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# "What About the Boys" in Tights: Beyond the "Boy Crisis" and Into the Literacy Potential of Superhero Fiction

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"WHAT ABOUT THE BOYS" IN TIGHTS?
BEYOND THE "BOY CRISIS" AND INTO THE LITERACY POTENTIAL OF
SUPERHERO FICTION

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

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**Abstract**

Comics and, to a lesser extent, superhero fiction have been gaining popularity in schools over the past decade. However, the potential for these texts to improve literacy curriculum across education has been limited by lingering traditional notions of literacy and the implementation of these texts as resources for helping struggling and disinterested readers, namely boys. Based on the thoughts and experiences of six, high school English students in Ontario, Canada, this qualitative case study investigates how a broader, more inclusive focus on literacy pedagogy, which includes the use of comics and superhero fiction, can foster greater interest in literacy learning for boys *and* girls across academic levels. Due to the gendered focus on boys in current literacy discourse, this thesis is structured around a two-pronged framework that calls upon the work of multiliteracies scholars and social constructivist views of gender to more holistically address issues in literacy education.

Keywords: Multiliteracies, boys' literacy, superhero fiction, comics, gender, masculinities

**Dedication**

To Jessie,

My sidekick in life,
a real superhero.

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When you spend the majority of your time staring into your computer, in a small room, with the door closed, the solitude can sometimes convince you that you are alone in this endeavour. The reality is that this is in no way true. This thesis is the result of a community effort whose presence must be acknowledged here.

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I always found myself leaving those conversations feeling motivated and, more importantly, cared for.

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# Chapter 1

## Contextualizing the Research

**What is the Problem?**

Over the last two decades, there has been growing concern, panic even, about boys' underachievement in school and in literacy in particular. Gaps between boys' and girls' literacy achievement levels in provincial and international testing data have fueled a "boy crisis" mentality in education discourse (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Kehler, 2013; Lingard, Martino, & Mills, 2009; Martino, 2008a; Rowan, Knoble, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002; Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010), where boys have become viewed as an "at risk" or "newly disadvantaged" group (Kehler, 2013; Lingard, 2003; MOE, 2009b; Rowan et al. 2002). Using sensationalized headlines about these statistics, extensive media attention has helped propel a discourse of panic into the public sphere (Kehler, 2010; Lingard, 2003; Lingard et al., 2009; Rowan et al., 2002; Weaver-Hightower, 2003), creating a "common sense" understanding that boys need help in schools. The March $5^{th}$ release of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2015) document, *The ABC of Gender Equality in Education: Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence*, which uses PISA test results to identify gender gaps in education, including the underperformance of boys in literacy has fueled further media attention. Some media sources have drawn attention to the gaps in this report by publishing alarmist headlines like *The Economist*'s, "The Weaker Sex: Boys are being outclassed by girls at both school and university, and the gap is widening" (2015). Others have used less dramatic titles, such as "Girls Strongly Outpacing Boys in Reading, Science" (Jones, 2015) and "Gender gap in education cuts both ways" (Porter, 2015), but the articles still incite worry about the status of boys in education through narrow and decontextualized lenses.

While certainly worth investigating, arguably these gaps have undeservedly become the primary focus in the literacy discourse. Furthermore, many of the initiatives and strategies in education to address boys' literacy achievement have resulted in efforts that lump all boys together as "underachievers" and are based on an essentialist mindset that recognizes boys' learning styles and preferences as undifferentiated and inherently different from girls' (Kehler & Martino, 2007; Martino 2008b; Rowan et al., 2002). This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, not all boys are underachieving and,

similarly, not all girls are high achievers (Jones & Myhill, 2004; Rowan et al., 2002; Warrington & Younger, 2000). Second, the presentation of these statistics rely predominantly on gender markers, rather than giving serious consideration to other more important social factors, such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, etc (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Martino, 2008a; Warrington & Younger, 2000; Watson, 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Third, the standardized tests used to gather this data are based on narrow conceptions of literacy that emphasize the traditional print literacy of school contexts. Fourth, and most important to the goals of this research, education reform initiatives that reinforce certain behaviours, skills, texts, and interests as uniquely masculine or feminine (Kehler, 2010; Martino, 2008b) fail to acknowledge the diversity within and the overlap between these stereotypically defined groups.

        Within these distinctly defined boundaries, comic books and graphic novels have largely been designated as "boy books" (Moeller, 2011, p. 477). Evidence of this association can be found in the literature surrounding comic use in the classroom (Carter, 2013; Martin, 2007; Moeller, 2011) and is also highlighted by the Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) (2004, 2009a) in their documents, "Me Read? No Way!" and "Me Read? And How!". Largely this designation has resulted from perceptions that the action-oriented content of comic books and graphic novels align with boys' preferences, and because the lower word count and accompanying images make these simpler texts for readers to engage with (Carter, 2008; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Jacobs, 2007; MOE, 2004; Moeller, 2011). However, narrowing comic content to the perceived interests of boys and failing to acknowledge the complex multimodality of the comic medium has limited the possibilities for comic use outside of the struggling "boy" group.

        Directly related to comic books and graphic novels, superhero fiction is also linked to boys' interests (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Martin, 2007; Moeller, 2011; Morrison, 2012). Again, the MOE (2004, 2009a) documents specifically indicate that boys tend to prefer action and adventure stories, and that superheroes even come up as a particular genre of interest for boys. Morrison (2012) agrees that superhero fiction has a long history of being directed at boys in particular, but evidence has shown that girls are equally interested in some cases (Moeller, 2011). However, despite their unavoidable presence in popular culture, fundamental role in the success of the comic industry, and

their socio-culturally relevant storylines, superheroes and their stories have been relatively neglected in literacy classrooms.

**Purpose and goals of the research.** The purpose of this qualitative case study is twofold. First, the study considers the role comics, namely superhero fiction, can play in fostering greater interest in literacy learning and providing contextually relevant learning for both boys *and* girls. The study challenges traditional notions of literacy that situate comics and superhero fiction as simple, picture-print hybrid texts, focusing instead on the complex, multimodality of the comic medium. The experiences and perspectives of students are pivotal in exploring this focus, as their first-hand accounts of viewing and interacting with these texts (both in and out of school) give context to the possibilities and barriers for adopting superhero fiction in the classroom. Interwoven with this primary focus, the second focus of the study addresses current conceptions of, and concerns with, literacy and literacy learning. This includes examining the boy crisis in literacy discourse and exploring the ways in which broader, more inclusive literacy practices can benefit literacy learning for all students. Again, this study focuses on a student-centered approach and therefore draws attention to students' perspectives on literacy, how they define literacy, and their experiences as literacy learners in English classrooms. Engaging with this broader focus on general literacy experiences builds a foundation on which to explore more nuanced understandings of how topics in the literacy discourse (expanding views of literacy and gendered achievement) take shape in the classroom. It also provides further insight into the possible barriers that influence the implementation of less traditional, multimodal texts, such as comics, in literacy classrooms.

The overarching question this research seeks to explore is: *How does the boys' literacy discourse, as well as social norms, assumptions, and expectations surrounding gender, influence the integration of comics and superhero fiction in the classroom?* Alongside this primary question two secondary questions are also used to guide the research and help maintain a clear focus on the purpose or goals defined above:

1. How do students perceive themselves as literacy learners and how do they view their literacy learning environments, both generally and with regard to gender?

2.  To what extent could comics and superhero fiction be used to promote students' literacy learning beyond their current role as "boy-friendly" resources?

**Thesis Overview**

In this first chapter I outline the context of the research, beginning with recent literacy statistics and current education and literacy discourses, identifying their implications for education reform. Narrowing the focus to Ontario, I examine some of the strategies outlined in "Me Read? No Way!" to discuss how essentialist gender reform has created a strict boy-girl dichotomy in education and how this limits the integration of comics and superheroes as literacy texts for all students. Finally, I situate myself in the research addressing my relationship with comics and superheroes, as well as how my past education experiences connect to the boys' literacy discourse of the present.

In Chapter 2, I outline the theoretical framework of the research. With this study's roots in the boys' literacy debate, I begin by considering competing positions on gender and masculinities, aligning with feminist and social constructivist theories of gender and masculinities to interrogate assumptions in gendered literacy discourse. I then shift attention to identify evolving conceptions of literacy and highlight multiliteracies (and multiliteracies pedagogy) as a comprehensive framework on which to build new understandings of literacy and educational reform.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to a literature review that further contextualizes the research problem in the existing body of work on literacy and achievement, student-centered pedagogy, and comics and superheroes. I begin by examining some influential work on the topic of boys' literacy, including research that problematizes the oversimplified efforts of essentialist gender reform by addressing constructions of masculinities and the reinforcement of a strict boy-girl dichotomy. Looking at trends across the literature, I question whether the focus of reform should be on gender or literacy pedagogy as a whole, shifting the discussion to student-centered and multiliteracies pedagogy. Finally, I examine the literature on comics and superhero fiction that has shown the benefits of including these texts in literacy education as contextually relevant, multimodal and engaging reading resources for all students.

In Chapter 4, I provide an outline of and justification for the methodological approach used for this study.

Chapter 5 introduces the six participants involved in the study and focuses on the gender patterns that emerged in the data collected. In this chapter, I call upon questionnaire data to highlight the inconsistencies of gender-specific claims about students' literacy and leisure preferences, and provide an analysis of focus group discussion data to uncover trends in participants' perceptions of gender differences in the classroom.

Chapter 6 continues the discussion on findings in the research, concentrating on participants' experiences with literacy learning in English classrooms. In the first half of this chapter I focus on the frustration in participants' comments about their learning, revealing broad pedagogical concerns and their relationship between these concerns and boys' literacy initiatives. In the second half, I draw on participants' interactions with and discussions about excerpts from superhero comics to explore the ways in which superhero texts could be used to engage students in relevant, student-centered, critical literacy learning.

Chapter 7 marks the conclusion of the thesis. In this final chapter, I review the problem and questions addressed in the research, and summarize my findings. I also discuss the significance of this research, outline opportunities for further research, and share some final thoughts.

**The Current Literacy Landscape – International and provincial statistics**

Recent statistics on literacy achievement continue to show gaps between girls and boys, where boys are performing less well than girls in both reading and writing (EQAO, 2013a, 2013b; OECD, 2014; Thompson et al., 2012; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2006). This has been a longstanding trend both nationally and internationally (see Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2001; Hammett & Sanford, 2008a; Lingard et al., 2009; Rowan et al., 2002; Warrington and Younger, 2000).

According to UNESCO (2006), in their report titled *Education for All: Literacy for Life*, in countries where gender parity concerning access and enrolment has been reached, female students tend to perform better than males in both primary and secondary

education. This includes higher achievement levels for female students in reading performance (2006) – a generalized marker in the complex web of literacy learning. Similarly, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Thompson et al., 2012) comparing reading performance of grade 4 students in the United States with 52 other countries found that any significant gaps measured between male and female performance favoured the female students. The most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test results also echo this claim, as girls are shown to outperform boys in reading across all participating Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2014). The PISA results also indicate that the gap in reading achievement between boys and girls has grown in 11 countries and only decreased in 1 of the participating countries since 2000 (2014).

        The same trend is reflected in the provincial context of Ontario. The 2013 results from Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing indicate that a larger percentage of female students perform at or above the provincial standard in reading and writing compared to male students (EQAO, 2013a, 2013b). According to findings from the Ontario grade 3 testing, 73% of girls are achieving the provincial standard in reading with 82% achieving this level in writing, compared to 63% and 71% for boys in reading and writing, respectively (EQAO, 2013a). These gaps are present in the grade 6 results as well, where 81% and 85% of girls are achieving provincial standards in reading and writing, respectively, compared to 73% and 68% for boys (2013a). Furthermore, results from the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) reveal that 82% of all female students successfully completed the OSSLT, while 72% of all male students were successful (EQAO, 2013b) – a gap that has remained relatively constant since 2009.

**The Boys' Literacy Debate**

        The consistent discrepancy between boys' and girls' literacy achievement levels in both provincial and international data has pushed boys into the spotlight of education discourse and caused alarm around the globe (particularly in the English-speaking countries of Canada, United Kingdom, United States, and Australia), triggering questions about what can be done to "help the boys" (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Hall & Coles, 2001; Hammett & Sanford, 2008b; Lingard et al., 2009; Rowan et al., 2002). Despite

there being a range of perspectives that attempt to understand the intricacies of the complex relationship between boys, men, and education, discussions around boys' literacy have largely been approached through two camps of thought: essentialist and anti-essentialist mindsets (Rowan et al., 2002). In education, initiatives to reduce gaps in achievement between boys and girls have primarily been structured around an essentialist mindset (Lingard et al., 2009; Martino, 2008b; Rowan et al., 2002), which has sparked ongoing debate about how literacy achievement gaps should be interpreted and what that means for reforming education pedagogy and policy moving forward.

Essentialist gender reform in literacy education is structured around the idea that literacy spaces favour the natural skill sets of girls or that they are or have become "feminized" spaces that are difficult for boys to effectively navigate and succeed in (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; MOE, 2004; Pirie, 2002). Responses to this perceived imbalance have emphasized two primary goals. The first involves creating more boy-friendly spaces, that use texts and learning strategies that cater to boys' particular interests and natural strengths or learning skills (Martino, 2008a; Warrington & Younger, 2000). Interventions often focus on boys' "*natural* predisposition for activity-based, hands-on, and physical approaches to engaging with texts" (Martino, 2008b, p. 91, original emphasis). The second goal has been to push for a greater male presence in literacy classrooms to provide boys with male role models or mentors (Lingard et al., 2009; Martino, 2008a; Watson et al., 2010). By implementing these strategies, essentialists feel that boys will have the support they need to reduce the gap in literacy achievement.

Anti-essentialist criticisms of essentialist gender reforms in education have commonly been directed at the oversimplification of the "boy problem" and its "solutions" (Epstein et al., 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2001). These essentialist quick fixes are neatly packaged and therefore more appealing to the public and to teachers who want a practical and immediately accessible approach to addressing this issue, but are not conducive to inclusive and equitable education (Martino, 2008a; Rowan et al., 2002; Watson et al., 2010; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Part of this oversimplification stems from a problematic reliance on gender-based standardized testing as an accurate measure of literacy performance (Hammett & Sanford, 2008b; Lingard et al., 2009; Watson, 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). As decontextualized activities that evaluate students'

proficiency in narrowly defined school-based print literacy, standardized testing lacks accuracy in its measure of how "literate" a student is or what literacy proficiencies they might have either in or out of the classroom (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Blair & Sanford, 2004; Tienken, 2014). Because gender achievement is so easily discernable in testing results, it is not surprising why it is prioritized over other pressing social factors for underachievement. However, socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity have all been shown to play a more significant role in literacy underachievement than gender (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Martino, 2008a; Warrington & Younger, 2000; Watson, 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

With this evidence, anti-essentialists question why concern has circled primarily around boys, particularly as a homogenous and undifferentiated group? Instead, many have argued (see Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Epstein, et al., 1998; Hammett & Sanford, 2008b; Kehler, 2013; Martino, 2008a; Rowan et al., 2002) that attention should shift to address the diversity of students and their needs, focusing in on a more directed and inclusive question: "*Which* boys *and* which *girls* are in need of support?"

**"Me Read? No Way!" – Addressing boys' literacy in Ontario**

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has latched on to the boy crisis discourse. In their report titled, *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy*, the MOE (2009b) states that the Ontario government is,

> committed both to raising the bar for student achievement and to reducing achievement gaps. Recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Aboriginal students, *boys*, and students with special education needs are just some of the groups that may be *at risk* of lower achievement. To improve outcomes for students at risk, all partners must work to identify and remove barriers and must actively seek to create the conditions needed for student success. (2009b, p. 5, my emphasis)

In their efforts to address these gaps or "remove barriers" in literacy achievement, the MOE (2004) developed, "Me Read? No Way! A practical guide to improving boys' literacy skills." This document is "structured around thirteen 'Strategies for Success,'" that, "attempt to distil for educators the most important research on how boys learn to read and write and the most effective instructional approaches and strategies for helping

boys enjoy learning to read and write well" (p. 2). Taking up an essentialist position on boys' literacy, this document rests on the belief that a more "boy-friendly" curriculum will cater to boys' distinct learning preferences and will help to improve boys' engagement and performance in literacy learning (Martino, 2008a, 2008b; MOE, 2004).

Before exploring several specific aspects of the MOE's initiatives, it is important to first recognize some of the general concerns with the MOE's approach. First, the MOE has problematically equated boys' apparent disadvantage with the obstacles faced by other groups who have experienced systemic inequality or severe barriers to even the most basic education. Drawing rather unrealistic parallels between boys and these other disadvantaged groups, the MOE further perpetuates and fuels the boy crisis discourse, and positions boys in a place of privilege, where they (i.e. men) not only occupy dominant positions in culture outside of school (Hammett & Sanford, 2008b; Kehler, 2013), but now also qualify as "disadvantaged," therefore reaping the educational resources and benefits needed to address other, arguably more, concerning issues surrounding gaps in student achievement. Second, though claiming to be "Based on an international review of effective practices" (MOE, 2004, p. 2) and presenting the "*most important* research" (p. 2, my emphasis) about boys' literacy, Martino (2008b) argues that clearly the construction of "Me Read? No Way!" was not informed by literature interrogating the essentialist mindset. Instead, Martino (2008b) states, "the document relies on many unreflective and unproblematized claims about boys' orientations to learning and engagement with literacy that are underscored by 'taken for granted' and 'common sense' assumptions about the nature of boys' masculinity" (p. 99). This is clearly evident throughout the document.

"Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004) firmly establishes from its outset that the relationship between boys' and girls' literacy and learning is one of distinct difference. Within the first few pages, boys' and girls' achievement and attitude toward literacy (specifically reading) are compared through "Boys-than-girls" statements. For example, "Boys read less than girls," or, "Boys have much less interest in leisure reading than girls do, and are far more likely to read for utilitarian purposes than girls are" (2004, p. 6). This sets up a dichotomized and boy-centered focus that continues throughout the whole of "Me Read? No Way!".

Despite claiming that the document provides insight into "practices that will enhance the learning environment for both boys and girls" (p. 6), "Me Read? No Way!" specifically addresses the strategies within toward boys, implying that they are less relevant (or not relevant at all) to girls. According to the MOE (2004) document,

*Boys* respond best when:

– Work is assigned in bite-sized, digestible pieces and is time-limited;

– Lessons are broken down into a variety of activities that include more "active" learning opportunities…;

– The work seems relevant to them – that is, when it has a purpose they can understand;

– Lessons are delivered in a brisk, well-paced format, with an obvious direction so that they can tell that progress is occurring;

– The work includes an element of competition…; …

– They receive regular, positive feedback. (p. 15, my emphasis)

While many of these teaching strategies could be beneficial to all students, instead they are directed specifically at boys and framed in such a way that boys (as a unified whole) come across as slow, impatient, and easily-lost learners.

Boys' serious disadvantage in literacy is depicted more overtly later in the document when it is said that, "Boys need to be let in on the 'secret' of what happens when we read and write" (MOE, 2004, p.16), a secret that other students, "especially girls" (2004, p. 17) understand. As a result, boys' inability to engage in the secret meanings of reading and writing leave them alienated and feeling "stupid" (MOE, 2004, p. 17). This condescending tone toward boys' capabilities in literacy classrooms continue in the MOE's (2009a) follow-up document, "Me Read? And How! Ontario teachers report on how to improve boys' literacy skills," where it is explained that, "findings of the teacher inquiry project overwhelmingly show that boys can and do read, in volume and in depth" (2009a, p. 4). Here, it appears to come as a surprise that many boys are actually able to read competently.

The gender-divide and oppositional discourse reinforced by the MOE (2004; 2009a) also filters down to make distinctions about the gendered nature of texts used in literacy learning. The MOE (2004, 2009a) claims that boys' universal reading preferences

are defined by books that "make them laugh and that appeal to their sense of mischief… fiction that focuses on action more than on emotions," and also include, "newspapers, magazines, comic books, baseball cards, and instruction manuals" (2004, p. 8). Similar generalized preferences are represented in other literature as well, where fiction and other narratives that focus on creative description and eliciting emotions to create meaning or affect have largely been labeled as "feminine" texts (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Hall & Coles, 2001; Rowan et al., 2002), while graphic and fact-based information texts have been assigned to "boys" (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Hall & Coles, 2001). These prescribed reading preferences regulate students' literacy practices and limit them to dominant, essentialist views of what is "acceptable" to read as a boy or a girl.

Although discussion and critique of the content and approach of "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004) and "Me Read? And How!" (MOE, 2009a) can extend far beyond what has been laid out here, what is stated above provides an overview and selective dialogue from which this discussion continues. Namely, issues surrounding essentialist understandings of the gendered nature of literacy and the influence this has on the gendering of literacy resources in education remain at the forefront throughout this thesis.

**Comics – A question of simplicity or familiarity?**

After many years of comics being pushed to the margins as "low culture" and unworthy of a place in education, boys' literacy concerns have helped act as a springboard for comics to make their way into schools. Due to their action-oriented format, stories, and characters, as well as research that indicates a significant male-student following (Carter, 2008; MOE, 2004; Moeller, 2011), comic books and graphic novels continue to be marketed in schools as "boy books" (Moeller, 2011). Associations between boys and the comic medium have been further cemented by evidence that shows comic books and graphic novels are effective tools for engaging struggling or disinterested readers (Carter, 2007; Jacobs, 2007; McTaggart, 2008) – terms in the current literacy landscape that are synonymous or intimately connected with boys and their literacy achievement. However, while evidence may support the successful use of comic books and graphic novels in these contexts, strictly confining their use to certain groups of students (boys and struggling or disinterested readers) limits the possibilities for these multimodal texts to benefit all students in literacy classrooms (Jacobs, 2007).

**Definitions.** According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2014), comic books are defined as, "a magazine containing sequences of comic strips." While this definition may accurately describe the comic books produced early in the medium's history, this definition is too narrow for contemporary works. It oversimplifies the dynamic relationship between the different elements at play within these texts. Instead, McTaggart (2008) defines comic books as, "any *format* that uses a combination of frames, words, and pictures to convey meaning and tell a story" (p. 31, original emphasis). Importantly, McTaggart (2008) distinguishes in her definition that comic books are a *format*, not a genre, as they are often mislabeled or misunderstood (Lavin, 1998; Moeller, 2011).

The term "graphic novel" has been in circulation since the 1960's, but gained increasing attention in 1978 following the term's publication on the back cover of Will Eisner's, *A Contract with God* (Ryall & Tipton, 2009). Since then a number of shifting definitions have been used to describe the medium, in order to differentiate it from comic books. This being said, the differences between the two are actually quite negligible – the main distinguishing factor being length (Bitz, 2010; Clark 2013; Griffith, 2010; Lavin, 1998; Ryall & Tipton, 2009; Weiner, 2002). Building from various working definitions, graphic novels can essentially be described as a book-length story (fiction or non-fiction) that is told in comic form (Bitz, 2010; Lavin, 1998; McTaggart, 2008; Moeller, 2011; Weiner, 2002). This definition would include trade paperbacks (a collection of monthly comics outlining a complete story and compiled in book form), though some argue that they should remain a separate entity (Lavin, 1998; Weiner, 2002).

In the discourse surrounding the use of comic books and graphic novels in schools, graphic novels have often garnered greater respect due to perceptions about their higher level of sophistication and mature subject matter (Bitz, 2010; Moeller, 2011; Monnin, 2009; National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), American Library Association (ALA), & The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF), 2006; Weiner, 2002). This is largely due to the greater number of non-fiction or historical and cultural fiction comics produced in the graphic novel form. However, what many people may not realize is that just as comic books originally emerged as collections of existing comic strips, many graphic novels are collections of serialized comic books (Bitz, 2010; McTaggart, 2008; Ryall & Tipton, 2009). In fact, McTaggart (2008) suggests that of the

two kinds of graphic novel, stand-alone stories published in book length comics being one, “The most prevalent (roughly 90 percent) graphic novel is the trade paperback collection of stories initially published serially as comic books” (p. 28).

For the purposes of this study both comic books and graphic novels will be used interchangeably with the term “comics” – based on their shared relationship as forms within the *comic medium*. For clarity, when speaking about “comics,” I rely on McCloud’s (1994) definition, which outlines the medium as, “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1994, p. 9). Furthermore, encompassing comic books and graphic novels within the broader term of comics avoids privileging one form over the other.

**Legitimacy.** Only recently emerging in school contexts, the comic industry has battled for legitimacy in the general public and in education for decades. A deeply embedded stigma surrounding the medium and its content has resulted in a long history of comics being “Routinely dismissed as puerile and insubstantial” (Costello & Worcester, 2014, p. 85) or worse, reduced to “sub-literate trash” (Versaci, 2008, p. 94).

In the 1950’s, negative perceptions of comics were reinforced and exacerbated by Frederic Wertham, a psychiatrist, who claimed that comic reading led to juvenile delinquency and an active deterioration of young readers’ literacy skills (Jacobs, 2007; Leber-Cook & Cook, 2013; Marrall, 2013; Morrison, 2012; Nyberg, 2009; Ross, 2006; Versaci, 2008). Despite being backed by weak evidence (Morrison, 2012; Ryall & Tipton, 2009), Wertham’s diatribe received strong public support at the time (Nyberg, 2009; Ross, 2006) and the comic industry was coerced into developing a regulation system – the Comics Code Authority (CCA) – that severely censored any violent or sexual content, disallowed any messages that shone civil servants in a bad light, or glorified villainous behaviour (Marrall, 2013; Morrison, 2012; Ross, 2006). Leber-Cook and Cook (2013) explain that the implementation of the CCA, “led to a decades-long aesthetic crippling of the comics art form” (p. 24). And while many comic companies managed to stay afloat publishing with the CCA seal of approval, others sacrificed a great deal to meet guidelines, with some, like EC (Entertaining Comics), going out of business entirely (Morrison, 2012; Nyberg, 2009; Ryall & Tipton, 2009).

Carter (2008) suggests that it is unlikely that Wertham's arguments are responsible for contributing to the slow uptake of comics in schools today. However, while his claims have since been dismissed by a wealth of research (Krashen, 2004), it is hard to ignore the lingering effects of Wertham's attacks, in terms of the major setbacks faced by the industry and the severe tarnishing of comics' reputation.

**Integration and limitations of comics in schools.** Comics *have* gained increasing popularity as mainstream media and have enjoyed some positive reception in education in recent years though. Much of the comic medium's integration in schools has stemmed from initiatives put forward to address boys' literacy concerns. In Ontario, this has largely resulted from the "Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project" (Bodkin et al., 2009), where the MOE provided funding for over one hundred teams to conduct investigations to work towards improving boys' literacy achievement. Bodkin et al. (2009) indicate that amongst the different teams, some funds were "used to purchase less traditional reading classroom materials," and that, "Graphic novels proved a popular choice" (p. 17).

Prior to this research, "Me Read? No Way!," positioned comics as "appropriate resources for boys," or as texts "Boys like to read" (MOE, 2004, p. 8) – claims that have been made in other literature as well (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Carter, 2008, 2013; Moeller, 2011; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). After collecting evidence from various research teams, "Me Read? And How!" (MOE, 2009) documented several teams' results, some of which reiterated that when identifying adolescent boys' reading preferences, "many schools noticed a tremendously positive response to graphic novels" (p. 9). Although addressing boys' literacy issues through the use of comics has improved the presence of these texts in schools, as stated previously, the emphasis the MOE (2004, 2009a) places on distinguishing between boy and girls resources or strategies limits the possibilities for comic use outside of the struggling "boy" group.

Another prominent (and somewhat connected) way that comics have been integrated in education is as simpler texts that can be used to build toward more complex understandings – stepping-stones or scaffolding that help students reach more "complex" traditional texts (Jacobs, 2007; Krashen, 2004; McTaggart, 2008; Schwarz & Crenshaw, 2011). In particular, comics have been shown to be effective when used to encourage reading among struggling, disinterested or reluctant readers, and English Second

Language (ESL) students (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Griffith, 2010; Jacobs, 2007; McTaggart, 2008; Monnin, 2009; Schwarz & Crenshaw, 2011). However, while the success that has come from using comics with these groups of students is certainly positive, Carter (2013) and Jacobs (2007) argue that focusing too narrowly on these contexts is "reductive" (Carter, 2013, p. 26) and limits the wider application and value of comics in education.

**What About the Boys (and Girls) in Tights? Superhero fiction in schools**

Despite comics becoming a more acceptable feature in school libraries and classrooms, perceptions about the quality of some comic content still seems to limit the range of texts that are used in schools. Evidence in the literature suggests that creative non-fiction or historical comic books and graphic novels are gaining significant momentum in classroom curriculums (Clark, 2013; Frey & Fisher, 2004; McTaggart, 2008), while other comic fiction, particularly superhero fiction, appears to be less popular in school contexts.

To a certain degree it is not surprising that superhero fiction has been slow to make its way into literacy classrooms. The violence, sexuality, and mature content within some superhero texts, both real and perceived, have been a significant barrier to the emergence of these texts in schools (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Moeller, 2011; Weiner, 2002). However, it is important to understand that general concerns about superhero content are not representative of all superhero titles and therefore should not limit the possibilities of these texts for literacy learning. Versaci (2008) argues, "Just like comics, books and film have their crud. Unlike comics, however, no one dismisses the latter two forms because of this crud" (p. 95). Similarly, McCloud (1994) cautions readers about making generalizations concerning comic content as a whole (see *Figure 1*), stating, "The *trick* is to never mistake the *message*--- for the *messenger*" (p. 6, original emphasis). Although there is a large quantity of violent and highly sexualized superhero stories (though not reduced to "crud" for this reason), there are also a number of quality works that are either quite tame or do not emphasize this "undesirable" imagery and are extremely relevant to the in- and out-of-school lives of students.

**Support for Superhero Fiction.** Putting aside these reservations, mounting evidence has showcased the potential that superhero content has for engaging readers in self-reflection and critical social discussion, as well as its ability to cater to some

students' particular reading interests (Botzakis, 2013; Carter, 2007; Hall & Lucal, 1999; Martin, 2007; Parry, 2014; Rourke, 2010). While a small portion of this literature has focused specifically on literacy education, as a whole, the writing that has surfaced generates a strong argument for the implementation of superhero content.

Just as comic books and graphic novels have slowly garnered support across the curriculum, superhero content is also finding ways into in a wide range of subject areas or disciplines in education. Examples from science (Westrup, 2002), history (Aiken, 2010), sociology (Hall & Lucal, 1999), political science (Costello & Worcester, 2014), and



*Figure 1*. A page from Scott McCloud's (1994) *Understanding Comics*.

English or literacy education (Botzakis, 2013; Carter, 2007) have all emerged with evidence of the successful integration (or in recognition of the potential for successful integration) of superhero content.

These feelings are echoed in writing outside of education as well. Grant Morrison (2012), in his book *Supergods*, begins his 400-page journey through comic history by stating:

> superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations…the best superhero stories deal directly with mythic elements of human experience that we can all relate to, in ways that are imaginative, profound, funny, and provocative… At their best, they help us to confront and resolve even the deepest existential crises. (p. xvii)

Throughout the book, Morrison (2012) reflects on the influence that comics and superhero stories have had on his life – paying particular attention to their ability to shift with and comment on major personal, social, political, and historical changes and events.

White and Arp (2008) and Rosenberg (2008) also comment on the relatable characters superheroes embody in their dialogue on the parallels between the personal, philosophical and psychological struggles faced by superheroes and ordinary people. Issues relating to gender, identity, mental illness, motivation, conflict, and how humans interact with the world around them are all addressed in various capacities across a range of superhero stories (Rosenberg, 2008). Topics such as these are pertinent to lives of students and coincide with discussions that arise out of the traditional texts used in literacy classrooms. Although the deep connections between the personal lives of students and the lives of superheroes are important, superhero stories are also able to "bring us out of ourselves and connect us with something larger than ourselves, something more universal" (2008, p. 2).

Rourke (2010) asserts that an appreciation for reading is generated "through the introduction of timeless themes, heroic quests, engaging characters, and stories that resonate with both personal and universal relevance" (p. xi). Superhero fiction contains all the ingredients to this recipe for reading engagement, with the additional secret ingredient of being an unavoidable fixture in pop culture that students are regularly (whether out of interest or not) confronted with. If this is the case, then it would seem that

superhero fiction should play a fundamental role in helping to shape the reading habits of many young readers.

**Positioning the Researcher: The influence of fandom and other points**

Bold (2012) states, "As a researcher you must consider your influence on the research at all stages… it is essential that you acknowledge your subjective position and collect and analyze data with this position accounted for in discussion" (p. 54). Before venturing any further in this thesis I feel it is important to disclose my position within the topic.

I am a fan of comics and superheroes. I would not consider myself a super-fan – I do not collect comic book issues regularly every month, I have never attended a comic convention, and I have not read from a wide swath of genres or even titles within the superhero genre. However, I am certainly partial to the medium and the superhero genre, maintaining a small collection of comics (most of which are superhero fiction and still more are specifically Batman titles) and having watched many superhero movies and television shows. Just as most, if not all, research stems from a personal interest of some sort, I would not deny that my personal connection to comics and superheroes has fueled the pursuit of this topic.

I also appreciate how my position as a researcher working from a multiliteracies framework and aligning with social constructivist theories of gender (to be discussed further in the following chapter), influences my approach to the research and the writing in this thesis.

Recognizing my bias, I have strived to maintain a balanced approach throughout the research. In discussing comics and superheroes I have been sure to devote significant time to addressing the concerns and barriers to the integration of these texts in schools as well as the possible benefits. Similarly, I acknowledge and outline competing perspectives and theories relating to this study's focus on literacy, gender, and how these have come together in the current literacy discourse.

