely engage in complex conversations come to new and often concrete views of new positions. To underestimate the potential value of what our students think undermines our belief in what we do. Our role is to encourage students to develop and to assess their methods, processes, and final outcomes of their thoughts. While these outcomes may be in opposition to our own, the examination of *how* one comes to a stance is really the important part of critical literacy. The belief that by simply engaging students in democratic topics in the classroom will result in their making an increased attempt to engage in these issues later in life is a misconception of critical literacy. Critical thinking is a means of exploring the process not the product of our thinking. Evaluating the information around us and how it impacts our position is the aim of critical literacy. By using information around us, we can attempt to make sense of the world around us.

Hypothetical questions allow us to evaluate our own thoughts and beliefs in an organized manner, allowing us to validate our thinking processes based on reason, experiences, and overall evidence. This exploration allows us to examine how others think as well, and allows us to value

the importance of learning from one another. I have gained insightful views of the world from my students. Because many of them come from a variety of countries and cultures, their stories are inherently situated in their own experiences, experiences that I myself have never explored. By personally exploring my own thinking process as well as the processes of my students, we can further clarify our understandings and make more intelligent decisions.

An important aspect of the examination of identity in critical literacy is the ability to possess a sense of humility and empathy. Because many aspects of critical literacy delve into the personal realm, proponents of critical literacy also recognize the great sense of humanization that can result in this process. “Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 43). Thus, the ability to examine issues with a sense of humility acts as a tool in determining issues of potential dehumanization. However, it is important for English language arts educators to recall that humanization differentiates from humanitarian concepts. Freire (1970) warned of false generosity, where oppressors do not actually end the oppressive state, but simply attempt to impart a false sense of freedom. The belief that social justice is an important aspect of our lives, must go hand in hand with a authentic examination of why and how the disenfranchised can be genuinely empowered.

### *Developing stance*

#### *6.1 Be encouraged to develop a critical stance.*

Research examining the importance of a critical stance in critical literacy has been associated to various outcomes and essential processes in critical literacy.

Critical literacy first requires a distancing from the issues. By distancing ourselves, we are able to gain the scope of our examination. This distance allows us to better identify various

ways of understanding (Short & Burke, 1989). By incorporating critical literacy in the English language arts classroom, we also have the opportunity to explore how language influences our understanding of issues. Because critical literacy focuses on the processes of our thinking, we can ultimately encourage and engage students to identify and examine their own stances. This process encourages us to shift lenses of understanding (Rose, 1989). These shifts of understanding open new concepts of thought and invite creativity and critical thought simultaneously. Through this process, students are open to deepen their self-awareness (Langer, 1994). When students take a critical approach, they come to a stance through their sense of identity, but often they come to a stance before examining their own identity. This comes back to some of the philosophical debates in education, namely, should students be taught to think for themselves or to adopt societal beliefs? Many students come into our classrooms with strong stances, which may or may not be supported by critical thought. While encouraging a critical stance is a worthy objective in the English language arts classroom, there are several factors that are necessary to ensure that this process takes place.

### *6.2 Confront various stances and values, particularly our own.*

A tenet of a strong critical literacy education is to provide students with literary forms of dissonance by creating opportunities to learn through the process of problem solving (Bean, 1996). By encouraging students to tackle world issues and questions in the English language arts classrooms, educators can assist students in exploring and honing the skills in order to examine important issues in society.

Through critical literacy in the English language arts classroom we can provide and allow students “opportunities to become aware of their potential and responsibility as individuals and social agents to expand, struggle over, and deepen democratic values, institutions, and identities”

(Giroux & Giroux, 2004, p. 84). Critical literacy can provide the opportunity for students and educators to confront their own values in the production and reception of language (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Educators who give students opportunities to visualize change (Giroux, 1994) encourage transformation and lifelong learning, as the skills being taught are then utilized, rendering the educational process as one that is praxial rather than replicative. By utilizing critical literacy in the classroom, “students not only read texts critically, but they also become actors to transform society” (Cervetti et al, April 2001). Proponents of critical literacy in the classroom notes that “Critical literacy is a key consideration in approaching controversial issues because it invites readers to become adept at investigating standpoints, values and choices, which are inherit in all texts” (Myrill, in Claire & Holden, 2007, p. 53). Additionally, dialogic conversations are an essential aspect of the English language arts classroom, but these conversations also entail student-centered learning (Skidmore, 2002).

### ***Connecting community to the world***

#### *7.1 We can examine and build our understanding of community.*

Through critical literacy educators and students can come to understand how language is impacted by forms of power and how our language is constructed in our daily lives (Rogers, 2002; Gee, 1990). It is this understanding which allows students and educators to examine how texts position us (Luke & Freebody, 1997) in order to explore various stances and multiple viewpoints (Nieto, 1999). An active, in the moment approach to education can provide an opportunity to apply these skills to local contexts. Our local communities can provide an ideal source by which to examine our own culture, as diverse as it may be. Because meaning exists in various social and cultural dimensions (Kamler, 2001), it becomes increasingly important that we understand how our own concepts of meaning are shaped by the social constructs in which we

live. On this issue alone, there are multiple perspectives. A local perspective best sets up the foundations for global perspectives as the local perspective directly mediates our current situatedness. Fairclough's (1989) emphasis upon combining the local, institutional, and societal realms is a necessary aspect of the critical literacy process in the English language arts classroom.

The Manitoba Senior 4 English Language Arts Curriculum Framework of Outcomes reads, "Students will listen, speak, read, write, view, and represent to celebrate and build community" (Manitoba Education and Training, 2000, p. 9). The desire to incorporate critical literacy in the classroom requires an examination of the relationship between democratic engagement and critical literacy skills. There exists an essential component to the realization of this correlation and that is the concept of community. By situating our learning in the context of our daily lives, we can better come to understand and appreciate the role of literacy in education and its value in understanding our community. Additionally, this awareness will highlight current issues of importance and areas of potential and increasing concern regarding power and social justice. In order to truly celebrate and build community, we must first notice our community, from which point we can determine what it is that we wish to build. This can take place through engaged discussions, reflection, and the examination of local news and events. Upon this exploration, we can determine areas of strength and weakness and envision change and communal growth.

