The Roles of Digital Literacies and Critical Literacy for Black Adolescent Females

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Abstract

The purpose of this conceptual thought paper is to argue for critical digital literacies instruction for all students, particularly students from marginalized populations. In this paper, the lived experiences of Black adolescent female avid readers were analyzed because of the complex nature of their discrimination due to their race and gender. Research questions included: What are the technologies and practices used by Black adolescent female avid readers? How and why do they use them? What are the implications for educators? To answer these questions, the voices of Black adolescent female readers from this author's previous study were used to explore the *method* of critical literacy and the *medium* of digital literacies from their lived literate experiences. Concurrent instruction or critical digital literacies instruction could improve students' reading experiences and amplify the voices of marginalized groups such as the Black adolescent females with the greater digital world on the social ills they witness in books and in life.

Keywords: Black adolescents, females, critical literacy, digital literacies

Introduction

The importance of instruction in critical literacy and digital literacies has been well

established in the research of several scholars; however, the relationship between the two has

largely been ignored. In this ever-evolving online age, it is critical to explore how students can

expose bias and move toward social action through digital means. Therefore, in this conceptual

thought paper, I argue for the research and classroom implementation of critical digital literacies,

so that students can astutely advocate for themselves and others.

The empirical research referenced herein focuses on the reading experiences of Black

adolescent female avid readers because of the complex position on experiencing discrimination

in two critical parts of their identity – race and gender. In this paper, I examine these young

women's literacy practices *in situ*, with an eye toward the *medium* and *method* of their reading

practices, where the *medium* could span the spectrum from print-on-the-page to pixels-on-the-

screen, and the *method* could range from mainstream comprehension practices to complex

critical reading strategies. Yet, given the rising tide of digital tools in teens' lives and the push by

educators, leaders, and parents for teens to be more astute and canny users of these tools, an

examination of the media and methods of Black adolescent female participants has the potential

to shed appreciably more light on this marginalized population.

More specifically, to examine the proclivities of Black adolescent female avid readers for

consuming and producing digital texts (i.e., the *medium*) could yield a better understanding of

how to empower and support their academic pursuits that employ online tools. In turn, educators

could then be better equipped to assist these girls in developing their digital literacies skills,

which they will likely need to succeed in the ever-increasing digital global marketplace.

Furthermore, to examine the critical literacy strategies (i.e., the *method*) of Black adolescent female avid readers as they engage with a range of texts in a variety of contexts could bear a fuller understanding of how these teens actually learn to do things with texts for various purposes. Such purposes, for example, could be the need to express frustrations about negative dominant views of their personhood or to bring greater meaning to their lives (Hall, 2011).

Taken together, these renewed understandings of Black adolescent female avid readers and their digital and critical literacy (i.e., the *medium* and *method* of their literate activity) have the potential to inform the design of voracious-creating reading experiences for all students, but especially those who could benefit from the self-advocacy that critical digital literacies afford. With the designs for such experiences in hand, educators could better equip their students to (a) capitalize on the affordances of digital tools and texts, and (b) transpose their needs and ambitions (whether they are personal frustrations, academic challenges, or professional goals) into social action targeted at change.

This paper, then, outlines the digital and critical reading experiences of Black adolescent female avid readers by focusing on the question: What are the technologies and practices used by these Black adolescent female avid readers, how and why do they use them, and what are their implications for educators? Before answering this question, the problem for this particular group of readers must first be unpacked.

Conceptual Background

The Problem

How are Black adolescent female readers seen through the lens of their race and gender? The research literature emphasizes those Black adolescent females who are remedial readers. One reason for this emphasis is because of these young adolescents' performance on

standardized measures. At the secondary and post-secondary levels, boys have long

outperformed girls on national measures of reading performance (Cohen, White, & Cohen,

2012). Even though recent evidence indicates that this gender gap is reversing, especially for

reading (Freeman, 2004), the emphasis on Black female teen who are challenged with reading

prevails. For example, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that

12th grade females in 2005 outperformed male students in reading by a wider margin than they

did in 1992. Thus, while more Black adolescent females are performing better in reading (Cohen,

White, and Cohen, 2012), the prevailing image of them in the scholarly literature is that they

need assistance with reading. While it is admirable to help Black adolescent female "struggling"

readers, the lack of attention to those Black adolescent females who love to read leads to a gap in

the literature in terms of their voices stating why they love to read, what led them to love

reading, how they use reading, among other questions. This gap is problematic in that it provides

a one-dimensional view of the reading lives of these girls.