Finally, I am positioned in this research as a male student who has not always been excited about learning. Throughout most of my years in elementary and high school I was frustrated, bored and uninspired, but still did quite well. When I graduated in grade 8 I received an award for the most proficient student in language arts. In grade 10, I failed

the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test despite achieving above average grades in English. After graduating from high school I returned for an extra semester and peer-tutored a grade 9 English class where I discovered my love for teaching. I completed a four-year Honours degree in English in three years (including an Honours Thesis), continued on to complete a teaching degree, and now find myself at the end of a graduate degree.

The above is not intended as self-promotion, but to paint a picture of a male student who was *never* "at-risk," who (unbeknownst to him until his final year of high school) had a strong interest in English, who had the capacity to succeed, but who, by established literacy standards, was "failing" in literacy. It is also meant to highlight the drive and motivation to learn that I experienced once I had the freedom to explore learning on my own terms, in university and beyond.

This story is meant to act as a springboard into the questions and discussion of this thesis.

**Chapter 2**

**Theoretical Framework**

The presence and use of comics (and more rarely, superhero fiction) in schools has largely been attributed to its tangled relationship with boys' literacy initiatives. Up until the last decade, comics had been scarce in schools. However, as concerns for boys' literacy achievement have grown, these action-oriented and "simple" picture-based texts have been adopted in an attempt to increase engagement and reading interest among boys and struggling readers. Although helpful for becoming integrated in schools, this has limited potential users to those in "struggling" or "boy" groups and perpetuates the common, but misinformed perception that comics are simpler texts to read than other traditional English texts.

Before addressing the limitations imposed on comics in education, I must first dissect its relationship with boys' literacy. In order to do so, the chapter begins by outlining various perspectives on gender and masculinities, identifying this study's position as one that examines gender through a critical social constructivist lens and adopts socialist feminist views of masculinities. With a clear understanding of how boys' literacy issues will be taken up in this research, the chapter shifts focus to acknowledge the multiliteracies framework that supports more widespread implementation of comics and superhero fiction in schools based on their multimodal properties and relevance to students' lifeworlds.

**Gender and Masculinities – Framing the boys' literacy debate**

Throughout everyday life we encounter gender divisions that regulate what we do, how we act, how we look, and where we can go. Washrooms, clothing stores, sports teams, certain jobs, etc., are distinctly labeled and oriented according to dominant conceptions of gender and "appropriate" gender behaviour. This is true for education contexts as well, where explicit (washrooms, locker rooms, single-sex schools, dividing into boys and girls teams) and implicit divisions, expectations, or assumptions (about preferences or interests, subject-specific skills, content selection) define the boundaries of gender-specific behaviour.

Concerns surrounding boys' literacy achievement and the initiatives taken up to address these concerns have further perpetuated common gender-regulating practices or

assumptions surrounding literacy skills and reading preferences. Through consultation with theoretical work on gender and masculinities, I argue that broad essentialist approaches to gendered learning homogenize boys and girls into undifferentiated groups, failing to acknowledge the diversity of individuals within these groups. Furthermore, I draw attention to the social construction and performativity of gender and masculinities and how this shapes the way some students may take up and turn away from particular interests or practices based on social expectations.

**Understanding Gender.** Boundaries or expectations of gender have often been and continue to be linked to the body (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Connell 1995, 2009; Paechter, 2001). Connell (2009) explains that gender is frequently presented as, "the cultural difference of women from men, based on the biological division between male and female" (Connell, 2009, p. 9). While this understanding reflects a hegemonic ideology, the "hegemonic," as Connell (1996) emphasizes, is not a representation of the majority or of the truly dominant understanding. Rather, it is the culturally dominant, or socially empowered perspective (Butler 2004; Connell 1995, 1996). Thus, theories of sex difference or biological determinism and socialization of gender (common views in the public discourse), though not universally representative of the views and experiences of many individuals and groups, still remain most visible in mass media and popular culture and have the greatest influence on how gender is regulated in social structures and institutions. However, some branches of sociology and feminism have worked to emphasize more complex understandings of the socially constructed nature of gender and interrogate the social norms that restrict its expression.

*Biological Determinism.* From a biological determinist perspective, gender is simply the expression of innate, and strictly dichotomized, qualities, traits, or behaviours that result from the biological division of male and female (Connell, 1996, 2009; Henslin, 2014). In other words, the same genetic configurations that define our biological sex dictate natural maleness or femaleness. These notions have emerged out of Enlightenment thought from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where "parallel dualisms" outlined the strict differences between men and women, such as, "participation in civil society versus rootedness in hearth and home, hardness versus softness, activity versus passivity, reason versus emotion and transcendence versus embodiment" (Paechter, 2001, p. 48).

Paechter (2001) argues that these types of dualisms, "still underpin the way we perceive, act out and encourage the take-up of gender identities and roles" (p. 48). The essentialist mindset dominating gender reform in literacy education is exemplary of this thinking.

*The essentialist mindset and literacy initiatives.* The essentialist mindset holds that there are "*essential* and *natural* differences between boys and girls… that there is something fundamentally different about the way men and women think, feel and act" (Rowan et al., 2002, p. 29, original emphasis). Gurian and Stevens (2005) argue that this natural difference is "validated by scientific findings regarding fundamental differences in male and female hardwiring, biochemistry, neurological development, and anatomy of boys' and girls' brains" (p. 41). Biddulph (2014), a leader in essentialist thinking (alongside Gurian), also supports the essentialist mindset focusing on the influence that hormonal differences play in differentiating boys and girls, claiming testosterone dips and peaks are responsible for the highly active, dopey, and aggressive behaviours boys exhibit. Additionally, Biddulph (2014) suggests that there are, "three stages of boyhood [that] are timeless and universal" (p. 10) and that by following a prescribed "program" that caters to boys' needs, parents and teachers can ensure that boys grow up into happy, safe, motivated, and mature men (2014).

Generally speaking, these views follow the adage that "boys will be boys" and, conversely, "girls will be girls" (Epstein et al., 1998). Thus, the essentialist mindset establishes a distinct divide between boys and girls that dichotomizes and homogenizes development, behaviour, thinking, and preferences as uniquely male or female (Jones & Myhill, 2004; Kehler, 2010; Lingard et al., 2003; Martino, 2008b; Warrington & Younger, 2000). This essentialist ideology is unequivocally present in the direct boy-girl comparisons used to give context to the boys' literacy problem within "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004) and in *The ABC of Gender Equality in Education*, the recent report from the OECD (2015). Even more so, the firm boy-statements in "Me Read? NoWay!" (MOE, 2004) are representative of essentialist thinking as they uniformly describe boys' distinct interests and preferences, portray all boys as struggling literacy learners in a system that caters to girls' distinctly different literacy learning preferences.

Despite claims made within biological determinist and essentialist research, Paechter (2001) highlights that over a century's worth of extensive research on the topic

of sex-differences shows, "Sex differences, on almost every psychological trait measured [mental abilities, emotions, attitudes, personality traits, interests], are either non-existent or fairly small" (p. 21). Because of the unremarkable difference in these results, some suggest common differences between men and women that may seem "natural" are, in many cases, being actively produced and upheld by individuals as they navigate social interactions, institutions, and norms that are rooted in strictly dichotomized views of gender (Butler, 2004; Connell, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

*Social constructivist understandings of gender.* Modern branches of sociology and feminism put forward that gender is a socially constructed reality rather than an innate one (Connell, 1995, 1996, 2009; Henslin, 2014; Thorne, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Connell (1995) states, "gender is not fixed in advance of social interaction, but is constructed in interaction" (p. 35). Therefore, unlike biological determinist thinking, social constructivists understand that gender is not something we "are" or "have," rather it is something we "do" (Butler, 2004; Connell, 2009; Thorne, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The most popular social constructivist perspective on gender is *socialization* (Connell, 2009), where external influences (i.e. family, peers, school, mass media, etc.) are believed to direct (or socialize) children into gender roles by reinforcing social norms of gender behaviour that are rooted in sex differences (Connell, 2009; Henslin, 2014; Paechter, 2001). However, while the concept of socialization acknowledges and emphasizes the influential role that social structures and interactions have on gender, other social constructivist perspectives have critiqued its oversimplification of the process of gender construction (Connell, 2009; Paechter, 2001).

A primary point of contention arises out of the passivity associated with the role of the individual in shaping gender (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2009; Paechter, 2001). Connell (1995, 2009) argues that focusing on the passive acceptance of gender roles dismisses the active constructions of self that individuals constantly participate in during their everyday lives and interactions. To Butler (1990) and Connell (2009) constructions and performances of gender are fluid and constantly shifting as individuals move in, out, and between various social contexts, not static.

However, Butler (1993) does stress that the difference between biological determinism and social constructions of gender is not simply a dichotomy of "fixed" and "free," respectively. Although social construction, in most cases, emphasizes the agency of the individual in their expressions of gender, these expressions are often embodied according to constraints that social structures have placed on gender (Butler, 2004; Connell, 2009; Henslin, 2014). Limits are, "set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on *binary structures* that *appear* as the language of universal rationality" (Butler, 1990, p. 13, my emphasis). Having authority over cultural representations, the widespread dissemination of hegemonic conceptions of gender establish and perpetuate narrow considerations for what is "natural" or "normal" gender behaviour. To act outside of these boundaries suggests an "unnatural" way of being, or leads to individuals being labeled as "others" or "deviants" (Martino, 1999; Rowan et al., 2002; Thorne, 1993).

*Anti-essentialist mindsets*. Aligning with social constructivism, Rowan et al. (2002) explain that anti-essentialist mindsets "see differences in behaviour or interests displayed by some girls and some boys as being *produced* in particular social and cultural contexts, and not as natural" (p. 29, original emphasis). This leads to far more dynamic and complex understandings of the relationships between gender and literacy achievement that juxtapose the simple boy-girl dichotomy of essentialist reform in literacy education.

Although a range of nuanced anti-essentialist perspectives exist, Rowan et al. (2002) establish that they "are not mutually exclusive" (p. 36) and share the common emphasis on "the social production of gender differences" (p. 36). For this reason anti-essentialist mindsets are presented as a united front within this thesis. However, an implicit focus on what Rowan et al. (2002) call the "transformative mindset" emerges due to its relevance to the framework of this research. The transformative mindset focuses on understanding "*how* and *why* some gendered patterns of behaviour have come to be so powerful, while others have been marginalized" (2002, p. 46, original emphasis). Furthermore, it examines the structures and processes that shape and reinforce gender norms, challenging traditional views and creating news ways of thinking about gender and schooling for both boys and girls (2002).

Documents like "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004) and "Me Read? And How!" (MOE, 2009a) provide publicly accessible structures through which specific and narrow understandings of gendered behaviour are perpetuated as dominant or normative. Passed down from an authoritative body like the MOE, the matter-of-fact statements presented within these documents that claim to be based upon the "most important research" (MOE, 2004, p. 2) in boys' literacy create a sense of trust with the reader, ultimately allowing these particular views to be taken up and supported in public and education discourse. Working from an anti-essentialist perspective rooted in critical social constructivism, this research interrogates the taken for granted assumptions about gender, literacy skills, and learning preferences in essentialist literacy reform. Rather than accepting the homogenized view of boys as underachievers in literacy, this research questions other factors that may influence gender construction and literacy achievement, including social expectations for "normative" gender behaviour and its connections to school achievement.

**Masculinities or What It Means To Be A Man.** Alloway and Gilbert (1997) point out that the recent concerns surrounding boys' literacy are curious considering evidence has shown that boys have been achieving less well in language learning compared to girls for significantly longer than two decades (Cohen, 1998; Rowan et al., 2002). However, it is well documented that this piqued interest is linked to the emergence of the men's movement of the 1990's (Connell, 1996; Francis & Skelton, 2001; Lingard et al., 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Since that time there has been a push to better understand the intricacies of the complex relationship between boys, men, and education. Diverse perspectives that have come out of the men's movement each have "concerns over different aspects of gender politics and its impact on the well-being of boys and men" (Lingard et a., 2009). Because of this, these diverging understandings of masculinities have contributed to the ongoing debate surrounding boys' literacy achievement.

*Exploring the masculinities "terrain".* Over the last century, gender relations have shifted dramatically as a result of evolving social structures and the rise of feminist movements (Kimmel, 1987; Messner, 1997). While this social revolution has undoubtedly contributed to positive social outcomes, it has also, in some cases,

"prompted what we might call a *crisis of masculinity*, because the meanings that had constituted traditional gender definitions were challenged" (Kimmel, 1987, p. 262, my emphasis). Different groups of men have responded both supportively or in opposition to this "crisis of masculinity" and to various tenets of feminist ideology, creating a palpable tension in social discourses surrounding gender and social order. Definitions or expectations of masculinity, perceptions of the "natural" gender order, and stances on the social inequalities faced by men and women are all uniquely understood across a diverse landscape of masculinities perspectives.

Kimmel (1987) identifies three basic positions that men have taken in response to feminism. The first is an *antifeminist* response, which calls upon natural law and religious doctrine (in some cases) to relegate women to the home or domestic sphere and away from interfering with men's roles in the public sphere (1987). The second is a *masculinist* response, where men are not averse to women's equal participation in the public sphere, but oppose what has been seen as a feminization of social culture (1987). Finally, *profeminist* responses seek solutions that are structured around "embracing the feminist model of social reconstruction" (1987, p. 262), which strives for equality and autonomy for women and men in both public and private spheres.

Messner (1997) recognizes and addresses diverse perspectives within and between these three ideological positions that create a politics of masculinities "terrain" (1997, p. 11). This map of masculinities understands and locates various positions based on, "(a) men's institutionalized privileges, (b) the costs attached to adherence to narrow conceptions of masculinity, and (c) differences and inequalities among men" (1997, p. 12). Based on these three factors, Messner (1997) outlines eight "organized responses to crisis tendencies" (p. 11) as a guide through which to examine the different socio-political factors and emphases that come into play when navigating masculinities. These include: men's liberationists, men's rights advocates, radical feminist men, socialist feminist men, men of colour, gay male liberationists, Promise Keepers, and the mythopoetic men's movement.

There are certainly clear ties between Kimmel's (1987) three responses to feminism and Messner's (1997) masculinities terrain. In his detailing of the various organized responses, Messner (1997) highlights behaviours within the Promise Keepers

and mythopoetic movement that can be categorized as "masculinist" – as supporters grasp tightly to essential or natural masculinities and are weary of the feminization of men. Men's rights advocates clearly adopt an anti-feminist mentality, placing blame for men's hardships on women and developing "a more overt and angry antifeminist backlash" claiming feminism is, "a plot to cover up the reality that it is actually *women* who have the power and *men* who are most oppressed by current gender arrangements" (Messner, 1997, p. 41, my emphasis). Conversely, radical and socialist feminist men are unsurprisingly positioned within the profeminist response as they take up feminist ideology to address masculinities.

Of the eight organized responses Messner (1997) discusses, socialist feminism demonstrates, "the greatest potential among feminist discourses to develop a balanced understanding of the structural privileges, costs, and inequalities among men" (p. 60). Socialist feminist men uncover the ways in which certain groups of men have gained institutional privileges and the oppression or dominance inflicted on women by some men, but emphasize that this is only true of *certain* or *some* men (1997). Messner (1997) states, "socialist feminists were among the first to call for an examination of inequalities *among* men, rather than relying on a simplistic and falsely universalized definition of 'men' as an undifferentiated sex class" (p. 56, my emphasis). Because of the balanced approach I would situate myself somewhere in the realm of socialist feminism. Although Messner (1997) does indicate that contemporary feminist discourses (like multiracial feminism) have emerged from socialist feminism to strike an even clearer balance between the three mapping criteria, I believe that establishing a position *somewhere* within that balance, what Messner (1997) calls "the terrain of progressive coalition politics," is the best space to start formulating personal ideologies or worldviews.

   ***Masculinities politics in the boys' literacy debate.*** Concerns surrounding the state of boys' education have often arisen from masculinist discourses that call out the feminization of education, and particularly literacy education, as the reason for boys' poor performance in school (Epstein et al., 1998; Lingard, 2003; Rowan et al., 2002; Watson, 2011; Watson et al., 2010). Epstein et al. (1998) highlight that in these discourses boys' struggles or failures are often attributed to limiting external factors, such as "failures of pedagogies, methods, texts and/or teachers" (p. 4). Essentialist literacy reforms, which

focus on introducing more boy-friendly curriculum and increasing the presence of male teachers to support boys' literacy learning, clearly develop from this line of thinking. Emerging from essentialist reform, "Me Read? No Way!" also draws on this masculinist discourse, as the premise of the document is to outline strategies for catering to boys' distinct learning skills and preferences in order to balance the "girl-friendly" environment of literacy classrooms and improve boys' literacy achievement.

Unfortunately, these masculinist (and even at times, anti-feminist) discourses fail to consider the broad scope of issues permeating literacy achievement. Socialist feminist views, on the other hand, disrupt essentialist thinking by discounting attempts to homogenize boys and men in an undifferentiated group. Additionally, by maintaining a profeminist response, socialist feminist perspectives avoid reinstating male privilege by focusing on equality, considering the needs of both the boys and girls and providing necessary support.

*Multiple and performed masculinities.* Messner (1997) notes that the balanced terrain of socialist feminist views creates a complex web of beliefs that can be difficult to navigate, communicate, and act upon. As a result of this ambiguity, I call upon Connell's (1995, 1996, 2009) work, as a leading scholar in masculinities and gender, to help construct the masculinities framework this research is guided by.

In particular, I am drawn to Connell's (1995, 1996, 2009) emphasis on the concept of *multiple masculinities*. This multiplicity is not only evident across cultural boundaries but within these boundaries as well, influenced by differences in class, race, sexuality, etc. (1996, 2009). On its own, this is not a very groundbreaking statement – it is somewhat of a superficial observation. However, Connell (1995) asserts, "To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We have to examine the relations between them. Further, we have to unpack the milieux of class and race [and sexuality] and scrutinize the gender relations operating within them" (p. 76). This is essential, as hegemonic (or culturally dominant and pervasive) views privilege a certain type of masculinity – one based on rugged, unemotional, white, heterosexual males of middle to high socio-economic status – thus creating a hierarchy of masculinities (1995, 1996).

The narrow scope of masculinity presented by hegemonic views and the reality that multiple and different masculinities exist outside of these views gives rise to a

tension that initiates a need for further exploration into the negotiation of masculinities. In Connell's (1995, 1996, 2009) work this seems to be taken up in discussions of the active role of the individual in constructing their gender or masculinities. Connell (1996) argues that masculinities "come into existence as people act… as configurations of social practice" (p. 210). Therefore, through both solitary and social actions or interactions a person creates and shapes masculinities – masculinities that are relevant or fit the particular socio-cultural contexts they participate in. Because of this active construction, masculinities are always changing or dynamic, rather than static (1996). Similarly, Connell (1996) explains that masculinities are often layered insofar as individuals, whether actively or subconsciously, enact masculinities in order to smoothly navigate between contexts or conceal parts of their identity.

This network of actively constructed, multiple masculinities is, I believe, a necessary framework through which to address the oversimplified, yet hyperbolic, concerns about boys' performance as literacy learners. With a focus on the use of superhero fiction in English classrooms, the boy focus is compounded by common perceptions about the gendered nature of the genre. Approaching these issues from socialist feminist understandings of masculinities and with a critical social constructivist view of gender will help to deconstruct the discourses that may be both limiting students achievement in literacy or English class and creating barriers for the use of superhero fiction in a variety of education settings.

**A Multiliteracies Framework**

The panic surrounding boys' literacy has emerged out of gaps in achievement statistics based on large-scale, standardized testing results. This testing is rooted in narrow views of "literacy" that prioritize the basic skills of reading and writing comprehension and textual analysis. Although these skills are important to the literacy repertoire of students', new conceptions of "literacy" and being "literate" stretch far beyond the basics of traditional print literacy (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000c; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Lankshear, Gee, Knobel, & Searle, 1997). The boy crisis has also been constructed from decontextualized data that focuses solely on gendered achievement. This has narrowed the scope of action for improvement to quick-fix, boy-centered solutions rather than considering pedagogical reform that benefits all students,

including boys, girls, students of various academic levels, and students with diverse ethnic, raced, and classed backgrounds.

Adopting a multiliteracies framework, I argue for adopting a broader definition of literacy that is more representative of the everyday literacy practices students encounter in their diverse lives outside of schools. This includes acknowledging the inherently multimodal nature of everyday life and implementing literacy texts, such as comics, that reflect these multisensory experiences. Furthermore, I argue that multiliteracies pedagogy, as a comprehensive, critical, and student-centered pedagogy, best reflects the type of action that is needed in literacy classrooms to improve students' engagement with and interest in literacy learning.

**Redefining Literacy.** For many years, the three "r"s – reading, writing, and arithmetic – formed the "basics" of education (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). The first two "r"s, now encompassed in what we call "literacy," focused on "elementary phonics to translate the sounds of speech into the symbolic images of writing, and reading as a process of decoding the meanings of written words" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 3). However, due to changes in the way we communicate and interact in contemporary society, it is recognized that these specific approaches to literacy, on their own, fail to provide students with a comprehensive literacy education for the twenty-first century (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000c; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Lankshear et al., 1997). While the "basics" of reading and writing are still vital skills for adept, language learning, Kalantzis and Cope (2012) emphasize that new conceptions of literacy must "capture a broader understanding of communication and a more active approach to learning" (p. 4).

Accounting for this, Luke and Freebody (2000) define literacy as, "the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken, print, and multimedia" (as cited in Anstey & Bull, 2006, p. 19). In simpler terms, they suggest literacy involves developing a strong and diverse set of skills that allow a person to understand, create, and express knowledge and meaning across a variety of communication forms and contexts. Although this definition provides a concise, contemporary perspective on literacy, its brevity allows it only to allude to the skills required of literate subjects and very generally address the

variety of texts through which these skills can be applied (Anstey & Bull, 2006). Extended conversations surrounding the specifics of what "literacy" includes and why a more fluid understanding of the concept is necessary have been ongoing since the late-1990's, but have been and continue to be cogently expressed through the work of multiliteracies scholars.

**Multiliteracies – The influence of social diversity and multimodality on literacy learning.** The New London Group's (1996) article "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies," has helped initiate widespread discussion about the changing communication landscape and its influence on redefining literacy and reshaping literacy pedagogy. They begin by establishing the position that the general purpose of education is, "to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life" (1996, p. 60). As a fundamental part of this agenda, the New London Group (1996) suggests that literacy education must therefore be redefined or redesigned to better represent the different types of meaning-making and forms of communication people engage with in these contexts. They identify two primary shifts in the socio-cultural sphere that trigger these necessary changes. First, they argue that literacy pedagogy must "account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies… for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts" (1996, p. 61) – summarized as *social diversity* (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). Second, they emphasize that literacy must also "account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" (New London Group, 1996, p. 61) – what they classify as *multimodality* (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012).

Through this bifocal lens of social diversity and multimodality, literacy is no longer viewed as a uniform set of skills based purely on proficiency in reading and writing printed text. Instead, a more comprehensive view is presented that acknowledges the potential for learners to be skilled in many different types of literacies for different contexts – what the New London Group (1996) coined, *multiliteracies*.

*Social Diversity.* Our current social worlds – work, public, and private spheres – have been and continue to be deeply influenced by increased local diversity and global connectedness. Migration and multiculturalism, advanced communication technologies,

and globally integrated economies have all contributed to a new and evolving social tapestry (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000b, 2009; New London Group, 1996). Amidst this localized yet widespread diversity, Cope and Kalantzis (2009) believe,

> The kind of person who can live well in this world is someone who has acquired the capacity to navigate from one domain of social activity to another, who is resilient in their capacity to articulate and enact their own identities and who can find ways of entering into dialogue with and learning new and unfamiliar social languages. (p. 173-74)

Education, as the primer for participation in life outside of school, is therefore responsible for providing ample learning opportunities that will help students prepare for these complex and varied social interactions. In order for this to occur, pedagogical strategies must be adapted to reflect the changes in society that determine the social diversity students will encounter in their lives both in and out of school.

While connections between education and the workplace, or students' future careers, are often at the forefront for contextualizing learning, multiliteracies also acknowledges the equally important relationship between education and general participation in public and private aspects of everyday life (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000c; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Mills, 2009; New London Group, 1996). The framework for this thesis focuses tightly on the importance of recognizing these diverse, personal experiences or the lifeworlds students engage in outside of school to consider how they can and should contribute to learning inside schools. This involves recognizing the broad scope of texts and meaning students seek out or confront in these spaces, including pop culture texts like comics and superheroes.

Each student brings to school the knowledge and experiences of their unique *lifeworlds* – their everyday lives and experiences (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000a; Gee, 2000) – which shape "What they know, who they feel themselves to be, and how they orient themselves to education" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000b, p. 121). The lifeworld experiences accumulated through exploration and interaction in social and cultural environments form students' initial and continued understanding about the world around them and themselves (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000a; Freire, 1987; Kalantzis, 2012). Students draw from this repertoire of knowledge, language, and skills from their lifeworld experiences in

order to gain understanding in other school and "real world" contexts – the repertoire creating reference points that contextualize and clarify unfamiliar domains (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Freire, 1987; Kalantzis & Cope, 2000b). Thus, failure to engage with students' lifeworlds or personal contexts limits the means by which many students can access their learning or successfully familiarize themselves with school discourses (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000b).

Both Gee (2000) and Freire (1987, 2013) stress the importance of relatable contextual connections for developing a person's understanding about new and unfamiliar meanings, as well as for creating new personalized meaning. According to Freire (1987), meaningful literacy learning is rooted in a world-word approach that moves from the familiar world, or "word universe" (1987, p. 34), of the learner to the new or foreign contexts of school literacies. However, Gee (2000) argues that school-based language, "is rendered meaningful not by the contexts in which it is used, nor the basis of shared experiences, but solely on the basis of what the words and sentences uttered or written literally mean" (p. 63). Similarly, "knowledge" and what counts as being "right" or "good" or "important" is often declared on school terms or based on school contexts, rather than being open to the interpretation of individual, contextualized perspectives. Therefore, while the learning *is* contextualized within the narrow parameters of dominant language and culture, and school ideologies, there is a contextual disconnect for anyone or any space that exists outside of these cultural and linguistic boundaries.

By separating important aspects of who students are, where they come from, and what they already know, from what goes on at school, students' lives and identities can easily become devalued in education. On a regular basis, the trivialization and neglect of students' lifeworlds and identities are expressed through the dominance of depersonalized, formal writing and strict adherence to the literary canon or teacher-selected texts. Both of these examples imply that what students can bring to these learning experiences (personal thoughts or connections, the discourses or dialects of their lifeworlds, the texts they spend time reading or viewing outside of school) is not important enough to be considered.

Until recently, comics were a part of this neglected culture and even now remain relatively limited in terms of the opportunities that are created for students to engage with

these texts in English classrooms. Despite comics' growing acceptance in schools, superhero fiction is still situated outside of what qualifies as legitimate literary or educational material. This is counter-productive as pop culture saturates students' lives outside of school (Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011; Wright & Sherman, 2006) and comics are "part of that cultural heritage" (Wright & Sherman, 2006). As Wright and Sherman (2006) state, "Comic characters such as Popeye, Superman, Batman, Peanuts, and Garfield have become American icons… These characters inhabit bookstores, toy stores, advertisements, television and the cinema" (p. 165). With such a pervasive presence in the social world and considering education's role to prepare students for life after or outside of school, it only seems natural to bring comics and superheroes into classrooms to help students navigate the meanings these familiar texts and characters present.

*Multimodality.* Amidst discussions about the increased diversity and transformation of social worlds, multiliteracies scholars recognize a corresponding shift in the diversified ways meaning is conveyed (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000b, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Mills, 2009; New London Group, 1996). New technologies, agency and autonomy, and the intensification of consumer culture have all contributed to an expanded media landscape, where oral and written language (historically, our dominant forms of meaning-making) comprise only one part of a complex web of multimodal meanings across different media (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; New London Group, 1996).

*Multimodality* refers to the combination of various modes, or representations of meaning, within different forms of communication (texts or media) (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Kress, 2000b, 2004; New London Group, 1996). This includes any amalgamation of written, oral, visual, audio, tactile, gestural, and/or spatial representations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Mills, 2009). Although these different modes can be separated from one another and individually labeled, multiliteracies argues that all meaning-making is, in fact, multimodal (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Kress, 2000b; New London Group, 1996).

For example, oral meanings (such as giving a speech) must be intricately connected to characteristics of audio meanings (like pacing and intonation) (Cope &

Kalantzis, 2009). Because different modes are closely and often inter-related, meaning that is represented in one mode can often be re-presented in another, in what is called *synaesthesia* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Kress, 2000a). An example of this might involve someone writing a description of what a particular house looks like (written meaning) and then drawing the same house (visual meaning). However, Cope and Kalantzis (2009) point out that, "Meaning expressed in one mode cannot be directly and completely translated into another" (p. 180) – any transfer of meaning will be influenced by the strengths or weakness of a mode to express particular aspects of the meaning.

Understanding how these multiple and interconnected modes function is essential for two primary reasons. First, as multisensory beings, our daily interactions with the world are inherently multimodal (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kress, 2000b; Mills, 2009). Just as different modes are closely linked and even overlapping, Kress (2000b) explains that, "none of our senses ever operates in isolation from the others" (p. 184). To orient, enjoy, or make meaning from some of the most basic experiences (e.g. walking down the street), we rely on the coordination of multiple sensory inputs.

Second, new media that pervade public and private social spheres (e.g. television, Internet, advertisements, video games, etc.) are increasingly multimodal. Kalantzis and Cope (2000b) state that, "Whole worlds of meaning are conjured up in a few moments of image plus music plus gesture plus tone of voice" (p. 145). The concentrated meanings of these multimodal representations aim to excite the senses and seize the ephemeral attention and interests of now more active users and discerning consumers of media. In order to understand and filter content, there must be a strong sense of how these modes work simultaneously to create meaning.

Despite the multimodal realities of our sensorial and social exchanges, Western culture has continued to prioritize written and oral language in literacy education (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Kress, 2000a, 2004). Other modes of meaning, such as visual, audio, and gestural, are then broken into separate subjects (i.e. art, music, and drama, respectively) and made distinct from literacy (i.e. English) and each other (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). However, Kalantzis and Cope (2012) point out that even in this separation, different modes of meaning still intermingle across the school curriculum in

the words and diagrams of science reports, or in the photos and oral interview recordings
of a history project, for example. Thus, Kress (2000a) asserts, "if language is no longer
the only or even the central semiotic mode, then theories of language can at best offer an
explanation for one part of the communicational landscape only" (p. 153).

While traditional print literacy is certainly an important part of learning, it "needs
to be balanced by something more compatible with our visual culture" (Blanch &
Mulvihill, 2013, p. 37). Comics invite students to engage in multisensory literacy
practices that mirror the information gathering and processing that they take on in
everyday life (Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013; Jacobs, 2007; Leber-Cook & Cook, 2013). With
multiple entry points (or modes) for accessing meaning, students use their strengths (or
familiarity) with certain literacies to support personal weaknesses and aid in the decoding
or comprehension of new or unknown meanings (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Freire, 1987,
2013; Giroux & Freire, 1989). When engaged in a multimodal experience, students take
an active role in working through literacy barriers rather than being excluded from
learning opportunities altogether because of a lack of proficiency in one mode of
meaning-making or literacy skill.

**Multiliteracies pedagogy – Toward more inclusive and meaningful learning.**
With evidence suggesting that social factors outside of gender have a greater influence on
literacy achievement (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Martino, 2008a; Warrington & Younger,
2000; Watson, 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2003) and that gaps within gender groups are
greater than those between gender groups (MOE, 2004), gender reform initiatives to
improve boys' underachievement in literacy have little to no efficacy. In fact, Martino
and Kehler (2007) explain that by avoiding critical discussions about the influence of
gender constructions on literacy learning, implementing these boy-centered strategies can
simply lead to "dumbing-down the curriculum for boys rather than helping them to
develop important skills and capacities" (p. 419). Instead, a more holistic and critical
pedagogical reform is necessary in order to more deeply and effectively address issues in
literacy education, including those surrounding gender (Lingard et al.; Martino, 2008a;
Rowan et al., 2002).

***Multiliteracies pedagogy – An Overview.*** Multiliteracies pedagogy follows a four-
dimensional approach to literacy education. Originally described as *Situated Practice*,

*Overt Instruction*, *Critical Framing*, and *Transformed Practice* (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000a; New London Group, 1996), the four dimensions have been more recently renamed: *Experiencing*, *Conceptualizing*, *Analyzing*, and *Applying* (respectively)(Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). Generally speaking, the anticipated outcomes are relatively interchangeable across each pair of terms. However, along with being renamed, these pedagogical approaches have also been reframed as "knowledge processes" to shift how these practices are understood or applied in various education contexts (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012).

Kalantzis and Cope (2012) identify that reinventing multiliteracies pedagogy as a group of knowledge processes helps to "shift the emphasis of pedagogy away from the stuff that happens to have found its way into children's heads – their thinking and understanding – to epistemology, or the things they are able to *do* in the world in order to know" (p. 356, my emphasis). Explicitly acknowledging this active approach to learning is congruent with the multiliteracies focus on Design, where students gather meaning in various representational forms (Available Designs) and transform these representations (Designing) to create new meaning (Redeisgned) (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000a, 2009; New London Group, 1996; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). It positions the student at the center of their learning, drawing on their individual experiences and knowledge to build new meaning for their current and future lives outside of school. Multiliteracies scholars believe that the internal (re-negotiation of identities and understandings of the world and its meanings) and external (a design's unique contribution to the world) transformations that occur during the process of design form "the essence of learning" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 177).