Critical literacy is a social practice that is impacted by social perspectives, just as our own classrooms are socially constructed. Because critical literacy specifically examines various dominant social practices through resistant stances, we can create a much more significant social network on which to base our very use of language. By doing so, classroom structure can

disappear and students can begin to move freely between a set curriculum and their daily lives (Shor, 1997), thereby reducing the division between school and community. A dichotomy between school and community is one that must be acknowledged. Not only does this divide make it more difficult for students to address their own needs outside their own community contexts (Kyle, 2000), it also makes learning literacy from a critical standpoint increasingly difficult as there may not be a context in which to examine these issues outside of a classroom itself.

### *7.2 Understand through active critical engagement and participation.*

Socio-political issues require us to have a strong understanding of what is happening around us. Critical literacy prepares students for their futures by critically examining issues of democratic relevance prior to leaving high school. This requires an up-to-date understanding of issues and educators must make additional efforts to ensure that they continually find new sources of information regarding our local community elsewhere. Classroom assignments and dialogue may be furthered as there is a better understanding of the inherent value of the context and rationale for study.

Elbow's (1995) belief that student writing can be more effective when issues are of interest and are meaningful to elicit a response is a valid point. Educators who actively attempt to connect the area of study to daily life generally elicit greater interest and response in students. In some cases, student disinterest is generally due to the incapacity of students to correlate an area of study to their own lives. For example, as an English educator, many students express a general disinterest in Shakespeare. While this is not always the case, many of their positions stem from previous intense examinations of particular Shakespearean texts that did not relate to other areas of English language arts study or simply other aspects of student's lives. Robbins clarifies:

One of our constant challenges with all that we teach, but certainly with Shakespeare, is to foster active learning. It is good when we can bring difficult literary texts such as Shakespeare's plays to life, but it is even better when we can teach students how to breathe life into these texts for themselves (2005, p. 65).

An integral part of overall learning is when educators can encourage students to engage actively. This is not always an easy task, but it is one that is important. By empowering and motivating students to participate actively, students have a greater likelihood of a positive association to areas that may otherwise have been considered of disinterest.

Increasing concerns over diminishing student civic participation has often been linked to the inability of education to connect what is explored in the classroom to what is explored in our communities. Critical literacy can bridge various issues examined in literature to local issues currently being explored around us. The praxial nature of critical literacy learning can simultaneously impart a sense of empowerment and conscious examination of our local community. Critical literacy emphasizes and ensures the ability to question, analyze, and act (Edelsky, 1999). However, without teachers correlating, connecting, and encouraging students to apply their understanding and knowledge of social issues in the classroom to issues in the community, very often these students continue to passively view the world around them rather than participate in it. Additionally, critical literacy “provides students with a vehicle for existential and social transformation” (Hyslop-Margison & Pinto, 2007, p. 198). Through the learning process, students examine issues in the world around them. Beyond simply studying how things are around them, students can examine areas in need of change, various stances on issues, as well as how some of these issues within literature directly impact their own

communities. By teaching literacy from a non-isolated context, literacy learning becomes an active inquiry. Students can apply this knowledge to understanding in their daily lives. The saying “think local, act global” is one many people often hear. This statement emphasizes the need to examine issues from a variety of standpoints and to assess the impact these issues have at various levels.

The praxial nature of critical literacy reminds us continually of the importance of situatedness and reflection. Through the examination of power structures in literacy, we can come to a better understanding of *why* things around us are the way they are. Too often, overt emphasis upon technical proficiency in English language arts imparts a sense of irrelevancy in students. Students come to believe that education is simply a means of obtaining particular skills, without necessarily examining how these skills can be utilized in our daily lives. In this case, students are no longer part of the process and, as such, have no intrinsic sense or desire of responsibility. The issues of the world are not theirs, and, therefore, they may never truly change anything.

### *7.3 Examine issues in the local community.*

While socially related issues are examined to some degree in schools, they are not often connected to the communities in which students live. These issues are not always represented in classroom curriculums (Giroux, 1994). While many forms of literature are examined, the ability to construct these examinations through the lens of current local views may not be explored. There are valuable rationales for connecting students to their local communities. These connections can help those within education to determine specific areas of study which connect to local concerns, possibly improving school climate and building stronger partnerships between community and school. By creating and strengthening partnerships between schools and

communities, these partnerships can strengthen the relationships between parents, educators and students, and emphasize the importance of community. The result can be a stronger community through active student participation.

Critical literacy increases our understanding and engagement around the discussion of social and democratic issues in our classrooms. Some studies suggest that students learn more outside of school about literacy than in school (Nixon, 1998). If this is the current case of literacy learning, it benefits students to have experiences in the classroom to examine a variety of contextualized views and potentially engage in civic and political issues (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Additionally, educators can bring local community into the classroom to explore these issues together. This approach additionally supports various stances as students are exposed to issues from varying standpoints. By bringing members of our communities into the classroom, we build connections with those outside of the classroom, highlight new awareness, and examine how issues are being explored and improved in our communities. Research suggests that community involvement within schools can have positive affects upon students' learning (Epstein, 1995). For high school students preparing to enter the workforce, this can be a wonderful opportunity to examine the various roles and positions available for students who find an interest or connection to these concerns.

#### *7.4 Make connections between local and global issues.*

By connecting local issues to national and international issues, students are better capable of making personal connections to these issues at least intellectually. The local perspective allows students to examine first how these issues shape their daily lives. For example, educators can bridge issues of global economy to issues of local economy, such as the local real estate market. Or, in the case of social justice issues, by first examining local programs which explore

social justice activities such as community philanthropic organizations and volunteer programs. This ability to reflect and connect to their own daily lives is essential to what Freire termed as the *conscientização*, where this connection is achieved through the understanding of social, political, and economic contradictions. The ability to articulate and explore these contradictions can in turn expose underlying issues not only within literacy but within society, potentially leading to a greater sense of self and community.

Through critical literacy, we can examine the power of what individuals can do when they are committed to making a positive impact in their schools, communities, and the world. Literature can stimulate discussions of larger societal conflicts (Bean and Moni, 2003), but it can only be done if we engage in literacies that promote the examination of these issues in the classroom. While these issues can be difficult to examine at times due to the personal level of this literacy, high school students deserve the opportunities to explore these questions.

