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CRITICAL INTERACTIONS:
TEENAGE MOTHERS' INTERROGATIONS OF TEXTS AND LIVES

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Kara L. Lycke

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CRITICAL INTERACTIONS:
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By

Kara L. Lycke

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ABSTRACT

CRITICAL INTERACTIONS:
TEENAGE MOTHERS' INTERROGATIONS OF TEXTS AND LIVES

By

Kara L. Lycke

This dissertation is a report of a study conducted over two years that focused on the critical literacy practices of nine teen mothers in an after school reading and writing group. This study grows out of a larger project designed around an intervention focused on the shared reading, writing, and discussion of texts about lives and social issues with which we felt the teen mothers could identify. At group meetings, we interrogated texts we read and wrote for their representation of roles of women and images of teen mothers. We also examined the ways in which the authors positioned themselves, their subjects, and their readers.

Using a hybrid of qualitative research approaches, I conducted my analysis in order to concentrate on two issues: (1) The literacy practices demonstrated in our reading and writing group and (2) the reciprocal nature of identity and literacy development of the teen mothers. My research was aimed at exploring how the young women in the group constructed themselves as they were informed by multiple texts, and how they responded (or not) to other's constructions of them.

I identified particular ways that the participants critically engaged with text at our meetings, and I call these ways of engaging *critical interactions*. The five critical interactions that I identified emerged out of in-the-moment enactments of critical literacy at group meetings; they are *offering a stance toward a text, comparing the representation*

in the text to one's experiences, explicitly acknowledging a text as a representation,

talking back to a text, and *making inter-textual references.* These critical interactions

offer some insight into a reader's perspective when she engages in critical literacy

practices, and they have implications for informing critical literacy teaching and learning

both in and out of the classroom.

To the teen mothers
who became the core of our group.
Thank you for allowing me into
your lives and your literacies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people helped to make this work possible and deserve my sincerest thank-you. First, I would like to thank Anna Neumann to whom I am deeply indebted for her dedication to this project and for devoting so much of her time and energy to it even as the miles between us increased. Thank you, Anna, for reading and rereading, for your encouragement, flexibility, unending support, and for teaching me about writing. I would also like to thank P. David Pearson for teaching me much of what I know about educational research and for providing me with multiple opportunities to practice it under his guidance. Thank you to Laura Apol, my collaborator, who helped transform a proposal on paper into relationships with people. Thank you to the rest of my committee members who were so responsive and adaptable as this project unfolded: Susan Florio-Ruane, Aaron Pallas, Dick Prawatt, and Jack Smith.

I am also grateful to my family, especially to Chris Connelly for his patience and his personal and scholarly support as this work stretched around both anticipated and unforeseen obstacles; to Ciaran Connelly without whom I would not be cultivating my own identity as a mother; and to my sister Kris Lycke who believes in me.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the individual young women, no longer teens, who participated in this research project and for what they helped to create as a group. Thank you, also, to the administrators, faculty and staff at Summit High School, especially the coordinator of the parenting program, who generously and trustingly consented to my presence in classrooms and the child care center. Finally, I would like to thank all the people who contributed to this work with their clerical support, and the National Council of Teachers of English and the Spencer Foundation for their financial support.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION

Overview of the Research Project

This dissertation is a qualitative research study about an intervention designed to impact the literacy learning experiences of teenage mothers in relation to their developing identities. This study grows out of a larger project in which Laura Apol and I explored the developing identities of teen mothers in three interrelated settings: (1) a voluntary reading and writing group, (2) an alternative high school, and (3) specific events in the teenage mothers' daily lives out of school (e.g., bedtime literacy rituals with their children). We designed this study around an intervention focused on the shared reading, writing, and discussion of texts about lives and social issues with which we felt the teen mothers could identify. As group facilitators and participants, and as educators, we sought to teach our participants how to develop and/or refine their literacy skills as they interacted with the texts we brought to our group. As researchers, we sought to: (1) investigate how teenage mothers' explorations of their literacies influence their understandings of their identities, and 2) consider how their literacy-based explorations shape their children's emerging literacies.

My dissertation concentrates on two issues related to the first of these two larger goals: (1) The literacy practices demonstrated in our reading and writing group. I used data from this and other settings of the study (e.g., records of interviews and observations obtained in the classroom and the homes of the teenage mothers) to support my analysis of what I observed in our reading and writing group. (2) The reciprocal nature of identity and literacy development of the teen mothers. Because their children are a major part of

their lives, I have taken account of them relative to my primary consideration—the literacy and identity development of the teenage mothers themselves. At our meetings, I asked the participants to look deeply into their own literacy practices and examine carefully their assumptions about who they are. In particular, I encouraged them to examine possible connections between how they engage with texts and how they define who they are. My research was aimed at exploring how these young women constructed themselves as they were informed by multiple texts, and how they responded (or not) to other's constructions of them.

The multi-part research question that emerged from this study evolved over time and through many phases of the project. In the tradition of grounded theory, I started with a general problem that allowed me "a sufficient starting point for what and where to study" (Dey, 1999); that problem was shaped into a research question that was refined as the study progressed. I planned initially to teach critical literacy skills to teenage mothers in a high school classroom situated within an alternative high school. I wanted to explore how critical literacy gets enacted in a literacy-rich setting and how critical literacy practices might help teenage mothers make more thoughtful decisions about their lives. I hoped to generate or discover a theory (Creswell, 1998) or revise existing theories that would explain some of the missing pieces I recognized in the theory and practice of critical literacy in a classroom. In doing this, I hoped to test the contention that critical literacy can give voice to marginalized students, thereby positioning them to participate as agents of change in a literate society (e.g. Luke, 2000; Morgan, 1997). As I noted in my proposal for a Michigan State University based Spencer Research Training Grant:

...the goal of the project is to determine if students will take personal and/or

social action toward the direction of their work in [the] class [that I taught]. The

minimal level of action that I imagine they will take involves reflecting on their

social status as a teenager, their roles as a teen mother, and their concerns about

the emerging literacy of their young children. In gaining access to the rhetoric

that positions them and constructs their images of themselves, they may begin to

see ways to transform their positions, to rename themselves, and to consider how

they will prepare their children to encounter a society and a school system that

values literacy in many forms" (Lycke, 1999).

As I started observing the teenage mothers at Summit High School[1] in their

parenting classroom and in other settings, I recognized an untested assumption that I was

making: I assumed teenage mothers need a great deal of help discerning the public

rhetoric that defines them, collectively, as a social liability—namely, as irresponsible

social actors, and as culturally devalued and unequal participants in the making of culture

(Kelly, 2000). I assumed, also, that they need help in creating alternative self-definitions,

and that this might occur through development of their literacy practices. These new

self-images could exist for their benefit, and also for the benefit of other teenage mothers,

their children, and others who have a stake in how teenage mothers are represented.

I was wrong in my assumption. As I was allowed entrance into this group of

teenage mothers' lives and literacies, I saw that they were already engaged on some level

in the public rhetoric and that they were not unaware of how others were defining them. I

was also wrong in thinking that they had little notion of alternative identities that could

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[1] The name of the high school and all other names used for people (except for the researchers) and places
are pseudonyms.

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exist for them outside of the stereotypes about them. I was more accurate in my view that they, like many teenagers, needed help articulating their alternative self-definitions through their literacy practices and in putting to use their literacy tools to enact the identities they chose to live. I also came to realize that the specific group of teenage mothers with whom I worked wanted to educate others about alternative identities that they were capable of taking on; they wanted to help others understand them beyond the popular public rhetoric. I eventually learned that they wanted me to help them enter the public conversations that presume to know them better than they know themselves. As I began talking and working with the teen mothers at Summit High School, some of whom would end up in my study, I realized that in many ways they were *already* taking a critical perspective toward texts and their lives. Even though they were not explicitly analyzing texts in the terms of critical literacy as defined by literacy scholars (e.g., Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 1996; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997; Roman & Eyre, 1997; Shor, 1993), they were informally performing many critical literacy practices in their daily lives, both in and out of school. I realized I did not need to teach them to practice critical literacy. Rather, I could facilitate an examination of ways in which they were already performing critical literacy practices, and I could help them refine and extend those practices. I could also assist them in understanding specific ways that their already developing critical literacy skills were changing their identities.

Through my research, I identified teenage mothers' performances of critical literacy practices, which I call *critical interactions*, in the everyday activities of their parenting class. As I will explain in greater detail in chapter 2, a critical interaction with

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a text is an in-the-moment enactment of critical literacy. A reader looks beyond the surface meaning of a text for possible multiple meanings that the author might be implying and she[2] considers how the text could be defining who she is and how she might use the information in the text. She interrogates the texts for its reflection of reality and the reader's role in that reflection (Apol, 1998).

I provide here one brief introductory example of a critical interaction occurring very early in my research. At this point in the history of the study, I was observing a class in which many students were pregnant and nearing the time of delivery. One day, an obstetrics nurse was a guest in their classroom. She had come to class to discuss questions and concerns the young women had about delivering their babies, an event which both excited and frightened them. The guest presented the students with information cards. Each card had on it a printed word and its technical definition. The words were medical terms naming possible complications that could be experienced during delivery: *Caesarian section, cephalopelvic disorder*, and *umbilical chord prolapse*. The guest passed the cards out to students and they read each card aloud.

In traditional classrooms where vocabulary learning is an important part of instruction, the lesson might stop here—the students had acquired the terms and their definitions. Also in traditional vocabulary lessons, students might be asked to write sentences using the words to demonstrate their understanding of the words "in context." But in this class, the students picked apart the definition of each term and discussed the real-life implications behind the terms' technical meanings. The teenage mothers, their

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[2] I use the female form of personal pronouns for generic references to readers and learners throughout this document because the participants, researchers and teachers involved in this project all were women. I do not necessarily intend to exclude males any more than most authors do when they use the male form of personal pronouns in a generic sense.

teacher, and the visiting nurse shared and compared stories of their own experiences with events related to these terms. They told stories they had heard about other women's deliveries involving the conditions named on the cards. They explored myths and medical advice associated with these words, and they discussed the students' options and rights as obstetrics patients, and the choices they might make if they were presented with similar situations during their own deliveries.

I find these engagements to reflect critical interactions for three reasons: Because in their class discussion the students did not stop making meaning of the terms at their official definitions, because the culturally situated definitions of the vocabulary held complex possibilities for enactment in their lives, and because the choices the students might make as a consequence of learning these new words would contribute to their self-definitions. The texts they were interrogating in this example was different from that which we examined in our reading and writing group—they were isolated words and their definitions, which can be contrasted with the stories, articles and other popular media we interrogated in the reading and writing group. Nevertheless, the students in the class were considering their roles as teen mothers in relationship to the new vocabulary they were learning. The classroom lesson was connected to a significant event in their lives—the birth of their children—that could have a powerful influence on how they understood this new language and themselves. They had a vested interest in the stories of the experienced mothers (their teacher, the visiting nurse, and their peers who had already given birth) in relationship to this new vocabulary. Others' stories were models of possibility for them within the technical definitions of words such as *Caesarian section*, *cephalopelvic disorder*, and *umbilical chord prolapse*.

Observing this conversation and others like it, in an early phase of my research, helped me to understand that many of the teenage mothers I hoped would participate in my study were already actively engaged in critically analytic habits of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking within the social contexts of their lives. I realized they were engaging critically with texts in at least one setting—their parenting class. At some level, they were already connecting their literacy practices to the real world of their personal circumstances. The preponderance of my thinking for this study has been located at the nexus of these teenage mothers' literacy practices and their choices about how to construct their lives.

At the time that I presented my dissertation proposal, I intended to address the following research questions:

1. How do critical interactions with texts (in both print and non-print forms) in a reading and writing group provide opportunities for teenage mothers to interrogate[3] the following:
   - the multiple roles they play,
   - the choices they make about what to do and who to be, and
   - cultural stereotypes about the roles they play?

2. What features of texts are salient in the teenage mothers' interrogations of their identities in a reading and writing group?

After some discussion with my dissertation committee at the presentation of my proposal, and as I began to immerse myself in the data I had collected during the study, I came to realize that my research questions were written so that they focused my attention on a phenomenon which I had yet to define—critical interactions. The first question specifically assumed I knew what enacted critical literacy would look like when I saw it. It also assumed that I could expect to see particular kinds of critical interactions and that I

would direct their occurrence in particular ways in our reading and writing group

conversations. The second question brought my focus to the *texts* rather than the live

and spontaneous interactions with texts that would occur as the participants engaged in

what I understood critical literacy to be. I came to realize that my research questions

needed to be refined to reflect the interactions with texts that occur in the moments when

readers engage in critical literacy practices. These efforts toward refocusing my research

resulted in the following question:

What kinds of critical interactions with texts occur in a reading and writing group comprised of teenage mothers, and with what consequences — especially in terms of the teenage mothers' opportunities to interrogate[4] multiple roles they play, choices they make about what to do and who to be, and cultural stereotypes that frame their identities?

The most important effect of this adjustment to my research question was that it

allowed me to concentrate my thinking on the teenage mothers' *interactions with texts*

rather than on the texts themselves. Though the texts themselves remain an important

piece of the critical interaction equation, the new research question directed me to closely

examine participants' conversations as the teenage mothers in the study discussed

relevant meanings of the texts we read and wrote during our group meetings. My

analysis centered on defining and describing the kinds of critical interactions in which the

participants engaged as they made sense of texts. I was able to note how closely linked

these interactions were to participants' interrogations of their self-understandings—how

they viewed themselves as individuals and as group members, and how they responded to

larger cultural views that claim to know who they are.

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[3] By *interrogate*, I refer to ways in which the teenage mothers in the study raise critical questions and to ways they examine or probe issues beyond a superficial level of engagement and acceptance.
[4] My understanding of the meaning of *interrogate* did not change with my revision of the research questions.

Characterizing Teenage Motherhood in America

There has been considerable debate over the roles of teenage mothers in our

society. Recent laws and publications classify these young women alternately as adult-

like citizens and as immature dependents. Deirdre Kelly (2000) describes many

representations of teen mothers in Canada and the US. She explores the meanings of teen

mothers as "stupid sluts," "children having children," "teen rebel," "the girl nobody

loved," "welfare moms," "dropouts," and "neglectful mothers" as images that are most

often evoked. These images position teen mothers as "either unworthy of public support

or as pitiable, yet incompetent to lead autonomous lives." Much of the public rhetoric

about teen mothers fixes them, as a group, as a social liability. Some research has

focused on the educational and political consequences of the choices of these young

women as students "at risk," (Chafel, 1994; Emihovich & Fromme, 1998; Natriello,

McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Small & Luster, 1994), especially so with regard to their general

educational failure. In other research, teen mothers are characterized as students who are

discriminated against in school and deserving of special services which generally are not

being provided (Kelly, 2000; Luker, 1996; Thompson, 1995). However, we know little,

if anything, about the learning tools and literacy experiences teenage mothers use to make

sense of their lives in and out of school—their dual existences as teenagers and as adult

parents—and how they construe their options for the future.

Today in the United States, we live in a state of "cultural schizophrenia" about

teenage pregnancy and early parenting (Luker, 1996). Kristin Luker explains that while

we expect women to "emulate competitive, 'selfish' male behavior in the workplace," at

the same time we expect them to "carry on their traditional roles of altruistic nurturers" in every other aspect of their lives. She notes that, except for the fact that they are, for the most part, unmarried, teenage mothers today are acting in ways that before the 1970's would have been viewed as acceptable and praiseworthy for a young woman. Earlier generations of women were expected to have children by the age of eighteen or nineteen, the age when most teen pregnancies today occur (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2002). However, today we typically declare that teenage mothers are too young, too poor, and too dependent on others, and therefore too irrational and irresponsible, to make thoughtful (and correct) decisions about their sexuality and childbearing. Viewing young women as self-centered rational actors when it comes to issues of sex, childbearing, family and home is, for many Americans, "chilling" (Luker, 1996). Rather, for people concerned about changing family structures, gender relations and changing ideals about sexuality, teen mothers represent female sexuality out of control (Kelly, 2000).

Along with the immense responsibilities of parenting, many teenage mothers are burdened with labels such as "deviants" and "sinners" (Thompson, 1995). "No one in the United States [today] is in favor of early childbearing: elected officials campaign against it, the public disapproves of it, and professionals warn that it is costly for everyone concerned" (Luker, 1996). Culturally, we stereotype teenage mothers as sexually irresponsible, and we view them, most often, as financially and emotionally dependent on their families, if not on welfare and other social services. A bumper sticker reading, "If you can't feed 'em, don't breed 'em," echoes the popular public sentiment that women who are perceived within a stereotype as unable to care for their children should not be mothers. A *People* magazine article published in 1994 featured teenage mothers as

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"babies having babies." The follow-up article five years later portrayed them as "still learning responsibility's lessons" (Plummer & O'Neil, 1999). Regardless of the social stigma that often comes with being a teenage mother, many young women view their pregnancies as periods of positive personal transformation rather than as tragic life events (Thompson, 1995). Teen mothers are a unique group of adolescents who experience dramatic and accelerated identity change. Some report experiencing a rapid shift from a "rough childhood" or a "downhill slide of puberty" into "motherhood, [and] the pleasures and rigors of adulthood" (Thompson, 1995).

I am not advocating, however, that there is never any truth to various stereotypes about teen mothers. At the same time, I am, like Deirdre Kelly, critical of the practice of reducing any person to a stereotype or a set of stereotypes. Categorizing a young woman who gave birth to a child when she was in her teens in this way risks "turning her into the Other, a degraded category" and severely limits her social, economic, and educational potential because she remains a "catch-all enemy" (2000). It is possible that we set teen mothers apart as "different" from the rest because of our expectations and attitudes toward teens more generally. They are a group within the larger adolescent population of Americans who are typically treated as consumers and cheap labor, and who are defined simultaneously as adults and children, and as experiencing identity "crisis"[5] (Erikson, 1968). Teen mothers face immense challenges, namely, how to achieve academic, financial and parental success (which, in US culture, means independence) in a world that, for the most part, is not prepared to view them as having the knowledge, resources or power to succeed.

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[5] See Chapter 3 for a discussion on adolescent identity development.

Researchers have considered many of the political, economic, and educational consequences of early sexual activity, but we rarely consider why 51% of young women between the ages of fifteen and nineteen are sexually active and why over one million teens get pregnant every year (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1999). Recent research indicates that there is more purposeful decision making behind teen pregnancy than is generally believed (Luker, 1996; Thompson, 1995). Studies report that between 22% and 44% of births by teenage mothers were the result of intended pregnancies at the time of conception (Frost & Oslak, 1999; Henshaw, 2000). Young women who intend to get pregnant or have a baby give reasons reflecting "a desire for a baby," a desire on the part of the baby's father, or the sense that the "time was right" to start a family (Frost & Oslak, 1999). "Through their actions, teens are trying to come to terms, …with the immense social and economic challenges they face in today's world: a shrinking job market, an indifferent community network, and public skepticism about the worth of minorities" (Luker, 1996).

There are both positive and negative reasons that can be attributed to why young women choose to become sexually active, and ultimately to become parents. Social factors contributing to teen pregnancy are likely to include: the mixed messages young women receive from the media about innocence and sexuality; the availability and cost of birth control, abortion, and adoption services; sexuality education in all its varieties (from abstinence-only education to access to free sexual health information and medical services in public schools); the age and status difference between teenage mothers and fathers (Frost & Oslak, 1999); the age considered appropriate for child-bearing cross-culturally in the US; and the increased status of women as they become mothers in many

cultures in America. Consider the following trends provided by the Alan Guttmacher Institute[6] (1999):

- The younger women are when they first have intercourse, the more likely they are to have had unwanted or non-voluntary first sex.

- By age seventeen, over half of all teenagers have had sexual intercourse.

- Each year, almost one million American teenage women become pregnant.

- Teen pregnancy rates are much higher in the United States than in many other developed nations—twice as high as in England, Wales, or Canada and nine times as high as in the Netherlands or Japan.

- The fathers of babies born to teenage mothers are likely to be older than the women. About one in five infants born to unmarried minors are fathered by men five or more years older than the mother.

- Nearly one in ten teen pregnancies [of women of all ages] are terminated by abortion.

- Since 1980, abortion rates among sexually active teens have declined steadily, partly because fewer teens are becoming pregnant and partly because fewer teens have chosen abortion.

　　　　Although teen pregnancy rates in the US are currently dropping, (National Center for Health Statistics, 1999), American teens get pregnant, have abortions, and have babies at about twice the rate of some developed countries. The decline in pregnancy rates has been attributed to a confluence of factors:

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[6] The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) is a nonprofit organization "focused on sexual and reproductive health research, policy analysis and public education." AGI publishes many periodicals and reports on these topics. The Institute's mission is to "protect the reproductive choices of all women and men in the United States and throughout the world. It is to support their ability to obtain the information and services needed to achieve their full human rights, safeguard their health and exercise their individual responsibilities in regard to sexual behavior and relationships, reproduction and family formation."

... increased motivation of youth to achieve higher levels of education, employment training and goals in addition to motherhood and family formation; provision of comprehensive sexuality education, leading to youths' greater knowledge about contraception, more effective contraceptive use and improved ability to negotiate contraceptive practice; and greater social support for services related to both pregnancy and disease prevention among adolescents." (AGI, 2002)

Other research supports these findings and suggests that young women's beliefs regarding abstinence, sexual activity, contraceptive use, and abortion are additional possible reasons why fewer teenagers are becoming pregnant (Darroch & Singh, 1999; Frost & Oslak, 1999; Henshaw, 2000). Still, we have not taken a close look at the range of choices that young women make about creating their present and future lives and whether those choices involve early parenthood. If/when young women do choose early parenthood as part of their identities—for whatever reasons—research has overlooked how teenage mothers navigate the barrage of negative social commentary, and how they negotiate a future for themselves and their children. Living an existence that is highly stigmatized would require, it seems, a critical eye toward public rhetoric and major efforts toward a redefinition of self.

Critical literacy is a tool that could be useful in examining public rhetoric that defines us. In my research, I created a setting where young women who were also parents could practice interrogating texts for what they say about who teenage mothers are and who they should be. I wanted to study what critical habits of mind they were already practicing as they encountered a variety of texts—for example in their parenting

class, at the doctor's office, at prom, in their homes—but I also wanted to create an environment where they could safely examine cultural and popular knowledge about them and decide, with the help of critical literacy, whether they were willing to accept the definitions of their selves that are offered there.

By naming and describing the critical interactions with texts the young women in my study interrogated, and by closely examining the in-the-moment practice of critical literacy, I hope to contribute to the work of critical literacy and critical pedagogy scholars and educators in a concrete way. One purpose of this study is to advance the understanding of what happens when students "use words as a passage into interrogating society" (Christensen, 2000) and their role in that society, both in and out of school.

Overview of the Dissertation

As the young women in my study faced struggles with difficult social issues of the sort described above, they were seriously contemplating their roles (present and future) in the world—as adult women and teenagers; as mothers, girlfriends and wives; and as students and people with careers and professional lives. In my work as a high school teacher of teen parents, and as a listener to the stories of the young women in my study, I have encountered teenage mothers who are also earnestly concerned about their literacy practices. Their concerns seem to be heightened as they consider their options for creating a home and a life for their children.

During this research project, I saw teenage mothers' critical literacy practices as a site within which they could imagine and enact the possibilities for their lives. I have explored the ways in which a small group of teen mothers participating in a reading and

writing group contemplated their multiple roles. I also have examined the actions that these teen mothers have taken toward constructing their identities, as they have read, written, and talked together. I have been especially attentive to their critical interactions with texts. In doing so, I have learned a few things about the sources and consequences of some teenage mothers' beliefs and actions and about the multiple roles they play.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation looks at several bodies of literature that undergird my research. First, I define *text* and *literacy* relative to their meanings within the reading and writing group meetings that I studied. I then examine related research literature regarding critical literacy. Next, I briefly examine different theories of identity and elaborate on the views of identity development that drove this study with particular attention to the dialogic construction of identity. Finally, I examine the research literature that is concerned with the role of language practices in shaping identity. Chapter 3 describes the methods I used to conduct this research. It introduces the research sites, participants, and structure and substance of the reading and writing group meetings. This chapter also describes my role as participant observer and the analytic method in which I engaged.

Chapter 4 is the central chapter of the dissertation. There, I identify and define the kinds of critical interactions with text that I emerged from the group's meetings. I present, with data-based examples, five forms of critical interaction. These include:

- offering a stance toward a text
- comparing a representation in a text to one's experiences
- making inter-textual references
- explicitly acknowledging a text as a representation

- talking back to a text

Since in this chapter the critical interactions are presented in the frame of group meetings, I view them as arising primarily from social context.

Chapter 5 is a case study of one of the reading and writing group participants to whom I assigned the pseudonym Elaine. I present Elaine's history and describe in detail her participation in a single meeting of the reading and writing group. Elaine exhibited, in that one meeting of the reading and writing group, engagement in all five of the critical interactions described in chapter 4. By offering an extended case study of one participant's use of these critical interactions, thereby revealing them in personal and social context, I expose their overlapping nature and inter-relatedness in the moments of their "live" occurrence in group dialogue. I also show the possible connection of Elaine's engagement in the critical interactions to her construction of her identity. This chapter, then, helps to reveal the dialogic nature of the self and how interactions with text inform who we know ourselves to be.

Finally, chapter 6 further connects literacy and identity development. This chapter gazes back at the patterns of critical interactions that I identified in the data, and discusses implications for teaching critical literacy in classrooms where reading and writing text is a major feature of the curriculum. In addition, this chapter offers a critique of critical literacy, especially in contrast with the more cognitivist notion of critical thinking.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This story concerns a select group of teenage mothers who, in my analysis, endeavored to improve their own and their children's lives, in part, by questioning prevailing cultural views of what it means to be a teenage mother during after school reading and writing group meetings. Part of the story is about how at times, the teenage mothers with whom I worked helped to perpetuate some of the stereotypes that surround them and define them. It is also a story of a few teen mothers who used their literacy practices to think about and beyond others' expectations of them as they worked to continually create and recreate a sense of themselves within but also outside the stereotypes and statistics that define them. It is by listening to their stories that I am able to tell my version of what they did during our meetings and how those activities connected with their lives outside of our meetings. They shared with me the sense they were making of the roles they played and the choices they made about how to live in those roles.

Jerome Bruner (2002) tells us that our knowledge of the structure and meaning of stories are what help us to know who we are. He says that "narrative... gives shape to things in the real world and often bestows on them a title to reality" (p. 8). We construct our selves through the stories we tell about the events in our lives which help us make sense of those events to ourselves and to others. There is no essential self to know, says Bruner (2002), but we "construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the situations we encounter.... Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what's happened, and why we're doing what we're doing" (p. 64). Our stories

about our selves do not get made up from scratch each time, but they accumulate over time. Our self-making stories fit new "circumstances, new friends, new enterprises." Self-making arises out of our memories, feelings, ideas, and beliefs—from the inside, and it also arises from the outside, from the culture in which we are immersed. Our selves are constructed by the stories we tell about ourselves, but also by the stories that others tell about us. We become characters in our own and others' stories and our stories are part of the discourse that surrounds us. The "esteem of others and... the myriad expectations that we early, even mindlessly, pick up" are guided by implicit cultural models of what selfhood should be, might be, and should not be (p. 65).

Bruner cites Dan Slobin, a scholar of how language and thought influence each other, and quotes "one cannot verbalize experience without taking perspective.... The world does not present 'events' to be encoded in language. Rather, in the process of speaking or writing, experiences are filtered through language into verbalized events" (2000). Thus, the stories we tell about ourselves and those that others tell about us combine to create our sense of self—these stories become the texts by which our selves change and develop. So, our literacy practices, the ways in which we read texts that tell us about ourselves and which shape the stories we tell about ourselves, are inextricably linked with who we think we are and can be.

Both in school and out of school, Deirdre Kelly explains, teen mothers, "in trying to describe and assign meaning to their own lives, struggle against and internalize the many competing discourses about the 'teen mother' identity" (2000). Kelly states that because teenage mothers are at the same time parents and adolescents, they are stigmatized and seen as in need of special services at school. Indeed, the young women

in my study all chose to attend an alternative high school so that they could make use of the parenting program and child care services there. Stories about teen mothers often characterize them as different from the mainstream by virtue of being poor, working class, emotionally and learning disabled, and academically underprepared in addition to being abnormal due to their parental status.

For many of the teen parents who participated in the parenting program at Summit High School, this story was accurate, but the young women who were the core participants in my study were pushing their way back from the margins in order to find academic and personal success. They were rewriting their stories and living narratives that portrayed them in many ways as resourceful, mature, and academically able. Outside of school, teen mothers are usually "culturally devalued and [perceived as] unequal participants in the making of culture" (Kelly, 2000). They are marginalized by society for many of the same reasons they are marginalized in school. Also for reasons discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, they struggle to make sense of competing discourses that assume knowledge of their identity as they work to make sense of their roles and experiences. The young women in my study were interested in examining the mainstream narratives about them, the narrative's expectations for the roles they should play and how to play them, and ways in which they were enacting their roles which confirmed or resisted those mainstream views of who they are. Their experiences sometimes matched what they knew of stereotypes about teenage mothers, and they endeavored to understand why they sometimes felt powerless to act any differently from what was culturally expected of them.

Critical literacy is one tool that is useful for helping people make choices about enacting an identity. It has the potential to help us learn about our selves within a range of contexts and to consider how others contribute to the construction of our selves. Critical literacy can be used to dismantle images of self that are inconsistent with those which represent productive participation in a variety of settings, for example, in school, at work, and in the society of other parents. Critical literacy can be a lens for examining how and why one construes one's self in connection to one's system of beliefs. It is also a tool that supports building images, privately and publicly, in ways that are meaningful for imagining one's own life. It is a tool that I used in my study to explore with a group of teen mothers the stories and images that create them—the ones they themselves create and others that arise from divergent discourses that claim to know the "teen mother identity." For educators particularly, critical literacy is often one of the more useful tools we have for engaging students in a struggle of defining themselves for their own personally and socially productive purposes.

Teaching and practicing critical literacy becomes all the more relevant if we believe, as Deirdre Kelly does, that schools are facing a "crisis of consensus over inclusiveness" (2000). She claims that schools are confronting the challenge of including students who have been traditionally marginalized, either formally or informally. Teenage mothers represent a population of students that has been both formally and informally marginalized. Formal institutional structures and rituals and informal social processes and practices that are performed in schools leave little room for the participation of, let alone the success of teenage mothers, and, therefore, they must either drop out of school or battle against systemic (formal and informal) discrimination.

From attendance policies, to lack of child care and health care services, to curricula which anticipate a normalized path through school, to social stigma associated with bearing evidence of sexual activity and having a child—most secondary schools are not set up to educate teen mothers. Teenage mothers' marginalization in schools could begin a trend in their lives of devastating educational, social and economic failure. Proponents of critical literacy claim that this marginalization and potential devastation does not have to be the norm, but that through critical literacy, the power dynamic in the classroom and other contexts might change. For teenage mothers, engaging in the practices of critical literacy may have some influence over what they believe can do and who they can be by opening up "possibilities for roles" (Dyson, 2001) and whittling away at life's limitations, both in and out of school.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine selected definitions and understandings behind the complicated construct of critical literacy. First, I examine the beliefs held by scholars, teachers and other proponents in the promise of critical literacy's processes and outcomes for engaging multiple perspectives and challenging social injustices in literate contexts. Second, I consider how critical literacy can serve as a cultural tool that engages young people in shaping their identities. When critical literacy scholars describe its implementation, they generally do so from the perspective of teachers, curriculum writers, and others who plan for its use. Rarely is critical literacy examined in its use by readers (students and others)—those who we hope will make use of it as a tool for the outcomes I have referenced. Researched and anecdotal accounts of readers' interactions with texts as they apply the principles of critical literacy are infrequent and incomplete. Finally, I review these accounts in order to consider how critical literacy may serve as a

cultural tool for teen mothers to use as they construct their selves and their lives day by

day. The lack of attention paid to what readers do as they engage in the activities of

critical literacy led me to closely examine conversations around texts using principles of

critical literacy that took place between the teen participants in my study, my collaborator

and myself. As we guided the participants in the ways of critical literacy, I was able to

observe the participants engage in in-the-moment critical literacy activities, which I have

come to call *critical interactions* with text. Chapter 4 offers an in-depth treatment of

critical interactions I observed as emerging from our reading and writing group meetings.

The literature on critical literacy also makes claims about how critical literacy engages its

participants in the shaping of their own and others' identities, but again with little

attention to the processes that might support such connections.

Literacy: Interactions With Texts, Contexts and Others

To understand critical literacy, one must look first at literacy itself. Literacy, as I

define it for this study, is both a technical skill and a social process. It is technical

because it involves practicing the skills of reading and writing which develop over time.

And literacy is social because it involves a negotiation among three complex phenomena:

texts (in both print and non-print forms), *individual meaning-making* (by authors and

readers who make meaning of textual symbols and interact with texts), and *contexts* (the

broader social and historical locations in which symbols are used and interpreted). These

contexts include locations where texts are read and written; especially for this research

they include classrooms, peer groups, conversations in physicians' offices, workplaces,

and research studies. Context also includes the task at hand for engaging with a particular text.

Literacy involves understanding the ways in which people use language for various social purposes (Gee, 1989). It involves observing, listening, and speaking as well as reading and writing. It is not a neutral technology, but rather, an "ideological practice, implicated in power relations and embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices" (Street, 1995). Like Street, I view literacy as concerned with the technical and cognitive aspects of reading and writing, and also as inextricably linked to culture and power structures in society (1995). Literacy does not occur independently of a context; it requires a social and conceptual system which includes its function and structure, as well as the social practices which help us make meaning of language. This study gives particular attention to this contextual expression of literacy—the literacy practices that were enacted during our after school reading and writing group.

Access to and control of literacy (in both a technical and social sense) is essential to participation in all aspects of society (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). But what do access to and control of literacy look like, and what might it mean in the lives of teenage mothers in particular? How can and do adolescents who live parts of their lives as dependent teenagers and other parts as responsible adults uncover the social and ideological nature of the language that they use and that others use to define them? How can they be critical and decisive in using language to position themselves in ways that offer meaning and agency?

Proponents of critical literacy have further defined literacy in social terms as they describe how people interpret texts and how they use language to make sense of their

lives. Heath (1982) describes *literacy events* as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes." Street builds on this notion and pitches literacy "at a higher level of abstraction" (1995). He defines *literacy practices* as both the behavior and conceptualizations related to the use of reading and/or writing. In Street's view, then, literacy practices are Heath's literacy events *plus* ideological preconceptions which inform the meaning of a text. These notions of literacy are especially important in this research because they allow me to examine literacy as active and partially observable in the interactions between participants around a text.

The literacy practices on which I focused are specific, observable interactions with texts and between participants in the reading and writing group meetings. In our group, interactions with texts were made evident by the discourse that defined and surrounded those interactions. In other words, without our conversations, I would not have been able to observe the textual interactions that made up the literacy practices of individuals in the group. At the same time, the discourse among group members shaped the interactions with texts in which we engaged.

My use of the word *text*, another term that is central to the study, requires definition. In this study, text means more than just words printed on a page. Given my perspective on literacy described above, I agree with Kress when he explains, "In a social theory of language... the most important unit [of analysis] is the text—that is, *the socially and contextually complete unit of language*" (emphasis is mine) (1993). This definition of text supports my examination of literacy practices within the context of our group. The meaning of the text emerges, in part, from the context in which it is read. Texts in

the context of the reading and writing group are what Morgan describes as "whatever in our social environment can be read as a text: whatever constructs a meaning through shared codes and conventions, signs and icons" (1997). For this study, texts are socially and contextually complete units of meaning: they include books, newspaper and magazine articles, stories and biographies that we read; a videotape of a television show we watched; photographs that we examined; and writing we generated in the group. Text also includes the groups members' talk related to other texts, the conversations we had about our reading and writing, and the oral narration of our experiences that accompanied our talk about texts.

This definition of text is also one that is used by many proponents of critical literacy. Morgan emphasizes a broader understanding of text in the context of research which views textual interactions as social phenomena. She states that "critical literacy inevitably entails a cultural studies approach to texts in refusing to confine its examination to words-on-the-page…. [I]t argues that texts, as representations of the world, in their circulation and uses, help to constitute the practices and possibilities of that world" (1997). Bakhtin viewed text as "not just a dead thing (although it is always partially that)—that is, it is not just writing on parchment or paper, but also an utterance. 'We not only see and perceive it but in it we can always hear voices (even while reading silently to ourselves)…. We always arrive, in the final analysis, at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being'" (Morson & Emerson, 1990).

In this study, I examine participants' interactions with print and non-print forms of text. The talk that helped to create meaning of the printed matter and the narrated stories (sometimes connected with print forms of text, sometimes not) are representations

of ourselves and our worlds. The texts of our conversations, as suggested above, were the discourses that contribute to the construction of our identities. As Alvermann and her colleagues suggest, every statement about texts that we read, write, or speak are "inherently tied to how we perceive ourselves in relation to others, to what we are willing to reveal about our own interests and desires, and to whether or not we believe we can make a difference by adding our voices to the mix" (1999, p. 224). Each young woman in the reading and writing group came to understand herself in relation to other group members (including myself) and the teen mothers we read, wrote, and talked about. With the help of texts, they explored a range of images of teenage mothers.

Critical Literacy: Opportunities for Interrogating Text

Now that my understandings of *literacy* and *text* have been established, I will examine some ways in which *critical literacy* has been defined. Ira Shor defines critical literacy as an active process involving "analytic habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking, or discussing which delve beneath surface impressions, traditional myths, mere opinions, and routine clichés" (Lankshear, Gee, Knobel, & Searle, 1997). He continues: Critical literacy involves understanding the social contexts and consequences of the subject matter out of which a text is written, and through this awareness a person engaging in critical literacy applies his or her understanding of a text to the contexts of his or her own life.

As participant observer and the group's co-facilitator, I intervened in the literacy practices of our reading and writing group members. I encouraged participants to delve beneath their surface impressions of the texts we read (for example, books and articles)

and created (for example, our writing and conversations) at our meetings. By interrogating the myths, opinions, and cliches of texts, I sought to assist the teen mothers participating in the group as they developed and refined their critical literacy practices. I wanted them to recognize explicit and hidden agendas in texts, interrogate textual ideologies, question textual methods, motives, and messages, particularly as they defined the roles and expectations of, and cultural beliefs about teenage mothers in the US, what Shor would call the contexts and consequences of the "subject matter" of teenage mothers. This kind of critical literacy also required the participants to pay close attention to the immediate social contexts and consequences of their own and others' literacy exchanges.

Wendy Morgan (1997), who writes curriculum for high school English classes and conducts research in classrooms where critical literacy is enacted, puts forth four principles that undergird her understanding of critical literacy: (1) Any text is made in a particular society at a particular time. The text's social and historical context influences the form it takes and the ideas it represents. (2) Any text represents a particular version (or portion) of a story. It emphasizes certain things and leaves gaps about others. (3) Texts do not contain a single fixed meaning articulated by the author. Different readers in different societies at different times can produce different meanings for the same text. (4) Any text invites a reader to adopt certain perspectives, values, and truths. What comes to be accepted as truth, as knowledge, serves someone's interests and neglects someone else's. Morgan's four principles informed my approach to supporting the critical literacy practices that I found already at play to some degree in the lives of the participants.

As a teacher, Morgan uses these principles to guide her students (and to help other teachers guide their students) as they learn to interrogate texts relative to their agendas, ideologies, methods, motives, and messages. While these principles are helpful in understanding an approach to engaging students in critical literacy practices, and while they are useful in discerning the goals of critical literacy, there is little attempt by Morgan, or by other scholars of critical literacy to understand critical literacy practices from the perspective of the student/reader, or in the case of my research, from the perspectives of reading and writing group participants. If we translate Morgan's principles into questions that readers may ask of a text when they practice critical literacy, what kinds of interactions will occur, and with what consequences? A reader might ask the following questions of a text in a critical interrogation: (1) How are the form of this text and the ideas represented in it influenced by when and where it was written/made? (2) What version (or part) of what story is told by this text? What does it emphasize, where are its gaps, and about what does it remain silent? (3) What meanings and messages in this text seem to be most important to the author, and by what evidence can we judge the author's conclusions? How might/have different readers in different societies at different times understand/understood this text? (4) What values are represented in this text? Whose interests are being served by paying attention to these values and whose are being neglected?

Questions such as these turn the static principles of critical literacy into guidelines for an active pursuit of meaning-making. Engaging in critical literacy with questions like these as the basis of textual interrogation leads the reader to an examination of the historical and social consequences that textual meanings have in our lives.

Questions similar to these can be found in Alan Luke's article (2000) which outlines recent changes in Australian curricula that makes broad use of critical literacy. He explains that for fifteen years, Australian schools have been working toward literacy reform which had as a major goal to implement critical literacy in classrooms around the country. His article reframes the questions that he and Freebody (Luke & Freebody, 1997) developed into a four tiered approach, which is now widely adapted across Australian schools. In this article, he redefines critical literacy's focus. He explains that critical literacy is about "teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and re-mediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students toward active 'position-takings' with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields[7] in which they live and work." With that redefinition in mind, he points out that there is, fortunately, no formula for "doing critical literacy" in the classroom, but that critical literacy education involves an "'attitude' toward texts *and* the social world, and a commitment to the use of textual practices for social analysis and transformation."

Freebody and Luke's (1990) four tiered approach, initially used in early reading instruction, is comprised of four "necessary but not sufficient sets of social practices requisite for critical literacy" (Luke, 2000). They are, in abbreviated form:

1. Coding Practices: Developing Resources as a Code Breaker—How do I crack this text? What are its patterns and conventions?

2. Text-Meaning Practices: Developing Resources as a Text Participant—How do the ideas represented in the text string together? What cultural resources can

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[7] *Fields*, in Luke's article, are contexts of social, cultural, and economic power where people use texts.

be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings and possible readings that can be constructed from this text?

3. Pragmatic Practices: Developing Resources as a Text User—How do uses of this text shape its composition? What can/do I do with this text, here and now? What can/will others do with it?

4. Critical Practices: Developing Resources as a Text Analyst and Critic—What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both write and read this naively and unproblematically? What is the text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Which positions, voices, and interests are at play? Which are silent and absent?

This scheme of social practices that Luke and Freebody claim is necessary for critical literacy have characteristics which elaborate on my earlier claim that literacy is technical and social in nature. The reader takes on each of these sets of social practices, or identities, as she engages in critical literacy. I characterize Luke and Freebody's first two roles of the reader, Code Breaker and Text Participant, as enacting the technical skill involved in literacy. A Code Breaker "cracks the text" for its explicit meaning through an examination of its patterns and conventions that convey that meaning. A Text Participant makes sense of the string of ideas through examining possible legitimate readings that can be constructed from this text. Of course these activities are social in nature and require social context for the reader to make sense of the semiotics, but they focus on technical features of the text that explicitly offer meaning and only imply ideology.

The second two roles of the reader, Text User and Text Analyst/Critic, shift the reader's focus from internal features of the text to an interrogation of the text that comes from outside it. A Text User questions the uses of the text for herself, personally, and for others. A Text Analyst and Critic considers the identity of both the writer and the reader and the sense that can be made of the text under various circumstances. She also considers the values, goals, and interests embedded in the text, whose version of reality is being represented, and whose voice is heard and whose is not. These two roles more clearly engage the reader in social processes of textual interrogation.

Luke admits that even his design for teaching critical literacy has been developed, or at least implemented from the top down. He points to the "more persistent question" asked by critical educators and governments committed to educational equity; they inquire whether classroom practices and curricular models designed around critical literacy practices are making a difference "in the life pathways of students" and whether students marginalized by traditional approaches to literacy are "any better off." While Luke does not explicitly state in what ways he thinks students who practice critical literacy might be better off, he alludes to an improvement in the life conditions of students by expressing a promise or "consequence" of critical literacy: For students to become "active designers and agents in shaping their social futures and those of their communities and cultures." He says that the search for empirical evidence on the efficacy of critical literacy is underway. In my view, a part of the empirical evidence that is missing has begun to emerge with research in the tradition in which my study is conducted. It is by studying those who practice critical literacy in their moment-to-moment interactions with texts in particular contexts that we will answer the questions

Luke and his colleagues entertain, the questions that lead to investigations of young

people's agency in shaping their future, community, and culture, and defining "better off"

for themselves.

Critical Interactions With Text

In the reading and writing group of my study, I used questions like those I shaped

from Morgan's principles of critical literacy and those asked by Freebody & Luke in their

four tiered design to inform and shape our interactions with texts. The questions became

a way for me to understand the actions of the participants during reading and writing

group meetings that correspond with principles of critical literacy. Because of the lack of

empirical evidence regarding the readers' perspective, I developed a scheme for

identifying interactions with text that I saw enacted during our meetings; I have come to

call these in-the-moment enactments of critical literacy practices *critical interactions with*

text. The incidents that I call critical interactions are moments when I observed the

participants in my study consider and sometimes think beyond generally held cultural

beliefs about teen mothers—stereotypes which greatly limit how they understand who

they are and could be. Critical interactions also point to moments when the participants

in the study seemed to be aware of their acceptance of some social expectations of them

inherent in stereotypes that surround them.

It was not the intention of this study to measure which practices of critical literacy

the participants already had, to measure any specific "improvement" in their critical

literacy skill, or to measure what critical literacy practice they may have acquired as a

consequence of participating in the reading and writing group. Rather, the study was an

attempt to define and describe what happened in those moment-to-moment critical interactions with texts and each other when critical literacy was enacted.

Identity: Self as Dialogically Enacted

Now that I have laid out the views of text, literacy, and critical literacy that underpin this study, along with the key idea developed in this research, critical interactions with text, I will give identity similar treatment as I define it specifically for my research. My understanding of *identity* combines phenomenological notions of the self with constructionist epistemologies. Phenomenological views explain that the self arises out of individuals' perceptions and representations of reality. Pinar (1995) explains, "The phenomenological investigator questions how phenomena—'the things themselves'—present themselves in the lived experience of the individual." I am less interested in the phenomenological perspective that suggests there could be "things themselves," or phenomena that exist in some stable form or essence. Especially in my understanding of identity, I do not find it useful to think about a "real" identity, one that could be static and unchangeable. The second part of Pinar's statement quoted above which refers to the "lived experience of the individual" is much more important to my understanding of identity, particularly for how it informs my research. Identity is constituted in its enactment rather than being a core, a set of traits, or an essence of a human being.

Constructionist psychologists study the "continuous everyday temporal flow of contingent communicative activity occurring between people" (Shotter, 1995). In other words, constructionist theorists regard the self as socially made from language practices.

This perspective is useful in my research because of the ways it connects identity to language practices. Identity emerges and develops continually over time, partly through how we talk about ourselves and how others talk about us. Individual sense-making of our lived experiences and language use, which is highly social, merge to constitute who we know ourselves to be, as well as how others know us and how we know them.

The Dialogic Construction of Identity

Theories of identity that base the development of self within language practices often refer to the self as dialogically constructed. Gergen (1994) agrees that individuals do not construct a sense of self in isolation. In his view, a person comes to know who she is through the discourses embedded in the relationships in which she participates. Shotter (1993) also claims that a person crafts her sense of self in the detailed and complex time-space relations between self and others. Consequently, in order for a person to have a voice in her identity construction, she must participate in informed ways in the discourses that create her.