In fact, the result is an absence of evidence to counter these negative narratives of Black

adolescent female readers. The limited evidence available suggests that the Black adolescent

females who do not excel in reading are not engaged with reading either because of the lack of

culturally-relevant texts, interesting texts, or culturally-sensitive pedagogy (Brooks, Sekayi,

Savage, Waller & Picot, 2010; Davis, 2000; Gibson, 2010; Sutherland, 2005). If engaged, these

scholars argue, Black adolescent females would enjoy reading more, do more reading, and

thereby, become more proficient readers. This researcher's phenomenological study on Black

adolescent females' love of reading gets to the essence of these questions for the participants,

and establishes that they craved reading as one does a favorite dish, but were also particular, as

are food connoisseurs.

Now that the need to study Black adolescent female avid readers has been established, the argument of this paper is to emphasize the need to also study Black adolescent females' digital and critical literacy skills, as both relate to their voracious reading practices. As students in the 21st Century, it is vital that these girls are proficient with digital books and tools, as well as critical literacy skills. My participants loved to read and wanted family and friends with which to share this desire to read. All of them also owned or desired to own electronic readers. Their desire for companionship around reading along with their interest in digital books contained great possibilities for enhancing their reading experiences, finding virtual companions in order to share their love of reading, and expanding their knowledge of using digital tools for the purposes of critiquing books. Through our interviews, the Black girl avid readers pointed to their limited knowledge in engaging with novels in these ways. If they had knowledge of these possible avenues to heighten their enjoyment of reading, they would have done so.

As I thought about these aspects of their reading experience while also reading scholarly literature, I found that it was important to explore how educators could best help marginalized students like Black adolescent females in their classrooms become well-rounded individuals prepared for the demands of the digital world while simultaneously teaching them how to question books and advocate for themselves and others. To do so, educators would do well to consider purposefully designing pedagogy to enhance and promote a combination of digital and critical literacy. The meshing of these two literacies is especially important for disenfranchized students because it helps them question the status quo, thereby empowering themselves to advocate for social change.

Teaching for Social Justice: Critical Literacy

Several scholars have written about the importance of incorporating methods of critical literacy in pedagogy, specifically for minorities and urban youth. Fecho and Waff (1998), Mahiri (1998), and Morrell (2008) purposed to help students question, challenge, and change the status quo. In their scholarly writings, they have encouraged other scholars and practitioners, to focus, in scholarship and practice, on developing relationships with students by incorporating community norms and language in curricula. They also challenged us to teach for social justice across the disciplines, because in an era where discrimination and hegemony continue to abound, students need a curriculum that incorporates the skills of rhetoric and calls for action to eradicate social ills. Social injustices can include immediate concerns about problems locally or abroad, and exploring these topics, which are of keen interest to marginalized students, engages them in subject matter. Oftentimes, teaching academic subject matter alone creates a resistance among students because they do not see the relevance of the curriculum to their daily lives (Mahiri, 1998). These authors challenge us to educate students for the purpose of equipping them to thrive in a world that continues to promote systems of oppression on people of color and the poor. Employing critical literacy instruction empowers students to articulate and expose these exploitive systems in order to initiate change.

While some may argue that incorporating critical literacy is difficult to do in an age of accountability, Avila and Moore (2012) have suggested techniques for incorporating this literacy in disciplinary classrooms. For example, in the case of the current Common Core State Standards, these scholars extracted specific standards that were malleable for inclusion of critical literacy pedagogy, so that teachers could recognize that using this pedagogical method was possible.

In addition to arguing for the pedagogical method of critical literacy, Morrell (2008) also provided several examples of how to include it in most, if not all, of the disciplines. For instance, in a unit on the *Odyssey* (Homer, 1900), he assigned students question systems that tend to downplay cultural norms scaffolding their ability to identify these systems in literary and other written works. To make *The Odyssey* more relevant to their lives, he incorporated the *Godfather* trilogy (Puzo, 1969) in this unit, and using both texts, he prodded students to question whether the values displayed in the works of literature were values forced on them by society. Student questioning was a tenet of critical literacy as they read and questioned Homer's *Odyssey*. Morrell's practical methods of incorporating critical literacy with a group of secondary urban students are just one of many exemplars for teachers and scholars to study for use in other disciplinary contexts.