Beyond understanding these complex systems or issues in English language arts, we must understand their impact upon culture. In order to extend opportunities to students and educators to engage in meaningful dialogues that are open to new and diverse cultures and situated literacies, we must understand the very systems we construct and the ways they influence our cultures. Through this process, the understanding of backgrounds and cultures help students to negotiate their lives within bilingual and bicultural worlds (Crawford, 2004). Rather than looking at literacy solely from a distance, students can reconstruct their understandings by placing themselves at the forefront of the literacy practices and have the capacity to “politicize themselves and engage in action aimed at challenging existing structures of inequality and oppression” (Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p. 23).

### *7.5 Impact students as they move into the world as adults.*

Because critical literacy identifies various perspectives, viewpoints, and stances on numerous issues, it allows students to explore their own assumptions while recognizing assumptions around them. If students can engage in dialogue around current affairs that impact their local community from a language standpoint, not only will they learn of issues in their own communities, but they also have the opportunity to examine how language impacts our understanding of these issues. As a Manitoba-born educator, I recognize that my own practices in education as both a student and as an educator were greatly shaped by my home life. Being afforded the opportunity to study was something my parents encouraged of all their children at a young age. I was raised with everything at my disposal. I consider myself to be very fortunate, and, as such, I feel it is my responsibility as both an educator to strive for more in my students.

Jennings and Okeefe (2002) stated that there is a belief that issues of social justice and democracy are better examined by adults. But our students often live lives interrupted by struggles for justice and democratic rights. If critical literacy begins to be employed in our classrooms with more regularity, so too can it be incorporated into other areas of literacy education, such as adult education. This can best be explored through Paulo Freire's philosophy of critical literacy in the form of adult literacy. Rather than simply coding or decoding, Freire described critical literacy is the method of analysis to help students and adults alike 'read the world' (Freire, 1970). David Archer and Sara Cottingham (1996) combine various theoretical frameworks developed by Paulo Freire, in a program called REFLECT. This program is designed to help non-literate individuals acquire new literacy skills in the context of community development and empowerment. REFLECT promotes activities which are deemed relevant to their local and society based context. Participants are empowered through the learning process as

they become agents of their own device, capable of making decisions in determining the process and activities used. It is designed to allow all those involved with a sense of agency. Programs such as this encourage educators to be forward thinking in their approach to critical literacy. Critical literacy skills should not only take place within the language arts or literature classes but in all classes across the curriculum. By bridging the gap between various curricular disciplines, learning occurs. Students can come to acknowledge and appreciate the benefits of a well-balanced education and apply their learning into other realms and disciplines. Education becomes a web of skill-sets that complement each other and abilities and strengths in one area help support another.

#### *7.6 Understand the language of the world.*

There is a natural complexity to many of the issues we examine (Luce-Kapler, 2000). Examining issues like social justice, economy, and war is complex and continually changing. By accepting and understanding the complexity of what we teach and examine, educators can be assured that the emphasis upon awareness in critical literacy is still a worthwhile outcome. Choosing to ignore complex issues for the sake of their density undermines the role that educators play in students' lives. If students are not engaging in examinations of these issues at home or in other areas of study, where are they being examined? Are they being examined at all? The Manitoba Curriculum describes that through the English language arts, *Students study the language arts in order to function in their communities and cultures.* This *functioning* is directly implicit to the examination of current community issues and our desire to actively engage our students. And while these issues may be complex, there is still a professional responsibility of ensuring that we are actually looking into these issues in our classrooms.

By allowing students to incorporate their own beliefs into classrooms, students can better understand various perspectives whether they be religious, political, or social. Rather than avoid student's views, we can encourage students to explore alternative positions. Misunderstood ideas regarding culture can be explored in a safe and nurturing environment. Teachers can act as mediators. By allowing and supporting these conversations in our classrooms, communities can flourish as they are grounded in shared and appropriated dialogue. These types of conversations are not only quintessential to critical literacy but also to civic life as well. The ability to work with others and to have an open sense of understanding is a crucial skill in today's globalized world. Students capable of defining and understanding cultural differences will not only be provided with an opportunity to create their own viewpoints on various issues in democratic life, but also empowered to feel as competent in issues of civic life as they do in core curricular areas such as English.

Critical theorist Peter McLaren (1992) points out, "Critical literacy has grown out of an awareness that the ability to read and write in no way ensures that literate persons will achieve an accurate or 'deep' political understanding of the world and their place within it" (p. 319). English language arts classes throughout the country take adequate time to ensure that students are prepared with the transactional skills appropriate for the workforce. These include items such as portfolios, resumes, as well as career-oriented units of study. Yet much of the examination around this language does not exist. It is important to ensure that upon meeting our curricular outcomes that we also aim to encourage continued literacy growth, awareness, and the value of personal identity and reflection in today's world. "Those who, in learning, to read and write, come to a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves" (Freire, 1970, p. 29). This examination allows students and educators to

appreciate the process of learning rather than the immediate results and strengthens the ability to carefully examine and understand language.

Kohl's (1995) belief that attitudes do not develop through avoidance is an often overlooked. While we may wish to ignore parts of the world around us in our classrooms, students never get a genuine opportunity to learn about these issues. We cannot participate genuinely and fully in civic life if we are unable to understand the power shifts that impact policy and governance in our countries. Political dialogues are spoken with words and which words we use and why we use them is at the heart of democracy. We (educators and students) bring to education our personal stories, experiences, and lives. This experiential element of learning is not only an essential part of education, but one which must be encouraged and nurtured. This lived experience is what connects us as individuals; the curriculum itself is no more than a set of objectives from which we situate our lived experience. An inability to connect the curriculum to our lives leaves students believing that reality is somehow "motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable" (Freire, 1970, p. 71), the very culmination of experiences and situations that students bring into the classroom.