Gergen goes so far as to say that "voices of humankind," "both harmonious and alien," *saturate* us and they become part of us and we of them (1991). Within a highly technological existence like ours, "social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self" (p. 6). To become "fully saturated" is to become no self at all. Further, Gergen explains that just as individuals depend on language in the formation of the self, relationships—social life—would be unrecognizable without "the language of the self" which describes our internal states, processes and characteristics, existing in relation to others.

What Gergen does not thoroughly explore is how we use the information we garner from a multiplicity of languages to make decisions about who we will be in the various lived experiences—contexts and relationships—of our lives. He discusses the loss of a unified self in a saturated world, but he does little to discuss how we manage the multiplicitous selves that we must be. He does not explain the importance of the consequences of the interactions of this complex self with those with whom we are in relationship.

In my research, the set of critical interactions with text that I have identified is a scheme which may begin to explain how we make decisions about who we will be and what actions we will take in order to manage our many selves. When so many texts are available to us, we are saturated with information about who we are and should be. We often are presented with multiple representations of the roles we have taken on, and, therefore, we have more information about alternative ways of being. We do not have to choose to be just one self, and we can critically evaluate stereotypes that attempt to define us. We can create a multifarious self that is flexible and which makes sense in the various contexts of our relationships and in our lived experiences.

Markus & Nurius agree that the notion of a "single self..., an authentic [real] self that one can know" is a denial of "the rich network of potential that surrounds individuals" (1986). They support, instead, the existence of "possible selves," thereby providing evaluative and interpretive contexts for the "now self" along with incentives for shaping future behavior. A possible self is the self that one strives purposefully to become. Marcus & Nurius believe that although "the individual alone is the final arbiter of the possible self," social influences are extremely important in its continued

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development. These include the individual's particular socio-cultural and historical contexts as well as models, images, and symbols provided by the media, and by the individual's immediate social experiences. By selecting and constructing "possible selves," an individual may move toward becoming a producer of her own development. As I have seen in my data, the process of selecting and constructing identities may be accomplished at least in part through interactions with texts.

Connecting Identity Construction With Language Practices and Literacy

Many proponents of critical literacy understand literacy practices as very closely linked with the construction of identity. As we engage in literacy practices, we are constantly learning from texts about our cultural roles and our cultural positions in relationship to others (Davies & Harre, 1999). Discourses in and around texts tell us who we are and how to fulfill our roles by performing what actions. We base this knowledge on the categories with which we identify ourselves or within which we have been classified—categories which define, for example, our gender, race, socioeconomic class, and sexuality. Gee (1996) calls the discourses in which we participate our identity kit, a set of tools with which one sees, acts, believes, thinks, and speaks so that it is possible to recognize and be recognized by others as oneself. Luke (2000) says that it may be worthwhile to debate the components of Gee's social semiotic toolkit that we put to use in our school, work, and civic lives, and to consider the enabling conditions "for engagement with and transformation of that toolkit." Interactions with texts and literacy practices are part of the discourses in which we engage.

Voicing is a construct that helps to draw the connection between literacy and identity. It is also an idea that was useful in both the design of my study and the analysis of the data gathered. The notion of voicing comes largely out of the writing of Bakhtin. Bakhtin (1981) claims that all discourse, whether spoken or written, expressed or internal, interacts dialogically with its immediate social and broader historical contexts. He said, "One's own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others' words that have been acknowledged and assimilated, and the boundaries between the two are at first scarcely perceptible" (Bakhtin, 1981).

Knoeller (1998) defines voicing as using language "as a vehicle for assigning specific perspectives to particular individuals or groups." His description of voicing can be most familiarly recognized as it is enacted in intentional role play, when we purposefully take on the roles attributed to other people. In my research, voicing was also a useful notion to help describe what happened when individuals who play many roles in their lives enacted a particular role by displaying specific characteristics of the role or when they expressed certain perspectives associated with the role.

Wortham also uses the notion of voicing to analyze how spoken narratives work to construct identity. In Wortham's early work (1995) and in the work of Knoeller (1998), the Bakhtinian concept of voicing is applied to classroom conversations that take place around texts. In classrooms, they say, we can use the concept of voicing to examine how students position themselves and get positioned (Wortham, 1995). A discussion in a classroom is not just a lesson in subject matter. It is a way of positioning ourselves and others relationally. Over time, students may internalize the ways that they are positioned (Wortham, 1999; 1995). Identity, then, can be viewed as developing

through rhetorical relationships with texts wherein particular positions may be tried on through the vehicle of various narrators' voices. Trying on voices that we are familiar with and those that are new may be useful for several purposes. They may be used for:

- testing our current and developing beliefs and understandings about texts,

- accepting and fulfilling the expectations of a specific audience, or

- resisting an audience's expectations and presenting an opposing view.

What we choose to "sound like," and how others choose to hear us, shapes who we "really" are (Knoeller, 1998).

Voicing is also useful to my analysis. Meanings in text at our meetings were constantly under reconstruction through our conversations, just as identities were under construction as meanings of relevant patterns—and even the patterns themselves— emerged as we discussed texts. We did not refer to a text as it was, but we interacted with texts during our meetings, redefining and reshaping its voice along with our own voices.

As I have been suggesting, our talk about text is inextricably linked to our identity development. In a sense, voicing allows us the opportunity to take on a perspective that we might not ordinarily do and to try on identities that are companions to those voices. Through voicing we might try to enact the viewpoint of someone who would write a certain text and believe in its ideologies, or we might express the views of the ideal audience of a certain text. We could then voice related, opposing and alternative views. The ways in which we perceive ourselves in relation to others, what we are willing to reveal about our own interests, desires and experiences, and whether or not we believe

our perspective will make a difference in the shape of a conversation influence the voices we might use in our discourse.

In our reading and writing group, as we engaged in critical interactions with texts, we voiced a range of perspectives on any given text. We voiced perspectives that allowed us to move beyond what we understood were generally held cultural beliefs about teen mothers—we took on the role of someone who might speak in opposition to negative images of teenage mothers. The participants could also be observed voicing when they spoke in ways that accepted social expectations of them. Voicing was a mechanism through which the participants in my study were able to enact roles, both those which were new to them and those with which they were familiar, and to try on multiple perspectives regarding a text.

Voicing connects language practices and literacy directly to the construction of the self. As we (re)craft our own language through others' words, in some ways we become like them. Critically scrutinizing language practices that others use sets us apart from them in some ways and does not allow others to identify us without our participation. We do not surrender to others the prerogative for determining who we are. We also must scrutinize our own language practices for how we represent our selves. Successful entrance into the conversations that define us requires that we first understand and are able to use the particular forms of discourse that are in place in the texts of our daily lives (Lycke, 1999).

Wortham's more recent work uses Bakhtin's notion of *emergence* to explain how explorations of language use yields insights into the ways in which spoken narratives construct identity. The concept of *emergence* refers to the idea that the boundaries and

effects of a narrative emerge in their creation. Ongoing conversation has a shaping effect on the meaning both speakers and listeners attribute to a narrative. Meanings can not be fixed by formal rules of dialogue because participants negotiate beginnings and endings of narratives so that they fit the flow of ongoing storytelling events. Positioning during narratives can result in the emergence of interactional effects, and through their use, these practices get solidified. In summary, Wortham states that "...an *emergent approach* studies how the contextual structures relevant to interpreting a narrative emerge over a conversation, often solidifying after the narrative itself has ended" (2001).

In our reading and writing group, the introduction of text into the conversation, or using text as a contextualizing factor of our conversation, influenced the kinds of narratives that were told, the shapes the participants' narratives took, and ways in which the text positioned the participants in the conversation. The conversations about texts often elicited the telling of narratives in which contextual structures emerged; meanings of the texts emerged as did our relational positions to one another and our understandings of our selves.

Davies & Harré (1999) also help to connect the notion of language practices to identity development. They say that in order to understand who we take ourselves to be, we must engage in the parts of the following process:

- learning the human-made categories "which partition the universe of human beings,"

- participating in discursive practices which give meaning to these categories,

- positioning oneself in some categories and not in others,

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- identifying characteristics in oneself that allow us to be located in certain

   categories and not others, and, finally,

- understanding oneself as historically continuous and unitary.

Within this last stage of the process, we may, through voicing various discourses,

recognize a diversity of selves within our unitary-ness. We participate in discursive

processes which locate us and others conversationally in jointly produced storylines, a

process which they describe as *positioning*. As we engage in positioning, we choose

stories with which to identify in order to make sense of who we take ourselves to be, and

recursively we narrate (voice) our past actions in ways that socially position us and

others. Through positioning, we can choose from a multiplicity of ways of narrating our

roles.

Davies and Harré make an important contribution to clarifying ways in which our

understanding of the social nature and structure of roles—and our stories about them—

help to create our identities. They do not address, however, the consequences of living a

life constructed of others' narratives about us, narratives that may largely go unexamined

in terms of, in the words of Luke, becoming active designers and agents in shaping our

social futures and those of our communities (2000). People who find themselves

identified narrowly and positioned in a marginalized category, in ways that teenage

mothers often do, live within others' narratives about them that they may not have chosen

but which they often accept, sometimes unreflectively and uncritically, as the stories of

their lives. These narratives might reflect larger cultural expectations of people grouped

by their age, social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or by any combination of these

characteristics. In order to choose from a multiplicity of ways of narrating the roles they

enact, to become the authors of their lived narratives, they must be able to view their lived narratives critically. Using the tools of critical literacy (including the knowledge they have about how lived narratives are constructed) to examine their identities, they may reflect on the choices they have available to them.

In our reading and writing group, the teen mothers participated in discursive practices which sometimes afforded them the conversational space to produce a diversity of meaningful selves. The study participants sometimes accepted positions of teen mothers as cultural stereotypes with predetermined roles and voices, and they also told complex narratives about the episodes of their lives that identified them very differently from the stereotypes associated with teenage mothers. This research is an attempt to answer the question of whether and how the young women in my study, often viewed as social liabilities and as incapable of living up to adult responsibilities, construct and narrate their identities, and whether and how they do so in the context of textual interactions.

So, we can begin to see how language practices in print and non-print forms of texts work to position us and work to construct our identities, for ourselves and others. In his book, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, Nodelman (1996) draws on several theorists to link ideology in written texts with identity development. He explains Althusser's theories that suggest how "ideologies persuade us of their obviousness by convincing us that we are the people who believe the things the ideologies want us to believe—that we are, in fact, certain kinds of individuals" (p. 136). This means that we become subjects of "hailing" by ideologies; they call our attention to who we are, or who we are expected to be within the constraints of that ideology.

Fairclough (1995) also reminds us of the presence of participants' ideologies in discourses and explains that critical discourse analysis aims to explore systematically the relationships between "(a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes" as well as to "investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are shaped by relations of power and struggles over power" (p. 132). Ideologies are imbedded in every kind of language-based communication media such as conversations, TV commercials, political rhetoric, film, song lyrics, and printed texts. Our existences are formed partly within a network of textual meaning that helps determine our every decision and action. We learn a language, how it is used in print and non-print forms, and learn to see ourselves partly in terms of that language and its uses.

The world offers us a variety of subject positions, conventional and ordinary ways of being human, "the adoption of which can make us understandable to ourselves and others" (Nodelman, 1996, p. 137). Partly through texts, we learn what are acceptable ways of identifying ourselves and others. The stories with which we choose to narrate our lives Davies & Harré call *lived narratives*. Davies' (as cited in Nodelman, 1996) explanation of our lived narratives reveals how we adopt a position by entering its language, and living out the story line it implies. Further, as we identify with certain narratives, we know that adopting certain kinds of language leads to certain kinds of outcomes. Without imagined storylines to adopt, "it is hard to know how we would make choices as we proceed through the everyday world."

Within texts lie ways to both discourage and encourage a critical perspective toward one's lived narratives. Nodelman says that "texts always act as a subtle kind of

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propaganda, and tend to manipulate unwary readers into an unconscious acceptance of their values" (p. 120-121). This manipulation on the part of authors can discourage examination of our personal storylines. If we are unaware of how we can question and resist or thoughtfully accept the "propaganda" of a text, we are left believing it as fact. Texts can be especially powerful when they describe others' lived narratives especially when they sound remarkably like our own or reinforce our current ways of knowing and being. "The closer the values of a text come to our own ideologies, the harder it is to read against it and find its absences. In some cases it may be impossible" (Nodelman, 1996, p. 121).

The previous discussion of the ways in which identity development is connected to language practices—particularly to interactions with text, indicates the importance of examining texts critically, recognizing the various ways we are positioned by them, and strategizing the ways we might reposition ourselves and others by (re)generating new texts. Questioning cultural beliefs in text (even when we agree with them) may help us to understand our status within various roles and how to enact those roles. We may then be able to more thoughtfully construct and reconstruct who we are and who we want to be. Ricker-Wilson (1999, January) provides an apt example of this. She writes about her high school English students who practiced reading critically in her classroom. Being more concerned about *how* her students read than *what* they read, she allowed a choice of free reading material to include romance novels, or "bodice busters" as she calls them. As the young women she writes about posed a series of critical questions to the text they read, and as they by learned to answer those questions comparatively across texts, they

were able to understand their own desire to read this genre of literature, and they learned other important ways to question how they were positioned by the text.

Critical literacy asks us to rethink habitual ways of interacting with text, to become more intentional about recognizing implicit power relationships in literacy exchanges. Unwary readers can be manipulated by textual agendas. Critical literacy allows readers to identify sources of textual power and manipulation so that they can consciously choose whether to accept or resist (or both) the explicit and implicit messages of a text. Such a shift requires new ways of thinking about how readers make sense of a text and how messages are "carried" by a text (Apol, 1998), and it requires readers to ask new questions when they encounter a text (Apol, 1992).

Ultimately, the shift to critical literacy can empower readers as active makers of meaning, and allows those readers to control how they are affected by a text. By practicing critical literacy in our reading and writing group, the teenage mothers and the researchers, together, had the opportunity to create a setting in which participating in activities around text could encourage us to interrogate our identities as they are socially constructed by texts. In addition, the reading and writing group was a setting which allowed me to examine what kinds of interactions with texts and with other members of the group provided for specific types of interrogations. The teenage mothers, the researchers, the texts (both in print and non-print forms), and the context of the reading and writing group helped to create a setting where both texts and identities were interrogated.

This study has striven to understand how identity development in the teenage mothers who participated in the reading and writing group relates to these kinds of

dialogic constructions of identity. I have explored how interacting with various forms of text contributed to the teenage mothers' identity constructions and how they developed and refined their own literacy practices as they (re)crafted their current selves and their ever-changing images of their possible selves. When the young women in the study looked critically at various authors and their own language practices and political implications of such practices, I tried to position them to re-evaluate their stereotyped positions and to exert more authority over their own identity development.

As I discussed in chapter 1, the teenage mothers who participated in the reading and writing group were already considering their identity choices in regards to textualized messages instructing them about who they should be. I saw this happening primarily in their parenting class—a context where, it could be argued, they were engaging in this kind of work because it was part of "doing school" and where their grade in the class was at stake (Seitz, 2002). In the reading and writing group, because the teenage mothers did not have to do anything for a grade or to meet any school requirements, I would like to believe their motivations for participating were more personal. Especially during the second year of the study, participants seemed more committed to the group members and the ideas and activities we shared in during meetings. Perhaps they felt empowered during our meetings, perhaps the meetings were offering them a way of talking about their selves and their lives that they did not get to in other places—or perhaps they came for the food and the company offered to them at our meetings. Regardless, I was able to study their critical interactions with texts, their in-the-moment critical literacy practices which helped me to understand more fully, at least for this group of teenage mothers, some connections between literacy and identity. Chapter 3 provides a presentation of my

methodology for studying this connection, the following two chapters make this

connection more specific and context based relative to the members of the reading and

writing group, and the final chapter attempts to broaden my theory of critical interactions

with texts to other settings—specifically, those in schools.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

A Hybrid Approach to Research:

Ethnographic Inquiry, Interview, Grounded Theory, and Case Study Approaches

As I have stated in the preceding chapters, this was a study that aimed to explore the process of teenage mothers' constructing identity through critical interactions with texts in an after school reading and writing group. I examined the literacy practices of the participants during our meetings to understand how they made use of texts that might help them interrogate the stereotypes that surround the roles they play and the consequences of the choices they make for enacting those roles. The qualitative research study that I conducted made use of the overlapping traditions of ethnographic inquiry, interview research, grounded theory, discourse analysis and case study research, each for particular purposes. Specifically, I chose this hybrid of approaches to cover the range of methodological needs emerging through the stages of the research process: design of the study, data collection, data analysis, and write-up/representation/presentation of findings.

This chapter outlines the process of research for my study. I have presented the phases of the process in what appears to be a linear sequence from research design, to data collection, to data analysis, to the presentation and representation of the findings. Though appearing orderly and sequential in retrospect (the story of my study has a beginning, middle, and end), the process was far less linear than it appears here. Written text is seductive in that regard, laid out as it is word after word, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, and page after page. To avoid an overly linear methodological representation of how the study unfolded, I have provided comments in this chapter as to

when the phases of the process overlapped, when they occurred simultaneously, and when they recurred.

The critical interactions with texts (that I describe in chapter 4) emerged from an intensive study of the talk about texts during our reading and writing group meetings, talk that was shaped by this hybrid research approach. The critical interactions are the principal findings of this study, but I may or may not have seen them, or at least may not have seen them in the same ways, outside of the context of the meetings and with the attendance of the particular individuals who participated in the study. The critical interactions themselves are important for what they may contribute to an understanding of critical literacy from the "inside" in its enactment, but they are also important for how they might contribute to an understanding of the connections between textual interactions and identity development. Though this latter piece of my findings is less developed in this study, it is nevertheless an extremely important consequence of engaging in literacy in its multiple forms.

My own identity was a meaningful feature of my research as well. Reflexivity, or a sense of self-awareness on the part of the researcher (Creswell, 1998; Lensmire, 1994), underscores an important assumption in qualitative research. Because I was the key instrument of data collection for my study[8] (Bogdan & Biklem, 1992; Eisner, 1991), my biases, values and experiences influenced the choices I made as a researcher, what I paid attention to, the ways I looked at those phenomena, and ultimately what I found in the data and how I presented and represented the findings of my research. Two important

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[8] I describe myself as the "key instrument of data collection"—even though many aspects of the study were planned and conducted collaboratively—because the questions I asked in this joint venture and pursued further in research grew out of my own emerging program of research on literacy, identity, and adolescence.

roles I took on as a researcher were those of observer and interviewer of participants, but my part in the research was not restricted only to those roles. I was also one of two coordinators of the reading and writing group as well as a participating member of those meetings. As a participating member of the group, I was never allowed to completely "hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality" (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000), nor did I want to. I call this study an intervention partly because I have hoped to elicit some change, some learning on the part of the participants. I hoped to change and learn as well. As an observer, I was allowed to build my own "a complex, holistic picture" of what I studied (Creswell, 1989). Also as an observer, I was afforded—or I appropriated—the power to see and speak about what I observed and what was "hidden from scrutiny" (Fine, et al., 2000).

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I drew on the traditions of ethnographic inquiry, interview research, grounded theory and case study research approaches to qualitative research. While the traditions of each of these approaches is embedded in the phases on which I have elaborated in the rest of this chapter, I will show here how each tradition has informed my work. Ethnographic inquiry is the broadest of the traditions on which my research draws. It encompasses a research process that spans research question conceptualization through to a representation of what I learned. A cultural lens shaped my initial research questions and my plans for observations and interviews; I revised these over time as the study in process informed my thinking about what I wanted to learn and what I could find in the particular setting of my research.

The tradition of ethnographic inquiry shaped the choices I made about how, when and where to collect data. It also shaped the character of the analysis and representation

of the data. As a participant-observer, I was able to participate in the group in some ways as a member, while I maintained a distance that allowed for data recording (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Fetterman, 1989). A primary component of ethnographic methodology of which I made use was data collection through participant-observation over an extended period of time. I was initially a relative stranger in the sites where my research was conducted. I gained access to the culture of the participants of my study, but I did not live my daily life within their world—inside their intact culture-sharing group. I did in many ways, however, participate in their culture by observing across multiple settings of their lives and by participating in many of the rituals and events of their lives. I was a participant-observer in the smaller culture of the reading an writing group in which I also had a noticeable hand in shaping (Creswell, 1989). The degree to which I was more or less a participant and more or less an observer varied from meeting to meeting and sometimes from moment to moment during any given meeting (Atkinson & Hammersly, 1994)

My analysis and the representation of the findings of my research also are characteristic of the tradition of ethnographic inquiry and grounded theory. In part, my analysis was conducted through systematic description and interpretation. I observed and attempted to understand the "everyday lives" of the participants in my study, and I explored emerging themes and patterns I saw (Creswell, 1989). Events and occurrences in the participants' lives inevitably informed what we discussed at reading and writing group meetings. Themes of talk that emerged out of reading and writing group meetings often reflected issues that the participants were dealing with outside the setting of our meetings. In my descriptions of the participants' lives outside and their activities inside

the reading and writing group, I included a high level of description of cultural behavior of the group and individuals in the group.

Traditions of grounded theory are located in my study primarily in the analysis of the data I collected as a way of thinking about and conceptualizing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Interactive data collection and theory development is the hallmark of grounded theory and was present in my research methodology as well. My study extended over two years, and during that time I repeatedly reevaluated the goals and procedures of data collection based at least in part on interpretations that grew out of early attempts to analyze the data. I began trying out explanations for what I was hearing in the talk that took place during reading and writing group meetings through methods of discourse analysis, and over time I adjusted my conceptualizations as I developed ways of articulating my theories about patters in talk about text. The interview and observation data from year one informed some of the decisions I made about how to conduct the reading and writing group in year two. Specifically, I had examined our discourse patterns and the ways in which the teen mothers were making sense of texts and characterizing themselves in various roles represented in the texts. Because I learned a great deal about the lives and education of the participants in year one, I was able to make some changes to reading and writing group meetings that not only suited the research, but that also better met the needs and interests of the participants. At the completion of data collection, I built upon early explanations and theory building to create a complex coding system by which to analyze data in search of themes and patterns and to name, define and describe the critical interactions I saw. Chapter 4 is in part a presentation of a theoretical model which elaborates on what were formerly coded categories and explains the

relationship between the critical interactions.

In this research, I analyzed the data I collected as three distinct forms of cases.[9] The reading and writing group may be viewed as one kind of case. Though clearly a part of multiple external contexts, it may be viewed as a bounded setting within which the study participants' critical literacy is enacted. This case for the study focused on the connection between critical literacy practices of teen mothers and their identity development through an examination of the critical interactions with text that I observed during our meetings.

Second, the participation of each teen mother is another kind of case in that it (her *participation*) is a "setting" within which critical interactions may be generated and experienced. In this dissertation I use Elaine's case as a as a vehicle for representing how the critical interactions I identified in the reading and writing group were enacted by/for a particular individual. In doing so, I offer a secondary representation of what a critical interaction is, and thereby, an alternative for viewing and understanding it.

Third, each meeting of the reading and writing group could be considered a case, bounded in time, wherein critical interactions with texts took place. I analyzed particular meetings discretely in deriving the critical interactions I have identified. For example, the critical interactions I derived in one meeting, one case, were then developed further in my analysis of another meeting, and so on. I was then able to take the critical interactions from the cases of the meetings and apply them to the cases of the individual participants, then more broadly to the lager context of the study. Looking across cases

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[9] A case is a bounded, integrated system that exhibits patterned behavior. It is not always easy to see the boundaries around a case, and features of the case and the context may not always seem distinct (Stake, 2000). However, the notion of cases as bounded and patterned systems was useful for my analysis.

and across different conceptualization of cases has helped me to understand some ways in which critical literacy gets enacted and some ways in which critical literacy and identity development influence each other. In data analysis, the themes and patterns I saw were supported by the different perspectives, or different locations, from which I could see the critical interactions.

Case study research draws attention to the question of what can be learned from specific cases (Stake, 2000). Further, Shulman (1988) has pondered what gives case study research its general value (perhaps akin to "generalizability") and he responds that "general value" derives from response to his question: "What is this a case of?" The reading and writing group, each teen mother's participation and each meting were in fact a grounded cases of how critical literacy practice may interact with identity development in the form of critical interactions. They are each particular ways of representing how critical literacy is enacted and identity development is a consequence of that practice.

Design of the Study

A Study Within a Study

As I mentioned in chapter 1, my dissertation is part of a larger study. The larger study focused more closely on the children of the teen mothers that this study does, as one of its primary concerns was to investigate how teen mothers bring their children into literacy. Because my collaborator, Laura Apol, is a scholar of children's literature and literacy, she, at the outset, was most interested in that piece of the larger study. As a former high school teacher and as a neophyte educational psychologist interested in

adolescent literacy learning and identity, my interest has been centered on the teen

mothers themselves. We designed the study so that both researchers' interests could be

explored. We collected data in three sites: (1) a voluntary reading and writing group, (2)

Summit High School[10], an alternative school of choice, and (3) specific events in the

teenage mothers' daily lives out of school. At the first data collection site, the reading

and writing group, we intentionally structured meetings so that they would address

questions related to the overlapping interests of the researchers. Some of the reading and

writing group meetings we held had the explicit goal of creating a setting in which the

teen mothers and their children could interact around children's literature, and some of

the meetings were explicitly focused on the teens' own literacy and identity development.

We anticipated that discussions of identity development of the participants would

necessarily include ways they thought about themselves as parents and the ways they

brought their children into literacy. This assumption was confirmed very early on in our

meetings and initial interviews. In addition, one reason the participants gave for being

interested in our project was that they wanted to learn about children's literature and

literacy.

In the second site, Summit High School—where the teen mothers attended—we

observed the participants in several locations, including their parenting class, their

children's literature class, and the childcare center where they dropped off their children

so they could attend classes. In these different locations, again, data for both parts of the

study were collected—the part focused on the teen mothers' conceptions of their own

identity and literacy issues, and the part that focused on literacy issues related to their

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[10] The name of the school and its programs, as well as the names of all participants, except for the researchers, are pseudonyms.

children's. Likewise in the third site, the locations of the teenage mothers' lives out of school, I attended events that were organized and structured primarily for the teen mothers themselves, for their children, and for both. For example, events that were more clearly for the teen mothers were the senior prom, graduation, and an overnight retreat planned as part of this study. Some "events" that I attended that were primarily for the children of the teen mothers were birthday parties, afternoon play sessions, and bedtime routines. Because this study focuses on the teen mothers, I have taken account of their children in a secondary way—that is, relative to my primary consideration, the literacy and identity development of the teenage mothers themselves.

Research Sites

Sessions of the Reading and Writing Group

Meetings of our after school reading and writing group, the primary site for the study, were held during the first year of the study at a community child development (childcare) center, and during the second year in an available classroom at Summit High School. We wanted the meeting time and place to be convenient for the young parents, so in both years we negotiated our meeting time and place, provided rides when needed, and hired licensed child care providers to care for the children while we met. Through the first year we held our meetings in the early evenings in a room we rented at the community child development center where we ate dinner together (usually pizza or other take-out meals that I picked up on my way to the meeting), and the children were cared for by child care providers from the community center.

During the second year of the study, because attendance at meetings was

inconsistent, we met earlier in the afternoon, right after school, so we had to change our meeting place as well. During those late afternoon hours, the community child care center we used during the first year could not accommodate us because our new meeting time was when the children who regularly attended the child care at the community center were present. It was convenient for the teenage mothers to meet at their school since they were already there. We hired child care providers from the day care center at the school to stay past regular school hours and care for the children during our meeting time. We continued our practice of eating dinner, but had it delivered to the school during our meeting time. We tried to minimize the interruption of our conversation when food was delivered, served and eaten.

The reading and writing group in which the teenage mothers participated was directed by Laura Apol and myself and structured around principles of critical literacy. There were anywhere from one to seven participants in attendance at each regular meeting (including the researchers) and the average number of participants in attendance was 4.4. Over the two consecutive school years, we met 18 times—approximately every other week from March until June in 1999, and from February until May in 2000. I was present at every meeting and Laura attended all but four meetings.

Early in the study Laura and I were concerned about the low number of participants and the lack of regularity with which they were coming to meetings. The average number of participants during the first year was 3.75 over 8 meetings. I wanted to believe that the participants were interested in the activity of the reading and writing group, but that belief, even if it was true, would not change the fact they had busy lives and were occupied with many other activities.

In the interviews I conducted with the participants, I learned that one reason they did not attend as regularly as we had hoped was that they were unfamiliar with, and therefore uncertain of the purposes of, some of the activities in which we engaged during meetings. They also mentioned that not knowing Laura or me well was a contributing factor to their irregular attendance that year. After some negotiation with the participants, and a change of meeting time and location of meetings, average attendance for the 10 meetings in the second year increased to 5. The participants cited getting to know me, Laura and the other participants well; more explicit structure in the activities; and a more convenient meeting time and place as motivators for more regular attendance. Not only did attendance increase generally, but those who could come (and wanted to come) began attending very regularly, and those who could not (or did not want to), mostly stopped attending.

In addition to our regular meetings, toward the end of the second year of the study, the core group of participants—and sometimes a fringe participant or two— occasionally met outside our regular meeting times and places. One example of this was a retreat we took to a nearby hotel where we had an intensive overnight meeting and slumber party. At that meeting, we discussed issues connecting identity and literacy and worked on writing a letter to Montel Williams, the host of a talk show—we had viewed an episode of his show together at an earlier meeting. This outing also gave the participants a chance to be teens without the worries of child care for one night, though, not surprisingly, their children never left their thoughts. For some participants, it was their first night apart from their children. There were many calls home that evening and first thing in the morning.

During the first year of data collection, I saw our reading and writing group as, in some ways, an extension of Summit High School's parenting class. In many ways, our group's textual interactions resonated with the conversations to which I was privy in the parenting class. Not all of the teenage mothers who participated in the reading and writing group were in the parenting class; some had taken it before we started meeting. Though most of the teenage mothers in the study moved on from the parenting class (it lasted one semester whereas we met over two years), they continued to use some of the discourse patterns they had practiced in the parenting class. It was a setting where they practiced, for example, taking a stance on various issues and finding and using community and personal resources to help them make decisions for themselves and their children.

By the second year of our meetings, we had established our own ways of interacting with texts and each other. Our interactions grew out of earlier patterns practiced and established in the parenting class, but our meetings no longer felt like extensions of any classroom activities, even though our meetings were held that year in a classroom in their school.

Meeting Texts and Activities

I planned the reading and writing group activities around principles of critical literacy so that I could closely examine how the participants used their literacy skills to examine texts. We negotiated not only where and when to meet and what to have for dinner, but also decisions about which texts to read, what to write and talk about, and how to engage with the texts we chose. The activity of our meetings centered around

interrogating texts and questioning our understandings of them and what they said about our various roles.

Table 3.1 below summarizes the eight meetings contributing in key ways to data analysis. Six meetings proved to be the richest sources for examining critical interactions with texts, two of which occurred during the first year of the study and four during the second. The texts of focus at these eight meetings are representative of the range of genres from which drew for our meetings more generally. Texts we read and wrote included prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction: For example, we read and responded to biographical texts such as Shandler's *Ophelia Speaks* (1999) and *People* magazine (Plummer & O'Neil, 1999, October 11), myths from Phelps' *The Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales From Around the World* (1981), and a video tape of *Montel* (Williams, 1999), a TV talk-show. We read and discussed non-fiction texts, including newspaper articles and information from the internet defining the social status and positioning of women in general, and of teen mothers and their children, specifically. Children's literature was also an ongoing interest of the group members, both teens and adults. It served as an important vehicle for discussing literacy development and identity in the children, and in some ways it enriched the teenage mothers' understandings of child development and parenting issues (Doneson, 1991; Johnson, Pflaum, Sherman, Taylor, & Poole, 1995/96), and issues related to their own identity development.

Table 3.1 – Selected Meetings

Meeting Code Name	Meeting Date	Those Attending	Text(s) Under Interrogation	Summary of Activities
Elsa	3/28/99	Sheila, Laura, Kara	Short story, "Elsa and the Evil Wizard," Phelps, 1981.	Read aloud and discussed the story. Topics of discussion included • the role of blondes in our culture • Summit High School's prom • the role of men as sexual predators • men who are provoked by sexually confused women • the author's intended message related to these issues
Ophelia Speaks #1	6/7/99	Elaine, Michelle, Estella, Laura, Kara	3 autobiographies from *Ophelia Speaks*, Shandler, 1999, written by teens who discuss their pregnancies, each ending in a different outcome.	Read aloud and discussed the autobiographies. Topics of discussion included • unwanted pregnancy • social stigma experienced by teen mothers • abortion • miscarriage • the intentions of the author in presenting this range of stories
People	2/28/00	Sheila, Estella, Elaine, Laura, Kara	*People* magazine article, "Revisiting 'The Baby Trap,'" Plummer & O'Neil, 1999.	Read aloud and discussed different sections of the article including accompanying photographs. Topics of discussion included • hard choices teen mothers have to make • various family structures • the role of fathers of teen mothers' children • representations of teen mothers in terms of economic status, race, and independence
Montel #1	3/14/00	Sheila, Elaine, Chelsea, Laura, Kara	Videotape of an episode of *Montel*, a television talk show, "Paying the Price: A Teen Mother's Struggle"	Watched the tape and briefly discussed it both during and after viewing it. Topics of discussion included • representations of teen mothers on the show • participants' changing opinions about the host of the show • host's treatment of the teen mothers on the show • complex relationships of families in the lives of teen mothers

Table 3.1 (cont'd)

Montel #2	4/10/00	Estella, Mindy, Sheila, Chelsea, Elaine, Kara, guest[11]	Videotape of an episode of *Montel*, a television talk show, "Paying the Price: A Teen Mother's Struggle"	Watched the tape again and discussed many of the same issues in more depth and detail. Decided to write the host of the show a letter that would offer a different perspective than the ones offered by the show.
Letter writing	4/17/00	Estella, Sheila, Chelsea, Elaine, Laura, Kara	Letters we had begun writing previously that were written in response to the TV talk show episode.	Read each letter aloud and discussed how we wanted to re/present our ideas to the show's host; discussed if we wanted to write one or multiple letters and the contents of a cover letter they wanted me to write introducing their letters. More discussion of the show and what it said about teen mothers' identities and decision making.

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[11] One participant was present who came as a guest of another participant and she did not sign a consent form allowing us to use data about her participation in the project.

The Parenting Class at Summit High School

Summit High School is a suburban school of choice and an alternative "non-traditional" high school in the Midwest serving teenage students, age nineteen and under. Enrollment is limited to 125 students. At the time of the study, Summit boasted such amenities as small classes, technology-based courses, the state's standardized test preparation, career preparation and counseling, school-to-work transition, and an award winning teen parenting program. The teen parenting program and the physical facilities attached to it were known as the Child Development Center. The program offered classes in child development, parenting, and children's literature. It provided participating students with on-site child care, bus transportation to and from school, vocational training, and employment and educational planning. The school also employed a full-time social worker who devoted many of his work hours to students enrolled in the parenting program. All students enrolled in the school were permitted to use the child care facility, which was part of the Child Development Center. All Summit students who had children at the time of my research used the child care facility, and pregnant students planned to do so once their babies were born. Any student who used the child care facility was required to take a minimum of one semester of the parenting class and was allowed to take up to four quarters of the class (two semesters).

The parenting class itself,[12] a secondary site for my dissertation, was offered once a term (the school year consists of four quarters, or terms) and had an enrollment of between ten and twenty-five students per term, almost always entirely female. Rachel

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[12] Most of the information about the parenting program was related to me during interviews with Rachel and informal interviews with school officials, and was taken from the school's published informational brochures.

was, and still is, the sole full-time teacher in the program. She makes use of many community resources (people and organizations) to help provide her students with specialized information and to engage them actively in the complex decisions they must make about their lives and the lives of their children.

Rachel's curriculum for the parenting class is structured around a set of topics which she has found over many years at her job to be important for her students. She teaches the class with an eye to the changing needs of her individual students. For example, when children's biting became an issue during one term, Rachel brought in articles by physicians and other child development experts that explained biting as a normal part of the development of a healthy child. The students discussed their personal experiences with their own children's biting, when and why it occurred, how they could help their children develop through this phase, and what they as parents could and should expect a child care facility to do in dealing with children who are biting.

Other classroom activities in which students participated during the parenting class included keeping a developmental scrapbook of one's child's growth, observing in the child care facility for various developmental markers and interactions between children and their care-givers, writing papers about various parenting issues and topics of concern, watching and critically examining videos on topics such as adoption, and completing a workbook that accompanies the textbook on parenting and child development. Rachel reported to me that she is careful not to preach her own beliefs about the "proper" way to raise a child, though she does not make her own views a secret. Instead, she strives to create discussions in which students may state their views on a particular issue (e.g., biting, spanking, paternity), and then, together, they talk through

their beliefs on that issue. Rachel's job, in her view, includes modeling for her students how one might thoughtfully take a stance on a controversial issue. Based on my observations, she enacted this view often by listening to her students, considering what they said, offering her own views, and then placing both perspectives within the larger context of "what kind of person do you want your child to grow up to be." Often there was agreement to disagree, and Rachel told her students that there are many "right" ways to raise a child.

Other Sites

In addition to the reading and writing group and the parenting class, I observed the participants in environments which are not formally structured around literacy. I conducted interviews, some of which took place in the participants' homes; I was invited to birthday parties and to observe bed time rituals; I accompanied participants to the doctor; I attended Summit High School's prom. Most of the participants (including the researchers) attended a seminar on women's issues that was offered at a local university. We also dined together in local restaurants on several occasions. Although some of these interactions with the participants were not formal data gathering sessions, they helped me to develop and maintain a personal relationships with participants that offered additional understandings about the complex ways in which they interacted with texts during our meetings. In addition, it was important to me that I observed the teen mothers engaging in language practices in a variety of settings, such as their parenting class with their teacher Rachel, because it seemed that the ways they talked in those settings would interact with those that occurred in the reading and writing group, as they would for their

language practices in their homes and other settings. Observational data I collected in the participants' classrooms and in their homes, as well as data I collected via interviews and through other sources, contributed to definitions of meaningful language practices in the reading and writing group data.

Entrance and Access

When early in our acquaintanceship Laura Apol and I discussed our mutual interests in literacy learning and critical literacy, she told me about Summit High School, which she was familiar with through a friend who taught there. She told me about the teen parenting program situated there, and we speculated that this could be an ideal site for pursuing some of our overlapping interests. Laura arranged a meeting between us and the parenting teacher, Rachel, who, we would soon learn, was also very interested in some of the same larger literacy issues that we interested in studying. Rachel had in fact produced some scholarship about ways that teen mothers bring their children into literacy. She was interested in our project because of the long-term commitment to the participants that was part of its design and because she was also interested in learning about issues related to literacy and identity. In the past, Rachel had opened her classroom many times to researchers who had assumed a "hit and run" approach—they came in for a month or less, observed, interviewed and were never heard from again. She was hopeful that our extended commitment to her and her students would be a positive one, particularly since the project would include intervention.

The participant pool for the study evolved to include eight teenage mothers. Rachel was invaluable in helping us gain the confidence of the participants and in

identifying a group that would be suitable for the study; but she did not help select the participants, nor did she participate in the reading and writing group meetings. She welcomed Laura and me into her classroom and introduced us to a group of current and former students who she recommended for the research project. We recruited others during some early observations which we conducted in order to learn more about the culture of the site and the students in general. Rachel was immensely helpful in this process in many ways. She supported my developing relationships with the teen participants, she allowed me to observe her parenting and children's literature class whenever I wanted to, and she allowed us to use her classroom—familiar turf to the teen mothers—for our initial informational meeting. At this meeting we outlined to a group of teen mothers—some of whom would become participants, some of whom would not—the goals and activities of the project.[13] Rachel helped us anticipate who might be at the meeting so that we could personalize our written materials. She also smoothed our access to other locations in the school including the childcare center, other classrooms, administrative offices and school functions. Though she did not attend reading and writing group meetings, she maintained her interest in what we were reading and discussing and had some influence over our group's activities.

Preparing for the Research

Prior to meeting with a group of potential participants, there was much planning to do. For instance, we knew the project would need modest funding to support our meetings' materials and food, transportation—our own and the participants'—and child

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[13] See Appendix A for a letter of introduction we distributed at the first meeting.

care, for starters. I applied for and was awarded a Spencer Research Training Grant (RTG) fellowship which helped fund some of these research expenses. Laura and I also applied for and were awarded a small grant from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to cover the basic expenses, as well as to purchase audio tapes and have them transcribed. Also, because I was a research assistant and mentee of P. David Pearson, he generously allowed us full access to his data collection resources (e.g., tape recorders, microphones, and video cameras).

The processes of applying for the Spencer RTG and the NCTE grants, and for permission to do research with Human Subjects Committee at Michigan State University and with the school district in which Summit is situated, forced me to articulate my interests behind the project and my goals for my research (both the larger project and my dissertation study within it). As I discussed in chapter 1, my research focus evolved over the course of the project, as did my initial plan for my role in the research. When I wrote about my research interests for my Spencer RTG application, I stated my goal as an educator and researcher: To "help students, through their experiences with text as both readers and writers, develop their unfolding reflective and critical awareness of society's ever-changing expectations of them and, in the process, help them understand that they possess the tools required for evaluating and transforming their lives" (Lycke, 1998). I planned to accomplish this task through "creat[ing], teach[ing], and study[ing] a class in which language as social and political discourse becomes an intentional object of analysis" (Lycke, 1998). By the time I introduced the project to potential participants, I knew that I would be coordinating a reading and writing group rather than teaching a class, but a focus on language as social and political discourse as an intentional object of

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analysis remained.

While I was writing grant and fellowship proposals, beginning to visit the research sites informally, and planning for our very important first meeting, I was simultaneously working out the logistics of our reading and writing group meetings. I knew the teen mothers would want to be assured that their children were being well cared for while we were meeting (and later would learn that they needed to be convinced that their time away from their children would be well spent). I made sure the child care would be provided by licensed staff in state-approved facilities. I also wanted to have a range of choices for meal options during our meetings, so I contacted local restaurants and created a list of reasonably priced eating establishments from which I could pick up dinner that would appeal to teens. Also, through a great deal of collaboration with Laura, I began compiling materials that we might read, and ideas for writing and other activities in which we might engage at our meetings. These were among the numerous details that needed to be addressed prior to our meetings.

Data Collection

Types of Data

The study draws primarily on three forms of data collected over the two years of the study, beginning in the fall of 1998:

- field notes and audio recordings of the reading and writing group activities,

- field notes of observations in school and other settings, and

- field notes and audio recordings of interviews.

The main sources of data gathered for my dissertation were the meetings of the reading and writing group along with individual interviews with most of my attention focused on three core participants, Elaine, Sheila, and Estella. The data, in the form of audio-taped recordings and field notes, gave me two meaningful vantage points on the critical interactions—the meetings themselves, and the lives of the participants as described primarily through interviews.[14] Other data provided context and substantiation for claims made about literacy practices and textual interactions in the reading and writing group. Chapter 2 includes a list of questions for discussion that were important for critical interactions with texts during reading and writing group meetings. These questions were sometimes used to address directly the texts under interrogation; they also helped guide and shape planning for our meetings and many of our textual interactions.

Recordings of Participation in the Reading and Writing Group

During our usually bi-weekly reading and writing group meetings, the teen participants and researcher participants explored our understandings of our places in the world through reading, writing, and discussing multiple genres of text. Our discussions revolved around the meanings of the texts we were interrogating (texts generated by others and texts we had generated) and uses and generation of text in and out of school. These conversations gave me the opportunity to view participants' literacy practices in relation to their identity construction. I audio-taped all of our group meetings and video-taped some as was appropriate to the situation. I then catalogued and transcribed tapes;[15]

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[14] The appendix includes interview protocols used with the teenage mothers and Rachel.

[15] When I catalogued a tape, as I listened to it I characterized topics or themes that were being discussed over a period of less than a minute to several minutes. Catalogues look like extended lists of topic

sometimes I had assistance with the transcription, and I edited each transcript for accuracy and consistency of conventions. I took field notes during and after every meeting.

Observations

In addition to meeting on planned occasions, I observed the participants in school and other locations (home, doctor's office, prom, birthday parties, etc.) as they went about their everyday lives. I observed them in their parenting class two to three times per week, and in other settings approximately three to five times per month. This type of data collection allowed me to observe more natural experiences around identity development and literacy practices when the participants may or may not have been explicitly focused on these issues. I kept field notes during observations if it was appropriate to do so and wrote notes after my observations. I audio- and/or video-taped observations as was appropriate to the situation, then I catalogued or transcribed tapes. As I've indicated, this data is secondary to that of observations during reading and writing group meetings.

Interviews

Over the course of the project, I conducted formal interviews with five of the nine teen mothers who attended the reading and writing group, including the three core

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descriptions marked with timer numbers. When I transcribed a tape, I typed a word-for-word record of what was said by the participants in the conversation. I attempted to capture some aspects of the illocutionary force of the conversation by indicating pauses, non-verbal sounds (e.g., sighs, laughter, tongue clicks), overlapping speech, interruptions, simultaneous talk, and other similar features of group's communication. I had help transcribing some tapes, so part of my transcription work involved reviewing others' transcriptions, correcting errors, filling in missed words, and adding symbols for conversation features such as those described above.

participants. At the beginning of the study, I conducted open-ended pre-intervention interviews of the core participants in the fall of 1998. The interviews provided base-line information about participants' literacy practices and their perceptions about their identities so that I could trace changes in these over time. I also informally interviewed all core and some fringe participants on a continuing basis. Since, core participants contributed to an ongoing evaluation of the group's activities, they offered feedback about the activities of the reading and writing group, and though they may not have been aware of it, they helped me to continually reevaluate the research procedures. I interviewed all core participants again at the end of the project.

I also formally and informally interviewed Rachel, the parenting teacher. Interviews with her were frequent and took various forms. I talked with her informally at length on numerous occasions about the various aspects of her work and mine. I conducted her final interview over three separate sessions; the length of the sessions varied between 20 minutes and over an hour. She sat down for formal interviews with me when she could take the time during her school day.

I informally interviewed at least nine other people related to the project, including family members, teachers, school administrators, boyfriends, and friends. These interactions were not recorded except in my field notes. I wrote field notes during and after all formal and informal interview sessions. Formal interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Interview data of the three core participants are the primary interviews of the study. The other interviews, though important to the study, served as contribute to the more central ethnographic observations and interviews of the core participants.

<u>Other Data</u>

In addition to the observations and interviews I conducted, I examined other artifacts of the participants' lives. I had access to academic information (i.e., grades, class projects) and testing data. Some of the school, childcare and medical information and was reported to me in the form of anecdotes by teachers and administrators; some of it was reported directly to me by the participants and confirmed by a teacher. Of most use of the artifactual data was the participants' classroom work. I read papers and perused projects written and completed by the study participants. Many of these artifacts were publicly available to anyone who walked into the parenting classrooms because they were displayed on walls and tables around the room. Some of them were handed in to the participants' teacher, and then she or the participant gave me permission to look at them.

<u>Participants</u>

For my analysis, I divided the nine participants of the study into two groups—core and fringe participants—based on the frequency and regularity of their attendance to reading and writing group meetings. Tables 3.2 and 3.3 provide some pertinent biographical information about each of the core and fringe participants. I designated three of the teenage mothers *core participants* because they had the most regular attendance to reading and writing group meetings and other events planned for the project outside of school. I continued to invite them to participate whenever they could. The core teenage mothers were of primary concern for my dissertation. The dynamics of the reading and writing group helped provide context for and substantiate patterns in the data focused on these three focal individuals' literacy practices and development of critical

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literacy skills. Sheila, Elaine and Estella, the core participants, had the most regular attendance to all planned events for the project, so much of my dissertation focuses on them. I paid the most attention to Elaine, and she is the subject of the case study in Chapter 5.