Teaching for Technology in the 21st Century: Digital Literacies

Next, many scholars are concerned that many teachers are not engaging their students in the medium of digital literacies. To illustrate this dilemma, Hicks, Turner, and Fink (2013) wrote about two fictitious schools, composites of the places where they observed and conducted research; the authors represented dichotomous schools on the continuum of digital literacies implementation. On one end of the continuum, teachers in affluent schools were not using technology in meaningful ways, and on the other end, teachers in under-resourced schools teachers did not have the technological resources; the latter lacked opportunities to engage students in the medium of digital literacies. For example, in the affluent fictitious school, *Access Academy*, the students were surrounded by technology affordances, such as interactive whiteboards in every room, devices for every student, and full Google integration with students having access to free *Google* apps. Even with these devices and teachers' and district leaders'

expressions of commitment for helping students improve their proficiencies in digital literacies,

teachers infrequently used these tools, and only employed them if there was 'extra time' at the

end of the unit. Hicks et al. (2013) stated that the medium in this composite school was "never

[used] in a sustained, inquiry-based manner" (p. 58). As such, the resources were an add-on, not

an integral part of the curriculum. According to these scholars, these circumstances were

indicative of many affluent schools that have plentiful technology, but do not use it for helping

students create and consume texts in critical ways that enable them to develop critical thinking

skills.

On the other end of the continuum, Hicks and colleagues (2013) described an under-

resourced fictitious school that they named *Exodus Elementary*. The problem of scarce funding

and technology was exacerbated by the reality that many students lacked personal computers and

other technological devices that would assist in their development of digital literacies. Without

these technology affordances, Exodus students were set up to be less competitive with affluent

students with these resources. The authors urged teachers in these situations to upgrade their

search for technological resources that enable their students to have equitable opportunities.

Obtaining these resources would likely level the playing field for these students, which would

increase their chances for gaining quality higher educational and career opportunities. Important

in both cases is to recognize that for both fictitious schools, improper or no implementation of

digital literacies instruction was problematic.

Existing Tensions for Digital Literacies Implementation

O'Brien and Scharber (2008) also understood these problematic dichotomies in the

implementation of digital literacies instruction that Hicks et al. (2013) described in their

composite schools. However, O'Brien and Scharber also pointed out the problematic tension

between educators when contending for the inclusion or exclusion of digital literacies instruction

in schools. On one end, educators passionately advocate for the inclusion this instruction, but do

so without honing in on the importance of using them effectively to meet curricular goals.

Conversely, other educators continue to adhere to traditional literacy instruction to the detriment

of students who need technological skills in order to compete in today's digital world. The

authors recommended blending the two extremes in order to create a balanced implementation of

digital literacies instruction, which would create magnificent possibilities for engaging

adolescent readers. In fact, O'Brien and Scharber (2008) stated:

> Some tech enthusiasts might be tempted to import into school the most enjoyable aspects
>
> of young people's social worlds and pleasures gained from creating and using digital
>
> literacies. This desire should be tempered with the understanding that the use of digital
>
> technologies in schools should be driven by educational purposes rather than social ones.
>
> (p. 67).

Accordingly, Hicks et al. (2013) and O'Brien and Scharber (2008), understood that instruction in

digital literacies cannot wait, but they also emphasized the importance of retaining traditional

literacy skills. In other words, they believed in the balance of both. After all, digital literacy

builds on traditional literacies; the latter is still important.

Role of Educators in Use of Digital Texts

Similarly, Gee (2012), with his focus on print and digital literacies and *texts*, pointed out

that whether the text is print or digital, the modeling and oral scaffolding from an adult in how to

critically think through and use these texts have the potential to determine whether the young

person can achieve economic success or not. Gee specifically commented on what he called

grades, or degrees of quality, in traditional print and digital literacies. He stated that the

premium grade led to success in the modern world while the average grade led to working-class

jobs, which had lower benefits and less union support. Gee also expressed the importance of

knowing and utilizing academic language that is associated with traditional print literacy. He

added that many people groan at the mention of academic language when it comes to traditional

print literacy, but that "the forms of language used in research, empirical reasoning, logical

argumentation" are connected to people getting good jobs; those who attain these high-level

positions "are often there because they got through their high school chemistry book and argued

and debated their way through a good college" (p. 418). In other words, traditional print literacy

skills remain important when it comes to having social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2001).