Critical literacy has the power to shape our perception of the world around us. Economic, political, and environmental changes in the world present new and continually complex problems before us. The ability to think critically and perceive the world through a new lens is vital. In order to meet increasingly new issues, we must be prepared to examine things from new stances.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion and Conclusions

This hermeneutic inquiry into critical literacy has had a direct impact in my classroom and has encouraged me to readdress this literacy and how it is being approached. It was first necessary to have a historical concept of where, how, and with whom critical literacy began. Through my historical research, I was able to identify some of the main themes of the early and later philosophers and researchers in this literacy. While my starting point for a proposed study in the area of critical literacy began with the reading of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I was very much influenced later by the work of Morrell's in *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation*. Morrell examined the philosophical foundations of critical literacy in great depth and clarity. This book was a considerable part of my research, as it laid out the groundwork for my historical timeline. While both of these texts had a significant impact on my research, Freire set the groundwork for my initial question, and Morrell's well-researched philosophical foundations encouraged me to explore my particular research question with greater fervour. Smith (1991) justifies that "we find ourselves, hermeneutically speaking, always in the middle of stories" (p. 201). I am also indebted to notable authors like Michael Apple, Colin Lankshear, John Dewey, and James Gee, these 'stories' in culmination provide me with a complexity of critical literacy from a historical, theoretical, praxial, and hermeneutic mindset. I began the historical timeline by reading Morrell's book (2007) and soon determined that the foundations of critical literacy, of which I was not yet aware were significantly more vast than I initially perceived.

While conducting my research, I continued to teach high school English language arts, as well as teach an undergraduate English Language arts pre-service teacher course at the university level. Each level of teaching, while vastly different, reaffirmed my belief in critical literacy and

critical thinking. I became significantly more reflective of not only my research but of my role as an educator. This inquiry became a praxial undertaking, and I employed some of the strategies and theories in my own teaching philosophy. Much of my research was impacted by my teaching experiences while conducting this research. I became more observant of my classrooms, student's behaviours, and overall observations in my teaching and my students' learning.

When I began this study, I was drawn to the philosophical nature of critical literacy. Proponents of this literacy, through their endeavours, find as many questions as they may answers. I found my engagement in this literacy research to be continually changing and evolving. As I continued my research, I came to many conclusions about the questions that I sought answers to. However, just like many of the researchers in this field, I have come to many new and unanswered questions as well. Fundamental to my research was the potential to uncover new insights and theories of my own. As an educator, I attempted to incorporate what I learned and to apply it in my classrooms. Above all, I hoped to answer what I deemed as the most significant question that surfaced in critical literacy education: Why utilize this literacy in English language arts, and why is there a strong need for critical literacy skills in today's democracy? These questions resurfaced throughout all my research and upon completing this thesis, I came to my conclusion.

My initial excitement when choosing this profession was my potential ability to shape and encourage student's thinking. I attempt to facilitate the discovery of new knowledge in my classrooms every day. My experiences over the past eight years, however, began to display the dismal reality of this philosophical endeavour. Students often display a disinterest in seeking answers on their own. In order for me to meet my professional responsibility, I find myself giving students the answers they seem unwilling to seek. This is due in part to their inability to

find these answers on their own. While I was apt at taking on more of the teacher-authority approach, I did begin to lose simultaneously my initial approach to my profession. I entered this profession to help students think for themselves. I realized that my role in the classroom had become the antithesis of why I set out to become an educator in the first place. Critical literacy should be explored in the English language arts as a way of examining issues of power in literature and encouraging and nurturing critical literacy skills. Through this process, both educators and students can become more personally aware of issues of power in their schools, communities, and current democracy. This awareness and understanding can better educate our understanding of our roles as civic participants and increase the likelihood of finding truth and highlighting injustices in the world.

Upon completing my research, I found that initial theories and themes of critical literacy research pointed to the need to expand critical literacy beyond the classroom. Many authors parallel positive critical thinking and literacy development to engagement in civic and democratic realms. I became increasingly interested in the topics of politics and democracy, partly due to my own interests in the area, but also due to the many experiences I was having as a high school teacher at the time. While I was teaching, I noted that much of the research that I explored had begun to affect my own teaching. I began to re-examine concepts of critical literacy and critical thinking and ask myself if this is taking place in my classroom. Returning to Smith's "middle of the story", I find myself in the middle of my own experience in regards to critical literacy. While there are varying conclusions to these experiences, my long-term progress as an educator will clearly impact my continuing research in this area.

Since curricular decisions reflect political and economic interests of a country (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002), it seemed imperative to first examine this issue from the inside out, beginning

with educators. Part of my rationale for examining this area was to determine what educators consider relevant to critical literacy in both schools, and society. As well, my own experience as an educator would play a role. Hoffman's (1998) belief that narrow approaches to education produce narrow visions of learning to students, suggests the importance of continual reflection over how and what we teach. This point in itself encouraged me to expand my own thought on the subject.

### **Results of the Study**

Through critical literacy education, educators and students can examine the importance of understanding issues of power vis-à-vis literacy. Critical literacy examines issues of power behind literacy, and this examination empowers students and educators to actively participate in critical examinations of local issues through their examination of literacy. Critical literacy can benefit English language arts through an emphasis upon continually reflective teaching, professional development, understanding of curricular outcomes, and the ability to construct and model critical literacy in the classroom. Through critical literacy, educators examine how power impacts school and curricular practices, and both educators and students can come to understanding how power impacts issues of social justice. These practices can conjointly encourage students to think for themselves, write for themselves, and prepare students for their futures through learning how to critically examining issues of democratic relevance prior to leaving high school. Critical literacy in the English language arts classroom can provide the foundations to explore and connect local issues to international issues, and bring the 'world' into the English classroom through attempts to take our understanding of these issues into action.

**Examining power**

The study of critical literacy in the classroom uncovers power relations – how power can be utilized or misused. This social-constructivist aspect of critical literacy requires open dialogues to ensure accurate communication and understanding. Those who utilize these critical thinking skills and abilities must be capable of participating rationally in the conversations around issues of power in the classroom, as well as conversations around issues in democratic society. Narrow assumptions of the nature of critical literacy undermine its philosophical foundations and its consistent role throughout education and democracy. Part of the problem is that without acknowledging social capital, students may believe that they have no power and thus no agency. With this, students may believe that they are, in turn, simply followers. However, without any sense of fallibility on the side of those leaders, students may never be witness to adult authority that may be incorrect, or illogical. This creates a strong cycle of either resistance to authority or a lack of empowerment. It is the responsibility of educators to act as role models of the personalities in school and in the outside world, encouraging students to understand that even those in positions of power can be fallible, a characteristic of being human.

