ARCHIE COMICS, LITERACY AND PRE-TEEN IDENTITY:
A CASE STUDY OF L1 AND L2 ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

by

KAREN JOY VANDERHEYDEN

B.A., McGill University, 1987
B.Ed., The University of Toronto, 1992

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Department of _Language Education_

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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Abstract

This study focuses on pre-teen's responses to a particular cultural form, the *Archie* comic book. The research is framed by two central questions: (1) *In what ways does the reading of* Archie *comics among pre-teen* Archie *readers support their literacy in L1 and L2?* and (2) *What do pre-teens' responses to the* Archie *story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," tell us about their identity and their ways of understanding the world?* In regard to the second question, I am primarily interested in students' identities as gendered and as L1 and L2 learners. In addition, I am investigating the ways in which this research could foster community building in the elementary classroom.

Two theorists in particular, Krashen (1993) and Glasberg (1992), have made claims about *Archie* comics, specifically in relation to student learning. Krashen believes that comics like *Archie* are perfect for "hooking" students into reading since they are high interest/low vocabulary reading. In fact, he concludes that comics in general are linguistically appropriate, not detrimental to reading development, and conduits to book reading in many cases. Glasberg takes a more critical approach to these comics and examines the messages that are embedded in the discourse. He argues that *Archie* comics relay dangerous messages to pre-adolescents regarding sexual stereotypes. This qualitative study attempts to respond and move beyond these claims by exploring student responses to questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were distributed to fifty-five pre-teen students. These students commented on their reading activities in general and responded to a particular *Archie* story. Out of the fifty-five students, thirty-four were categorized as *Archie* readers and filled out an additional section of the questionnaire in which they were asked to share their insights about these comics. In addition, twenty of these *Archie* readers were subsequently interviewed. The objective of the interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of

pre-teen identity and specifically, to explore the extent to which insights about *Archie* comics could reveal the multiple identities of these readers.

The findings point to the importance of popular cultural forms such as *Archie* comics in the lives of these pre-teens, both L1 and L2. They indicate the ways in which these comics can support literacy for students. They also suggest that using comics in the classroom could be an effective tool for engaging children in a critical reflection of text, in particular the way that gender is constructed in stories.

It is important to note that this study is part of an ongoing research project conducted by Dr. Bonny Norton, and therefore the use of the pronoun "we" in this thesis refers to Dr. Norton and me.

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Glossary of Key Terms:

Identity as defined by Norton (1997):

"How people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people understand their possibilities for the future." (p. 410)

Literacy as defined by McKay (1996):

"Literacy is a complex interplay between both individual skill and social knowledge. In other words, literacy is seen from a sociocultural perspective that involves particular kinds of thinking which can take place in either written or oral language. Thus, it is not just reading and writing." (p. 421)

This connects to Gee's (1992) definition of literacy as social practice:
"Literacy practices are almost always interwoven into and part of, wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values and beliefs." Gee defines these practices as discourses. Hence, "reading and writing are not private affairs but rather social acts one engages in within a community. It involves supportive interaction with people who have already mastered the "discourse." Therefore, "becoming literate entails social interaction with those that know how to use the text to serve a particular social purpose." (Gee as cited by McKay, p. 428)

L1: Defined as students whose first language is English.

L2: Defined as students whose first language is not English.

***Archie* readers**: Defined as those students who read *Archie* comics a lot, sometimes read *Archie* comics or used to read *Archie* comics.

Pre-Teens: Defined as students between the ages of ten and twelve.

Gender: "Socially constructed aspects of differences between males and females." (*Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, 1998).