Kalantzis and Cope (2012) also note that rooting multiliteracies pedagogy in these knowledge processes may provide "teachers and learners with more control over the relationship of their instructional choices and their learning outcomes" (p. 357). The broadened, yet more specific model involves paired sub-divisions that distinguish different practices within each process, providing more direct guidance on how these processes can be applied or enacted in classrooms. This caters to teachers' need for practical and accessible pedagogical strategies (Martino, 2008a; Rowan et al., 2002; Watson et al., 2010; Weaver-Hightower, 2003) without resorting to quick fix, or one-size-

fits-all solutions. Additionally, the use of terminology that is based on familiar language from education contexts reduces barriers to accessing and translating these approaches into teaching and learning goals (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012).

*Experiencing.* Experiencing acknowledges that all meaning is situated and contextual, that it is constructed from and amidst human interactions, textual encounters, and real world experiences (Gee, 2000; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). It is a deeply subjective and personalized process. Experiencing *the known*, involves learners "reflecting on [their] own experiences, interests, perspectives, familiar forms of expression and ways of representing the world… learners bring their own, invariably diverse knowledge, experiences, interests and life-texts to the learning situation" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 185). Unequivocally, experiencing *the new* involves learners encountering unfamiliar texts, information, or situations through which they navigate and create meanings (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012).

*Conceptualizing.* Conceptualizing involves building, "specialized, disciplinary and deep knowledges based on the finely tuned distinctions of concept and theory typical of those developed by expert communities" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 185). Learners can conceptualize *by naming*, whereby they group, categorize, and classify information based on terms they define or concepts they generate (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Conceptualizing *with theory* encourages learners to distinguish between and connect different concepts in order to develop generalizations or patterns into theories (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012).

*Analyzing.* Analyzing or being analytical, "can mean two things in a pedagogical context – it can describe analyzing functions or being evaluative with respect to relationships of power" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 359). Analyzing *functionally* requires learners to make connections within the text, noting patterns and making inferences or drawing conclusions from information they encounter (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). There is a focus on the structural and functional components of the text and how it works. Analyzing *critically* calls attention to the construction and presentation of meanings. More specifically, critically analyzing encourages the interrogation of meaning, contexts, and perspectives in order to uncover power relationships and privileged or silenced voices within a text, as well as the motives

of the meaning-makers (Cazden, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2000a). It also encourages learners to be introspective in order to reflect upon and challenge their own processes of thinking, conceptualizing, communicating, and meaning-making (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2000a, 2012).

*Applying*. Applying focuses on how learners translate or transfer their knowledge to the real world or new contexts (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2000a; Gee, 2000). Applying *appropriately* refers to the process of testing or communicating knowledge in and for specific authentic or simulated real world situations, "to see whether it works in a predictable way in a conventional context" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 357). Applying *creatively* focuses more on the personal interests and experiences of the learner, whereby their original ideas or constructed knowledge "expresses or affects the world in a new way" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 186). This includes experimentally transferring their developed knowledge from one context to another to create new meanings or perspectives for that context.

*Implementing multiliteracies pedagogy.* Despite being presented in what could be taken as a logical sequence of pedagogical strategies, multiliteracies pedagogy is not intended as a sequential model (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000a, 2012). Similarly, a balance does not need to be struck in the time devoted to each process (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). Rather, Kalantzis and Cope (2012) affirm that, "The knowledge processes require instead that teachers reflect purposefully on the mix and ordering of the epistemic moves they make in their classrooms and are able to justify their pedagogical choices on the basis of learning goals and outcomes" (p. 358). Through this diverse and dynamic approach of multiliteracies pedagogy, teachers are prompted to actively consider the ways they are teaching and the types of learning their students have or have not been asked to employ. It also seeks to afford *all* learners, regardless of gender or any other social grouping, more opportunities for active, diverse, critical and meaningful learning experiences that call upon and contribute to their lives both in and out of school. This undoubtedly provides better opportunities for fostering student engagement and interest in literacy learning than the decontextualized, highly scripted and rigid programs of traditional literacy teaching.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have outlined the two major components of my theoretical framework, beginning, as this research problem does, with conceptions of gender and learning, and moving toward a more comprehensive lens through which to address pedagogical reform. In taking up gender and masculinities as socially constructed realities, I acknowledge the active role individuals have in shaping how they perform or present gender, specifically how boys perform masculinities as per "norms" of masculine behaviour. This deeply impacts how patterns in boys' literacy achievement can be viewed and changes the approach of improvement efforts addressing boys' literacy from one that reinforces hegemonic masculine behaviour to one that challenges essentialist notions of masculinity and focuses on which students truly need support. Understanding that many students within *and* outside of the stereotypically defined "boy" group still need help, I adopt a multiliteracies framework to explain how pedagogical reform that reflects the world experiences students currently face and will encounter in the future, better prepares all students for active participation in life outside of school. Selectively emphasizing lifeworld experiences and the importance of multimodality, I consider how these factors strongly support the introduction or more meaningful integration of comics and superhero fiction in literacy classrooms.

## Chapter 3

## Review of the Literature

Boys' literacy achievement has remained at the fore of literacy discourse for the better part of two decades. Regular media hype about consistent gaps between boys and girls in provincial and international, standardized testing has created panic about boys' perceived disadvantage in literacy education (Kehler, 2010; Lingard, 2003; Lingard et al., 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Amidst this "boy crisis," gender reforms aimed at improving literacy education for boys have perpetuated an essentialist mindset that homogenizes boys' distinct learning skills and preferences (Kehler, 2010; Lingard et al., 2003; Martino, 2008b; Warrington & Younger, 2000). Within these reform efforts, comics have been a popular resource for engaging boys in literacy learning (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Bodkin, et al., 2009; MOE, 2004, 2009a). While this has helped comics establish a presence in schools, the strict boy-girl dichotomy of essentialist reform prescribes comics as texts to help boys, thus limiting the scope of students engaging with these texts.

This study is rooted in the expanding field of literature that addresses the multifaceted topic of literacy learning. Within this field, much has been and continues to be written on literacy achievement (including the boys' literacy debate), literacy pedagogy, and more recently, the importance of drawing from students' lives for contextually relevant situated learning. However, the literature addressing the use of comics and (especially) superheroes in literacy education is relatively limited. This thesis aims to contribute to the broad field of literature on literacy learning, by shedding new light on boys' literacy issues, while focusing on adding further depth to the scarce literature on comics and superhero fiction use in English classrooms.

This literature review will begin by engaging with studies that take up the issue of boys' literacy, moving on to examine findings about the integration of student interests in education, with a specific focus on comics and superhero fiction. Exploring this literature will help build the foundation on which this topic rests, while exposing gaps this thesis aims to fill.

**Boys' Literacy and the Root of Underachievement**

Provincial and international statistics on literacy achievement have consistently shown that boys perform less well than girls in reading and writing (EQAO, 2013a, 2013b; OECD, 2014; Thompson et al., 2012; UNESCO, 2006). This has led to an internationally-recognized "boy crisis" discourse in literacy – a concern so strong that the MOE (2009b) labeled boys as "at risk" alongside Aboriginal students, students from low-income families, students with special education needs, and recent immigrants. Initiatives introduced to narrow these gaps between boys and girls have focused solely on improving boys' literacy achievement through essentialist strategies that attempt to address boys as an undifferentiated group of underachievers. The MOE (2004) document "Me Read? No Way!" is one of these initiatives, outlining boy-friendly strategies for teachers to implement in their classrooms that cater to the distinct interests and learning skills of boys. As part of the backbone of evidence used to make claims in "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004), Smith and Wilhelm's study on boys and literacy seems like a pertinent place to begin this literature review.

In their book, *"Reading Don't Fix No Chevys" Literacy in the lives of young men*, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) document the results of their study that aims "to take a close look at a wide variety of adolescent boys, to observe and talk with them about their literate activity in and outside of school… to understand them personally, to understand their literate behaviours" (p. xx), with the ultimate goal of understanding how to improve teaching strategies to better educate these boys. For their study, 49 boys "who differed from each other on a variety of dimensions: race, class, school experience and achievement, and linguistic background" (p. xx) were selected to participate. According to Smith and Wilhelm (2002), selecting this diverse group of participants has two purposes. First, they argue that comparing a diverse group of boys is more conducive to thinking about accurate generalizations about boys (if these are possible) than comparing boys to girls. Second, they believe that the diversity also opens up conversations about how other issues outside of gender "might be more important categories for teachers to consider" (p. xxi).

This is an appreciable methodological justification. In their review of the concerns surrounding boys' literacy, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) outline a long list of generalizations about boys' preferences and boy-girl comparisons surrounding literacy

practices and achievement that have been documented in other research. Several of these statements are reproduced in "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004) to highlight reasons for focusing on improving boys' literacy experiences and catering to boys' needs. However, while Smith and Wilhelm (2002) acknowledge these findings may help as a starting point for addressing boys' literacy concerns, they very quickly put out a disclaimer that they, "worry that the tendency to compare boys and girls means the pitting of one gender against the other" (p. 12). This competitive, antagonistic relationship has been the concern of several scholars addressing the gendered focus of literacy achievement (Jones & Myhill, 2004; Keddie, 2010; Rowan et al., 2002; Watson et al., 2010). Additionally, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) outline that, unfortunately, "teachers have been shown to use this research in ways that emphasize traditional socially constructed notions of maleness and to reinforce boys' current general tendencies rather than expand on or redefine them" (p. 12). This is how the information has been translated into "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004) and the strategies it outlines for teachers. Taken out of context, these statements provide the matter-of-fact evidence for quick-fix solutions like those the MOE (2004) has tried to employ, but as Smith and Wilhelm (2002) make note of in their findings, such broad generalizations overlook the diverse and outlying perspectives and interests of many boys.

In their findings, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) *do* generalize about the boys in their study though, based on recurring themes across their participants' responses. Identifying their own themes and building from Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of "flow" (which focuses on happiness and the deep or intense involvement with and enjoyment from doing an activity), Smith and Wilhelm (2002) highlight several commonalities that surface across the boys' responses. For the boys in this study, there was a general sense that enjoyment in doing something came from being able to do it well to a certain degree (competence) and, conversely, not feeling competent in a particular area deterred them from pursuing both old and new activities. However, many participants also talked about enjoying a level of challenge when engaged in an activity – if something was too easy it became boring, but too difficult an activity would turn them off (2002). Also important to these boys was engaging with personally relevant material and having choice (control) in

making decisions about their learning (2002). Finally, these boys placed significant weight on the social aspects of their lives (2002).

What is interesting about these general themes is that there is no indication that these are gendered views or traits. As Smith and Wilhelm (2002) point out, "flow" is not a gender-biased concept and since much of what these boys discuss aligns with that concept, these findings suggest that all students could benefit from challenging work that caters to their diverse (not polar or divergent) strengths and interests. This is not surprising when scholars like Freire (1987, 2013) and Kalantzis and Cope (2000b, 2012) have noted that meaningful learning starts from where the student is at, or experiencing the known, and works towards more challenging or foreign meanings.

Literacy-specific findings revealed that while most of the boys found little to no enjoyment in schooling, many of them shared an understanding of the importance of school and reading for future success in life – they "clearly valued school in a profound way. And they valued reading as well" (2002, p. 66). However, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) point out the discouraging finding that the boys' discussion of school and reading is, "almost entirely future-directed. The pleasure of learning and the pleasure of reading were not something they focused on" (p. 66). Thus, it is easy to see how students can become disconnected from the impersonal and unexciting daily grind of school regardless of their recognition that school *is* important for some aspects of future success.

Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) study is profound in the way it acknowledges that the most generalizable characteristics of boys and their learning could be applicable to girls as well. At several points in their book, they object to erecting barriers between boys and girls and their preferences, and argue that boy-girl comparisons are unproductive for looking into gender-specific issues. However, they are also hesitant to take up issues surrounding the boy-girl dichotomy and to address the deeper, potentially universal benefits that emerge from findings in this study. In their concluding chapter, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) suggest that their findings "give us a place to start in thinking about how to do a better job of teaching boys (*and maybe girls as well*) (p. 184, my emphasis). Understanding that they did not study any girls and therefore may be tentative to make claims about their learning preferences, their work can still be critiqued for passively allowing undertones of gendered literacy discourse to pass through their work without

being critically examined. This lack of critical discussion is also evident in the way Smith and Wilhelm (2002) address the performance of participants' masculinities and the "other issues" outside of gender that influence literacy achievement that they allude to at the beginning of their study.

Consideration of performances of masculinity arise when Smith and Wilhelm (2002) question, "whether the boys would speak differently [about a boy from one of the student profiles] to their friends" and that they, "thought hard about whether the boys were masking their feelings and telling [them] something socially acceptable" (2002, p. 77). Many of the boys, amongst praise for his dedication, criticized one boy in a student profile for being relatively anti-social as a result of his avid reading habits and interest in school – one boy even suggesting that "'He's gay'" (2002, p. 77). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) consult work by Martino (1998) in recognition and affirmation of their own experiences teaching in high schools with students who use homophobic slurs to criticize less "macho" boys (2002). However, they are quick to dismiss or justify the boys' responses, indicating that any criticism was directed at anti-social and "schoolish" behaviour, rather than expressing views that reading and schooling is feminine or "'sissy' stuff" (2002, p. 78). Although this is true and relates to the level of importance boys' placed on their social lives, it does not call attention to the ways these boys' attitudes establish norms or expectations for behaviour.

It also overlooks the complex negotiation some boys (and girls) face when participating in social circles. One of the boys from Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) study talks about how part of his social life includes playing video games with his friends. He admits he is not very good at them, saying, "'they always make fun of me when I play it but I just… it's funny trying to do good'" (p. 43). The boy dismisses the situation as humorous and Smith and Wilhelm (2002) highlight it as outlying or inconsistent behaviour, where a boy is still interested in something despite a lack of competence. However, they fail to confront the pressures this boy may face in choosing a lesser of two evils – play video games poorly, be made fun of, but stay connected to a social group, or risk alienation and more severe scrutiny by not participating at all. Justifying the participants' attitudes toward the boy in the profile also fails to interrogate why "schoolish" behaviour is worthy of criticism. As some scholars have suggested, simply

doing well in school has been labeled as "un-masculine" behaviour in some circles (Mac an Ghaill, 2000; Martino, 1999). Therefore, critiques of explicitly stated "feminine" behaviour must not be the only factor considered when questioning the performance or reinforcement of hegemonic masculinities among boys.

As mentioned, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) also skirt around the "other issues" influencing literacy achievement, such as race, ethnicity, and social class. Race is wrapped up in a discussion about maintaining an interest in learning, rather than a critical examination of the unique obstacles that some students from racially diverse backgrounds may face. Similarly, the commentary on social class revolves around participants' admiration for a student in a profile who has to work to help support his family financially, and participants' advice for this student to continue to focus on his schooling. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) seem to allow the intricacies of racial and socio-economic barriers in these scenarios to be pushed aside by their focus on students' interest in schooling and the lack of emphasis the boys' explicitly place on these barriers.

Although Smith and Wilhelm (2002) raise some important questions about boys' motivation or their relationship with reading, they confront but then largely dismiss investigations into issues of race, social class, or the negotiation of gender and identity. These "other issues" play a significant role in interrupting public discourse that has latched on to oversimplified views of "boys" as disadvantaged, underachievers who need help – something that Smith and Wilhelm (2002) appear to have concerns about. Furthermore, by focusing on boys without critically considering the implications their study may (and likely, will) have for girls as well, allows findings in this study to be easily misconstrued or misinterpreted to support essentialist efforts like "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004).

Sokal et al. (2005), like Smith and Wilhelm (2002), also explore boys' motivation in reading and experiences with literacy to gain insight into claims about boys' disadvantage in literacy classrooms. Studying 69, grade 2 boys, Sokal et al. (2005) used self-reporting surveys and a 10-week, reading group intervention to examine boys' intrinsic motivation toward reading, their interest in and attitude toward reading, and their views of reading as a feminine activity. Intervention groups gathered once a week to read a book and were organized into the following groups: a male reader with a boy-friendly

book, a female reader with a typical book, a male reader with a typical book, and a female reader with a boy-friendly book.

Contrary to beliefs about the "boy crisis" in literacy discourse, Sokal et al. (2005) highlight findings that a large percentage of boys indicated a positive intrinsic motivation to reading (nearly 80 percent). Additionally, they note in their preliminary findings that lower interest in reading correlated with boys from low-income families, suggesting that socio-economic status is a considerable obstacle in the development of literacy skills (2005). This is a popular finding that has been emphasized by a number of scholars (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Martino, 2008a; Warrington & Younger, 2000; Watson, 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2003) who emphasize that not *all* boys, rather certain groups of boys or individuals are at risk of low literacy achievement. However, this widely recognized and influential factor remains sidelined by initiatives that focus on boys' distinct and disadvantaged interests.

Of particular interest to Sokal et al. (2005) was finding out boys' stance on reading as a feminine activity. Although a larger portion of the participants did not indicate that reading was a feminine activity, nearly 25 percent of the group did. Sokal et al. (2005) assert that, "correlations revealing the negative relationship of intrinsic motivation toward reading, interest in reading attitudes toward reading with boys' view of reading as a feminine activity support the claim that reading is a gender-marked activity" (p. 225). Sokal et al. (2005) argue that by age 7, children are able to understand and navigate social expectations of gender and because of this boys may reject reading due to its common associations with femininity or female learning strengths. Thus, they hypothesize that, "If some boys come to perceive reading as a feminine activity… Defeminized views of reading could in turn lead to higher intrinsic motivation toward reading" (2005, p. 220). However, findings revealed that the intervention strategies used in the study, which mirror some of the main focuses of initiatives introduced to improve boys' literacy, did not influence these boys' motivation, interest, or attitudes toward reading (2005).

While Sokal et al. (2005) find "the lack of treatment effects on this group… troubling" (p. 226), I argue this is an important observation that strengthens Martino and Kehler's (2007) claims that inclusive, pedagogical reform rooted in critical literacy must

be the focus for improving literacy and challenging social expectations of gender moving forward, not boy-friendly initiatives. In fact, Sokal et al. (2005) found that the sex of the reader in each group did not seem to effect boys' experiences, undermining the commonly considered initiative that hiring male role models in literacy classrooms would improve boys' literacy achievement. On the other hand, boy-friendly books (the dominant strategy for improving boys' literacy) did have a positive effect, increasing motivation, interest, and attitudes towards reading for a number of boys.

Apart from admitting that using boy-friendly books is not a comprehensive solution to improving literacy underachievement, Sokal et al. (2005) appear to too easily accept this finding as a positive result. They acknowledge that young students already have the capacity to negotiate social expectations, but do not interrogate the correlation of boys' increased interest in reading and the use of "boy-friendly" books through this lens. Furthermore, Sokal et al. (2005) state that, "although choice of books for the classroom appears to be a highly important factor in making books accessible to many boys, clearly there is more to choosing appropriate books than engaging a stereotypical view of boys" (p. 227). Meanwhile, Sokal et al. (2005) base their intervention around the use of "boy-friendly" books and "typical" books, where "Boy-friendly books included stories about animals, adventure stories with male protagonists, informational texts about natural events (e.g., volcanoes) and about sports, and book series such as *Captain Underpants* in which boys express great interest" (p. 222-23). These have been identified as stereotypically 'boy-friendly" texts that only reinforce essentialist and oversimplified views of boys' natural interests.

At the beginning of their study Sokal et al. (2005) argue that, "Studies that compare girls' and boys' literacy experiences and performances have created a false dichotomy and artificial homogeneity that is fodder for the rhetoric surrounding the 'boy crisis'" (p. 217). While I agree that direct boy-girl comparisons are often not productive and reinforce these dichotomized views of gender, I would argue that many studies benefit from a mixed participant group. The boy-girl comparisons or this dichotomy in the literacy discourse, which both Sokal et al. (2005) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002) acknowledge but avoid critically engaging with, is a focal point in Jones and Myhill's (2004) study that looks at underachievement for both boys and girls.

In the UK, Jones and Myhill (2004) explain that from the 1990's on, concerns about underachievement have focused so intensely and narrowly on boys and literacy that, "Boys within the classroom have been pictured as cast adrift in an alien environment where the preferred ethos and learning styles, the approved literacy practices, even the testing procedures, all favour female strengths and preferences" (p. 548). Citing supporting literature, Jones and Myhill (2004) discuss how this underachievement discourse has influenced teachers' perceptions of students, stating,

> the positioning of the debate about underachievement as a gender issue in relation to boys, together with the perception that girls do not present problems in the classroom, may be influencing teachers' patterns of expectations for girls and boys in the classroom. (2004, p. 549)

Because of these problematic assumptions, Jones and Myhill (2004) explore and grapple with this relationship in their study.

Jones and Myhill (2004) conducted 40 teacher interviews, interviews with a total of 144 students (interviewed in pairs), and 36 sets of classroom observations for their study. Teacher participants were asked to select one high-achieving boy and girl and one underachieving boy and girl to participate in the study. Jones and Myhill (2004) justify this methodological decision by asserting their wish, "to avoid the coupling of boys with underachievement," and "to make comparisons between the four groups in order to consider the underachieving boy in relation to other boys and to female underachievers" (p. 552). By looking more generally at underachievers, Jones and Myhill (2004) uncover trends in their data that disrupt common perceptions about gender and achievement and would otherwise have been ignored by studying only boys. Similarly, my research aims to avoid restricting comics and superheroes to boys, instead focusing on the potential these texts offer for all students by engaging both boys and girls in the study.

Examining teacher interviews, Jones and Myhill (2004) found that teachers' claims that boys and girls have equal academic potential were contradicted by further conversations revealing that teachers, "give voice to a deficit model of male achievement, whereby expectations informed by pupil's gender are seen to disadvantage boys" (p. 556). This was paralleled by generalizations in teachers' responses, which describe a typical boy as being immature, disruptive, unmotivated in writing, and an underachiever,

compared to typical, high-achieving and compliant girls (2004). Observational data collected on each participant's on- or off-task participation in class (an indication of the disruptive or attentive behaviour of students) revealed that, in general, both high-achieving and underachieving boys were identified as less focused or on-task than their female counterparts. However, Jones and Myhill (2004) underline the fact that, "the significant differences are between achievement groups, with relatively smaller differences between gender groups" (p. 557). Interestingly, the MOE (2004) clearly state at the outset of "Me Read? No Way!" that they also note, "the differences *among* boys and *among* girls are greater than the differences *between* boys and girls" (p. 6, original emphasis). Yet, the MOE (2004, 2009a, 2009b) continues to focus solely on boys, as much of the literacy discourse has.

Questioning how teachers' perception of gender in the classroom might influence students and the learning environment, Jones and Myhill (2004) uncover concerning trends about the impact on boys' and girls' participation. First, it is important to highlight that Jones and Myhill's (2004) findings indicate that both boys and girls identified as underachievers shared similar attitudes and behaviours in the classroom. Despite this observation, they note a hierarchy when it comes to the focus of teachers' attention in the classroom, which tends to favour underachieving boys. Jones and Myhill (2004) state that their observational data showed that "the underachieving girl is consistently less likely, or the least likely, to be invited to answer a question and the underachieving boy is consistently more likely, or the most likely, to be invited to respond" (p. 557). This means that while both underachieving boys and girls are equally struggling, teachers' eagerness to keep boys involved has rendered underachieving girls "invisible" (Jones & Myhill, 2004, p. 548; Sanford, 2006, p. 312). Sanford (2006) argues that these trade-offs must be avoided when looking for ways to help struggling students, emphasizing that girls have often been overlooked as a result of efforts to improve boys' achievement.

Jones and Myhill (2004) also note changes in boys' classroom participation, as they get older. Their findings show that high-achieving boys become increasing less engaged by Year 8 to the point that they more closely resemble underachieving boys. Jones and Myhill (2004) argue that, "It is possible to interpret this as a picture of change whereby the high-achieving boy negotiates his male identity, moving from enthusiastic

engagement, to self-conscious and deliberate disengagement" (p. 559). Recognizing that "boy-ness" is apparently tied to underachievement, some boys navigate school spaces accordingly, actively decreasing engagement or performing underachievement (Jones & Myhill, 2004; Martino, 1999).

Jones and Myhill's (2004) work clearly defines the potential detriments of upholding strong expectations about gender and learning. This study provides pivotal support for my research insofar as it interrogates generalizations that permeate the popular "boy crisis" discourse in education and raises concerns about how (even subconscious) assumptions can limit opportunities for all students, much like the limitations that have restricted comic use in schools.

*Masculinities and achievement.* Building off of Jones and Myhill's (2004) findings surrounding students' negotiations of identity in the classroom, it would be careless not to acknowledge Martino's (1999, 2001) work on the social construction of masculinities and the various ways some boys navigate (what have become known as) "feminized" school spaces or practices, including literacy classrooms, reading and high achievement in school. Martino's (1999) interviews with 25 boys (aged 15-17) in a school in Perth, Australia, reveal that many boys are aware of and actively avoid certain behaviours and practices that run counter to hegemonic views of masculinity. In response to a question about why he thinks a lot of boys do not enjoy reading, one boy in Martino's (1999) study says, "'Maybe they don't think it's masculine or whatever to read books,'" (p. 249) explaining that girls are brought up reading more than boys and therefore also do better in school. When asked about this further, the boy continues on to say, "'I know a lot of friends who are really smart but they don't want to try because they think they'll get called names and stuff for trying hard, doing extra work and that…'" (1999, p. 249). For some of these boys, behavioural expectations are very clearly defined through a lens of hegemonic masculinity that prioritizes sport over school and rejects certain preferences or activities typically associated with girls or femininity – in this case reading and high achievement in school (1999). In order to maintain their masculinity or "boy-ness" they must perform in opposition to or reject femininity or "girl-ness".

As Martino (1999, 2001) and others (Kehily, 2001; Kehler, 2010; Kehler & Martino, 2007; Mac an Ghaill, 1994, 2000) have noted, much of the negotiation of

masculinities is policed through the use of homophobic slurs – the purpose of this name-calling being to emasculate boys whom are different or "other", who fail to adhere to the dominant views of masculinity. Both Kehily (2001) and Kehler (2010) argue that fear of this harassment has effectively contributed to reproducing or reinforcing performances of heteronormative hegemonic masculinity. Parading heterosexuality therefore becomes a part of some enactments of hegemonic masculinity (Kehler & Martino, 2007; Mac an Ghaill, 2000). Martino (2001) found this to be true in a number of boys' responses to survey questions about their reading habits. One boy describes reading, "'magazines like sport and surfing and of course like any male would, except if you're gay– girlie mags'" (2001, p. 66). Another boy explains, "'I like reading music books, *Playboy*, sports mags, *Penthouse*… These texts are more interesting to me because this is what I'm interested in… I like tits so I read and look at them'" (2001, p. 66). Even in the private spaces of an individually written survey these boys firmly assert their heterosexuality, distancing themselves from any associations with effeminacy or homosexuality. Martino (2001) states, "It is through these kinds of practices that relations of power are crystallized to produce particular currencies of masculinity" (p. 66) and by letting them go unchallenged, they will continue to oppress masculinities that fall outside of the "norm".

This work is important for showcasing the active constructions and performances of gender and masculinities that are undertaken to avoid social chastisement. It establishes the influential role that privileging a hegemonic masculinity, or "normative" masculinity, has on influencing the way students understand themselves and shape their performances of gender and identity. Again, these issues are perpetuated by problematic assumptions and generalizations about what it is to be boy or girl, masculine or feminine. Thus, recognizing the unrealistic limitations of a simple masculine-feminine dichotomy is only the first step. Martino and Kehler (2007) stress that any significant improvements can only occur with the adoption of critical pedagogical reform that confronts and disrupts common perceptions of normativity and assumptions about gender in public or popular discourse. Though my research does not involve a critical pedagogy intervention in a classroom context, it aims to interrupt common gender associations between boys and comics, while exploring the potential for comics and superhero fiction to be used as platforms for these critical discussions and relevant learning for all students.

**Pedagogical Reform: Engaging student interests and multiliteracies pedagogy**

       **Student interests and pop culture.** Research and initiatives focused on improving boys' literacy achievement offer important insight into pedagogical reform. Stripped of specific references to boys' interests and boy-girl comparisons, this literature ultimately boils down to the conclusion that literacy classrooms, and education in general, need to better recognize and implement the textual and learning style preferences of students and their out-of-school experiences. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1963) argues that the strict structure of traditional education (for example the organization of time and social interactions) is, "sharply marked off from any other form of social organization" (p. 18). As a result, "required subject-matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young" (1963, p. 19). Traditional education therefore fails to engage students in relevant and meaningful learning rooted in their life experiences or lifeworlds (Dewey, 1963; Kalantzis and Cope, 2012; New London Group, 1996). As Freire (1987) explains, children begin developing literacy skills as they *read the world* around them and through reading the world come to understand reading the *words* connected to it. However, formal education has often focused on the decontextualized learning of foreign words and ideas that are disconnected from this prior knowledge. In these settings, the goal is "not to work *with* the student, but to work *on* him, imposing an order to which he has to accommodate" (Freire, 2013, p. 34, original emphasis) and this method of teaching only leads students to react defensively and reject new or foreign concepts.

       Although dated, Dewey (1963) and Freire's (1987, 2013) statements speak to tensions that still exist between students and their education. Heron-Hruby, Hagood, and Alvermann (2008) examine this tension in 3 adolescent students' experiences with bringing their out-of-school interests into the classroom or school-like settings. For two of these students, their interest in hip-hop culture had been suppressed by limitations in school that discredited the value of this culture for learning. One student's use of hip-hop vernacular was openly deemed inappropriate for the classroom and when the student planned to dress up as a male rapper for "opposite day," her interests were again quelled. Similarly, the second student's use of library computers for looking up song lyrics and chatting with friends online was identified by the librarian to be "outside the parameters

of appropriate use" (2008, p. 320) of library resources. The third student, also interested in hip-hop culture simply refused to engage with her teacher's prompts about her hip-hop interests (specifically regarding clothing). When asked, "why she did not participate, she replied, 'Oh that was so lame. He only does that to look cool in front of the students'" (2008, p. 323).

The out-of-school culture these students bring to the classroom are dismissed or integrated superficially (as indicated by the one participant's reaction). However, as Heron-Hruby et al. (2008) discuss, each instance of conflict provided opportunity for growth or engagement in school learning. The first student could, "politicize her argument in formal terms" (2008, p. 331), Heron-Hruby et al. (2008) suggesting she could use her frustration surrounding her costume for "opposite day" to write an essay or engage in classroom debate. The second student, whose computer use also involved emailing back and forth with one of the authors, produced a poem that addressed the important issue of teen pregnancy and relationships. It is revealed to Heron-Hruby et al. (2008) that the third student's rejection of her teacher's discussion prompts, were connected to a statement he made about African-American males. Although she was not able to or did not engage in critical discussion about this topic in class, it "prompted her to reflect on her dislike of stereotypes, specifically in relation to her interest in urban hip-hop culture" (2008, p. 331), which is productive in itself but also could have resulted in productive school engagement.

Heron-Hruby et al.'s (2008) study suggests that teachers should consider the benefits of implementing pop culture and student interests in the classroom, especially when "the lives of young people in Western cultures continue to be sonorously driven by popular culture" (Savage, 2008, p. 52). As Savage (2008) indicates in his research, pop culture texts "have prime currency in young people's lives" (p. 62). Unfortunately, many educators fail to appropriately acknowledge pop culture in the classroom and, by association, the everyday experiences of their students because pop culture texts are either neglected or integrated ineffectively. Participants in Savage's (2008) study admitted that, "whilst they enjoyed studying popular culture texts, the texts that their teachers chose were in many cases out-of-date or boring" (p. 60). One student pointed out that, " 'If [teachers] want to make the class interesting they have to teach something that the

students can relate to and something that they will be interested in'" (2008, p. 61). The notion that pedagogy can improve student engagement by focusing on what is relevant or interesting to students is well documented in the literature (Alvermann, 2002, 2006a, 2006b; Brozo, 2013; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Giroux & Freire, 1989; Hagood, Alvermann, & Heron-Hruby, 2010; Hall & Coles, 2001; Hibbert, Barker, & Ludwig, 2012; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Lenters, 2007; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Recognition of the positive effect pop culture texts (like comics and superhero fiction) have on engagement is definitely important, but must be contextualized in the understanding that popularity alone is not enough to justify integration in schools (Griffith, 2010; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011). They should not be used as a superficial or "cosmetic" (Parry, 2014, p. 21) solution to engage students, but must be taken up as meaningful resources for serious educational discussion (Giroux & Freire, 1989; Parry, 2014; Savage, 2008). Despite what some may think, students understand this. Commenting on the use of pop culture in the classroom, one student in Savage's (2008) study explains,

> we need to know more about it and the effect that it has on people and on the society…it's good to hear an adult's perspective rather than ours all the time. We need teachers who are excited about these things as well, but who are able to help us read into them and think more about them. (p. 61)

Creating these spaces requires educators to be versed in the pop culture texts and relevant life experiences that students face (Dewey, 1963; Giroux & Freire, 1989). As Giroux and Freire (1989) assert, educators should, "steep oneself… in the language of the everyday, the discourses of the communities that our students are produced within" (p. ix-x). In doing so, teachers are offered an important glance at the ways students are interacting with, constructing, and negotiating meaning in their world (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013; Giroux & Freire, 1989; Savage, 2008). Alvermann and Hagood (2000) stress that, "Drawing lines of demarcation between topics that adolescents find appealing… and those that adults find worthy of taking up school time is a counterproductive pedagogical practice" (p. 437). Thus, through an immersion in pop culture (which shapes both young people *and* adults) and acceptance that pop culture is

"everyday culture" (Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Hagood et al., 2010), teachers can meaningfully engage students in critical discussions about the information and texts they encounter (Dewey, 1963; Giroux & Freire, 1989; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011).