I designated another four teenage mothers *fringe participants* because though they expressed interest in participating in the project, their life situations were such that they sporadically, and in some cases rarely, attended scheduled meetings or other events outside of school. Fringe participants were also included in the analysis of the study data, but they are infrequently, if ever, referred to by name in the dissertation. Though they only occasionally were in attendance at reading and writing group meetings, fringe participants were commonly the subjects of conversation during meetings. Mindy, a fringe participant, was a frequent subject of orally narrated texts during group meetings and conversations in the parenting class. She became a more consistent participant on at least two occasions when she came to three consecutive meetings, so she felt at times like a core participant, and when she was attending, she spoke and acted as if she intended to become a very regular participant. The researchers and the teen participants would begin to believe she was becoming a core participant, but then we would not see or hear from her for a week or longer. Although most of them are not named individually in the dissertation, the other fringe participants played an important albeit tangential role in the study as supporting and or contrasting cases. In this comparative and substantiating way, they contributed to the analysis.

Table 3.2 - Core Participants

Sheila	<u>Age at start of the project</u>: 15 ature<u>Race</u>: European-American <u>Child's name/age at start of the project</u>: Drew/6 mos. <u>Child's father/age at start of the project</u>: Dallas/19 <u>Family information</u>: Sheila lived in a rural town 15 miles from Summit. Sheila lived with her mother and sometimes her twin brothers in a small house they rented; she also had an older brother who was incarcerated during the project. Sheila usually held down a pert-time job at a fast food restaurant. Her mother was employed as a factory worker, lost her job, and then experienced periods of unemployment during the two years of the study.
Estella	<u>Age at start of the project</u>: 16 <u>Race</u>: multi-racial (Mexican-, Arab-, European-American) <u>Child's name/age at start of the project</u>: Ariel/8 mos. <u>Child's father/age at start of the project</u>: Ariel's father was not a part of her or Estella's lives. <u>Family information</u>: Estella lived in an urban town 10 miles from Summit. Estella lived with her mother, father, three sisters and one brother in a culturally Latino, Spanish-speaking household. The family owned their home. Her mother is Mexican-American, and her biological father who was not present in her life is Arab-American. Her adopted father with whom she lived and who she knew as her father for most of her life died during the project of a heart attack.
Elaine	<u>Age at start of the project</u>: 16 <u>Race</u>: bi-racial (African- and European-American) <u>Child's name/age at start of the project</u>: Marcus/8 mos. <u>Child's father/age at start of the project</u>: Evan/18 <u>Family information</u>: Elaine lived in the same urban town as Estella 10 miles from Summit but in a different neighborhood. The family owned their home. Her mother is European-American and her father is African-American; her father is college educated and her mother had some post-secondary education; both parents were employed. She has an older half brother from her father's previous marriage and an older sister who shares her biological parents.

Table 3.3 Fringe Participants

Michelle	Age at start of the project: 16 Race: European-American Child's name/age at start of the project: Aaron/6 mos. Family information: Michelle lived in a rural town 20 miles from Summit. Michelle was living with her son's father's parents during the project. The family owned their home. Her mother and father, who are divorced, live in the South; she has a younger brother and sister who live with their mother. Her son's father occasionally lived with them but not as a partner to Michelle; he has a younger sister who also lived with them.
Mindy	Age at start of the project: 15 Race: European-American Child's name/age at start of the project: Halina/8 mos. During the project Mindy had another child, Sean, born July 1999 and gave him up for adoption. Family information: Mindy lived in the suburban town where Summit was also located. At the start of the project, Mindy lived in an apartment with her father and her mother who was ill with cancer. During the project her mother died. Her older sister lived in a large suburban town about 50 miles from her home.
Renee	Age at start of the project: 18 Race: Mexican-American Child's name/age at start of the project: Renee was pregnant with Jacob at the beginning of the project. Family information: Renee is Estella's half sister. They share the same mother; Estella's adopted father is Renee's biological father.
Nadine	Age at start of the project: 19 Race: European-American Child's name/age at start of the project: Caleb; 18 mos. Family information: Nadine lived in a rural town about 15 miles from Summit.
Chelsea	Age at start of the project: 15 Race: European-American Child's name/age at start of the project: Chelsea was pregnant at the beginning of the project and had her baby after it ended. Family information: Chelsea lived in the same rural town as Sheila 15 miles from Summit but in a more upscale part of town. Chelsea enrolled in the parenting program and joined our group during the second year; she was a friend of Sheila's from their former public school. She lived with both of her biological parents.
Tara	Age at start of the project: 17 Race: European-American Child's name/age at start of the project: Tara was pregnant with Tabitha at the beginning of the project. Family information: Tara was not a frequent enough member for us to get to know much about her.

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Table 3.4 Adults Related to the Project

Rachel Classroom teacher and coordinator of the Child Development Center	Age at start of the project: 49 Race: European-American Children: 3—ranging in age from teenager to adult; one daughter, two sons. Family information: Rachel lived in a neighboring town to Summit. Her husband is a psychologist at the local university.
Laura University researcher	Age at start of the project: 36 Race: European-American Children: 2—ages 8 and 12 at the start of the project. Family information: Laura lived in a neighboring town to Summit where the university is located with her children.
Kara University researcher and graduate student	Age at start of the project: 36 Race: European-American Children: None during the project.[16] Family information: I lived in a neighboring town to Summit where the university is located in an apartment. For most of my childhood I lived in a suburb of a major Midwestern city with my father, step mother, sister and three step brothers.

Data Analysis

The hybrid approach I took in this research project includes variations on the

constant comparative method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss &

Corbin, 1990), for data analysis. I conducted simultaneous data collection and theory

development and applied methods of coding data for themes and patterns from the

traditions of grounded theory. As I have implied previously, the first year of the study

was less than prosperous in terms of the data collected, but bountiful in developing

relationships with the teen mothers in our reading and writing group, and in developing

ways of talking about text and our lives. I thought that the data I had collected that year

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[16] Although I was not a mother during data collection, I have since become one. Being a mother has made a significant difference in my understandings of the choices and roles of the teenage mothers in our group.

would be what I would mostly rely on for my analysis. My initial analysis led me to believe that the second year's study would serve to confirm what I found in the first year as I was fairly confident that the patterns of participation in reading and writing group meetings in year two would look much like they did in year one. As I have intimated, year two looked quite different from year one not only in terms of frequency and regularity of participation, but in terms of the quality of participation as well. However, when data collection concluded at the end of the 1999-00 school year, and I directed my efforts toward analysis of both years of data, I found that the most fruitful meetings for my analysis were those that took place during year two of the study.

By the end of the second year of the project, I had in hand a set of data that enabled me to look at individual meetings and across them, in addition to looking at the individual teen mothers' participation. In both of these locations I was able to discern some significant critical interactions with texts.

At this point, I was listening to tapes and reading transcripts of meetings as I looked for themes and patterns in the data. I conducted close discourse analysis on the conversation at meetings where we talked about texts with a tone of interrogation. As I discussed previously, my research question changed during the analysis process. Somewhere in the middle of the second year of data collection, I realized that my focus was misplaced. Instead of looking at the texts and the individuals who were reading them, I needed to look at the interactions that were created in the context of our reading and writing group. In other words, I needed to focus on the discourse that was particular to our meetings and that surrounded and was created by the texts, the individuals, and the task of looking at our identities. The research question I have been working with for

most of my analysis centers on the impact of the critical literacy goals and activities of the study:

What kinds of critical interactions with texts occur in a reading and writing group comprised of teenage mothers, and with what consequences — especially in terms of the teenage mothers' opportunities to interrogate[17] multiple roles they play, choices they make about what to do and who to be, and cultural stereotypes that frame their identities?

Creation of Categories: Seeking Themes and Patterns

In order to answer the research question that drove my study, I spent a great deal of time coding segments of text that could possibly be categorized as enactments of what I thought might be critical interactions that were emerging out of the group's discourse. My research question guided what I looked for in the talk of the group's participants— specifically, I looked for conversation about roles, responsibilities, and expectations the participants had for themselves and expectations others have for them. In order to discern what constitutes a critical interaction, I examined features of the utterance's context, including, for example, the text under examination, the participants who were present and active, and the topic(s) of our discussion and how closely it related to the text or to issues of identity.

At the same time I carefully examined what I was at that point loosely defining as interactions (not necessarily *critical* interactions) in order to better understand their shape and content. I tried isolating the talk that was directly about printed text, and I discovered

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[17] My understanding of the meaning of *interrogate* did not change with my revision of the research questions.

that not only was there a very fine line between what was directly about text and what was not, but that in doing this I left out large segments of conversation within which important work was being done to make sense of the text in terms of the participants' lives—a crucial part of critical literacy. In this process I asked myself a series of imaginative questions to better understand what was happening in an interaction and why. I asked: Why is this interaction occurring now? Why is it occurring at all? Why does this interaction involve these participants and not others? What are the consequences of this interaction? Why did the interaction have these results and not these others?

I wrote multiple "memos" that attempted to describe and explain, guided by these questions, the interactions I saw around texts at the reading and writing group meetings. In writing the memos, I worked to name and define moments of critical interactions; I wrote descriptions of what I interpreted to be "going on" at the meetings, including the significance of a particular text under interrogation and the significance of turn-taking in our conversation. My memos also contained lengthy portions of transcription from meeting tapes that I believed to reveal instances of critical interaction. For example, in one memo I included nearly a page long transcript wherein I guided the participants in a conversation about their personal understandings of the role of a good mother, cultural understandings of this role, and the differences and similarities between those understandings. Though specific critical interactions were still roughly identified and defined at this point, I wrote trying to explain the transcript in terms of critical interactions with texts.

As my analysis continued, the shape of the critical interactions I was seeing became more distinct. I soon had a list of what I thought I could identify as critical interactions, definitions of them, and examples from meetings to show how they were enacted. A technique I used to help me mold the emerging critical interactions was to look at a single participant's interactions with texts across meetings. I looked especially at Sheila's, Estella's, and Elaine's interactions across the meetings described in Table 3.1. I attempted to characterize each of these participant's particular ways of interacting with texts (critical and not critical) and explain, with the support of their interviews, why they might be interacting in these ways. This approach was extremely helpful in showing three important qualities of the conversations at our reading and writing group meetings. First, I learned that some of the talk that I had previously decided was "off topic talk" and not useful for my analysis was, indeed, very useful in showing me why and how we were making sense of particular texts in particular ways. After exploring what emerged as patterned ways of participating in meetings and analyzing a participant's interviews, it became clearer that some of the seemingly unconnected contributions were preliminary attempts at an analysis by the participants of their roles in relationship to the piece of text under examination.

Second, my approach of looking at a single participant's contribution across meetings was useful in revealing to me the process of collaborative meaning making during meetings. Often in looking for critical interactions in a single participant's talk across meetings, I would find that I was drawn to the same sections of meeting transcripts that I used in examining critical interactions in a different participant's talk. On careful examination of these segments across participants, I saw that two or more participants

often would make sense of a text together. This happened when one participant would help make meaning of a text with another participant by restating or rephrasing what someone else had said, by providing examples for an assertion that someone else had made, or by completing a sentence that someone else had started. Estella and Elaine were particularly adept at collaborative meaning making, but they were by no means the only ones who participated in conversations in this way. As we all got to know each other better, we seemed to converse with each other more and more frequently in ways that resulted in collaborative meaning making.

Finally, as I conducted my cross-case analysis of meetings by participant, I came to realize that one type of text that I had been overlooking as remarkably meaningful was the text of our own conversations. Especially during the second year when our group was much more cohesive and had developed a history of ideas and patterns of interactions, we referred to previous conversations much in the ways that we referred to visual texts (e.g., printed texts, videos). We told stories that were then interrogated in the same ways that we questioned other media. We also narrated events for which several of us were present then we discussed not only the events themselves, but our ways of narrating them, our representations of them as well.

One example of how our conversations were treated like other texts began in a parenting class meeting I observed during the spring of the second year of data collection. A schism had developed in the group of students that the teen mothers labeled as "the old moms vs. the new moms." The "old moms" were the teen mothers that had been in the program a year or more and the "new moms" were those who were new to the program that year. The old moms had established patterned ways of being and talking when they

interacted with each other, Rachel and the childcare providers in the center. The new moms were entering into this culture and its conversations, and they did not always make a smooth transition. They questioned some of the classroom and childcare practices and talked about some of the old moms as adversaries. The agitation grew until one of the new moms said she wanted to kick an old mom's "bootie," and she called her a "hoochie" (a slut). Some of the animosity was directed at Rachel, as well.

This situation itself and some consequences were discussed in at least three contexts that I observed. Different narratives of the threat of bootie kicking became a text for us to interrogate at our reading and writing group meeting. We talked about the different perspectives that the participants (all "old moms") brought to the discussion concerning this event. For example, the participants recognized that each of them represented the event differently as a consequence of her own relationships with the "new moms," with Rachel, and with the other adults in the school.

Presentation of Data

Laurel Richardson (2000) rightly claims that writing is a method of inquiry, "a way of finding out about yourself and your topic" (p. 923). She says writing is not just telling about the social worlds we study, it is also a method of discovery and analysis. Even in the final revisions of this dissertation as I "worded the world [of my research] into existence," I discovered more about what I have been studying in this project. Still, in spite of my use of social scientific conventions of writing, my reliance on metaphors to explain through comparison and prescribed writing formats, I am unable to completely capture the world of the reading and writing group. Still I try.

As is true of any text, this dissertation tells but one version of the research I have conducted. I have made choices about what to include and what to leave out, what to emphasize and what to de-emphasize. The heart of my dissertation is in the next two chapters—chapter 4 and chapter 5. In chapter 4, I identify and define, with examples from the conversations of our meetings, five forms of critical interaction with text that I observed during our group's meetings. The chapter on critical interactions presents my key findings, the critical interactions, through a depiction of the primary site of data collection, the reading and writing group. I have chosen particular moments during our meetings which highlight the use of the critical interactions I have identified. Table 3.1, which summarizes important aspects of some of the key meetings, also indicates which meetings and discussions were particularly rich in critical interactions.

In addition to presenting the critical interactions through an analysis of the reading and writing group meetings (chapter 4), I offer them through the lens of a single participant in the case study of Elaine (chapter 5). Chapter 5 is my biographical characterization of her participation in the reading and writing group—how that participation shaped and was shaped by relevant features of her life. I was able to construct this perspective by observing Elaine's particular ways of participation in the meetings, by discussing with her her experiences in the reading and writing group and other settings where she performed literacy practices.

I also conducted this sort of case study analysis with two additional participants, Sheila and Estella, whose cases are not included in the dissertation. Through this analysis, the critical interactions have been examined in multiple contexts—in many of the reading and writing group meetings, and in the data that constructs each individual

core participant. I chose to present my findings in a more limited way, but in a way that was nonetheless informed by my analysis of each of the contexts. I ultimately decided to include Elaine's case study in this dissertation and not the cases of the others because my analysis of Elaine's participation through methods of discourse and narrative analysis revealed the most complex understandings of the diverse socio-linguistic processes at play in the data. Elaine had a unique way of participating at meetings. Indeed, her participation in many ways shaped the tone and topics of our conversations. The kinds of critical interactions in which I saw her engage were often characteristic of what the group was doing more generally. Elaine was an occasional participator the first year of the study, attending only four of the ten meetings, but she became more regular in her attendance during the second year, when she attended eight of the ten meetings. In carefully examining Elaine's participation and other contexts of her life, I was better able to understand how critical interactions emerged and were enacted in our meetings in the other members' participation and various contexts of their lives. My analysis of Sheila and Estella's cases contributed a great deal to my understanding of Elaine's case, to my understanding of how the critical interactions were enacted during reading and writing meetings, and to my capacity to make connections between their interactions with text and their developing identities.

CHAPTER 4: CRITICAL INTERACTIONS WITH TEXTS

Introduction

As I discussed in Chapter 2, I define text more broadly than printed words on paper. Texts are representations of the world and, in part, define and describe who people are and what they should do. I also discussed in that chapter that literacy in this study involves complex activities, has broad implications for dealing with symbol systems, and does not view literacy as merely reading printed characters on paper with the goal of finding a single, true meaning (Alvermann et al., 1999; Heath, 1983; Street, 1995). Literacy is about the influences on how a reader understands texts, what she believes about what texts can mean, and how those beliefs translate into action. If a reader of any kind of text does not think beyond a single meaning in a text, her choices about who to be and how to act in the world are radically limited. My definition of text and literacy are reflected in my definition of *critical* literacy.

This study and others like it (e.g., Comber & Simpson, 2001) emphasize that critical literacy is *not* a skill that is for or should be practiced by the educational elite alone, nor should the skills required to interact critically with text be taught and developed only when students are in advanced placement high school classes, in post-secondary education, or only practiced for academic purposes. The contexts in which critical literacy and critical thinking skills are practiced usually do not extend to lower track classrooms, lower grade levels, or outside of academic tasks, especially for marginalized people. All people should have opportunities to develop as critical readers and to practice interacting with texts inside and awareness of texts as representations with

multiple meanings. A part of this development, practice and awareness is an understanding that the creation and publication of texts is motivated and that textual meanings are not fixed. Further, if readers are to understand how texts can designate who they are and what they should do, the reader not only has the right, but the obligation to consider how a text positions the people around it. Those who are positioned by a text include the reader, the writer, those who are subjects of texts, and those who are influenced by the ideologies and ideas embedded in texts. The reader must consider how an author offers a representation of reality and how that representation matches or does not match with the reader's own representations. Teenage mothers are among those who are marginalized from thinking about complexity of meaning and representations because of their diminished social status. In my research, I have found that for teen mothers, critical literacy practice is vital as they negotiate competing discourses about them (Kelly, 2002) and their multiple roles as mothers, teens, students, and numerous other perspectives that their roles demand of them.

In this study, I observed teenage mothers interacting critically with texts across settings; but for this study, their critical interactions helped me to understand some things about the enactment of critical literacy within the context of the reading and writing group. First, the critical interactions I name here were ones I observed in performance by the teenage mothers in our group across settings, not just during our group meetings, and with a range of texts, although I focus here on a few texts that we read and discussed within the setting of the reading and writing group. Second, interacting critically with the texts present at our group meetings usually helped the participants to consider conflicting cultural beliefs about teen mothers, including stereotypes which greatly limit how they

might understand who they are and who they can be. Third, these critical interactions point to ways in which the participants in the study sometimes seemed to accept and want to live up to expectations of them which align with generalities about them, and also point to the ways in which they thought about conceptions of their lives in more particular ways. Finally, our reading and writing group gave the young women in our study an opportunity to practice interacting with texts in a variety of ways that were different from the ways they might in other contexts of their lives. Our group was a place where they could refine critical literacy skills they already had and perhaps provide an opportunity for them to practice a few new ways of critically interacting with texts. As I have stated elsewhere, it was not the intention of this study to measure which skills of critical literacy they already had, to measure any specific improvement of critical literacy skills, or to measure what critical literacy skill they may have acquired as a consequence of participating in the reading and writing group. Rather, the study was an attempt to define and describe what happened in moment-to-moment interactions with texts and with each other when critical literacy was performed, and the conditions that were present to allow for this kind of practice. I have also examined some consequences for identity development when the participants interacted critically with text.

When we set out to conduct this research, my collaborator Laura and I hoped that during our meetings the participants would practice interrogating texts for the versions of reality they offered and to practice carefully examining texts for how they matched up with the participants' own representation s of their current and future lives and expectations for themselves. In turn, we hoped that they would think hard about which textual messages to accept and which to resist or reject and why they were doing it,

scrutinize the stereotypes that tell them who they should be, and consider the possibilities for how to carry out their roles. Our textual examination and interrogation, then, we hoped, would provide a different context in which the participants could reflect on their actions and identities—how their actions themselves were complex representations that in some ways matched and in some ways did not match general and particular textualized representations of young women and teen mothers.

The critical interactions with text that we observed in our reading and writing group were highly complex in their groundings, occurrences, and consequences. For this reason, this chapter aims to accomplish two purposes. The first is to describe and define the kinds of critical interactions with texts that I witnessed in our reading and writing group and to provide examples of these critical interactions. Although the names and descriptions of the critical interactions have come out of my analysis of our reading and writing group meetings and were identified as a result of how the teen mothers interacted with text during our meetings, in order to most clearly identify individual critical interactions, I have removed from the definitions and examples much of the very important context which surrounded the critical interactions as they occurred in action. In the case study that follows this chapter (chapter 5), I have attempted to restore relevant contextual information to reveal more completely what I learned from participating in and studying our textual interactions. The critical interactions themselves depend on the ways in which they are situated in our conversations. One complicating factor in presenting the critical interactions as I do here is that they often did not occur in mutual exclusivity of one other; even thought they seem very separate in this chapter. The participants interacted with texts (including the texts of group members' conversations)

on multiple levels simultaneously, so the critical interactions I observed were often

simultaneously reciprocally developed. That is, depending on the reader's purpose, for

example, she likely would have engaged with a text using more than one type of critical

interaction at once. In order to clearly describe and define the kinds of critical

interactions with texts that I witnessed in our reading and writing group, it is necessary to

point to them individually and discuss them as if they are distinct and separate form one

another and not dependent on other features of the context.

The second purpose of this chapter is to lay the foundation for exploring the

factors influencing occurrences of these kinds of critical interactions and some

consequences for identity development that they could have for the participants in the

study. The chapter following this one presents the case of Elaine and uses the definitions

and descriptions explored here to take up the discussion of how she, one participant,

interacted critically with particular texts that she read and discussed in the context of our

group. The context includes all the people present, the task we took on in interrogating

text, and the text we were discussing, both those that were brought to meetings and those

that were created during meetings.

Kinds Of Critical Interactions With Texts

As I have discussed previously, as we critically interacted with text in our group,

we moved beyond literal comprehension, beyond accepting any single meaning in a text

as truth. As readers critically interact with texts, they activate their practice of

interpretation, analysis, and interrogation of a text based on cultural knowledge about

what it means to do these things and what meanings can be made in their practice. The

more explicitly we discussed cultural aspects of a text, such as the time/place influence

over a construction of a text, the more deeply critical our interactions seemed to become and the more we seemed to be willing to examine issues of power and positioning.

However, there were also subtle ways in which the participants critically interacted with texts that may have lead a conversation back and forth between a very personal connection to the text, as in having experienced something like what was described in a text (which was sometimes revealed to the group and sometimes not) and explicit, public critical interactions. That is to say, critically interactions occur within the context of understanding, in both private and public ways, one's own roles and relationships in society. The reader does not always make public the connections she sees, so, in our group, unless a participant in some way made her thinking public through, for example, discussion or writing, it was impossible to try to interpret what sense she was making of a text. This fact made our group's conversations essential for me to identify the kinds of critical interactions we engaged in. Ways of interacting with the texts which were not vocalized and remained in private thoughts were not available for me to study.

Through my use of grounded theory and the constant comparative method of analysis, I was able to group the critical interactions into five coherent and internally consistent categories—*offering a stance toward a text, comparing the representation in the text to one's experiences, explicitly acknowledging a text as a representation, talking back to a text,* and *making inter-textual references.* Each type of critical interaction requires a different sort of connection with the text;[18] some types allow for a distancing of the self from the text, and some require a more personal and direct examination of a

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[18] See Table 4.1 for a brief description of each critical interaction.

participant's own thought and action in response to a text. Some critical interactions required us to understand differing perspectives on the text while not necessarily believing them.

I observed each type of critical interaction that I have named here enacted in varying contexts and across multiple meetings. The descriptions and examples I offer below are intended to characterize particular types of critical interactions that I observed and which allow us to look more closely at some ways that critical literacy happens in the moment.

My definitions and examples could not describe exhaustively every way of interacting critically with text. Nor are they intended to create a taxonomy for how people interact critically with texts or as a rubric for observing and identifying them as they happen. In our reading and writing group, as in classrooms and other settings where texts are analyzed and discussed , each participant brought her uniquely developing knowledge and particular experience to the text and to the conversation and for her own purposes. This made it difficult to isolate any single critical interaction as it occurred in real time, especially since the different types of critical interactions overlap with one another, and they are used for multiple purposes in conversation and in positioning and repositioning self and others.

In many of the instances of critical interactions with texts, participants used one kind of interaction to bridge to another within a short span of time. For example, in Elaine's case study, I show one situation where she compared what she read in a text to her own experiences, one form of critical interaction. In talking about her experiences connected to a text she expressed a stance toward that text and developed it over the

meeting. Because critical interactions occur in these overlapping and interconnected ways, they are makes them. The critical interactions I have identified, treated individually below, are not static entities, but they evolved as the purposes and consequences of our conversations about texts evolved.

Table 4.1 - Critical Interactions With Text

CRITICAL INTERACTION	DEFINITION/ENACTMENT OF THE CRITICAL INTERACTION
Taking a Stance Toward a Text	A reader offers a perspective on a text which may itself be agreed or disagreed with, explored, accepted, resisted, or rejected. She may explore why she has taken her stance, and she views her stance, if not as valid as the author's message, at least worth considering next to the text. She does not merely accept what she reads, but she *decides* what the text means and whether or not she agrees with it.
Comparing Textual Representations To One's Experiences	A reader compares the text's truth to her own experiences. She brings her personal experiences into the discussion of the text and to the attention of other participants in the discussion. A reader explores textual messages by making her personal knowledge public and using it as an evidentiary guide through a reading and understanding of a text.
Explicitly Acknowledging a Text as a Representation	A reader interrogates the authority and meanings of a text as it works to create a reality and position its readers. A reader marks a text as a version of reality. She interrogates cultural beliefs within the frame of an author's meanings.
Talking Back To a Text	A reader purposefully engages in a conversation with a text in order to scrutinize the truths it tells. She takes part in a two-way discourse that purposefully aims to teach the author, and perhaps others, a different way to think about the subject at issue. She voices her understandings of the text and the ways in which it speaks to her roles. She shares power with the text in positioning herself and others.
Making Inter-Textual References	A reader recalls and acknowledges one or more texts while interacting with another, and looks across texts as they represent different cultural meanings and identities.

<u>Critical Interaction (1): Taking A Stance Toward A Text</u>

One type of critical interaction with text is *taking a stance toward a text*, which

might also be called offering an opinion about a text. This is on the surface a fairly

simple type of critical interaction. In fact, it may not seem to some people to be a *critical*

interaction at all—those skeptics might say that every reader has an opinion about what

an author has written, a statement with which I agree. Taking a stance toward a text, however, is more complex than merely having an opinion. An uncritical reader may treat a text as if it arises from an "objective" position wherein the author is regarded as invisible, as having a great deal of authority, or as someone who has no motivation beyond providing truthful/factual information for the reader. From this perspective, a text is then read as if there is little or nothing to be discussed about where and when the text was written or the motivation behind the information offered; it is treated as if it is communicating information with no ideology attached—it just *is*. Hence, the reader may view her opinion about the text as less informed, less authoritative, and therefore, less valuable and less true. Taking a stance toward a text allows a reader to claim slightly more authority. She acknowledges her opinion, if not as equally valid as the author's message, at least as worth considering next to the text.

This type of critical interaction with text borders on reading text as if it contained a single truth, but there is a subtle difference. When the reader takes a stance toward a text and offers her opinion about it, she indicates that she has some sense that the meaning of the text can be negotiated. In her stance toward a text with which she is engaging, at least publicly, she advances a cursory analysis of the possibility of multiple meaning s in a text. She must decide on some level if she agrees or disagrees with what she takes the author to say and possibly why, therefore pushing the message of the text beyond blind acceptance and into the realm of scrutiny and analysis. This is not to say that the reader is consciously engaging with the text as a representation of the author's version of reality, but on some level, she realizes there may be more than one message in the text, not a single message that should be true for everyone for all time. Offering an

opinion about a text is the beginning of a process of interrogating its possible meanings and examining the seemingly invisible author's motives in writing it.

A reader may interact critically with text in this fairly superficial way for several reasons. One reason could be that the reader has had little practice interacting critically with a text. She may never have had, or may have only rarely had experience questioning the authority of a text, examining the context in which it was written, exploring how it connects or does not connect with her own experiences, analyzing the words that are used by the author to create a certain effect or imagining what story is *not* being told. She may, in fact, have primarily experienced text as a container of a single, perhaps complex, meaning to be discerned by the reader.

The kinds of texts with which the reader may have had experience engaging, particularly in the classroom, provide another reason why a reader may be engaging in this kind of critical interaction. She may have encountered many texts written with an authoritative voice that present information as objective, truthful, and factual. Many textbooks and newspaper articles, for example, are written in this style. Especially with texts such as these, when a reader takes a stance toward a text, she may state what she believes the message of the text to be, and then she does not merely accept what she reads, but she *decides* whether she agrees with it or not. She may not yet have developed an awareness of a text as a representation, but she knows on some level that the possibility exists for negotiating textual meaning.

A third reason to critically interact by offering a stance toward a text is to set the stage for more complicated types of critical interactions. A reader may first feel the need to state agreement or disagreement with the text as a basis for further analysis of the text

or of the stance itself. Before she can interrogate the text for a range of features that place it in a context of time, place, and ideas, and which make its meaning negotiable, she may need to choose a location from which to examine those features. This is not to say she will maintain her stance in location of agreement or disagreement through further critical interactions with the text—in fact, as part of her interrogation she may decide to try a different stance. In order to examine other perspectives, however, she must claim at least a beginning one for herself.

Offering a stance toward a text is a *developing* form of critical interaction and in our reading and writing group it was a way of interacting with texts that I saw enacted more frequently in our early meetings, or at the beginnings of meetings at which a new text was introduced. For some members, however, interacting with text in this way was a primary approach to textual interrogation. Recognizing this developing form of critical interaction in a reader provided opportunities for Laura and me as facilitators to help a participant understand that she is engaging with a text on the brink of deeper critical interactions. As a facilitator of our discussions, I tried to be attentive to moments when, especially during the early stages of a meeting, a participant might offer an opinion or take a stance without explaining her view, without telling us how and why she was opposing or accepting a particular message of a text. In other words, she might simply agree or disagree with a particular message in a text under discussion. Her stance, because she may not have explicitly supported it, did not reveal much about the ways in which she was interacting with the text. In this case, the observer is left guessing about other layers of reflection, response, and questioning of a particular textual message. It

becomes incumbent upon the facilitator to follow up with questions to help the reader probe more deeply into the text with the tools of additional types of critical interaction.

There were occasions, however, when a participant took a stance toward a text and then proceeded to explain why she was accepting or rejecting what she believed was an important message in the text. At times the participant chose to explain her stance as part of her contribution to the conversation, and at other times I or my collaborator stepped in and questioned the participant about what she was thinking. We could better understand the stance a participant was taking when either of her own volition or through questioning, the reader discussed the stance she was taking and publicly engaged in the negotiation of meaning in the text. It is not enough to merely state an opinion if we are to call it a critical interaction—otherwise every unsubstantiated utterance could count as a critical interaction with text. But by offering a stance toward a text and beginning to explore why she is taking that stance, she is also offering a perspective that may itself be agreed or disagreed with, explored, accepted, resisted, or rejected.

An Example of Taking a Stance Toward a Text from the *People*[19] Meeting

At one reading and writing group meeting, we discussed the *People* magazine article, "Revisiting the 'Baby Trap.'" This was one meeting at which I observed participants engaging in the critical interaction of taking a stance toward a text as we began talking about the article and as we moved into other ways of critically interacting with it. Although this meeting took place during the second year of the study, after the group had a fairly well-established common understanding of our purposes for meeting

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[19] See Table 3.1 for contextual information about this meeting. All the meetings used as examples in this chapter and chapter 5 are included on Table 3.1.

and ways of interacting with each other (which is not to say these did not continue to evolve throughout the time we met together), it was a meeting at which we were interrogating a new piece of text that offered many points of entry for conversation and many ways that it could be read. Perhaps because it was a new piece for our group, we began our discussion with a rather safe critical interaction with the text before we moved into more complicated ways of interrogating its meanings. Taking a stance allowed some participants to begin the discussion by acknowledging what they seemed to understand to be the textual message, opening the conversation for further analysis of the text and of their stances.

Another reason the participants may have initially engaged with this text by taking a stance toward it is because the article is written in a journalistic style which does not readily invite interrogation of the author's stance and authority. It is a *People* follow-up piece of an article printed five years earlier, "Babies Having Babies." "Revisiting the 'Baby Trap'" retells the story of the teenage mothers featured in "Babies Having Babies" who are now twenty-something mothers. The narratives of these young women's lives are presented as factual and complete; their stories are accompanied by photographs which make them seem all the more realistic, static, and true. Any author biases that are part of the stories and any value judgments applied to the choices and actions of these women are embedded in the structure and rhetoric of the article and are not explicitly stated as such (though the article's title gives away some of the authors' stance). In other words, the authors and their positions remain generally hidden behind the "facts" of the text so that a reader who is not practiced in critical literacy may easily take the information in the article as the truth.

One story we discussed from "Revisiting the 'Baby Trap'" describes the life of a young mother, Faye, who entered into military service when her child was an infant. One consequence of this action was that she moved from her home and temporarily left her child in the care of her mother and her child's father with whom she was no longer involved. Tragically, her son was killed in her absence. The end of Faye's story is that she eventually "fell in love," married, and had another child. At our group meeting, we discussed many issues related to this story. One topic that the participants were particularly interested in discussing was our own beliefs about whether or not Faye's decision to leave her child was the right one for a young mother to make. During our conversation, Estella[20] offered support for Faye's decision. She said, "I mean, she did it to better herself and give her son a better life. I don't think she did it 'cause she didn't want to be around him and she didn't care about him."

In her comment, Estella took a stance toward the text. She offered her opinion and a brief explanation as to why she accepted Faye's decision. As she agreed with the choice that Faye made, she did not seem to question or doubt the validity of the narrative presented by text in any way. She accepted this version of Faye's story as realistic because she understood a possible motive for her actions—Faye wanted to improve her own economic standing as well as to provide "a better life" for her son. Estella did not state what she meant by "better[ing] herself," nor did she explain what a better life for her son would consist of, but she accepted the text as being believable and factual. She also took a stance against the perspective that was emerging from our group's talk, that Faye

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[20] See Table 3.2 for participant information.

may have made a mistake in leaving her child in the care of others because she may have been able in some way to prevent her child's death if she had been present.

Estella's complex reasoning for taking this stance was not revealed immediately in our conversation, but later, when we returned to this topic, Estella spoke more explicitly and personally about why she accepted Faye's story. She herself recently had struggled with the very same decision that she read about in Faye's narrative. She considered entering military service to "better herself" and to cultivate a life with more opportunities for her daughter—which would mean temporarily leaving her young daughter behind in the care of her mother and sisters. She did not discuss with the group that she decided not to join the army because she could not bear the thought of living without her daughter, and so she sought other options for developing a career and financial stability. At this meeting, she simply stands her ground and offers a brief rationale for accepting the message of the text.

Without the knowledge of Estella's personal connection to Faye's story, it may seem that Estella's critical interaction was superficial. By offering her stance and briefly supporting it, she does not delve into an interrogation of other possible meanings of the text, the author's intentions in presenting Faye's story in this way, or provide any other explicit social, political, or historical commentary or analysis. She does, however, present a perspective that was until she spoke unrepresented in our group's talk—that perhaps Faye's decision was made with the hope of a positive outcome for herself and her child and not because she wanted to abandon her child. Knowing more about Estella's unspoken personal connection to Faye's narrative reminds us that there often is much more thinking behind comments about a text than there may be space, time, or

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desire to articulate in any conversation about it. Estella did present an important theme that we would return to in this and other discussions—ideas related to bettering oneself in order to provide one's child with a "better life."

An Example from the *Montel* Meeting

Another example of interacting critically with the text by taking a stance toward it came about at a different meeting with a different text. During this meeting we watched and discussed a videotaped episode of the *Montel* show, a TV talk show hosted by Montel Williams (Williams, 1999). The *Montel* show is like other popular television talk shows in that it focuses on a particular current issue for discussion. Montel facilitates the discussion and presides over a panel of guests. The panel includes a range of ordinary people who have some experience with the issue and, occasionally, an expert on the issue such as a psychologist or a well-known authority on the topic. After a conversation with the invited guests, the discussion is opened up to the studio audience members' questions. Montel does not conceal his opinion about the topic under discussion and often asks pointed questions of his guests to make a particular point.

The episode we watched and then discussed with our group was called "Paying the Price: A Teen Mother's Struggle," which brought one teenage mother after another onto the stage to discuss her particular parenting situation and her sexual experiences that led to her pregnancy. The panel of guests also included one teen father—his child's mother was also a guest—and his mother. Montel's primary role during this show expanded from his usual role of moderator to include father figure. He spoke in a calm and even voice and did not attempt to incite arguments on the part of his guests, a

common occurrence on shows of this genre which sometimes lead to violence. Montel's popular image as a talk show host presents him as a man who tries to bring people together toward a peaceful resolution of conflict and toward making informed choices. Indeed the website about his show includes information about "after care" for his guests. His own perspectives on the issue of teen parenting, however, were not hidden during this show, and he occasionally would offer personal advice to the young women who were his guests. For example, his first guest was a pregnant teen who was considering the option of giving up her child for adoption. She wrote a letter to her unborn child explaining why she thought the best thing for the child would be to let someone else raise him or her. Montel repeatedly questioned her about the consequences of this decision for the child, the mother herself, and society. Though he stated that he was not trying to talk her into a decision one way or the other, he repeatedly explained that she could very well be making a serious mistake. He seemed to be attempting to convince her to raise her child herself in spite of the obstacles she expressed were preventing her from doing so. At the end of the show, Montel presented her with an offer of a job interview he had arranged. The company for whom she might have gone to work was based in her home town. It also provided child care for its employees, so if she were to be hired by this company, she would be able to bring her child to work with her.

The videotaped broadcast of the show was the text under interrogation for our meeting. A TV talk show is a complicated text because it contains multiple layers of representation simultaneously interacting. There is, on a general level, the text of the overall ideology presented by the show, if it can be said to have a unified perspective. This text is presented through its publicity (e.g., commercials, website) and its history of

presentation of ideas. On a more immediate level, it is a text of current issues embedded in its ideological history and presented on an episode-by-episode schedule. Even more immediately, each episode of the show presents the texts of the conversations between various participants—Montel, his guests, and the audience members. These conversations are influenced by at least three different styles of talk: scripted, rehearsed, and spontaneously generated conversations.

Although the text was a visual and audio text, it was read similarly to ways we read printed text at our meetings. We read it together at the same time and commented on it during the reading. We also stopped and started reading and reviewed parts we wanted to see or listen to again. Our sense of the author's ideas in the text, however, seemed different than if the text were printed. Montel does not remain in any way anonymous in his presentation of the issues he discusses on his show. This is not uncommon for printed text, but on this video recording, Montel is very visible, textually and literally. It was easier for us to assume that the ideas presented on this show were representations of Montel's views. This assumption, however, may be misleading, because although Montel is one if the show's producers, he works in assistance with a co-producer and a team of writers, editors, and others who work to create the text and present its ideas in particular ways. As with a printed text, there are many people behind the shaping of the text of this television broadcast, people who are involved in emphasizing some messages and de-emphasizing others for considerations including TV audience appeal and ratings. These aspects of authorship and publication of the text were not highlighted in our meeting, nor is it readily apparent to the reader. Montel himself

was held personally responsible by our group members for the ideals presented and represented on the show.

Before we watched the video at our meeting, the teen participants were very excited to learn about Montel's views on teen parenting. He was, in their eyes, a man deserving of a great deal of respect and authority. They were intrigued to watch the episode because they were very familiar with the show's format from watching it on TV, and they thought they could predict some of Montel's views—they thought that in some ways he would be their advocate or at least offer representations of teen mothering that they were familiar with. They thought that he would, for the most part, be on "their side" of this complicated and controversial issue. It was unclear if they expected to see multiple representations of teen motherhood, but it was fairly obvious to me that Montel's perspective had significant (textual) authority with them.

As we watched the tape, group members spontaneously spoke to Montel or expressed what seemed to be surprise about what views he seemed to be advocating. The participants listened attentively to Montel presenting the case of the young mother described above who was contemplating putting her then unborn child up for adoption. He read her letter she had written to her child stating, "I knew deep down that I wasn't stable financially and that if I raised you on my own, you'd grow up in a life of poverty." In Montel's discussion with this young woman about her letter, he presents his own text which takes the perspective that giving up a child for adoption is a situation fraught with bad judgment and with almost entirely negative consequences. Montel supports this view by making statements such as, "Making this decision [to give your child up for adoption] quickly could turn out to be a horrible thing for both you and your child," and, "...we

cannot continue to flood our country with babies hoping that someone else will take care

of your child," and, "...[after its apoption] that child just became... a burden to another

family, and the burden may not be realized for ten or fifteen years" (Williams, 1999).

The young women in our group had several spontaneous negative reactions to the

text of his comments; Sheila said, "I hate him," and Elaine offered, "He's getting on my

nerves." These comments reveal a readiness for critical interaction with the presented

texts which allow Sheila and Elaine to take a stance toward different textual messages

that the show is intentionally of unintentionally presentng. The young woman's letter

and her narratives related to it are textual representaitons of a reality they can understand

and empathize with, and *Montel's* perspective ia a textualized commentary on that reality

that they cannot accept. Sheila at one point exclaimed that she wanted to write Montel a

letter that would encourage him to allow students from their high school parenting

program to be on the show. When I asked her about this comment, Shiela explained her

stance of resistance to this text:

Kara: So you said you wanted to write a letter to Montel. What would you say?
Elaine: [answering for Sheila] Something. Well, you know, kind of tell him about the
        program that we have here [at Summit High School]. He sounded so negative
        about [teen parenting] you know. ...He's just talking about, oh, what are you
        going to do? [quoting Montel]
Sheila: Especially he said that it is a burden on someone else when that girl's giving up
        [her baby] for adoption. They're not going to ...adopt a baby unless they really
        want to have a baby, cause they want a baby. ...[T]hat's not in any way a burden
        on anybody. ...Yeah, what she did, ...she is just getting away with it by just
        getting rid of it or whatever, but it is not a burden on anybody else. I mean if
        someone is going to adopt a baby it is because they want to, not because they
        have to.

Elaine and Sheila seem to feel urged to respond in writing to the texts of this TV

show. They understand a life story where a teen mother is seriously considering giving

up her child for adoption, like the young woman is who is featured on the show. For them this story represents a complicated set of circumstances that they themselves have lived or that they have closely observed in others' lives. Montel's perspective provides an interpretation of this text that opposes theirs. While Sheila states that a family would not "adopt a baby unless they really want to have a baby," Montel's view is that giving up the child would be an error in judgement on the part of the mother, potentially harmful to the child and adopting family, and detrimental to society at large. In the part of our conversation transcribed above, Elaine agrees that "something" should be said to Montel about his "negative" commentary on teen pregnancy, especially regarding teens who are considering giving up a baby for adoption. Her stance is one of opposition to Montel's interpretation of the text of his guest's letter. She does not explain what it is specifically about his view she disagrees with, but she repeats one of his questions to this guest, "What are you going to do?" She does not explain why this question, which is the crux of the discussion, is a negative one. She does not elaborate, but because she opposes or resists someone's textualized stance on an issue, she is critically interacting with the text. She is suggesting that Montel's perspective is debatable, that it is not the only perspective to be taken, and that she is resisting it. There are multiple possible, sensible answers to the question "What are you going to do" posed to the author of the letter. Elaine suggests that Montel should become aware of her high school parenting program which would expose him to different ways this question has been answered and to the lives of some of the women she knows who have answered it. In addition to this initial stance of resistance, there is some suggestion of other ways Elaine might critically interact with the text (e.g., comparing the representation in the text to her experiences, explicitly

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acknowledging the text as a representation, and talking back to the text—which are elaborated upon in the latter part of this chapter). She does not *intentionally* engage with the text in these ways at this point. Here, she is merely taking a stance.

Sheila also takes a stance toward the text that opposes Montel's message, but her resistance is presented in a more complicated verbalization. It is clear that she opposes part of the message, but there may be parts of it that she supports. Sheila rejects at least part of Montel's view in two ways: She addresses the issue of adoption from the perspective of the adopting parents and in terms of broader cultural implications of the issue. She disagrees with Montel's view that anyone would adopt a baby if they do not want a child, so she reasons that an adopted child is not a burden on the adopting parents. In addition, she addresses Montel's comment which accuses teen mothers of "flooding our country with babies hoping that someone else will take care of [the] child." She responds by saying that adoption is "not in any way a burden on anybody." This is her brief explanation of her stance of resistance to Montel's representation of this issue.

Sheila's analysis becomes more complicated when we consider her coment, "She [the teen mother] is just getting away with it by just getting rid of it or whatever." She seems to see the mother in some ways as shirking her responsibility by "just getting away with" not taking on the responsibilities of motherhood—she is "getting rid of" her child. Although Sheila seems to feel strongly that people will not adopt a baby unless they are committed to raising a child, she also seems to think that young mothers should raise their children themselves in spite of obstacles she like the ones laid out in the letter written by the young woman on this show. Sheila takes her position, resists the message of the text, but does not elaborate further on her stance. Again, other ways of critcally

interacting with this text are alluded to (e.g., comparing the representation in the text to her experiences and talking back to the text), but she, like Elaine, is not intentionally engaging with the text in those ways at this point in our conversation.

As in the example above which describes Estella's stance toward a section of the *People* magazine article, Sheila has personal reasons for taking her stance which she does not reveal in this moment. Her quoted words do not indicate the complicated expereiences of her life that undergird her perspective. She and Elaine have a friend in common who is also a teen mother and who gave up her second child for adoption. She is, in fact, one of the less regular participants in this study, Mindy. Mindy's situation is not raised at this point in our conversation, but in many other conversations, both in and out of meetings, several of the group members have expressed mixed feelings about the act of giving a child to another family to raise. In fact, when we began watching the episode of *Montel*, when they learned that the first guest would be discussing that she was considering giving up her child for adoption, someone said, "Mindy should be on this show." Sheila has thought some already about the issue if adoption—in fact, all the participants have because of their own early pregnancies. Adoption seems to be a sensitive topic for the teen mothers in our group partly because of a generally held belief in American culture about teen mothers giving up a child for adoption. A well-accepted ideal related to our cultural understandings about teen mothers is that adoption is a real option, much more so than for older mothers. Deciding to raise a child by oneself is a hard choice for any mother, especially for teen mothers who are usually harangued by many voices telling them that it might be better for both mother and child if the baby were raised by older parents. Underlying this message, and Montel's message which

staed that teen mothers are flooding our with babies hoping that someone else will take care of them, is the notion that perhaps the child should not have been conceived, the mother should not have been sexually active. Sheila seems to agree with Montel in his perspective that a mother should be responsible for the care of her own child.

Sheila brings up none of her personal experiences, nor does she reveal her thinking on this issue with our group during this meeting. She may have chosen not to—perhaps she is unwilling or unprepared to furhter articulate her stance at this point. There are numerous possible explanations for why she did not elaborate on her stance. The point is, she has a complicated stance of resistance to the text offered by Montel. The author's representations of the choices made by teen mothers in some ways do not speak about the stories she knows.