Gender Stereotypes as defined by Urquhart (1996):

"***Femininity:*** associated with sociability, sexual passivity, and an acceptance of domesticity and motherhood. It is seen as compliant with subordination to and accommodation of the interests and desires of men." (p. 150)

"***Masculinity***: characterized by power, authority, aggression, and technical competence." (p. 150)

Poststructuralism as defined by Davies (1993):

"Poststructuralism opens up the possibility of agency to the subject through the act of making visible the discursive threads through which their experience of themselves as specific beings is

woven. It also defines discourse and structure as something which can be acted upon and changed." (p. 12)

Socialization as defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (1998):

"Socialization is the process by which we learn to become members of society, both by internalizing the norms and values of society, and also by learning to perform our social roles. Socialization continues throughout the life-course. It is also recognized that socialization is not simply a one-way process, in which individuals learn how to fit into society, since people may also redefine their social roles and obligations. Any understanding of socialization must therefore take account of how the process relates to social change." (p. 625)

Language Socialization as defined by Ochs (1986):

"Language socialization refers to the ways in which language socializes us and how we, as individuals, are socialized to use language." (p. 1)

Powerful defined for the purposes of this study by Vanderheyden (1999):

Feelings that signal Betty's comfort and/or confidence about her actions in the story "Fairy Tale Land Revisited."

Powerless defined for the purposes of this study by Vanderheyden (1999):

Feelings that signal Betty's regret or discomfort with her actions in the story "Fairy Tale Land Revisited."

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I would also like to offer a special thanks to Tammy Slater, who generously shared her experience and resources with me over the last few months. In addition, I wish to thank the Principal, Vice Principal, and three participant teachers from Mountain Elementary School who gave generously of their time to make this research possible. I also want to thank the fifty-five children who participated in this study, and especially the twenty students with whom we conducted interviews. Their warmth, enthusiasm, and openness helped make this project an enjoyable experience for me.

A big hug and kiss to my husband, Ron, who made sure I never lost sight of the light at the end of the tunnel and to the rest of my family and friends who believed that I could do this even when I had my doubts. Finally, a special thanks to my unborn baby who gave me a gentle kick every once and a while to inspire and motivate me to finish this project before June.

Chapter I: Theoretical Framework of the Study

1.1 Introduction:

> It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across
> different sites at different points in times, and it is through language that a
> person gains access to-- or is denied access to-- powerful social networks that
> give learners the opportunity to speak.
> (Heller, 1987, cited in Peirce, 1995, p. 13)

Popular culture, as a social and cultural tool for literacy, has been largely overlooked by educational research. This may be due to a persistence on the part of educational institutions to devalue popular culture in favour of so-called high culture in the curriculum, in other words, the classics. If popular culture is a cultural product (Simon & Giroux, 1989; Walkerdine, 1985), and language learning is cultural learning (Heath, 1985), then an examination of the social networks or social worlds of pre-teens necessitates an examination of popular cultural materials such as comics that many of these students are engaged in on a daily basis. In addition, if we assume that pre-adolescent children read and use popular culture in order to know about the world (Urquhart, 1996), then the exploration of these cultural forms may serve to forge a bridge of understanding and community spirit between children of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The popular cultural form that has been chosen in this study is the *Archie* comic book because it satisfies five important criteria. First, it is extremely popular amongst pre-teens. According to Glasberg (1992), *Archie* comics fuel the third largest publishing business in comics, earning approximately thirteen million US dollars annually. Given that the average reader is 11 years old, the revenue from *Archie* comics is generated primarily from pre-teens. Second, *Archie* exists in seven languages which indicates its widespread appeal amongst children of different languages and cultures. Third, it is easily accessible to both L1 and L2 learners (Krashen, 1993) with its abundance of visual images and grade two level of writing. Fourth, the comics revolve around the lives of a group of teenagers, which makes the content of this cultural form

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meaningful to pre-teen readers. Finally, the longevity of *Archie* comic books (first published in December, 1941) attests to their importance and resiliency as a cultural artifact.