**The critical mindset**

The educators who most greatly shaped my life were capable of instilling the desire to think critically. The reward of this mindset was the ability to position myself in the world as a student and as a citizen. These teachers did not rely solely upon my acquisition of skills but instilled the responsibility to think critically and for myself. The skills I learned in English language arts could be transferred to other areas of my life. Skills such as strong communication, the ability to articulate my thoughts, and the skill to understand the thoughts and beliefs of those around me were nourished. Answers were not given as rewards, but instead withheld. I, along

with my fellow students, had to push to discover and uncover knowledge on our own. At this point, the educators could then act as mediators to examine our rationales for our stances. My learning became not only a desire to meet the teacher's standards but also to surpass my own standards of thinking. Educators who take upon the responsibility of encouraging and instilling the philosophical and critical mindset can transform students into truly critically minded students and citizens. My initial research began with an exploration of the early Greek philosophers, and once again returns to the same principles. Aristotle reminds us, "since it is this knowledge that we are seeking, we must consider the following point: of what kind of principles and of what kind of causes is wisdom the knowledge?" (cited in Lawson-Tancred, 1998, p. 7). In order for critical literacy skills to truly be valuable, one must first understand the principles behind our thinking. This is perhaps the great unsaid fear of critical literacy - a skill which has the capacity to increase our overall examination of the world around us, and often, creating increasing concern of the systems around us, such as for our own profession.

The inherent characteristics of education and democracy should be focused upon encouraging citizens to think, question, and examine the world around them. This role cannot be left solely to philosophers or theorists or politicians, or simply to those who create the policies we enact in the profession. In disregarding our own responsibility to examine the world around us, we become disabled by our reliance upon those in power to control power. We give up our sense of personal empowerment and civic duty to align with what is most acceptable and powerfilled. It is not possible for teachers to create a critical environment if they are not critically minded themselves. Educators can find social capital in striving to have students *think for* themselves, not be simple, passive followers. English language arts education is a necessity in

society, but it is only as good as the value espoused in our teaching: citizenry, shared decision making, honesty, and loyalty – the very principles we reason essential to our democracy.

Being critically literate can certainly aid in the ability to understand literacy, but not all literacy is so obvious and straight forward. Literacy can contain rhetoric which may mislead readers. This can sometimes be seen in various sources of digital media including news coverage, as well as within realms of political literature. Rhetoric is generally understood to be the art or technique of persuasion through speaking or writing. We certainly conceive of these perspectives in published work, but this can also be found in the very work of educators. In many ways, current teaching practices, inclusive of the types of questions being asked, phrasing of assignments, tests, and overall classroom environments, counteract the critical process due to the manipulation of empty abstractions (Rosenblatt, 1989).

While educators should be nurturing, there is a responsibility to ensure that our students leave high school with an understanding of the role of language, and how language can be used in empowering, as well as oppressive, ways. The ability to be critically literate can help us build our communities and develop leadership. When individuals create a strong community, the possibilities for growth are endless. Preparing our students to be strongly apt in their ability to communicate their stances effectively and accurately, will help to ensure that their needs, feelings, desires, dreams, can potentially come to fruition as they have made an honest and educated attempt to truly be heard as individuals in the world. Today's global issues require a collective approach. Great changes can happen when individuals work together, for the good of one another. Many of the world's great advancements in medicine were achieved through a collective approach as have been great political changes in the world. Along with great collective

improvements have also come great collective disappointments. We must learn to come together for wisdom on these collectives.

### **Becoming reflective citizens**

I often ask myself, what guides my decisions? How do I make major choices in my life? While there are multiple forces at play that I take into consideration, the final decision is generally mine and mine alone. I look to myself, my experiences, my knowledge, skills, abilities, desires, passions, ethical and moral stance, to direct me when making choices. This sense of inward reflection is at the heart of what it means to be critical, and it about taking responsibility. By determining my stance upon various issues, I am able to determine my stance. The sense of actualization when coming to a point where I have indeed determined my stance on a particular issue is a very empowering concept. This is the very skill I wish for my students to have. As educators, we attempt to encourage our students to explore their intrinsic beliefs and understandings in a social setting.

Critical literacy ultimately examines power, and in the process, encourages self-exploration and reflection. Critical literacy is founded upon shared decision making and mutual respect. Through this process, we become better aware of ourselves and each other. The research in critical literacy points directly to all individuals involved and the need for reflection. Simply advocating critical literacy for the sake of critical literacy cannot be truly achieved if individuals are not willing, to first be critical of their own assumptions and beliefs. This is the starting point from which one examines their understanding of the world around them. There is no single method of approach for major systems in our world, such as economy, healthcare, or education for that matter, that is not impacted by social challenges. Philosophical detachment from our current systems helps us to ensure that these systems seek social and democratic justice for all of

our students. Too often, researchers and educators point to other properties of the system, such as assessment, media, and technology. They lose sight of the overall picture. While I assert that these properties impact our education system, they should not solely be the focus of our institutions. The decisions educators make transcend individual moments in time and require continual reflective thinking. A short coming which I feel that exists in the lives of many educators, including myself, is the opportunity for time to engage in thinking about the philosophical foundations and research of critical literacy. Throughout this thesis, I have examined the various roles that critical literacy has played historically and present education. I have identified major themes apparent through the study of critical literacy. Beyond simply exploring the foundations of critical literacy in high school, I attempt to make a case for its potential role in the current English language arts classroom. While I advocate critical literacy practices in the classroom, I primarily advocate that teachers explore this area of literacy and become it.