One story Montel does not explicitly explore is the one that tells about how a decision whether or not to raise a child as a teen mother involves grave consequences for her identity. As will be illustrated further in this chapter and the next one, Sheila and Elaine are committed to raising their children well, that is—put simply, discerning and meeting their children's physical and emotional needs as well as providing them with a stimulationg, nurturing environment the hope will provide opportunities for success as they grow up. While it may seem like the "right thing" for a birth mother to raise her child, the teen mothers in our group understand that if a child's well-being is placed at risk in the hands of his or her birth mother, perhaps a better solution is for another family to raise the child. They also understand, through their friend Mindy's experience, that this choice can come with an even greater stigma than the one that comes with teen motherhood. The fierce negative consequence for one's identity seems for some a

worthy price for the safety and well-being of the child. A teenage mother who gives up her child for adoption risks being labeled as heartless, selfish, irresponsible, incapable, and impulsive. But, as has been illustrated to the teen mothers in our group by their friend, the child who is given up legally is not forgotten by his or her mother. Mindy experienced a great deal of turmoil over the adoption of her child. She questioned its affects on herself and the child all the way up to his release to the adopting parents. She retained some visitation rights so that her birth son will have some knowledge of her as he grows up. She later became distraught upon hearing the news that the adopting family was planning to move to Europe.

Returning our gaze to our meeting around the episode of *Montel* with this context in place, Sheila and Elaine's resistance to this text makes more sense. In our conversation related so far, they have just begun to articulate ways of negotiating different meanings represented in the text of this TV show. They do include as part of our conversation the notion that there are gaps in the story being told, and that another perspective may be more meaningful than the author's. They are tentative in their challenge to Montel's authority. They provide an opinion and offer a brief explanation for why they reject his perspective, but they do not critically interact with the text beyond this level. Not yet, anyway. Not in these examples. Not at this point in our conversation.

Critical Interaction (2): Comparing the Text's Representation To One's Experiences

Another critical interaction that I saw emerging from our discussions about various texts was comparing a text's representation to one's own experiences. In examining textual representations next to our own experiences, some of the contexts that

helped shape the participants' perspectives on various issues related to teen motherhood were brought to the surface of our discussions and to the center of our group's interrogations. In the examples given for the previous critical interaction, taking a stance toward a text, Estella, Sheila, and Elaine kept their personal lives at the edges of our discussion; their lived experiences were held just on the other side the stances they took on the texts—on the side that was not available to me during meetings. They remained distant enough from the text to appear to be grappling with it on an abstract (or uninformed) level when in fact their own experiences were very strongly informing their readings of the texts. They chose not to bring these connections to the attention of those present at our discussion. A person listening casually to our conversation might notice that a stance was taken, but would likely say that the participants had no support for their stances, that they were merely drawing baseless conclusions. However, conclusions do not form out of thin air and stances must be taken upon some ground. But from what were they drawing their conclusions? When a reader critically interacts with a text by *comparing what the text offers as truth to her own experience* she brings what is grounding her stance into the discussion of the text, and to the attention of the participants in the discussion. She questions what might be taken for what the text offers as truth and she explicitly considers at least two perspectives on the text, the author's and her own. I indicated in my example of Sheila's resistance to some of Montel's textual messages that there were experiences informing her stance—experiences she did not divulge in our conversation. If Sheila were comparing the text's representations to her own experiences explicitly as I did in my analysis, she would have been engaging with the text in publicly critical ways. Criticality is more complex when it engages others with

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the texts of our representations. For facilitators of critical interactions, unless there is an explicit comparison of representations (e.g., printed texts or spoken narratives), the activities of criticality are difficult, if not impossible to guide.

There were many times during our meetings when we explored textual messages by making our personal knowledge public and using it as a guide through our reading and understanding of texts. In the moments when a participant's own stories were part of our conversations about a text, the juxtaposition of those personal narrative with a text became a rich source by which we could explore our own beliefs about more broadly held cultural beliefs. Bruner, in *The Culture of Education* (1996), explains this idea by stating that "early on, children encounter the hoary distinction between what is known by 'us' (friends, parents, teachers, and so on) and what in some larger sense is simply 'known'" (p. 61). He says that during childhood we "begin to understand how evidence is used to check beliefs," and when we do, we "often see a process akin to forming a belief about a belief" (p. 61). The child, or adolescent in this case, might say to herself, "I now have reason to believe that this belief is true (or false...)." Looking at our own stories next to a text allowed us opportunities to compare evidence we associated with a personal belief with the evidence an author of a text offered in support of a textualized personal or cultural belief. We were able to examine how our personal beliefs related, or did not relate, to "what is [culturally] known"—what the author of a text assumes to be generally true.

In addition to checking beliefs asserted in a text, comparing our own stories to those in a text allowed us a way to examine our lives. In the numerous instances when our own narratives were brought into the conversation, the stories of our lives became

another text for us to consider.   Morgan (1997) discusses the value of reading and writing biographies for their narrative quality including the use of the language of everyday life. Biographies bring us in close to the stories they contain because they resonate with our own everyday lives. At the same time, because they are textualized stories, reading and writing biographies creates a personal distance from the stories that "makes room" for analysis (Morgan, 1997). Telling our own stories turns our lives into biographies; our experiences become texts that represent us and as we shape our stories we shape who we are. In our group's meetings, the stories, the texts, we told about our own lives helped us think about the texts we read together, as well as the meanings of our own narrated lives. The meanings of both texts were shaped as we discussed them next to each other.

An Example from *Ophelia Speaks*

The participants in our group had multiple opportunities across meetings to explore the theme of how teen mothers are generally depicted in popular culture in the US. At one meeting we used three biographies from Sarah Shandler's book *Ophelia Speaks* (1999) to explore that very topic. The participants' own stories were also an important part of this meeting; they were used to interrogate Shandler's text and to explore some assumptions about teenage mothers and representations of their lifestyles. *Ophelia Speaks* is a book that was written in response to family therapist Mary Pipher's popular book, *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) which is an analysis of the psychological life of teenage girls. *Reviving Ophelia* offers numerous stories about young women dealing with developmental challenges associated with eating disorders, sexuality, and

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competitive sports, for example. *Ophelia Speaks*, Shandler's book, is a collection of stories written by young women themselves who are dealing with similar challenges. The stories were gathered by Shandler who had the expressed goal of providing a space for teenage women to tell their own stories about how they deal with the challenges of growing up.

Each of the three stories we read from *Ophelia Speaks* represents a different experience with teen pregnancy. In one story, a young woman tells about her miscarriage, another is a teen's story of her abortion, and the third is told by a pregnant teenager who has decided to keep and raise her baby in spite of the harsh criticism of members of her community. The third story led to a discussion in our group about the poor treatment to which teen mothers are subjected on a daily basis. Elaine read the passage aloud to us, then she began our discussion by comparing the text with a story of her own.

Elaine: OK, [reads]
> I'm a sixteen year old Puerto Rican woman, and I will give birth to my
> first child on September 1, 1998. The reason I write to you is because I
> have been mistreated many times due to my pregnancy. The church I
> went to was like a home but once people found out I was pregnant, they
> wouldn't even look at me.... I am not here as a symbol to encourage
> anyone to do anything. I live my life. I symbolize my own life and the
> child I carry within me. Whether people see my pregnancy as a mistake or
> a wondrous thing, I tell people to take it for what it is, to gauge their own
> lives for what they see when they see me.... The way people responded to
> my pregnancy made me feel depressed. It even made me feel like it was
> not right to love or feel proud of my child. With the help of the people
> who did not judge me, I realized my baby was special. He deserves to be
> loved. A lot of people like to judge pregnant teens

—I agree with that [Elaine's comment]—
> as soon as they see one. They automatically think she's on welfare, her
> parents take care of her, she doesn't have a job or that she dropped out of
> school. Well this is my opportunity to defend myself.... Every day

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dozens of kids drop out of school, but come to my school and see young pregnant women trying to make a life, a future for their children and themselves by continuing their education. We hold down a full schedule of classes, go to jobs, have responsibilities at home, and try to keep alive our dreams. Being a young mother is not a burden upon society. I do and shall always do for myself without the help of the society that looks upon us with disdain. We see your eyes not looking at us but our bellies. We hear your whispers and walk out of a room.... You refuse to acknowledge us as people, as women, as one of your own.... I write this to you as an advocate for the thousands who have no chance to write, for the thousands who have no way to express their frustrations, for the thousands more who can't yet speak up for a more deserving life for themselves and their mothers[21] [end of reading].

I like that one.

Kara: You like that one?

Elaine: Yeah.

Kara: What did you like about it?

Elaine: I like how they talk about [[Michelle: You totally can relate to that one.]] yeah, cause how they talk about [how] a lot of people judge pregnant teens as how they automatically think they are on welfare, the parents take care of them, they don't have jobs. Like I remember, I think I was only like 6 or 7 months pregnant, it was when I just started showing, and I went down to the health department cause I was applying for WIC [aide for Women, Infants and Children] and I was dressed up *real nice* and everything and this lady there treated me like I was a piece of trash. She was like, *take a number and sit down*! And so, you know, I was like well, I am just like I'm here to, you know, drop a form off. *Oh yeah*, she was like, *yeah, yeah, they all are here to drop a form off.* That's what she said. So I, you know, just kept on going, so then I dropped my form off and sat down and she was like, didn't you, *didn't I already take care of you*? Didn't I *just* take care of you? And I was like, you know, I need another form back. She was like, well, you should of said that when you came up here in the *first place*. I mean, I will never go back up there again.

Laura: Did you have any sense of whether she treated other people that way?

Elaine: *Everybody*. Like this one did-

Laura: Or was it cause you were a teen, or because you were a mom who was applying for WIC?

Elaine: Because I was pregnant and I was applying for WIC. Like she just assumed like, and at the time I was [[Estella: Why are you having babies if you can't take care of them?]] Yeah! Cause I was working and stuff.

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[21] Shandler, S. (1999). *Ophelia speaks*. New York: Harper Collins, pp. 118-119.

As soon as Elaine finished reading the text aloud, she offered her stance on it—she likes it. Then, she seems compelled almost immediately to tell a story of her own that she sees as parallel. She was able to provide evidence that the text is offering a truth that she believes in, that teen mothers are treated like "trash" because of the stereotypes people hold about them. Her evidence was her own experience that validated the one she just read about. The case worker at the health department (the "lady there") assumed Elaine was like other teen mothers who "all are here to drop a form off." She "assumed" Elaine was like those who are "having babies" and "can't take care of them." Elaine seemed to feel sorted by this caseworker as a stereotypical teen mother who, as the short story from *Ophelia Speaks* explains, is on welfare, her parents take care of her, she doesn't have a job or that she has dropped out of school.

By juxtaposing her own story with the text, Elaine is able to examine a larger cultural belief about teen mothers next to her own experiences. She disagrees with the generally held cultural belief, that teen mothers are basically irresponsible and a social liability, and she has had enough personal experience to view this belief as fairly common. Her own experiences, including the one she relates to us in the meeting, provide her with enough evidence that allow her to support the narrative in *Ophelia Speaks* and claim that this belief is not generally applicable to all teen mothers. Like the author of the story, Elaine goes to a school where every day she "young pregnant women trying to make a life, a future for their children and themselves by continuing their education. [They] hold down a full schedule of classes, go to jobs, have responsibilities at home, and try to keep alive [their] dreams."

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In addition to examining her belief about a general cultural belief about teen mothers, Elaine examines her own identity as a teen mother. We see the beginnings of the examination in the transcript above. She positions herself, through her narrative in juxtaposition with the one from *Ophelia Speaks*, as someone who follows instructions, but who alos wants to maintain her own dignity. In the face of a caseworker at the health department "treating her like trash," she still accomplished what she wanted to do—turn in her form. Elaine states that she will not return to the that office again because of the indignity she faced there.

She also aligns herself with teen mothers who are stigmatized unjustifiably. When Laura asks her if the caseworker treated "other people" in the same disrespectful manner, Elaine rushes to say "everybody." Laura adds to her question asking if her treatment could be attributed to the fact that she was a teen mother seeking aide. Elaine clarifies that she was mistreated because she was "pregnant and... applying for WIC." Her first response, "everybody," may have been motivated by a memory of the narrative from *Ophelia Speaks* she had just read which discussed stereotyping, and she may have meant that all teen mothers at the health department—everybody—are treated alike, and not every person she encountered there. Elaine, though she understands negative stereotypes about teen mothers, attempts to separate herself form them by saying "I was working," not unemployed and dependent on social services. The biography Elaine read of a teen mother's mistreatment seemed to remind her of her own similar experience, and in telling her own story to the group, she can analyze her own connection to and separateness from the stereotype of teen mothers as presented in this *Ophelia Speaks* narrative.

Both in meetings and out of them, I heard the participants complain about the

mistreatment they have been subjected to based on people's assumptions about who they

are, assumptions which are grounded in stereotypes about teen mothers. In the transcript

provided for the example, Michelle and Estella offer confirming comments to Elaine's

perspective. Michelle says she can "totally relate," to the story and Estella fills in her

imagined thoughts of the health department worker in her encounter with Elaine--"Why

are you having babies if you can't take care of them?"—as if she is very familiar with

them also. Michelle and Estella also told stories at this meeting which in some ways

corroborate Elaine's and her analysis of the situation, such as the one below.

Michelle: The people who work [at the health department] are just people who aren't on
           [welfare] anymore, most of them.
Elaine: Yeah, a lot of them are.
Kara: Who recently got off, you think?
Elaine: Yeah.
Michelle: Yeah, they are. They tell you when you go to apply for welfare, the person
           who is your, whatever they're called, is a person who used to be on welfare
           [[Elaine: So they can relate to you.]] but then once you get there, they treat you
           like, you know, [[Elaine: Like crap]] like they're a lot better than you. So.
Elaine: Yep. And I never had to go back up there.
Michelle: Like the lady that I've been, I have been trying to get help forever and she
           won't help me. She goes, she's like, you're the only teenager I have to deal with.
           But she had told me before she knew how old I was. She had told me, oh yes, I
           was on [welfare] when my two little boys were small because I couldn't do it and
           I was only a teenager and all this stuff and then she asked me how old I was and I
           told her. And she goes, I thought you were about 22. And I was like, no, and
           then she started being rude to me, and she won't help me. She always finds a
           reason why she can't help me.
Elaine: They're crappy though. Like I never even dealt with my caseworker.

Michelle and Elaine further make the case, through their stories of their

experiences with caseworkers at the health department, that teen mothers are mistreated.

Not only do the caseworkers withhold help that they are professionally bound to give, the

narratives offered by Michelle and Elaine describe the case workers as people who have

perhaps decided that teen mothers are getting assistance they do not deserve. They seem

to be saying that their caseworkers believe young mothers do not deserve any extra help

because they made poor decisions that got them "into trouble." They prejudge teen

mothers, are rude to them, and will not help them even when it is their job to do so. This

conversation becomes much more than a discussion about textual issues or an

interrogation of ideas. It evolves into a discussion about the participants' lives—who

they are and what they can do. Reading a text that addresses a common concern of teen

mothers being treated poorly as teen mothers inspires them to tell about their own similar

experiences. Michelle and Elaine resist a stereotyped position they are placed in by

others, as well as those who have control over resources they may need to raise their

children and those who may be influential in distributing those resources unfairly.

At this time, there is something ironic in this conversation. While the young

women in our group do "hold down a full schedule of classes, go to jobs, have

responsibilities at home, and try to keep alive [their] dreams," which is commendable

and deserving of respect. The evidence already on the table seems to be enough for the

group to begin developing a standardized, almost a stereotyped way of thinking about

how the public deals with teen mothers. However, in a portion of the conversation above,

they reveal that some of them have in the past received some public assistance or have

applied for it—information that supports a popular view of teen mothers. The author of

the story from *Ophelia Speaks* says, "Being a young mother is not a burden upon society.

I do and shall always do for myself without the help of the society that looks upon us

with disdain." The teen mothers in our group *have* relied on the help of the society that

scorns them, and their harshest critics might say they are indeed a burden on society.

As our conversation continued, it becomes further complicated. Just after we

began to establish evidence for the existence of negative treatment to which a teen mother

is likely to be subjected, especially at the hands of those with power to help them, Estella

brings a counter-narrative to the discussion. Estella offers an opposing view and

indicates that not all teen mothers, herself included, have to endure this kind of treatment

because not all teen mothers rely on social services. The following brief excerpt of

conversation reveals Estella's contribution to the narrative we are shaping in the

discussion as more complicated.

Estella: I never had to deal with that.
Elaine: Oh, I have.
Estella: I didn't apply for any welfare or Medicaid.
Elaine: I never applied for anything, except WIC was the first thing I ever applied for.
...
Michelle: I really don't even use WIC, to tell you the truth.
Elaine: I don't either. Like, it's milk, and I don't need milk. Milk is, like, two bucks.

When Estella mentions her lack of dependency on social services and aide to teen

mothers such as welfare and Medicaid, Elaine and Michelle begin to change their way of

talking about their own need as well. At the same time that members of our group are

resisting being prejudged and stereotyped in ways described by the piece from Shandler's

book, they had been recreating the stereotyped image that teen mothers are in need of

help from health and social service agencies. They know about the mistreatment and

stereotyping of teen mothers partly because of the criticism they have received from

people who interact with them when they are behaving in stereotyped ways. This

stereotyped image of a teen mother on welfare stands in contrast to the very narrative

from Shandler's book that began this discussion and to other images of teen mothers we

read about and admired, images of self-sufficient and goal-oriented young women.

This conversation is an example of how our group engaged in a critical interaction

with a text by comparing a narrative that represents certain images of teen mothers to

their own experiences. This comparison allows them an opportunity to interrogate both

the text we read together and the stories they tell about their own lives and actions. Their

examination of a personal belief (that teen mothers are/can be/should be self-sufficient

and deserve respect) next to a cultural belief (that teen mothers are a burden on society

and therefore deserve disdain), involves at least two levels of analysis. First, the teen

mothers support certain messages in the *Ophelia Speaks* narrative because it matches

their personal belief; consequently, they resist the cultural belief. At the same time, the

conversation that relates their experiences about what it is like to go to the health

department office to receive aide, a place where they are subjected to poor treatment, in

some ways contradicts a message in the narrative we read. When Estella confesses her

lack of experience with social services, there is some acknowledgement by Michelle and

Elaine that they are not the kind of teen mothers who receive aide—Michelle "really

[doesn't] even use WIC. Elaine begins with the perspective of saying "I have" had

experience dealing with mistreatment from caseworkers, then shifts her position to "I

never applied for anything," adds "except WIC," and finally moves to taking a position of

being able to afford the "two bucks" it costs to buy milk. The cultural belief that teen

mothers might be a burden on society because they use public aide has become a reality

in this conversation, and a possibility for their identities as they interrogate all the stories

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on the table at this meeting—the one in print and the ones that emerge during our conversation. This conversation contains a check, initiated by Estella, on a generalized way of characterizing the people in the teen mothers lives, especially those who judge them, and it is a check on how the participants characterize themselves and their actions. In reflection on three different stories about teen pregnancy told in Shandler's book, Estella reminds the group that not all their stories are alike. Just as there are multiple cultural and textual representations of teen sexuality and pregnancy, there are multiple personal representations of the lives of teen mothers within our group. In this example, by engaging in the critical interaction of comparing textual representations to one's own experience, the participants are able to conduct this analysis.

An Example of Comparing Textual Representations to One's Experiences from the *People* Meeting

In addition to the instance of the critical interaction described above, during other meetings of our reading and writing group we also compared our own stories to the texts we read. Unlike in the example with *Ophelia Speaks*, at times participants' own narratives provided a direct contrast to the text and that contrast prompted the participants to take a stance against messages in the text. The teen mothers in our group sometimes told stories that disclosed a very different reality from what was depicted in texts we examined, and as they reviewed their own narratives next to textualized narratives, they sometimes rejected the text in favor of their own experiences. An example of this can be seen in our conversation around the *People* magazine article I referred to previously. Recall the story of Faye's decision to go into the military and our related discussion

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during which participants took a stance toward the text. Faye's decision to join the

military meant leaving her child and placing him in her mother's care. As I explained in

a previous example, Estella (a core participant in our group) accepts this text more

readily than others in our group do; she alludes to the notion that she has had a personal

experience similar to that of Faye's but stops after stating her opinion about the situation.

As our discussion of the story continues, Elaine presents a view that is different from

Estella's. She does not explicitly reject a textual message, but she rejects the positive

representation of Faye, this particular teen mother. Recall that Faye's child was killed in

a car accident in her absence. The story in the magazine explains that a few years after

his death, she met and fell in love with a man with whom she then had a second child.

Elaine strongly objects to Faye's actions and therefore, the way she was represented as a

positive model of a teen mother. The following excerpt of our conversation illustrates

Elaine's objection.

Elaine: To me, this [story] kind of irritated me.
Kara: Why?
Elaine: First of all, I don't think it's anything wrong with a woman going into the
        military. More power to 'em. But me, like when you [Estella] told me you were
        going to go into the military, I was like, you better not go cause you have a
        daughter. That's how I thought. This is my, like, best friend. But, I see it as, you
        know, ok, you have a child. You need to be with your child, especially at a young
        age. Then *she* [Faye], she, ok, she has a child, she is going to the military. That's
        good and dandy, or whatever. Then she's like, I fell in love not giving the child—
        you know what I mean? Oh, *forget* the child, I'm in *love*, that doesn't matter.
        But he's helped me have a better love for myself [quoting the article] and, I don't
        know, this is more crap. I don't like this one.

Elaine struggles to explain herself rationally through her distaste for this story—

she has a complex reaction to this piece of text. First, she explains, she supports the idea

of women in the military, but she has trouble with the idea of a mother with a young child, especially her best friend, leaving that child behind: "You need to be with your child." Next, she reconciles, a bit sarcastically, the fact that Faye made the choice that she discouraged her friend from making: "That's good and dandy, or whatever." Finally, she is outraged that Faye could forget her child in what seems to Elaine such an easy manner. Elaine voices Faye's thinking, "forget the child, I'm in love." This representation of a teen mother does not sit well with Elaine.

If Faye were her friend, Elaine would have done her best to talk her out of going into the military in order to stay close to her child, as she did with Estella. She would have encouraged her not to let a man and a new baby take the place of her dead child. Elaine resists this textual representation of teen motherhood for its characterization of the choices a teen mother might make. At this point, she concludes with "this is more crap," indicating her disgust with Faye's ease of accepting the death of her child, or perhaps with the simplistic representation of a very complex situation. As in the example of the *Montel* meeting previously discussed, the *People* article seems to be offering shallow treatment of the choices facing teen mothers. The decision to leave a child in the care of family members, they know from experience, is excruciating, and one that Estella ultimately could not make.

Beyond the textualized narrative, Elaine alludes to Estella's similar dilemma and her reaction to it. As our conversation continued, Estella revealed a bit more about her personal choice not to enter the military, and she continued to support Faye's thinking behind her decision. The conversation is excerpted below.

Estella: I mean, she did it to better herself and give her son a better life. [[Elaine: Right.]] I don't think she did it cause she didn't want to be around [[Elaine: Right.]] him and she didn't care about him. But when people, when I told people of my plans to go into the military, people really looked down on me.

Elaine: I didn't look *down* on you, like.

Estella: A lot of people did because, [[Elaine: Mhm.]] like how could you leave your daughter, how could you abandon her. That's not what I was doing. That's, that's, not even, you don't even think about abandoning. That's like the least, the last thing you want to do is to leave your child.

Elaine: Mhm.

Estella: You are saying I want to have a *good* life / for my child. I want to give everything I can give to my child.

Elaine: See and I see it like, yeah, you can better yourself, but like, I don't know, my, my way is you can better yourself but why do you got to do it to be away from them? You know what I'm saying? Like to me there's nothing wrong with going to the army, but I think like some people have like different motives for it.... I know how hard it is for you to be away from her, but I think with some people, see, it's like a get-away, you know. I can-

Estella: That's why I'm *not* going because I *can't* be away from her.

In this conversation, Elaine tries hard to remain supportive of her friend Estella in spite of her philosophical disagreement with leaving behind a small child for a career opportunity. She did not "look down on" her, but she knew others did. She reiterated that she understood Estella's motivation to join the army would have been to "better herself." Elaine said all this to her friend while at the same time remaining very critical of Faye, the woman whose story we read in the magazine. When Elaine said that some teen mothers might join the military for a "get-away" she may be implying that Faye did, and perhaps she thought that was part of Estella's motivation.

Elaine and Estella, in our meeting, use the text to talk about their lives, but there is critical textual interrogation happening at the same time. They are engaging in the critical interaction of comparing the text's representation to their own experiences, which is played out in two ways in this conversation. First, they are examining a cultural belief next to a personal belief. Our cultural beliefs about appropriate and inappropriate reasons

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to leave a child are what Elaine is examining. The story in the magazine focuses mostly on Faye's life after the tragedy of losing her child occurred. She has a new family—a new husband and a child. The article does not explicitly discuss how she was able to move on into a new phase of her life, but it does discuss briefly how difficult the loss of her child was for her and the guilt she associates with his death. Faye is one of the positive images of teen mothering the magazine presents. Elaine disagrees that she should be portrayed as simply admirable and opposes the image of a teen mother who would leave her child. This image is one of a teen mother who willingly gave up the responsibility of raising her own child, albeit to provide her child with a better life. Whether the child would have lived were he in the care of his mother no one can know, but Elaine seems to believe that his mother's choice to leave him was misguided; that is, it is preferable for a mother to be with her child even if she is not providing an immediately optimal situation for him. In Elaine's view, it is unacceptable for a mother to leave her child, but she also understands that it is not a simple matter to make that choice. She seems to think that it is "crap" for a magazine to present this mother in a trite way.

Second, this critical interaction of comparing the text to their own experiences helps Elaine and Estella use their lives as biographical narratives next to another more distant narrative in order to examine Estella's deliberation about joining the military and subsequent decision to stay with her daughter. The magazine story allowed them the analytic distance to interrogate their own narratives and their own choices in comparison to the story they read. Though she was outwardly supportive of Estella, it is possible that Elaine really did not support her friend's logic, and used Faye's story to indirectly

criticize her for even considering going into the military and leaving her child behind. Estella decided not to join the military because, she said, she could not stand to be away from her daughter, and maybe, she seemed to realize, because people were looking down on her for considering it, but Faye, the textualized woman, did decide to go. Elaine can vilify Faye without damaging her friendship with Estella. She can say she knew all along that Estella did not want a get-away, but she asks the question, "You can better yourself, but why do you got to do it to be away from [your child]?" Elaine rejects the representation the text offers of Faye, a teen mother who she sees as having made the wrong choice, while at the same time she speaks carefully about her friend Estella so as not to reject the validity of her narrative, her choices, her actions, thereby damaging their relationship. A critical interaction occurred in Elaine and Estella's discussion of the magazine's representation of Faye's life in comparison with the texts of their own lives.

Critical Interaction (3): Explicitly Acknowledging a Text as a Representation

During our reading and writing group meetings, the participants sometimes explicitly acknowledged the text as a representation,[22] another form of critical interaction. When this occurred, much more complex critical interactions were focused directly on the text than with other kinds of critical interactions discussed so far. When a reader acknowledges a text as a representation, she marks it as a version of reality. Acknowledging a text as a representation is one way to "struggle within and against those

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[22] A text is a *representation* because it stands for or symbolizes a personal and/or a cultural belief about, for example, a "type" of person, an event, a phenomenon; and it takes for granted some mutual understanding between the author and the reader about contextual elements surrounding the understanding. Because a text can present to the reader's mind images of a person, it claims authority (and—if read uncritically—is granted authority by the reader) to act as a strong influence over that person's representations of him or herself.

institutions that wield economic, cultural, and political power" (Giroux et al., 1996). In other words, it is a way to interrogate the authority and meanings of a text as it works create reality and position its readers.

By explicitly acknowledging the text as a representation, a reader also makes room for the two remaining critical interactions which I have not yet elaborated upon— talking back to a text and making inter-textual references. I will discuss in coming sections of this chapter that by talking back to a text the reader shares power with the text in positioning ourselves and others, and by making inter-textual references the reader looks across texts as they represent different cultural meanings and identities. When we acknowledge a text as a representation, we examine it in ways that might allow us to understand it within a context of some possible alternatives to commonly held truths about our own and others' social positions and identities. We might interrogate what I described earlier as cultural beliefs, but now we can ask questions such as "whose culture?" and "which beliefs are reflected in and are represented by the text and why?" We can question where an author aligns him or herself in relation to what some scholars call "grand-," "master," or "meta-" narratives. A meta-narrative takes for granted some cultural understandings which assume a mutual understanding of their underlying assertions and ideologies, and it is told in such a way that often securely place individuals according to various stereotypes and generalities. Acknowledging a text as a representation allows a reader to interrogate those stereotypes and generalized characterizations of who we are and what we are expected to do and be, and to generate more complex images of reality. When a reader explicitly acknowledges a text as a representation, on some level she is aware that embedded in the word *representation* (a

noun), is a verb: *to present.* Exchanging the idea of representation as a noun for a related verb form allows the reader to ask "*who* is presenting these images and understandings?" and she creates a space for making the author more visible and deliberate. In making representation more active, the reader can also ask questions of the text about *who else* might represent the same ideas, what representations would *they* put forward, and for what purposes? In addition, she might ask what alternative representations are possible? Are these alternatives in this text in any way—has the author addressed the possibility of their existence?

There are many ways that a text can be examined and interrogated when it is understood as a representation, but the kinds of critical interactions that emerged during our meetings where we intentionally interrogated a text as a representation can be categorized into two large groups. One is when we looked at *gaps in a text*—we looked at, for example, what story was being told and what was left out, whose voices were heard and whose were not, and what details were included and which were not. This led us to interacting critically with text in a second way which engaged us in considering the text from the perspective of *choices made by the author*—we examined the author's choice of words and the connotations associated with the words, and we looked at what examples an author used to make a point.

In both of these ways of critically interacting with a text as a representation the reader understands that a text contains more than a single truth. The most important difference between these two ways of critically interacting with a text as a representation is that when we *looked at the gaps in a text,* we tended to discuss the text as a stand-alone entity and took its meanings for granted. We sometimes did not question the author

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directly, but looked at the larger issues a text presented and interrogated the more general

assertions behind the text's meanings. The pronoun *they* was used frequently in our

discussion when we were referring to an author, people we believed had some authority

about the issues we discussed, people in general, or those who abided by generalized

cultural beliefs. We did not always explicitly include the author in our interrogations of a

text when we examined it at this more general level, for example when we examined the

voices included and those left out.

In contrast, when we examined the *choices made by the author*, we thought more

about the person (or people) behind the text. The author became an active agent in the

construction of a text who decided which words to use and which examples to use to

make a point. We considered the author's ideas as human constructions and, therefore,

the author's position of authority on a topic came into question. When we talked about

specifics of the text, such as word choice and examples employed by the author to make a

point, the group members seemed more comfortable connecting the deliberate act of

constructing a text to another human being with ideas and opinions not necessarily more

true or valid than our own. We could then more easily make the transition from

understanding a text as an entity unto itself, as a (presumably) valid representation of true

cultural beliefs—which sometimes invalidated our own personal beliefs—to

understanding text as a creation of human beings which represents a set of beliefs, values,

and interpretations subject to further consideration.

Questioning the Gaps in *Montel's* Perspective on Teen Parenting

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After watching the *Montel* show about teen parenting, our group decided to write a letter to Montel Williams as a way to provide him with alternative voices and stories with a different perspective in addition to ones he offered on the show. We began writing individual letters, then the group decided to write a joint letter which combined the different ideas offered by each participant. As we planned what to write, there was substantial negotiation about what we believed were the most relevant and important issues presented by Montel, as well as which of his messages we would respond to. The writing of the letter itself is discussed more thoroughly in the section of this document about talking back to the text, but the examples offered here are an attempt to show how the group members began to question the representations in the text directly.

The participants explicitly acknowledged the *Montel* show as a text with negotiable truths, as a representation of cultural and/or personal beliefs and practices regarding teen mothers. Perhaps it was easier for them to do this with this particular text because they actually saw the person who was creating the text; Montel was an author of sorts to them. They could see him on the television screen, so perhaps the text of the show felt more immediate and not as durable as a printed text. Perhaps the show felt more like a face-to-face conversation in which meanings are commonly negotiated, whereas when reading a printed text, the author is usually physically invisible and therefore more difficult to "see" in a text. A printed text can feel more lasting and its messages less than negotiable.

Regardless of why the participants were more readily able to acknowledge this text as a representation of ideas about teen parenting, we thought carefully together and separately about how to compose a letter to Montel. We thought about what the text of

the TV show said, whose voices were present, and what messages we heard coming from those voices. A portion of our meeting's discussion examined the message of the TV show in general as compared with the messages conveyed by the individual guests on the show. Sheila pointed out that Montel supported a "salute" to those teens who acknowledged that becoming parents early in life was a mistake, and she suggested that another kind of salute be offered as well—one to those who are *successful* teen parents. She tried voicing a statement for the letter, which inspired a discussion regarding Montel's actual statement about who should be saluted.

Sheila: I suggest that you salute those that are succeeding, blah, blah, blah.
Estella: Wait, wait, wait, what did he say? This is a salute to, what?
Kara: What he said-
Sheila: People who made a mistake and can um, and can admit, or something. I don't
    know, can admit-
              Estella: Can admit they made a-
Kara: Who admitted they made a mistake or something like that [looking through notes]
Estella: Yeah, that's a good thing, Sheila. You should say, why don't we salute those
    who are succeeding or [[who have succeeded
                    Kara: The show is a salute to those]] who know they have
    made a mistake. Yeah, I like that idea [to Estella]. He should salute, should
    salute what?
Sheila: And make sure he knows there's a lot of us.
Estella: Salute those who are. Are or have been succeeding.
/ / /
Sheila: For example the people at our school.

Together in our conversation, Estella and Sheila questioned a gap in the text, namely the absence of the voices of teen mothers who were having positive parenting experiences. They realized that the voices of the teen mothers who "are or have been succeeding" are missing from this representation of teen mothers in general. Not all teen mothers admit to or believe "they have made a mistake," particularly those who strive to be good parents and who have continued their high school education at a school like

Summit. Montel talked about the teen mothers on the show as if they universally viewed

their parenting situation as a mistake, and they were encouraged to talk about the

negative side of being a teen mother. They were asked to discuss events in their daily

lives and their relationships with the fathers of their children, their children's fathers'

parents, and their own parents. Montel asked his guests what their dreams were and

almost all stated that they wanted to go to college and/or have a good job. When one teen

mother began to discuss the dreams she had for her child, that is, that she would have a

happy life and have everything she needed to have a fulfilling life, Montel interrupted her

and asked sternly what her dreams were for *herself*, as if a parent's dreams for her child's

happy life and fulfillment do not figure into the scheme of her own dreams. Montel

seemed to believe that this kind of dream is inappropriate for a teen mother to hold.

Sheila and Estella noticed this textualized gap—the failure to acknowledge the stories of

teen mothers who are on many levels invested in their children. Montel did not present

stories of teen mothers' success, teen mothers who are working hard to be good mothers,

good students, and good at multiple other aspects of their lives every day. The

participants seemed to want Montel to have a more inclusive view of what teen mothers'

lives can be—including the notion that teen mothers can work to fulfill their own

personal and educational goals as well as care for their children and provide for their

needs.

As the conversation continued, another participant (one who was not in the core

group) suggested that "maybe those people [on the show] thought that they made a

mistake." Perhaps, she was suggesting, Montel's version contained some truth and the

young women on the show did feel that having a child at a young age was a mistake and

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that they regretted being mothers. We considered that idea in light of other pieces of textual evidence we heard on the show. Did the teens on the show consider that they had made a mistake by becoming mothers at a young age, or was that an assumption that was being communicated in ways other than through the teen mothers themselves? In reconsidering some features of Montel's representation of teen motherhood, we discovered some inconsistencies between that message and what the teen mothers actually said during their interviews. Estella recalled a caption that ran under the image of a teen guest who was speaking on the show. The caption stated that the guest regretted having children at such a young age. We discussed whether we actually heard such regret articulated by the guest herself in her own speech, or whether the authors of the show (perhaps Montel himself) interpreted her feelings as regretful by way of the artificially inserted caption. We discussed what messages about teenage mothers Montel wanted to convey in the show, and we critiqued his interview technique for strategies that made the guests on his show appear to regret having children at a young age, whether or not they felt regretful:

Estella: It said *regrets*, that was the first word and I don't remember the rest of it, it was like-
Kara: Having a baby at 15 or 16.
Estella: getting pregnant or regrets being pregnant or regrets being a teen mom. I don't remember what the other words were, but I know the first word was regret.
Kara: OK, so and maybe some of the moms on the show did feel like they made a mistake, but do we remember anyone saying that?
Estella: No. / / /
Sheila: [They] might have said I wish I would have waited, but they didn't say I regret having this baby.
Estella: What I didn't like about the girls was that they got up there and they made us look bad because they didn't even stand up for themselves. They could have been like, listen Montel, you know? I would have. If he was going to sit there and degrade me, humiliate me in front of, you know, the nation, I would have been telling him something. You know, I would have given him a piece of my mind.

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> Be like, you don't invite me to your show so you can say how I'm, you know, a mess up. That I'm not going to amount to anything because... cause I don't have, you know a good job or whatever, and cause I got pregnant when I was, you know, 16 or whatever. There's nothing wrong with that.

Kara: Well, and he did make the woman who was thinking of giving her baby up for adoption, he made her feel-

> Estella: That she was the worst person in the world.

Kara: bad about doing that.

Sheila: But then again they were bad for keeping it and you're bad for getting pregnant, it's just the whole thing. No matter what you do you don't get any appreciation.

Estella and Sheila seem to be arguing that perhaps the "authors" of the show used their own words to interpret the decisions and conditions of teen motherhood in the lives of the young women on the show. Perhaps the problem is, as Estella said, that the girls did not "stand up for themselves." Perhaps they were not given much of a chance to speak in ways that allowed Montel and his audience to find anything to appreciate in these young women. Sheila explains that there is no winning in a situation wherein a person has already been defined in a particular way. In Estella's words, Montel made a young woman who was considering adoption feel like "the worst person in the world;" and as Sheila said, the teen mothers "were bad for keeping [their babies]" and "bad for getting pregnant."

Together, we came to these conclusions: The gaps in the text and the choices made by the authors of the text created a representation that not only "degraded" and "humiliated" the guests on the show, but kept absent the alternative voices of teen mothers who are not "mess ups," and who are successful and satisfied young mothers, even if they do have problems and may sometimes wish they had waited to have their babies. The story told about teen mothers in this text made the general group of teenage mothers seem as if they would not "amount to anything" and ensured they would get no

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"appreciation." The examples of teen mothers given in the text of the *Montel* show did represent a popular cultural belief about teen mothers, but did not match the personal beliefs the individuals in our group had about themselves and their future. This textual representation does not speak favorably of the teen mother identity in general, and it leaves a large gap in representing positive life choices and identity construction that was being carried out by teen mothers in general, and by those in the reading and writing group.

Questioning the Author's Choices in *Ophelia Speaks*

On looking again at the meeting during which we discussed biographies of teen mothers in *Ophelia Speaks* (Shandler, 1999) that represent different outcomes of teen pregnancy, we see instances of the group beginning to consider the author's hand in the construction of text. We see the group members beginning to acknowledge the text as a representation that intentionally communicates a diversity of experiences of teen pregnancy. At that meeting, we interrogated the author's power to create new images and roles a teen mother might play, or to sanction existing ones. I asked the participants during the meeting to consider why the author might have included biographies of three young women who had divergent experiences in relation to pregnancy.

Kara: If we could take two minutes and try and take a step back from these stories....
        I'm wondering if you are thinking that maybe the author of this book, the one who
        compiled all these stories, if you think she has something in mind that she is
        trying to say. What do you think her message is by using these three stories in a
        book, in a section about pregnancy? What do you think she's trying to say?
Michelle: She's trying to show you how we all deal with it differently.
Elaine: Yeah, I think she's just showing... all views from it, or like, I don't know. I
        mean it's kind of hard to put all those in categories because they are all different.
        You know what I mean? / /

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Kara: So maybe that's the message, that [[Elaine: Mhm.]] women have to deal with these issues-

Elaine: Pregnancies in all different types of ways. Cause here's this girl, she had an abortion and she talks about it. Then this girl, she's all in love and then she gets pregnant. Then here's this girl talking about how she feels / you know how people saw her when she was pregnant.

Elaine and Michelle discussed the author's choice of using these three examples as a way of showing difference; each of the narrative biographies in the printed text reveals a different experience with teen pregnancy. Elaine reminded us that it is difficult to place all teen mothers, all stories of teen pregnancy "in categories because they are all different." The author's choice to offer a range of perspectives, three divergent examples, was a message to the group's participants that the author respected that "we all deal with it differently." By acknowledging that the author has thoughtfully chosen to represent teen pregnancy as she did, they acknowledge that the author has a perspective, that she wants to convey a message that there are multiple ways of "dealing with" a complex issue such as teen pregnancy. This way of interacting critically with the text allows the participants to articulate a personal value they see in the text, and it happens to be one they agree with. The author herself provides three alternatives for representing "dealing with" teen pregnancy in the biographies she includes, which in some ways resist cultural views of teen pregnancy by going against some widely accepted stereotypes of teen mothers.

As I discussed in chapter 2, Nodelman (1996) points out that often ideologies with which we agree are the hardest to recognize as ideologies in a text. This could be a situation that arose during this discussion. Although the participants acknowledged that the author made a deliberate choice in including three representations of teen pregnancy,

they seem satisfied that the representations offered a sufficiently diverse range of experiences, and they did not seek additional representations of teen women dealing with their pregnancies. Moreover, it may be important to consider what is absent in *Ophelia Speaks*. It contains no representation of a teen who has an abortion and is very happy about her decision, one who struggles with the decision of raising her child or giving it for adoption, or one who decides to keep her baby but has complex feelings about it including guilt, insecurity, satisfaction, fear, and excitement. These absences are among the stories of the teen mothers in the group themselves, people they know, and texts we had read or would read in our group. The participants' critical interaction with *Ophelia Speaks*, viewed as a representation, was limited, perhaps because the identities offered by the author were satisfying to young women in our group. What may have helped make the stories (which represented identities of young women) satisfying, in addition to the diversity of experiences, is that they were stories told in the voices of the teenagers who lived the experience and that they were stories with which the teen mothers in our group were familiar. The participants were unable or unwilling to see the lack of complex identities offered in the text's limited representations of teen pregnancy.

In this situation, I prompted the participants to think about the author's choice in organizing her ideas, but there was no hesitation on their parts in responding to my question about what they think the author is trying to say by offering the three narratives that she does. It seems as if they had already considered the active agency of the author in the construction of a text and were satisfied with what they found. They seemed to understand the author as generously and realistically (in relation to their own experiences) providing multiple perspectives on the issue of teen pregnancy. They did

not see, or choose to see, that the three biographies limit the perspectives Shandler offers about teen pregnancy. She, like every author, is a human being with ideas and opinions that in some ways represent cultural beliefs and over-simplify the identities of pregnant teens. She does make some attempt to broaden cultural beliefs about teen mothers beyond stereotypical notions, and this attempt is what the teen mothers in our group choose to focus on. They had not yet at this meeting seen the video of the Montel show, so they had not had much practice in examining textualized representations of teen mothers; perhaps this is one more explanation for why the participants did not discuss gaps in this text..

Examining the Author's Word Choice During the *People* Meeting

We also interrogated authors' representations of teens and teen parenting when we examined the words used to describe teen parents' relationships in the *People* article, "Revisiting the Baby Trap." Of the teens shown in the article, few are married or in parenting partnerships. The words used by the authors of this article to describe the relationships between teen mothers and teen fathers served as a rich source of critical interactions with the text as a representation. At various points during our examination of the article, we noted the authors' word choices, and we discovered negative portrayals of the relationships in which teen parents were involved, and some negative portrayals of the males in those relationships. Our close scrutiny of the text revealed that in many instances the article referred to the male in a relationship in a generic form: "*the* father," whereas the female in the relationship was more frequently referred to by name.

Along the same lines of critical reading, we looked closely at the portrayal of the relationship of one couple portrayed in the article, Twanna and Jeff. In the section that described their relationship, Twanna was characterized as being very interested in getting married, and Jeff was described as being very committed to his children and their mother, but he was not particularly eager to get married. The members of our group had several conversations about the descriptions that supported these characterizations. Elaine, Sheila, and Estella each commented on the portrayal of this relationship through very particular words that the authors chose for their descriptions. They examined the words' connotations in this particular context.

Elaine: And then, this part doesn't sound right either, when she was, like, when she said, this is what she said, [searching the text] / / [reading] *deep down* they love each other. [[Sheila: Mhm.]] And then, and then because, ok, that's-
Kara: Why does that not sound right?
Elaine: *Deep down*, I'm, ok, why don't they-
Estella: It looks like they don't love each other. Like they don't show that they love each other, [[but deep down inside they do.
      Elaine: Yeah, deep down, *deep down*, I love him.]]

*   *   *   *   *

Sheila: He *claims* to be faithful or something.
Estella: *Claims*. [[Elaine: Yeah.]] They always lie. [laughs]
Kara: Is that what it says in…, he *claims*?
Estella: Mmm.
Sheila: It's like he claims her.
Estella: The word *claims* is in there?
Elaine: I don't—is it?
Sheila: I don't know, it's something like that. / / /
Elaine: I didn't know, they didn't even need to put that in there; that wasn't necessary.
Laura: [reading] Though he *swears*
               Kara: He *swears*, he swears,
                         Laura: he'll be faithful.
                              Kara: which is
stronger than claims.

Elaine: That made it like he's a cheatin' scoundrel, and she's like, *oh, baby, but I want to marry you, we got four kids together* [high caricatured voice].
Estella: I don't care if you cheat on me, I just want a ring on my finger.

In these segments of conversations, the group members are examining the precise wording used by the article's authors, and the implications of using certain words for the meaning of a passage and for the representation of a teen couple's relationship. In the first segment, Elaine and Estella debate whether the author gives enough credit to the couple's relationship by using the words *deep down* to describe their love for one another. If the author must say *deep down*, they argue, the surface appearance must not "show that they love each other." Elaine evaluates that these words do not "sound right" when describing a committed relationship between two people. In the second conversation, Jeff was portrayed as less than an equal partner because of his avowed commitment to the relationship, coupled with his unwillingness to marry Twanna. This portrayal was supported by the group members ("They always lie"), and it is also criticized ("they didn't even need to put that in there; that wasn't necessary"). Even though there seems to be general agreement in our conversation about Jeff as a member of a group of males who will easily lie to their partners about being faithful, Elaine seems to think that the description is unnecessarily judgmental of Jeff. His actions, she seems to believe, at least as they are portrayed in this text, indicate that he is committed to his family.

In this second example, even though we determine through a closer look at the text that the word *claims* is not actually used, the necessity of the young father's claiming or swearing love for and commitment to his partner brings his intentions toward this woman, the mother of his children, into question. Sheila feels that the word *claims*

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(erroneously identified as being included in the text) indicates that Jeff is claiming Twanna—staking a claim on a person rather than making a statement justifying his actions. It is unclear if Sheila thinks this is a negative statement, if he claims Twanna as in taking possession of her as he would an object, or if he claims responsibility and commitment to her. Once we determined that the word the authors used was actually *swears*, the participants' overall sense of the author's characterization of Jeff does not change. Although *claims* was not a word used by the authors, it seems to some of the group members that it would have been an appropriate choice because it matches the rest of the description in this section of text. Estella and Elaine seem to believe that Jeff is promising his fidelity and commitment to the relationship, but it perhaps is a promise not to be trusted after the birth of "four kids" and a prior record of "cheatin'."