This study is in part a response to the work of two theorists regarding *Archie* comics, Krashen (1993) and Glasberg (1992) and attempts to move beyond their claims. The study is framed by two central questions. First, Krashen claims that *Archie* comics are an ideal tool to hook L1 and L2 students into reading because they are high interest/low vocabulary reading. In this light, we ask the question *In what ways does the reading of* Archie *comics among pre-teen* Archie *readers support their literacy in L1 and L2?* Second, Glasberg claims that *Archie* comics set up highly stereotyped gendered narratives and cultural assumptions that relay dangerous messages to their readers. He argues that these messages influence the ways in which children see the world. This research, therefore, represents an investigation into pre-teen values, beliefs, and identities through the use of an *Archie* story. Thus, the second research question is, *What do pre-teens' responses to the* Archie *story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," tell us about their identity and their ways of understanding the world?* The primary focus of this study is on pre-teens' gendered identities and their identities as L1 and L2 learners. I wish to explore the extent to which these *Archie* stories can help uncover the narratives of pre-teen identity. In order words, unless there is an understanding into how children view their world, it is difficult to have a transformative agenda. Furthermore, I wish to examine how these insights could lead to community building in the elementary classroom. This research will examine pre-teen reflections and responses to *Archie* comics generally, and to one story specifically. The pedagogical implications of these responses will be examined in depth.

For the purposes of clarity, I have decided to separate the theory from the practices that inform this study. Thus, *theoretical orientation* is an overview of theories and ideas, and *literature review* is an overview of research which directly links to the key constructs in this

project. Those key constructs are as follows: popular culture, gender, identity, human agency, childhood literacy, and critical pedagogy. While I recognize the inherent connection between theory and practice in research, I felt it would be useful to begin by building a theoretical foundation for this project, proceed with the methodology, and then follow with a discussion of relevant research.

1.2 Theoretical orientation

This research draws on theories of popular culture, poststructural theory, and critical theory as well as theories of language, socialization, identity, and gender.

Giroux and Simon (1989), in a book titled *Popular Culture and Schooling*, have impressed upon educators the importance of examining the role of popular culture in the lived experiences of students. "If we do not consider the cultural and social forms that children are invested in, we may run the risk of silencing and negating our students" (p. 3). It is vital to work with the knowledge that students bring to the classroom, knowledge which enables them to interact in *their* social worlds and through *their* eyes. Furthermore, the authors argue that studying popular culture gives us insight into the complex identities of students. In other words, popular culture positions students in different ways, in different contexts, and these positions represent the building blocks for critical pedagogy:

> The study of popular culture offers the possibility of understanding how a
> politics of pleasure addresses students in a way that shapes and sometimes
> secures the often-contradictory relations they have to both schooling and the
> politics of everyday life. If one of the central concerns of a critical pedagogy is
> to understand how student identities, cultures and experiences provide the basis
> for learning, we need to grasp the totality of elements that organize such
> subjectivities. (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 3)

Early in life, children are exposed to three potentially opposing strands of culture: popular culture as determined by media, high culture as determined by school, and finally home culture as determined by a multiplicity of variables including race, gender, and class (Venn, 1996).

These three strands may often send out conflicting messages, messages that children must grapple with to determine who they are and where they fit in the world. Given these conditions, children have to navigate through an array of cultural forms to construct their own meanings and identities (Davies, 1993; Urquhart, 1996).

This brings us to poststructuralist theory, which explores the social construction of knowledge, focusing on the notion of the *subject* as opposed to the individual. Poststructuralists do not search for a single truth, but rather for a multiplicity of truths and meanings, all socially constructed and therefore subject to de/re-constructions. In other words, poststructuralism does not prescribe a truth, but rather points out the existence of many constructed truths within the subject.

Unlike humanist notions of identity, subjectivity is not a fixed essence (Davies, 1993); rather it is constantly moving through space and time and in relations with others. Subjectivity is conceived of as a set of relationships. In other words, it is entirely relational. These notions are further elaborated in Weedon's (1987) feminist poststructural definition of subjectivity in which she illustrates that the notion of the self is both conscious and unconscious. It is made up of our thoughts and emotions, our sense of ourselves and the way we understand ourselves in relation to the world around us. This subjectivity, or sense of self, is constantly changing through time and space and is constantly being reconstructed each time we think or speak.