### **Exploring identities**

Although high schools generally encompass a wide demographic of student identities, there is a fairly narrow view of the world that takes place in a school. And since many students will attend a single high school for the majority of the very crucial transformative process, it is desirable that teachers and parents encourage and support individualized thinking. Since every individual in a classroom comes with their own set of preconceived notions, there is an importance in assuring that all voices are heard. Understanding concepts of dissent and banking are essential to educators in order to determine if their classroom practices genuinely support the opposite, a critical-minded approach to literacy practices. Much of what impacts these stances and senses of identity, are in the words we use. These words come together to create stories that

give great insight into the human condition. English language arts courses provide ample opportunities to discover these stories. We examine literature from multiple perspectives to mirror the very multiple perspectives that exist in our lives. These stories become pieces of greater pictures, which enrich us with multiple viewpoints, and allow us to place ourselves in these situations, and ask ourselves great philosophical questions. As a child, my father would often tell me stories before bed. These stories usually contained a moral, or a lesson that I could then reflect on. While the outcome of critical literacy is generally focused upon understanding issues of power in order to liberate oppressed classes, there may be an even greater potential outcome of critical literacy. Healthy, dialogue-rich environments in classrooms have the power to benefit students and educators in determining a sense of self.

### **Seeking truth**

This awareness impacts our desire to uncover truth and fallacies within the world. However, responsible educators must seek truth themselves. They must question the world around them and move forwards to improve the state of that which they are invested in as professionals and citizens. This requires a continual re-examination of our goals within the profession and within our daily lives. While my initial interest in exploring this literacy came out of my reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, my interest in exploring the *why* of critical literacy came out of my everyday experiences. While each author in this literacy approaches and examines it differently, each ultimately upholds and values the importance of critical thought. Today's world is no longer only about accessibility but also about uncovering truth. Today's students have access to information faster than ever before. Students have become accustomed to finding information at any point in their day, whether on computers, on the Internet, or through handheld devices. Access however, is not a guarantee of an educated citizenry. Given the

unreliability of much of our instant information, one must have the ability to properly dissect and process the information.

There is a continuing question in North American democracy today about who is privy to the details and workings of government. In schools today, we often teach of the importance of voice and stance but, without information, this becomes difficult to create. Much of today's concerns with modern North American democracy are our governments' abilities to shield information from the people. While this may not be a primary goal for those within politics, the result of political rhetoric and jargon can confuse many. We, as the people, therefore entrust journalists, television anchors, and "specialists" to unravel the mystery behind politics *for* us and to make transparency an essential part of reporting. Citizens often too readily trust those who are chosen as elected officials, news leaders, and representatives of the people, utilize information with great integrity and careful analysis of the facts, ensuring that our information is accurate and up to date. Part of being critically literate is, in fact, the empowerment of self-discovering, analyzing, and reflecting on information for ourselves. Through these critical skills, we can become more fully aware of the information around us. It should not be solely the role or duty of reporters to decide what we should think, but lacking adequate critical thinking skills, they often do shape our thinking.

### **Encouraging empathy**

Learning how to communicate our thoughts and respect other's opinions and beliefs is a skill. Critical literacy encourages sincere empathy for others since it considers other's viewpoints and beliefs, and encourages each of us to re-evaluate our own stances. Through this process, educators and students not only come to terms with their own sense of identity and worth, but also adopt a larger vision of what it means to be self-sufficient, comfortable with thoughts and

opinions, and capable of negating roles and positions in society. By providing students with opportunities to explore sociocultural positions and stances, we can better come to understand the underlying messages and voices in our texts, and potentially challenge existing structures which may oppress or marginalize. This can foster a state of empathy into a state of action for making changes. We must, however, make an effort to bridge knowledge and action by first emphasizing the importance of this literacy in classroom teaching.

By encouraging students to examine these everyday struggles in English language arts classrooms, teachers can make issues of social justice and democracy become vital areas of importance in our conceptualization of what principles guide our thinking. Rather than simply being exposed to stories that explore these areas of struggle, we can instead engage in these conversations from a critical stance which ultimately questions our own position on these very issues. Hence the process of exploring these issues is not based upon a desired consensus, but a desired examination of the philosophies behind these consenting and dissenting stances.

### **Thinking locally and globally**

Critical literacy education impacts our understanding of democratic issues. The long term benefit of a strong critical literacy education can lead to increased awareness and understanding of social justice. While this is a worthy goal of critical literacy, there are many essential aspects which must take place throughout the critical literacy process. I define this as a process, as there are multiple stages in which the full development of critical literacy skills can occur. Democracy is a responsibility. We must understand the power we have been afforded as democratic citizens and countries, and this can be strengthened by our understanding of the powers that work for us as well as against us, and the power of the language behind it. The power to make choices that benefit not only ourselves but also each other is something we have great responsibility to

protect, but also a great responsibility to understand and appreciate. This understanding and appreciation is at the heart of being critically literate. This is not simply the power of language, but the power of judgement for choosing the language which makes each of us who we are, and strengthens our identity, community, and democracy.

Current issues in the world must be solved through the collective unity of our communities and countries. But these changes can only happen when an individual decides for themselves that an issue is of importance to them. Students who have the luxury of growing up in relatively comfortable environments may not have the same intense drive to make changes in the world 'out there'. Just like the students who graduate from high school, it is difficult to know what you will experience, if you have never experienced it before. Our schools and classrooms should mirror the world, locally and globally at the same time as they critique it. Critical literacy provides us this opportunity to explore these issues, and explore how these issues are impacted by the language we use, and do not use. While many teachers may voice a fear that a strong critically literate classroom would be difficult, and potentially dangerous when dealing with various issues, needs only to look to our lives outside of our schools. These are the issues of everyday life. Ignoring them does not provide a greater education to our students, but rather a smaller scope of reality.

### **Partners in Critical Literacy**

To ensure that critical literacy is realized in current educational practices, it is important to understand the responsibility of stakeholders in this endeavour. Essential to this literacy is the role of educators, but those in school communities, higher education, and the in research field, have significant roles as well. These will now be addressed.

## **Educators**

Educators require the essential foundations of critical literacy in order to discuss issues of power, examine the power of language in the classroom, and empower students in the process. When thinking about the foundations of critical literacy, many of today's critical literacy researchers return to the works of early philosophers to examine the foundations and nature of education. Early philosophical works such as Plato's Republic required an examination of the connections between law and authority. The theory of justice, for instance, was based upon concepts derived from the exploration of man and the world around him. Similar to the study of law, our concept of education must also be derived from the exploration between man and the world around him. Since professions such as law and education are socially constructed, philosophies in education require dialectic understandings.