Analogous to traditional print literacy, digital literacies also has a premium and average

grade (Gee, 2012). For instance, "premium digital literacy is the ability to use specialist/technical

language connected to digital tools," and "it is also the ability to use academic language

connected to institutional and public-sphere knowledge-building and argumentation" (p. 418). In

print and digital texts, language, although different types, is important, and instruction and

scaffolding by an adult is necessary for students to be prepared for career opportunities. In sum,

instruction in both types of texts is necessary for students to be versatile and adept in both

genres, which will be part of their future academic and career endeavors. Since the benefits of

using traditional print texts are well understood and implemented in schools, it is also important

to understand specific ways in which electronic texts are useful in schools.

Webb (2007) found digital texts an effective means of enhancing students' ability to

enthusiastically engage with literature in his former English language arts classroom. When his

literature anthologies did not arrive on time, Webb was forced to turn to digital texts. In

searching for literature, he found a plethora of digital readings that allowed students to obtain

more in-depth background information, definitions, connections with authors, among other

benefits that made their texts come alive. In the case of their poetry unit, students were more

engaged as they found online recordings of poetry, local poetry reading announcements,

newsletters, and other resources. In another case, students were able to read various translations

of *The Odyssey* (1900); they were also able and create their own line-by-line translations of it

based on more in-depth understandings of the work due to their exposure to different versions of

the play. These are just a few examples of the ways in which Webb (2007) found literary digital

texts exciting and engaging for students.

Relationship Between Digital Texts and Reading Comprehension

However, when it comes to benefits for reading comprehension with digital texts, Wright,

Fugett, and Caputa (2013) found no change when using digital instead of traditional print texts

with elementary-aged children. Also, the children's reading time was consistently longer when

reading from an iPad than from a print source. On the other hand, the children made more use of

reading support sources, such as dictionaries, when reading from electronic texts, and their

enjoyment of reading increased when they read literature electronically. So while no change in

comprehension was found, this study corroborated the findings of Grimshaw, Dungworth,

McKnight, and Morris (2007), who conducted a similar study. In the Wright and colleagues'

research, the children enjoyed reading digital devices because they were easier to hold, the

screen's lighting contrast could be adjusted, electronic bookmarkers were useful, among other

benefits.

Truly, although these studies found that reading comprehension remained unchanged

between print and digital texts, the fact that children's enjoyment of reading and use of

comprehension tools increased is a good reason for educators to incorporate digital texts (and

digital literacies instruction) in classrooms, for fostering the love of reading is just as important as improving students' reading comprehension skills. Therefore, as Hicks et al.'s (2013) article title indicated, digital literacies are no longer a luxury that can wait.

Combining Critical Literacy and Digital Literacies Pedagogy

Peters and Lankshear (1996) discussed the importance of teaching students to not only critique traditional print texts, but digital texts as well, by the following:

> Why are certain bits of text brought [sic] together in a particular constellation? On what principles are images, sounds, and texts amalgamated in this way, in these particular circumstances, at this time? What purposes or interests do these assemblages or constructions of the world serve? How do they affect the way people live? Why are these elements of text, sound, and image brought together in this way and not in other possible combinations? What might it do to put music to this text or text to these images? And so on.

These questions are indeed foundational in critical and digital literacies instruction; however, the focus of this paper is to point to the end result of this questioning, and that is the social action tenet of critical literacy. Because of the vast audience the online environment provides, it is an effective means for students to advocate for themselves and others. Classroom instruction must play a part in how to do so most effectively, so that students are able to get the results they hope to achieve. Getting results, especially for the silenced, is most important. Thus, it is imperative that educators are adept in critical literacy and digital literacies in order to adequately prepare students to make a difference in their lives and the marginalized citizenry.

Empirical Background

While the evidence herein is based on phenomenological research on the lived experiences of five Black adolescent females, the findings are relevant to all adolescents. However, it is crucial for marginalized students to have critical digital literacies skills to combat their own oppression. As such, Black adolescent females were chosen to highlight because of their unique position of experiencing bias based on gender and race. This excludes other parts of their identity that could also be a source of discrimination (e.g., social class, sexual orientation, religion). Their experiences, or the lack thereof, with critical digital literacies are important to researchers and practitioners as we consider the need to help all students question bias and use digital means for social action.