The temporary misreading of the authors' use of the word *claims* by the participants points to the possibility that in this instance the co-construction of an interpretation of the authors' intention became the task of the conversation at the expense of a careful reading of the actual language used. Once the participants had what they understood to be a general sense of the authors' portrayal of Jeff, they began building a new text that was in accordance with a portrayal of teen fathers with whom they were familiar. While the participants demonstrated in other parts of our conversation that they were able to carefully read the text for wording choices made by the authors in order to determine portrayals of identities represented in the text, their willingness to substitute *claims* for *swears* reveals an occasional dependence on cultural views and stereotypical perspectives. A critical perspective is sometimes difficult for the participants to maintain in the face of so many predetermined media-generated ways of knowing and being—like

those found in the *People* article—especially when the target of stereotyping shifts momentarily away from teen mothers. A social pariah in the US, perhaps worse than a teen mother, is a cheating teen father who is unwilling to commit to raising his children in a traditional family setting. Identifying Jeff, the teen father we were reading about in *People*, as a "cheatin' scoundrel" is tempting—even after a conversation minutes before this one in which the participants objected to the authors' frequent use of the generic expression "*the* father."

In the participants' earnest interrogation of the text as a representation, they looked for more complex ways of understanding the textual identities portrayed there. They looked for implications for how the authors of a text phrase meaning in the authors' choices of examples. They examined the representations of teen parents offered by the *People* article and considered how the words and examples and voices there speak about their own lives, identities, and the lives and identities of people they know—and how they do not speak about them. They seem to understand, on some level, that a text that talks about teen parents generally (mothers and fathers) is also talking about them personally. In our discussions of texts as representations of identities, the participants were frequently able to compare larger cultural understandings about who they are with their personal beliefs, experiences and choices about who they are and want to be. They also showed vulnerability to the constant barrage of messages which too easily identify them and others, and struggled to maintain a critical perspective on the media's messages.

<u>Critical Interaction (4): Talking Back to the Text</u>

Talking back to a text is a form of critical interaction with text that strongly indicates that the reader understands textual meaning as negotiable and that text can be interrogated on multiple levels serving a variety of purposes. It is also a way of rewriting a text or retelling the stories in a text that have the potential to position the reader, the author, and those who are the subject of the text in a variety of ways. When textual meaning is constructed using this kind of critical interaction with text, the reader purposefully engages in a conversation with a text, and the power of a text to tell a single truth about a particular issue or topic is scrutinized. By talking back to the text, the reader has an opportunity to voice her own understandings of the issues being dealt with in the text and the ways in which it speaks to her roles in relation to them. When a reader talks back to a text, a two-way discourse is crafted in a way that purposefully aims to position the author as a participant in a conversation rather than a source of indisputable knowledge. A reader who talks back to a text may attempt to teach the author and other readers about another perspective on the issues at hand. In the critical interactions discussed prior to this one, a one-way communication exists and the reader can state what she "knows" in relation to the text, but there is no outward intent to reach and teach others, as there is when talking back to the text.

There are many ways a reader can talk back to a text. She can participate in an actual face-to-face conversation with the author or with other readers of the text, or she can talk back independently of the physical presence of others; this can be accomplished through writing, speaking, or in private thoughts. In our group, we engaged in some public ways of talking back to texts which allowed me to observe this critical interaction

when it emerged. At the suggestion of some of the participants and with my guidance, we talked back to the text in our meetings through the following media: imagined conversations with the author of a particular text, written responses in the style or genre of an author's writing (e.g., writing poetry, journal entries, biographies), discussions about how we might write about our lives and identities in the style of or in response to an author we read (e.g., writing our own version of Shandler's *Ophelia Speaks,*), and letters which offered an alternative perspective on an issue that was presented and discussed in a text.

Some would argue that all the ways of critically interacting with a text that are described in this chapter are ways of talking back to a text. By taking a stance toward a text—possibly an alternative one, by comparing one's own experiences to textual messages, by acknowledging the text as a representation through an examination of the text's gaps and the author's choices, and by making inter-textual references, a reader is talking back to the author about how the ideas in the text are put to use. I agree that these are all ways in which an individual could engage in one-way critical interactions with the text that interrogate its messages. However, the kinds of critical interactions I have just listed lack the *potential* of a two-way exchange of ideas between the creator of the text and those who help to make its meaning (readers). "Potential" indicates the possibility of a real conversation (really sending a letter), or one that is imagined as real though with a lesser likelihood of follow-through (e.g, a letter or email written to illustrate the power of what could happen if it were mailed). One goal of critical literacy is to empower readers with the tools that help them understand the purposes to which language practices may be put. One such use is interrogating textual messages in order to help readers question

the authority of texts as they position us. As critically literate people, we may also extend our own voices into the conversation that constructs our culture and our selves by talking back to a text.

An Example from *Montel* Meetings

One specific way that we talked back to a text occurred across a set of meetings during which we wrote a letter to Montel Williams in response to his show about teen mothers. We intended to send the letter as we were writing and revising it, so it was written with that end in mind. Unfortunately, because writing the letter came at the end of the school year and with the imminence of graduation, the impetus to complete the letter dissipated and a final draft was never mailed. Elaine, however, decided to write her own letter and sent it independently of the group. As we were drafting the group's letter, she decided that more than one letter would have a greater impact than one letter signed by multiple authors. She did follow through with her commitment to the ideas we were constructing by sending her letter. At the time of my last contact with Elaine, two years after the completion of data collection, she had not received a response from Montel.

Our group spent a good deal of time at two meetings discussing how to write the letter. We negotiated which issues of teen parenting we wanted to address and how to present ourselves to Montel as a group of people who wanted to enter the conversation that he was conducting on his show. We also went on a weekend retreat to work on, among other things, writing this letter and to continue to discuss some of the issues we had broached at other meetings, generally about women's roles and the social position of teen mothers in our culture. By the time we returned from the retreat, several individuals

had written some form of text that they wished to contribute to the letter. At our next meeting we discussed how to put all of our ideas together. In writing the letter, the teen mothers thought about how they would be represented in it. In the following excerpt, we are discussing their desire to be introduced by me, an adult who knows and supports them.

Kara: I thought that it was going to be a letter from Elaine, Sheila, Mindy, [[Elaine: Mhm.]] and if Chelsea wants to put her name on it with some ideas in it. I mean that's one model we talked about. Another model we talked about... that you suggested, that I write, I sort of like make it from me and sort of tell your stories.

Sheila: I think that's a-, I think we should have that inclu-, like another letter to go with it. Cause if he just hears from a bunch of teen moms he'll be like, they're just mad because I made fun of them. And if he hears from an adult that's not even going through that but knows about it.

Kara: Do you think he thinks he made fun of them?

Sheila: I don't think he realizes it.

Elaine: Not made fun of them, but.

Sheila: I don't think he'll take it seriously as much if its just us that talks to him.

Kara: So maybe if I like write an intro letter to this packet of letters that we are sending or something? Say that we've been working together and talking-
        ...

Elaine: I do want to write Montel, ...we are not hearing about any success stories. Cause I mean like me, I didn't know what I was going to do when I was pregnant. I mean I knew I wanted to go to medical school to become a nurse.... I didn't know what I was going to do. I knew I was going to graduate somehow. ...All they had was girls-

Sheila: And they didn't let them talk enough. It's like I'm pregnant, this is were the dad is.

Elaine: Yeah. Yeah. He is incarcerated. (laughs)

Sheila: That's all they said. ...I mean they kind of said more than that but they didn't say any good things. I think he doesn't want to say good things. I think that was the point, so people won't get pregnant. I mean now, I don't know maybe they will think about it before.

In this conversation, the participants discussed how they want to be represented and their intention in writing the letter. They want to be "taken seriously," and they have come to the conclusion that, based on the way Montel treated the teen mothers on his

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show, he may disregard their message if it comes from "a bunch of teen moms" who are "just mad." They prefer that "he hears from an adult" that is not a teen mother experiencing their life, but someone who understands and supports them. They want to present him with a model of teen mothers who are successful. They say that he believes that by putting forth such negative images about teen mothers that other teen women "won't get pregnant;" he thinks that teenagers will "think about it before" they find themselves in their situation, or perhaps before they have sex.

The women in our group critically interact with the text of the messages that Montel's show put forth by planning how to talk back to it. They want to reveal to Montel some "success stories." Elaine says she wants to show him that even in the face of dealing with a pregnancy, she was still planning to graduated from high school and developing a career. Sheila says she wants to write this letter because Montel did not let the young women on his show "talk enough." They want the voices of successful teen mothers to be heard without being interrupted by Montel's commentary or by a commercial break. They want to claim some of the power of constructing cultural understandings of who teen mothers are and how they live their lives. They want to have a voice in negotiating larger truths about their lives rather than allowing Montel's version to be the last word.

Later in the meeting, we discussed the shape of the letter we would send to Montel and what ideas we wanted to be sure to include. We spoke of the letter as being a personal communication with Montel Williams, the person, rather than writing to the TV show as an entity. We discussed that the letter might be a method of convincing Montel to reconsider his perspective. At one point when we imagined what we might say in

response to some of Montel's comments about teen mothers, Elaine said, "*Listen,* Mister, who do you think you are? Do you have any teen daughters? You know, what if one of your teen daughters were to get pregnant? Would you be there, would you support her, would you condemn her?" Elaine imagined speaking personally to a man who did not seem to have a close enough familiarity with the complicated issues related to teen parenting in her view. She seemed to want Montel to understand her perspective on teen parenting, not just from the standpoint that this is a social issue, but from the standpoint that it is also a personal issue, a family issue. Her talking back to the text is a two-way discourse crafted by the letters with the purpose of teaching Montel about a different way of understanding the lives and successes of teen mothers.

We also discussed specific language that would be appropriate and effective to include in the letter; this part of our conversation points back to a kind of awareness of textual representations that was used in a previous critical interaction, explicitly acknowledging a text as a representation. The participants were aware of authorial choices that Montel made to convey his message, and they attempted to use the same rhetorical style that he used to make their own point. For example, in one segment of the episode of the show we watched, a caption was projected under the image of various teen mothers that suggested they *regretted* having children so young. As mentioned earlier, we talked about the fact that we never heard a single teen mother on the show say that she regretted anything about her life, let alone being a young mother. We did hear some say that if they were to do it over again they might have waited and that certain aspects of their lives were more difficult now that they had children, but none spoke directly about regret in relation to their children. We determined through our conversation that it may

have been a true statement, that some of the young women on the show may have felt

regret, but we were not convinced that Montel's characterization of them should include

regret if the language they used to talk about their lives was different. A more fair

representation, we decided would have come out of more careful listening on the part of

Montel to the side of the conversation offered by the teen mothers on his show.

Another word that was frequently used in the episode was *salute*. Montel said on

several occasions that the show was a salute to teen mothers. His salute, the participants

in our group seemed to think, was a condescension. The transcript below is from part of

this conversation. Sheila begins by dictating a line she was suggesting be included in the

letter.

Sheila: I suggest that you salute those that are succeeding, blah, blah, blah.
Estella: …This is a salute to, what?
Sheila: People who made a mistake and can, um, and can admit it or something, I don't
       know, can admit-
Estella: Can admit they made a-
Kara: Who admitted they made a mistake or something like that [looking through
       notes].
Estella: Yeah, that's a good thing, Sheila. You should say, why don't we salute those
       who are succeeding or [[who have succeeded
                             Kara: The show is a salute to those]] who know they have
       made a mistake. Yeah, I like that idea [to Estella]. Should salute [writing],
       should salute what?
Sheila: And make sure he knows there's a lot of us.
…
Estella: Salute those who are. Are or have been succeeding.
/ / /
Sheila: For example the people at our school.

In this brief segment of conversation, we see Sheila and Estella working to

accurately recall the language used in the show as they have done with other texts at other

meetings. They want to talk back to this text using Montel's words, and refocus them so

that teen mothers are identified in more positive ways. They seem to feel belittled by the use of the word *salute* in reference to acknowledging a monumental mistake in their lives, and they wish to be saluted for something that deserves respect. They want to be acknowledged for creating lives and identities for themselves in which they can act out multiple identities, including *teen* and *mother* and *student*, among others. They seem to believe that Montel is generalizing to all teen mothers from his own perspective and not speaking about the experiences of the young women in our group, or perhaps even the group on his show. To salute those who "know they have made a mistake" assumes a mistake was made. The participants in our group reject that notion and instead want to teach Montel to understand that many teen mothers can be and are successful. Sheila expresses a perspective on teen mothers that is very different than the representation offered by Montel. She knows "a lot of" successful teen mothers, for instance a number of women who attend her school.

The young women in our group talk back to an author as they critically interact with this text. They acknowledge the text as a representation of the author's understanding of some large cultural understandings about the lives of teen mothers, and they open the conversation to further interpretation of the issues he presents. They construct their own representation of themselves in their talk-back, and they interrogate and redefine the use of the notions of *regret* and *salute* from Montel's rhetoric on his show. They take the opportunity to rewrite his text and retell its stories so that it more closely represents their beliefs, actions, and selves.

Critical Interaction (5): Making Inter-Textual References

Making inter-textual references is another type of critical interaction I observed emerging from our group's conversations. The teen mothers made inter-textual references both during group meetings and during conversations outside meetings. Reading or discussing a text sometimes elicited thoughts of another text. At least three important features of interacting critically with texts arise from inter-textual references. One feature is that texts have multiple meanings; there is not one fixed meaning put there by an author for all people, for all times. A single text can have many meanings for an individual at one reading, it can mean different things for that individual at different times, it can mean different things to different people, and it can mean different things during different periods of history. When a person reads one text and recalls another text, the reader can call on cultural knowledge (e.g., when a mythic theme is drawn upon or an allegory is used, or when a stereotype or generalization is used in advertising), or personal knowledge (e.g., when the story reminds the reader of a letter she has written, something her father said to her the other day, or a song she heard on the radio that morning) to make that conclusion. Different texts may be bridged by different people or by the same person in different time/place contexts.

A second important feature of making inter-textual connections is the reader's awareness that text is made in a particular society at a particular time. The author's own cultural and personal knowledge results from, in part, the time and place in which that author lives (or has lived). Therefore, the form of the text and the ideas it represents are situated in time and place. When another text is recalled at a reading, the reader transcends the first author's textual representations and at the same time connects with

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them. For example, if a reader is reminded of a modern short story when she reads a Shakespearean play, she has a way of understanding the play that is grounded, at least in part, in a current representation of ideas that can be found in both texts.

A third feature is that the author's representations in a text support valuing certain things and not valuing others. An inter-textual reference allows the reader to understand what ideas or ideologies a text values or rejects by comparing these values to those in another text.

I observed inter-textual references less frequently than the other types of critical interactions I have described in this chapter, and they were part of our conversation more frequently in contexts outside of the reading and writing group, such as during interviews, casual conversations, and in the moments before and after meetings began and ended. Still, making inter-textual references seemed to be an important way of critically interacting with texts. It seems worth considering how it might have been useful in our meetings to encourage participants to engage with texts in this way more frequently. I say this because a person who makes inter-textual references assumes a great deal of her interlocutors' cultural knowledge and knowledge of texts other than the one under analysis. There must be mutual knowledge or awareness of the texts being referred to in relation to the central text of the discussion. If there is not some mutual awareness texts being referred to, the inter-textual reference is meaningless.

Another reason this type of critical interaction is worth considering is because the participant who engaged in the inter-textual reference both during our meetings and in other conversations was Sheila. When comparing the particiaption of Sheila and Elaine during our reading and writing group meetings, overall, Sheila's critical interactions with

texts seem less sophisticated than the ways in which Elaine engaged with texts. Sheila and Elaine interacted with texts in some similar ways. Both had skill in comparing textual representations to their own experiences, acknowledging a text as a representation, and talking back to the text. Elaine often was a leader in our conversations as she set the tine and usually began critical interactions with texts. Sheila was able, however, to make inter-textual references in savvy ways that helped her fill out her stories, put together examples to illustrate her points, and to inject humor into the conversation.

It is important to note that although this kind of critical interaction occurred less frequently than the others discussed, including it in this analysis reminds us of some important issues in regards to texts and the voices that interrogate them, especially in classrooms. First, students in classrooms (and people in other settings where texts are analyzed) have many valid and useful ways of critically interacting with texts, some of which do not get honored or even noticed when they are not part of the more regularized ways of enacting literacy practices. Second, some students may find specific ways of interacting with texts difficult or unfamiliar. So when others engage with text in ways that are uncomfortable to them, they may be silenced. In Sheila's case, when Elaine, Estella, and some of the other participants were adeptly comparing textual representations to their own experiences, explicitly acknowledging a text as a representation, or talking back to a text, Sheila would sometimes look on in silence. At other times she would participate in relating personal experiences, but, occasionally, her contribution would seem unrelated to the topic and the rest of us would have to try patiently to understand Sheila's story in the context of the other texts under discussion. Sheila may have

understood her story as logically connected, but may have also had difficulty articulating the bridge she saw between the ides. Especially at early meetings, this was the case. Over time, she became more familiar with the ways of engaging with text that I describe in this chapter, and she participated more fully and more skillfully. But before she became comfortable with the norm of interrogation that developed for some participants in early meetings, she could make useful and meaningful inter-textual connections across texts with which she knew we had some familiarity.

This second reminder draws me to a third—students have much to learn from one another by observing each other as they participate in conversations about texts and practice the skills of critically interacting with texts. Because Sheila was practicing a type of critical interaction that at the time seemed less valuable than others, she did not get to practice it as much and it sometimes went unrecognized as a useful way of talking about a text. Just as Sheila was able to learn from listening to the ways in which Elaine and the others interacted with texts in ways most sanctioned and supported by me and Laura, my research collaborator, so could they have learned about the skill of making inter-textual references from Sheila.

Because I did not recognize Sheila's contribution of inter-textual references until after we were no longer meeting, I was unable to encourage their inclusion in our meetings. I did not recognize their potential as a way to critically interact with texts until after we had ceased our purposeful interrogation of texts. If I were to structure a similar group in the future, I would pay attention to and encourage the development of making inter-textual references. If there were to be in this future group a participant who made

inter-textual references, I would encourage her to more publicly engage with texts in this way and to discuss her meaning and intention so that others might learn from her.[23]

An Example from the Elsa Meeting

The first setting in which I have data that captures a participant's practice of making inter-textual references was at our very first meeting to which we brought a text for the group to read and discuss. Sheila, Laura (my collaborator) and I were the only group members present that day. We had a story called "Elsa and the Evil Wizard" before us which is a feminist folktale about a young woman who struggles against an evil wizard who is pursuing her.

In an early part of our discussion of this story, we examined the character of Elsa, particularly her "golden" blonde hair, and we discussed that it was a potential source of her power. We discussed how the message in the story worked against the stereotype of blondes in our culture where they are often portrayed as "ditsy" and "helpless." Sheila brought to our attention a popular TV talk show which is named after its host, Jenny Jones. *Jenny Jones* shares some features with the *Montel* show: it is recorded with a live studio audience, it sometimes discusses controversial issues, its guests are people who have some life experience with the issue under discussion, and its audience members participate to some degree in the discussion. Occasionally an expert of some kind will also appear on the show to discuss a research or clinical angle on the issue. Sheila's

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[23] I would like to say that I would also pay attention to other skillful ways of interacting critically with texts that are not normally sanctioned as regularized methods but remain as activities that are practiced on the edges of more formal conversations. I fear, however, that I would not notice some alternative methods until I was analyzing data gathered during the experience and no longer meeting with the participants, much like in this endeavor.

mention of the *Jenny Jones* show, she explained, was that on that show she listened to a discussion about the social power of blondes in our culture. She told us she used to watched this show on late night television when she waited up for Dallas, the father of her son, to come home from work. Our discussion centered on the ways in which a blonde woman is depicted as powerful in the story "Elsa" and may or may not be in our broader culture, and Sheila offered this inter-textual reference:

Sheila: They did a thing on some *Jenny Jones* show or something one summer that I was just. Cause when Dallas used to live with us, he'd work till like midnight or one and I'd stay up real late and have to watch these shows just to see him for that hour or so till he went to bed, just to talk about how his day went and stuff and watch whatever, *Love Connection* was on or something. And I'd watch *Jenny Jones* and they had this thing on where they dyed some people's hair blonde cause they heard that blondes have more fun, but she--they even said after that one day that they felt they were more willing to say things and they felt more outgoing or something.

This inter-textual connection made by Sheila served several purposes in our conversation. First, she divulged some personal information about her life. In order to provide us with the context of why she was making this connection, she seemed to want to explain how she came across the *Jenny Jones* show. Because this was one of our very earliest meetings, we knew very little abut each others' personal lives. By making this connection, she was offering us some information about where she gets some of her cultural information, form this TV talk show and why that is a salient text for her when discussing women's hair color and their perceived power by our culture in general and by the individual women themselves.

Also, in discussing with us how the text of the *Jenny Jones* show was connected to her understanding of the story we were reading together, Sheila provided us with the

context within which she was reading the text of the short story. By telling us that Elsa's story reminded her of the Jenny Jones show, we have greater insight into how she is understanding the story. This additional text adds more opportunities for analysis of the cultural phenomenon of the power—or lack of power—of blonde women. In the context of discussing this issue after having read "Elsa," Sheila brought us further evidence from popular media culture for examining this cultural view of women, an additional popular representation of blonde women.

Sheila's reference to *Jenny Jones* turned out to be quite fruitful for our conversation. She explained that guests on the show, presumable brunettes, were given the opportunity to experiment with being blonde for a short time. Sheila told us they reported "that [in] one day that they felt they were more willing to say things and they felt more outgoing." As a blonde herself, Sheila was able to examine her own experiences next to the representations of blondes on *Jenny Jones* and in the story about Elsa. She told us that she tends to be shy, but that she has felt that some people, men (or boys) in particular, have had expectations of her behavior due to her hair color and that even she herself has found a source of identity in her hair color. She told us about a boy she dated that expected her to be sexually promiscuous because of her status as a teen mother and also as a blonde. In this situation, in the context of her status as a teen mother, being blonde and attractive is a liability. She also told us during this meeting that in planning her prom attire and hair style, she imagined her hair in golden ringlets, similar to Elsa's, and much like Cinderella's. In this three-way comparison (between herself, Elsa, and Cinderella, all attractive young blonde women who are negotiating various relationships with males), she makes two textual references and alludes to the

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power she will have in her beauty as a blonde woman. As a blonde herself, she was able to use the texts of "Elsa," *Jenny Jones*, and later Cinderella to discuss the complex images of women as simultaneously powerful and vulnerable.

In making inter-textual references, another type of critical interaction with text, Sheila was able to look across texts, in both print and non-print forms to engage her in the practice of many of the other types of critical interactions that I have outlined in this chapter. In the example above from the meeting "Elsa" meeting, we see that she was able to offer a stance toward a text (her complex view on the power and vulnerability of women) and compare the representation s in the text(s) with her own experiences (offering stories where she is like and unlike the women depicted in the texts she references). She was able to move closer in and further out from her own life stories as she analyzed how these texts spoke to her experiences and to more generalized cultural understandings. She was able to interrogate the multiple texts for how they positioned her and how they, together, gave her complex ways of understanding at least part of her identity.

Conclusion

The five major categories of the kinds of critical interactions I observed, offering a stance toward a text, comparing the representation in the text to one's experiences, explicitly acknowledging a text as a representation, talking back to a text, and making inter-textual references provided me with an analytical frame in which I could look at the moment-to-moment enactment of critical literacy. Because each type of critical interaction requires a different sort of connection with the text, I can see each one as

analytically separate ways of interacting with a text. Some types of critical interactions allow for a distancing of the self from the text and some require a more personal and direct examination of one's own beliefs, choices, and actions in response to a text. However, it is difficult to isolate a single critical interaction as it occurs in real time because different types of critical interactions overlap with one another, and they are used for multiple purposes in conversation and in positioning and repositioning self and others. This overlap and interconnection of the types of critical interactions will be illustrated in the next chapter, chapter 5. This chapter is the case study of Elaine, one of the participants in our group. One goal of chapter 5 is to show how each of the five critical interactions I have outlined in this chapter were enacted by an individual, and for what consequences for her developing identity. Elaine's participation in the group contributed a unique set of knowledge and experiences to the texts and to the conversations of our meetings for her own purposes.

CHAPTER 5: CASE STUDY OF ELAINE

Introduction

In this chapter, I offer the case study of Elaine, a core participant, in two parts. The first section is a biographical sketch of relevant features of her life including information about her family and home life; Evan, the father of her son, and Marcus, her son; her educational goals; her literacy practices, and Marcus' literacy practices. I learned about these aspects of her life primarily through interviews with her and observations of her as she participated in the reading and writing group and in other settings. The second part of the chapter focuses on Elaine's participation in the reading and writing group. I was able to construct this perspective primarily through my observations of her in meetings, by discussing with her her experiences as a participant in the reading and writing group, and by comparing her participation with other core members' participation.

Part 1: A Biographical Sketch of Elaine

When I first met Elaine she was seventeen, and her son Marcus was twelve months old. She appeared to me to be a self-directed and thoughtful young woman who, as she told me, "likes to talk." From my observations of her across many settings—in her home, around her friends and other peers both in and out of school, in conversations with her teachers and parents, and in our reading and writing group meetings—I came to view her as someone who can move easily among the many social worlds to which she belongs.

She spoke at length and candidly with me during her interviews, and seemed comfortable taking on a range of topics both in our interviews and with group members during our reading and writing group meetings. In fact she cited getting to know the other group members as one of her favorite parts of the study. Her willingness to open herself up to others, share information about herself, and listen empathetically to other people's stories often moved our reading and writing group conversations into more personal realms that revealed much about individual participants and the worlds in which they live. She also sometimes pushed us into interacting critically with a variety of texts, both print and non-print as she applied her leadership qualities, her inquiries about texts and her interrogations of texts. I saw her as quite well liked by her peers and teachers at school and as a person with close ties to her family and the people in her neighborhood. She enjoys a good laugh, and often during interviews and when she was at our group meetings, laughter punctuated our conversations.

Elaine and I had some discussion of her race in terms of school and family life, and she, both directly and indirectly, discussed aspects of race in our group's conversations. She called herself "mixed": of African American and European American descent. She said that she does not feel conflicted about her own race, but when discussing her school experiences, she mentioned at times it "was harder" for her than for people who more clearly identify with one race or another. She named school as a location where she has been racially categorized; it has been a place where race has mattered for her. She explained, "When I was in [a suburban school], it was hard because …[I'd] have a class of like twenty something kids and there would only be one

other child in the class who looked like me," meaning, with physical features of a black person.

When she moved to a nearby urban area, the racial demographics in her school were different. In her new public school, she found "all types of kids who look like me...in all different shades, and then you've got your whites, Mexicans and everything." In a school with students of multiple ethnic and racial backgrounds, Elaine did not feel like she stood out. When she went to Summit High School, the alternative high school she was attending when I met her, she had to deal with other students within the black community who viewed "different shades" of skin color as highly significant. She says, "I did get some [flak] because [I am] lighter complected and so I have stuff with darker complected black girls." Because she has lighter skin than many of her black peers at school, Elaine has been derogatorily called a "white girl;" a person handing out hostile criticism indicated that Elaine thought she was superior because of her lighter skin tone.

In talking about her current schooling situation in relation to race, Elaine recalls another incident she experienced in middle school where a girl had a similar understanding of shades of skin color. She thought Elaine was trying to be "all that" because she had "light skin and long hair." This girl behaved, according to Elaine, as if having a white mother "was bad." Elaine's response to that attitude is "I love my white mother so it doesn't really matter" what others think.

Her high school graduation party provided evidence to Elaine that if there ever was tension between herself and other students at Summit over race, it was, at least on the surface, resolved. She described the racial mix of other parties she went to as "predominantly black," "more Hispanic," and "Hispanic and black," and she identified

her party as "mixed up." She noticed groups of "white people over here, black people over here, and then all the mixed up [people]." She could see how these groups also divided along generational lines, the younger people being the "mixed" ones.

This characterization of social situations as having their tensions resolved was typical of Elaine's attitude toward many aspects of her life that I was able to observe. She valued balance as a mode of existence and felt uneasy if there was lingering tension between herself and other individuals at school or in her family. She worked to balance her own desires with logic and reason and attempted to be at least cordial with all her peers at school, whether she viewed them as her friends or not. I also observed Elaine take this approach when she was interacting with texts. She would try to lend credence to any of the multiple perspectives she might notice being presented in or about a text. And when she communicated her own perspective in a zealous manner, she would often allow others to temper her perspectives with their own stories or critique of hers.

Elaine's Family and Home Life

During the time of the study, Elaine lived with her mother and father and her son in a small city in the Midwest in a modest home in a lower-middle class residential neighborhood. Her parents are both college educated and have professional employment. She is very close with her parents and, after an adjustment period, they warmly accepted Evan, the father of her son Marcus into their lives. Though the circumstances which brought Marcus into their lives are viewed by this family as less than ideal, they clearly are invested in this child on many levels for the long term. All

family members contribute to his care. They value his father's influence in his life, but question whether his and Elaine's relationship will be a long term one.

Part of the family's care of Marcus involves his literacy development. Elaine's family might be characterized as a family of readers as literacy activities are infused throughout their daily lives. From reading books to Marcus as a regular part of their daily activities, to a morning reading of a daily devotional, to the numerous books in their home, I could see in many ways that Marcus was growing up in a literacy-rich household, as Elaine herself did. Elaine describes her grandmother and father as "big readers," and they "passed on" the importance of reading to her. She told me that she and her father look up a new word every day along with reading a section of the Bible every day. Her spirituality and her literacy are inextricably linked. Over the course of both interviews, she explained to me that many of the books she reads are about her faith.

Not only does Elaine credit her family with passing on to her the bug for books, but she also relies on multiple family members for information about a variety of topics which often comes as textual media which she reads in many forms. Her family reads and exchanges books and articles on topics ranging from food and nutrition to parenting. One of this family's favorite topic to read about and discuss is that of health matters. Elaine made reference on several occasions to her mother's, father's, and sister's knowledge about healthy eating and what they read to help them make healthy choices about their diets. She explained to me that her mother has read extensively about the "Zone" diet, and has taken it on as her daily food regimen. Therefore, the rest of the family eats in the Zone, because her mother prepares much of what the family eats. Her

parents have shared their books on the Zone diet with Elaine and she has searched the internet for more information in order to decide whether or not she would start the diet.

Elaine's mother has conducted her own independent review of literature available on herbal supplements so when she consulted an herbalist about her gynecological health and taking herbal supplements as a way to regulate her menstrual cycle, she could make informed decisions. Elaine's father also reads about healthy eating, and, Elaine reported, he eats a fruit smoothie every day for breakfast and has a salad with flax seeds for dinner every night. Elaine's sister Karla, a twenty-something single mom, is an "organic freak," eating no foods that have been grown with the use of pesticides. Elaine said, "It's almost like a little job," to be health conscious about their daily food intake. Buying organic foods and herbal supplements for health benefits are not choices that most mainstream middle-class Americans make. In order to live this lifestyle, one must educate oneself on the sub-culture surrounding this way of life that is informed by an immense range and quality of information.

Critical literacy is practiced as a regular custom in this household, partly as a way of making decisions about what information is useful and reliable. Elaine's family reads a variety of popular and technical literature in the form of books, magazines, and internet information in order to know, for instance, where to shop for organic foods, how to prepare foods in healthy ways, and what combination of foods make up a food regimen such as the Zone diet. In addition to reading a variety of sources to learn about eating healthfully, they also consult with experts, such as medical professionals, on health and nutrition.

This healthful attitude in Elaine's family—some would say radically so—carries over into raising babies. When Elaine was taking a parenting class, she said that she and her sister Karla exchanged information about parenting issues on a regular basis via facsimile machines. Karla had recently faxed her a section of a book relating the fact that children under two should not eat shrimp, information Elaine considered carefully when she was dining in a restaurant with her son.

Karla is an avid proponent of breast feeding, and nursed her daughter until she was two years old. When Elaine and Marcus had difficulty nursing when he was born, Elaine felt that her mother and sister put a lot of pressure on her to nurse. Because Elaine herself is convinced of the benefits of breast milk, she pumped her milk and fed it to Marcus—at first through a tube taped to her finger, a feeding technique with the goal of training a baby how to nurse from his mother's breast—and then they made the transition to bottle feeding with breast milk. She explained, "As long as he's getting the [breast] milk, I don't care if he's drinking it through a sippy cup." At one point in her struggles with nursing, Elaine became curious about using infant formula as a supplement to breast milk. She told me this story: She had a small sample can from the hospital and mixed a little with the milk in a bottle she was feeding to Marcus to see if he would accept it. At that moment, her mother came home and commented on the strange smell in the room. Elaine told her, "I'm tired, I don't feel good, and Marcus is hungry… so I'm giving him some Similac, and if you don't like it I don't care." This prompted her mother to call Karla, who was living a state away, so that they could discuss Elaine's decision to "[mix] breast milk and Similac together."

Literacy and making healthy choices for living, including raising children, are family affairs for Elaine. Literacy is inextricably linked in many ways in her families ethos. Multiple sources of information and educated decisions are highly prized. This perspective no doubt influences how Elaine related to me the story of her pregnancy and her interactions with her family over this matter.

Evan: Marcus' Father

Elaine reported to me that Evan, Marcus' father, is very much a part of this family, though he does not live in their household. Marcus sees Evan several hours nearly every day and often spends weekends with him. Evan, Marcus and Elaine frequently spend time together as a family as well. Elaine is usually confident that she and Evan will one day get married, though she "always thought ...like, when I get married, I thought that I'd have my degree... and I didn't think I'd have Marcus, but stuff happens." At the time of the end of the project, the couple were thinking about finding an apartment and living together. Elaine's parents were not entirely supportive of this decision and urged her not to move from their home yet, though, Elaine told me, they knew that the time would soon arrive when she would live on her own—whether that move included Evan or not.

Elaine reported that she and her mother were arguing more than they usually did. Her father, not realizing that this decision meant that she was closing in on a long-term commitment with Evan, gave her pager number to a young man from their church. This young man had told her father that she was "hot" and wanted to get to know her. Because Elaine and her father were not seeing eye to eye on her relationship with Evan,

she was inspired to initiate a "heart-to-heart" conversation with her father where she explained her commitment to Evan and told him she wants to marry Evan. Her parents did not expect that Elaine's relationship with Evan would last, and Elaine's father assumed she was open to dating. He did not necessarily expected her relationship with Evan to result in any kind of long-term commitment aside from, at best, amiable mutual commitment to their child and perhaps ongoing financial responsibility.

Evan is a constant in their lives. According to Elaine, he gave up a football scholarship at a west coast university to be with Elaine and the coming baby once he learned of her pregnancy. Both Elaine and Evan are committed to their relationship with each other and to building a family for Marcus. She does not date others for these reasons and because she "[doesn't] want Marcus having another dad." She disapproves of situations where "girls will, like, bring guys around their children. I just think that's, like, inappropriate...." She worries that "the kids get attached to the guy," and then if he decides to no longer be a part of the child's mother's life, the child will emotionally suffer the break up as well. Elaine told me, "[Evan] wants to move in together." She "wants to marry him so bad," but she is not convinced that living together before marriage is a good idea. She explained,

> "I feel like it's from my upbringing. I feel like we shouldn't live together. I mean, it's like, okay, my parents raised me, you're not supposed to have sex out of marriage. I had sex out of marriage. But at the same time, I'm like okay, that's done, over with. ...He's like, well, we have a child together and Marcus needs to be [with his] mom and dad all the time, not, you know, me going home at night, you staying the night at my house. I understand where he's coming from."

Elaine's parents influence is present in her struggle with what to do. She had sex against their advice, and now, perhaps in an attempt to balance that decision, she is reluctant to live with Evan before they are married. Her life in some ways resists the path expected of a young woman which is scripted by traditional American values, including completing her education, starting a career, marrying her sweetheart, and then having a child—in that order. Though she already has her son Marcus, she imagines she could complete her education before she "settles down" into family life.

Elaine divulged to me that she became pregnant the first time she had sex. She and Evan had broken up when he went away to college and then they got back together. They were at his mother's house alone one afternoon when they decided to have sex. Elaine urged Evan to use a condom—he did go to get one—but the "silver packet" remained unopened. Elaine "was mad at him because I felt like he knew more than I did. I don't know what the heck I'm doing, you know. I'm, like, cause [it was my] first time. …It wasn't all that. I mean, it was an interesting feeling but I wasn't getting out of it what he was getting out of it, you know." Evan told Elaine that he would "pull it out" in time to protect her from pregnancy. The withdrawal method of contraception, as Elaine soon discovered, "doesn't work at all." Her period, which had been so regular before then, was late—"and so now we have Marcus."

Elaine told me in one interview that she sometimes wonders if, in choosing a partner at such a young age, she is making the right choice—is Evan "the only thing out there" for her? Although Evan is a devoted father and is committed to his relationship with Elaine, they do have their disagreements which reflect a pattern of behavior that began with their first sexual encounter. That is, Evan does not always follow through

with Elaine's desires or suggestions, as in not using a condom against her request that he do so. That is not to say Elaine believes Evan should do everything she tells him to, but there have been instances, in addition to when they had sex, when his disregard for her request had serious consequences for which Elaine paid a significant price. For example, Evan sometimes disregarded Elaine's priorities in caring for newborn Marcus. Because they had difficulty nursing when Marcus was first born, Elaine attempted to teach Marcus to nurse by finger feeding him with a thin tube taped to her finger as I mentioned earlier. The technique involves injecting pumped breast milk (or formula) into the tube with a syringe, and when the baby sucks on the finger and tube simultaneously, he exercises his sucking muscles and is rewarded for sucking by getting milk. Evan was supportive of the method and agreed that feeding Marcus breast milk was very important. Both Elaine and Evan at times felt awkward finger feeding and felt that it "look[ed] funny." They did not like to finger feed him in public places partly because they felt it looked "like something is wrong [with the baby]" and because of the inconvenience of the system.

Both soon got frustrated with this method, but Elaine stuck with it and resisted using a bottle in hopes that Marcus would soon be able to breast feed if he finger fed a while longer. Evan's frustration won out, and he began feeding Marcus with a bottle— without informing Elaine—when Marcus stayed at his house. Elaine told me that after a while she began to feel that finger feeding "was not getting it." Marcus was not latching on well, so she worried that he would not latch on to a breast or to a bottle. One day at Evan's house, she decided that since he was not finger feeding well, she would "put him on the bottle." The first time he tried it, she explained, she thought that Marcus really seemed to know what he was doing. Elaine was pleasantly surprised—"I'm like, oh, my

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gosh, how does he know how to do this?" Meanwhile, Evan was "looking down" and "he's like, 'I have to tell you something because it's been eating me up.' He was like, 'I didn't like the finger feeding. My fingers are too big to fit in Marcus' mouth.' He's like, 'I've been giving him a bottle for the last blah, blah, blah.'" Marcus confessed that he had secretly gone against her wishes in the method he used to feed their son. Elaine took a stance that does not surprise me because of her history of avoiding conflict through seeking balance. She said that she "wasn't even mad. I was like, that's okay." In Evans' defense, though he had disregarded Elaine's wishes at the cost of some serious consequences, he was willing to share in their responsibilities in both of these examples. When Elaine got pregnant, he dropped out of school to be closer to Elaine and the baby and to help care for them, and he continued to help Marcus learn to suck, even if it was on a bottle.

After about three weeks of bottle feeding, Elaine decided to try nursing again. She and Marcus were in her bedroom and she began to pray. "I'm like, Lord God, please just help him to nurse. …I was like, if he'll nurse one time, I will be so happy and I was like, he doesn't even have to keep on doing it. …[I] pull out the breast, stick him on, he is eating away! I started crying. I was like mom, he's nursing!" This situation was the perfect equilibrium for Elaine—she took advantage of the fact that Marcus now knew how to breast feed and bottle feed. She easily transitioned Marcus into a schedule where he was fed with a bottle during the day and Elaine put him to sleep at night after nursing him. This schedule worked well for both of them. Marcus and Elaine were now able to cuddle and nurse in the evening, and Marcus could continue with his bottle during the day. For Elaine, this new situation allowed her a little more time in the evening with

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Marcus because she did not have to pump her milk, and she could leave her milk and

bottles at the day care center with Marcus when she was attending class at Summit.

Elaine's Educational Goals

In many ways, Summit High School is a place that strives to meet the needs of its

teen mother students, including Elaine's. For example, by offering the parenting program

and providing child care for the children of its students, it seeks to educate the teen

parents for successful parenting, job performance, and higher education while providing a

convenient child care situation for the teen mothers to make use of. The parenting classes

at the school have been beneficial for Elaine; she has enjoyed many of her classes and has

felt intellectually challenged by nearly all of them. In other ways, Summit does not meet

the needs of its young parents. At times, the school's faculty have expectations for their

students that do not rise much above a stereotyped image of alternative school kids—

teens who indulge in all sorts of risky behaviors (unprotected and promiscuous sex, using

and abusing substances, etc.) and of dropping out of school. They are often treated as if

they are on the brink of having to deal with serious health and legal issues and as if they

do not demonstrate ambition or promise in the way of career and educational goals.

Elaine is not a "typical" alternative high school student. For example, Elaine does

not regularly use alcohol or do drugs. She does not intentionally break the law or cause

trouble in or out of school. She also does not plan to be finished with school any time

soon. Instead, she says, "to get the highest education I can get would be like my dream.

...I want to get my Ph.D." One aspiration of hers is to become a medical professional—

a physician, radiologist, or pediatric nurse—some day. She has plans to begin her college

career at the local community college where her mother works or at the state university where her father is an alumnus.

Elaine is aware of the educational politics surrounding being a teen mother in an alternative high school. In spite of her ambitious educational and career goals, Elaine was required to take a typing class at Summit. She says, "We were kind of pushed more into taking office skills. I really didn't want to take it because I am not going into taking any secretary's job or anything like that, but I can't type real fast." Taking the typing class was a requirement because "it's in this grant." The school "get[s] a lot of money [for] us...[for] the teen parent stuff."

When asked about her future plans, her desires for herself seem fairly stereotypical of a young suburban woman, and then she thinks about the needs of others.

"I want to travel. I want to live in a nice house. I want a dog. I want--this sounds funny--um, I guess I want maybe like one more child or two. And get married. Um, that would be like my dream like to pay off, my parents are in debt a little bit, to pay off their debts. ...My grandmother, she's like getting like real old and I want to give her anything that she would want."

In spite of how goal oriented and focused on her future Elaine can be, she also understands that she must live in the moment and that goals fluctuate and change as we continue in our present existences. She attributes her pregnancy to the fact that she was curious about sex and the strong physical feelings that developed early in her relationship between herself and Evan. Shortly after she became pregnant, she and Evan decided to abstain from sexual activity. Even though they had "perfect birth control," meaning she was already pregnant, she did not want her relationship with Marcus to revolve around

sex. She explained that it was difficult and at times they planned to be together around other people so they would not give in to their sexual desires. Elaine and Evan wanted to see if they could maintain a relationship out of mutual love and respect if they were not sexually active. Elaine expressed a desire to be in control of her will and chose to focus on her education and the child that soon would command much of her time and energy.

Elaine's Literacy

When I asked Elaine during her first interview what it means to be literate, she provided an answer she seemed unsure of. She said being literate means "to know a lot, to have a wide understanding of things, ...reading a lot of material and books and stuff." She positioned her response next to what it means to be illiterate, which is when "you don't have a lot of knowledge." In a later interview she used the word *illiterate*, unprompted by me, in a colloquial sense meaning coarse or unrefined. In this use of the word, she was discussing how a family friend was explaining some specifics to her and her sister about sexuality and was trying to emphasize to them that they deserved better than "thugs, hustlers and hood rats who sell drugs" as romantic interests. The friend explained that "kissing those boys only lasts so long; it only leads to one thing." The friend, herself, had "got caught up in some stuff" and wanted Elaine and her sister to be able to distinguish between the good guys (a doctor or lawyer, a guy "who's got an honest job") and the bad guys.

In our first interview, as soon as she offered her initial description to me about what it means to be literate, she said, "I wish I knew what literacy means, I'll go look it up. ...I'm a dictionary person." She returned with her cloth bound college edition

dictionary, and as she looked up the word we discussed the idea that many words have multiple meanings; I told her I thought her definition was valid even if it wasn't exactly what it said in the dictionary. She read the first definition listed for *literate*, "The condition or quality of being literate, especially the ability to read or write." She explained that this was the beginning of an extensive definition she found on the page, and she continued to read aloud, "Able to read and write, knowledgeable or educated in several fields. Familiar with literature; well written; one who can read and write. A well-informed, educated person." She stopped reading, seemingly satisfied that at least one dictionary definition closely related to hers.

She stated that she believes that being literate "helps [people] in the world. It can help them go where they want to go." She referred back to the dictionary definition she read and explained that a person would have a hard time getting the job they want if they can not obtain information about what that job requires of a person. In addition, a person who is "not smart or [doesn't] know how to read, like [the dictionary] said, or know how to write, [society will] knock [that person] down so much. …It seems like you would be able to do more if you are literate." The way a person speaks influences what people think about them, she explained. She named what she called Ebonics as an example of a kind of speech that makes others assume "you don't know a lot." People "just kind of assume that you're not a smart person or you don't know what you are talking about. But like, if you talk, you know, proper English, they think that you know more what you are talking about."

She explains that she has been around a lot of different kinds of people and has seen how people put others in categories. She says that the stereotype about people

speaking in dialects which don't conform to standard uses of English are sometimes true, but she also knows people who do not conform to those stereotypes. "One of my friends, she speaks a lot of Ebonics, and she is like one of the smartest people I know." She acknowledges that some people use Ebonics to fit into certain crowds, but she understands that language has different uses for different purposes and part of being literate, knowing a lot or being well-informed, is understanding when and where to use different styles of speaking. "To me," she says, "I think it sounds pretty ignorant, you know, to a certain degree.... I just don't think you go into a job and [say] 'whatcha all fitin' to do up in here.'" In relating literacy to what it can do for a person, Elaine believes "you can never know enough."

When I asked her directly about how she uses her own reading skills to get through the day, she stated that she does not use reading in her daily activities, but once she began talking about all that she reads, it became apparent to me that she does quite a bit of reading across many genres and for a variety of purposes. Elaine discussed with me the ways in which she reads for information, for school, for her religion, for pleasure, and she reads to her son Marcus, but she still does not count herself among "big readers," as she does her grandmother and father. She enjoys reading and writing and has grown to like it more in "the past two and a half years. Whenever I get to read or write, I get all excited about it." She keeps a journal because she finds it "relaxing" to go home after school and write a poem or "write about the whole day" there. She "gets to" write all the time now, and "it's good."

Exchanging reading material about food and nutrition with her family, Elaine believes, is one way, in addition to her schooling, that she prepares herself to enter the

medical field. She says it is important to stay apprised of what "modern doctors think" about various issues, and she notes they do not often agree. Her aunt and uncle are both nurses, and she often compares the decisions her parents make regarding their own health and nutrition with the views of medical professionals in her family and those she reads. She explained that her aunt, uncle, and some doctors do not believe it is necessary to eat organic food or other "health foods," but her parents believe it is very important to do so. I conducted one of my interviews with Elaine in her family's home and our conversation ran close to their dinner time. While we talked in the living room, Elaine's father was in the kitchen preparing a salad that he eats on a regular basis and which he shared with me. The salad contained, among other things, organic greens, organic carrots, sunflower seeds, and a dressing made with a combination of ingredients including flax seed oil and beet juice. (It was delicious!)