**Multiliteracies pedagogy: Recognizing students' multimodal lives.** Kalantzis and Cope (2000b) suggest that, "learning is a matter of repertoire; starting with the recognition of lifeworld experience and using that experience as a basis for extending what one knows and what one can do" (p. 124). Outside of school, students are inundated with diverse media and sensory experiences (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Hagood et al., 2010; Kalantzis & Cope, 2000b; Kress, 2000b; Mills, 2009; Petrone & Borsheim, 2008). Therefore, incorporating students' previously established literacy repertoires based on their out-of-school experiences and interactions with pop culture texts in classroom learning relies on embracing a shift in conceptions of literacy and a recognition of students' multimodal lives. Hall and Coles (2001) urge that by recognizing and respecting these skills or literacy practices developed outside of school, education can work at, "building learners' self-concepts, helping them see what kind of reader and writer they already are, helping them make links from one form of reading and writing to another and helping them interrogate their own practices" (p. 220). The importance of such an approach is reflected in the fact that despite some students' poor performance in school settings, it has been documented that outside of school these same students have "considerable intellectual accomplishments," suggesting, "a different view of their potential as capable learners and doers in the world" (Hull & Schultz, 2001, p. 575).

Cumming-Potvin (2007) conducted a qualitative study examining grade 7 students' participation in a multiliteracies novel study unit that used a four resources reading model, which "recommends the simultaneous utilization of four practices that bridge the polarization between the whole language and phonics approaches to reading" (p. 491). Focusing on one boy in particular (Nicholas), identified as a struggling reader who reads several grade-levels below his own, Cumming-Potvin (2007) gained insight into the diverse literacy and multimodal skills students hold and how these can scaffold learning in other literacies.

Despite struggling with traditional reading practices, "when using computers at home, Nicholas demonstrated some powerful multiliteracies" (2007, p. 493). These

computer literacy competencies, translated to an "informal task" in the research where Nicholas had the opportunity to position himself as the "pedagogical leader by controlling the computer mouse and displaying his knowledge about the avenues for entering the website" (p. 498) when working on an activity with his mother. Beginning with Nicholas's strengths in computer literacy, once on the website and navigating through a student discussion board, Nicholas's mother was able to provide support in reading and decoding the written passages from other students.

In an in-class activity where students were discussing the topic of crime and punishment in the novel, Nicholas's reading deficiencies were supported by opportunities for socially constructing knowledge, as he and other students built understanding through sharing personal experience or prior knowledge. Although Nicholas's initial responses lacked depth, peers and the researcher prompted him to explain or think more critically about his claims, something he is not able to do when focused on "code-breaking" simple reading tasks, but that he could engage with here.

Cumming-Potvin (2007) states, "multiliteracies and interweaving scaffolding and diverse texts in meaningful tasks can encourage agency in student learning across contexts" (p. 499). In the situations described, Nicholas had the opportunity to engage with his learning both as an expert when scaffolding the learning of his mother and as a co-constructor of knowledge with his peers, while also working on his reading weaknesses, decoding text on the website and investigating the layered meanings of the terms "crime" and "punishment". The skills that Nicholas possesses and the knowledge he utilizes are not, however, measured by the standardized tests that determine "literacy" competencies of students in schools. For this reason Cumming-Potvin (2007) believes that rather than focusing so restrictively on boys' perceived underachievement from literacy test scores, there needs to be a "call for research to investigate boys' academic achievement in ways that reflect dynamic construction of literacy identities at home and at school" (P. 501).

Blair and Sanford (2004) take up that call, examining boys' agency in "morphing" their literacy experiences to connect with their learning preferences and out-of-school interests. Like Cumming-Potvin (2007), Blair and Sanford (2004) believe that standardized tests and achievement scores "do not tell the full story about boys' literacy

abilities and practices" (p. 454). Studying the experiences of elementary and middle-school boys in literacy classrooms, Blair and Sanford's (2004) initial findings supported public discourse suggesting that schools and pedagogy were failing boys. However, they also recognized that, "this wasn't necessarily true for all of the boys and didn't seem to provide [them] with any depth of understanding about what [boys] *were* doing" (p. 454). Here Blair and Sanford (2004) push back against the deficit model of male achievement and look instead to the productive practices boys are engaged in.

Amongst preliminary data, Blair and Sanford (2004) note that while "many of these boys struggled to make meaning of their school literacy experiences, they talked enthusiastically about their literacy practices outside of school" (p. 454). In all three of Blair and Sanford's (2004) main findings (transforming time, transforming purpose, and transforming literacy events into social-cultural capital), students' morphing of literacy events is done to match the more enjoyable out-of-school experiences. Although boys transformation of time in school was more related to a need to move at their own pace, Blair and Sanford (2004) highlight that in their discussions of playing video games, many of the boys in their study did not have trouble settling into the activity, instead being completely immersed in the virtual adventures.

When transforming the purpose of their literacy activities, boys in Blair and Sanford's (2004) study would often find ways to make the activities fun, incorporating characters, or creating similar characters, from their interests outside of school (which often included superheroes) into their writing activities. Similarly, their text selections reflected out-of-school reading practices, Blair and Sanford (2004) noting that, "boys frequently selected visual, humorous, and active texts, such as *comic books*" (p. 456, my emphasis). There was also a multiliteracies component to this morphing, as "boys often found ways to represent their knowledge in alternative formats – visually, orally, and with gesture" (2004, p. 456).

Blair and Sanford (2004), like Smith and Wilhelm (2002), also noted the importance of social relationships in these boys' transformed literacy practices. In their study, boys "gave greater emphasis to taking *from* the text rather than immersing themselves in it, in order to share information with their friends" (p. 457, original emphasis). This process is linked to the idea that students create literacy identities from

the texts they engage with that reflect who they are both in school and out. Blair and Sanford (2004) point out here that with these boys there seemed to be evidence that part of this practice was about "morphing themselves into what they perceived to be acceptable masculine beings" (p. 457) – perhaps evidenced by the strong focus on action-oriented, sport-related, and violent texts they were drawn to.

Although worry has mounted over boys' achievement in literacy testing, Blair and Sanford (2004) highlight that their findings indicate boys, "are becoming literate in spite of school instruction" (p. 459), in ways not traditionally recognized in the classroom or measured by standardized testing. Blair and Sanford (2004) argue, "Alternative 'texts' and 'literacies,' often dismissed as irrelevant to the agenda of school, can be adopted more readily and meaningfully in classrooms" (p. 458), catering to students' familiar literacy practices and better preparing them for the world outside of school.

Bailey's (2009) study of a grade 9 English teacher and her attempts to incorporate new literacies in the classroom emphasizes the importance of meaningful multiliteracies integration in coursework. Observing the teacher actively shift and rework her pedagogical approach over five months, Bailey (2009) notes that while the teacher began by incorporating new literacies in the classroom superficially, she "slowly came to value the elements of new literacies less as a way to 'hook' students and more as a way to do the real work of a literacy curriculum" (p. 215). As new literacies practices were more meaningfully incoporated, "students did seem to better learn the authorized ninth-grade curriculum; moreover, many came to see themselves as possessing new powers brought about by a growing understanding of literacy as social practice" (2009, p. 215).

In one activity that Bailey (2009) draws attention to from her observations, students watched a music video and were directed by their teacher to consider the multimodal meanings within. Starting with individual notes and moving into a class discussion, students were able to read deeply into the metaphor and imagery used in the video, while also developing understandings about how the visual, audio, and gestural modes in the video created or enhanced meaning.

Bailey's (2009) study focuses on a new literacies pedagogy, which is entrenched in the social influences of literacy and focused more on digital technologies. Although meaningful for my research, I diverge from Bailey's (2009) focus on digital technologies.

While I recognize the importance of these literacies, my research highlights how the visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modes of meaning often associated with digital texts are also present in multimodal comics.

**Comics: Complex, multimodal texts**

Comics have gained popularity in schools over the last decade due to their multimodal interplay between print and visual literacies, and their engagement with some students' out-of-school literacy interests and practices (Bitz, 2010; Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013; Carter, 2008; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Griffith, 2010; Jacobs, 2007; McTaggart, 2008). Primarily, as mentioned in a number of the studies above and elsewhere in the literature (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Bodkin et al., 2009; Carter, 2008; Griffith, 2010; MOE, 2004, 2009a; Moeller, 2011; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), comics have been framed as texts that cater to boys' interests in adventure, action, and violence. While there is evidence that many boys enjoy reading comics, McTaggart (2008) and Moeller (2011) argue that despite these common ties to male audiences, there are boys that *do not* enjoy comics and conversely, many girls that *do*. Comics have also typically been viewed as simpler texts that act as stepping-stones for students to engage with "more complex" traditional literacy texts (Jacobs, 2007; Krashen, 2004; McTaggart, 2008; Schwarz & Crenshaw, 2011). As discussed in Chapter 1, and reviewed in the literature here, I argue that comics are not so much simpler texts, but through their multimodality provide a more familiar sensory experience through which students can grasp at meaning. Both as boy books and simple texts, the role of comics in literacy learning is restricted to certain groups of students despite their potential to engage all students in multimodal, critical learning.

Moeller's (2011) research explores the common assumption that comics are "boy books" in her study with 15 high school students. The study asked both male and female participants (8 female, 7 male) to read three, randomly selected graphic novels: one superhero title, one work of creative non-fiction about the Rwanda genocide, and another about fairy tale characters. After conducting focus group meetings and interviews, Moeller (2011) found that, "Rather than affirming the notion that graphic novels are boy books, this study's participants experienced various levels of interest in this sample of graphic novels, depending on the extent to which they identified with characters from the

stories" (p. 479). Only slight gender differences emerged, according to Moeller (2011), and these differences were most notable when reading the superhero comic.

Some girls in Moeller's (2011) study admitted in the focus group that they went into this text with the mindset that they would not enjoy it, but were surprisingly drawn in by the empowering story of a teenaged, mutant, female assassin who wants to change her life. Conversely, boys were split on the story, either identifying that it was a "quirky" take on a female version of the well-known character Wolverine, or dismissing the character as a "Wolverine knockoff" (p. 480). Moeller (2011) argues that these boys' responses "reflected their own internal negotiations with gender norms" (p. 480), but I argue they might also be considered a defensive response to a "knockoff" of their culture being presented to them in a school-like contexts (despite the fact that the title used was an official Marvel story that branches from Wolverine's storyline).

Despite this evidence showing slight gender differences and other findings that supported girls' tendency toward discussions of character and emotion versus boys' discussions of action, Moeller (2011) does not buy into distinctly labeling texts as girl or boy books. Instead Moeller (2011) is interested in how social constructions or the fluidity of gender factor into these reading practices. Interestingly, participants admitted that their perceptions of comics and their interactions with the texts were shaped by social or cultural expectations (2011), a sentiment that emerged in other studies as well (Carter, 2013; Clark, 2013; Savage, 2008). Typically they understood the medium as "'nerd culture'" (Moeller, 2011, p. 480) (implicitly connected to a *male* demographic) and that "the public act of graphic novel reading would leave them open to scrutiny by peers and popular social groups" (2011, p. 480). Therefore, regardless of their personal feelings about the comic medium or genres within, students can be deterred from using comics by the possible social ramifications of associating with the interests of a group situated lower in the social hierarchy. Similarly, since "graphic novel reading is not included in the performance of 'female'" (Moeller, 2011, p. 481), these texts seem to be dismissed by a female audience whether they have an interest in comics or not. Unfortunately, this response illustrates the limitations that assumptions or expectations about audience can enforce.

Ignorance or assumptions about the comic medium may be the most limiting factor to their implementation in classroom curricula, with much of the skepticism surrounding comics being linked to misinformation about the content and targeted audience of the medium and its genres. McCloud (1994) recalls facing this skepticism when he first began explaining his interest in comics to other people (see *Figure 2*). For him it became evident that, "If people failed to *understand* comics, it was because they defined what comics could be *too narrowly*" (1994, p. 3). McCloud's (1994) assertion is certainly well represented in the literature.

In a study with pre-service teachers in a class devoted to graphic novels, Carter (2013) notes that in a high volume of participants' early journal responses, "there were

*Figure 2*. Excerpt of panels from Scott McCloud's (1994) *Understanding Comics*.

value judgments at play regarding not just gendered reading, but literacy, textuality and textual worth" (2013, p. 61). This undervaluing of comics is often rooted in the medium's focus on the visual, rather than print (Carter, 2013; Jacobs, 2007; Leber-Cook & Cook, 2013) – the lower word counts of comics making them an easy target for skepticism about their "literary" value or their level of reading difficulty. Despite their initial reservations, after a few activities that engaged participants in the comic-making process, Carter (2013) notes a significant shift in perceptions. One participant states, "It was more challenging than I expected it to be because of the importance of giving very explicit details about what is happening" (2013, p. 68). Another explains, "I feel this is a great way to show real world applications of literacy" (2013, p. 68). By the end of the study, many participants' acknowledged the complex and detailed process involved in making comics, overturning their statements about the simplicity of the medium (2013). A common response among participants was reflected in one student's statement that, "My views on graphic novels have changed a lot over the past two weeks. I just did not know a lot about graphic novels and all they could offer a classroom" (2013, p. 70). Other participants recognized the assumptions they had entered with, one participant stating, "The first day of class, I associated all comic books w/ superheroes… Their [sic] is so much variety to choose from" (2013, p. 70). Interestingly, by the end of the study any comments about gender assumptions that had surfaced in the beginning had vanished (2013).

Clark (2013) saw similar results in his research with pre-service teachers using graphic novels as historical narratives. Once again, the initial attitude toward graphic novels was poor as, "Many of the preservice teachers were not excited about reading graphic novels in the course and could not foresee much value in reading two graphic novels" (2013, pp. 40-41). However, Clark (2013) indicates that most participants' views changed once they had the opportunity to explore the content and work with the texts personally. Acknowledging the multiple and diverse perspectives these texts presented, one participant explains, "I believe the content is highly valuable, as it not only discusses issues in American history that are not normally discussed, but also employs a variety of less traditional perspectives to do this" (2013, p. 41). Many others recognized and appreciated the new perspectives historical comics offered and the level of engagement that came from working with these texts. Unfortunately, even after experiencing the

potential benefits these graphic novels could have in history classrooms, many participants still said they would not feel comfortable using them in the classroom because of "professional constraints," or being "worried about professional acceptance at two levels…community and school" (2013, p. 42).

This attitude coincides with Leber-Cook and Cook's (2013) statement that, "the general view is that comics… are not serious *texts*… and cannot be, instances of *serious reading*" (p. 25). However, even if focused purely on the printed text in comics, Krashen (2004) suggests otherwise. When looking at the "Readability Grade Level" of a number of comics from the 1970's, many popular titles (including a number of superhero titles and others) scored between a grade 5 and grade 7 reading level. While this may seem low, Krashen (2004) points out that best sellers of the same time period had a grade-level range between 6 and 10, with an average readability score of 7.4. Krashen (2004) further cements his point by providing specific excerpts from Fantastic 4 comics that scored at a grade 12 reading level.

Rather than denigrating the medium for its "simpler" print text, Frey and Fisher (2004) see the opportunity that these reduced word counts offer for matching texts with struggling readers' reading levels. Although admittedly a little hesitant in the beginning, Frey and Fisher (2004) realize "the power [comics] have for engaging students in authentic writing" and that they, "provided a visual vocabulary of sorts for scaffolding writing techniques, particularly dialogue, tone, and mood" (p. 24). McTaggart (2008) argues that many struggling readers have difficulty visualizing when reading and because they "cannot 'see' in their minds what is happening in the text… they do not comprehend the text's message" (p. 32). Having images to support visualization, students are able to interact more meaningfully with the story, characters, and messages, without being restricted by overwhelming amounts of printed text. Frey and Fisher (2004) found that with using graphic novels as a scaffold for students, their ideas became more complex, they were writing more and "many writers explored more sophisticated word choice" (p. 24). Although their study focused on struggling readers, the majority of the group being English Language Learners, it is easy to see the parallels this offers for all student groups. However, I argue, contrary to Frey and Fisher (2004), that comic use does not scaffold from simpler to more complex texts, but is instead a scaffold from the natural

multisensory experience of students to the print-dominant texts that permeate English curriculum.

Blanch and Mulvihill (2013) stress this point as well, arguing that the print-based texts of literacy classrooms need to be balanced by the visual texts that students' encounter outside of school on a regular basis. For Blanch and Mulvhill (2013), "Comic books can address [visual, auditory/verbal, tactile, and kinesthetic] learning styles at once, while engaging students at the same time" (p. 37). To explore the use of comics in the classroom, they conducted a qualitative study with six, university-aged participants who had taken part in an anthropology class that used a graphic novel as one of its textbooks. Again, like Carter (2013) and Clark (2013), many participants' views of comics were initially restricted by the deeply engrained stereotypes around the medium (white, nerdy males reading this medium and in their parents' basement), but their perspectives changed once they worked with the text (Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013).

Several important findings emerged from Blanch and Mulvihill's (2013) study. All of the participants shared that they read the whole textbook for the course, an admittedly rare event amongst nearly all of the participants and their friends when using conventional textbooks (2013). Also important was the fact that participants said they retained much more of what they had learned compared to friends in other anthropology courses (2013). These findings indicate strong student engagement with the text and led participants to have an increased appreciation for comics' literary value (2013). The diversity of the learning opportunity was also noted, as one participant shared the textbook offered, "'multiple ways of learning, different ways of learning, all combined into one thing'" (2013, p. 43). According to Blanch and Mulvihill (2013), an unexpected finding that came out of the research was the social influence using this textbook had on participants. One participant mentioned that she was surprised that aspects of her life outside of school that are, "'normal and fun could actually be referenced to something I learned in class. Not always can I make that connection'" (2013, p. 44). Other responses indicated that participants were talking about and using what they had learned in class in conversations with friends.

This research outlines the wide-ranging benefits of incorporating comics in the classroom. While participants acknowledged that traditional textbooks were still needed

for giving background context to the comic stories, participants also expressed deep interest in using this unconventional text and suggested that teachers should be using comics more. As noted in the findings, with increased student engagement and retention of what they are learning, students can bring their learning from the classroom into the social worlds they experience outside of school.

**Superheroes: Promoting multimodal, critical learning through relevant pop culture texts**

Despite comics growing success in schools, superhero fiction has not been given equal consideration as "serious" reading for classroom use. Many have noted the violent, sexualized, and perceived childishness of superhero content as barriers to these texts being implemented in classrooms (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Martin, 2007; Moeller, 2011; Weiner, 2002). However, as icons in pop culture (especially since the superhero boom in the movie industry), superhero fiction connects to the texts and meanings students are engaging with outside of the classroom. Furthermore, by taking up these texts in literacy classrooms, teachers can appreciate the multimodality of the comic medium while also critically engaging with the themes and characters that arise in a wide variety of superhero titles.

Amidst complaints about violence in superhero fiction, Martin (2007) argues that, "due to the complexity of superheroes' lives, they can positively influence the development of children if children are taught not to focus on the violence but on the values superheroes promote" (p. 240). Martin (2007) focuses instead on the lessons superheroes can teach about selflessness, teamwork, responsibility, and the navigation of complex social issues.

In his study, Martin (2007) asked 42 fourth-graders about their familiarity with superheroes, as well as their attitudes toward themselves and superheroes using a questionnaire to determine how students ranked their own behaviours in certain situations to those of superheroes. Martin (2007) found that students were generally fairly familiar with the superheroes that existed in pop culture and also identified being familiar with a number of superheroes outside of current mainstream media. Results also showed that males may be more likely to identify with superheroes than girls, but Martin (2007) believes this could be a result of that lack of presence or success of female superheroes in

popular media. Martin (2007) highlights that the correlations between students' own behaviour and their perceptions of superheroes' positive social behaviour could indicate that, "children *may* learn values from superheroes, and that superheroes can be used as a tool to educate children on how to cooperate with others" (p. 248). Additionally, "low correlations between self-ratings and superhero rating on forgiving others and never disrespecting others suggest that children may feel that superheroes are sometimes unforgiving" (p. 248). These findings are important for potentially dispelling myths about the negative influence of superhero violence on young people.

Bauer and Detorre (1997) also addressed connections between superhero violence and student behaviour, through an analysis of their teaching experiences with young children. Bauer and Detorre (1997) argue that while they understand concerns about violent behaviour that may arise from superhero play, they "support a more productive approach to superhero play that incorporates children's interests in ways that promote positive development" (p. 18). Through referencing and allowing superhero play to emerge in the classroom, children have the opportunity to develop strong understandings of right and wrong, cooperation, and teachers are able to direct that superhero play into other school activities – Bauer and Detorre (1997) specifically address visual art and drama activities.

A number of other scholars have also expressed how superhero fiction could be beneficial across various classroom curricula (Aiken, 2010; Botzakis, 2013; Carter, 2007; Costello & Worcester, 2014; Hall & Lucal, 1999; Rourke, 2010; Westrup, 2002), but few have conducted research on this topic. Rourke's (2010) book, *The Comic Book Curriculum*, uses theme-based sections to thoroughly examine a broad cast of superheroes (from Batman to Spider-Man to the X-Men and others) whose stories are relevant to a variety of educational discussions. Rather than focus on a particular subject, Rourke (2010) instead focuses on a character and connects them to a variety of curriculum areas, including (most often) humanities subjects, psychology, world literature and mythology, philosophy, and civics. Carter (2007) explains that he has taught Spider-Man in both college and middle school classrooms, and highlights the text's relevance to student life as "a veritable metaphor for puberty and teenage angst as Peter Parker under goes rapid changes in attitude, appearance, and social status" (p. 50). Hall and Lucal (1999) argue

that while they are sometimes exaggerated, superhero stories often closely parallel contemporary culture and events.

Costello and Worcester (2014) explain that, "Comics have been read as reflecting the cultural context in which they were created, reflecting dominant ideologies, public opinion, or the political culture of their era" (p. 87). As icons in the comic industry with a longstanding and now booming presence in pop culture, superheroes and their stories contribute to this social commentary in a unique and pertinent way. However, few scholars have specifically focused on and conducted research on the potential these socio-cultural and political superhero narratives have for the literacy classroom. My research aims to build on these connections between students' lives and the relevant issues tackled in superhero comics. By using only superhero fiction, my study allows this genre and its potential benefits to remain in focus rather than being pushed to the wings by discussing other seemingly more serious texts.

**Conclusion**

This chapter reviews a number of studies important to the purpose and goals of this research and the problem it aims to address. With the emphasis on boys in literacy discourse, this literature review presents some key research that has attempted to broaden understandings about how boys' literacy can be improved through student-centered pedagogy. At the same time, this review also questions the approaches to literacy improvement and the focus on "boys" as an undifferentiated group through important works that challenge conceptions of masculinities and literacy, and that problematize current essentialist reform. Focusing on the recurring theme that pedagogy should be structured around students' interests, this literature review also explores studies that have implemented student interests and pop culture to develop pedagogical approaches that engage students in more relevant and meaningful learning for life outside of school. Finally, literature on the use of comics and superheroes are examined to showcase how these texts and characters have contributed to meaningful learning for students in various levels of education.

Throughout the literature review I have also interjected to highlight how the literature explored either informs my research or the gaps it leaves that my research aims to fill. While a great deal has already been written about literacy achievement and the

boys' literacy debate, my research addresses this issue from a different avenue considering its impact on limiting certain text use, namely comics and superhero fiction. Literature on the benefits of comics has developed considerably over the last decade, with some scholars even focusing specifically on the benefits of using superheroes in the classroom. However, there is still a relatively limited pool of literature that explores the use of superhero fiction in the classroom. This study will contribute to the existing literature on comics by continuing conversations about the multimodal literacy opportunities they provide, while also opening up new conversations about the potential for superhero fiction to engage students in relevant, multimodal, critical literacy learning.

# Chapter 4

## Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of and justification for the methodology adopted to carry out this study. I begin with a restatement of the research problem as a point of reference for my methodological choices. Continuing from there, I outline the qualitative case study design of this research, highlighting its relevance to my social constructivist ontology and its focus on developing rich descriptions of participant experiences, which aligns with the student-centered approach of this study's multiliteracies theoretical framework. Following a justification of the research design, I outline the data collection and analysis methods used in this research and reveal the limitations of the research, identifying decisions or compromises that were made throughout participant recruitment and data collection phases of this study. This chapter concludes with a reflexive note on how I, as the researcher, influenced the data collection and analysis.

**The Problem**

In the first chapter I explored how the current education discourse has narrowed the focus of literacy underachievement to "boys" based on findings from local and global standardized testing. These findings have distracted educators and policy makers from other social factors at play in this deficit model response, such as socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity. Therefore, rather than establishing pedagogical changes that improve literacy learning for all students, both struggling and not, recent reform efforts have concentrated on implementing strategies that are meant to help the oversimplified and generalized group of "boys" who are reportedly at-risk.

Reform strategies have partially been geared toward identifying or labeling, and therefore regulating, the types of texts that are "boy-friendly" or that boys will naturally be drawn to. Comics and superhero fiction have often been given this designation. The MOE (2004) specifically targeted comics as resources "boys like to read" (MOE, 2004, p. 8) and reiterated this in "Me Read? And How!" showing that data found, "common reading choices [for boys] in the classroom included… comic books about superheroes" (MOE, 2009, p. 10). Others (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Carter, 2008, 2013; Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Sokal et al., 2005) have also

highlighted boys' particular interest in comics, while Moeller (2011) found that this labeling was occurring at the student level, where female students in her school, "would often say, 'Those are boy books'" (p. 477). Constant references to comics and superhero fiction as being suitable reading materials for boys both sets up and maintains gender stereotypes about "appropriate" reading habits or interests. This type of labeling positions reading resources in a boy-girl dichotomy that can influence or deter students from choosing particular materials based on social expectations.

Furthermore, as books that are meant to help boys (or other struggling readers), comics have also been viewed as simpler texts that help students work up to more complex reading (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Krashen, 2004; McTaggart, 2008; Schwarz & Crenshaw, 2011). This view has been contested and cautioned in other research (Carter, 2013; Jacobs, 2007) arguing that a greater appreciation for the complex, multimodality is necessary to reap the full benefits of these texts as literacy resources.

This research uses a qualitative methodology and case study design to explore senior high school students' perceptions of and experiences with literacy learning, establishing a specific focus on how superhero comics have been, or could be, used in literacy classrooms. In order to address the problem and these research goals, this study ruminates on the question: *How does the boys' literacy discourse, as well as social norms, assumptions, and expectations surrounding gender, influence the integration of comics and superhero fiction in the classroom?* Two additional questions support the investigation of the issues surrounding this overarching question:

1. How do students perceive themselves as literacy learners and how do they view their literacy learning environments, both generally and with regard to gender?

2. To what extent could comics and superhero fiction be used to promote students' literacy learning beyond their current role as "boy-friendly" resources?

**Research Design**

Holding a social constructivist ontological position and working from a multiliteracies framework, it is important that my study design aligns with a participant-centered approach that allows for knowledge and understanding to be co-constructed or

co-developed through the shared experiences and discussions of participants. A qualitative case study design adheres to this approach.

Calling upon work by Yin (2003), Baxter and Jack (2008) outline that researchers should consider choosing a case study design when:

> (a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. (p. 545)

This study is guided by three "how" questions that focus on capturing the essence of participants' subjective thoughts and experiences through non-invasive, open-ended, and semi-structured methods of data collection. The study's exploration of the case (student perceptions of and experiences with literacy learning, comics and superheroes) is situated within the natural, bounded context (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006) of senior, high school English classrooms. Although participants were not observed in this context, their contributions are drawn from this context specifically. The definition of this context is not only intuitive, as this is where literacy learning is commonly seen to occur in education, but the institutionalized nature of this context also prompts exploration into socially constructed perceptions of literacy learning and how this shapes the learners within.

Baxter and Jack (2008) highlight that some of the most definitive work outlining case study methodology is based on a constructivist paradigm, or social constructions of reality. In qualitative case study designs, contemporary phenomena are explored through rich descriptions of "participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 254) – accounts that provide a window into participants views or constructions of reality (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Typically these experiences are gathered using multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006), which "allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). Employing three different data collection methods (questionnaire, focus group discussions, and personal reflections), this case study design generates rich, qualitative data through which participants' experiences with literacy learning, comics, and superheroes, are best understood.

**Setting**

This study was conducted at a high school in a rural town in southwestern Ontario. With no restrictions on the type of setting or population required for this study, the possible choices for a research site were relatively limitless. This specific site was chosen mainly for two reasons. First, previous connections with the school board involved reduced barriers for contacting personnel and negotiating access. Second, due to the rural nature of the school board and school, invitations to participate in research are less often extended to the area compared to other urban, university-associated settings. I wished to offer the school board and particularly the participants an opportunity to engage in research and have their voices heard by the wider education community.

**Participants**

For this study I used purposive sampling to select participants in order to create a participant group that was relevant to the questions and goals of the research (Schwandt, 2007). More specifically, the goal was to use a maximum variation sampling strategy (Amos Hatch, 2002; Coe, 2012; Schwandt, 2007) to provide "a wide range of cases or incidents to get variation on the concepts of interest" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 271). Using this sampling strategy, three male and three female students were recruited from senior English classes (grade 11 and 12) to participate in the study, for a total of six participants.

General recruitment was carried out by presenting information about the study to the English classrooms scheduled during the time of the study. Consent forms were distributed to all students and direction was given about returning these forms to the main office if students wished to participate. The actual selection of individuals to participate in the focus group was done randomly. After organizing the returned consent forms by academic strand (using a colour-coded paper system) and sex, forms were randomly selected from each group to create a purposive and maximally variant (as much as possible) sample of three male and three female students across the academic strands (both university and college). While my goal was to recruit a male and female student from each academic strand – university, college, and workplace – limitations to access and the consent process did not allow for this maximal variation within the group. Instead, the group of participants was made up of five university-level English students (four grade 12's, one grade 11) and one college-level English student (grade 11).Due to

my interest in the gendered literacy practices of schools, creating a balanced sample allowed both male and female voices to emerge in the research. While I validate (to a certain degree) concerns for improving boys' literacy, my focus on literacy pedagogy for improving all students' literacy achievements made this balance necessary – providing a space in which both male and female students could explore their relationship with literacy, comics, and superheroes. Furthermore, due to the fact that comics have often been associated with boys' preferred literacy interests (MOE, 2004; Moeller, 2011), this blended group generates more inclusive insight into students' perceptions of these texts and their interests to either strengthen or challenge such claims.

Similarly, seeking participants from different grade-levels and academic strands was undertaken to include a diverse group of voices on the topics of study. Although comics are commonly seen as simpler texts – stepping-stones to more complex texts or topics – my goal was to gain insight into how comics have been able to or can function in a variety of classrooms to engage students at various levels.

Finally, my decision to choose a sample group of senior students had two purposes. First, as older students these participants have the greatest amount of literacy experience to draw from. Second, superhero stories are often perceived to contain mature content not suitable for younger audiences (discussed in Chapter 3). Although content was selected purposefully to make it acceptable for student viewing, I targeted an older participant pool to help ease any potential tensions that may have obstructed access.

Before engaging in the process of data collection, informed consent was received from all participants (see *Appendix A*). However, Bold (2012) suggests that consent should be "an ongoing process throughout the research" (p. 58). Therefore, I made every effort throughout the collection phase to ensure participants understood that their involvement was voluntary, emphasizing that they could choose to opt-out of any particular aspects of the data collection process or completely withdraw from the study at any point.

**Data Collection**

Qualitative case studies often rely on the use of various data sources in order to gain a more in-depth perspective or complete picture of the case being studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Day Ashley, 2012; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Therefore, three methods of

data collection were employed for this study, including an initial entrance questionnaire, focus group discussions, and individually written reflections completed at the end of each focus group meeting. This was meant to provide participants with opportunities to share their perspective in both individual and group settings, and through written and oral communication.

Tymms (2012) indicates that questionnaires can be helpful for "exploratory work" and for establishing controls or a baseline for a study. Asking participants to reflect on their perceptions of literacy, comics and superheroes in the open-ended questionnaire for this study (see *Appendix C*) I was able to capitalize on this exploratory feature, as responses helped provide insight into participants' past experiences and interests, and helped to guide or facilitate focus group discussions in the second phase of data collection. Additionally, the questionnaire was completed before focus group meetings began, so these responses acted as a baseline to be considered alongside other data during analysis, to compare entrance responses with dialogue that emerged through discussions or reflections.

Focus group discussions formed the bulk of the data collected for this study. Focus groups bring together a selected group of participants to collectively and interactively discuss (with each other and the researcher) a particular research topic (Gibbs, 2012; Wilkinson, 1999). Through this interactive and dialogic environment, participants have the opportunity to co-construct complex ideas and use the support of the group setting to share and develop perspectives on more sensitive issues they might not have in individual interviews (Bold, 2012; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010; Gibbs, 2012). Gibbs (2012) identifies several purposes for the use of focus groups, including, "co-constructing new knowledge, gauging opinion… [and] learning from experiences" (p. 186). Considering this study's student-centered focus, new knowledge that emerges will help bolster the limited education literature on superhero fiction and literacy, while ensuring this is accomplished through the perspectives and experiences of students. Furthermore, Wilkinson (1999) suggests that the, "focus group method is well suited to exploratory, interpretive, multi-method, and phenomenological research questions" (p. 223), much like those used to guide this study.

Gibbs (2012) indicates that, "Most texts advise groups composed of between 4 and 12 people" are best, with meetings lasting "between 45 minutes and two hours" (p. 188). Based on these guidelines, I selected six participants to form the focus group for this study and we arranged to meet for 45 minutes on three separate occasions. Over the course of these meetings, participants engaged in semi-structured discussions about various topics or issues encompassed in the research interests of literacy learning, comics, and superheroes (see *Appendix D* for initial focus group outline). The semi-structured approach to these meetings was meant to help guide discussion while remaining flexible to allow new directions or ideas to emerge from participant interaction. As Riessman (2008) argues, "It is preferable, in general, to ask questions that open up topics, and allow respondents to construct answers in ways they find meaningful" (p. 24-25) – a statement that speaks to the dialogic and student-centered framework this study is built on. With this in mind, I tended to initiate the discussions, but, because participants were eager to discuss their thoughts and opinions, I spent much of the rest of these meetings focused on listening, reacting, and responding to where participants had taken the discussion. There were still times where I brought the discussion back to focal points of the research, but ultimately the focus groups were less structured than what I had planned initially.

Focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis following each focus group meeting. This, of course, was essential for ensuring that conversations were captured in whole and helped with more accurate documentation and representation of participants for analysis. However, making sure the recordings were transcribed prior to each focus group meeting also meant I was re-exposed to the data and could begin analyzing and forming more thorough notes on the discussions, following Baxter and Jack's (2008) assertion that, "data collection and analysis occur concurrently" (p. 554). This, in turn, helped to generate new points of discussion for the next meeting as well.

Before each focus group meeting, participants were given a pen and piece of paper for making notes to help keep track of their thoughts during the discussion. At the end of each meeting, participants were to complete these notes with any further discussion points they had not been able to share with the group. I called these *personal reflections*. This written data was to be viewed only by me and was meant to provide a more private outlet

for the explorations or extrapolations that participants may not have felt comfortable sharing in the full-group dialogue. Gibbs (2012) identifies that a weakness of focus groups can be the silencing of some participants in the group dynamic. Although I went in to the data collection phase hoping to avoid this silencing in the group discussions, this written component was meant to create a space for voices to be heard should they be silenced in any way.

**A note on the use of comics within the focus group.** Following the first and second focus group meetings, participants were given copied excerpts of superhero comics to read or browse prior to the next meeting. These excerpts were used to initiate discussion about the use of comics, and particularly superhero fiction, in the classroom. Specific references to the different comics are used throughout the analysis in Chapter 7 and are supported by figures that depict panels (or portions of panels) discussed during the focus group.

Excerpts were taken from *Batman: The Killing Joke* (Moore, 2008), *Batgirl Vol. 1: The Darkest Reflection* (Simone, 2012), and *All-Star Superman* (Grant Morrison, 2011), which were distributed after the first meeting, and from *Marvels* (Busiek, 2004) and *New X-Men Vol. 1* (Morrison, 2001), given to participants following the second meeting. The copying of these texts and use of these excerpts for research complies with "Fair Dealing" allowances in the *Copyright Act* (1985).

## Data Analysis

Hancock and Algozzine (2006) indicate that, "case study research is generally more exploratory," seeking to, "identify themes or categories of behavior and events" (p. 16). Thus, as a case study using subjective, semi-structured or open-ended methods, data from this study was analyzed using an inductive interpretational approach. Inductive interpretational analysis uses specific details or instances from the data to establish or recognize emerging patterns or themes that exist across or within the data sources (Amos Hatch, 2002; Creswell, 2012). Due to the "focused" nature of focus group discussions, some patterns and themes presented superficially as they tied directly to questions about literacy, comics, and superheroes. However, subjective responses to open-ended questions in the data collection required interpretive work for, "making inferences,

developing insights, attaching significance, refining understandings, [and] drawing conclusions" (Amos Hatch, 2002, p. 180) between the data and the research as a whole.

The interpretive work involved in analyzing data in this research was guided in part by the education literature on literacy learning and achievement, comics, and superheroes, and also by the study's two-pronged theoretical framework rooted in social constructions of gender and multiliteracies. Understanding that gender is a socially constructed reality (Connell, 1995, 1996, 2009; Henslin, 2014; Thorne, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987), this lens encouraged me to be cognizant of students' active constructions and/or renegotiations of identity during and between the questionnaire and focus group discussion. Calling upon Connell's (1995, 1996, 2009) work on multiple masculinities, my interpretations of the data also consider the existence of and interaction between diverse masculinities *and* femininities, and how this corroborates or contrasts the views put forward in essentialist literature. Interpreting through a multiliteracies lens, as well, reveals how participants conceptualize literacy and perceive themselves as literacy learners. It also forms a strong foundation for analyzing participants' experiences in English class and their perceptions of the viability of comics and superhero fiction as a classroom resource. However, while using the literature and my theoretical framework to inform my analysis, I took care to avoid impeding new or diverging concepts or experiences from emerging as a result of my previously held expectations or claims in the literature (Riessman, 2008).

If a case study is meant to "investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 253), then presentations of collected data and its analysis should be representative of these aims. As a result, data collected from focus group discussions is (as often as possible) presented in excerpts of dialogue that accurately capture the interactivity and "collective perspective" (Gibbs, 2012, p. 187) inherently sought through this method of data collection. In these social spaces, Vaughn (2012) asserts, "participants continuously engage in interpretative activity, negotiating and creating knowledge during the course of their social action" (p. 275). Therefore, components of discourse analysis must be incorporated during analysis of the data to consider how participants' and the interviewer's language and other "non-language

'stuff'" (Gee, 2005, p. 8), such as gestures, emotions, beliefs, etc., work to construct and negotiate the network of meanings and identities in and across particular social contexts (Gee, 2005; Silverman, 2013). When analyzing both the questionnaire and focus group data generated from this study, I paid close attention to participants' negotiation of these discursive spaces, looking at how participant voices varied between the individual and group contexts, and how this shaped their constructions of self and experience.

In coordination with the study's focus on student-centered approaches, it was essential for participants' voices to be accurately re-presented and to remain in the fore. Therefore, all data was transcribed and presented to participants prior to analysis in order to seek verification on the depiction of individuals' voices and ideas. Furthermore, in presenting the data in this thesis I made every effort to ensure that participants' thoughts and ideas were accurately expressed through their own words and voices, rather than my interpretations of what was said.

**Compromises and Limitations**

Day Ashley (2012) acknowledges that time and resource limitations can put the researcher in a position where, "you may need to make realistic compromises in the face of obstacles" (p. 38). In this study, limitations on time influenced the formation of the participant group. In the semester I began recruiting, there were no senior workplace-level English classes running. Although there would be some in the next semester, in order to stay within the research timeframe I chose to recruit from the university- and college-level courses that were running in the current semester. I did not see this as a major compromise, as it still allowed perspectives from at least two different levels within the education system to be presented in the research. The real limitation to the formation of the group resulted from a lack of consent from students in the college level courses, as only one student from this strand provided consent.

When discussing time compromises, Day Ashley (2012) also stresses that, "you should be aware of the time constraints of your participants" (p. 38). Working with six participants and trying to manage a meeting schedule could have been quite difficult, but was surprisingly not so in this particular situation. However, schedules did conflict for the second meeting, in which two of the participants had to miss the discussion due to previous commitments (one needing to attend a last minute club meeting and the other

needing to leave for a co-op placement). Although this obviously limited their participation in the discussions compared to others, I made sure these two participants' thoughts were prioritized at the beginning of the third meeting, giving them the opportunity to (1) call attention to anything they noted in the readings for the previous meeting and (2) respond to the first discussion point for the day.

During the data collection phase I also had to make a compromise on the use of personal reflections. It was my intention to have participants complete brief notes during and at the end of meetings, which would act as supplementary material to the oral discussions. The first boundary to the use of personal reflections was that participants did not seem to be interested in jotting notes during the discussion, instead remaining focused on contributing and actively listening throughout. The other boundary largely involved time management on my part, but was complicated by the rich discussion emerging out of the focus group. Although I was aware of the fact that I planned to devote time for participants to write additional notes, I felt torn between cutting discussion off to provide time for these notes and letting the conversation continue organically, relying on the notes participants took during the discussion. Ultimately, I decided on the latter, placing more emphasis on the group dialogue, while still having the opening questionnaire and students during-conversation notes as more private written contributions. Although I thought this method would be a helpful outlet for some students and manageable within the research timeframe, unfortunately I had to make some compromises in this portion of the research.

**Researcher Positioning**

Cohen et al. (2007) stress that, "researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research, seeking to understand their part in, or influence on, the research" (p. 171). Amos Hatch (2002) indicates that this reflexivity is, "essential to the integrity of qualitative research" (p. 11). Although I began this reflexive discussion in Chapter 1, it is necessary to continue it here in order to acknowledge the limitations and influences that I, as a researcher, bring to the data collection and analysis phases of this study.

First, I recognize my particular bias within the research topic and understand the need to reduce the influence of these biases during the research process to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Although I relied on my own self-regulation during

the data collection phase, presenting participants with transcribed data afterward ensured that appropriately re-presented their ideas, perspectives, and voices – a process called "member checking" (Coe, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). During the process of analysis and interpretation, Cohen et al. (2007) explain that construct validity must be demonstrated thorough, "not only confirming the construction with that given in relevant literature, but also looking for counter-examples which might falsify the researcher's construction" (p. 138). While calling upon the literature to support my constructed meanings from the data, I also highlight and grapple with "rival explanations" (Yin, 2011, p. 80) to determine the most plausible interpretations of the data. Furthermore, triangulation (Coe, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Day Ashley, 2012; Silverman, 2013) – comparing data across different sources in order to check, evaluate, and adjust interpretations – was used when reviewing my analyzed data to check for validity and accuracy of interpretation. These processes for maintaining validity also reinforced the reliability of my observations and interpretations by reassuring the likelihood that another researcher working from the same theoretical framework would draw similar conclusions (inter-rater reliability), which would also suggest that, given the research had taken place at a different time or setting, I too would have drawn the same conclusions (stability of observations) (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 148).

Second, I understand that my presence alone as a researcher has the ability to influence or shape how or what participants share (Amos Hatch, 2002; Cohen et al., 2007; Yin, 2011). This influence can be mitigated, in some instances, by establishing strong rapport with participants and creating a relationship of trust, so that participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences with the researcher (Mears, 2012). Although we were only going to be working together for a relatively short period of time, my goal was to use time at the first meeting to establish a welcoming and comfortable space in order to help form the initial bonds for a trusting relationship moving forward (see outline for first meeting in *Appendix D*). This foundational work appeared to be successful, as students willingly opened up about personal preferences in reading and writing as well as detailed experiences of past and present English classes and teachers. Perhaps the strongest evidence came in two separate instances where one participant used "badass" to describe a character and another stated that she felt pressures to write a

certain way in English class were "B.S." These examples mirror a social language that Gee (2005) describes as, "contain[ing] clues or cues for solidarity, informality, participatory communication, attention to shared values, and a focus on the social world and not the self" (p. 106). In other words, participants used language that might not have otherwise been used if they felt less comfortable in the research setting. However, these are only two specific instances from two participants and I understand that despite these appearances, my presence will still have had an influence in ways I cannot pin down.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed overview of the research methodology employed for this study. I identify how the use of a qualitative case study design is conducive to seeking answers to the research questions of this study and highlight how the methods of data collection and analysis paired with this design also align with the theoretical framework of the research and its focus on a student-centered approach. Addressing both the benefits and limitations of each data collection method, I justify my choices to use specific and multiple sources of data, including the role these can play in triangulation and their contributions to analysis. I also discuss the interpretive work that was involved in the analysis of data and the importance of presenting participants' voices in their natural and authentic form. Finally, this chapter covers the limitations and compromises involved in the research process and closes with a reflexive statement recognizing my influence as a researcher on the study.

**Chapter 5**

**"I don't see that difference personally...": Analysis of gender in student responses**

Much of the language and presentation of strategies promoted for improving boys' literacy creates distinct borders that problematically separates the "natural" interests and skills of boys and girls into a strict dichotomy (Jones & Myhill, 2004; Kehler, 2010; Martino, 2008b; Rowan et al., 2002; Sokal et al., 2005). While there are undoubtedly boys and girls who fit this binary, such uniformly oppositional views of gender are not representative of the diversity of the population as a whole (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2009; Paechter, 2001). Contributing to this conversation, this chapter uses responses from the initial questionnaire and focus group discussions to provide an introduction to the six participants involved in this study and examine the gender patterns that emerged across this data. An analysis of data taken primarily from participant questionnaires addresses the inconsistencies of gender-specific claims about learning and leisure preferences. Shifting the focus toward discussions in the focus group, the chapter also provides an analysis of the (in)visibility of gender in participant responses and how gender differences that did emerge can be interpreted within the greater social structure of classrooms and education.

**Portrait of a Focus Group**

Just as the researcher must be reflexive when conducting and presenting their work, I believe it is also important to outline and reflect on the personal contextual information participants bring to the dialogue of the research. Providing this information prior to engaging in the analysis and discussion of the data helps to create a more open environment for understanding, appreciating and challenging the data, its analysis, and the discussion surrounding it in this thesis. In no particular order, this section of the chapter briefly introduces each participant (pseudonyms have been given to all participants) and highlights some notable points that can be taken from this initial portrait. These introductions are constructed from the brief introductions at the first meeting as well as from answers to the initial questionnaire (see questions 3, 4, and 5 from *Appendix C*).

**The participants.**

***Damian.*** Damian is a grade 11, male student in university English. He is a native of the small southwestern Ontario community where the research site is located and describes himself as someone who enjoys "watching sports, not as much playing them." Damian also enjoys reading "Fantasy-Fiction such as Percy Jackson, Lord of the Rings, and Harry Potter," but has never had a chance to read comics before, though he has "always been eager to try." When asked to reflect on how he would describe himself as a learner in an English classroom, Damian said he was "very outgoing when it comes to creative work and debates. I am often the opposing side for most arguments. Which makes me an antagonist in most class discussions."

***Rachel.*** Rachel is a grade 12, female student in university English. At the first focus group meeting, Rachel was eager to point out her strong interest in pop culture and music, and said she wants to study broadcasting in university. Rachel is an active reader and writer outside of school, stating, "I write in a journal on a daily basis and I mostly read news articles as well as historical fiction and comics." Rachel's experience with comics has revolved around Marvel comics. Rachel identifies herself as "a very strong English student," and believes that, "others would agree." More specifically, Rachel says, "I'm a good writer, as in I am able to connect my ideas with people so they really know what point I'm trying to get across. I am also a very detailed writer and I pride myself on that."

***Selina.*** Selina is a grade 12, female student in university English. Selina lives in a small town neighbouring the community where the school is located, but explained that she has a job in the school-town. Selina also shared that she wants to go on an exchange to Australia this summer. Selina's reading interests outside of school include, "adventure and fantasy novels," (indicating she had some experience reading comics and specifically manga) and she also shared that she, "used to write creative short stories as well." Reflecting on her English skills, Selina says, "I have the capability to express myself well in English class. I think I'm quite capable of writing detail and staying on point. My teachers might tell me to communicate my ideas further."

***Todd.*** Todd is a grade 11, male student in college English. In his introduction, Todd expressed that he had "moved around a lot" when he was younger but that he now lives a short distance from the school. Outside of school, Todd said, "I read comics,

mystery novels, and sometimes I write about random things and try to make a 'story' about it." Discussing his abilities as an English student, Todd stated, "I am a strong reader and I enjoy the subject," also adding, "My teacher says I am a strong reader and I work hard in class."

*Vicki.* Vicki is a grade 12, female student in university English. Vicki recently moved to Canada (two years ago) from a country in Europe. Vicki expressed a desire to become a journalist, sharing that she had lined up a co-op at the local newspaper for the next semester. She also highlighted music and debating as some personal interests, and said she enjoys "fantasy reading," including Harry Potter and Game of Thrones. Vicki admitted having no experience with comics, saying, "Even though I'm really into science fiction I just never happened to have read a comic before, I'm not sure why." As an English student, Vicki explains, "I sometimes have trouble organizing my essays, but I think I am a good English student." Vicki acknowledged that she thought her teacher would agree with her assessment, finishing with a side note that she does well "with a lot of hard work."

*Jason*. Jason is a grade 12, male student in university English. When he grows up to be "a big boy," Jason says he wants to be a computer programmer. Jason enjoys live comedy and reading the horror genre, identifying himself as "a huge Stephen King fan." Besides Stephen King, Jason is also interested in reading the books that some of his favourite movies are based on and has experience reading comics such as Deadpool, Spider-Man, Spider Girl, Batman, and The Simpsons Comic. Reflecting on his performance as an English student, Jason stated, "I'd say that I have good ideas but I have trouble expanding and developing them as well as proving my arguments. My teachers and peers have all said the same thing."

**Some additional notes on Jason.** The above profiles were initially planned as a standalone section in this chapter – a brief introduction to each participant with relatively equal space devoted to each. However, reflecting back on Jason's responses to the questionnaire and observing his participation in the focus group, I find it necessary to pause on his profile to make a few notes that will help direct the remainder of this chapter.

Why is Jason's profile of particular interest? Jason (at least the Jason I observed in focus groups and on paper) embodies the "boy" image set out by much of the literature concerned with the state of boys' education. His interest in comedy, horror novels, comic books, and computer programming align with findings that suggest boys are drawn to humour, violence, action, and technology (Blair & Sanford, 2004; MacDonald, 2005; MOE, 2004, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Jason also expresses a token lack of interest in English class, bluntly stating, "I am not a fan of it. I don't look forward to going to class." Expanding on these feelings later in the focus group, Jason says,

> English is a boring subject, to me personally. So anybody who's been in my
> English class can say I zone out. I just, it's not a matter of not wanting to
> participate, I'm just not interested in what we're talking about, or I don't care
> enough, so I'll just zone out…

This lack of interest can easily be tied to two concerns in the essentialist discourse. First, it may be perceived as the result of insufficient boy-friendly texts or topics being used in class – connected to critiques of the "feminized" nature of the English subject (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; MOE, 2004; Pirie, 2002). Or, when paired with his earlier statement that he struggles with "expanding and developing" his ideas, Jason's attitude toward English class reflects Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and MacDonald's (2005) argument that boys tend to create negative associations with or withdraw from tasks that they feel incompetent in or incapable of performing.

I highlight these few points to acknowledge that the "boy"-ness discussed in so much of the boys' literacy literature was actualized in my research. However, I also make note of it to emphasize that while it does exist, it is only representative of one of the three boys in this study. Understanding potential sample bias, I do not wish to claim that this proportion reflects real-world circumstances. I simply wish to reiterate that the hegemonic or stereotypical and undifferentiated representations of boys in a wide swath of the literature are inaccurate in assuming that boys, or what it means to be a boy, can be encompassed in a single (often narrow) set of interests and behaviours. Similarly, generalizations cannot and should not be made about girls.

**Disrupting the boy-girl dichotomy: Gender patterns in the initial questionnaire**

Jason's profile offers an interesting introduction to the topic of gender in this study, as his story (in the context of this research) plays to the arguments of both sides in the boys' literacy debate. Similar extended profiles of each participant could have been provided to gain further insight into the relationships or trends between gender and literacy interests or practices. However, gender trends (or lack thereof) in this study are more pointedly illustrated through an analysis of the data from the initial questionnaire (with some support from focus group discussions). Four key findings emerged from participants' responses about their experiences as English students and their literacy practices both in and out of school.

**Positive perceptions of performance.** When reasoning through the gender gap in literacy, boys' poor attitude toward reading is a common point of reference (CCL, 2009; MOE, 2004; OECD, 2015). In the document, "Why Boys Don't Like To Read," the CCL (2009) states, "Boys spend less time reading than girls, are less motivated to pick up a book, do not value reading as an activity, are less confident readers and see themselves as having lower reading skills than girls" (p. 4). In this study, all six participants (including three boys) alluded to a positive aspect of their performance in English classrooms, suggesting a certain level of confidence in their reading ability (in the questionnaire, three participants responded specifically about the role of reading in English class). Todd (a college-strand student) was the only participant to directly address his reading skills, identifying himself as "a strong reader." Three participants (two female and one male) indicated areas for improvement in English class, but these were all with respect to their writing abilities.

The boys in this study therefore act counter to popular essentialist findings that suggest boys are naturally disadvantaged in this skill area (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; MOE, 2004; Pirie, 2002) and also appear to overcome barriers outlined in anti-essentialist research that shows boys denounce English skills as a result of its perceived femininity (Martino, 1999; Sokal et al., 2005; Watson et al., 2010). MacDonald (2005) might argue that the confidence these boys' express in their English abilities could stem from a need to maintain their masculine "status" in front of their peers, which can be reduced by publicly failing at certain tasks or admitting weakness. However, considering participants were made aware of the fact that only I would be reading their responses, the reduced

threat of peer scrutiny narrows the likelihood for that motive. Instead, I argue that these boys simply represent a divergent masculinity from others presented in boys' literacy research. They are comfortable with and proud of their identities as capable English students (in both the college and university academic strands). Their voluntary participation in a reading-based study renders these findings rather unsurprising, but stressing that these identities do exist among boys highlights the need to avoid generalizations about boys' performance in literacy and especially claims about boys' natural or innate disadvantage.

**Out-of-school reading habits.** In "Me Read? Now Way!" the MOE (2004) highlights that, "Boys have much less interest in leisure reading than girls do" (p. 6). This claim has been supported in reports by the CCL (2009) and more recently in an OECD (2015) report on gender gaps in education. However, all the participants in this study indicated leisure or out-of-school reading habits from a wide range of media, including fiction and non-fiction books, news articles, and comics. There was no measure on the questionnaire of how often participants were engaging in this leisure reading, which would give a better indication of how well these findings support or refute findings or claims from the aforementioned reports. The only participant who did give evidence of the time they spent reading was Todd, who very broadly said in a focus group discussion, "I read all the time." Still, the fact that all three boys shared about reading habits outside of school is important for bolstering evidence that some boys participate quite actively in reading outside of school.

**Reading preferences.** Acquiring boy-friendly resources and choosing boy-friendly topics has been touted by many as a productive solution for closing the gender gap in literacy classrooms (Brozo, 2013; Hall & Coles, 2001; MOE, 2004, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Sokal et al., 2005). According to literature on boys' reading interests, boys are drawn to stories with action, adventure, humour, (sometimes) violence, and male protagonists (MOE, 2004, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Sokal et al., 2005). Informational texts, newspapers, magazines, comics, and electronic texts are also frequently associated with boys' interests (Blair & Sanford, 2004; CCL, 2009; Sokal et al., 2005), along with the fantasy and science fiction genres (CCL, 2009; MOE, 2004). In

documenting these interests, an oppositional gender divide is often stated or implied, where boys' interests are contrasted with girls (Kehler, 2010; Watson et al., 2010).

Responses from participants in this study did not adhere to the expectations laid out in the literature discussed above. Of the three participants who expressed an interest in the fantasy genre, two were female and both Vicki and Damian shared an overlapping interest in the Harry Potter series. Rachel was the only participant to declare an interest in non-fiction leisure reading – another "boy" interest (Hall & Coles, 2001; MOE, 2004) – saying she enjoyed news articles and later sharing in the focus group an interest in biographies or life stories. Only two participants (one boy and one girl) initially stated that they read comics for leisure. However when prompted to list their prior experience with comic books or graphic novels, four participants (two boys and two girls) wrote that they had previous experience reading comics – none of which came from in-school activities. Aside from Jason's interest in the horror genre, participants diverged greatly from perceived gendered reading interests.

**Debating.** In *Boy Smarts: Mentoring boys for success at school*, MacDonald (2005) explains,

> For boys in particular, debate can be an especially engaging, challenging, and exciting pursuit as it combines elements of competition with collaboration… In debate, boys have the opportunity to get *all fired up* and channel their testosterone in useful ways that demands an element of rigor, sometimes missing for boys in many classrooms. (pp. 161-62, original emphasis)

MacDonald (2005) uses heavily gendered language in this passage to suggest that boys, specifically, enjoy and will benefit from debate. His statements are reflective of much of the dichotomous language of "Me Read? No Way!," which also suggests that "intellectual sparring" (MOE, 2004, p. 33) is a useful strategy for engaging boys. Once again though, participants in this study did not follow the trend, with one boy and one girl expressing an interest in debating during class.

The data presented showcases the diversity and similarities that exist across this group of students and its implications for understanding student and classroom diversity. In fact, four of the grade 12 university English student participants, who had both shared and disparate interests and skills, were actually in an English class together during the

semester this data was collected. Although the data is based on a small and, in some ways, biased sample, it is necessary to consider how these findings draw attention to the ineffectiveness or inaccuracy of a strict boy-girl dichotomy in the literacy discourse. It raises questions about generalizations and whether literacy learning strategies can or should be prescribed based on gender. While it is important to be mindful of the limitations of the sample, the evidence that emerges from this study identifies that dichotomizing literacy strategies poorly represents the interests of *all* students and limits the learning opportunities for boys and girls who fall outside the boundaries of this dichotomy.

**The (in)visibility of gender and social influences on perceptions: Gender in discussions**

Data from the questionnaire clearly helps to destabilize thinking about gender-specific preferences upheld by proponents of the boy crisis discourse. Although contributing partially to the discussion above, data from the focus group illustrates how participants perceive gender differences in their school experiences.

**The (in)visibility of gender.** The language used in discussions about boys' disadvantaged position in literacy classrooms suggests a stark and undeniable reality. Yet, in discussion with six students living this apparent reality, it was not significant enough to emerge organically in the focus groups.

In conversations about the positive aspects and shortcomings of English class, including some thoughts on struggling students (particularly readers), gender was not giving as a determinant in either equation. In other words, positive or negative reactions to English were never connected to gender advantages or disadvantages and struggling students were not identified by gender. When discussing comics – often identified and used as a boy resource – gender was not a factor in the participants' statements about the benefits or downfalls of the comic medium. The same was true when focusing specifically on superhero content.

This is not to suggest that the participants are blind to gender or that gender has no bearing on how they perceive their own experiences or those of others. There were times where gender preferences could be read as implied in some participants' responses. For example, Vicki explains that *Batgirl* was, "great as an entertaining story, but it has so

much action and stuff – which is great because it's a comic, you know – but I just didn't see English potential there." Vicki is not distancing herself from this typically boy-friendly characteristic here, but implicitly acknowledges that action texts (boy-friendly texts) are not represented or have no place in the English curriculum. Immediately after this statement, Rachel counters that, "There's something in there with, like, relationships too that you can analyze," thus adhering to claims about the girl-friendly, emotional draws of literature (Hall & Coles, 2001; MOE, 2004). While this supports essentialist literature, Jason and Todd's later interest in the relationships between mutant outcasts in *X-Men* neutralizes the conclusions that can be drawn from Rachel's statement. All this being said, the initial evidence provided in this section does show that without prompting, participants were not inclined to make explicit references about gender differences or imbalances.

Nearing the end of our third and final focus group meeting, I addressed participants directly about gender issues in literacy or what they have experienced in English class. Up until this point I had been adamant about refraining from interjecting with gender-based prompts that might limit the scope of the conversation and to avoid imposing any personal bias that might impact participant responses throughout the study. Recognizing this would be the last topic of discussion and therefore would not shape any other responses, I asked the group about their thoughts on gender differences in literacy and English class,

So something that comes up in a lot of the other research I've been reading about English classes and comics and stuff is that there is often a difference between boys and girls in English class… I just kinda want to get your perceptions of that. Would you say that there is– that that's true, that there's a difference? Um, and what would be your observations or personal feelings about that?

Even in this prompt I try to remain vague about what these "differences" in the literature are in an attempt to initiate but not influence participants' opinions.

Amidst some discussion about noticeable gender differences (to be discussed shortly), a quick exchange involving Vicki and Jason highlights the continued (in)visibility of gender differences for some students. In response to an initial point by

Damian, I begin to ask for additional clarification when Vicki jumps into the
conversation:

JC:     Right. Do you find that there's a very distinct divide in–

Vicki:  I personally don't see it – that much of a difference.

Jason:  Not as much. Not as specific as that. (*in reference to an example from
Damian*)

Vicki:  Like, in English class, daily, like, writing essays on *1984*, like, how
much people get involved or pay attention. I – there was only like three
or four people, four boys, in our class this year, but, I don't know, I
just don't, I don't see a big difference. Like, maybe if you tell me a
specific topic that there's a difference, then I'll say, like "Oh yeah,
there is that"–

Vicki is forthright in expressing the absence of gender differences in her experiences in
English class. While both Vicki and Jason give very general responses initially, Vicki
substantiates her claims with astute observations about writing and paying attention in
class. Interestingly, Vicki also draws attention to the limited number of boys in her class,
not to point out a gender imbalance in higher academic strands of literacy learning, but to
seemingly explain that her observations about boys are taken from a small sample size.

Vicki's final line is pivotal. In a way it complicates the firmness of her
observations by suggesting that what she sees or thinks could be overturned by another's
point of view – falling in line with the "compliant girls" discourse that Jones and Myhill
(2004) critique. At the same time it may simply showcase a positive character trait – her
openness to considering others' thoughts or opinions. Either way, Vicki admits that
interactions with others have the potential to shape her thinking, much like anyone else.
This validates concerns about my influence on participants in this study, but on a broader
level speaks to how gender norms are constructed and maintained through social
experience.

**Social constructions of gender and the problematic divide.** Reilly (2010)
argues that, "the social and cultural context of learning shapes the perceptions of students
and particularly their attitudes toward gender" (p. 69). With this in mind, I strived to

maintain open and unbiased lines of communication in the focus group to see how students' perceptions of gender, literacy and superhero fiction would naturally take shape. Despite the construction of literacy and comic use as gendered topics in education discourse, participants never expressed gender as an external factor influencing either their experiences in English class or their thoughts about the use of comics in the classroom. However, when prompted, participants began reading into their experiences to show how gender differences were also *visible* in the classroom. Interestingly, this visibility was not related to any of the "natural" gender differences in performance indicated in the essentialist literature. Instead, it was rooted in the presentation of content that adhered to and perpetuated gender stereotypes.

Damian was the first to respond about the gender differences he noticed, specifically in regard to a question on his final English exam:

Damian: I'd say that, yeah, it's pretty– it's fairly true, because, like, in, like, in looking at what I had for an exam, we had a choice of what essay we got to write. I, like, there was a bunch of choices, one of them including, uh, university sports, whether players should get paid, or the feminist movement. I would guarantee you that none of the guys wrote about the feminist movement, and, lean towards the university…

JC: Why do you think that is?

Damian: Well, like, the comfort of, like, of what you're writing about, like, females, um, all of them have their opinions on it. Some of them think that it's not true, some of them think they are being deprived of their rights. Meanwhile, guys would rather stay out of it because personally it's not our problem. I feel females have their rights just as much as males do, but I feel like wasting your money paying university players is more of an appealing argument to me. So there's always that, the opinion that will generate around both sexes, that will differ what they write about and potentially what they get graded on, because of the content of what it may contain.

Damian's responses mirrors findings in a study by Cummings (1994) that revealed, "A considerable number of students (14%) saw gender issues evolving from instructional practices" (p. 198). Here, Damian very easily deciphers that these two questions are constructed to appeal to boys and girls separately and explains that the choice of one over the other is based on "comfort." While this "comfort" could be interpreted as a boy's natural inclination toward the boy-friendly topic of sport, Damian's response implies that the "comfort" is more about avoiding tensions created by a deeply gendered and taboo topic.

The way Damian explains the situation, girls have varying opinions on feminism, while "guys would *rather stay out of it* because personally it's not our problem." He does not say that boys do not also have opinions on it – in fact, he expresses his own thoughts briefly in his comments – but suggests that this is a complicated conversation where boys opinions (likely referring to those similar to his own) would likely raise uncomfortable tension. Looking again at his final statement from above, Damian also says that, "the opinion that will generate around both sexes, that will differ what they write about and *potentially what they get graded on, because of the content of what it may contain*." One interpretation of this statement suggests that if Damian's position on feminism is one of dissent in his class (he writes in the questionnaire that he is often the "antagonist" in many class discussions), then perhaps he feels he would not be graded well for expressing how he truly feels if he were writing on feminism. Therefore, the sports question becomes almost a default for the boys, in Damian's mind. Rachel follows up on Damian's example arguing, "they should have more of, like, a general question. Like those– it's kind of like two ends of the spectrum right there, instead of, like, two more general questions that can go either way." While Rachel does not try to deconstruct the gender stereotypes at play or reaffirm Damian's particular views, she does recognize the potential limitations these questions impose on student choice.

Jason and Rachel's experiences (classmates in another English class) covering gendered topics in class (once again, feminism here) paint a very different picture:

> Jason:   I felt this course was unisex this year, because, like, we had, like you said, four or five or six boys out of the twenty-something, right? And, taught by a female teacher too. I never saw any spike, in the… like…

JC:     You didn't feel like there was any sort of disconnect, or–

Jason:  No, no, like even when one of the theories was feminist theory, right, I never felt like she tried to appeal to any of the girls, or tried to dis-appeal to any of the guys, or tried to even convince the guys of anything, right? [*background agreement from other participants*] She just told us the facts of what the theory was, and then she moved on. And I–

Rachel: She taught us as a whole.

When discussing value-laden, political, or "controversial" topics, Reilly (2010) argues, "the challenge is to try to provide the space for students to express their views whilst encouraging them to consider alternative perspectives, thereby shaping students to become critically reflective about literary and real worlds" (p. 77). In this case, although there are clearly marked gender lines or assumptions in this excerpt, the more open approach to teaching feminism in this class reduced barriers that might prevent students from engaging with this or other topics that could be read as gendered, ultimately leading to a more positive experience for these students.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined how questionnaire and focus group data from this study complicate the gender assumptions put forward in much of the literature addressing boys' underachievement in literacy. Participants' responses to the questionnaire clearly illustrate that literacy interests are not divisible by gender – that much of what has been so clearly defined as "boy-friendly" is actually equally "girl-friendly." I have also analyzed how conversations within the focus groups provide insight into how social expectations and previous learning experiences can shape students' perceptions of gender and influence the choices they make. Importantly, I also make note of the absence of gender considerations in participants' dialogue on experiences in English class and using comics as a classroom resource. This chapter acts as an important lead into the findings discussed in the next chapter, as it helps to temper the emphasis on gender as a primary concern when focusing on issues in literacy learning and the potential uses of comics in English classrooms.