This section, therefore, focuses on these teens' critical digital literacies practices. As the five girls in this study described their experiences with reading, data was collected about their knowledge of how to question authorial intentions and issues of power through digital means. The following paragraphs illustrate the strategic what, how, and why these Black adolescent female avid readers used digital literacies as a means to engage in critical literacy.

Participants' Uses of Critical Literacy

Alexandra (a pseudonym), an intelligent culturally-conscious Black adolescent female, was attuned to issues of race and equality in readings, whether real or perceived. Her ability to notice issues of race in books was largely due to her mother's influence. Her mother, who, interestingly enough was an avid reader and served as a director for a multicultural awareness initiative in a major school system, instilled pride in Alexandra for African and African American history, literature, and culture. Alexandra grew up with her mother reading her and her brother African American children's stories in the book, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, told by Virginia Hamilton (1993), so she had an early instilment of self-worth;

Alexandra saw her value in an acculturating childhood book, regardless of society's frequent

devaluation of the African American experience. As such, when Alexandra read her favorite

book series, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008), she was disturbed with the image of

Black people in one district because they worked as food gatherers. She grappled with the idea of

Black people doing work that she considered similar to slave labor in a futuristic setting. At first,

she wondered if the author was trying to send a message about society's thoughts on the

occupational and societal roles Black people should hold. She stated:

> I guess I was like kind of curious as to why she had written it that way. I really – I was
>
> trying to figure out like deeper into the story what – what it was, like if she was trying to
>
> say something. Maybe they've got – maybe because the capital is kind of like this – it
>
> seemed like this white community, as far as people, but I mean, there were – there was
>
> one other black person. His name is Cinna, and he was like the designer of Katniss. But,
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> I mean, uhm, he was the only other black character in the capital, so it kind of made me
>
> wonder if she thought that maybe society thinks that slavery is like almost a necessity or
>
> if it's something that would make the community better or make the world better.

It appeared that Alexandra was hesitant, as noticed through her "uhms" and breaks in speech, to

accuse the author of maliciousness. She wanted to be fair in her assessment while also stating her

confusion and concern.

As Alexandra continued to question the rationale of portraying Black people as food

gatherers, she moved from wondering if the author thought society felt that Black people should

be in slavery-type positions to wondering about the author's personal intentions. Alexandra

stated:

I guess I would have felt better if it weren't so – like, if were more diverse. And if it was

noticeably diverse. But like, I mean, of course I know it's just a book, but you know I

also know that the author's White. So that's one of the things that comes to mind when I

think of it. For gathering, you know, why would you use Black people? It just kind of

runs through my mind when I -

Alexandra did not state that the author's intentions were racist. However, Alexandra was curious

about the reasoning behind Collins' choice to portray most of the Black characters in this way.

Her curiosity and questioning demonstrated her moving through the method or process of critical

literacy.

Although Alexandra's concern may have been a bit off-centered, that is, she had not yet

grappled with the scene enough to consider all of the polysemous prose; namely, the probable

meaning that Collins' portrayal of Black people as mostly food gatherers was probably to

capture, in its most extreme form, the unjust treatment of the citizenry by the Capitol

(government officials in authority). Nevertheless, Alexandra was adept at questioning and

considering other possible meanings and implications, other than malicious intent, behind the

author's words. She had yet to formulate a solid conclusion at the time of our meetings.

Although Alexandra was one of several teen participants to openly question an author's

intent, the other participants also thought deeply about books and connected to them in personal

ways; however, they did not take the next step and question the authors. Additionally, all of the

participants, including Alexandra, had yet to use questioning to move toward social action,

which could have been used to speak out against any possible malicious authorial motives. This

skill is one they needed in order to combat the fatigue and frustration Alexandra and another

participant, Kayla, felt as a result of curiosities about authors' purposes.

In sum, even though some teen participants engaged in critical literacy practices, their

knowledge of how to fully engage with texts critically was limited. In essence, they seemed to

lack a range of strategies for how to question authors' purposes and issues of power in books. If

they had been taught this skill, which none indicated they had, perhaps they would have felt

more empowered and confident in their assessment of an author's intent as well as

knowledgeable about ways to advocate for those marginalized populations who may have been,

in other cases, inappropriately portrayed in books.