Elaine has in her life, as most people do, living examples of conflicting opinions and behaviors, and she is aware of this range of perspectives in her daily life. Her aunt and uncle espouse one theory of nutrition and behave accordingly, and her parents live according to another theory. Both sets of people are informed by extensive formal and informal study, discussion, and experience. Elaine reported to me that she notices this sort of conflict in her daily life in many places, and she believes it is something from which she will benefit if she pays attention. In the face of opposing viewpoints, she will seek out further information on her own and will depend on opposing dispositions to keep her informed about her own decisions. She carries this strategy with her to school and into the decisions she makes about raising her child.

Elaine estimates that she reads for "a couple hours" a day in school every day. At the time of one interview, she was taking an American Literature class which demanded about 45 minutes a day of reading. With the reading from her other classes, she totaled her reading to be at about two hours in school. Once home, she studies and reads for her own interests and pleasure in addition to reading with her son Marcus. She, like other teen mothers I interviewed, claims that before she had her son, she used to be a "big reader where I just can't put the book down." Now, she says, she has to think of her son's needs before she can pick up a book. "I just can't sit and [say], yeah, Marcus, let's read the next page," when she is reading for herself. Still, she emphasizes the importance of reading in order to meet her personal definition of what it takes to be successful. She cites one teacher who tells her that "the kid with the biggest vocabulary is the one to pass that SAT test," and she believes her vocabulary grows through reading.

In reading for pleasure, she names a book she recently read which she speaks of critically, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, by Terry McMillan (1997). She claims a distaste for the book because it was "predictable." She explains, "I don't like really boring books where I just read the first chapters or two, and it's like, okay, I don't want to read any more." She states a preference for Christian books, and her new favorite book is one she recently received as a Christmas gift called *Just Like Jesus* (Lucado, 1998). She explains that the book tells the reader, "God loves you just the way you are but he refuses to leave you like that. He wants you to be… just like Jesus."

In addition to her own reading for school and for her personal and professional interests, she reads with her son Marcus "almost every day." "Usually when we get home we go outside and read, and I always read him, like, a bedtime story. That's when

he knows it is time to go night-night." Before Marcus was born and when he was a newborn, Elaine would read aloud to him because she believed that it was important that he hear the sound of her voice. She read in parenting books and magazines about the importance of reading aloud to children even before they can read themselves.

Elaine connects the writing and reading skills she uses outside of school with those she uses in school. Elaine had taken a creative writing course at her former public high school, and she was taking one at Summit High School during part of the time of our work together. In her class at Summit, Elaine explained, she reads in order to write. In class, she completes assignments in which she "replies" to a reading from class, and she says her reading helps her decide what to write about. In addition, she believes her skill in writing can be a reflection of how well she understood what she has read.

Writing is a passion for Elaine both in and out of school because "you can express how you are feeling" through writing. She reported enjoying her creative writing class at her public high school—"like, there would be probably about fifteen minutes out of every day that we would come into class and just [write] like how were we feeling." But at Summit, her writing teacher "just goes wild with it.... I love that class. Like, through your poems you can express, like, anger or hatred." She mentions a recent shooting at a high school in Littleton, Colorado, as a topic about which she wrote poetry expressing her thoughts regarding school violence.

In addition to writing poetry, she is assigned to write short stories but does not enjoy this genre as a writer. She explains, "I am not a short story person. I mean, I can do it, but I don't really like it. You have to get a character, a conflict, and all. It's not really me. ...I like papers. I like reports and finding information, and I like finding like

what's going on and stuff, okay, like, why is this happening, what is the cause of it and stuff like that." She enjoys the writing she does in her psychology class in which, for example, she wrote a response to the film *Rain Man*, and she has written about issues related to topics such as autism and AIDS. This writing is also connected to her thinking about her future as a medical professional.

Some of the writing she does connects her home and school lives. The writing she described doing for her psychology class is reminiscent of the process of gathering information that is modeled for her and which she practices at home. In another writing assignment she did for an English class, she was required to take some action that required the use of her literacy skills. She wrote a letter to a diaper company and told them she would no longer purchase their product. She returned to the company what diapers she had not used along with her letter and demanded a refund. In a related assignment that asked her to write to a company for information, she used the opportunity to obtain information as well as to challenge the company about their truthfulness in labeling practices. She explained,

> "It was on juice. [I asked] why on the container does it say it's 100% juice when actually [it's not]. And so on the front of it, it says *lite*, and so I am thinking, you know, what's in here? And on the front it does not say Nutra-Sweet. You know how, like, Nutra-Sweet is like horrible for you and can cause like all this stuff, and it didn't say it on the front of the container. So we wrote to the company and asked them, why on your product, you know, you don't have the Nutra-Sweet symbol, you don't have anything. Yeah, it's fake juice, it's like Kool-Aid. It's horrible. Never give it to your kids."

The company did not respond to her request for information, but she still believes it is important to use her reading and writing skills to help her make decisions, and to act on her decisions.

She often reads to inform her parenting decisions--"I don't want to be, like, an ignorant parent." She said that she reads medical books and has used that reading in the care she provides her son. She explained that once Marcus "scratched his eye and it looked like pink eye. So I'm like reading up on it in this book, ok, when pink eye, you know when it's starting to turn red and changing pink and there is crust you need to do this." She learned from what she read that Marcus did not have pink eye and thus, she did not need to take care to prevent the spread of infection. Because she reads medical books, she feels confident in offering first-aid advice to other young mothers. She related to me that, "a little kid at the nursery had like a real bad cut, and it was bleeding real bad, and I was like, oh, I know to apply pressure." She claims that more than once a day she puts to use information that she has read, but confesses that some of the uses to which she puts her knowledge from reading is "not anything big" or important. An important use to which she puts her literacy skill is providing a model of literate activity for her son, as her family does for her.

Marcus' Literacy

When Elaine discussed her own reading and writing, she often connected it with Marcus' emerging literacy. By connecting her son's literacy with her own, she continues the line of family literacy that extends from her grandmother and her parents, passed to

her, which is sustained through to her son. When asked specifically about Marcus' literacy, she says, "I want him to have, like, the widest vocabulary in the world. I believe that a child should always be better than their parents. It's like, your parents have done this, they have taught you that, and then you go on to the next step and do more. I don't want [him] to have to struggle in life because he doesn't have a lot of knowledge."

As Elaine described watching Marcus grow into literacy, she recalled the earliest steps he took toward reading and writing. Elaine detailed a story of engaging Marcus in writing when he was just a few days old. For her birthday, Elaine's mother helped Marcus "sign" her card. "He was only nine days old and my mom… had him put the pen in his hand, and you know how babies stretch and stuff, so he like made a little mark." Elaine continued that method of including Marcus in sending cards to friends and family members and letting Marcus make his mark.

Other early steps toward Marcus' literacy include drawing and coloring, being read to, and being exposed to spoken and sung language. He has had lots of practice coloring and drawing at the child care center at Summit. During our first interview, fifteen-month-old Marcus saw that I was writing as I took notes. He crawled to me and began grabbing for the pen and swiping at my notebook. He clearly had some familiarity with what I was doing and wanted to participate. I gave him some paper of his own and a spare pen, and he set to work "writing," just as I was. Elaine has continued an established pattern of reading to Marcus—"we always read before he goes to sleep"— that she began by frequently reading and talking to him when she was pregnant. It was important to Elaine that Marcus be exposed to a variety of genres of language even *in utero*, so she read him *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950), "Christian"

books, "medical" books (when she was coming down with the flu), magazines, and her homework.

As we talked about Marcus' entrée into literacy, Elaine brought music and other semiotic experiences into our conversation. She explained that when she was pregnant, "he'd really like [when] I played my cello, he would just move all over. ...And even now he loves music in church, clapping, and has his little tambourine and stuff like that. And he likes to sing." Elaine connects Marcus' early exposure to music with his developing sense of language and its uses. She also thinks that interacting with "a lot of different people" and "taking him to different places, let[ting] him see new things, ...try[ing] different touches and tastes" might help build his vocabulary and provide him with a wide range of experiences to draw from in order to help him relate to his literate experiences. "I think it made a difference, you know, doing that when I was pregnant."

Part 2: Elaine's Participation in Reading and Writing Group Meetings

This section of Elaine's case study discusses the kinds of critical interactions she engaged in during our reading and writing group meetings. In the biographical information provided, I have included Elaine's statement of her understanding of literacy—it is "to know a lot, to have a wide understanding of things, ...[and to read] a lot of material and books." The literacy practices she performed in our reading and writing group match well with this definition. Her broad way of thinking about what literacy means pointed to her ability to enact her literacy skills across numerous and specific practical ways at group meetings. If being literate means having a wide understanding of people and perspectives, Elaine's literacy allows her to apply what she

reads to her identity construction for her present circumstance and for her own and Marcus' future. Her knowledge is more than just a stream of facts and information; she puts her literacy to work for her. She articulates the connections she makes between what she reads (and writes) and her own experiences. She uses her literacy skill to explore the expectations she has for herself and those of other people.

The discussion here of Elaine's participation at meetings is grounded in data gathered at a single reading and writing group meeting—the one during which we read and discussed the *People* magazine article referred to in chapter 4. Instead of drawing from several meetings, I chose to stay focused on this single meeting, because during it Elaine exhibited each of the five critical interactions I have previously named. She offered a stance toward the text, she compared the representations in the text to her own experiences, she explicitly acknowledged the text as a representation, she talked back to the text, and she made inter-textual references. Also, her interactions with texts and other group members during this meeting were not surprising in comparison to her participation that I observed at other meetings.

When engaging in critical interactions with a text, participants did not do so in such a way that they occurred one-by-one or in any sort of linear fashion. Their interactions often overlapped and occurred simultaneously. This was true of Elaine's way of interacting critically with the *People* magazine article at this meeting. In this section, I describe Elaine's critical interactions as they happened. I discuss them as they occurred in the unfolding of our conversation, and where more than one critical interaction occurred at once, I discuss them together. In these examples, the critical interactions worked simultaneously to create the kind of textual interrogation that

occurred. Specifically, first, I discuss how Elaine developed a stance toward the text while at the same time she compared the text to her own similar experiences. It was through her comparison that she was able to develop her stance toward the text. Next, I explain how Elaine acknowledged the text as a representation of the lives of teenage mothers while she simultaneously looked across several of the vignettes in the article performing an inter-textual comparison. Finally, I discuss Elaine's method of talking back to the text. As I mentioned earlier, this type of critical interaction is a more direct way of negotiating the meaning of the text and the consequences of the messages that it potentially carries. When a reader talks back to a text, she also acknowledges the text as a representation of a truth and she more explicitly puts forth her stance toward the text. Elaine's way of talking back to the text reveals these other critical interactions that are just under the surface.

The *People* Meeting

The article we discussed during this meeting, "Revisiting the 'Baby Trap,'" as I discussed in chapter 4, is a collection of short vignettes that illustrates a range of lives that former teen parents, mostly mothers, were living in 1999, the year the article was printed. The young women, and a few men, featured here were interviewed and written about in a similar article five years prior, so the parents in this article are all now in their twenties and have children up to seven years old. Laura my collaborator and I distributed this article at one meeting and asked the participants to read it for the next meeting. When this meeting began, it quickly became apparent that no one had read it as we had hoped; no one had time, nor had made it a priority; perhaps the participants enjoyed the way we had read other pieces aloud to each other at previous meetings and hoped we

would do the same at this meeting. Elaine was not at the meeting at which we distributed the article, so we gave her the article when she arrived at this meeting, and because no one else had read it, she had the same experience with the text as the other participants—virtually none. After she was given the piece, she immediately began leafing through it and reading some of the stories to herself while the rest of us were engaged in pre-meeting chatting and getting settled into assembling. She was the first group member who showed interest in particular pieces in the article, and she directed our conversation toward these specific stories.

As we discussed various stories in the article, Elaine often turned to look at her own life and held it up in comparison. The more we talked, the more she was able to examine the stories as more than just stories. She recognized that they were stories told by teen mothers, written by the authors of the article, and represented a way of life that was intended to be closely connected to hers, and in some ways was. She began to understand the significant role of the authors of the magazine in characterizing, not just other teen mothers' lives, but her life as well.

Developing a Stance Toward the Text Through Comparing the Text to Experiences

Elaine started our conversation by giving an overview of her first impression of the article. She said it was "cute" and stated that she believed that the article's intention was to simply inform those who read about these teen parents five years ago "how they're doing now." This perspective reveals a rather simplistic stance toward the text and does not show that Elaine was thinking about it in terms of the authors' motivation for writing the piece or the consequences of their doing so, which ultimately she did do.

She pointed to a story in the article which she said she liked, the story of a young woman named Kim Huffman, a teen mother who "did something with herself." Kim's story offers a textualized life of a teen mother that provided Elaine with a point of comparison around which she judged some of her own past decisions and goal setting, as well as the likelihood that she will be successful in accomplishing her goals. This comparison lead her to develop a more informed stance toward the text along with a more complicated understanding of her own choices.

Elaine directed us to the page in the article where Kim's story begins and summarized it. She then read some of the text of the article which gave us information about what Kim had been doing with her life since the authors of *People* magazine talked to her five years ago. She then began comparing Kim's life to her own, immediately connecting with the details of Kim's story so closely with her own that she imagined she could have, or has had, a similar life and that her own story could appropriately be depicted in this article as well. Elaine's words might help to clarify the scenario.

Elaine: It's page sixty, and right now she has a six year old David and little five-month-old Abigail. And I like it cause it doesn't show like *she's on welfare* [breathy], and um, she's like, she did something with herself. She, like, kind of had like a checklist. ...Um, it says, [reads] It is an impressive list. She graduated from high school, attended cla—uh, college. She went to police academy, became a patrol officer, not to mention, her greatest achievement, providing a stable life to her son [end of reading]. And it's good though, too, cause it's like... I can see in my life how I have changed like from, you know, my *freshman* year in high school, like until now. And so, I kind of like thought about, oh, man, I could be in this little *magazine*. You know in ten years from now, I'll be like a *registered* nurse in a big city, you know, stuff like that.

As Elaine compares her own life to the story of Kim's life in the article, she begins building the case for how Kim's life is similar to her own. Kim has changed since she had her baby and so has Elaine. As she compares her past to Kim's, she states that

her life has changed from when she was a freshman in high school, and she looks to the future and predicts that her life will continue to change much in the way that Kim's has. Elaine calls what she read a "checklist" which provides evidence that Kim "did something with herself." This list is a device the authors have used in the article, which they call a "To Do list," used in the piece to tally Kim's accomplishments as a teen mother. Elaine seemed to understand this list as an inventory of Kim's goals, a list which Kim has created for herself and off of which she has ticked each item as she accomplished it.

We might interpret the list as what Kim herself is quoted as saying in the article, "what she set out to do," but it its unclear from the article how much of this list was planned and is a result of deliberate choices made by Kim, or how much of it is a list that the *People* authors have offered in retrospect on Kim's life so far. Nevertheless, Elaine was at that time working on her own "checklist" and was beginning to work toward achieving some similar goals in her own life as a teen mother; she seems to see this list as a way to compare her own goal-setting to that of a successful teen mother.

One of her goals, Elaine tells us, is in ten years to be a registered nurse in a big city. It is because of the changes she has made in her life from freshman year in high school that she sees herself as able to accomplish this goal. During this conversation, I asked Elaine to tell us how she has changed since her freshman year. She responded by discussing how she has matured and how having her son has made her more serious about her education and career goals. Before Marcus was born, she explains, she *told* herself that she was on a path to college and a career, when actually she wasn't "applying

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herself." Having Marcus forced her to realize that she needed to put herself solidly on a path toward more realistic expectations.

She adjusted what she wanted for her career and what sort of lifestyle she desired as a working mother. She developed a more practical plan for how to meet her goals so that she could have the things she wanted for herself, as well as provide a good life for her son. She also became more resourceful about how to accomplish her goals. Elaine told me in an interview that at one time she dreamed of becoming a pediatrician although she was not in reality working toward that goal. After Marcus was born, her priorities that designate how she spends her time switched from the kind of lifestyle a doctor might lead to wanting to be more available for her son. This meant redirecting her own career aspirations from pediatrician to registered nurse.

Elaine's description of her past and future have many features similar to Kim's story from the *People* article. Kim graduated from high school and began her education that lead her directly into her job as a police officer. Elaine had a similar path marked out for herself; she planned to graduate in the upcoming spring and begin her education toward becoming a nurse. In addition, both Kim and Elaine are teen mothers who maintain "a stable life for their children" as a priority. It may be coincidental that a woman in the article had a style of goal setting and structuring her life which was very similar to Elaine's, or Elaine may have been drawn to Kim's story because it mirrored an image to which Elaine aspired; it provided a narrative inside which Elaine could positively compare the representation of the life of a successful teen mother to her own present and future life.

Incidentally, the changes through which Elaine's describes putting herself during her freshman year in high school as a result of becoming a young mother are contrary to those described in the same article by spokesperson Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Elaine's life changes are ones which allowed her to begin to develop a life story that looks more like Kim's than some of the less successful teen mothers discussed in the article, but Brown has a different theory. She explains that the dropping rates of teen pregnancy are due to a realization on the part of young people that early parenthood is crippling to their options for a viable future. Brown says, "We can conclude that teenagers are getting the message that starting families while still young themselves is a situation where everyone loses."[24] The story Elaine tells us about her life seem to contradict this message. With the birth of her son, Elaine was able to reexamine her life for the goals she wanted to be pursuing and those she was acting on. This comparison allowed her to reevaluate and adjust her actions so that they matched her stated goals of going to college and becoming a pediatric nurse. If her son were not born, it is possible that Elaine would not have sought change and would not have called on the resources she did to begin applying herself toward a college education and a career. Reading Kim's story provided Elaine with an opportunity to discuss these positive changes in her life and a model to which she could compare her relative success. Images of successful teen mothers are sparse, but do exist in spite of the rhetoric from individuals representing organizations such as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy which portray teenage parenthood in the terms of a common cultural belief, as nothing but disastrous. Elaine's stance toward the text resists this image

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[24] See other theories about why teen pregnancy rates are dropping and the consequences in chapter 2.

because she has a textual image and her own experiences as evidence that support an alternative one.

Although motherhood came earlier than Elaine had planned, as for many teen mothers, the added responsibility of motherhood helped her view her life with more meaning and purpose. She is actively applying herself toward choices she is making about her own and Marcus' future. She can imagine what her list of accomplishments might look like "ten years from now," and she believes her life would make a worthy tale for *People* magazine: "I kind of, like, thought about, oh, man, I could be in this little *magazine*." In other words, Elaine believes her narrative, like Kim's, will be a success story and other teen mothers could read about it and they could compare their own successes to Elaine's. Elaine's comparison of Kim's story to her own is a way of validating her personal belief in her own choices in the face of a storm of cultural opposition.

In the next part of our conversation, Elaine's view of her choices becomes more complicated. Now that she has Kim's success story in her arsenal of evidence about making choices regarding the challenges of balancing motherhood with education and career, she can more articulately discuss her own personal understandings of why she is making the choices she is. She and her close friend Estella, another member of our group, pursue a conversation about how having a child has changed their sense of their future and what they will accomplish in their lives. Both say that not only have their goals changed, but the option of meeting their goals has disappeared—they simply must do it. With a child to care for, now they have no choice but to push themselves toward

success. However, they have important but subtly different ways of understanding why

this is. Kim's story helps Elaine talk about how her belief is different from Estella's.

Here, Elaine continues the conversation from where it left off above. Estella

confirms that before Marcus was in her life, Elaine was "just talking" about her goals and

actively pursuing them. Elaine explains,

Elaine: Yeah, basically [I was] talking and not doing it. And now it's like I have not only
me, I have Marcus and I'm trying twi-three times as hard, four times as hard, you
know, like to do it, so. I liked it [Kim's story] cause you kind of could tell, oh
you know, yeah, I did that, or [[I can relate.
                                        Estella: Yeah, now you have]] more of a push.
                                                                              Elaine: Yeah.
Estella: It's more of a, more in depth, you have to be pushed now.
Elaine: Yeah. It's more, I have to-- [overlapping with Estella's next statement]
Estella: And the pushing is—the kid is pushing me to do it. It's like you don't have a
choice, you have to do this.
Elaine: Yeah.
Estella: Before it was a choice.
Laura: How is the kid pushing you?
Estella: Because I want something better for her, [[Elaine: It's more like--]] and she's
[my daughter is], she's more my motivation.
Elaine: It's more a self motivation. They're not pushing us, but it's like I see him and I
want him to have the finer things in life, you know. Like I'm not knocking
people for being on welfare or *nothing* like that, but for me, ...I don't want to
have to, you know, live in the projects and be, you know, getting a monthly check
and all that.... You know, being in the medical field, not only with that skill can I
help people who, you know, don't have health insurance, but I can be leading, you
know, living a good life and like giving back to the community, you know. And
so I see it not only can I like, help Marcus with it and provide for him, but I can,
you know, help other people with it.

Kim's story from the magazine reminds Elaine and Estella how much harder they

have to push themselves to be successful. Elaine says that with Marcus in her life, she

tries perhaps two, three, or four times harder than she did before she was a mother. In

this section of conversation, Estella and Elaine agree that they no longer have a choice to

work harder to be successful, and Estella begins using the word *push* to explain that she

is motivated by her child. When Laura, my collaborator, asks her to explain how the child is pushing her, Estella explains that her motivation is external, it comes from her daughter who is pushing her to succeed. Elaine offers a slightly different perspective. She explains that having a son heightens her sense of her own, intrinsic motivation. She feels self-motivated to provide her son with "the finer things in life;" she is not being pushed in any particular direction by her child. Estella describes the motivation provided by her daughter as a cutting off of other options, but Elaine feels that her path has been more seriously directed toward goals similar to those she had already set before Marcus was born. She sees her son as a catalyst to stimulate her efforts toward her medical career and in effect she will not only provide for her son, but will also be able to "give back to the community." Although Elaine and Estella work together to explain the phenomenon of how a child in their lives has motivated them to be successful, through this conversation, different ways of understanding it evolve.

Elaine's statements again recall Kim's story from the article. Elaine only briefly mentions Kim's story again at the beginning of this segment of discussion ("I liked it… I can relate), still her story resonates. Elaine and Estella are both connecting with Kim's story: They both want to do better for themselves so that they can do better for their children. Elaine examines Kim's story and her own to one more level of complexity. She wants a career where she can gain financial security as well as help others . Kim's job, a police officer, is one that also requires that she give back to her community. Elaine can "relate" to Kim's situation of developing a career that allows her to provide for her son and at the same time provide a useful service to others. She does not want to "get a monthly check" from the welfare system or "live in the projects," which is a story many

teen mothers could tell, but she is intrinsically motivated to develop a career through which she can help people in need.

By discussing her own hopes for her future, Elaine practices at least two critical interactions with the text, two that I have identified as occurring in our meetings. She reveals and develops her stance toward the text through this conversation and she compares the textual representations of Kim's life to her own life story. In her stance toward the text she is publicly engaging in a cursory analysis of what she believes the message of the text to be. She has decided that she agrees with what the text says about successful teen mothers and she approves of its message. Consequently, she has pushed the message of a text beyond merely accepting it close to the realm of scrutinizing what her acceptance of it says about her own life. She is drawn into an analysis which includes a comparison of one teen mother's life to her own.

As Elaine reveals her stance of acceptance toward Kim's story, she explains what it is she agrees with; Kim's story provides Elaine with an archetypal successful and accomplished teen mother--she has done it all. Elaine reads us Kim's list of accomplishments, and we are made aware through the text of the article and Elaine's interpretation of it that she has worked hard to achieve what she has. In addition, her friend Estella offers another representation of the success of teen mothers, particularly about what motivates her to be successful. Both Elaine and Estella verify how hard they must work to achieve their own goals as teenage mothers. Kim's story rings true and hopeful to these young women, especially to Elaine. Her stance toward the text is one of credulity; there is no discussion of how the author of the article, the shaper of Kim's story, may have led us to believe anything about Kim one way or another. Elaine agrees

with the text; she likes the story. She does not overtly scrutinize the text for what it is offering or not offering, nor does she talk about the text as a representation of Kim's life or as one way to tell her story. She does not consider what may or may not have been in place in Kim's life in order for her to achieve what she has.

Possibly Elaine is accepting of this archetype of the teen mother and her life because they can be positively compared to Elaine's own experiences and provides her with a positive image of her own future self. Kim has managed her list of what she "set out to do" and tells the article's readers that she is "right where she wants to be." Elaine believes this story can be her story as well. Putting Kim's story next to the one Elaine tells herself about her own future confirms her belief that it is possible for a teen mother to be materially and professionally successful, raise a child well, personally satisfied with her choices, and a contributing member of society all at the same time. She may not have a choice about whether or not she can be successful anymore—she must for the sake of her son, but with Kim's story to project Elaine's future story, she is willing to accept that representation of her own life.

Acknowledging the Text as a Representation and Inter-Textuality

Just as in the previous section where Elaine demonstrates two critical interactions in close connection with one another, in this section I examine two different critical interactions together as they were enacted together during the *People* meeting. As the meeting continued, we talked about several other vignettes in the magazine article, and Laura and I purposefully attempted to engage the group in some critical interactions with the text, especially practicing acknowledging the text as a representation. We tried to

encourage the participants to examine the text as one version of reality as we looked for gaps in the text: we asked what details of the stories are not told, what those gaps lead us to want to fill in, and what other stories might be told about the person whose story is being related in the article? We also put the authors at the center of our conversation as we interrogated the text for specific features of the article, choices made by its authors, devices they used to elicit certain images and beliefs about its central characters. Elaine took advantage of many opportunities to participate in this kind of critical interactions with the text. She gradually became more confident in her ability to ask questions of the text and to propose possible answers.

She also engaged in a kind of inter-textuality as our discussion of one teen mother's life would remind her of another story she read within this article. She would lead us to gaps that different stories in the article shared, and she pointed out similar techniques used by the authors across vignettes in this same article. After our conversation that considered this issue generally, we decided to read aloud one of the two stories in the article profiling a teen father. Sheila and Elaine offered to share the task of reading aloud, which in our meetings tended to mean that they were allowed the first chance at discussion; the conversation was usually directed by the person or people who read aloud.

The story we chose to examine how the life of a teen father was portrayed in this magazine is about a young man named Kevin, the only single father in the article. Kevin was 29 years old at the time of the second *People* interview. The short piece tells the basics of his life: his job at McDonald's, his $200 rent in a three-bedroom HUD (Housing and Urban Development) apartment, and how he spends time with his two sons. The

article explains that the boys' mother sees them every day for fifteen minutes during her lunch break from a Goodwill warehouse and every Thursday for four hours. The couple never married, and chose to become parents at age twenty-three.

As Sheila began reading this piece aloud during our meeting, she stopped to comment on the detail provided about Kevin and his partner who "'decided to have the baby'" because he was "'getting kinda old'" and "wasn't doing much with his life 'except drinking it away,'...." then Sheila commented sarcastically, "Oh, *that's* a good idea." Directly following Sheila's comment, Laura points out that the article refers to Kevin's son as *the* baby, ironically, as just prior to reading this piece we had been discussing how the magazine piece refers to fathers as *the* father. A teen mother has a child—*it*—and the child has a father—*the* father. This use of articles and pronouns points to the cultural understanding that relationships between teen parents are less significant than the relationship between older parents, socially acceptable parents, and the depersonalizing articles and pronouns draw attention to the fact that teen parenthood is an objectionable situation. In our earlier conversation about the use of the expression "*the* father," the teen participants in our group focus on the age of the parents as a factor in determining if this expression is used or not. An adult relationship between a woman and her child's father is described as more stable and predictable while the relationship between a teen mother and her child's father is assumed to be fleeting, therefore it is acceptable and sufficient to refer to him as *the* father.

As Laura points to the article's reference to *the* baby, we have a short conversation about how depersonalizing pronouns can be in referring to people we care

about. A child of a teen mother is relegated to a category—*the* baby (of a teen mother)—

rather than being discussed in terms of a relationship—*her* baby.

Laura: *The* baby.[laughs]
Elaine: Isn't that crazy?
Sheila: *The* baby.
Kara: *The* baby.
Sheila: He has a name though, or *it*. [Elaine laughs]
Elaine: I know—*it*.
Sheila: People will be like, so is *it*-
Elaine: Don't you hate it when people are like, how's your kid doing? [laughs] Your kid.
Sheila: How's *the* kid. [resumes reading]
...
Estella: But, they only refer to that when they are talking about young / [Sheila: Teenage.] single mothers.

              Elaine: They *do*! That is so-

                                Estella: If I was thirty, [married

                                          Elaine: And married,]

you know-

                  Estella: They'd be like, oh how is your husband?

                                    Elaine: Husband.

                                            Laura: Even,

even if you weren't married, ...no one asks me about *the* father.

In this brief segment of conversation, the teen mothers use their interrogation of

the text to make an observation about cultural attitudes toward teen parenting. They

acknowledge that many people in the US disapprove of teen parenthood and their

discussion reveals that they believe if they were older, their familial relationship would

be discussed in more personal terms rather than in the more generic, depersonalized ways

than the use of *the* father and *it* indicate. In this conversation, Sheila, Elaine, and Estella

are engaging in a critical interaction with this text by paying attention to a convention

used by an author of the article. They are explicitly acknowledging the text as a

representation of larger cultural ideas about teen parents as presented by this particular

group of authors. The teen mothers in the group are critical of the way the authors seem

to accept and make frequent use of the generally applied rhetoric which socially positions all teen parents as worthy of less respect than more mature parents deserve.

To be fair, the authors of the article do, at some points, try to show the lives of teen parents in a positive light, as in the case of Kim discussed earlier, though those positive images are representative of mainstream cultural ways of living and parenting. That is, for example, in the case of Kim, she is married and she and her husband are both educated and have jobs. The photographs that accompany their story shows them in what appears to be a middle class neighborhood with a grassy lawns, and a tree-lined street, and their living room is furnished with a new-looking couch by a large window.

After the conversation about pronouns and articles, Sheila picks up reading again, then stops to offer her commentary on what seems to her like the article's emphasis on the detail that Kevin's children's mother only sees her kids for fifteen minutes on her lunch break from her job at the Goodwill warehouse. Then, Elaine continues to read and follows Sheila's pattern of commenting during the reading. She notes that the article mentions where Kevin works, at McDonald's, which is not considered by this group to be a high status job.

When she finishes reading the vignette, Elaine is the first one to speak, beginning the conversation and setting the course of the discussion's topic. She elaborates on Sheila's comment about where Kevin's partner works, which seems to be an attempt to continue the discussion about these parents' places of employment. We are briefly deterred from this topic by Estella, who speaks next and asks a clarifying question that temporarily changes the direction of the discussion. This change of topic opens the discussion to an interrogation of the gaps in this text. Much is *not* told in the article about

this family that seems important to the members of our group. We helped each other pull

out as much meaning as we could from the text, then we were left to speculate about what

is not told. The transcript here takes up immediately after Elaine finishes reading.

Elaine: I like that [story] cause they had a father, you know, but I think that's interesting
          how they said the mom was only there for fifteen minutes to see the kids at-
Estella: Well, did he take the kids away from her?
Elaine: Yeah, cause he said he was ready to settle down.
Estella: She doesn't *want* her kids, is that what it is, or-
Elaine: It doesn't really say.
                    Kara: What do you think?
                                        Estella: or was it a custody thing or-
Kara: Let's do the same thing we just did [Estella: the courts?] and think about what's
          not told.
Elaine: It's not detailed enough.
Estella: Was the mom, did the mom have problems that [she couldn't take care of them?
                                        Elaine: Work it, *the* mom. [laughs]
]
Kara: [Good question.
Estella: Why does she only] get to see her kids for so many times, you know, is that her
          [Elaine: Why only fifteen minutes.] visitation rights by the courts or, was she like
          a crack addict, or, you know, what was her deal?
Elaine: Good questions.
                    Laura: What do they make it sound like?
Elaine: She's a loser.
                    Estella: That she didn't really want them.
                                        Sheila: She works at Goodwill.
Elaine: That she abandoned them.

In this segment of conversation, Estella helps the group consider the details of this

family's story about which the authors leave us wondering. The authors of the article

have switched their focus on parental roles from what we have read previously—from a

situation where the mother is the primary care provider, or perhaps the only care

provider, to one where the father is caring for his children mostly on his own. This

family's mother, as Elaine points out, "was only there for fifteen minutes to see the kids"

on her breaks from work. With these first statements Elaine reveals her stance on the

text—she likes it because it offers the perspective of a young father, but more importantly, Elaine, with a lot of help from Estella, leads us in an interrogation of the authors' meanings of the representations in the text. She may be ready to take Kevin's side, or to at least honor his efforts as the children's father since their mother seemed to be mostly unavailable to them.

Estella co-constructs this interrogation, and her initial question, "Well, did he take the kids away from her?" could have at least two purposes. Most obviously, she could have been asking for clarification about the details of the article. Estella may be asking her question as a genuine request for more information as if she perhaps missed a detail or two in the story. She could believe that perhaps there is a gap for her that may not exist for others. Alternatively, she could be asking her question ("Well, did he take the kids away from her?") as a way of interrogating how the authors represent Kevin's motives in his role as father. She may be asking the other group members for their reactions to an interpretation of the story that sets Kevin and the children's mother, April, in opposition to each other. Rather than seeing Kevin as Elaine wanted to—as a responsible father stepping up to his role because his children's mother is unavailable to them, Estella had a different conception of their lives. She seems to be questioning the text for indications that Kevin could have actively denied his children's mother access to them. It is possible that Estella's question served both purposes—asking for more information and questioning Kevin's motives—simultaneously.

Elaine's remains faithful to her stance in her next turn. She explains that the article told us Kevin took responsibility for raising the children because "he said he was ready to settle down." Kevin, Elaine seems to be arguing, should be the primary care

provider for the children because he is emotionally prepared for the responsibility of fatherhood. Estella's next question reasserting her stance of questioning April's role: "She doesn't *want* her kids, is that what it is?" Her question again could have at least two purposes. She could be trying on another perspective in order to understand April's situation. Is it that she cannot see her children because Kevin took them (her first question), or does she not *want* to see her children? Or she could be asking the question anticipating Elaine's response—"[the article] doesn't really say"—in order to defend what seems to be her original stance in support of a mother who has to work and has had her children taken away from her. The article leaves enough ambiguity, or a large enough gap, for either emerging interpretation, Elaine's or Estella's, to be worthy of speculation. This brief exchange allows Elaine and Estella to interrogate the text by questioning the authors' meaning specifically by pointing out the gaps in the text that allow for these differing views on the situation.

It seems relevant to note in regards to the story about Kevin that Elaine and Estella have had very different experiences with the fathers of their own children. Elaine's son Marcus' father Evan, as I discussed earlier in the biographical section of this case study, is very present and an important part of their life. Evan sees Marcus every day and often spends entire weekends with him. Elaine and Evan have discussed marriage, and at the time of end of the project, they were seriously considering living together. On the other hand, Estella's daughter Ariel's father has never been a part of her life. He visited Estella and her newborn child in the hospital the day Ariel was born falsely promising his emotional and financial support, and he has not been present in their lives since. Estella expressed to me in meetings and in interviews that when she was

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pregnant her image of what parenting would be like is very different than her experiences with it. She believed that Ariel's father would provide her some support, even if it was only monetary, and because he is not present in any way, her experience has evolved to be very different than what she imagined.

The reason I bring this to the reader's attention here is that the different understandings or constructions that each young woman developed about this story and the ways they critically interacted with the text can be connected to their own experiences with their child's father. They have pointed out an important gap in information in this narrative about the mother's role and her debatable desire to be with her children. The textual analysis offered by Elaine and Estella in some ways represents each young woman's own experiences with the father of her child. Elaine seems to want to believe that Kevin is responsible and adequately fulfilling his role as a father in spite of the needs or desires of their mother about which the article does not provide enough information to judge. Estella seems suspicious of the motives behind Kevin's position as his children's primary care giver, and she also seems suspicious about the role of a mother who may have had her children taken from her, or who may not want to care for her children herself. Each perspective seems to resonate with each young woman's own experiences with the fathers of their children and with their own roles as mothers. The interrogation of the text allows them to build into our conversation pieces of their own identity.

Following this important interrogation, I gently press Elaine and Estella to interrogate the text further after Elaine points out that the article "doesn't say" definitively what the situation is between Kevin and April. Estella then continues her turn which points back to her question about whether *the* mother wants to spend time

with her children or not. As a matter of fact, Estella's next three turns are questions that continue this line of interrogation. She seems to be seeking an explanation for why April is not caring for her children, and their father, Kevin, is. She asks "was it a custody thing," "did the mom have problems that she couldn't take care of [the children]," "why does she only get to see her kids so many times…," if she was exercising her "visitation rights by the courts," and finally she questions if April had issues with substances— perhaps she was a "crack addict."

Elaine interjects that the article is "not detailed enough" for us to answer those questions. Her interrogation can not lead to any definitive answers from what information the authors of the text have offered us. She also reminded Estella that she has called April "*the* mother," positioning her as relatively anonymous, disconnected from and less significantly related to her children than Kevin is. Estella has used this rhetorical device of depersonalizing April's relationship with her children just as we were criticizing the authors for doing with "*the* fathers" in earlier pieces. As Estella speculates about and interrogates the text, she poses questions that are at the same time possible explanations for the situation between Kevin and April. Elaine concedes and acknowledges the gaps by saying "good questions."

Following that exchange, Laura voices a question that presses the teen mothers to articulate what the textual representation of the lives of these young parents are modeling. When she asks "What do [the authors] make it seem like?" Elaine, Estella, and Sheila have a ready answer: they declare that April is made to appear like "a loser," that she "didn't really want [her children]," and that "she abandoned them." Sheila's comment that she works at Goodwill is in support of this generally negative depiction of April as a

mother. This comment could be a calling back to an earlier part of our conversation regarding Kim Huffman and her checklist of accomplishments. Neither Kevin nor April has a career oriented job like Kim does. The information that is offered in the text, some of the other stories we read in the same article, and the participants own experiences as parents all seem to give the teen mothers in our group enough substance to fill in the gaps in this text with the conclusion that April, at least as a mother, is made to be a loser who has abandoned her children.

In the next section of our conversation, Elaine and Estella take turns as they continue to interrogate April's role as a mother. Even after Laura has asked them to draw some kind of conclusion about April, they are not satisfied with the simple judgement they have acknowledged that the article makes about her which is that she is not a good mother, and so they continue to seek information that might help them understand these young parents. Elaine's question propels the interrogation.

Elaine: Do the parents get along?
                              Estella: Does it say that?
Elaine: They made it like …she's not really around. / / /
Kara: I don't know, do you get a sense about their relationship?
Estella: Wait, how old is he?
Elaine: Twenty-nine.
Kara: He's twenty-nine now.
Laura: And you know they decided together to have a baby.
Elaine: Right.
Laura: And then, [she's the one, he's the one who wants to settle down.
                    Elaine: I think that's interesting.]
Estella: Right.
Laura: It makes you wonder who wanted to have babies.
Elaine: Right.

This segment is the end of our conversation about Kevin and his family. We come to the conclusion that we have more questions than answers about them. After

Elaine and Estella pick up their interrogation with Elaine asking if Kevin and April "get along" and Estella asking if the article said anything about that, Elaine makes another statement in support of the conclusion we drew previously about April, that the article "made it [appear]... like, she's not really around." I ask a question out of a sense that there is uncertainty in the group, and out of my own uncertainty, if the group members "get a sense about [Kevin and April's] relationship." My question was an attempt to understand if we were building a stronger case in support of the conclusion that April is a loser, and also I hoped that it would serve as a reminder that we are speculating about the lives of these people. We do not directly address my question, but we end our discussion by stating a few of the facts that we do know, what we have learned from the text. We state that Kevin is twenty nine, that Kevin and April decided to have a baby together—it was no accident, and that he was the one who "wanted to settle down."

Laura makes one final speculative remark about another aspect of the text, another story line that we could interrogate. She says, "It makes you wonder who wanted to have babies." Elaine responds by saying, "Right," but no one takes up the offer to further interrogate the text. We seem to have pointed out as many openings in this text that we wanted to explore, and now we are ready to move on. We have acknowledged the text as a representation by looking at the gaps left by the authors and the word choice they have made in certain instances. We have struggled with and against the definitions of teen parents and their lives as reported by the authors of this article. We have used this vignette to question the authority of the text to define teen parents in generalized and stereotypical ways. This analysis allowed the teen mothers, Elaine especially, to articulate a more complex version of the reality of teen parenting and it allowed her to

indirectly analyze her own relationships. She was able to acknowledge the text as it had purposeful representations of teen parents, which allowed her, again to compare the text to her own experiences. She was also able to look across vignettes, or look inter-textually, at the different representations offered about the lives of teen parents.

Talking Back to the Text by Examining the Authors' Choices

As we continued our conversation at this same meeting over the article in the *People* magazine, Elaine continued to engage in critical interactions with the text, and she lead us to an examination of another vignette in the article during which she engaged in talking back to the text. When a reader talks back to a text, either through speech or in writing, she critiques the meaning she makes of the text through identifying the implications that are carried with that meaning, and then by stating alternate ways of understanding the issues in the text through rewriting a text or retelling the stories in a text. The text can be interrogated on multiple levels which serve the purposes of the reader. One purpose to which talking back to a text can serve is that of making suggestions for or actually rewriting a text or retelling the stories offered in a text. The consequences of the retelling are such that the reader and those who are the subject of the text can be repositioned and re-identified. The power in the text is no longer only wielded by the author; it is reshaped as in a conversation between the reader and the author.

Elaine began her critique as she pointed us directly to the page in the magazine on which a story about teen parents Jeff Mims and Twanna Gaines was found. Part of the transcript of this conversation may seem familiar because it was used in chapter 4 as an

example of how the group examined the author's choice of words during the critical interaction of explicitly acknowledging a text as a representation. The fact that this conversation is useful to discuss two different critical interactions reinforces the notion that they overlap and can easily occur simultaneously. In this analysis, I am looking specifically at Elaine's focus on talking back to the text and I provide more context within which the critical interaction took place.

The article describes Jeff and Twanna, the couple in the vignette we had turned our attention to, as an unmarried couple living together with their four children ranging in age from one to six years old. Elaine brought our attention to this story and she told us, "I'll read this one.... I want to read this one." She read it aloud with an abundance of expression, laughing as she read, and concluded by making the statement, "I think *that* is funny!" The passage in the *People* magazine article containing Jeff and Twanna's story begins:

> Once imprisoned for selling heroine, Jeff Mims says he no longer messes with
> drugs. Fatherhood, he says, has straightened him out. "I shut [dealing] down," he
> says, "just like the flip of a light switch. *This* is my life" (p. 63).

The rest of the piece explains how for Jeff, "even without drugs, it is not an easy life." Between getting to their jobs early in the morning as a teacher's aid and an assistant manager at a restaurant, Jeff and Twanna have their hands full with the added responsibilities of caring for four young children. Their morning parenting activities include getting their children off to school and day care. The article offers other details of their lives including the fact that Jeff holds down a second job in the afternoon, and the family lives in public housing far from where either Jeff or Twanna works. The article's

depiction of this family is supported by Twanna's words in which she "admits that none

of her kids was planned," and though she has "hard days with them," the authors tell us

she has no regrets about having her children.

Jeff and Twanna reportedly disagree about marriage. Jeff says he does not want

to get married, but "swears he'll be faithful," and Twanna is quoted as saying, "I want

one thing from Mr. Mims. A ring on my finger. I'm worth it." Accompanying the story

are two photographs, one of a scene to illustrate the updated telling of their story in

1999—it is of the whole family, apparently in the morning getting ready for school and

work. The other photo, from 1994, is a close-up of Jeff beaming and holding an infant

close to his face with a caption quoting Jeff saying, "I will never leave my kids' life."

Our group's discussion of this story began when I asked Elaine why she was

laughing as she was reading this vignette. The conversation that followed is reproduced

here.

Elaine: ...I think this is funny. They put, like, on young parents, like, *I got five--* [in a
caricatured voice] excuse me, but this is just how they are, let me see how many
kids they have, one, two, I think it's three, four kids. These kind of people put
these little stereotypes on people like, [resumes caricature] *I got five kids with this
// Negro, he better put a ring on my finger, and blah.* You know, I just hate that
.... They do not need to put that. I want one thing and that's for a ring on her
finger. They didn't need to put all that in there. That wasn't necessary, I don't
like that.

Laura: Cause how does she look?

Elaine: Like a hood rat. [laughs from the group]

Estella: Desperate for her husband or boyfriend.

Elaine: Mhm!

Estella: Can't live, she *can't* live
without a man.

Elaine: She can't *live* without him. He was like, oh, I'll be faithful. She's
like, *oh, he better put a ring on my finger. // We got four kids.* [high voice with
the caricature; Estella laughs] And then, this part doesn't sound right either
...when she said... [searching the text] // [reading] *deep down* they love each
other. [Sheila: Mhm.] ....

Kara: Why does that not sound right?

Elaine: *Deep down*, I'm, ok, why don't they--
                                   Estella: It looks like they don't love each other.
Like they don't show that they love each other, [but deep down inside they do.
                                   Elaine: Yeah, deep down, deep down, I love
him.]

Elaine was passionate about her perception of the authors' use of what she saw as

stereotypical descriptions to depict young black parents. She said several times "they

didn't need to put that in there," and she dramatized the scenario with the expression in

her voice. She acknowledged the piece as a representation of teen parents from the start.

She referred to the authors as "these kind of people" who try to present a negative image

of young black people, "Negroes," that she did not appreciate. She seemed to want to

talk back to the text as soon as she had read the vignette aloud to us so that she could

examine the stereotype of a young black woman who has many children, yet is

unmarried, and is pursuing the father of her children for a wedding ring--"She can't live

without him." The expressiveness and play-acting tone in her voice indicated that she

was either mocking Twanna, the woman in the story, or she was mocking the portrayal of

this young black teenage mother. As she immediately began talking about the stereotype

that the authors seem to be building on, she was also critiquing that stereotype. While

she criticized the authors for using this stereotype in the details they chose to reveal about

this family, she is at the same time examining Twanna's life for, in some ways, living

down to the stereotype.

This approach to the text is different from what we have seen from Elaine until

now. In previous discussions she analyzed the text in terms of how the representation of

the lives of the teen parents compare to her own experiences; she looked across vignettes

to compare the authors' choices of the examples they provide, words they use to illuminate certain perspectives on teen parents' lives and details they leave out; and her stance toward the text evolved out of these discussions. In discussing Jeff and Twanna's life, however, Elaine immediately wanted to renegotiate what she had interpreted the message of the text to be. As person identifying with the black teen parent identity, but not its characterization, she seemed to want to immediately reposition the characters in the story by questioning the details provided by the authors which make Jeff and Twanna seem as if they are no more than stereotypically negative images of black teen parents. She talked back to the text and claimed some authority through her own previously discussed experiences about the life of a teen mother who does not have four or five children and is merely waiting around for the children's father to put a ring on her finger (recall again Kim's story of successful teen parenting).