# Chapter 6

## "Change is necessary": The limitations of traditional literacy pedagogy and the multiliteracies potential of superhero fiction

The focus on gender as a determinant of success (or lack thereof) in literacy classrooms has prevailed in education discourse despite a wide swath of literature (Epstein et al., 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2001; Kehler, 2013; Martino, 2008a; Rowan et al., 2002; Warrington & Younger, 2000; Watson et al., 2010; Weaver-Hightower, 2003) that challenges its essentialist foundation. As discussed in Chapter 1, the boy crisis discourse and the initiatives that emerge out of it (such as the MOE's (2004) "Me Read? No Way!"), are problematic insofar as they perpetuate a limited construction of masculinity and present certain behaviours, interests and skills as natural and distinct to all boys (Kehler, 2013; Martino, 2008b). Mounting evidence, including the data from this study presented in Chapter 5, has shown how the simplistic boy-girl dichotomy employed in essentialist gender reform efforts does not provide a realistic representation of students' diverse interests, skills, and identities (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Epstein, et al., 1998; Hammett & Sanford, 2008b; Jones & Myhill, 2004; Kehler, 2010, 2013).

Gender reform initiatives have also problematically sensationalized boys as a coherent and undifferentiated group of underachievers compared to girls, disregarding the fact that many boys are doing quite well in school, while many girls are doing poorly (Jones & Myhill, 2004; Rowan et al., 2002; Warrington & Younger, 2000). Interestingly, in the wake of the MOE's (2004, 2009) boys' literacy efforts, Ontario has experienced a general downtrend in high school literacy rates over the last five years as a result of lower success rates for both boys *and* girls fully participating in the OSSLT (EQAO, 2013b). The drop in the overall success rate is a mere 3% (from 85% to 82% between 2009 and 2013) (EQAO, 2013b). However, put into context with the steady 8% gap between boys and girls (over the same time period) that has continued to garner attention, this small drop reveals the disconcerting reality that the time and resources invested in boys' education have not only failed to improve boys' literacy rates, but have also allowed literacy rates among the general student body to slip. Considering Martino and Kehler's (2007) critique of the weak research-based evidence for essentialist gender reform initiatives, such a result is not surprising. While many, including Martino and Kehler

(2007), have argued that other social factors (such as socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity) should be prioritized when addressing underachievement in literacy (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Martino, 2008a; Warrington & Younger, 2000; Watson, 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2003), Martino and Kehler (2007) also believe that, "Attention must be directed to an examination of pedagogical practices that are conducive to simultaneously promoting higher order thinking and engaging students actively in learning" (2007, pp. 424-25). Data presented in this chapter corroborates these claims, as participants give insight into students' growing loss of interest in English class as a result of stagnant, exclusionary, traditional literacy pedagogy.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I present three common threads (traditional pedagogy, traditional texts, the process of analyzing) in participants' discussion about literacy and literacy learning, connecting them to overarching themes of limitation and exclusionary practices in literacy pedagogy, and the loss of interest in English learning. Throughout this section I also call upon evidence from participant discussions to argue that the focus of literacy concerns should shift away from perceived gender differences as a starting point for literacy reform, toward gaining a better understanding of how students (regardless of gender) view their learning and what practices they find engaging.

In the second section, I explore the potential for superhero comics to contribute to addressing these shortcomings, highlighting participants' expanding views of literacy, their appreciation for relevant and relatable characters and storylines, and natural engagement in critical discussion after reading excerpts of four different superhero comics.

**"There's a limit": Students' conceptions of literacy and experiences in English class**

Despite the obvious technological and social changes that necessitate the need for literacy reform, and efforts in the literature to broaden understandings of literacy or litera*cies* beyond traditional views (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Kress, 2000b; Lankshear et al., 1997; New London Group, 1996), relatively little has changed in schools over the last hundred years with regard to literacy pedagogy (Hicks, Young, Kajder, & Hunt, 2012). When asked to define "literacy" or what being "literate" means, participants emphasized basic comprehension in reading and/or writing, with many connecting this to the

development and necessity of skills in communication. These conceptions of literacy reflect what Kalantzis and Cope (2012) call the "old basics" (p. 3) of literacy pedagogy, where the value of traditional reading and writing take precedence. This is most clearly expressed in Jason's comment about how, "way back when they were teaching us and trying to develop our reading and writing skills, that's when there was more focused on literacy *itself*" (emphasis added). Through his experiences, Jason has come to understand that literacy *is* (intrinsically) basic skills in reading and writing. His statement also implies that the intense focus on learning "old basics" is relegated to the early years of education. However, participants' unanimity in defining literacy in traditional terms and the learning experiences they describe in the focus group discussions highlight that there remains a strong, traditional foundation to the literacy pedagogy of English classrooms.

The importance of basic literacy skills must be respected, but the New London Group (1996) argue that clinging solely to a traditional conception of literacy restricts literacy pedagogy to, "formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (p. 61). Similarly, Kress (2000a) asserts, "The focus on language alone has meant a neglect, an overlooking, even a suppression of the potentials of all the representational and communicational modes in particular cultures" (p. 157). These attitudes have reverberated throughout the work of multiliteracies scholars who argue that the limitations of traditional literacy fail to represent the diverse, multimodal literacy practices students engage in outside of the classroom (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000c; Kalantzis & Cope, 2000; Kress, 2000a, 2000b). Unfortunately, this limited, traditional approach to literacy is precisely what is assessed in standardized testing (Tienken, 2014) – the popular mode through which "success" and "failure" in literacy education are determined, and the root of the panic surrounding boys' perceived literacy woes.

Speaking about the work of Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), Alvermann (2002) explains that,

> various instructional practices, while important, do not directly impact student
> outcomes (e.g., time spent reading independently, achievement on standardized
> tests, performance assessments, and beliefs about reading). Instead, the level of
> student engagement (including its sustainability over time) is the mediating factor,

or avenue, through which classroom instruction influences student outcomes. (p. 192)

Yet, gaps in standardized testing results related to boys' literacy achievement have consumed the literacy discourse in education, leading to attempts at gender reform largely focused on quick-fix interventions or instructional practices directed solely at boys (as they are defined by the narrow scope of hegemonic masculinity). The absence of gendered trends in literacy practices and interests in this study (discussed in the previous chapter) raises questions about the efficacy of gender-centered initiatives for addressing literacy achievement. Rather than viewing their learning through a gendered lens and bringing boys' literacy achievement into focus, participants' responses uncover the overarching themes that traditional literacy pedagogy imposes limitations on the scope of literacy learning often leading to exclusion (of texts, students and their ideas) and has led to a waning interest in English classrooms, potentially the source for underachievement or dropping literacy rates in education.

**Traditional literacy pedagogy: The impacts of a language-intensive curriculum.** Kress (2000a) explains that the use and prevalence of certain semiotic modes in various cultures are dictated by a history of social and cultural instillation that privilege specific communicational and representational forms. This is evident in the context of the Ontario education system, as students receive mandatory English education throughout their schooling, where the dominant focus (perhaps not surprisingly) is on language development (MOE, 2007a, 2007b). However, the Ontario English curriculum is also "dedicated to developing the knowledge and skills on which literacy is based" (2007a, 2007b, p. 3) – tying "literacy" directly to language development. For Kress (2000a), this "single, exclusive and intensive focus on written language has dampened the full development of all kinds of human potentials, through all the sensorial possibilities of human bodies, in all kinds of respects, cognitively and affectively" (p. 157). In other words, in our multisensory reality where communication and representation are becoming increasingly multimodal, literacy-learning opportunities are restricted to modes rooted in language.

***"When it comes down to it, you're still writing": Jason's Frustrations.*** An exchange between Vicki and Jason in the focus group reveals the frustrations of some students with how deeply entrenched traditional literacy practices are:

> Vicki: … like, I think teachers should bring out other components to English class. Like, I think there's more to it than– mind you, that's difficult, because, in this English course we had this year, we did do different things. Like we did do a video, and we did, like, a creative assignment.
>
> Jason: But at the end of it, it was an essay every two weeks pretty much it felt like.
>
> Vicki: Yeah, but there was like so much writing to it. Like even though they try to incorporate more creative, or, like, different stuff, there is so much writing to it, that if you are like Jason and don't like writing…
>
> Jason: Right. Like, and even the creative stuff, like we wrote a video. We had to write a couple pages describing why we did it, what's so important about what we did, the motifs and the themes and stuff. So like, when it comes down to it, you're still writing.

Jason recognizes that even in "creative" assignments that attempt to move away from traditional literacy practices, writing is still prioritized or is used to *validate* these activities.

In their review of a century's worth of writing in the *English Journal* (*EJ*), Hicks et al. (2012) explain that over this time tentative venturing into progressive pedagogy has resulted in a slow evolution of literacy practices in schools. As Hicks et al. (2012) describe, "What emerges is a slow dance, one where teacher-authors in *EJ* dare to look ahead toward bold changes in writing instruction and the integration of media and technology, yet quickly return to what is known" (pp. 69-70). Bailey (2009) corroborates this with evidence of a teacher in her study who, despite incorporating technology and alternative literacies, still struggles to view these as autonomous literacy practices rather than "hooks" to lure students back to learning traditional print literacy. This appears to be the case with Jason and Vicki's teacher as well. There is an effort to branch out from traditional practices, but rather seeing these new designs as independent literacy products (containing meaning to be read, analyzed, and re-designed), there is a dependence on written language to provide the "real" literacy work of the assignment.

As Vicki and Jason's dialogue alludes, the dependence on traditional literacy has also created a divide between the everyday work of classrooms and "creative" assignments. First, this is problematic as it suggests that the traditional practices of reading and writing are not also creative endeavours – likely due to the formalized writing and skill-and-drill practices often employed in literacy classrooms. Second, by constantly supplementing alternative literacy practices with print literacy, a precedent is set that identifies print literacy as having value in its own right compared to other, "dependent" modes of communication and representation.

Elliot Eisner (2002) confronts this mindset in his book *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, where he explains that the arts have been pushed to the margins of an education model focused on efficiency, test results, and "hard" subjects. This, despite the fact that, "many of the most complex and subtle forms of thinking take place when students have an opportunity either to work meaningfully on the creation of images – whether visual, choreographic, musical, literary, or poetic – or to scrutinize them appreciatively" (2002, pp. xi-xii). Multiliteracies scholars have tried to harness what Eisner (2002) describes through the recognition of the multimodality of the world's representational forms and the creative process of design, where meaning making in any mode (including those of traditional literacy) can only be accomplished through creatively designing and re-designing available existing meanings (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2000a). Continuing to separate "creative" learning experiences (typically multimodal or alternative literacy practices) from traditional literacy activities disconnects students from the multisensory realities they grow up learning to navigate (Eisner, 2002; Kress, 2000b), ultimately limiting their potential to be creative, critical, and active meaning-makers in the world outside of school.

*"I just don't see how the same education can work for every student": Vicki's critique of traditional literacy practices.* Apart from its failure to prepare students for negotiating multimodal meanings in the world outside of school, Vickie indicates that traditional literacy practices (the reading- and writing-heavy curriculum of English) also contribute to students' loss of interest in English as a subject and their exclusion from some aspects of literacy learning. During the first focus group discussions, Vicki says,

> And there's so many kids in high school that, you know, they might not take–
> 'cause university English is required to go to university. And I understand it
> because you're going to have to do a lot writing in university and you need the
> skills, but they might be dis-encouraged to take university English because, you
> know, you're going to have to do a lot of reading and stuff …

There is tension in Vicki's statement between her future-oriented preamble and what she sees as restrained learning practices, but she understands that the intensive reading and writing in English is an obstacle that could limit some students' participation in English class or deter them from the subject completely. Vicki's observation is contiguous with Cope and Kalantzis's (2009) belief that, "a pedagogy that restricts learning to one artificially segregated mode will favour some types of learners over others" (p. 180), leading to the exclusion of some students who are likely capable literacy learners, but whose strengths are in other modes (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kress 2000b).

Essentialist proponents of the boy crisis discourse have attempted to claim traditional literacy's potentially exclusionary practices as an issue uniquely impeding boys' opportunities to succeed in literacy. As a result, some gender reform efforts have attempted to tackle the limited pedagogy of traditional literacy through progressive pedagogical reform. For example, in "Me Read? No Way!" the MOE (2004) stresses the need to (among other things) diversify the reading resources made available to students, channel the arts in literacy learning, encourage social interaction, and incorporate technology in the classroom. However, these pedagogical strategies are targeted at *boys* and presented as solutions to *their* distinct literacy issues, despite their relevance to the learning needs and preferences of many girls and the impartiality of some boys.

Interestingly, though not surprising (considering the evidence from the previous chapter), Vicki never mentions gender as a factor for exclusion. Her perspective as a student, removed from the boys' literacy discourse, provides important grassroots insight into pedagogical concerns that have been continually constructed as a gender issue, but which Vicki seems to understand are more generally influential,

> I don't know, I just, I think the system, one of the main problems is that it's to
> each our own… maybe I'm thinking about the problem without considering if the

solutions are possible, but I just don't see how the same education can work for

every student…

Siding with the broadly encompassing views of Vicki, Cope and Kalantzis (2009) argue that shortsighted pedagogical strategies that fail to consider the learning needs of the wider student population like those tied to essentialist gender reform, result in "ineffectiveness, inefficiencies and thus wasted resources in a form of teaching that does not engage with each and every learner in a way that will optimize their performance outcomes" (p. 188). As I have noted earlier, this appears to be the case in Ontario, where boys' literacy initiatives have failed to improve literacy rates for boys while also allowing overall literacy rates to fall (EQAO, 2013b).

Nearing the end of the final focus group, Vicki adds,

Another big problem I think, um, that you said that makes people lose interest in

English class or whatever… I think exactly, yeah, what I said, they'll lose interest

over the years. You get someone like Jason who doesn't like writing essays, and

that's all you do in English class…

Jason's narrative in this study does reinforce Vicki's point, as he is frustrated with the amount of writing they do and its interference with alternative learning activities, contributing to his view that "English is a boring subject." It is also supported by Csikszentmihalyi (2014), who argues that when, "you feel that your skills are not being used, *that there is no opportunity for you to express your skills*, then you would be bored" (p. 138, my emphasis). Therefore, as long as English classrooms remain rooted in a single dominant form of literacy (language-intensive, written literacy practices), students' whose skill set falls outside of this focus will have trouble maintaining motivation and interest, likely resulting in impeded participation and lowered achievement.

**"There's no variety": Defusing the canon and the importance of relevant, student-centered learning.** Since written language has been historically nurtured as the culturally dominant form of representation, and therefore the primary focus of literacy education, inevitably print texts have maintained their position as the principal literacy resource. While it has already been argued that this monomodal approach to literacy does not reflect the multimodal environments students navigate outside the classroom, students' textual encounters are further restricted by ideological barriers that privilege

certain print texts (namely those from the literary canon) in literacy classrooms (Carter, 2008; Freebody, Luke, & Gilbert, 1991; Hibbert et al., 2012; Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). This hierarchy of cultural or literary merit discredits, and often excludes, the literacy resources students engage with outside the classroom, deleteriously impacting students' conceptions of themselves as literacy learners (specifically readers and writers) (Hall & Coles, 2001) and ultimately leading to disengagement in the classroom.

During the focus group discussions, a subtle hostility in the tone of the dialogue revealed participants' simmering frustrations concerning classroom content,

Damian:   There's no variety. It's always the same thing every year. Like, *Lord of the Flies* in grade 10 English, uh, *The Pearl* in grade 9, then… it's always the same things every year. There's no change – so, all the students hear about it and they don't, they lose interest over the years, through the generations–

Jason:   You talk to your parents and they read pretty much the same stuff too.

Damian:   So when there's no change–

Vicki:   My Dad read *1984* in school.

At another point, Rachel also questions, "A lot of these, older novels, like, are we necessarily going to like those?" capturing her uncertain, but strong disenchantment with the aged texts often used in English classes. While some of these comments may, on the surface, appear to focus trivially on the age of texts, this exchange triggered a turning point in the discussion that unraveled participants' contention toward the stagnancy in school reading lists. Nicol (2008) argues that although she understands the cultural value of passing on iconic texts from the canon, in order to foster students' appreciation for literature, "as English teachers we should constantly reevaluate the suitability of the texts we prescribe" (p. 22), making sure reading selections are, "examined for their context in our students' own worlds" (p. 24). As participants in this study explain, this includes texts that are both relevant to students' lives and that cater to their literary interests or preferences.

***Infusing relevance.*** Increasing student engagement through relevant learning experiences is a pedagogical strategy that has been widely supported in the literature (Alvermann, 2002, 2006b; Brozo, 2013; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Giroux & Freire, 1989;

Hagood et al., 2010; Hall & Coles, 2001; Hibbert et al., 2012; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Lenters, 2007; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011; New London Group, 1996; Savage, 2008; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). For the New London Group (1996), in order to be relevant, "learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore or erase, the different *subjectivities* – interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes – that students bring to learning" (p. 72, original emphasis). It also means that learning experiences should emerge from the lifeworlds of students, so that what they engage with in school is directly connected to their socio-cultural contexts (Dewey, 1963; Freire, 1987; Kalantzis & Cope, 2000b; Nicol, 2008).

Participants were not entirely disgruntled about the use of older texts in the classroom. Prior to the exchange above, Vicki and Jason acknowledged the merit of *1984*, Jason crediting the book as "timeless" and "more applicable now [than when it was published] with all the technology that we *do* have." As Jason's comments reveal, the key for developing an appreciation of this text was its particular relevance to the current technological age – its deep connection to students' immediate context.

Interestingly, Jason's enthusiasm for the relevance of *1984* once again aligns perfectly with findings presented by the MOE (2004). In the section of "Me Read? No Way!" titled "Keep it real: Making reading and writing relevant to boys," the MOE (2004) states,

> Boys will be deeply engaged in literacy when they are deeply engaged in the subject of the reading or writing task itself. Having boys explore real-world themes and issues – particularly, but not limited to, those that touch them personally – taps into their need for academic tasks to be purposeful, and meaningful to their lives. (p. 37)

Jason, so perfectly fitting the mold outlined by the MOE (2004), provides strong anecdotal evidence for their boys' literacy claims. But data from this study clearly shows that this deep, personal engagement through relevant learning tasks is certainly not particularly salient to boys, as the MOE (2004) suggests. In fact, outside of the comic-specific discussions, it was the three girls in the focus group who explicitly stressed the importance of keeping learning grounded in relevant socio-cultural experiences.

Recognizing a theme taking shape in the vigor of participants' responses, I approached the topic of relevance to lead into the second focus group discussion:

JC: So I guess the first question, kind of to get things rolling, um, is what kind of issues or relevant topics do you think we should be reading about? Or what do you kind of see as important things to address – and maybe they are being addressed in your classes or maybe they're not – um, but what do you kind of see as top issues that you're like, "yeah, students right now should be talking about this?"

Rachel: I guess maybe anything that people don't really see, like, things that you aren't aware of, like, every year you learn of like a different type of oppression or something like that and I feel like if you learn more about that, then that can also even make you a better human being.

JC: Right. Okay.

Vicki: Yeah. For example, okay so this year, it's a bit repetitive, but, so we studied Orwell and like *1984* and that kind of, like, is relevant with today's society and, like, understanding how we can be oppressed by our government and it's good to understand that and be aware of that. But I think there are other issues that could be relevant as well, like, I don't know, like… especially with teenagers, like, in this phase of our lives I think there's a lot more literature that revolves around other topics that are relevant to us right now, I think….

Rachel: Yeah… Sorry, did you say *are* relevant?

Vicki: Yeah.

Rachel: Yeah. Like, actually I've even seen a lot of stuff, like there's even more mental health books around–

Vicki: Mental health – yeah.

Rachel: Which is a big thing.

Vicki: Which is– well, mental health is addressed in, like, extra-curricular activities, especially in this school a lot, but, in the classroom you could get, like, a more intellectual sort of understanding, like a more… you know–

Rachel and Vicki extend each other's ideas, identifying specific issues (oppression, mental health, sexuality comes up later in this thread as well) and more generally recognizing the wide range of topics relevant to students' lives that could be addressed in class. It is through these socio-culturally rooted texts, topics, and experiences that students learn to critically engage with meanings, representations, and power relations in their world (Giroux & Freire, 1989; Petrone & Borsheim, 2008). Unfortunately, this exchange and a later admission that classroom discussion is limited (to be discussed in greater depth further on in this chapter) also gives the sense that these important topics are somehow minimally (or maybe never) present in their English curriculum in a meaningful way, despite (as Vicki suggests) their pertinence to this stage of their lives.

Selina's contribution at the end of the exchange between Rachel and Vicki identifies an important understanding that grounding these relevant learning experiences in the familiar contexts of students' lives does not mean students should avoid unfamiliar territory. Instead, Selina addresses how reading into the experiences of others can lead to transformative learning,

> Especially, like, in English class where we'd be reading about other people's experiences and learning, like how they handle things it's– we can take that and apply it to our own lives and just, yeah, really see what other people have gone through and then we can learn from it as well.

What Selina describes mirrors the multiliteracies knowledge process of "experiencing the new," where learners interpret new information or experiences and construct new meaning to apply their own personal contexts (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). However, Cope and Kalantzis (2009) argue that this process is only possible, "within the zone of intelligibility and safety, sufficiently close to their own life-worlds to be at least half meaningful in the first instance, yet potentially transformative" (p. 185). While some canonical texts have the contextual relevance to bridge the familiar and the new, Vicki suggests this learning may be facilitated through other texts,

> maybe like current issue books to help students be more connected to the world as well. Maybe that's because I want to be a journalist and stuff that I think it's important, but I think it's relevant for everybody. Maybe, like, have them read *I Am Malala*, for example, like, more, like, books that are important today that,

maybe, I don't know, based on one of the award winning books, or like Top 10

books of the year, or whatever. Choose one for the grade 12 classes or something

like that, that are relevant to that year, maybe. That tell them something about

their generation and… where they're at…

Very simply, Vicki expresses a desire to, not only connect with relevant issues, but to do so through (what she refers to as) "modern literature" – recognizable, contemporary texts.

Important in this discussion is that participants do not reject or denounce texts from the canon, nor do they recommend a complete overhaul of school reading lists. They do, however, crave learning opportunities reflective of the issues they experience in world outside of school. As Dewey (1963) and Freire (1987, 2013) agree, initiating learning from these immediate contexts or the present experiences of students is pivotal for engaged, transformative learning that fosters student growth.

*Student appeal.* Alvermann (2006b) asserts that, "teachers who are student-centered in their approaches to instruction can expect increased student achievement on a variety of outcome measures" (p. 9). Support for this claim can be found across a wide swath of the literature (see Alvermann, 2002; Brozo, 2011, 2013; Dickie & Shuker, 2014; Giroux & Freire, 1989; Hagood et al., 2010; Hall & Coles, 2001; Heron-Hruby et al., 2008; Hibbert et al., 2012; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Lapp & Fisher, 2009; Lenters, 2007; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011; Petrone & Borsheim, 2008; Rowan et al., 2002; Savage, 2008; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), where scholars have explored a variety of ways in which student-centered and interest-based texts and learning strategies contribute to increased engagement and motivation in schools, and in particular in literacy learning. Understandably then, in their efforts to improve boys' literacy the MOE (2004) dedicates two of their thirteen "Strategies for Success" to interest-based learning opportunities, encouraging teachers to stock their classrooms with books that cater to boys' interests and to "Build learning around students' interests and abilities" (p. 37). Considering the success of these practices in the literature cited above, the results of school interventions based on these strategies, taken up in "Me Read? And How!" (MOE, 2009), predictably show that "Boys who were allowed to exercise some choice around their reading selections and writing topics showed increased motivation and engagement" (p. 10). However, positive outcomes of this research and the implementation of this pedagogical

strategy must not be framed exclusively around boys, as the shared experiences of participants in this study indicate the mutual benefits of adopting this strategy for boys and girls.

According to the Ontario high school English curriculum, "Research has shown that when students are given opportunities to choose what they read and what they write about, they are more likely to discover and pursue their own interests," thus, "the curriculum requires that students select some of the texts they read and decide on the topic, purpose, and audience for some of the works they produce" (MOE, 2007a, 2007b, p. 5). True to this statement, efforts were being made by some English teachers in the participants' school to draw from students' literacy interests and create student-centered learning opportunities. Sharing about their experiences in the focus group, Damian and Rachel showcase the productivity and motivation that comes from students pursuing interest-based learning:

Damian:    … I choose *The Hobbit* for, um, a theme-based novel study and I found lots to work with [*stutters over some words, mumbling in background*], as it is an old book and Tolkien is a very traditional author, but… I found a lot to work with and I found even as I was working with the ideas I already had, I found new ideas that I could put with different themes in my novel, so… anything can belong in any classroom.

Rachel:    And, it's kinda cool, 'cause when I was in grade 10 and we got to choose our own novels – um, for a summative – is that when I got to choose my own novel I was so much more passionate about writing, like, I want to do good– I choose the Kite Runner. I love that book. I want to do well on this. I want to look through. And you just feel more encouraged and it's better than doing all boring writing.

Csikszentmihalyi (2014) describes that during "flow," "you're doing things that are so enjoyable that you want to pursue them for their own sake" (p. 132). In the grade-fueled culture of schools this type of intrinsic engagement can be hard to come by. However, Damian and Rachel's desire to build on their knowledge, to more thoroughly explore the

texts they are studying, to a certain degree, exemplifies what Csikszentmihalyi (2014) explains.

Even in reflecting upon this experience, Rachel's quickly constructed, monosyllabic sentences give a sense of the excitement she felt when having the opportunity to work with a text that she found compelling and meaningful. Alvermann (2002, 2006b), Hagood et al. (2010), and Savage (2008) have all documented how students' attitudes toward their teachers and English class change when they feel their interests are taken into consideration, Alvermann (2002) highlighting specifically that, "Other research on effective literacy instruction has shown that teachers contribute to adolescents' sense of competence and self-worth when they are able to convince them that they care about them as individuals and want them to learn," and that students', "Perceptions of self-efficacy are central to most theories of motivation" (p. 192).

Conversely, Todd illustrates a very different learning atmosphere when students' interests are overlooked,

> if they make you read books that most of the class isn't interested in, why would they try to do good on it? Like, 'cause I've seen it throughout, like, all of my years of schooling that there have always been, like, some groups of students that, they can't read as well as everybody, because they don't want to. Like, I know that there are some people that can't read, like, just like, because they have like a disability or something, but there are people that, just because they haven't been interested in it the entire time they've been in school, they haven't really tried to improve on it.

For Todd, content and performance are directly linked, as his experience attests to students' fading engagement or motivation to learn when what is being studied does not align with student interests. Unfortunately, this may be a familiar picture in many classrooms considering Alvermann's (2006b) point that (at least in the USA), "educators… remain (at best) lukewarm to the idea of connecting students' so-called out-of-school-literacies with in-school curricula" (p. 11). Hagood et al. (2010), Marshall and Sensoy (2011), and Page (2012) have noted this more recently as well. This hesitation may be a result of a knowledge disconnect, where "teachers themselves will have to do their homework" (Schwarz, 2006, p. 63) to learn more about these out-of-school

literacies. Savage (2008) bleakly notes in his research that this tends to result either in the effort not being made by teachers to bridge the gap, or that applications of student culture are superficial or out-of-date. Alternatively, tentativeness to reduce the boundaries between in- and out-of-school literacies has also been traced to perceptions that students' out-of-school literacies do not have the substance be considered "school" materials (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Clark, 2013; Heron-Hruby et al., 2008; Hagood et al., 2010; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011; Page, 2012).

  While the benefits are widely recognized, a certain caution is required when educators consider how students' interests will be incorporated in the classroom. Many scholars have explained that without respectful and careful integration, students may feel that their interests have been co-opted or appropriated by teachers (Alvermann, 2006a; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hall & Coles, 2001; Heron-Hruby et al., 2008; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Petrone & Borsheim, 2008), ultimately stripping them of their, "vigor and appeal" (Hull and Schultz, 2001).

  In conversation with Jason (with contributions from Rachel and Vicki at the end), I witnessed tentativeness about and even outright refusal of the use of interest-based texts in English class as a result of this feeling of appropriation:

> JC: So do you think, like you said you like reading Stephen King, if you walked into your English class today, lets say, because it's day one, and your teacher's like "So the first novel we're going to read is Stephen King." Do you think that that attitude would change?
>
> Jason: No. Because, I've tried this, I… it kind of comes around to why personally I'm sitting on the fence about the comic book thing, but, um, I love Stephen King, and, I think it was even him himself who said, like, if you really love a book, or love an author or whatever, don't analyze it in English class because then you have to actually, like, it's not reading for fun anymore. I like reading him to enjoy myself, and twice, I've made that mistake twice, of picking one of his books to do for an English summative, and I just ended up hating the book and just didn't have any fun with it and… I think when it comes down to it, I can't analyze– I don't know if I'm making sense or not.

     JC: No, yeah for sure, I know what you're saying, yeah.

    Jason: If I would have said "We're going to read Steven King for the first

       thing", I'd say "No thank-you."

     JC: "I'll switch classes."

    Jason: Yeah, because, like I said, I want to read it for fun, I don't want to ruin

       the, um, the magic of his writing.

     JC: Yeah, no, I totally get that.

    Jason: Because then you feel the pressure to make something out of it, or, not

       so much in English class because, like, you have the freedom of

       speech, but, sometimes you feel swayed to make an opinion that you

       weren't even forming, and then so you're like "I don't even like this

       opinion of the book." Whereas, like, your own opinion – sometimes I

       can't even write down in words what I'm feeling about a book. I'll

       recommend it to someone who's like "Oh, why was it good?"… "Well,

       it, you had to read it." You can't just tell me to tell you why, it just

       was.

Jason's negative attitude is not simply a result of blurring in- and out-of-school lines, but manifests from negative experiences working *on* rather than *with* books by his favourite author in the classroom (Freire, 2013). This relates, albeit in a less severe way, to Freire's (2013) concept of "cultural invasion" (p. 100), where "it is incumbent on the invader to destroy the character of the culture which has been invaded, nullify its form, and replace it with byproducts of the invading culture" (p. 101). As Jason describes, bringing "his culture" into the classroom meant viewing it through an analytical lens shaped by school learning that disconnected him from the enjoyment he feels when engaging with these books outside of school.

   Without more background information, I cannot explain why Damian and Rachel's experiences were so different from Jason's. However, these stories reveal that if approached positively with a view of balancing students' freedom to explore interest-based texts and topics, while also involving them in meaningful learning, student-centered pedagogy and the use of interest-based texts can result in deeply engaging and motivating learning opportunities.

**"It's very closed off": "Analyzing" and the absence of critical discussion.**

Multiliteracies scholars argue that for students to become "people better adapted to the kind of world we live in now and the world of the near future" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 7) literacy pedagogy must prepare them to be active, flexible, and collaborative learners, with the skills to think *critically* about their world and its diverse texts and meanings (Anstey & Bull, 2006; New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Mills, 2009). Aims to support this kind of learning in classrooms are outlined in the section "Principles Underlying the English Curriculum" of *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 and 10: English* (MOE, 2007a) and *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 11 and 12: English* (MOE, 2007b), where developing "successful language learners" is said to include (among other things) teaching students to,

- make meaningful connections between themselves, what they encounter in texts, and the world around them;
- think critically;
- understand that all texts advance a particular point of view that must be recognized, questioned, assessed, and evaluated... (p. 22)

Although initial responses in the questionnaire focused on traditional literacy practices (basic reading and writing comprehension and communication), when discussing their literacy learning experiences, participants suggested that some of this more complex, interpretative work Kalantzis and Cope (2012) and the MOE (2007a, 2007b) describe was being fostered in their learning.

Reflecting on her answers from the questionnaire, Vicki expands her understanding of literacy and literacy learning saying,

not just being able to read it, as just like, you know, [*pointing at her page*] this says "Vicki" – just like comprehending further the, uh, a bit more like deeper the meaning of like – I dunno, if you read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you understand like deeper meanings, I guess?

Rachel similarly recognizes how skills developed in English class help students, "formulate ideas as well as discover different possibilities by going more in depth instead of looking at something on the surface all the time." Jason also adds that in his experiences, "[teachers] tell you to question stuff and think about what happens…" when

reading and writing. The skills and experiences participants describe – mining for deeper meanings, thinking about and questioning texts – are encouraged in multiliteracies pedagogy through the knowledge process of analyzing, and particularly analyzing critically (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). In fact, many participants specifically referred to their focused work on texts in class as "analyzing." However, the vagueness with which "analyzing" was used by participants, alongside Cope and Kalantzis's (2009) claim that "the critical literacy implied by analyzing has had less uptake" (p. 186) in literacy pedagogy, raised questions about what kind of analyzing participants were actually engaging in.

The broad application of "analyze" or "analyzing" throughout the focus group discussions clouded the term in ambiguity, making attempts to decipher it as a reference to analyzing functionally or critically varyingly speculative. At a few points in the focus group, participants specifically paired analyzing with society and relationships, and also pointed out aspects of one comic that related to Marxist and feminist theory. In these moments, analyzing had the potential for a critical leaning, but the generality of these connections failed to provide insight into the depth of critical analysis participants might pursue. With little evidence from participants' specific use of the term, I revisited the data from the focus group discussions and found that an extended conversation about classroom discussions revealed the possibility that the analyzing participants were engaging in was limitedly critical.