There should be less or no division between the goals of language arts educators and the goals of the institutions we inhabit. Issues in education philosophy are relevant in today's understanding of English language arts education. Education philosophy examines our abstract conceptualization about the nature of education and questions our roles and responsibilities in the profession. As educators, we should be able to justify our current practices within our educational institutions. Educators must reflect upon their philosophies towards critical literacy education. This means exploring the literature on critical literacy and first determining a stance on these issues. While there may be a shortfall in the area of critical literacy at various levels of our educational system, this deficit also highlights the fact that education can potentially be a major force in social development at both the local and global levels.

Educators who explore critical literacy approaches may, in turn, become better grounded in their philosophical ideals, as opposed to simply following methodologies which may lack in genuine relevance to the educators or the students. Without this exploration, advancements in curricular objectives become isolated in the present. To move critical literacy into the future requires active discourses taking place around literacy in schools. Many of these dialogues are mediated, or planned, or organized around specific curricular goals and outcomes. Furthermore, many of these dialogues are neither authentic nor organic in nature, and being directed solely by the educator. Education cannot simply be transmission. Whether ideas or thoughts, literacy requires dialogue and questions leading to questions. The ways in which students interact and articulate their beliefs and stances is often in relation to the classroom, teacher, subject area, and their overall circumstances. What makes the classroom a vital arena in a student's life is the opportunity to articulate themselves in a critical manner, complete with thought, reflection, and understanding. However, if educators are unsupportive of one of these aspects, students are invariably taught to become submissive in a hierarchical pattern, and potentially learn to second guess themselves. This is an inappropriate approach to teaching, and is clearly outdated for the needs of today's youth to see themselves as active agents in the world. By providing opportunities for students to engage in dialogues that question, rather than simply transfer knowledge from teacher to student, teachers make students aware of the process of examination, rather than simply the product since this process allows them to explore the complexity of thought.

Critical literacy is a vital aspect of English language arts education. Encouraging students understanding of language alone, without discourse and interaction, serves non-educational ends. Being critically literate can aid in the ability to understand information, as not all information is

obviously clear or logical. Much of today's information is plagued with deception and confusion and a great deal of rhetoric. The ability to think critically and dissect the information around us is a necessary skill, one which can help us shift power struggles and issues of social justice within our homes and communities. Through the critical literacy process, we learn to share our thoughts and theories, but more importantly, learn to respect and understand the thoughts and theories of others. Critical literacy is not only about dialogue, but learning how to be active listeners as part of the dialogical process as well.

Critical literacy encourages empowerment, connecting conversations in the classroom to community and examining issues of oppression, dissent, rhetoric, politics, and democracy. Researchers connect these issues and concepts to education to highlight the role of education and the role of strong critical skills. The works of Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, Michael Giroux and many others noted in this thesis, explore critical literacy from their own standpoint and can help teachers. Proponents of critical literacy have been pressed to find increasingly new ways of reiterating the underlying importance of this skill: it impacts the understanding of our lives. We cannot only hope to effectively teach critical thinking skills, but we can also work toward ensuring that our teaching methods, approaches, and stances model the goals we are attempting to meet.

### **Curriculum and policy makers**

Critical literacy requires an understanding of what we determine to be the role of literacy, and how literacy can help build community. As for the forward thinkers throughout the history of critical literacy, changes in how we approach our profession can elicit fear. This is due in part to the illusion of potential chaos that would be loosed if this literacy became part of the everyday classroom. Educators and researchers alike must attempt to reconstruct current notions of critical

literacy and be open to new dialogue and objectives within this field. Part of this difficulty is the necessity of first coming together on the meaning and goals of education today. This requires continual reflection and re-actualizing the role of literacy education.

By listening to others, students will come to recognize the diversity of their communities and the world around them. Culture is a negotiated context. When there is an inability to find a cultural middle ground, then discrimination, abuse, and hate are manifested. For this reason, it seems indispensable to discuss these aspects of culture when we examine critical literacy in the English language arts classroom. As technological social networking continues to increase while civic participation continues to decline, the opportunity for individuals to voice their beliefs and engage in face-to-face conversations and debates ultimately decrease as well. While students may observe issues being discussed, they are not part of the discussions, and they may become observers as opposed to active participants. This approach to information and issues is further carried into everyday life, and students lose the opportunity and desire to engage in significant discussions and issues. Curriculum creators and policy makers must take their consideration into account in their work, and so must teacher education institutions.

### **Teacher training**

I recall that while training as a beginning teacher, there was often very little room for open dialogue and ‘teaching in the moment’, which were often viewed as an unorganized approach to teaching. I was requested to create very specific lesson plans and outcomes, and was judged on my ability to follow though not only on my goals, but also the time frames, assignments, and assessment practices. Many universities continue to train teachers into filling every moment of their time, in order to ensure the greatest examination of a subject area. While seemingly beneficial, this can lead to a very unnatural approach to teaching, one that is didactic

in nature, where the teacher becomes *the* authority. This only supports the intrinsic belief by many students that the teacher knows best, and their own internal ideas and beliefs never come to the forefront. This style of teaching is certainly much easier than engaging in difficult dialogues that may move against the grain of an educator's beliefs and ideals, but it is important that educators show students the importance of thinking critically.

### **Further limitations of the study**

For educators, meeting the demands of the curriculum may cause feelings of increased intensity. Critical literacy, although a worthy pursuit requires time, something that many teachers are quick to acknowledge rarely exists in view of their everyday demands. Incorporating critical literacy should itself be a priority; it does not necessarily require a lesson plan, or curriculum documents. Those who are supporters of literacy, point out that it is necessary and possible to incorporate into our everyday classrooms without diluting the structure of a moment in time. It should not be surprising that the attitude or disposition of some educators towards critical literacy is much due in part to their own pedagogical training. Emphases upon carefully weighed lesson plans down to the nanosecond do not encourage critical thought and reflection. Students often move from class to class, subject to subject, without an opportunity to really think. There seems to be a lack of emphasis on the importance of creative and abstract thought.

### **Implications for further study**

Critics of critical literacy often point to the difficulty of examining sensitive issues in the classroom. Whether sensitive issues are or are not examined in the classroom, these issues will continue to exist until they are remedied. We must first examine our own personal assumptions

and beliefs as well as our intrinsic ethical and moral stances. Education in schools is a process; a type of steering vehicle for social organization and change. The passion for the mission of democracy is easily undermined through the desire to avoid conflict or dissenting views, a way of keeping peace for the short term but at what cost for the future?