The discussion that followed Elaine's initial comments allowed her to continue to interrogate the stereotype of black teen parents. Our discussion turned to an examination of the relationship within which Twanna has had several children and maintains a desire to marry her children's father. Elaine notes the tension between the two statements "I'll be faithful," said by Jeff, and "he better put a ring on my finger," said by Twanna. The phrase offered by the article's authors, "deep down they love each other" is supposed to work as the expository glue that holds Jeff and Twanna's relationship together in this narrative. However, the members of our group question this statement with at least two possible routes of interrogation. It is unclear from the article if the words are actually stated by the couple ("deep down we love each other"), or if the phrase is a representation of the couple's relationship offered by the authors and, therefore, a condescending

interpretation. On one hand, if we believe that Jeff and Twanna did utter those words, Elaine, for one, does not seem to believe in the truth of the phrase. On the other hand, if the words are offered by the authors, Elaine wants to question the intention that is present behind the phrase. She has trouble explaining why this phrase feels uncomfortable to her, and says, "*Deep down*, I'm, ok, why don't they--." Estella comes through with her half of the construction of the idea and explains, "It looks like they don't love each other. Like they don't show that they love each other, but deep down inside they do." Elaine echoes the sentiment with, "Yeah, deep down, deep down, I love him." In the short discussion above, Elaine and Estella began to renegotiate a message they understood to be just under the surface of the text. They combined the efforts of two critical actions wherein they examined the authors' choices and talked back to the text, thereby engaging in a more powerful critical interaction with the text. Our conversation, transcribed below, continues where it left off in the transcript above.

Laura: You think, why are they together?
Elaine: Yeah, because of the kids.
Laura: Mhm.
Elaine: Shoot, forget it, ... I think that's good to have a father around, but don't be with him if you don't love him.
Laura: In this story, who do we think wants the relationship more?
Elaine: Her!
          Estella: Mhm.
Elaine: Women. They make it like we, oh, [I want, I want to be with my babies' dad. I hate that.
                                        Estella: Mhm, she's acting like she has these kids, she doesn't have a choice.]
Laura: I'll keep having babies and [Elaine: Yeah!] wait till he gives me a ring.
Elaine: Yep, basically.

In this conversation, we further explore the representation of Jeff and Twanna's relationship for several of its dimensions. We briefly examined the ways in which teen

mothers, or possibly women generally, are portrayed as wanting to marry at the cost of self-respect. Elaine claims that being in a relationship for the sake of the children that have resulted from it is a mistake if there is a lack of love and unequal commitment. The article portrays teen mothers as not having a choice about committing to their "babies' dad." Elaine's statements foreshadowed my conversation with her during her second interview about her own prospects for marriage. In that interview, Elaine remarked that she does not want to marry Evan, her son's father, simply because they have a child together. She wants her decision to marry him or anyone else to be based on love and a reasonable certainty of long-term success. Here, she says, "I think it's good to have a father around, but don't be with him if you don't love him."

The critique offered by Elaine and Estella is extended to women more generally. Laura's question regarding who of the couple seems to want the relationship more was met with Elaine's immediately response, "Her!" indicating Twanna—and Estella agrees. This couple may or may not love each other and perhaps they are only together for the sake of their children, their four children. The man promises his faithfulness and the woman nearly begs for a wedding ring—this is a derogatory depiction of women and what they want out of a relationship. Elaine "hates" that "they," the authors of the magazine, make it look like we only "want to be with our babies' dad." The interpretation that Elaine and Estella seem to have generated from the authors' depiction of Jeff and Twanna's lives indicates that women are unable to make it on their own, so they must procure a man, and a reasonably sure method of doing this is to have his children. Estella objects to the depiction of Twanna as a woman who "has no choice" because she "has these kids." Twanna seems desperate and seems not to have considered

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the path that Estella has chosen, to raise her children without their father. Laura's comment, in voicing what seems like Twanna's perspective, resonates with the stereotype of a young, black, probably poor, woman who will "keep having babies" and will wait till the father "gives [her] a ring."

In the last part of this conversation, we looked at a choice made by the authors that centers around a single word. We have established that Twanna wants a ring on her finger from Jeff, perhaps desperately so, and that Jeff prefers to remain unmarried. The specter of the unreliable teen father appears again in this conversation as it has in previous ones. Sheila, Estella, and Elaine together examine how the authors depict this relationship through their choice of a single word. The section of our conversation transcribed here is the same one used in chapter 4.

Laura: And [Jeff] says I'll be faithful...
                              Sheila: He *claims* to be faithful or something.
Estella: *Claims*. [[Elaine: Yeah.]] They always lie. [laughs]
Kara: Is that what it says in here, he *claims*? [[Estella: Mmmm.]]
Sheila: It's like he claims her.
Estella: The word claims is in there?
Elaine: I don't, is it?
Sheila: I don't know, it's something like that. / / /
Elaine: I didn't know, they didn't even need to put that in there, that wasn't necessary.
Laura: [reading] Though he *swears*--
                              Kara: He *swears*, he swears--
                                             Laura: He'll be faithful.
Kara: Which is stronger than claims.
Elaine: That made it like he's a cheatin' scoundrel, and she's like, *oh, baby, but I want to marry you. We got four kids together.* [high caricatured voice]
Estella: I don't care if you cheat on me, I just want a ring on my finger.
Elaine: M-mhm. [Estella laughs]
Laura: Or somehow a ring will make a difference about whether he cheats or not.

The authors paint a picture with words that reveal Jeff as a faithful and devoted father who does not want to get married. Our group seeks clarity about the level of

faithfulness to which he can be trusted, especially in the light of Twanna's pleas for a

wedding ring. The authors' choice of words is essential to understanding this subtle, yet

weighty point because as Sheila points out, claiming to be faithful in this relationship

could be tantamount to claiming Twanna, which is perhaps beyond his rights. Twanna,

according to our previous discussion has not lost her right to choose a partner even

though she has had children. Because he is unwilling to marry her, Jeff seems to have

even less of a right to "claim" Twanna.

Laura checked the text of the article and reported to the group that the word the

authors chose to illustrate Jeff's level of commitment to Twanna is *swears*. He "swears"

he will be faithful. Elaine strongly objects to this form of a proposal because it seems to

her, if he *swears*, "That made it like he's a cheatin' scoundrel." If he has to swear, but is

unwilling to further his commitment to his relationship with Twanna, he most likely is

not trustworthy. Again, it is unclear who is responsible for the language used to describe

Jeff's intentions. Did Jeff himself say he swears he'll be faithful, or did the authors chose

the word before they "put that [detail] in there"? Regardless, Elaine and Estella agree

that this makes Twanna specifically, and teen mothers generally, appear worse off than

and as victims of the men with whom they have children. Twanna is made to sound as

the voice for all teen mothers when she seems to proclaim, in Estella's words, "I don't

care if you cheat on me, I just want a ring on my finger."

Elaine and Estella's probing for meaning in this text and their subsequent

interrogation of its representation of Jeff and Twanna's life reveals the authors'

stereotypical way of identifying women, blacks, teen parents and people with a

combinations of those characteristics. By pointing to the language that defines Jeff and

Twanna, Elaine and Estella also point to language that defines them. They resist the stereotypes offered by this piece of text and the roles that they are designated to play in them. Elaine and Estella do not want to be characterized as fitting a stereotype of which represents them in popular culture as desperate, passive, or thoughtless about the choices they are making. As we have seen in discussions of other vignettes from the magazine, Elaine wants to live the life of a successful mother, an educated and professional woman who does not enter into relationships lightly. By engaging in the critical interaction of talking back to the text she is able to renegotiate the representations offered by the authors who are positioning her and other teen mothers and make a choice about the models of teen parenting she will allow to speak on her behalf.

Finally, our meeting ended with a resolution to literally talk back to the text. Elaine suggested that we write a letter to the magazine reflecting on the article overall and which might call into question some of the damaging portrayals the lives and successes of teen mothers. Sheila suggested we write the conclusion page to the article summing up the overall message of the vignettes. We never actually wrote either text, but our discussion of what could be written and the possible consequences of making those texts public were nevertheless fruitful.

Kara: Well, I liked Elaine's suggestion that we write a letter to the magazine, or your suggestion Sheila, that we write the conclusion page, [[Sheila: Yeah.]] so what did we learn from this?
Sheila: So what does all this mean? [[Kara: What does all this mean?]] Are they saying teen mothers suck and you are never going to succeed…
Estella: …some of us, not all of us.
Elaine: Yeah, not all of us, only some.
Estella: Maybe one out of three. [laughs]
Kara: And what do you need to succeed?
Estella: You need discipline. You need to discipline yourself. You need to motivate yourself.

After reading and discussing a series of vignettes from the *People* magazine article, the young women in our group wish to offer counter-narratives to negative representations of teen mothers they read about. They seem to hope that none of them will be the "one out of three" that will not succeed, and through their own success stories they can live other ways of being a teenage mother. They wish to raise questions about the message of the *People* magazine article that early parenthood is crippling to options for a viable future and that starting families while still young is a situation where everyone loses. They do not believe that "teen mothers suck and ...are never going to succeed." Their choices and actions as teen mothers are examples of efforts to build lives of "discipline" and self-motivation.

By the end of our conversation, Elaine's assessment of the article has changed. When she first encountered the article she viewed it as a report of how the teen mothers on which this magazine reported five years ago are doing now. After she has had a chance to more carefully examine the stories for their depictions of the lives and worlds of teen mothers and the choices the authors make in telling them, she was left wondering if the authors were trying to portray a picture of teen mothers largely as failures. At the very end of the meeting Sheila queries, "So what does all this mean?" Are they saying teen mothers suck and you are never going to succeed...?" Elaine replies, "Not all of us, only some." She seems to have gone from thinking the article is merely information to be read as a sort of update on the subjects' lives to understanding that the article has a bias, a message that says something powerful—whether or not it is truthful—about a segment of the broader population of teen mothers, a group to which she belongs. She does not seem to believe absolutely that the article portrays a negative view of teen

mothers, but it seems to say to her that at least "some" will "never succeed;" on the other hand, some will talk back to the texts that define teen mothers as failures and they will negotiate a different truth, one where teen mothers can be successful students, professionals and parents.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction: A Summary of What I Learned from the Study

The process of discovering the critical interactions that I present in this dissertation was an attempt to describe and define the moment-to-moment enactment of critical literacy as well as to understand some connection these activities have with identity development. The questions put forth by critical literacy educator-scholars, which are discussed in chapter 3 (Luke & Freebody, 1997; Morgan, 1997) relate to my questions in that they ask for an examination of how critical literacy happens and with what consequences. In attempting to address these issues, I have come to understand critical literacy as a complex process that requires the reader to keep present in mind three related and overlapping issues of representation. Critical interactions with a text engage readers in the representational perspective, power and purpose of the text. Questioning representational *perspective* requires readers to attend to whose views of the world are being textually represented, whose views are not, and the effects those perspectives can have on the meanings that can be made of the text. Questioning representational *power* requires readers to be aware of the possibility of multiple understandings that authors and readers have about culture, including notions of gender, sexuality, race, and social class and how those understandings and their underlying assumptions position people and impact readers' and writers' roles and relationships. Questioning representational *purpose* requires readers to interrogate authorial intentions in writing and publishing text and the effects of those intentions.

In my efforts to examine how readers make meaning within these representational possibilities of perspective, power and purpose, I studied the interactions around text with

a particular group of people—teen mothers who attended an alternative high school, in a particular setting—an after school reading and writing group, two of many factors that framed and shaped the interactions with text enacted in our group and that created a particular way of seeing them. Within the context of the presence of these participants in this textual and task-related setting, I looked to answer the research question:

What kinds of critical interactions with texts occur in a reading and writing group comprised of teenage mothers, and with what consequences — especially in terms of the teenage mothers' opportunities to interrogate multiple roles they play, choices they make about what to do and who to be, and cultural stereotypes that frame their identities?

The five critical interactions that emerged from my analysis were presented in two ways in this dissertation: through the case studies of individual reading and writing group meetings and through Elaine's case study. Each critical interaction is surrounded by a complex context that brings together the reader, the text, and the task of critically interacting with the texts we interrogated for particular representations. We also produced our own texts which represented particular perspectives, power relations, and purposes. I identify the critical interactions that emerged from our group's talk as (1) taking a stance toward a text, (2) comparing textual representations to one's experiences, (3) explicitly acknowledging a text as a representation, (4) talking back to a text, and (5) making inter-textual references. The situational factors that influenced the occurrence of these critical interactions are discussed in a latter part of this chapter. I will first briefly remind the reader of some important definitions which ground the five critical interactions.

Definitions in Context

Literacy and Critical Literacy

Early in my dissertation I explained my understanding of some concepts which underlie this research. My interpretations of the concepts of *literacy* and *critical literacy* are relevant in the discussion of the conclusion of this work. In chapter 2, I described *literacy* as being both technical and social. The technical qualities of literacy are the skills of reading and writing, and its social qualities are embedded in meaning making that happens when a reader encounters a particular text[25] in particular contexts with particular tasks or purposes for the reading. In this dissertation, I use the phrase literacy practices which implies both the technical and social aspects of literacy. Literacy practices engage a reader in particular behaviors and conceptualizations of reading and writing text (Street, 1995), including the observable interactions that occur between people around a text which were my focus during my dissertation project. *Critical literacy* (which also has technical and social qualities) involves reading a text with an awareness of the possibility of multiple meanings. This requires an awareness on the part of a reader of overlapping time and place contexts in which meanings can be made *by the author* of a text, and in which meanings *of a text* can be made by various readers. In other words, critical literacy is decoding and encoding (both reading and producing) the potential social, political, and ideological meanings in texts.

Critical Thinking and Guiding Teaching

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[25] In chapter 2, I explain my definition of *text* as whatever signifies meaning through shared codes, conventions, signs and icons. This definition includes but is not limited to printed words on a page.

Although the concept of *critical thinking* was not an explicit focus in this dissertation, related concepts were significant in some ways for my research and presentation of it. In my mind, critical literacy and critical thinking are connected by some of their basic ideas, but each is located in a different philosophical perspective and in different research traditions. In order to understand mainstream academic conceptions of critical thinking and critical literacy, I surveyed five Educational Psychology textbooks that are in current popular use (my estimation based on presentations of them by their large publishing houses). It also seems important to consider the definitions of these constructs offered by popular disseminators of educational knowledge to students whose future work and lives connect with education. If my research has potential for application in classrooms, it seems important to understand what ways of knowing about and acting on critical thinking and critical literacy preservice and practicing teachers encounter in some commonly used resources.

In the five *Educational Psychology* textbooks I examined that teach about critical thinking, I found a range of definitions and ideas about critical thinking usually situated within larger philosophical and theoretical frames of cognitivism or individual constructivism. In these books, I found not a single mention of critical literacy or a related approach to teaching critical pedagogy. Critical literacy and critical pedagogy have their roots in socio-cultural and post-modern philosophies, but if the textbooks authors mentioned social theories of learning at all, they did not include any discussion of critical literacy of critical pedagogy.

In one Educational Psychology textbook authored by Slavin (2000) information on critical thinking can be found in chapter 8, "Student-Centered and Constructivist

Approaches to Instruction." Based on the surrounding information, the author intended

constructivist to mean *individual* constructivist. The text states that critical thinking is

the ability to make rational decisions about what to do or what to believe, for example

identifying misleading advertising, weighing competing evidence, and identifying

assumptions or fallacies in arguments. These activities, the book states, requires practice.

A teacher can help students practice critical thinking by giving students dilemmas, logical

and illogical arguments, or valid and misleading advertisements. The teacher must be

willing to accept divergent perspectives and direct free discussion in the classroom within

this practice.

Another text by Woolfolk (2001), in chapter 9, "Social Cognitive and

Constructivist Views of Learning," says that critical thinking is "evaluating conclusions

by logically and systematically examining the problem, the evidence, and the solution"

(p. 355). Though this book acknowledges that there are social philosophies and theories

of learning, there is no mention of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. Students

engage in critical thinking when they examine a historical document to see if it contains

biases or not. This skill, Woolfolk says, does not always transfer to real-life or current

problems.

Eggen & Kauchak, authors of a third text (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001), say in

chapter 8, "Complex Cognitive Processes" (in a section subtitled "The Strategic

Learner") define critical thinking as "a person's ability and inclination to make and assess

conclusions based on evidence." Critical thinking, they say, makes a person "wary" and

"skeptical" and "irritated" when there is no evidence offered to support a particular

conclusion, when people often have unconscious bias in their arguments, or when there is

no explanation as to the why's of given directives (as in, you should take these pills with food) . The elements of critical thinking are depicted in sentence and graphic formats in this chapter, and they include, domain-specific knowledge, basic processes, motivational factors, and metacognition. A case study is offered to illustrate the teaching of critical thinking that describes a teacher setting up an experiment during which students taste jelly beans in order to determine the class' favorite flavor.

While these textbooks do not provide wrong information, they do provide limited definitions, descriptions and applications of critical thinking. They present knowledge as discreet, finite, static and ultimately true. Even when a textbook acknowledges that learning can be social and historically situated, it suggests that there are some texts that have biases and others that do not (i.e., by asking students to examine a historical document *to see if it contains biases or not*). Advocates of critical literacy contend that every text is biased, even those we write ourselves. In addition, describing a critical thinker as "wary," "skeptical" and "irritated" shines a derogatory light on the person who should perhaps not be so testy and accept the information and explanations she is offered. I could continue to critically interrogate these textbooks, but that is not the point of this discussion. Rather, I endeavor to represent the philosophical and pedagogical orientation offered by these texts in order to reveal how text producing institutions, and by association, educational institutions, present what critical thinking is and also that these texts offer no mention of critical literacy or critical pedagogy. The implications are weighty for teacher education programs and for assisting preservice teachers as they learn about the theory and practice of critical thinking and critical literacy. If no other

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perspective is offered, these presentations of critical thinking may be the only

conceptualization students of educational psychology have of criticality.

In addition to surveying textbooks, I also perused the discipline-based standards

put forth by national education organizations in math, English, and social studies for their

expectations for student learning in each respective discipline. Specifically, I wanted to

know if these standards included an expectation for helping students develop as critically

literate participants in local and distant contexts of their lives. Only the National Council

of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards make mention of critical thinking

specifically, but do not mention critical literacy per se. The National Council of Teachers

of English (NCTE) standards make references to criticality as an important way of

learning, and the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS) says students should

practice being critical readers.

The NCTM Communication Standard states that,

"Instructional programs from prekindergarten through grade 12 should enable all

students to organize and consolidate their mathematical thinking though

communication; communicate their mathematical thinking coherently and clearly

to peers, teachers, and others; analyze and evaluate the mathematical thinking and

strategies of others; use the language of mathematics to express mathematical

ideas precisely. ...They may benefit from the insights of students who solve the

problem using a visual representation. Students need to learn to weigh the

strengths and limitations of different approaches, thus becoming *critical thinkers*

about mathematics (emphasis is mine)" (National Council of Teachers of

Mathematics, 2003).

In this standard, critical thinking is akin to communication, or making their thinking public in order that students can consider alternative approaches to problem solving. As represented by this standard, mathematical thinking is social.

The NCTE standards make no mention specifically of critical thinking except in Standard 11, which states "Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and *critical* (emphasis is mine) members of a variety of literacy communities" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2003). The elaboration of this standard explains, "The last two standards build on the vital recognition that literacy has both social and personal significance for language users." Standard 11 stresses the use of collaborative learning as a way for students to use the language arts to find and develop a sense of community.

The NCSS standards are introduced with a long statement including this quote:

"If we want our students to be better thinkers and better decision-makers, they must have contact with those accustomed to thinking with precision, refinement, and clarity. We must encourage them to be *critical* (emphasis is mine) and copious readers of the best media, print, audio, and video content, writers of reflective essays, and critics of social phenomena. An awareness of the relationship among social studies content, skills, and learning context can help us establish criteria for developing reflective social inquiry. This disposition toward reflective thinking is essential if we wish to foster democratic thought and action" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2003).

These standards also advocate that in an excellent social studies program, educators will work with students in developing their skill related to the above standard. The skills that are to be promoted are "acquiring information and manipulating data; developing and

presenting policies, arguments, and stories; constructing new knowledge; and participating in groups." This standard and these skills walk a fine line between philosophies of learning that are cognitivist or individualist in nature and those that are oriented in social philosophies of learning. They suggest that a positive model for thinking and decision making is one that involves thinking with precision, refinement, and clarity. The skills involved in social studies learning include acquiring information and manipulating data. These pieces of the standard hint at a quest for a unified truth in social studies knowledge. On the other hand, there are many indications that these standards are based in understandings of learning as social. For instance, reading and producing texts as well as reflection and critique of social phenomena are emphasized along with fostering "democratic thought and action." In addition, developing and presenting policies, arguments, and stories; constructing new knowledge; and participating in groups are activities that anticipate interaction either in the process or products of practicing these skills.

Connecting Thinking and Literacy

Looking at conceptions of and connections to critical thinking and critical literacy points to the assumption that thinking and literacy are tied in significant ways. In his book *The World on Paper* (1996), David Olson explains the connections between thought and literacy as he understands them. To begin, he defines literacy as having two main components. The first is competence with a script. Different scripts, he explains, recruit different competencies in a reader. Second, literacy requires participation in a discourse of some textual community, though literate thought is not restricted to the medium of

writing—it is not enough to know the words on the page to claim literacy. Scripts serve as a model for speech, though no script provides an adequate model for the illocutionary force of that speech. He explains that there is a close relationship between literacy and cognition. Writing provides representations of thought; therefore, a major feature of literate thought is that it is represented in script. Representations of thought, for Olson, include explicit statements, maps, equations, and diagrams, and these representations are about thought, not about the world. In other words, thoughts, or their representations, mediate the world "as it is," if the world "as it is" is knowable. Literate thought, Olson says, is premised on a self-consciousness about language. Writing provides a relatively explicit model for the intentional aspects of language and renders them conscious. Anything can represent anything else, a fact which Olson says grants script representational autonomy. Representations, says Olson, exist independently of a speaker-writer and of the world. If any script, or any text, can mean anything, the question then becomes how are representations "to be taken"? How are we to understand anything in representational form, the only form through which we can communicate?

Olson says that we have many choices about how we can "take" representations. Are we to understand them literally or metaphorically, as factual information or as relational models, as a cause or an effect, as a claim or as evidence for a claim? The inferences we make when we try to understand representations, are not derived from statements themselves, but from ways of taking those statements—ways of interpreting them. In addition, statements, or expressions of thought, do not have implications themselves, but speech acts do—meaning comes from how a statement is taken by a reader. Representations are revised on the basis of evidence, which places the gap

between knowledge and opinion at stake. What evidence is used and who finds it convincing is part of what it seems Olson means by participating in a textual community. "Literate thinking, then, involves understanding the role of evidence in the assignment of illocutionary force to expressed propositions" (p. 280). "All thinking involves perceptions, expectancies, inference, generalization, description and judgment. Literate thought is the conscious representation and deliberate manipulation of those activities."

Olson explains critical reading as "recognition that a text could be taken in more than one way and then deriving the implications suitable to each of those ways of taking and testing those implications against available evidence." Olson acknowledges social factors of literacy and a negotiation of meaning making in his assertion that meaning comes from how statements are "taken." However, he has missed the spirit of critical literacy when he implies that the individual is the final maker of meaning. He does not suggest any awareness of cultural or political forces at work in the meaning making. It seems that he makes the individual reader responsible for meaning making when how statements are taken are wrapped up in cultural, political, and historical assumptions about ways of taking. His notion of a textual community, which quickly drops out of his discussion, has potential in reclaiming this important social aspect of the connection between thought and literacy. He does not discuss that a writer must anticipate how a reader might take her statements and attempt to predict how a particular representation might be taken except in his mention of illocutionary force which assumes a writer with intention on the other side of the script. Critical literacy assumes that multiple readers' interpretations are always anticipated in the form and function of the writer's representation.

A Critique of Critical Literacy

In the discourses of scholarship about education, critical thinking is more often compared to critical pedagogy and *critical literacy* falls out of the discussion. Critics in the camps of either critical thinking and critical pedagogy try to differentiate each perspective, but others criticize them for having similar flaws. The discussion of the differences and similarities between critical thinking and critical pedagogy can be extended to include critical literacy, situating critical literacy as closely aligned with a variety of critical pedagogy that can be described as more familiar with classroom teaching and learning.

Burbules & Berk (1999) offer a succinct and apt comparison of critical thinking and critical pedagogy. They outline the contrasting notions each perspective offers about what it means to be "critical," and they suggest some alternative ways to think about "criticality." What critical thinking and critical pedagogy have in common, they say, is the view that individuals in "a general population in society... are to some extent deficient in the abilities or dispositions that would allow them to discern certain kinds of inaccuracies, distortions, and falsehoods [that] limit [their] freedom" (p. 46). A difference between critical thinking and critical pedagogy lies in the explicitness with which each tradition views this concern. Critical pedagogues see the world as "fundamentally divided by relations of unequal power" (p. 46) and are concerned with educational knowledge and cultural formations that perpetuate or legitimate the status quo. Critical thinking proponents "cite similar concerns but regard them as subsidiary to

the more inclusive problem of people basing their life choices on unsubstantiated truths—

a problem that is nonpartisan in its nature or effects" (p. 46).

Burbules & Berk cite the main activities and goals of critical thinking as similar to those discussed in the textbooks examined above. To be "critical" for critical thinking proponents is to be more discerning in recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, and truth claims based on unreliable authority, and so forth—the problem lies in irrational, unexamined living. If we do not examine our lives and choices, we are not free; we do not control our own destinies. The self-sufficient person is the liberated person. As suggested in the textbooks, teaching students to think critically must include allowing them to come to their own conclusions, but thinking critically has nothing to do with thinking politically. It assumes no set agenda of issues that must be addressed and precludes identifying any fixed set of questions to be asked let alone a fixed set of answers. Critics of critical thinking have attacked it for its rationalistic epistemology that is white, Euro-centric and masculinist in nature. They argue that its agenda is so normalized that it has become individual. It's agenda is to find truth as truth that will perpetuate the current structures of power.

Critical pedagogues "regard specific belief claims, not as primarily as propositions to be assessed for their truth content, but as parts of systems of belief and action ... that have aggregate effects within the power structures of society" (p. 47). This tradition sees no distinction between thinking critically and thinking politically. For critical pedagogy, it makes no sense to talk about issues in a non-relational, item-by-item basis. It wants to "draw in for consideration factors that may appear at first of less immediate relevance" (p. 56). Gore (1993) distinguishes two separate strands of critical

pedagogy. One emphasizes a social vision that is concerned with articulating critical theories of education. Significant constructors of and supporters of this strand include Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren. Another strand emphasizes pedagogy and context-specific instruction, which is supported by such people as Ira Shor and Paolo Freire. The variety of critical literacy I am in support of is in theory and practice more in line with this second strand which emphasizes the *pedagogy* over the critical in critical pedagogy. Freire's brand of critical pedagogy, especially in the latter part of his life, includes a sentiment against elitism that can come with activities and discourses of prestige in the academy. He suggested a greater focus on classroom practice and viewed literacy as key in examining and changing the power structures that exist in a society (1970). For Freire, illiteracy was powerlessness and dependency on a generalized way of living. Further, literacy was not about developing the skills of reading, but it is a way to bring awareness to one's self-concept. As a result of literacy, the desire and means to change one's self and one's social group comes about through collective thought and action. Literacy creates dialogue, not just with those who are in the room, but with people everywhere who communicate through reading and writing. For critical literacy and critical pedagogy, self-emancipation is contingent upon social emancipation; that is, individual criticality is intimately linked with social criticality.

Detractors of critical pedagogy say that it "crosses a threshold between teaching critically and indoctrinating...; [it] seems to come dangerously close to prejudging" the conclusions at which criticality must arrive. Critical pedagogy has also been subject to criticism as rationalistic and its "purported 'open dialogue' [that] in fact masks a closed paternal conversation" (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 57).

Both critical literacy and critical pedagogy exist within a historical context as discursive systems with particular social effects (Cherryholmes, 1988; Gore, 1993). That is, both make claims that frame the world and characterize different positions in the world. Any theory that claims sovereignty, as both critical thinking and critical pedagogy do, identify themselves as deeply akin to one another and point to their own limitations (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Burbules & Berk support a practice of criticality that asks what are the conditions that give rise to critical thinking, that promote a "sharp reflection on one's own presuppositions," and that allow for rethinking the conventional and support thinking in new ways (p. 59). They support a criticality that encourages interpretation, which suggests creating meaning and seeking out several alternative meanings. Multiple, unreconciled interpretations, they say, might yield benefits beyond theoretical or social solidarity and beyond any predetermined understanding or change, and could instead encourage fecundity and variety. In other words, "Criticality is the opposite of hegemonic" (p. 61). They support that one important part of criticality should include developing an ability to reflect on one's own views and assumptions as features of a particular cultural and historical context. We should be able to question and doubt our assumptions, especially the ones, paradoxically, without which we do not know how to think and act. Finally, they say that criticality is always social in character partly because it is a function of collective questioning, criticism, and creativity. Criticality is social because individuals are relationally shaped; the activities of criticality often arise from interactions within the challenging views of others and which take a variety of forms.

In my work, like a critical pedagogue (though I do not name myself as such), I advocate for social change, for a focus on the structures of power within which we live. I also support a variety of ways of being as our social structures are reshaped. Not all teen mothers are alike in positive, powerful ways, as they may often appear to be in my representation of them, any more than they are alike in stigmatized, stereotyped ways. The kind of critical literacy in which I intended to engage the participants of our reading and writing group supports developing an ability to reflect on possible textual meanings as well as on our own views and assumptions as features of particular cultural, political and historical contexts.

What is Critical About Critical Literacy?

This discussion of different ways of being critical leads to a consideration of where textual meaning may lie. If any text can have multiple meanings, it does not follow that meaning resides in a text. However, even the staunchest advocates of critical literacy often treat text as if it contains meaning when texts are written for an understood audience ("the reader") and sent out to be read and apparently to stand on their own.

David Olson (1994) calls this phenomenon the autonomy of text. He explains that through a complicated history of the development of written language, written texts have come to be seen as having the potential to express definitive meaning which adequately represent a writer's intention. The invention of graphical and lexical devices for indicating not only what is said, but also how it is to be taken, led to the possibility that text could stand as a representation of a writer's intention. "As long as knowledge was thought of as in the mind, the usefulness of writing was limited; writing could only be

seen as a reminder not a representation. To create representations is not merely to record speeches or to construct mnemonics; it is to construct visible artifacts with a degree of autonomy from their author and with special properties for controlling how they will be interpreted" (p. 196).

The degree to which a text can be autonomous is at issue here. There is an extremely large number of symbols in any given system of language and representation that have the power to induce intersubjective understanding. However, critical literacy proponents argue that no text is really autonomous because the signs and symbols that make up any text have behind them history, culture, and ideology that make their meaning.

In the reading and writing group, we were able to read texts independently of one another and without the help of the author—in this sense the text was fairly autonomous. We could make up our own interpretations of what the text might mean, but we were not doing this independently. The multiple voices behind every use of language in reading or writing makes this a social act, not one independent of others. The author's voice, intention, and representations are present in the text, but they were not a unique and contained creation of the individual who wrote it. And as the preceding chapters show, once we started discussing the meaning we were making of the text in the context of our reading and writing group meetings, we all participated in the interrogation of other potential meanings, exceeding those the author might claim.

To summarize, literacy and thinking are strongly linked, and therefore, in some ways, critical literacy and critical thinking are linked. Olson states that writing is a representation of thought, but does not allow us a direct link to the "real world," only to

thoughts. Olson says that texts have some autonomy in meaning because there is some

agreement about the meaning of the symbols that make up systems of representation (i.e.,

writing). However, how a text is taken is what determines its meaning in local contexts

and in textual communities. How texts are taken by different people under a variety of

circumstances (e.g., historically, politically) brings textual autonomy into serious

question. In other words, our participation in multiple textual communities, which all

readers do, determines our meaning-making of texts. Critical literacy is looking across

textual communities to generate and interrogate various meanings that are made under

various circumstances. Burbules & Berk suggest that the most fertile kind of criticality

we could conduct and teach, the most challenging collective and individual way of

thinking and acting, that is self-reflective, creative and that results in multiple

unreconciled interpretations of texts. In the next section, I discuss more explicitly the

sense of these ideas in the context of the reading and writing group.

The Context of Critical Interactions

Burbules & Berk (1999) state that certain conditions must exist for criticality to

occur. These conditions include: possession of a certain kind of personal character by

the reader, communicative opportunities, challenging and supportive social relations in

the context where criticality occurs, and contexts of difference that present us with the

possibility of thinking in alternative ways. These conditions were present in our reading

and writing group. By personal character, Burbules & Berk refer to criticality as a way of

being, as well as a way of thinking; in other words, criticality is part of one's identity.[26]

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[26] Burbules & Berk refer to identity here as a static set of features, or a core being, that is a person. I have
argued against this position on identity development. However, the context of criticality supports a

It involves a relational way of being as well as an intellectual ability. The identity of a person who engages in criticality is marked, for example, by a tolerance for (or an enjoyment of) "[moving] against the grain of convention" and a willingness to admit to being wrong—which may be a function of the supportiveness of the environment. This condition may not have been present from the beginning of our meetings and it may not have been met at every meeting. However, at our most productive meetings, as far as interrogating and interacting critically with text, the active identity features of the participants included an interest in thinking against texts and occasionally against each other.[27] Communicative opportunities are situations in which people can discuss texts and ideas, such as in our reading and writing group. Challenging and supportive social relations were part of our group dynamic, which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Burbules & Berk continue by saying that these conditions allow for the development and exercise of criticality. They are educational conditions. "Criticality is a practice, a mark of what we do, who we are, and not only how we think."

These conditions, in some ways like the factors that I have outlined in my own research, come together in order for critical literacy to occur. I have stated that critical literacy occurs in the coming together of reader, text, context (of which the task is part). In my research, willing participants attended the reading and writing group meetings in order to read texts about their lives and with the task of interrogating those representations of themselves. At the beginning of the project, my collaborator Laura

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dialogically constructed identity such as they describe—a person who interrogates conventional interpretations, as well as an interlocutors' first response to a text, and a second person (the interlocutor) who is willing to adjust his or her own thinking in light of others' views or to more complex understandings.

[27] As I discuss later in this chapter, in most of our conversations at our meetings we supported one another's ideas and encouraged each other's view points. We did occasionally disagree.

and I worked to ensure that all the participants were interested in the ideas behind the work before they were invited to meetings. They appeared to enjoy thinking in complex ways about texts, and sometimes enjoyed resisting them. Not always, but in many cases, resisting the messages in a text we read was resisting conventional ways of thinking and being. In many other cases, the texts themselves represented a resistance to conventional thoughts and lives. The participants were surprisingly open to listening to one another and allowing space for divergent talk.

Certain combinations of the conditions that Burbules & Berk outline contribute to a complex system that may have influenced the occurrence of critical interactions in the reading and writing group of my study. This system represents many differing ways whereby readers, text, and context combine to yield critical interactions. I examined aspects of this systemic coming together in the research conducted. Others must be subjects for future research. In closing, I want to outline some of the systemic features that, in various combinations, may induce the occurrence of one or more critical interactions:

- Knowledge and experience readers bring to a task (e.g., readers as story-makers)
- Relevance of personal connection to a text (reader/text factor)
- Degree to which a reader agrees or disagrees with the text (reader/text factor)
- Genre and subject matter of the text used (issues of the text and context)
- Presence or absence of a supportive environment for discussing sensitive issues (reader/context factor)
- Relationship between the texts we used in the reading and writing group and the ways we talked about them (text/task factor)

One of the factors listed here that can be discussed in light of what I learned from my research is the centrality of a supportive environment for discussing sensitive issues amidst the teaching of critical literacy. An analysis of the data I gathered for this study, not yet completed though it bears anecdotal commentary, involves examination of critical interactions that occurred around the texts of our conversation. This kind of analysis, while not the focus of my research, could prove fruitful in providing a more complete picture of the conditions and features of the occurrence of critical interactions with texts. In our group meetings, there was generally a friendly, agreeable environment. Rarely did we experience conflict, and when we did, the disagreements were minor and short-lived. It seemed as if our unspoken code of conduct included respectful listening and a willingness to at least give the speaker the benefit of the doubt that her view had some validity, even if that was not readily apparent. We did not necessarily expect to agree with one another, but it never appeared that a differing interpretation or perspective was rejected, even if it was temporarily, often gently, resisted.

An example occurs in what I have been calling the *People* meeting, when Estella disagrees with the general sentiment of the discussion and tries to give Faye, the protagonist in the story, the benefit of the doubt in her decision to leave her child behind and enter military service. The group made room for this divergent view and waited patiently for Estella to explain her perspective. Estella offered little explanation until much later in the meeting when Elaine and Estella talked about the issue in the context of their friendship as they helped each other make decisions about their lives as mothers and as young women entering the close of their high school careers.

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In short, the environment for talking about texts and identities was unusually supportive, at least in comparison to the environments of typical classrooms. I hypothesize that part of the support and respect between group members was due to the fact that the teen group members had many experiences in common and experienced similar consequences for their identity development. They all have been, at one time or another, socially stigmatized for one of the most important, or at least obvious features of their identity, their motherhood (which implies to many people some conclusions to be drawn regarding their sexuality). In facilitating the group, Laura and I found ourselves decreasingly directing the conversation and monitoring the floor of the discussion because of the participants' abilities to manage this themselves.

Of the texts on which we focused most of our attention (including printed text, video recordings and photographs), the text of our conversations was the least interrogated and the most readily accepted. Our patterns of discourse parallel many of the findings of Tannen's research in her examination of gendered talk (1994). While it was not the focus of this study to examine these patterns, they are worth mentioning here and worth further investigation. Tannen has conducted research studying cross-gendered talk as well as single-gendered talk, and since our group was all female, the latter is the focus of discussion here. Her research and others' (Conley, O'Barr, & Lind, 1979; Lakoff, 1975) has revealed the following patterns in talk between females. Tannen observed the patterns of discourse listed here in conversations of females aged fifteen (tenth grade) through adulthood:

- Females seek to cooperate and avoid conflict in conversation.
- Females desire rapport building over power in conversation.

- Females in conversation with one another align their bodies and their gaze in orientation to each other. They are physically more still than men in conversation, and they touch each other more than men do.

- Females' talk is more tightly focused and more elaborative around a focused topic than men's talk. Females tend to find it easier to find topics for conversation with one another than men do.

These general interpretations of women's talk can easily be applied to our own group's discussions about texts as well as other informal conversations. Because I am a female who participated in these conversations, my interpretations of our talk are located in gendered cultural ways of understanding the intention and effect (Tannen, 1994, p. 20) of what was said during our meetings. Our gendered patterns of talk have undoubtedly influenced the kinds of critical interactions I noticed, and the ways in which I saw them enacted.

This example illustrates one way that contextual features of our group's system of activity combine to induce critical interaction with text. This research project reminds us of the existence of other combinations of features that contribute to occurrences of critical interactions, as I listed on page 241-242. The combinations of features I listed and others that emerge from other settings were readers interact around text bear closer examination in future research designed specifically to pursue them.

Critical Literacy In the Classroom

If, as Burbules & Berk say, the conditions for criticality are educational conditions, then the findings of my study have potential for extending into realms where

education is a concern, both in and out of the classroom. Short and her co-editors, in their introduction to a special edition of *Language Arts* (2002) on critical literacy, say that "a critical literacy curriculum focuses on building awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead. It is based on the recognition that reading does not take place in a vacuum, but includes the broader social, cultural, historical, and political context" (p. 371). Remove the word *curriculum* from that statement, and it could apply to critical literacy in any location. In the same issue, Shannon (2002) discusses his family's use of critical literacy in everyday life in and out of school. He says, "At school, we use literacy to struggle against the imposition of standardization... and high-stakes testing. At home, we attempt to escape the technologies of a society of control.... On the street, we seek the power to represent ourselves to others in order to participate with them to make history and culture" (p. 415). Critical literacy crosses the boarders of schooling. While it may be a schooled way of thinking, critical literacy, involves people in reading the world and the word by using dialogue to engage texts and discourses inside and outside the classroom (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002). Literacy practices can also engage people in transformative action, both in and out of school. In the reading and writing group, we explored and created multiple images and representations of teen mothering and teen mothers. Our activities together employed a language of critique (Shannon, 2002). We interrogated the relationships of power implicated in positioning various producers and consumers of media that represent teen motherhood and teen mothers in conflicting ways. It is possible that our by critically interacting with texts, we have participated in the discussion and development of alternative actions in our daily lives.

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If critical literacy is to be a regular and significant part of schooling, as many literacy scholars advocate, it is important to consider what lies behind a curriculum that supports a critical way of thinking about the world. Through my reading and research I have encountered and formulated questions that attempt to get behind the assumptions of critical literacy, not in a classroom, but in educational opportunities occurring outside the classroom and as a way of life. I discuss these questions below along with some possible responses:

Should we support a model of helping readers/students fit into society or develop the tools to change it?

Seitz says a teacher must always ask whether to teach with the goal of helping students fit into society or convincing them to change it (2002). My contention is that we should do both—teach them both mainstream academic knowledge and transformative academic knowledge, rely on cultural/personal knowledge and popular knowledge to help them connect to what they are learning and to help them understand school knowledge and ways of using it.[28] Critical literacy allows for an examination of cultural meanings as represented in textual form. It helps students develop and practice the skills –in appropriating meanings that are useful and sensible, and in resisting, rejecting, or taking other action in response to those that are not. The hard work of examining one's own assumptions—the difficulty of letting go strongly held beliefs--sometimes leads readers-

[28] This scheme comes from James Banks' (1996) conception of five types of knowledge students should both be aware of and make use of in every classroom setting. The five types are 1) personal/cultural knowledge—what we bring to school from home, 2) popular knowledge—what we learn from the media, 3) mainstream academic knowledge—knowledge that is canonical in the disciplines, 4) transformative academic knowledge—disciplinary knowledge that is changing the ways scholars think in and about their field and which may over time become mainstream, and 5) school knowledge—the knowledge that is

students back to a reconstructed stereotype. In our reading and writing group, the teen mothers would occasionally resist and simultaneously accept a stereotype about them. This points to the need for more research for understanding the complexities behind critically interacting with text, perhaps with attention to bridges among: the realization of new ideas, the acceptance and deep learning of those ideas, and the repudiation of conflicting, long-held beliefs.

Why should readers be prepared to resist text?

Lewison and her colleagues (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) synthesized numerous definitions of critical literacy into four dimensions: 1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple views, 3) focusing on sociopolitical views, and 4) taking action to promote social justice. Though none of these dimensions can stand alone in the enactment of critical literacy, the last one points to the answer to the question about why student should be prepared to resist text. Lewison, et al., and their students engage in praxis[29] as they "analyze how language is used to maintain domination, how nondominant groups gain access to dominant forms of language without devaluing their own language and culture, how diverse forms of language can be used as cultural resources," and how to promote social justice and work to change existing discourses through action. This work does not always involve resisting text, but it opens up and enlarges conversational spaces for students to discuss issues that are significant in their

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presented through students via teacher tools such as textbooks, formalized curricula, and published lesson plans.
[29] Acting upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1970).

lives. It involves being more than a spectator in the construction of culture and requires thoughtful participation in a range of discourses.

This perspective expects a lot from students and reveals further questions that deserve attention from educator-researchers. Some of those questions are: What action on the part of readers is expected from and appropriate in response to critical literacy and critical literacy instruction both in and out of the classroom? What is meant by *action*, and what happens when students resist criticality? Where do sociopolitical views come from? Do social-political theories come from close scrutiny of a reader's local contexts and her roles in them, and if so, what does it mean for a person's identity to disrupt these?

Some Implications of Critical Literacy for Teaching and Teachers

Critical literacy allows previously marginalized or invisible cultural forms into institutional spaces such as classrooms. It would perhaps be idealistic and naïve to say that critical teachers act in ways that support what they value in the classroom, and that they model the kind of action they hope students will carry across multiple settings—in classrooms and other places. This is no easy task, and while certain teachers may try to engage their students in such ways, cultural myths do much to prescribe meaning onto their pedagogical practices and identities. It is not just students who struggle with multiple representations of cultural meaning and dialogic identity; the work and identities of a teacher is also at stake in contexts of critical literacy. Britzman (2003) identifies three cultural myths that contradict critical views of what teachers should do and who they should be. The three myths are: 1) everything depends on the teacher, 2) the teacher is the expert, and 2) teachers are self made. These myths do much to "authorize

discourse[s] on power, knowledge and the self" that promote the impossible desire of embodying a non-contradictory self, a self which is capable of asserting a form of control that accepts these authoritative discourses in unambivalent ways (p. 223). In other words, teaching and a teacher's identity are texts informed by many discourses, and teachers must work to understand and balance inconsistencies in their teaching as well as in themselves as teachers and other identities. Critical literacy in the classroom implies a critical reflection on one's own practice and a willingness to continually remake teaching and the teacher-self. This self-reflection is engaged as new contexts disrupt the commonplace activities of classroom work and as a teacher interrogates multiple views on her teaching. If, for example, a teacher values a moral imperative to help students critically consider their roles in society, teachers must develop this mentality themselves before trying to help students practice this aspect of critical literacy. This requires an awareness of the inconsistencies and injustices in the life of the classroom as well as in life "out there" (Britzman, 2003, p. 207).

Other researchers have studied teachers and students as they have practiced critical literacy together, though with varying degrees of success. Dyson (2001) explains that critical literacy is the evolution of a dialogic process for teachers and students (she also includes parents). Meaning and self making is a process of "articulating and reimagining the taken for granted" (p. 16). The dialogic process allows room for voicing different perspectives and becoming more conscious of ideological choices and of social consequences of words. In her work with 36 month-old Megan, Dyson saw social change in the form of opening possibilities for gendered roles in family practice. Megan's conversation with her mother and brother and their management of a toy vacuum,

revealed Megan's beliefs about familial roles of males and females and allowed her to

consider more flexible ways of living these roles. Megan came to realize that it is not

just "ladies" that vacuum, but that "Daddies" and other males also vacuum and may take

other duties of household maintenance. Dyson saw the conversation between Megan and

her mother and brother as an instance of voicing alternative perspectives on family

members' roles and an opening of ideological possibilities for males and females

enacting family practice. Dyson views this as social change "for the better," which is the

ultimate goal of critical literacy both in and out of the classroom.

Stein (2001) discusses classrooms storytelling as a site of reappropriation and

transformation of textual, cultural, and linguistic forms. Her study was motivated by a

body of research that she wished to counter which depicted linguistic and cognitive

capabilities of black students from the perspective of deficit and racist models. She

studied the multilingual resources students were using and bringing to a classroom in

South Africa, initially, in order to better understand how to structure a classroom context

to give students opportunities to "freely express the linguistic resources" they brought to

the classroom. These students attended school where English was the official and

sanctioned language of classroom instruction, but her students used as many as four or

five languages in their everyday conversations and in informal classroom activities. By

allowing students to tell their own stories, Stein realized the wealth of their

"representational resources," the multiple and complex ways they made meaning and

represented their stories to one another. They produced "countertexts"—texts that had

the potential to "subvert the existing canon and reconstitute an alternative canon" (p.

164). Their storytelling also involved the reappropriation of the students' identities as

they became valuable meaning makers and less marginalized users of previously sanitized, taboo cultural and linguistic forms. This study points to the classroom as a site for appropriating and transforming social structures wherein learners can draw on a range of discourses and discourse practices in order to transform them for their own meaning making and representational purposes, and wherein students identities can be altered for themselves and others as they engage in sophisticated language practices and multimodal text production, rather than passively receiving text. In my research, the teen mothers were similarly engaged and transformed—at least in my view and, I hope, in their own views.