During the second focus group, a meaningful transition occurs as participants shift their focus from the relevant topics that should be addressed in class to identifying why they may not be:

> Vicki: Yeah, I mean, we came up with the topic of mental health, but I'm sure you sit down and actually think about it, there's so many other things that are relevant to teenagers that we can learn about… that have more to do and can be more engaging and actually have more, like, have more impact on our education… have more impact on our personal growth. Give us more–
>
> Rachel: Even stuff, like, different types of sexuality. Like, right now–
>
> Vicki: Sexuality, that's a very good topic–

> Rachel:  What I'm noticing around right now, you know how things kind of build up and they become like this big thing? Like mental health built up and everybody knows about it now. Now I'm finding it's like transgender stuff… If you read stuff about that then you have a better comprehension.
>
> Vicki:  Exactly. Especially where we live in a small town and there's a lot of, like… no information at all, like… no information at all. And like, we have to break those taboos I think and that's a very good way of starting, but…
>
> Rachel:  It's also 'cause we're in a small town. The type of town we're in… it's where everybody's close-minded.
>
> Vicki:  Yeah, that's true.
>
> Rachel:  Like, not to be, like, offensive to anybody, but it's like, we live around where there's a whole bunch of farmers and, I don't know, we're not very diverse, so you kind of close your eyes to whatever else is around you.
>
> Vicki:  The really only way that can change is by education and discussion and hope, like, talkin' and informing people and giving different viewpoints…

Vicki and Rachel very clearly identify that the social issues they believe should be taken up in school are seen as "taboo" (as Vicki says) or "controversial" (Stevens & Bean, 2007; Wallowitz, 2008b) and lacking presence in their community. In her final remark, Vicki establishes that the way these "taboos" *can* change (be deconstructed and addressed) is through education, discussion, and understanding different viewpoints – a process initiated by critical literacy.

However, Selina's response reveals pedagogical limitations that exclude opportunities for students to engage in critical discussions about their learning in the classroom,

> Selina:  Yeah, like discussion is a big thing that we don't do enough, it's– we'll get an assignment, we'll read something, but, um, the thing we don't do is, we don't talk about it afterwards, it's like, we just write about it

and it's not really, like, opening up about it.

> JC:    Right.
>
> Selina:    And hearing other people's opinions. It's just, yeah, it's very closed off.

Rachel adds support to Selina's claims shortly after, saying,

> I also– I feel like we don't get as much of an opportunity to discuss things because when we get follow up questions for, like, a play or for a book, when you're in a younger grade they go through every question and you can discuss things. But they don't do that anymore. It's just like, "okay, does anybody have a question about this?" If you do then you ask and if you don't then we move on. Like, there's no opportunity to discuss everything…

The window Selina and Rachel provide into what goes on in their English classrooms identifies pedagogical limitations that exclude opportunities for students to engage in critical discussions about their learning.

This brings the focus back to Cope and Kalantzis's (2009) statement about the critical components of analyzing having failed to be meaningfully taken up in literacy pedagogy. Some suggest alternate understandings of what "critical" learning is – promoting the development of higher-order thinking skills – may be unconsciously limiting the critical analysis Cope and Kalantzis (2009) are talking about (Luke, 2000; Wallowitz, 2008a). Others argue that the struggle to instill critical literacy practices in education is related to a general discomfort with broaching the ideologically charged topics and discussions critical literacy advocates (Keddie, 2010; Love, 2008; Luke, 2000; McDaniel, 2006; Petrone & Borsheim, 2008). Evidence from the focus group suggests the latter may be the limiting factor in these students' experiences.

When asked why they thought their community and opportunities for discussing these social issues was so "closed off" (as Selina described), Jason was quick to respond:

> Jason:    Ignorance.
>
> JC:    Ignorance?
>
> Jason:    People just… sometimes to change it's really hard and if they aren't educated, it's like stepping into another dimension and some people can't handle that...

Jason's explanation seems to be directed more toward the greater community, a reflection of the culture of their small town, but is also applicable to the school context. Vicki certainly thinks so, contributing later,

> So I think that leads us to, teachers maybe are afraid that people throw in their opinions at each other without previous knowledge, which I personally agree with to a certain point, like I think debate is really important even if you don't have that much background knowledge but… um, yeah, I think teachers maybe are afraid that, you know, discussion is not going to get us anywhere…

Or maybe the fear is that it *will* go somewhere – induce some uncomfortable tension, initiate critical discussion. Although Vicki is speculating, returning to a point discussed in the previous chapter, when teaching feminist theory, Jason explained that the teacher, "just told us the facts of what the theory was, and then she moved on." While participants commended this as a gender-neutral approach to the topic, it can also be read as stifling discussion about another "taboo" topic.

 Giroux and Freire (1989) emphasize that educators must "connect rather than distance themselves from the most pressing problems and opportunities of the times" (p. ix), confronting them with a critical lens to effectively prepare students to critically engage with the diverse texts and meaning in their worlds. To fail to do so results in, "unwittingly imposing someone else's agendas" (Wallowitz, 2008a, p. 4) – most often perpetuating the dominant ideologies that need to be challenged most. This is precisely what has occurred in the boys' literacy debate, as failures to consider the literature outside of the essentialist mindset has perpetuated problematic understanding of boys as undifferentiated underachievers (Martino, 2008b).

**"Change is necessary."** Considering the overarching themes of limitations, exclusionary practices, and a general loss of interest in the English subject, it is not surprising that the overwhelming response from students is that something needs to change. Vicki diplomatically underlines this from the outset, including in one of her questionnaire responses that, "some changes could be done to the subject for its improvement." However, Damian's firm statement better captures the palpable frustration expressed by participants throughout focus group discussions,

Change is necessary because without change it'll nev– like, without change it'll be

a consistency of constants… a loss of interest. If we're always being taught the

same message then nothing will change through the ideas or what we're learning

in the classroom. If we're always learning the same thing, we're not developing,

as we've always been taught to do.

Despite popular belief in literacy education discourse, the avenue for invoking this

change is not through gender reform. Admittedly, some of the strategies outlined in

gender reform initiatives can be catalysts for change. In fact, I have attempted to show

that the issues raised by participants in this study pair quite seamlessly with a number of

the strategies presented in "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004). However, the steadfast

concern and support for "boys," narrowly defined by an underachieving, hegemonic

masculinity, ultimately limits the potential for widespread literacy reform. Instead, a more

universally beneficial, pedagogical reform, that acknowledges and incorporates the

multiliterate lives of students, both boys and girls, and helps them learn to engage

critically with their world, is necessary. I argue that this change can begin to be enacted

through the use of superhero comics in the classroom.

**"There were so many things that jumped out at me": Superhero comics as**

**multimodal platforms for student engagement and critical discussion**

One tenet outlined in initiatives brought forward to address boys'

underachievement in literacy has been the need to implement classroom resources that

cater to boys' particular interests (Martino, 2008a; Warrington & Younger, 2000). This

has helped diversify what is made available to students and broadens the scope of what is

considered "worthy" of study in literacy or English classrooms. However, the

opportunities these initiatives have created for meaningful change in literacy education is

limited by their foundation in an oversimplified boy-girl binary that reinforces hegemonic

gender norms. This binary powerfully shapes how students negotiate the social spaces of

the classroom and peer groups, as research has shown that boys will distance themselves

from what is deemed "feminine" (including certain literacy practices) to avoid their

masculinity being scrutinized (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Martino, 1999; Kehily, 2001;

Kehler, 2010; Mac an Ghaill, 2000; Martino, 2007). Looking at the evidence from this

study, where participants' interests (with the exception of one) were not reflective of the

stereotypical gender patterns cited in boys' literacy initiatives, it is easy to see how maintaining such rigid lines between boys and girls can severely limit students' opportunities to engage with texts that they prefer, but that do not fit the confines of the gender binary.

Comics have often been highlighted as one of these resources suited to boys' literacy needs and preferences (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Bodkin et al., 2009; Carter, 2008; Griffith, 2010; MOE, 2004, 2009a; Moeller, 2011; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). A dominant genre (or maybe *the* dominant genre) in the comic medium, superheroes or superhero fiction, have also been specifically referenced as particularly interesting to or geared toward boys (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Martin, 2007; Moeller, 2011; Morrison, 2012). Despite these claims, boys and girls in this study were equally divided when it came to pursuing comics as an out-of-school interest (2 boys, 2 girls). Of the four who had previous exposure to the medium, the two boys, Todd and Jason, gave examples of superhero titles they had read, Rachel said she had read lots of Marvel comics (one of the major superhero publishers) and Selina gave no examples of specific titles whatsoever. This initial data (although taken from a small sample) reveals boys and girls identifying an equal interest in the medium and shared interest in the superhero genre as well – results mirrored in Moeller's (2011) study exploring high school students' attitudes toward comics. However, while this evidence complicates essentialist assumptions about gender and literacy preferences, what I argue is of greater significance is the educational relationship participants formed with superhero comics after reading and working with them in the focus group.

Even with its growing popularity in education and research (albeit largely one-sided) that supports the deep interest many students have shown in this medium, none of the participants in this study had experienced using comics, let alone superhero fiction, at any point in their education. In the first half of this chapter, I outlined the major issues participants raised regarding their literacy experiences in English class, including the limitations of traditional literacy pedagogy (both the skills used and the texts selected for these classrooms) and the top-down approach of "analyzing" in English class. Interestingly, in the focus group, the superhero comics that have struggled and often failed to penetrate the "literary" bookshelves of schools, provided participants with a

platform for engaging in the learning they were missing out on in traditional literacy
pedagogies.

        **"It's another form of literacy": Broadening literacy through comics.** From the
outset of the study, participants' conceptions of literacy focused on traditional notions of
literacy as basic comprehension in reading and writing written language. Unsurprisingly,
their experiences of literacy learning in English class were also deeply rooted in
traditional literacy pedagogy. But when given the opportunity in focus group to explore
comics, which branch out from the print focus of traditional literacy, participants began
independently broadening their understandings of literacy and appreciating the
complexities of comics' visual and spatial literacies.

        Vicki was quick to acknowledge an expanded view of literacy, pointing out in the
first focus group discussion,

> Vicki:   Exactly. Like, I think sometimes when we are talking about analyze–
> like, being literate, we're talking about, we're talkin' about like major
> novels. Like, analyzing these deep… things. And, I think sometimes
> we're putting it to the plate of students, like, grade 12's, and, like, like
> I think this idea [points to comics on table] is very good because I
> think it's so much more, like, dynamic– like, I think there's lessons to
> learn in comics too, not only in other types of novels. Like, there's
> other ways of being literate than to just, like, analyzing – you know
> what I mean – like analyzing these works that are so complex…
>
> JC:   Right.
>
> Vicki:   That *seem* "complex." [does air quotes with fingers]

Vicki acknowledges that literacy extends beyond the practices she has participated in, in
her English classrooms. Unfortunately, due to participants' eagerness to share their
opinions and my inexperience as an interviewer to pick up on and pull the conversation
back to this point, this comment passed by without being further investigated. However,
in the second focus group discussion, Selina also mentions that literacy can take other
forms and had the chance to elaborate on her point,

> JC:   But Selina, you're saying, like, it's another form of– another type of
> literacy. Can you expand on that?

Selina:    Yeah, like, well like how Jason said, we all read novels, like, left to right, it's simple to understand – and it goes from scene to scene, you know who's speaking and… Whereas this, it's, um, like for some people, for these authors it's a different way of communicating their opinions and their ideas. And so, it's just being able to read it and understand it – that's how we really intake what they're trying to get across and really understand the lesson they're to show.

Selina's explanation calls upon her original understanding that communication is an integral component or result of literacy, but allows communication to take on new meaning, to expand into visual representations.

More important than simple recognition of literacy's broadened scope is the fact that both participants also directly comment on the seemingly contrasting and certainly divergent complexities involved in engaging with the visual-spatial environments of comics compared to traditional print texts. Vicki's use of quotations to dampen how "complex" traditional texts are, suggests that she has detected the hierarchy within school reading selections and challenges the privileging of texts that are perceived to be more "literary." Although she does not say that reading comics *is* complex in comparison to other print texts, her allusion to the dynamic characteristics of comics highlights a different learning experience than what traditional texts offer, one that should be given more equal consideration in education. Selina, on the other hand, specifically remarks that reading and writing printed texts is "simple to understand" – not devaluing the quality or complexity of the content, but acknowledging the deep familiarity students have interacting with and orienting themselves within these texts and how that differs from the visual-spatial literacies of comic pages – texts foreign to literacy classrooms.

The visual component of comics has been discussed in the literature as a more accessible pathway for struggling readers to understand the written word (Chun, 2009; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Jacobs, 2007; McTaggart, 2008). McTaggart (2008) argues that struggling readers tend to have a hard time with visualizing what they read, limiting the meaning they can take from a text, and that images in comics encourage deeper interactions with textual meanings by providing visual support. Vicki and Selina both seem to agree with this, Vicki stating, "for the kids that don't like reading so much, it's– I

think it's [using comics] going to be really encouraging…" and Selina commenting that reading comics is often more enjoyable for her because they are "simple and to the point…without all the complicated detail and description some novels give" – tools in written language necessary for fostering visual images in the reader's mind.

     However, in a later focus group discussion, Selina and Vicki conversely illustrate the challenges of navigating the visual-spatial environment of comics,

> Selina:    Another thing with familiar, I think, is that, um, like if you've never read a graphic novel before, like, you won't know, like, what box to go to next– [*laughter*]
>
> Vicki:    Yeah, I had trouble with that.
>
> Selina:    Like, who's speaking at what time… Like, I'm more familiar with manga, like, Japanese graphic novels, so they're backwards, like right to left. So I struggled a little bit with that and, like… And so, yeah, if you don't know how to read it, it's kind of confusing.
>
> JC:    Yeah. For sure.
>
> Vicki:    Personally, I think, I don't– I'm not familiar with either manga or comics, personally, and I don't think I've ever read a whole comic. And I was reading and I, I really like it, I think I'm going to start reading comics. [*laughter*] I really appreciate the drawing. I really like it. It's really amazing. But, yeah, I was a bit confused, like, okay so what comes first? And, okay, I kind of figured out the little things in, like, squares are her thoughts… But, yeah, like, I don't know, it was a bit confusing at times, like, here… [*flips through pages*] What goes first? Okay, [*pointing at frames*] I'm guessing this one, and then this one, this one? Like, I don't know, I just like didn't really know where to go, but…
>
> JC:    Right.
>
> Vicki:    I guess that could be explained as well… It's not a big deal, I don't think.
>
> JC:    It's definitely very different than, you know, just reading lines of words, I would say.

>       Selina:   And it's definitely something that we could learn and, like, it's another
>                 form of literacy, like, communication is too – just develop, yeah, how
>                 to read this.

Unlike reading written words, the reading path for images or visual representations (i.e. comics) is far less restrictive (Kress, 2004), as can be seen in *Appendix E*. This provides the creator and the reader (depending on the text) with more freedom in the construction and interpretation of meanings, but can also be disorienting in its diversion from literacy "norms" (or what is typically learned in literacy classrooms), evidenced by Selina and Vicki's confusion during their interactions with comics. A similar representational freedom also exists in the interplay of words and images in comics, where rather than, "the visual being subservient to the written" (Jacobs, 2007, p. 20), as is the belief in dominant literacy ideologies, the written and visual (largely inseparable from spatial, gestural or embodied, and audio representations as well) work together to create complex, multimodal meanings (Beavis, 2013; Jacobs, 2007). Vicki briefly touches on this as she thinks aloud about navigating the written language in one comic, deciphering through visual cues the difference between the speech bubbles and the captions or "squares" containing Batgirl's inner dialogue (see *Appendix E*). Although a rather superficial example, what Vicki points out helps to showcase how reading into one mode without the other(s) fails to provide the full breadth of meaning in these multimodal spaces.

The traditional literacy skills that typically deal with the left-to-right orientation of written language, in isolation from other modes, are insufficient for effective engagement with multimodal texts, like comics (Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kress, 2000b). For this reason, comics cannot continue to be labeled as "simple" texts, as they require a complex set of skills in order to navigate their interwoven, multimodal meanings (Blanch & Mulvihill, 2013; Jacobs, 2007; Schwarz, 2002, 2006). It is important to understand that these complex literacy skills are *not* new, as our everyday lives are inherently multimodal (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kress, 2000b). In fact, it is likely because of this familiarity with the multisensory worlds of comics that readers are drawn to these texts and into their meanings with perceived ease. However, since written language has remained "dominant at the expense of all other senses and *their* mode of engagement with the world" (Kress, 2000b, p. 184, original emphasis), suppressed

multimodal literacy skills need to be recognized and honed in order for students to confidently negotiate and critically engage with the increasingly multimodal texts and meanings in the world. The popularity of superhero comics paired with their ability to explore personal struggles and contemporary social, cultural, and political issues, provides a relevant, student-centered entry point for students to refine these multimodal literacy skills.

**Beyond the "super": Relevant *human* struggles and critical discussion surrounding superhero fiction.** The title of an article by Weiner (2002), "Beyond Superheroes: Comics Get Serious," demonstrates the negative perceptions surrounding superhero content that continue to pervade public opinion about the superhero genre. In the article, Weiner (2002) explains that graphic novels have garnered more attention in recent years because, "Instead of limiting themselves to the superhero genre, many graphic novels are now concerned with conflicts often found in more accepted forms of literature" (p. 55). The "limits" Weiner (2002) mentions are also described by Monnin (2009), who frames superhero fiction as simple, superficial stories involving "a famed superhero who follows a singular plotline, from Event A (need for superhero) to Event B (superhero saves the day)" (p. 20). However, while these observations may be reflective of superhero storylines throughout the early- and mid-twentieth century, they do not accurately capture the quality of the contemporary superhero writers' work, which tackles current social and political issues, and skillfully navigates the deep personal conflicts their characters experience (Morrison, 2012). Jason explains this old-new division in the focus group saying, "the older stuff used to be just straight hero defeats the bad guy or has some kind of criminal he has to get rid of, right?... But now it's like– it deals with, like, social issues and stuff…" Recognition of this meaningful discourse in superhero fiction has led to a growing appreciation for the use of superhero content in classrooms across a wide range of subject areas (Aiken, 2010; Botzakis, 2013; Carter, 2007; Costello & Worcester, 2014; Hall & Lucal, 1999; Rosenberg, 2008; Westrup, 2002; White & Arp, 2008). Adding to this quiet, but growing support, participants' discussion in this study emphasized the educational merit of superhero comics, highlighting the relevance of content for both their in- and out-of-school lives, while also eagerly generating and engaging in critical dialogue about topics and themes in the comics they read.

**_"I'm dealing with this too": Curriculum connections and the relatable (out)cast of characters in_ X-Men.** Very early on, Selina recognized that students could take "a lesson or a moral from a comic book… understand that and apply it to daily life," suggesting that comics offered learning opportunities relevant to students' lives. This was supported throughout the study, largely through participants' "daily life" applications of comic content to their learning in English class. Rachel was quick to point out that, "Just from, like, grade 12 learning about different theories, I saw a whole bunch of stuff that could be identified as, like, feminist theory," while Jason recognized opportunities for looking at Marxist theory and the use of character archetypes. Rachel also talked about the "cliffhanger" ending of one of the excerpts being "helpful in an English class because if you don't give the ending then that helps with, like, inferring skills." With little effort, participants were able to independently draw upon aspects of the comic excerpts they received to connect their content to prior knowledge and learning experiences in English class.

However, as Damian says, "anything can belong in any classroom." The fact that participants are able to see the relevance of these texts for their classroom learning is certainly positive, but it is not strong enough evidence to support why superhero comics should be a fixture in literacy classrooms – it does not set superhero comics apart from the traditional novels participants expressed such frustration with in the first half of this chapter. However, participants' reaction to reading _X-Men_ (Morrison, 2001), starkly contrasted their attitudes toward the stagnant novels of their English classrooms, showing a deep interest and engagement with a text that spoke to the issues they face as teenagers.

Vicki's opening statement about _X-Men_ (Morrison, 2001) captures the underlying excitement in participants' discussion on this comic,

> Um, what I have to say – I don't know if you have anything else to say about
> _MARVELS_, but reading _X-Men_ is by far my favourite! I was reading it and I was
> like, "I really get this point." And it I think it has everything, like… It has obvious
> things, like, okay, at the beginning it talks about how, I don't know, like, he killed
> this guy who was gay, whatever, you can talk about that. But then it has so many
> other things – I didn't make notes, because I didn't have a pen at the time – um,
> just let me quickly skim through… Like, there's the prejudice that jumps in at the

beginning where like all the press is– like all the people are like complaining

about how it's so awful, this school, and they want to shut it down, the mutants.

And then again, like, with the parents of this girl that's a mutant and how they try

to segregate them from society. And then inside the school there's so many things

going on as well, like, in the relationships. The girls, they don't want this other

girl, um, to be in the relationship with this boy because they– like I think that has–

that can be analyzed too in so many other ways. I don't know, there were so many

things that jumped out at me while I was reading this, like, "wow, like, you could

look at that." So I think this in an English class would have so much potential

because there's so many things that a student could choose from and analyze. I

don't know I just thought it was great.

Although lengthy and a little scattered, Vicki's reaction to reading this comic is the

coveted response every teacher looks for when discussing an assigned text in their class.

Without being prompted, Vicki enthusiastically dives into the important topics and

themes in this excerpt (e.g. homophobia, social prejudice, segregation of the other,

relationships). She even admits that she would have made notes if she had a pen while she

was reading. There is evidence in Vicki's response of an intrinsic motivating factor to

engage with this text, one that Lapp and Fisher (2009) attribute to working with materials

deeply connected to an individual's interests and that have meaningful applications to

their life.

After a brief pause, Vicki adds, "It has the action parts, like, it's interesting, it's

engaging, it's something that students could identify with because, you know, everybody

has a bit of outcast in them…" Accurate in her assumption, the idea of the "outcast" was a

recurring theme throughout the discussion on this text. Similar to Vicki, Jason identifies

that *X-Men* (Morrison, 2001), "kind of shows you, like, even though these are fictional

characters and you can't have superpowers, but even to be an outcast is universal to

everyone in the world, right?" Todd takes a more direct approach, drawing specific

parallels between the text and what he observes in school,

with the whole, like, the X-Men thing and Xavier's school, like, I find that high

school students can relate to it because in the school, you do have the group of the

popular mutants, then you have the ones that, you know, they're like, just your

regular people and that and then you have the people that do keep to themselves, like, they're not going out, like, trying to make friends, like, they're shy, or, like, they're – they have trouble making friends, and that because, like, they're scared or whatever.

Finally, Damian goes so far as to suggest that superheroes' purpose is grounded in this "outcast" motif,

I feel like that's why– that's what the characters and the heroes are made to do. They're created to target and relate to the quote-unquote "outcast" of the social– social network in schools and basically anywhere, because the characters are given that, that style and the flair that gives them the hope that, "I'm not alone, I'm not the only one."

This final statement is echoed by Jason as well, "and you're like 'I'm dealing with this too' and, like, 'oh, Wolverine's doin' it too. It can't just be me.'" Apparent in these comments is the closeness or personal connection between participants and this topic. As Rachel says, "in high school you come into your own a lot" and framing this text around being an outcast draws on this familiar teenage struggle to "fit in" or find your place in the world.

The "outcast" image was not the only point of entry for participants to relate to these characters though. For Rachel and Vicki, simply having a diverse group of characters made it easier to locate themselves within the text. Rachel explains, "Maybe because, like, *X-Men* has a variety of characters, so… You have more opportunities for people to relate to what characters are going through." Vicki agrees, "Exactly. You have the different types of characters with different superpowers, different personalities, different struggles that you can relate." Jason focused particularly on characters' struggles, commenting that, "the greatest part about that is, like, they don't know how to use their own powers, right? Just like teenagers don't know how to use their own strengths to their advantage, right?" He finds comfort in the relatable vulnerability of these characters, an often-overlooked trait of superheroes that shifts their character status from super to human, that make their otherworldly lives become so familiar, relatable, and relevant to those of the reader (Carter, 2007; Morrison, 2012; Rosenberg, 2008; Rourke, 2010; White & Arp, 2008).

These responses give a clear indication that participants are interested and invested in texts that relate to their lives and personal struggles as young adults. Although this data does not provide empirical evidence of any changes in participants' literacy abilities, considering Alvermann's (2002) assertion that sustained engagement is the primary factor influencing learning outcomes, the excitement and extended conversation this text prompted suggests that implementing this text or another like it could significantly improve students' attitudes toward and performance in literacy classrooms.

**"We're here, and we're actively discussing…because we want to discuss our opinions on things": Organic critical engagement with superheroes and beyond.** A significant amount of time during the focus group was spent addressing participants' frustrations with the lack of discussion or the failure to acknowledge students' opinions in their English classrooms. Perhaps not surprising then, when prompted to share their thoughts on the comics they read, participants were quick to capitalize on the opportunity to vocalize their perspectives. However, the superficial feedback about personal assessments of the comics ("so cool," "awesome," "fun," "entertaining," etc.) I expected would dominate participants' initial reactions, were displaced by an immediate foray into critical discussion.

*Lois Lane, Batgirl, and the roles of female characters.* When I asked participants what jumped out at them in the first two excerpts they read, *Batgirl* (Simone, 2012) and *Superman* (Morrison, 2011), Rachel gave a fiery response,

> Like, it actually– part of it actually drove me insane about, like, how are women being treated like this? Like, seeing how, like, the men – however, it was a little bit comical at points – how, like, the men are treating Lois Lane, like trying to win her over. It's just like, what is this?

The overtly sexist tones in the excerpt Rachel discusses (see *Appendix F*) satirize the brutish masculinity and fragile femininity prevalent in much of the older superhero content and still present in some comics today. As Rachel admits, its frankness is "comical" in a way, but also maddening, leading to a tension that invokes critical readings of the text.

Responding to Rachel's frustration, Vicki immediately contrasts the passive role of Lois Lane in *Superman* with the powerful presence of Batgirl's character (see Figure 3),

> I thought that was really interesting, but, I didn't have a chance to finish
> Superman, like, I saw at the beginning that it was just, in this one, she was just,
> okay, "superhero for a day" – she drinks his powers, okay. She's just for the day.
> But, comparing it to Batwoman– Batgirl, um, I thought it was, like, I was
> surprised at the beginning to see how, like, muscular and how powerful Batgirl
> looks and then looking at Superwoman [*pointing at Lois Lane in costume*], she's
> like half naked and… [*laughter*] you know, and I, like Rachel said before, they're
> trying to win her, like tell her how beautiful she is and… yeah, I just thought that
> was a big contrast.

Selina also contributes to the exchange, saying, "And especially that it's just, like, for one day. It's like they assume she is only strong when she has this power. Whereas when she doesn't have it she's just regular Lois Lane, like, not as special."



*Figure 3*. Comparison of Lois Lane in *Superman*
(Morrison, 2011) and Batgirl in *Batgirl* (Simone, 2012).

These excerpts were chosen precisely for their contrasting representations of female characters. Freebody et al. (1991) argue that, "The juxtaposition of contesting texts in the classroom offers and makes visible to students contrasting reading positions and portrayals of subjectivity and reality" (p. 453). Although a fairly surface-level observation, Rachel's initial statement prompts Vicki's comparison between the two characters, and once the discursive space is opened, Selina is able to contribute further insight into the issues at the core of this text. Confident that participants would make note of this oppositional relationship between Lois Lane and Batgirl, or at least be aware of the sexism in *Superman* (Morrison, 2011), having the freedom to follow their own line of thinking, participants' discussion allowed for the progression of ideas that led to more critical dialogue.

*Taking down red flags.* Amidst the excitement and discussion around using comics in English classrooms, it seemed inevitable and appropriate that the boundaries for implementing these texts in schools would become a point of conversation. During the final focus group meeting, Vicki concluded her opinions on *X-Men* (Morrison, 2001) by stating, "what I'm trying to say here, is that, the things that I would be doubtful with other comics, *X-Men* has it for sure." Having had such positive feedback to this point, I was curious about where these doubts were rooted,

> Um. Interesting that you brought up being "doubtful" of other comics… Is there anything else– like we talked a little bit about flaws and we've addressed right now the idea of that disconnect between maybe some students and lets say, Batman, or Superman. Um… do you see anything in these that would immediately raise red flags in a school, or a teacher would say like, "No, we're not doing this."

Jason and Vicki responded:

> Jason:  Yeah, there is some– my Dad just jokingly said that like he, he personally didn't care right, but on the one X-Men one there was a scantily clad woman, right? And, um, like he was just joking but he's like, "Is that allowed in a Catholic school?" or something, right? So like, even though she wasn't fully nude, it's like still the… she barely was dressed. [Chuckles]
>
> JC:  Was that– is that Emma Frost in that one?

Jason:   Yeah.

Vicki:   It does say here, for example, "and just as we were uh, learning how to
         implant receptive erotic images into the mind of our enemies, weren't
         we girls?" Like, I think that's awesome, but I mean, maybe you…

Jason:   But for a school setting…

Not surprisingly, Jason and Vicki point out the sexual content that has so-often been
critiqued in superhero fiction. Yet, while sexual and violent content is commonly raised
as a barrier for school uses of these texts (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Martin, 2007; Moeller,
2011; Weiner, 2002), students are inundated with sexual and violent imagery in the media
that flood their out-of-school lives (e.g. advertisements and commercials, video games,
movies, etc.) and should have opportunities to learn to critically engage with and
interrogate these meanings in school.

Recognizing the naivety of this barrier, participants questioned why sexual and
violent content have to be limiting factors. Rachel was quick to defend the sexual content
Jason and Vicki noted, focusing on the sexualized clothing of Emma Frost,

But also I think that sometimes things like the way she's dressed are important,
almost because you can't shut that out. It's there in the world, you have to deal
with it, you're not going to do yourself, or anybody else, a service by covering it
up. Certainly, like, nothing like full-fledged nudity in a comic, but, I don't see the
problem with it…

Rachel emphasizes that this content has valuable application for learning to confront and
navigate similarly constructed representations of people (women in this case) that pervade
the world outside of school. As Mills (2009) argues, "ignoring the pervasiveness of
popular culture leaves a significant number of gendered representations and stereotypes
unopposed and unquestioned" (p. 106). Earlier in the conversation, Rachel had pointed
out that she thought Emma Frost was "pretty much a badass. Like, she's really cool. And,
like, just the way that you can also– you can look at the way she's dressed and she's
totally not like the stereo– her attitude isn't the stereotyp– the way women are
stereotyped, which is cool." Given the opportunity to think aloud about the character in
this short statement, Rachel clearly confronts and negotiates her stance on the character
and her representation in the text, considering the parallels with other representations of

women she has encountered. Without the opportunity to interact with this content and explore the constructed meanings within, students fail to develop and hone the critical literacy skills necessary to interpret these meanings outside of school.

The majority of participants' concerns were directed at the hypocrisy of excluding texts like comics for violent or sexual content when it was already widely present in the texts they were being assigned,

Rachel:   I'd like to point out that in some of our summative books that we had to choose, there are some very inappro– "inappropriate" [*Does finger quotations*]…

Vicki:   Yeah, it's true! Like in 1984, there is some erotic content in it.

Rachel:   Yeah, there's erotic content in that. Even like, our own choosing of books that–

JC:   Well you said you did the Kite Runner, right?

Rachel:   Yeah, I did The Kite Runner the one year, and there's, yeah, there is definitely um, like, sexual innuendos and things like that in there…

Jason:   Like, you could raise a red flag if…

Rachel:   Yeah. But it's also like, in our books we get the words, we're reading them and we get to decide what it looks like. And what's the difference between us kinda thinking about what somebody looks like and it being given to us.

Damian:   Well, what I feel is, like, they've already shown us very graphic content in previous years. Like, the short story "Lamb to the Slaughter," it's very, yeah– [*laughter*] Like, within the first three pages, like, one, like, the main character kills someone which is the ultimate sin. So, why a Catholic school board is giving us that– ok, so Batman is dead now – ok, that's reality. So what's the difference between that reality and this reality? Lord of the Flies, Piggy dies. They throw a rock on him. What's the difference between getting shot, and getting a rock thrown on you? I'd rather get shot, in all honesty. [*laughter*] What's the difference between graphic novels and our much more detailed imaginations?

Petrone and Borsheim (2008) argue that pop culture texts (comics in the context of this research) can be "used to generate discussions that encourage students to turn the critical lens away from fiction and toward their own world" (p. 187). Rather than engaging with these "controversial" topics in the confines of the text or in the texts of the world outside of school, participants begin to question the ideological perspectives that shape the educational spaces they are a part of – they begin to more critically read their world (Freire, 1987).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored how the traditional literacy pedagogies adopted in English classrooms confine the learning experiences of students and how superhero comics have the potential to open new pathways for motivated and critical literacy engagement. Through an analysis of the data from both the questionnaire and focus group discussions, the first half of the chapter examines students' perceptions of literacy and their experiences with literacy learning in English classrooms. Three common threads emerged in this data, where participants expressed frustration with,

- the traditional literacy practices in English classrooms (the reading- and writing- heavy curriculum);
- the overused, traditional English texts (from the literary canon) that lacked relevance or connections to students' lives and their personal interests; and
- the lack of classroom discussion about topics, themes, or issues in the texts they studied (focus on "analyzing")

Two overarching themes appeared to propel these frustrations, as participants' responses focused on:

- traditional literacy pedagogy as *limiting* and *exclusionary*; and
- a generally noted *loss of interest* in English class, or literacy learning

Participants were adamant about the need for change in English classrooms, suggesting that a greater focus on student interests and subject matter that was relevant to their lives might improve students' attitude toward and engagement in the subject.

Throughout this half of the chapter I also call attention to the potentially progressive, yet limited purview of boys' literacy initiatives, and their relationship to

these findings. Drawing on responses from both male and female participants, I highlight how essentialist gender reform initiatives, like "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004), lack inclusivity, failing to consider how the *boy*-friendly strategies they outline (such as relevant topics, interest-based learning, diversity of learning resources, etc.) could contribute to more universally beneficial learning opportunities for all students.