Participants' Uses of Digital Literacies

In terms of their digital literacies text and tool preferences, the adolescent participants in

the author's research were mainly *mono-literate* in that the medium in which text was delivered

was the same (print or digital books). The girls still read books whether they were in print or

digital format; they were simply preoccupied with reading material of any form. In fact, Taylor,

one of the participants, loved her Kindle:

> …[M]y dad got it for me last Christmas and I just, it's so wonderful. This is, it's
>
> definitely helped me to get books easier, since the books come from Amazon and I can
>
> just go right to the store and pick out books I wanta get. And I was so excited when I got
>
> it 'cause I was just like, "oh, I want this book and I want this book and I want this book."
>
> And I actually have a whole list of books that I want… And this has definitely helped me
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> because before, when I didn't have my Kindle, we'd have to go to the library, and we
>
> couldn't always get to the library because my dad, he works late some days and even on
>
> Saturdays, like he just came back from teaching at [a local school] a few hours ago. And
>
> so we never really had the time to get to the library. And so during that time, I didn't

read as much. I had to always depend on the school's library, but now that I have my

Kindle, it's so much easier, so much better. It really makes me happy.

Like Taylor, the participants who owned an electronic reader, enjoyed having the ease of

securing books quickly and relatively inexpensively while also having the ability to read and

carry around several books on one device. Although Kayla talked about the comprehension tool

on her Kindle, she found the ability to secure some of the complimentary books quickly to be

more appealing than the tools. Consequently, what the participants appreciated most was the

ability to engage and purchase multiple books frequently. In essence, while Taylor and the other

participants loved their digital readers, they did not use them in ways that enhanced their reading

enjoyment other than having books at their disposal all of the time.

The author's concern is that they did not produce any digital artifacts such as blogs,

iMovies, *YouTube* videos, vlogs, tweets, or *Facebook* notes and statuses (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer,

and Morris, 2008) in any way whether to simply share views or question authorial intent. In fact,

when I asked Kayla, a participant who had online access, whether or not she did anything with

her reading pastime online, she stated, "I've heard of Goodreads, but I haven't really gone to it.

And I don't have a *Facebook* and *Twitter*; it's a waste of my time. Like, I just read. I just read."

Indeed, Kayla, like many of the participants, was primarily a consumer of books. This pattern

was consistent across most of the girls in the study: whether they had access or not, the girls

were content to sit in their reading environments and read books whether they were

paper/hardbound or digital in order to fill their unquenchable desire for more and more appealing

plotlines and characters. With one exception, their love of reading had a limited connection to

any online activity that involved production (e.g., writing, designing, communicating, etc.).

So why did these girls refrain from sharing their love of reading except through gatherings with friends, listening to *YouTube* reviews (a step up from face-to-face conversations), and/or watching the movies based on their fascinating books? Listening to their descriptions of their teachers' classroom lessons revealed that a traditional view of literacy was utilized, so they did not view these technological avenues as relevant to their reading experience. The girls did not express technology as being used in their classrooms in diverse, novel ways.

The participants' focus on consumption, and not production (Attewell & Winston, 2003)., speaks to the need for teachers to share and demonstrate how digital products are beneficial to the reading experience, whether students are wired at home or not. All but one participant had Internet access at home, but those wired still did not actively engage or produce digital artifacts. Their responses established that they were not knowledgeable about the ways in which producing artifacts could enhance their reading experience as well as connect them to other readers and interested parties.

Because the girls wanted companionship around their love of reading, it pointed to the necessity for teachers to communicate the benefits of loving to read as well as instruct them on how to share their fervency with others in the greater world. While the girls had some digital literacies skills, they could have been amplified for the purpose of obtaining the companionship they desired, which would, in turn, elevate their already sheer enjoyment of reading. Of the participants, Sydney was most connected online, but she still was not making the most of her online resources. To explain, Sydney enjoyed watching *YouTube* book reviews on the Cass Jay Tuck Channel in order to decide what books she wanted to purchase and have someone to engage with after having read a book. She found this tool especially useful if none of her friends had read her particular book. The reviewer on the Cass Jay Tuck Channel was the person she

could relate to online; interestingly, the *YouTuber* is a white female who appears to be in her

early twenties. Not only did Cass Jay Tuck confirm or contest Sydney's own thoughts about the

book she had read, but the *YouTuber* also served as a role model of sorts in that she was able to

witness that there were indeed people in the world who shared Sydney's love of reading. In fact,

Sydney stated:

> It means like I'm not the only out – like out there who loves to read and that there
>
> are other people who are out there who really like to voice their opinion about the
>
> books that they read. There are other people who agree with those opinions. And
>
> then there – you have people who disagree with the opinions, and you're able to
>
> have a debate over it and it's pretty cool.