The examples I have provided in this chapter of people engaging critically with multiple forms of texts both in and out of the classroom are ways in which critical literacy can open up possibilities for teachers' and students' roles across the contexts of their lives. Though I feel generally positive about the critical literacy practice in which members of the reading and writing group engaged, I encountered challenges that brought to my awareness the struggles faced by classroom teachers and others who educate from the perspective of critical literacy. For instance, critical literacy emphasizes multiple understandings of texts of all sorts, and as Stein's research, described above, reminds us, students are rich with linguistic resources and stories that represent their lives. Because their stories are shaped by their personal experiences within a cultural and historical context, students may be denigrated as nondominant contributors, and they may denigrate themselves or others in their representations. One of the goals of critical literacy is social action that works toward a just world for all people. What that means to individuals and societies is also part of a complicated cultural context. As educators, we

must constantly check our own value systems and help students to recognize theirs as well. Teachers possess the power to authorize discourse, and if we operate under the myth that everything depends on the teacher (Britzman, 2003), we may feel pushed to control learning and devalue our power to explore unknown territory and taken-for-granted beliefs.

Sheila, a participant in my study, told those present at one meeting what it means to be beautiful—the power and liability that comes with being physically attractive. We discussed these belief in the context of reading the text of a short story "Elsa and the Evil Wizard" (Phelps, 1981).[30] In our discussion of the story of "Elsa," my collaborator Laura pointed out that Elsa, as a beautiful blonde woman, is in danger of being a victim of violence, but at the same time, it is her hair, a source of much of her beauty, that saves her. When Sheila began talking about the story, she told her own stories of her experiences around the notion of beauty. She initially represented her understandings of beauty in our culture as simply a matter of being attractive because she has a certain hair and skin color combination. But as we continued talking, Sheila revealed a complicated sense of what it means to be beautiful in her home cultures. For example, she related several instances of her awareness that being an attractive blonde afforded her certain privileges, and she also discussed preparing to go to a high school dance and how being beautiful required a certain amount of effort. She herself had been in situations whereby she was ostracized or physically threatened because of her physical attractiveness.

Opening the door for Sheila to express multiple responses to the story of Elsa, and to her own initial representations of beauty, revealed—at least to me, and possibly to

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[30] See figure 4.1 for a reminder of the content of the story and the themes present in our discussion at the meeting.

herself—that any cultural notion, such as beauty in this example, is complex and has multiple instantiations. Martino (2001) has researched students' understandings of masculinity and homophobia in the classroom, and he advocates that we give students ample opportunity to reflect on their readings and reevaluate the assumptions that lead them to respond in certain ways. As Martino found, students might respond to sensitive or controversial topics (such as personal attractiveness, teen parenting, masculinity, or homophobia) from the position of normalizing assumptions. If students have opportunities to talk beyond those normalizing assumptions, teachers can encourage them to regard these topics as socially constructed and help them develop an awareness of the complex context of meaning surrounding them. Gendered discourse, for example, in classrooms are often tinged with definitions of opposition, denigration and inferiorization. If students have the opportunities to talk through these normalized perspectives, together they can problematize normalized views of gender, the social structures that support those meanings, and consider alternative ways of thinking, acting, and being in relation to issues of gender.

One frustration that teachers and students alike may meet is that in educational contexts where critical literacy is practiced, and where knowledge is mutually constructed and meaning is locally negotiated, it may feel like there is no solid ground on which to stand—there are no answers provided in the enactment of critical literacy, there are only more, though perhaps better, questions. Some students and teachers prefer to function under a phenomenon Britzman (2003) has pointed to—that the teacher is not only the expert on whatever topic is raised in the classroom, but she also sanctions the kinds of possible discourses that are put to use in classroom talk. This perspective assumes that

knowledge is free of values, motive, and ideology and is taught and learned as if it is universal and transcendent. Supporters of this myth also assume that teachers have nothing to learn and that knowledge is a possession around which territorial lines are drawn. The territory around knowledge compartmentalizes curriculum and the power afforded to the experts with disciplinary knowledge. Critical literacy practice in the classroom is more than mere application, as is any teaching methodology (Britzman, 2003). When knowledge is being constructed together by teachers and students, there will be intentional and unintentional effects of knowledge construction that require consideration of how literacy practices are working in that context. Some dissenters are hard to persuade that critical literacy involves much more than dissecting personal values for the sake of a grade and that cultural criticism is not just another part of the academic game (Seitz, 2002). Further, nothing will guarantee that students will "identify their sense of self with... critical objective[s] as more than an exchange value for the grade" (p. 506). Students may not accept a part in negotiating meaning in the classroom which requires that they adopt a range of subject positions in order to establish reciprocal discourse relations with each other and with the teacher (Seitz, 2002). The notion of mutual meaning making is a key component of critical literacy. But the question remains, how is mutual meaning making accomplished and what are some consequences for students' interrogating identity both in and out of the classroom? This is a topic touched upon in my research and worthy of future research.

Though we may see a growing number of examples and models of enacted critical literacy both in and out of the classroom, we are just starting to understand what it means to engage students in mutual meaning making, in interrogation of texts and identities, and

with what consequences. To date, there has been little investigation into students' perspectives in this endeavor. There has been little research conducted that looks carefully at students' engagement in whatever kind of pedagogy we hope to examine. Much more work is required to address this side of the teaching-learning equation.

An additional tension with teaching critical literacy is highlighted by Shannon (2002) in a statement he makes about his family's critical literacy projects. He says he and his family consider it their "right and obligation to voice our names for things, to state our views, and of course, to defend the names and views when necessary. ...[W]e create culture through our literacy projects...." While this is true, it is also a statement that positions his family in a location of extreme privilege. They seem to take for granted that they possess the power to use their voices to "name things," to state and reflect on their views, and defend their perspectives when challenged. These are privileges of good and advanced education, of class, and possibly of race. Who gets to say? The Shannons and people like them do—well-educated, upper middle class, white people. Though this statement out of context does not reveal a reflectiveness on this power and privilege, there are moments in Shannon's writing that are expressive of the importance of participating in "creating culture" and doing it with a critical consciousness. Nevertheless, it is primarily the voices of the people like the Shannons (mine included) that have the power and privilege to say and do.

Issues of Identity

Identity is always lingering around the edges of literacy practices in the reading and writing group and in my discussion in this dissertation of what these practices mean for critically interacting with text. Much of my discussion in this chapter and others has

been connected with identity, though I may not have explicitly pointed to it. It is one of my "taken-for-granted's" that is difficult to discuss; it is such an intrinsic part of this work that it can become invisible to me. Miedema & Wardekker (1999) explain that "any pedagogical theory is ultimately about the question of the quality of actorship to be acquired by the educated" (p. 77-78). Besides acquiring certain competencies of reading, writing, and numeracy, for example, education asks for the development of personal identity, which Miedema & Wardekker define as a person's awareness of him or herself as a continuously judging and acting person. We cannot achieve this without the concept of identity, they say, but the modernist interpretation of identity as a stable, unified personality, part of a free and self-aware humanity, is not useful in today's postmodern world. Rather, "identity is not a given, but an activity, the result of which is always only a local stability" (p. 79).

Individual identity, they explain, is created again and again for a short period of time in a specific situation and in interaction with a specific public as what is learned is internalized by the individual. Internalization is a process of giving meaning to social structures in interaction with others and in relation to what the individual has already learned, even about the self. Rather than passively accepting information about who she is, the learner constructs her sense of self through incorporating new meaning into, and making qualitative changes to, a building repertoire of meaning . She then can make public the perspectives she is developing about herself and thereby has the power to dialogically transform public knowledge about herself and others. Her expression of new meaning also affects the social structures surrounding who she is and how her in-the-

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moment self is enacted. "Identity is not only produced dialogically; it always retains a dialogical character" (p. 79).

The critical interactions I observed in the reading and writing group point in some ways to this conception of identity. Though I found the part of my research question related to identity the hardest to pin down, my research has links to possible responses to questions regarding how identity is developed in the practice of critical literacy, or more generally, as Miedema & Wardekker believe, as we learn. Being aware of multiple meanings in a text means having some awareness of and articulating one's own perspective—or taking a stance toward a text. It means connecting one's own experiences, the ground for meaning-making, to what one reads in a text and maintaining an awareness that one's own particular social-political history has shaped the meanings we make of text—a process of comparing textual representations to one's experiences. A willingness to understand that all texts possess the potential to reflect multiple interpretations includes explicitly acknowledging a text as a representation. When a reader makes inter-textual references and talks back to a text, she is reflecting on her own presuppositions about what each text could mean and how those meanings can relate to other texts and contexts. This process implies a continuous construction and reconstruction of one's identity and an active awareness of the process. It also allows a reader the power to use that "awareness" as knowledge for taking the stance toward a text—she may choose how to represent her thoughts in a text and the issues and identities it calls upon for interrogation.

Concluding Thoughts

My work as a student and an educator has afforded me opportunities to encounter, have contact with, and keep company with (Glazier, 2003) other students and educators of shifting privilege and powerlessness. People of "majority groups" in our society often seem to be unaware of their membership in privileged groups and the meanings of those affiliations (Foss, 2002). People who are identified as "minorities" often feel that they struggle with "the myth of America" (Adisa, 1994) every day. The myth is believed mostly by people of privilege and encourages an attitude that this country is based on equality for all people and on Horatio Alger's bootstrapping mentality—if you work hard enough you can be or do whomever and whatever you choose. While it may be true that they have worked very hard to get what they have, most of the people who "have" in this country were born into a system that set them up for having. Those who live with powerlessness—in poverty and with access only to poor or minimal social services such as education and medical care—are in many ways casualties of a system designed to maintain power structures that privilege some and not others.

I have been asked what was the focus of my research in taking on this project: Did I intend to contribute to knowledge and thinking about critical literacy, teen mothers (or more generally, marginalized populations), or identity development. When I first answered the questions, my response was that I was most concerned about critical literacy. My intention in answering this way (though I may have not articulated it quite like this) was that critical literacy encompasses all three of the areas I was asked about (and probably many more that have remained outside the focus of this project). Critical literacy itself deserves the attention of many more studies as it is implemented more and more across the country and around the world (I have offered examples from Great

Britain, Australia, South Africa, and Brazil), as educators continue to reflect on and theorize about their practices and their identities as teachers, and as students contemplate and critique the purposes and uses of their education. Studying the practices of critical literacy both in and out of school allows me as a teacher and scholar to consider the relations of power in classrooms and in numerous other social settings. Inevitably, the recognition of marginalized people and the voices that represent them must be acknowledged in this work. Identity development is intrinsically connected to these ways of thinking about education and literacy because, as I discusses above, all education is about who we expect our students to be becoming. Schooling is a self-reflective process that engages us in the practice of identifying our selves and framing the Other. A better answer to the question posed to me—What is the center of my work?—is that it has many centers, it is multi-centric. It is within the study of critical literacy, informed by multiple pedagogies and many theories of teaching, learning, and being. The teen mothers that worked with me in the reading and writing group, and who so generously let me into their lives, offered me some glimpses into what it means to interrogate textual meanings, to construct identity, and connect those activities in the practice of critical literacy.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: First Meeting Letter to Teenage Mothers (Potential Participants)

Thursday, February 25, 1999

Dear X:

We are inviting you to participate in a research study about how you use reading and writing to develop a sense of who you are and who you might become. If you agree to be involved in the study, you will recognize that the study focuses on writing and reading at two levels.

1. We are interested in how *you* use writing and reading to learn about yourself as a young woman, a teenager, a parent, and about your future.

2. We are also interested in the way you talk with your *children* about books (or your plans to interact once your child is born).

We hope to better understand how what you write and read helps you think about yourself and your future, and how you help (or plan to help) your child become a reader and a writer. The fact that you are already participating in a parenting program that values many of the ways that you can learn about yourself and help you make decisions about your life puts you in a special population. You have already thought about what is useful for you and what is not in many contexts of your life.

As a participant in the study, you will be a member of a small reading/writing group made up of the other young women here today (and maybe a few who couldn't make it to this meeting). In the group, we (including Kara and Laura) will write, read, and talk about a wide range of issues--some of them very generally about reading and writing, and some very personal. As we explore the many ways that we live our lives--as women, as people in many kinds of relationships, as students, as mothers, as workers and as professionals--we will explore how what we read and write helps us think about and make decisions about what to do. We will write, read, and talk about our personal understandings of things like learning, jobs, health, love, sex, family, hopes, and goals.

As a participant in this study, we (Kara and Laura) will observe you in your Parenting class, and we may ask to observe you in other settings of your life, both in and outside of school. We will observe you as you interact with children (your own and others'), and we may set up some situations where you, a researcher (Kara or Laura), and your child will read a book or story together. You do not have to worry about how good a writer or reader you are (or your child is!). We are interested in how you think about what you already know. We are interested in how you continue to learn about yourself, your child, and what the future will/can be like for both of you. We are interested in how what you

write and read adds to your knowledge and your expectations for your child(or children).

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the consent form on the following pages. We have outlined exactly what will be expected of you and what you can expect of us. Please return it to one of us or Rachel, your Parenting class teacher. Sue has agreed to help us with the study by letting us into your classroom and sharing her thoughts about the parenting program with us. She may also help us to think about what we learn and how we can best learn from you in and out of class, with and without your children. But if you decide to participate, the grade you earn in class will in no way be a reflection on your participation in the study.

Please feel free to contact us at the numbers listed above if you have *any* questions or if you would like to talk more with either of us about the study. We would be happy to talk with you on the phone or in person.

Sincerely,

Laura Apol   Kara Lycke

Appendix B

First Interview, Spring, 1999

I'd like to ask you some questions today about your life in relation to your everyday reading and writing. I'm interested in how you use reading and writing in and out of school, and how reading and writing helps you make decisions in lots of different ways in your life. Take your time. I might ask you some follow-up questions about some of the topics we talk about. I might ask you the same question in a couple of different ways. That is so I can better understand what you mean. Many of the topics we talk about today will be part of our reading/writing group's conversations, too.

If you ever feel uncomfortable about a question and you don't want to answer, that's ok. Just tell me you'd rather not answer that question.

Also, please do not discuss the questions of this interview with the other people in the group until we've talked to everyone. Any conversations about the interview might influence how people think about or answer the questions. Ready?

General Literacy Q's

How would you describe yourself as a **reader**? What do you enjoy about reading? What is hard for you about reading?

How much do you read in a typical day? In school? Out of school?

Describe all the ways that you can think of that you use your reading skills in a typical day. How do you use what you read to help you make decisions?

Can you think of a specific example of a decision you made recently that was helped or shaped by something you read? How did what you read help you make a decision and/or act on it? How did you come across the information you used to help you make the decision? Did you seek it out, did you happen to come across it?

Describe yourself as a **writer**. What do you like about writing? What is hard for you about writing?

How much do you write in a typical day? In school? Out of school?

Describe all the ways that you can think of that you use your writing skills in a typical day. How do you use what you write to help you make decisions?

Can you think of a specific example of a decision you made recently that was helped or shaped by something you wrote? How did what you wrote help you make a decision or act on it? How did you know what to write to help you decide or act on the decision you made?

How often would you say you use reading and/or writing each day to help you make decisions? What information do you rely on to help you make everyday decisions? What information do you use to make personal decisions for yourself? parenting decisions? school-related decisions? work-related decisions? future goal-related decisions?

What does it mean to be **literate**? How important is it to be literate in our culture? Why? What does literacy do for a person; what does it get in the way of?

How much do you think reading and writing will be a part of your life in the future?

How much do you think literacy will be a part of the future of your child? What do you expect your child to be able to do as a literate person as s/he grows up?

Parenting Q's--Child

Tell me a little about your child (name, age, anything else you think I should know)? Describe where you think _____ is right now in his/her language development. What does _____ know about reading and writing?

How important is it for parents to help their children develop language and literacy skills? Why (not)?

What do you do to help your child develop language and literacy skills? What kinds of reading and writing do you do with _____? Do you **read** with _____? How often; in what ways? Do you **write** with _____? How often; in what ways? In what other ways do you think _____ learns about and uses language and literacy skills?

Parenting Q's--Self

How have you learned about being a parent? What information do you rely on to help you make parenting decisions? to learn about the growth and development of _____? If you could give advice to other teen parents about where to get reliable information about important parenting decisions, what would you tell them?

Do you plan to ever have more children?

If **YES>** Why? What have you learned as a parent that you would definitely do again with your next child? Differently? How did you make these decisions? Has what you have read or written influenced this knowledge?

OR

If **NO>** Why not? What have you learned that has helped you make that decision? Has what you have read or written influenced this knowledge/decision?

Relationship/Sex Q's

Are you in a romantic relationship now?

If **YES>** Can you describe what it is like (how long have you known each other; how serious is your emotional commitment to each other)? How have you learned about what it means to be in a relationship? Are there sources of information you rely on now to help you understand your relationship and make it work? Does what you read or write help you understand what it means to be in a romantic relationship?

If **NO>** How have you learned about what it means to be in a relationship? Are there sources of information you rely on now to help you understand your relationship and make it work? Does what you read or write help you understand what it means to be in a romantic relationship?

Is the father of your child in your life or in your child's life now? Is he in your future plans?

Are you currently sexually active?

If **YES>** Do you use birth control? Have you ever? Do you plan to? How have you learned about birth control? sexual health? How long have you been sexually active?

If **NO>** Have you ever used birth control? Do you plan to? How have you learned about birth control? sexual health?

Can you tell me how you decided to have sex the first time? Did you think about/talk about the possibility of getting pregnant? With whom? When? How did you decide to keep and raise your child?

Do you ever plan to marry or make a long-term commitment to a partner?

If **YES>** What information do you rely on to tell you about what to expect in marriage or long-term partnership? What do you know/have you learned from other relationships you have or had (say, as a daughter, a friend, a sibling, a

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student) to help you make decisions about and act in a romantic relationship? Has anything you have read or written helped you understand what to do and expect in a romantic relationship? Other relationships?

If **NO>** What do you know/have you learned from other relationships you have or had (say, as a daughter, a friend, a sibling, a student) to help you make decisions about what to expect in a romantic relationship? Has anything you have read or written helped you understand what to expect in a romantic relationship? Other relationships?

Q's about Images of Future Selves
What are your **educational** plans for the future? How have you learned about your options? How have you made/are you making these decisions? What steps will you take to make these plans happen? What information will you rely on to help you when you have to make decisions? Has/Does/Will what you read or write influence these goals?

What are your **career/professional** plans? How have you learned about your options? How have you made/are you making these decisions? What steps will you take to make these plans happen? What information will you rely on to help you when you have to make decisions? Has/Does/Will what you read or write influence these goals?

What **other goals or plans** do you have for *yourself*? How have you learned about your options? How have you made/are you making these decisions? What steps will you take to make these plans happen? What information will you rely on to help you when you have to make decisions? Does or will what you read or write influence these goals?

What **other goals or plans** do you have for your *child*? How have you learned about your options? How have you made/are you making these decisions? What steps will you take to make these plans happen? What information will you rely on to help you when you have to make decisions? Does or will what you read or write influence these goals?

Q's about Participation in the Reading/Writing Group

Why do you want to participate in the reading/writing group?

What are your expectations for the group? What do you hope to learn or gain from participating?

Do you have any suggestions about what you might want to read or write? Topics? Kinds? Specific suggestions?

Appendix C

<p style="text-align:center">Second Interview, June, 2000</p>

Now that you have been participating in the reading and writing group for about 2 years now, I'd like to ask you some more questions. I'll ask you about your participation in the project and about your life in relation to your everyday reading and writing. I'm interested in what you use reading and writing for, both in and out of school. Take your time. I might ask you some follow-up questions about some of the topics we talk about. I might ask you the same question in a couple of different ways. That is so I can better understand what you say.

If you ever feel uncomfortable about a question and you don't want to answer, that's ok. Just tell me you'd rather not answer that question.

Also, please do not discuss the questions of this interview with the other people in the group until we've talked to everyone. Any conversations about the interview might influence how people think about or answer the questions. Ready?

Q's about Participation in the Reading/Writing Group

How would you describe what we have been doing at our meetings?
(If a friend asked you, what would you tell them?)

Why have you been participating in the group?

What were your expectations for the group when we first started coming to meetings? What did you hope to learn or gain from participating?

How have your expectations been met or not met?
(Did your expectations change over time? How?)

What has your experience I the group been like for you?
(What were the best parts of the meetings? The worst?)

What have you learned about yourself or other as a result of being in the group?

What meetings did you find the most useful/valuable/interesting? A waste of time?

What piece of reading or writing did you like the best or get the most out of?

Are there any topics you wish we would have dealt with or dealt *more* with?

Is there anything you wish we would have read or written that we didn't?

If we set up this kind of group again somewhere else, do you have any suggestions about how to change what we did to make it better?

General Literacy Q's

How would you describe yourself as a **reader**?
(What do you enjoy about reading? What is hard for you about reading?)

How much do you read in a typical day? In school? Out of school?

Can you think of a specific example of a decision you made recently that was helped or shaped by something you read?
(How did what you read help you make a decision and/or act on it? How did you come across the information you used to help you make the decision? Did you seek it out, did you happen to come across it?)

Describe yourself as a **writer**. What do you like about writing? What is hard for you about writing?

How much do you write in a typical day? In school? Out of school?

Can you think of a specific example of a decision you made recently that was helped or shaped by something you wrote?
(How did what you wrote help you make a decision or act on it? How did you know what to write to help you decide or act on the decision you made?)

How often would you say you use reading and/or writing each day to help you make decisions?
(What information do you rely on to help you make everyday decisions? What information do you use to make personal decisions for yourself? parenting decisions? school-related decisions? work-related decisions? future goal-related decisions?)

What does it mean to be **literate**?

How important is it to be literate in our culture?
(Why? What does literacy do for a person; what does it get in the way of?)

How much do you think reading and writing will be a part of your life in the future?

How much do you think literacy will be a part of the future of your child? (What do you expect your child to be able to do as a literate person as s/he grows up?)

Parenting Q's--Child

For the record, how old is _____. Describe where you think _____ is right now in his/her language development. What does _____ know about reading and writing?

How important is it for parents to help their children develop language and literacy skills? Why (not)?

What do you do to help your child develop language and literacy skills? (What kinds of reading and writing do you do with _____? Do you **read** with _____? How often; in what ways? Do you **write** with _____? How often; in what ways? In what other ways do you think _____ learns about and uses language and literacy skills?)

Parenting Q's--Self

How have you learned about being a parent? (What information do you rely on to help you make parenting decisions? to learn about the growth and development of _____?)

If you could give advice to other teen parents about where to get reliable information about important parenting decisions, what would you tell them?

Do you plan to ever have more children?

If **YES**> Why? What have you learned as a parent that you would definitely do again with your next child? Differently? How did you make these decisions? Has what you have read or written influenced this knowledge?

OR

If **NO**> Why not? What have you learned that has helped you make that decision? Has what you have read or written influenced this knowledge/decision?

Relationship/Sex Q's

Are you in a romantic relationship now?

If **YES**> Can you describe what it is like?
(How long have you known each other; how serious is your emotional commitment to each other?)

How do you know what it means to be in a relationship?
(Are there sources of information you rely on now to help you understand your relationship and make it work? Does anything you **read or write** help you understand what it means to be in a relationship with this person?)

If **NO**> How have you learned about what it means to be in a relationship?
(Are there sources of information you rely on now to help you understand your relationship and make it work? Does what you **read or write** help you understand what it means to be in a relationship?)

Is the father of your child in your life or in your child's life now? Is he in your future plans?

Are you currently sexually active?

If **YES**> Are you using birth control? Have you ever? Do you plan to?

How did you learned about birth control? Sexual health?

If **NO**>   Have you ever used birth control? Do you plan to?

How have you learned about birth control? Sexual health?

Do you plan to marry or make a long-term commitment to a partner such as in a marriage?

If **YES**> How do you know what to expect in marriage or long-term partnership?
(Have you learned from other relationships you have or had (say, as a daughter, a friend, a sibling, a student) to help you make decisions about and act in a romantic relationship? Has anything you have **read or written** helped you understand what to do and expect in a romantic relationship? Other relationships?)

If **NO**> Have you learned from other relationships you have or had (say, as a daughter, a friend, a sibling, a student) to help you make decisions about what to expect/how to act in a romantic relationship?
(Has anything you have **read or written** helped you understand what to expect in a romantic relationship? Other relationships?)

<u>Q's about Images of Future Selves</u>

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What **other future plans** do you have for *yourself*? Education? Career? (How have you learned about your options? How have you made/are you making these decisions? What steps will you take to make these plans happen? What information will you rely on to help you when you have to make decisions? Does or will what you read or write influence these goals?

What **other goals or plans** do you have for your *child*? How have you learned about your options? How have you made/are you making these decisions? What steps will you take to make these plans happen? What information will you rely on to help you when you have to make decisions? Does or will what you read or write influence these goals?

Do you have any questions for me?

Do you have anything else you want to say about your participation in the project, or about the project in general?

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR THE TIME YOU INVESTED IN THIS PROJECT!!!

Sue's Interview, Fall, 1999

Q's about the program

Please tell me about the parenting program you coordinate and teach in.

What are the main responsibilities you have as coordinator and as teacher in the program?

How is the program funded?

What is the curriculum like? What are some of the expected outcomes of the program? What are your goals as a teacher?

Describe the students you work with and how they come to you. How do they find out about and get into the program?

General Literacy Q's

How would you describe your students as **readers**? What do they enjoy about reading? What is hard for them about reading?

How much do they read in a typical day in school? How much do you think they read outside school?

How do they use what they read to help them make decisions?

Describe your students as **writers**. What do they like about writing? What is hard for them about writing?

How much do they write in a typical day in school? Out of school?

How do they use what they write to help them make decisions?

What information do they rely on to help them make everyday decisions? What information do they use to make personal decisions? parenting decisions? school-related decisions? work-related decisions? future goal-related decisions?

How would you define literacy? How important do your students think it is to be literate? [What do they think literacy will do for them? What does it get in the way of?]
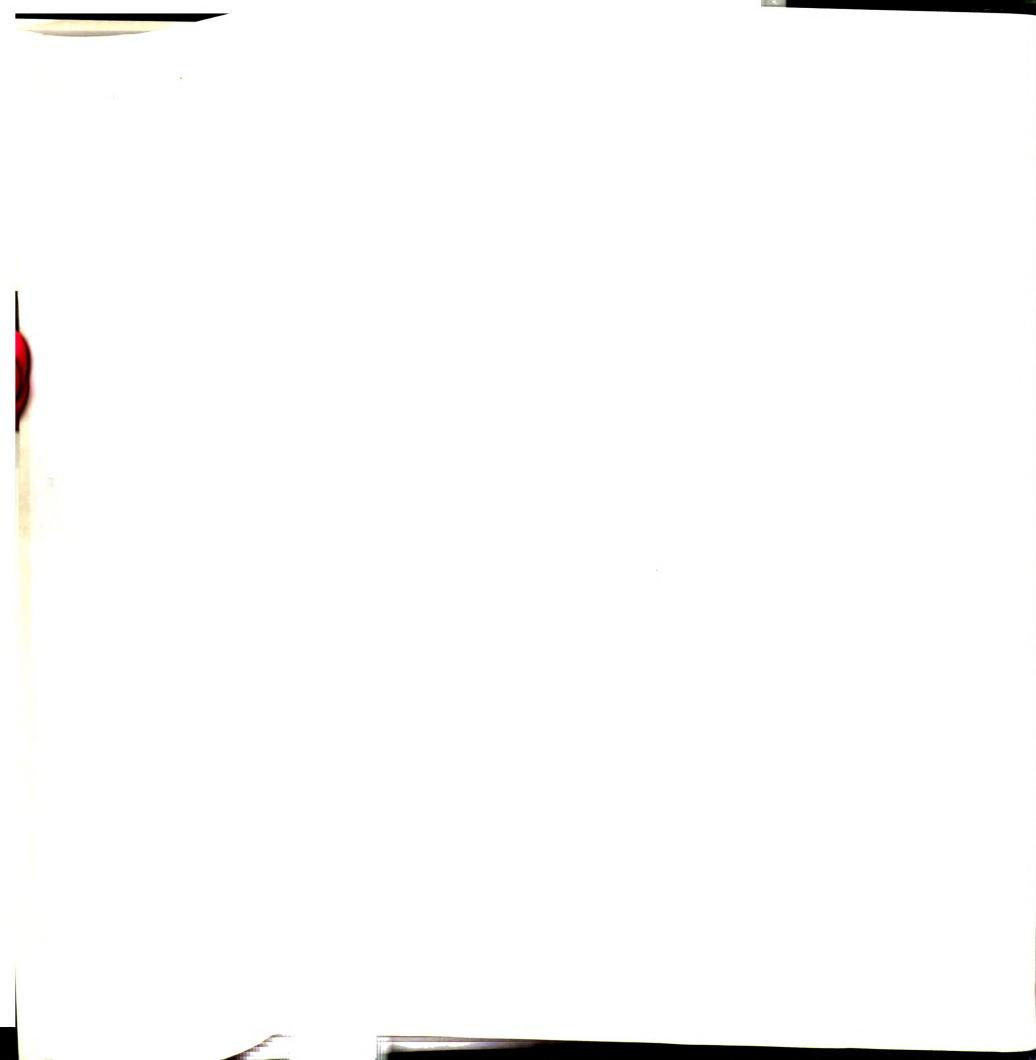
How much do they think reading and writing will be a part of their lives in the future?

How much do they think literacy will be a part of the future of their children? How do they imagine their children as literate people as they grow up?

How do you help your students develop literacy skills?

How do you help your students help *their children* to develop language and literacy skills?

Parenting Q's--Self

How do your students learn about being a parent? What information do they rely on to help them make parenting decisions? to learn about the growth and development of their children?

Relationship/Sex Q's

How have your students learned about what it means to be in a relationship? [Probe about TM's relationship with fathers.]

Are the fathers of the children in their lives? What role do fathers play?

Do they use/know about birth control? How do they learn about birth control?

What do they know about long-term relationships? Where do they get their information?

Q's about Images of Future Selves
What are their **educational and career/professional** plans for the future? How do they learn about their options? How do they go about making decisions for their future lives?

What **goals or plans** do they have for their **children**? What information do they rely on to help them decisions?

Q's about Participation in the Reading/Writing Group

Why do you think the students who are participating in the project chose to participate?

What do you think are their expectations for the group?

What do you hope they learn or gain from participating?

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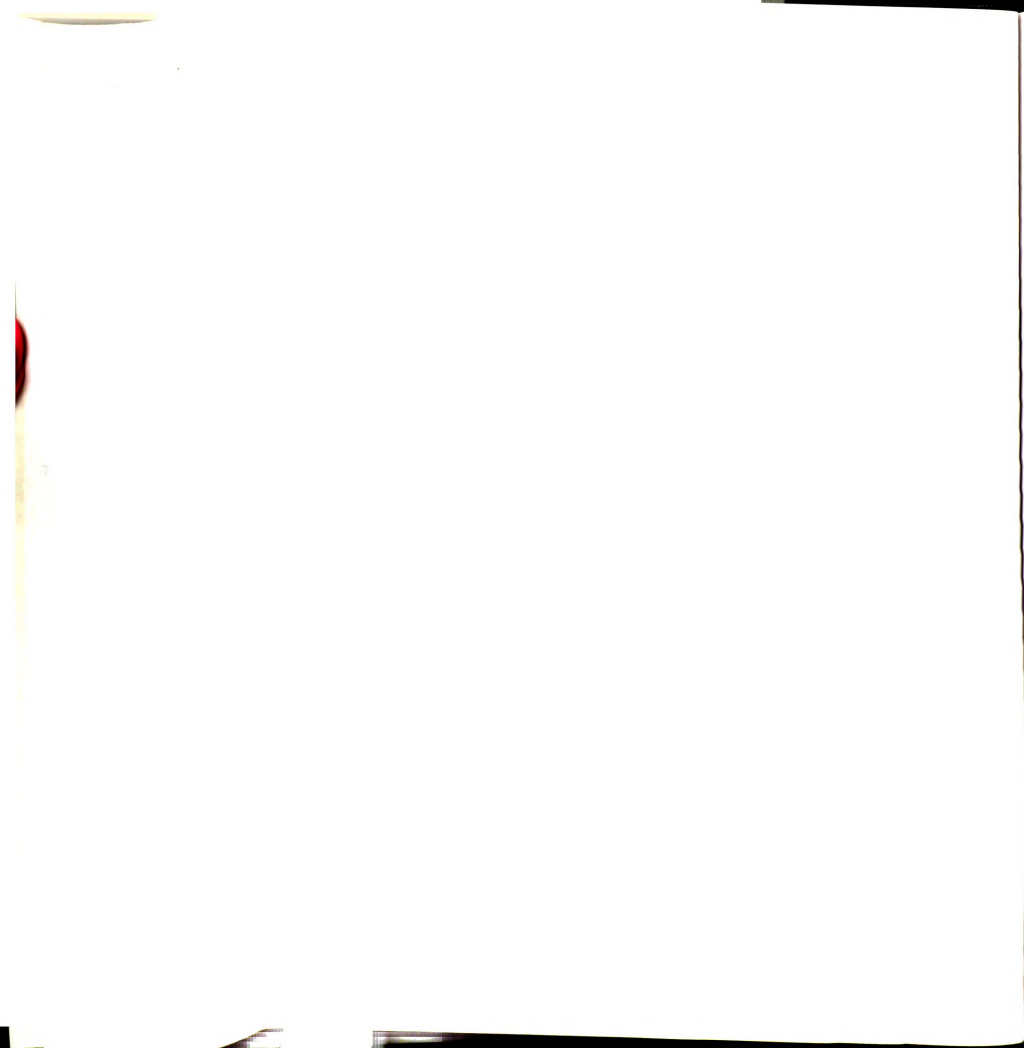
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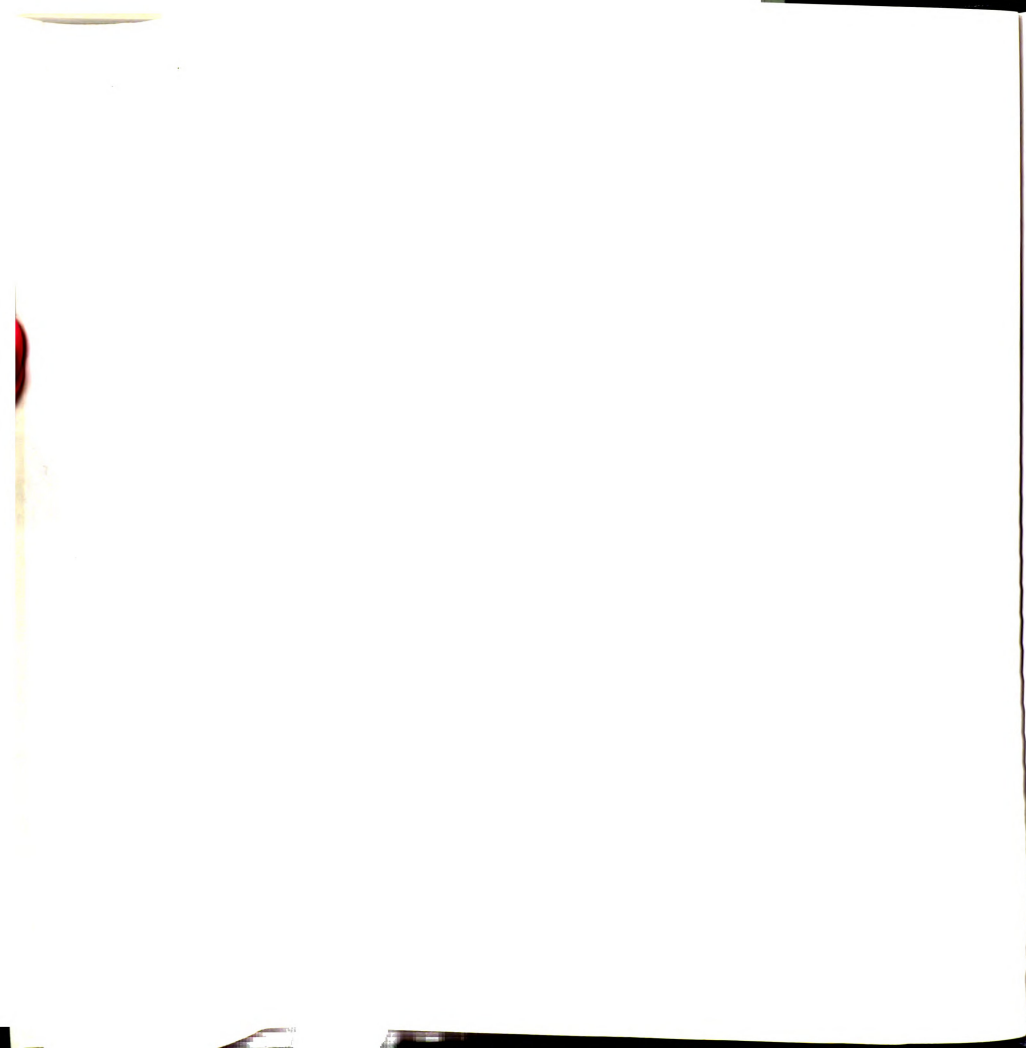
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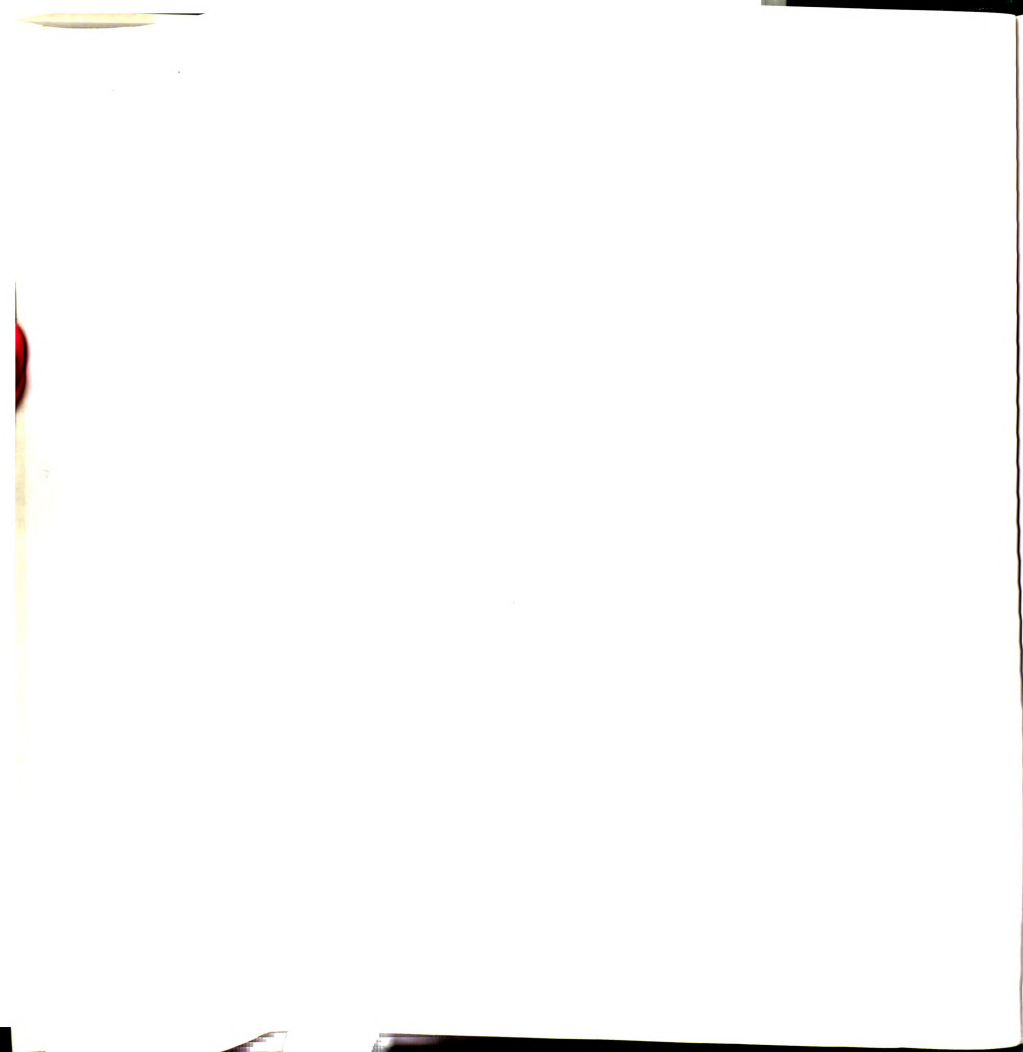
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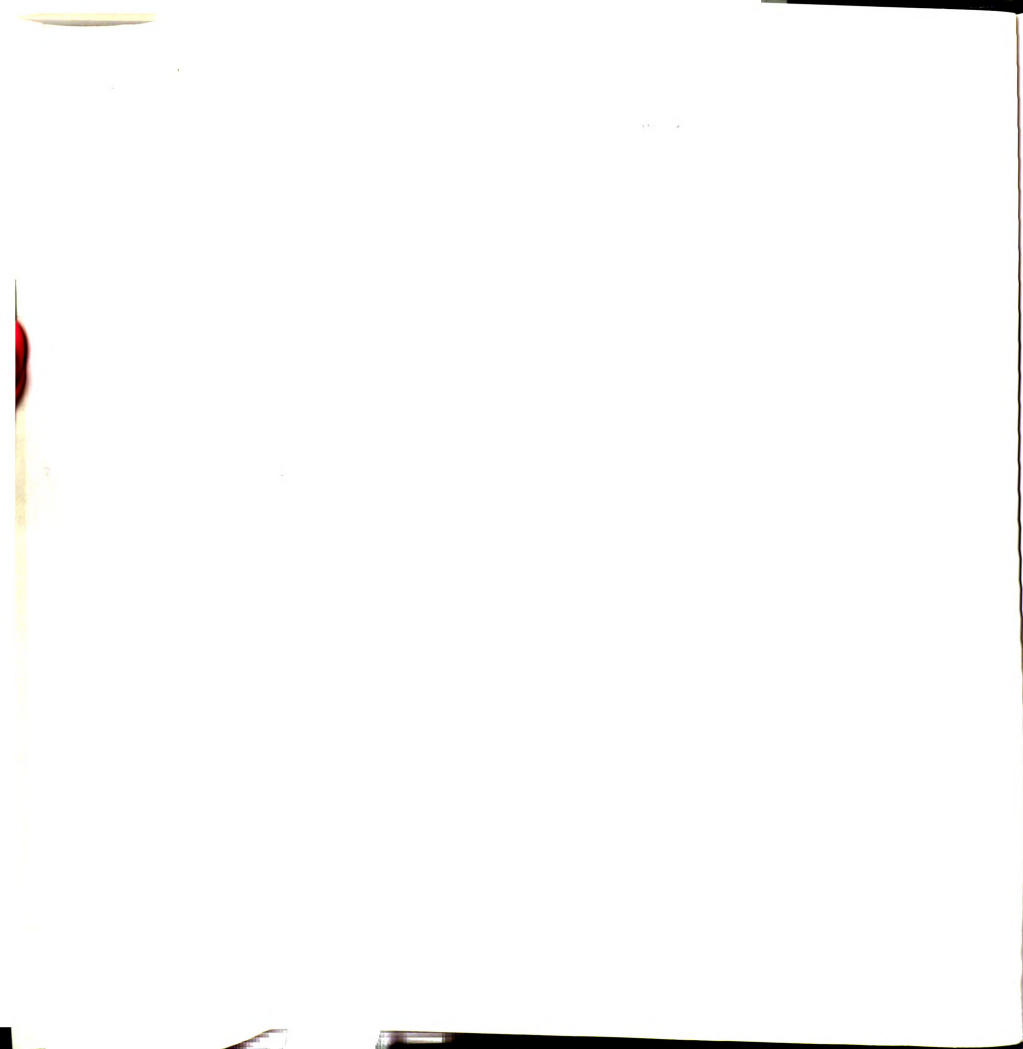
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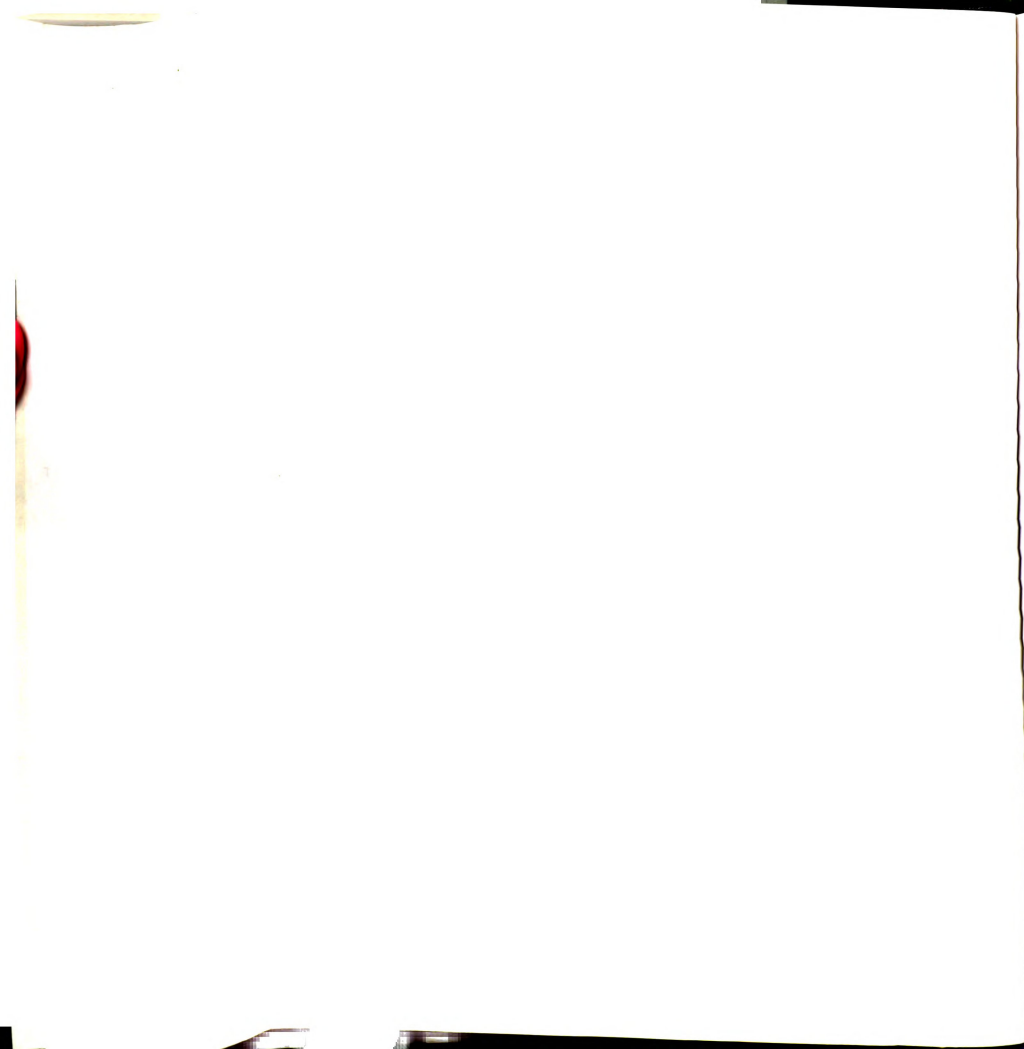
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