Set up to mirror participants' frustrations with their current literacy experiences, in the second half of the chapter I investigate the potential for superhero comics to address the literacy needs of students not being met by traditional literacy pedagogies. After two focus group discussions, each centered on a pair of superhero comic excerpts, I found,

- participants appreciated the "dynamic" multimodal content of these texts and began discussing literacy in terms that broadened their initial, traditional understandings;
- participants were able to relate to the characters and could draw out important topics or themes in the text (homosexuality, gender, trauma, mental health) that connected to classroom learning as well as to their worlds outside of school; and
- participants engaged in self-motivated critical discussion about content with excitement and interest

Considering these findings, I argue that superhero comics should be better implemented in schools as a student-centered, multimodal platform to motivate and engage students in meaningful, relevant, and critical learning.

# Chapter 7

# Conclusion

When I first started talking to people about my interest in doing research on the use of superhero comics in the classroom, the immediate reaction, almost without fail, was, "Oh, the *boys* will love that!" It was a bittersweet response. I appreciated the affirmation that my topic would be well received by students, but was always frustrated by the gender assumptions that came along with it. However, it was through these countless interactions that I began to understand the underlying implications of my research in the literacy discourse. Investigating the potential of superhero comics as literacy resources would not only involve challenging limiting preconceptions about the comic medium and superhero genre, but would also require the acknowledgement and interrogation of the boundaries in the literacy discourse that restricted the scope of these texts' integration, specifically their being targeted as *boy*-friendly resources.

This qualitative, case study explored six, high school students' literacy experiences in English classrooms to gain insight into their perceptions of themselves as literacy learners and questioned the role superhero comics can play in fostering engaging, multimodal literacy learning. Tangled in the boys' literacy discourse, the framework for this research, rooted in social constructivist theories of gender, challenges essentialist gender reform efforts in literacy by interrogating their focus on a limiting, hegemonic gender binary. By also adopting a multiliteracies framework, this research raises broader pedagogical concerns about how a continued focus on traditional literacy in education may be influencing students' performance and motivation in literacy learning, and how superhero comics could help to fill the void.

In this concluding chapter, I review the problem and questions that guided this research, and summarize my findings. I also consider the implications of this study for both the literacy discourse in education and pedagogical reform in literacy classrooms and consider opportunities for future research in this area.

## Revisiting the Problem and Research Questions of this Study

Over the past two decades, as boys' underachievement in literacy has maintained priority in the literacy discourse, essentialist gender reform efforts have continued to position boys as "disadvantaged" by the "feminized" practices of literacy classrooms

(Gurian & Stevens, 2005; MOE, 2004; Pirie, 2002; Kehler, 2013, Lingard, 2003; MOE, 2009b; Rowan et al. 2002). Boys' literacy initiatives have aimed to prop boys up through quick-fix strategies (such as implementing more boy-friendly resources, like comics) that cater to their perceived natural and distinct skills or preferences (Martino, 2008a; Rowan et al., 2002; Watson et al., 2010; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). These efforts fail to consider the limited constructions of masculinity they perpetuate, ignore the fact that not *all* boys are performing poorly in literacy, and disregard the needs of *girls*. Furthermore, by gendering certain literacy resources, like comics and superhero fiction, boys' literacy initiatives and the supporting literature contribute to erecting social barriers that may prevent or deter students from accessing these texts in literacy classrooms. These barriers add to the already nebulous relationship between comics, superhero fiction, and schools, in which comics and superhero fiction have historically faced scrutiny over their perceived "lowbrow" content, but have also recently gained appreciation in education, albeit often as simple texts that scaffold students to more "complex" reading, upholding certain "lowbrow" preconceptions.

Seeking to address the gender assumptions pervasive in the "boy crisis" discourse and to better understand the scope of superhero fiction's potential as a literacy resource, this study was guided by the question: *How does the boys' literacy discourse, as well as social norms, assumptions, and expectations surrounding gender, influence the integration of comics and superhero fiction in the classroom?* Focused investigation into this issue is supported by two supplementary questions:

1. How do students perceive themselves as literacy learners and how do they view their literacy learning environments, both generally and with regard to gender?

2. To what extent could comics and superhero fiction be used to promote students' literacy learning beyond their current role as "boy-friendly" resources?

These questions and the case study design of the research provide a space for extended conversations to occur with and between students, empowering student voices and resulting in rich, qualitative data that focuses on the lived experiences of students in literacy classrooms.

**Summary of Findings From the Research**

This study focused on the literacy experiences of six, high school students (three male, three female), gathering data through an initial entrance questionnaire (*Appendix C*) and three focus group discussions. Findings from this data are presented in two chapters in this thesis, with Chapter 5 providing an analysis of gender patterns (or lack thereof) in participants' responses, while Chapter 6 investigates participants' concerns with their current literacy learning in English classrooms and explores the literacy learning opportunities of superhero fiction.

**The (in)visibility of gender differences.** In this study, questionnaire data (with supporting evidence from focus group discussions) revealed no consistent gender patterns relating to participants' literacy identities, skills, or preferences. All participants highlighted some positive aspect of their English literacy performance and disclosed their involvement with leisure reading or writing activities outside of school. This complicates evidence in the literature that suggests boys' attitudes toward literacy learning tend to be negative and that they are less likely than girls to read for leisure (CCL, 2009; MOE, 2004; OECD, 2015). With regard to literacy preferences, both male and female participants expressed shared interest in a variety of texts (comics), genres (fantasy, non-fiction, superhero fiction) and skills (debating) – specifically (as noted in parentheses) some of those outlined in "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004) perceived to cater to boys' particular interests. However, of the six participants, one boy, Jason, did align almost seamlessly with the "boy" image outlined in much of the essentialist literature, identifying interests in "boy-friendly" texts and genres and explicitly stating his indifference to and boredom with English class. Although Jason's narrative provides support for essentialist literacy initiatives, the findings from the participant group as a whole indicate that definitive claims about "natural" and distinct gender preferences in literacy are inconsistent and a poor representation of the diversity of students' interests and skills.

During focus group discussions, specific references to gender (differences in performance, divided interests) were absent. For participants, gender was not a visible factor influencing their experiences of or issues with literacy classrooms. However, when I directly addressed gender differences nearing the end of the final focus group meeting,

some participants acknowledged their presence. Damian described an exam question that offered writing prompt choices clearly rooted in gender stereotypes (students could write on sports or feminism), and the uncomfortable tension that could arise from a boy writing about or discussing a "girl" topic (i.e. feminism). Interestingly, Damian's example focuses on gender stereotypes in content and instructional practices, not "natural" gender differences. Despite taking a firm stance initially, Vicki admits, "Like, maybe if you tell me a specific topic that there's a difference, then I'll say, like 'Oh yeah, there is that.'" Findings from the focus group discussions therefore illustrate participants' unconsciousness of gender in literacy experiences, that is, until it is constructed or shaped by an external social influence.

**The limitations of traditional literacy pedagogy in English classrooms.** Rather than focusing on gender as a significant factor influencing their literacy experiences, participants identified the limited scope of traditional literacy pedagogy as exclusionary for some students and ultimately leading to a general loss of interest in English as a subject for many others. Evidence of these overarching concerns was revealed in three common threads within focus group discussions. First, participants argued that the reading- and writing-heavy curriculum in English does not account for the diverse needs and skills of students. Second, participants emphasized that the traditional English texts they studied in class were overused and, in many cases, lacked relevance or connections to students' lives or personal interests. And third, participants devoted a significant portion of time in focus group discussions to expressing their frustration with the limited, open discussion about topics and texts addressed in their English classrooms.

Frustrations expressed by participants (both male and female) with their current literacy learning experiences pair nicely with several strategies outlined in "Me Read? No Way!" (MOE, 2004) that frame relevant, interest-based, and textually diverse learning strategies as "boy-friendly." These findings emphasize the need for mobilizing broader pedagogical reform that attempts to bolster student interest and motivation in literacy learning, through literacy education that is better suited to students' interests and skills, and the diverse worlds of meaning outside of school.

**Superhero comics as platforms for relevant, multimodal, critical literacy.** The straightforward answer to the original phrasing of the third research question (To what

extent are comics and superhero fiction being used to promote students' literacy learning?) was that no one had experience with superheroes, or even comics, in their literacy classrooms. However, with a subtle manipulation to this question, participants' discussion revealed the extent to which comics and superhero fiction *could* be used in literacy classrooms – their potential extending beyond simplistic preconceptions and the "boy books" label.

Participants had the opportunity to read four different superhero comic excerpts in this study, which they discussed during focus group meetings (two discussed at each of the second and third meetings). From these discussions, three main findings emerged that responded to participants' concerns with the limitations of traditional literacy pedagogy. First, as participants engaged with the texts they began to expand their conceptions of literacy to include, as Vicki suggested, "other ways of being literate" outside basic comprehension in written language, developing an appreciation for the complex, multimodal spaces comics offered. Second, participants found characters (particularly in *X-Men* (Morrison, 2001)) to be relatable and situated within relevant social and personal issues that are meaningful to the lives of students. Finally, given the opportunity to freely explore questions, concerns, or thoughts about the texts, participants eagerly initiated critical discussions within the focus group about meanings in the texts. Furthermore, while possible barriers to the integration of these texts in classrooms were raised during discussion (violent and sexual content), participants were able to shift the focus of their critical lens inward to their own contexts in order to question and challenge the power relations at play in classroom text selection.

Overall, participants' attitude toward reading and discussing these texts were far more positive than their reactions to the texts they described studying in their English classrooms. While part of this was a result of an open discussion space (a pedagogical strategy participants were frustrated not to have in their everyday learning), this discussion was fueled by participants' excitement and self-motivated engagement with the characters and issues taken up in these superhero comics.

**Significance of the Research**

Interested in exploring the potential of superhero comics as multimodal and critical literacy resources, the inclusion of comics and superhero fiction as "boy-friendly"

resources in boys literacy initiatives and literature necessitates investigation into how this relationship influences the integration of comics and superhero fiction in the classroom. Therefore, this study uniquely contributes to a wealth of research on gendered literacy achievement and multiliteracies.

The focus on boys' literacy achievement in the literacy discourse, resulting from gaps in standardized testing results, has prompted numerous inquiries seeking to better understand the specific literacy practices and preferences of boys. However, these studies are limited by their gendered focus. Inspired by earlier research by Jones and Myhill (2004), this research helps uncover the importance of considering the perspectives of both boys *and* girls when addressing literacy issues. Evidence of the lack of gender patterns across participants' responses in this research disrupts definitive essentialist claims about gender differences and preferences in literacy, discrediting the oversimplified, oppositional gender dichotomy of essentialist gender reforms.

The (in)visibility of gender in participants' responses within this research also calls attention to the influence of social factors on constructions and perceptions of gender and literacy achievement. When I presented gender differences in literacy as a possible social reality for participants to consider, I was "activating awareness of gender differences" (Sokal et al., 2005, p. 228). As a result, participants began reading their experiences for traces of gender differences. However, prior to introducing them to this possibility, participants were not drawn to gender issues (differences or disadvantages) at all. Instead they focused on pedagogical shortcomings that limited students' enjoyment and participation in literacy learning. These findings can be extrapolated to the context of literacy reform and research, where continued exposure to the boys' literacy discourse and essentialist gender reform efforts, have preserved social realities that problematically limit and shape understandings of gender and literacy achievement. Removing these confining, essentialist gender lines, future research and literacy reform efforts will be in a better position to more generally investigate students' literacy practices and issues with literacy pedagogy.

Participants' focus on the limitations of their current traditional literacy practices opened up conversations, both in focus groups and within this thesis, about expanding conceptions of literacy, integrating student-centered literacy resources, and the need for

critical discussion in classrooms. While these concepts or strategies are not new or groundbreaking on their own, their emergence out of (largely) participant-directed focus group discussions, offers valuable, unique insight into the ways students actively think about and engage in their learning. Students' voices were essential to developing the quality and depth of the data in this study. By prioritizing authentic student voices in this research, flaws in current literacy pedagogy were identified through a bottom-up approach that empowered students to influence change in their education, to shape future learning opportunities for themselves and others.

Finally, this study adds to the growing body of research on the use of comics in the classroom. Much of the research in this field discusses comic books and graphic novels as separate entities and focuses specifically on integrating graphic novels as more "serious," literary works (Bitz, 2010; Moeller, 2011; Monnin, 2009; NCAC, ALA, & CBLDF, 2006; Weiner, 2002). However, this study (as stated in Chapter 1) does not privilege either form, focusing on the multimodal opportunities of all comics, or the comic medium. Distinct, from the majority of literature on comics, this research challenges negative preconceptions of superhero fiction and provides evidence to bolster the smaller pocket of literature that recognizes this genre's ability to root itself in and comment on contextually relevant social, cultural, and political issues. This was evident in the findings of this study, where a variety of salient topics emerged while participants read and discussed superhero comics, including sexism, feminism, homophobia, mental health, segregation, bullying, and relationships. Paired with relatable characters in a multimodal text, superhero fiction fostered participants' engagement with these topics through motivated and self-directed critical discussion.

**Opportunities for Further Research**

The scale and scope of this study, and the relatively small body of research investigating superhero fiction's potential in high school English classrooms, means the opportunities for further research are abundant. Due to the fact that this particular research topic is still in its youth, qualitative, case study research is arguably the best approach to continue exploratory efforts to better understand the "why's" and "how's" of implementing superhero fiction in literacy education. In fact, it would helpful to replicate this study to reinforce its reliability and draw comparisons between different contexts

(participant group, setting, text selection, etc.). Contextual influences could also be explored using a classroom intervention that increases the scale of the project and investigates the translation of findings from this research to the structured learning environments of English classrooms. As Vicki pointed out in discussion, she knew she was, "never gonna be completely comfortable talking in a twenty people classroom," a sentiment shared by a number of participants. Therefore, it is important to consider how the critical discussion and engaging dialogue between participants may be stifled by larger, group settings.

In planning this study, I wanted to focus solely on the voices of students, to gain insight into their lived experiences and to avoid pressures to validate their experiences by comparing them with teachers' experiences. However, as gatekeepers of classroom content, I think it is pivotal to begin including teacher voices into further research as well, not to replace or substantiate student voices, but to work in concert with them to gain a more holistic understanding of issues and opportunities for literacy education.

Finally, I think it is important that further research involve sample groups that include both male and female participants. This helps to avoid perpetuating simplified gender claims about literacy skills and preferences, ensuring that research does not marginalize certain groups of students who could benefit from its findings and future implications.

**Final Thoughts**

As Damian simply, but powerfully stated in this research, "Change is necessary." Research on broadening conceptions of literacy (see Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Kress, 2000b; New London Group, 1996; Lankshear et al., 1997), gender and literacy achievement (see Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Epstein et al., 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2001; Hammett & Sanford, 2008b; Kehler, 2013; Lingard et al., 2009; Martino, 2008b; Rowan et al., 2002), and fostering relevant, student-centered learning (see Freire, 1987; Gee, 2000; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Kalantzis & Cope, 2000b) all have extensive histories that stretch back at least a decade, and even two in some cases. Yet, there is still a struggle to translate this research meaningfully into school contexts and education discourses. Continuing these efforts to initiate change, this thesis seeks to disrupt essentialist claims that have gendered the success and interests of students in literacy learning, considering

instead the broader pedagogical concerns that may be influencing students' performance and motivation in English classrooms, and how superhero comics may contribute to addressing these issues.

Evidence throughout this thesis has shown that comics and superhero fiction have profound literacy learning potential. Although superhero fiction has faced greater scrutiny than the comic medium in general, as research continues to grow and support the literacy potential of superhero fiction, perceptions about the quality of the content in superhero fiction and the simplicity of its visual literacies will surely be overcome, resulting in a more serious appreciation for this genre.

However, a more challenging barrier outlined in this research, both for the integration of comics and superhero fiction, and the creation of inclusive literacy environments, stems from essentialist boys' literacy initiatives and the "boy crisis" discourse in education. Although documents like *Me Read? No Way!* (2004) and its follow up, *Me Read? And How!* (2009), claim to endorse strategies that are beneficial to both boys and girls, the language used within sets up a gender dichotomy that creates an oppositional and competing relationship between boys and girls in school. Until such rigid boundaries confining the learning of boys and girls are deconstructed, many students and literacy resources will continue to be overlooked or unnecessarily confined in efforts to address literacy achievement.

At one point in the research, Rachel explained feeling like, "it's a sense of, like, just convenience for some teachers that we don't change these novels" and I would argue that the same attitude applies to the oversimplified "solutions" to literacy achievement. Essentialist gender reform conveniently dichotomizes boys and girls, and their interests and skills, attempting to compartmentalize and normalize perceived gender differences rather than confronting and critically examining the messiness of human diversity. Rowan et al. (2002) emphasize the need to recognize, "the productive value of taking risks, exploring the unknown and letting go of the familiar and the 'safe'" (p. 6). This applies to adopting new ways of teaching and incorporating new texts in the classroom as well, including superhero fiction, which this thesis has shown is a productive "risk" worth taking. As Morrison (2012) states, "It should give us hope that superhero stories are

flourishing everywhere because they are a bright flickering sign of our need to move on, to imagine the better, more just, and more proactive people we can be" (p. 414).

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**Appendix A – Letter of information and consent form for students**

**Project Title:**
## "What about the boys" in tights?
*Beyond the "boy crisis" and into the literacy potential of superhero fiction*
**Principal Investigator:**
Dr. Michael Kehler, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Western University
**Co-Investigator:**
Jacob Cassidy, MA Candidate, Faculty of Education, Western University

## <u>Letter of Information</u>

1. **Invitation to Participate**

   You are being invited to participate in this research study about students'
   experiences learning in English classrooms and the role that superhero fiction can
   or does play in these classrooms because (1) you are a senior high school student
   with an abundance of experience in English classrooms and (2) this study wishes
   to better understand its focus through a student-centered approach.

2. **Purpose of the Letter**

   The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to
   make an informed decision regarding participation in this research.

3. **Purpose of this Study**

   The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding about students'
   experiences with literacy, or the various ways we create, understand, and interpret
   the information we communicate or receive. More specifically, this study is
   focused on gathering information from students about how they describe
   themselves and their learning in English classrooms, as well as their thoughts on
   the role that superhero fiction can or does play in these classrooms.

4. **Inclusion Criteria**

   Individuals who are currently enrolled in a senior ( grade 11 or 12) English class,
   from any of the academic strands (university, college, or workplace) are eligible to
   participate in this study.

   However, due to the small scale of this project, ***those who are eligible and have
   given consent to participate will not necessarily be selected to participate in the
   focus group***. Only one male and one female student from each academic strand
   (university, college, workplace) will be randomly selected to participate, for a
   total of six participants.

5. **Exclusion Criteria**

Individuals not eligible to participate in this research include those not currently enrolled in a senior English class (grade 11 or 12) and those not between 16 and 18 years of age.

6. **Study Procedures**

If you agree to and are selected to participate, you will be asked to:

(a) complete a short **questionnaire** (taking approximately 10-15 minutes) that asks about your views of literacy, learning experiences in English class, comics and superhero fiction, including how you would define literacy and yourself as an English student and what experiences you have with comics and superheroes in English class

(b) take part in **3 focus group discussions** (with 5 other students) where you will talk about your experiences in English classes (based on questions from the questionnaire), share your interpretations of various superhero comic excerpts that will be read during the study, and discuss your thoughts about whether superhero comics belong in schools

(c) write brief **personal reflections** about any ideas that came up in discussion or that you did not feel comfortable sharing with the group as a whole – these will be completed before the end of each focus group meeting

(d) **provide feedback** on transcribed data to help ensure that what is presented is an accurate reflection of your voice and contributions to the group discussion

Focus groups will be **audio recorded** to capture the essence of the spontaneous and interactive nature of the group dynamic.

It is anticipated that the entire study will require approximately **2.5 hours of time commitment** (each focus group lasting approximately 45 minutes, with additional time included for providing feedback on transcribed data). The study will be conducted during lunch breaks in a classroom or similar space within the school as designated by administration.

7. **Possible Risks and Harms**

Although this study does not intend to put you in a vulnerable or uncomfortable position, it must be understood that any research that involves participants sharing information about their personal lives or experiences creates the potential risk for emotional discomfort. That being said, precautions will be taken to minimize the potential for these risks.

It is important to understand that *you will be expected to maintain a trusting and respectful relationship with all participants in the group*. Behaviour that does not meet these expectations will be addressed and discussed between the individual

failing to participate within the group's ground rules and the researcher. Should an issue arise or go unnoticed by the moderator, participants can and should approach the researcher with any concerns relating to feelings of emotional discomfort or disrespectful behaviour.

## 8. Possible Benefits

The possible benefits to you include being able to voice your unique perspectives with the aim of improving learning experiences for yourself and for the education system as a whole.
Possible benefits to society include contributing new evidence and perspectives on learning experiences in English classrooms to education research, and opening up dialogue on the topic of using superhero comics in English classrooms – both leading to potential improvements in the education system.

## 9. Compensation

In appreciation for your assistance with this study you will be given a $20 iTunes gift card.

## 10. Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your academic status or grades.

## 11. Confidentiality

Throughout this study, every effort will be made to keep the collected data confidential. All written data (from questionnaires and personal reflections) will only be accessible to you and to the investigators of this study. However, despite best efforts there is no guarantee that focus group data will remain confidential, as this will be shared in a group setting.

Teachers will not be informed of your willingness to consent or your being selected to participate in this research – this is to protect participants' academic status or grades. Therefore, ***signed consent forms must be returned to the main office in a sealed envelope with only the researchers' names on the outside.***

If the results are published, your name will not be used. If you choose to withdraw from this study, your data will be removed and destroyed from our database. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may contact you or require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

## 12. Contacts for Further Information

If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact:

**Jacob Cassidy, Co-Investigator**   Phone:
                                       Email:

**Dr. Michael Kehler, Principal Investigator**   Phone:
                                                  Email:

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact:
**The Office of Research Ethics**    Phone: (519) 661-3036   Email: ethics@uwo.ca

## 13. Publication

If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. If you wish to learn about the results of the study, please write your name and email address on a separate piece of paper and you will be sent a report of the results via email.

*This letter is yours to keep for future reference.*

## Consent Form

**Project Title:**

### "What about the boys" in tights?
*Beyond the "boy crisis" and into the literacy potential of superhero fiction*

**Study Investigators' Names:**

**Jacob Cassidy**
MA Candidate, Faculty of Education, Western University

**Dr. Michael Kehler**
Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Western University

*I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.*

Student's Name (please print): _____

Student's Signature: _____ Date: _____

*Please check one of the boxes below to indicate whether or not you consent to being audio recorded during this study:*

☐ I consent to being audio recorded during the focus group discussions of this study

☐ I DO NOT consent to being audio recorded during the focus group discussions of this study

Parent/Legal Guardian/Legally Authorized Representative *(\*\*if participant is under the age of 18)*

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

*To be completed by researchers…*

Person Obtaining Informed Consent (please print): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

### **\*\*Please return this consent form to the main office in a sealed envelope with only the researchers' names on the outside.**

## Appendix B – Masters Thesis Proposal and UWO Research Ethics Approvals

❤️ Education

### APPROVAL OF MASTER'S THESIS PROPOSAL

This signed form and ONE copy of the research proposal is to be submitted to the Graduate Programs Office for final approval.

*It is the student's responsibility to provide a copy of the research proposal to the thesis supervisor and all members of the advisory committee.*

If the proposed research _involves_ human subjects, the student has to receive ethics approval from the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board before beginning their research.

**Student's Name:** Jacob Cassidy        **Student #:** 250665694

**Title of Thesis:** "What about the boys" in tights? Beyond the "boy crisis" and into the literacy potential of superhero fiction

**Thesis Supervisor:** Dr. Michael Kehler

**Thesis Joint Supervisor:**
*(if applicable)*

**Thesis Advisory Committee:**
*(at least one person)*        Dr. Kathy Hibbert

**APPROVAL SIGNATURES:**

**Graduate Student:**        **Date:** September 19, 2014

**Thesis Supervisor:**        **Date:**

**Thesis Joint Supervisor:**        **Date:** Sept
*(if applicable)*

**Advisory Committee Member(s):**        **Date:** Sept 22, 2014

**Associate Dean**        **Date:** Oct 10, 2014
*Graduate Programs:*

A STUDENT MAY PROCEED WITH RESEARCH WHEN A COPY OF THIS FORM CONTAINING ALL APPROVAL SIGNATURES AND ETHICS APPROVAL (IF APPLICABLE) HAS BEEN RECEIVED.

*A copy of this proposal may be made public and kept on a two-hour reserve in the Faculty of Education Library.*

Version Date: July 24, 2013

Western University        Faculty of Education        Graduate Programs Office

**Western Research**

**Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board**
**NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Michael Kehler
**Department & Institution:** Education\Faculty of Education, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 105869
**Study Title:** "What about the boys" in tights?: Beyond the "boy crisis" and into the literacy potential of superhero fiction
**Sponsor:**

**NMREB Initial Approval Date:** December 04, 2014
**NMREB Expiry Date:** December 01, 2015

**Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:**

| Document Name | Comments | Version Date |
|---|---|---|
| Western University Protocol | | 2014/11/10 |
| Recruitment Items | Recruitment Email | 2014/11/10 |
| Letter of Information & Consent | | 2014/11/11 |
| Other | Batman: The Killing Joke - Moore, 1988 (Comic Excerpt) | 2014/11/10 |
| Other | Batgirl Vol. 1 - Simone, 2012 (Comic Excerpt) | 2014/11/10 |
| Other | New X-MEN - Morrison, 2001 (Comic Excerpt) | 2014/11/10 |
| Other | Marvels - Busiek, 2004 (Comic Excerpt) | 2014/11/10 |
| Other | All-Star Superman - Morrison, 2011 (Comic Excerpt) | 2014/11/10 |

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941,

Ethics Officer, on behalf of Riley Hinson, NMREB Chair

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

| Erika Basile | Grace Kelly | Mina Mekhail | Vikki Tran |
|---|---|---|---|
| ebasile@uwo.ca | grace.kelly@uwo.ca | mmekhail@uwo.ca | vikki.tran@uwo.ca |

*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*

**Appendix C – Participant Questionnaire**

PART 1:

Name: _____

Sex: ☐ Male   ☐ Female

Grade: ☐ 11   ☐ 12

Level: ☐ Workplace   ☐ College   ☐ University

PART 2:
*Please provide short responses (a few lines) to the following questions in the space provided.*

1. What does "literacy" or being "literate" mean to you?

2. What do you think about English as a subject?

3. How would you describe yourself and your abilities in English class? How might others (such as your teachers or peers) describe you and your abilities?

4. What kinds of reading and writing do you do when you are not at school?

5. Do you have any experience reading comic books or graphic novels?
   a. ☐ Yes  (If checked, please proceed to question "**b**")

   ☐ No (If checked, please move on to question "**c**")

   b. If "**yes**," please *list some examples* of what you have read and *briefly explain what you enjoyed or disliked about reading this type of book*.

   c. If "**no**," why is this?

6. Are comic books and/or graphic novels being used in your English class? How are they being used? Which ones have been used?

7. Have you used superheroes and their stories (superhero fiction) in your English class? If so, how and which ones?

*Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire!*

## Appendix D – Focus Group Outline

**Sample Focus Group Questions/Prompts**

FIRST MEETING:

The first meeting will be used primarily for introductions and completing the questionnaire. During this time I will cover ground rules, brief participants on the anticipated plan for the meetings, and organize/schedule our future meetings. Participants will also be able to ask questions or receive clarification about any aspects of the study they wish to know more about.

Because we do not have a lot of time together, this initial meeting will lay the foundation for our group dynamic – creating an environment based on trust and respect so that everyone feels welcome and able to participate to their fullest extent.

Introduction Questions:
- Please tell me about yourself.
- What are some of your hobbies or interests?

Participants will be given a comic excerpt at the end of the meeting to read for the next scheduled meeting time (specific title and pages are yet to be determined).

SECOND MEETING:

The second meeting will focus on revisiting questions from the initial questionnaire and starting into our discussions on superhero comics.

Beginning with the questionnaire questions will provide an easy entry point for our first discussion, as they have already thought about answers to these questions. Additionally, revisiting these questions may provide an opportunity to see how participants shift between individual and group contexts.

*Questionnaire Follow-Up*

* What does "literacy" or being "literate" mean to you?

* What do you think about English as a subject?

* What kinds of reading and writing do you do when you are not at school?

    o Do you ever get to do this kind of reading or writing in class?

* Do you have any experience using comic books and graphic novels at school?

 Do you think comic books and graphic novels could/should be used in English classrooms? Please explain.
* Do you have any experience using superheroes and their stories (superhero fiction) in your English class?

    o Do you think superhero fiction could/should be used in English classroom? Please explain.

*Superhero Comics*

&ast;   What were your first impressions after reading this comic?

   o   Was it a difficult read? Please explain.

   o   Did you enjoy it? Why or why not?

   o   What elements were you drawn to?

&ast;   What, if any, issues arise in this excerpt? (Social, political, historical, etc.)

&ast;   Are the characters and their situations relatable or relevant to your life? Please explain.

&ast;   Could this comic be used in English classrooms? Please explain.

   o   What topics does it address that are pertinent to English?

   o   What concerns might you have with this being used in an English class?

   o   How does it differ form other texts used in English class? How is it similar?

   o   What would be the benefit of studying this text in class?

Participants will be given two more excerpts at the end of this meeting to read for our next discussion (titles and pages are yet to be determined).


THIRD MEETING:

During this meeting we will discuss the excerpts given to participants at the end of the last meeting, address any outstanding topics from previous discussions, and conclude our focus group.

Questions posed to participants in the previous meeting (see *Superhero Comics* in "Meeting Two") will be used again to facilitate discussion, with one additional question:

How, if at all, have your ideas about literacy, English, comics, and/or superheroes changed throughout this study?

**Appendix E – A page from *Batgirl* (Simone, 2012)**

**Appendix F – A page from *Superman* (Morrison, 2011)**
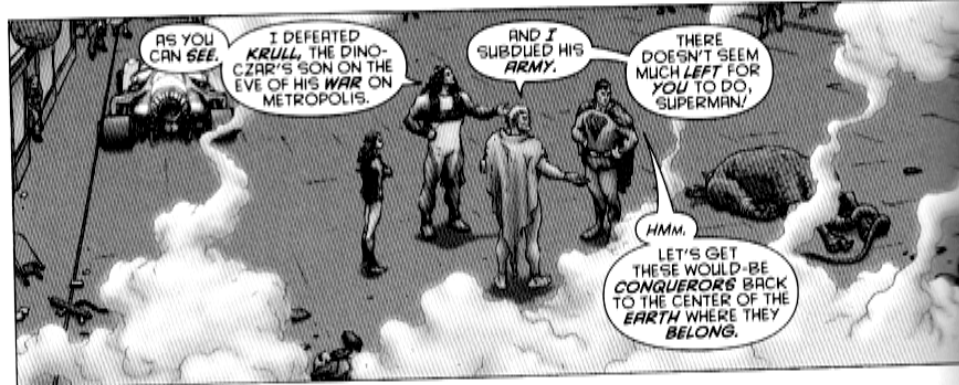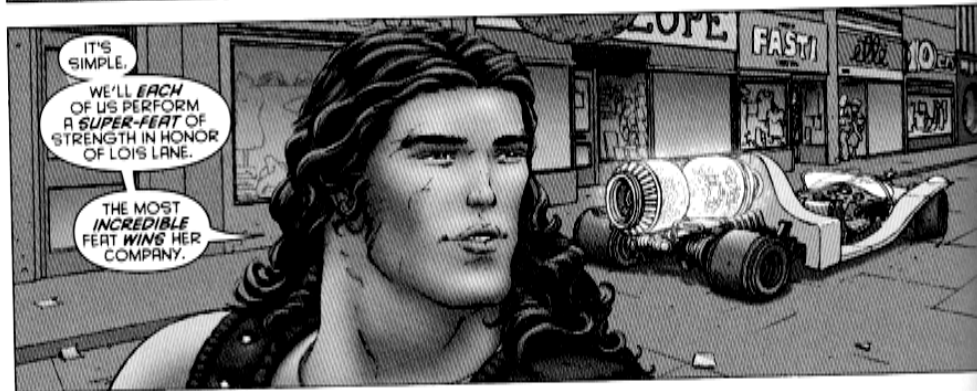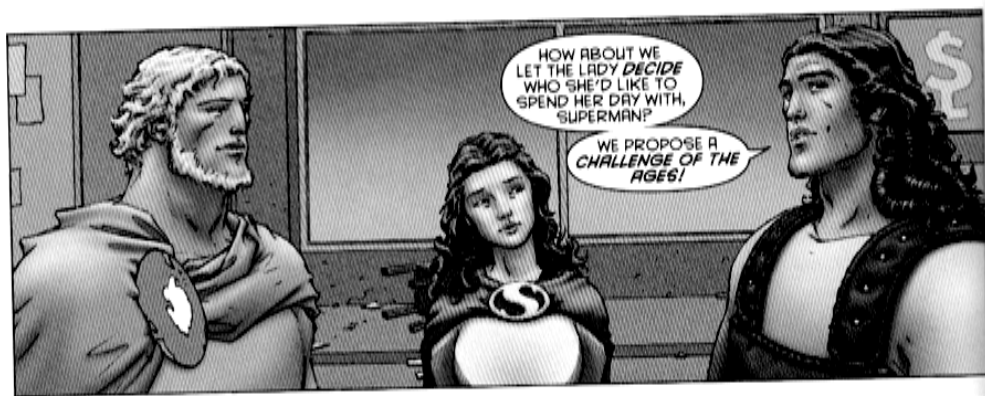
## Appendix G – Curriculum Vitae

**Name:**                        Jacob Cassidy

**Post-secondary**          University of Guelph
**Education and**            Guelph, Ontario, Canada
**Degrees:**                     2008-2011 B.A.

                                      The University of Western Ontario
                                      London, Ontario, Canada
                                      2012-2013 B.Ed.

**Related Work**             Occasional Teacher,
**Experience**                 Bruce-Grey Catholic District School Board
                                      2013-2015