In her case, Sydney debated with the reviewer by watching and reading – not participating in

online discussions or writing the *YouTuber*. Nevertheless, this watching and reading were

sufficient enough for Sydney because she had access to someone else that not only enjoyed

reading the same books, but also shared the same passion for reading. This reviewer was

Sydney's virtual companion.

On the other hand, because Sydney did not participate in the *YouTube* dialogue or

produce her own digital artifact, e.g., blog or vlog, she was left out of book conversations on

deeper levels. This void is where a teacher or another adult could have intervened and scaffolded

her knowledge of digital practices and connected them to her love of reading. As Gee (2012)

stated, digital literacies skills are more effective when a knowledgeable adult supports the young

learner. Sydney could have benefited from having a more knowledgeable person as a resource

for the purpose of making her reading experience even more rewarding.

Implications

Given the conceptual and empirical material presented in the previous pages, a number of implications can be drawn for educators who design reading experiences that support the digital and critical literacy experiences, especially students from discriminated populations such as Black adolescent females. In terms of *digital literacies practices*, the design of reading experiences works optimally with a balanced approach, where teens are prepared to read traditional print texts *and* online digital texts critically. This balance means preparing them to read texts in ways that imagine textual meaning that is imbued with a broad range of cultural and linguistic factors in mind. For instance, with the U.S. "projected to become a majority-minority nation for the first time in 2043" … where "no group will make up a majority" (Census Bureau, 2012), readers need to apprehend texts as polysemous, signifying meaning that varies across people, place, and time. Thus, designing the use of digital texts for students will require a multi-dimensional model for balancing the many elements at play when the digital medium of literacy is constituted by many forms with polyvalent functions.

Furthermore, *critical literacy practices*, are also important to all students, so that they can identify bias in their readings, videos/programs, and communities. Again, this paper highlights issues raised by the voices of Black adolescent females because of their complex marginalization due to their race and gender. In many respects, a complex, complicated, discriminatory background has rendered them invisible and silent in national dialogues on literacy.

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have engaged in excellent work on behalf of many of the marginalized and silenced students. I take up their conversation to further the thinking about critical literacy and digital literacies to the more balanced discussion of critical digital literacies to reflect the ever-evolving online era..

Conclusion

In summary, the conceptual and empirical backgrounds of this conceptual work indicate Black adolescent avid reading girls and other adolescents do engage in digital and critical literacies, but in superficial ways. Furthermore, the literature and evidence suggests that more direct support for teaching critical and digital literacies could develop more strategies beyond these limited ways. In line with participants from my study, Hall (2011) concluded, on his study with Black adolescent female writers, that instruction in digital literacies would be ineffective without explaining how these tools could bring meaning to the teens' lives. Due to discrimination based on their age, race, gender, and acuity, marginalized groups have much to say regarding their lives and their lived literate experiences, which could be expressed through various digital venues (e.g., iMovies, blogs, vlogs, social media networks). Although findings from the author's research revealed some of the participants' knowledge of moving through the critical literacy process and using digital tools, their use of the method and medium was not maximized, seemingly due to the lack of purposeful instruction connecting the two literacies together in participants' classrooms.

The dearth of research on adolescents' critical digital literacies skills, indicate a need to understand their practices better. If research on the methods, processes, and imperatives for critical digital literacies are not conducted, an opportunity for effective, widespread online advocacy adolescents' can use for themselves and others could be largely left neglected and untapped. By comprehending the what, how, and why of youths' practices, educators can move from teaching these concepts without consideration of student experiences toward teaching them *in situ*, with relevance, and concurrently. Combining the teaching of these literacies has many benefits, including enhancing the reading experiences and abilities of students for advocating, through digital means, for the oppressed, marginalized, and silenced in books and in life.

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