There is sometimes a tendency to accept that if educators engage students directly with complex issues of politics, social justice, and morality, the potential disagreements and complexity of the issues at hand far exceed the desired outcomes. These conversations and examinations will result in increased criticism of the world around us. We must re-examine the very way in which misunderstandings and social injustices are nurtured. By engaging in conversations and examinations of literature which directly examine the dialectical nature of justice and injustice, individuals can mutually engage in philosophical discussions of the very issues we are most concerned with in today's world.

Dissenting views and divergent opinions, as well as consenting views, can be re-examined and deconstructed to determine their moral justification. Students should not be educated to accept consenting beliefs, but rather to examine the very foundations of their thoughts and rationales for their beliefs, encouraging a multi-philosophical understanding of the world – which is the very nature of philosophical understanding. By restoring the acceptance of examining issues of great moral, ethical, and social relevance, educators can likewise encourage the nature of democratic understandings and better prepare students as citizens in the world.

It is impossible to argue for critical literacy in education without also arguing for examinations of morals, ethics, philosophies, and individual beliefs. These foundations are at the heart of philosophical arguments as well as issues of social justice. Educators may fear the potential for contradictions, agreement, and argument. Some subjects may seem too controversial

to discuss in classrooms including race, gender, sexuality, politics, and religion. But it seems counterproductive not to include these discussions in schools, as these are the very conversations that citizens deal with everyday. Is school to represent an abstract social context, or to mirror, engage, and articulate the issues of daily life? Educators and students should attempt to confront these issues in high schools, rather than solely at the university or college level. All levels of education must begin to work together and work within their communities to promote active participation and reflection upon some of today's most pressing democratic issues and affairs.

### **The Future of Critical Literacy**

Dewey believed that the values of our experiences are not only judged in the present, but in our views of the future as well. Educational practices cannot simply exist upon our conceptualization of what students need today, but should explore what students might need in the future. By approaching our profession with an open mind to new systems of thought, we can examine the consequences of our thinking and our actions and potentially uncover solutions to many of today's complex issues. This approach to teaching, however, requires the willingness to understand our own assumptions first. Pedagogically sound educators deserve, understand, and respect their responsibilities. These educators can distinguish between the appearance of busy work and genuine learning. Having students sitting passively in their desks may not necessarily correspond to strong educational learning.

Many of today's global and economic problems are not part of inherently faulty systems. These systems may be trying to retain qualities that worked in the past, but that are insufficient in the present, or for that matter, in the future. The inability to conceptualize forward thinking and

action have begun to dismantle many of our most trusted systems, from healthcare, to education, to the economy.

Critical literacy should not be deemed merely as a 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy. Critical thinking and the foundations of critical literacy have always had a necessary place in education and democracy. Many important issues in society have been overlooked due to indifference and an inability to understand the conflicts of power that have created them. To misinterpret critical literacy as a fad undermines the importance of literacy, and the importance of teaching it. Critical literacy does not undermine the importance of other processes. Instead, it supports understandings of English language arts foundations, while systematically bringing these contents to deeper levels of understanding. Proponents of critical literacy have been pushed to find new ways of articulating the underlying importance of these skills. These skills impact our understanding of our world and our competence in it.

Power and justice are only as strong as the citizenry that supports them. Lack of critical literacy can encourage passivity in our society, and without a critical exploration of information and literacies in our classrooms, citizens may not make informed decisions. They may be manipulated by political advertisements and promoters who use media to sway their elected officials, past civic scrutiny, in a domain unavailable to most people. It is time for educators to take responsibility. Citizens of all ages and demographics are not only entitled to their beliefs, but also as citizens, can change the system if they choose. By incorporating critical literacy into our classrooms and grappling with urgent issues, we can come to better understand our place in the world by connecting to the world to our classroom, and ultimately connecting to democracy in the process.

Education is a vital element of critical literacy's past and future. It is beneficial for us to acknowledge the vast spectrum which critical literacy encompasses. Critical literacy skills are not only essential to effective learning, but also to productive living. It is the responsibility of educators to model critical literacy in the classroom and acknowledge the reality of fallibility and suspending judgement. This is a reality. We as individuals can be wrong. It is human to err, and it can be a valuable lesson for students. Without any sense of fallibility on the side of educators, students may never question adult authority that may be incorrect or illogical. This creates a strong cycle of either resistance to authority, or a sense of disempowerment. It is the responsibility of educators to act as role models of truly noble qualities in school and in the outside world, encouraging students to understand that even those in positions of power can be fallible, a characteristic of being human.

In order for English language arts education to be increasingly relevant for today's students, we must be reflective on the world around us. This is the nature of critical literacy education and education as a whole. Critical literacy research supports the belief that introducing democratic conversations in the classroom require an understanding of one's own critical stance which is tied to everyday life. Critical literacy skills are essential to effective learning and productive living. Students today may truly have no knowledge of, or be disengaged from, their understanding of civic responsibility. This disengagement, however, may not be due to the lack of strong leaders or politicians, but rather a disconnect between education and democracy.

Future changes in curricula must confront what we value within literacy education. Making revisions to our instructional programs can result in meeting ongoing societal demands within democracy and within the workforce. These changes require ongoing professional development and they will ultimately shape generations for years to come. The English language

arts curriculum is vitally necessary to our society's success. By recognizing its role not only within schools but also within society at large, we come to better connect the changes needed and visualize a strong literacy future for Canada.

Curriculum is a continual area of concern, but notwithstanding, a significant constant of our education systems. Adaptations made in order to better understand critical literacy theories and philosophies must be explored and incorporated into current curricula. Additional materials must be incorporated into the English language arts curriculum to ensure that critical literacy education within high schools meet the needs of each new century. Additional documents which highlight the theoretical underpinnings of critical literacy, its vast history, as well as its continual role within society and democracy, can better inform educators and school leaders of its importance and necessity. It is incumbent upon English language arts educators, administrators, policy makers, and curricula developers to incorporate these changes and achieve effective curriculum revisions. After all, it is through language that we communicate with one another to examine the world around us. Critical literacy will help connect students of English language arts to the world.

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