The fact that children are of a particular race, gender, and class influences the way they view the world, their place in the world, and how they interact in it. Exploring the meanings and pleasure children derive from popular culture, for example, comic books, will provide some understanding of the construction of their multiple and contradictory subjectivities. Appreciating the child's growing consciousness and the development of their subjective self is part of the exploration of this research. Responding to desire and pleasure in text and understanding how

these are constructed is part of poststructural thought. When we examine forms of popular culture, we are exploring the ways in which gender, race, and class are constructed in the text. We are also examining the way in which readers interact with text that they desire, and how and why that desire is constructed. As Urquhart writes:

> The reader brings to the text her or his expectations based on experience of life and of other texts, while the text itself also contains the author's socially and historically located assumptions about life and other texts. It is in the meeting of these worlds that meanings are forged. (1996, p. 167)

Historically, poststructural theory can be linked to George H. Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism (1956). He introduced the notion of agency in which the individual is seen as an active agent in their own socialization throughout the course of their life. In this way, individuals are able to select the values they wish to embody rather than internalizing the way others view them. He believed that individuals and society construct each other through their social interaction. Furthermore, learning and knowing is recognized as an active process. It is no longer acceptable to view children as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, to be filled with knowledge. Rather, the objective of some educators is to move towards a view of the child as equipped with their own personal histories and experiences in which the school serves as a place to enhance and share the knowledge the students already possess.

Bronwyn Davies' work (1993) traces the route that children in the Western world follow if they wish to attain full citizenship. According to her understanding, children must have a sense of agency. In other words, they must be able to make decisions and to accept responsibility for those decisions. They must make rational choices while following the rules deemed acceptable to the group and within the realm of possibility as conceived by the group. (Her work with children's construction of gendered identities will be discussed under the section of gender and popular culture.)

Both adults and children have a desire for agency, albeit for different reasons. According to Fine and Sandstrom (1988), pre-adolescents, who are described as children between the ages of ten and thirteen, test the boundaries of "adult-sanctioned behaviour, form close friendships and develop a finely tuned sense of how they see themselves" (p. 160). Lacking a true sense of power within the adult world, children want to be seen as competent, independent, and powerful in the world. This, according to Urquhart (1996), is why children in this age group are often drawn to adventure fiction. Typically this storyline allows children to play out their desire to be powerful by overcoming dangerous situations. In other words, they enjoy the fantasy of being fully competent and powerful human beings.

Critical theory, in particular resistance and cultural production theory, also plays a part in this research by focusing on individuals' capacity to make meaning of their lives and resist oppression. It acknowledges that the capacity to resist and understand is limited and influenced by race, class, and gender positions. Therefore, if we examine the construction of pre-teen identity we will begin to get a sense of how these multiple positions manifest themselves within this group. In addition, literacy cannot be viewed as neutral technology since we do not all have equal access to cultural products. Consequently, social positioning (Hilton, 1996), is reflected in children's choices of texts, for example, comics, approaches to writing and knowledge, and the views they have of their own competencies and futures. Some of the questions posed by the researchers in this study required a critical reading of an *Archie* story by pre-teen readers and presumed these readers to be active agents in their own learning. It is also important to note that this research, which is in part an investigation into the pedagogical possibilities of *Archie* comics in the elementary classroom, presupposes a need for change of and reflection on existing practices. Both poststructuralist theory and critical theory share in the desire for reflection and transformation within existing structures.

Sociocultural theory comes into play in this work when we examine the interaction between readers and writers from diverse backgrounds. The unique cultural knowledge and meaning that each individual brings to the discourse is critical to their social interaction. Willett (1995) stresses the importance of investigating the interactional routines and strategies individuals use within a sociocultural system and the place each takes within that system. Furthermore, literacy is viewed as a social practice. According to Gee (1992), literacy practices are "almost always integrated with or interwoven into wider practices or discourses that involve talk, interaction, values and belief" (p. 32). Moreover, mastery of these practices requires "supportive interaction" with people who have already mastered these discourses. Gee views reading as a social act one participates in within the context of a community. Thus, we must examine the interaction between writer and reader, as well as between readers themselves, to understand the sociocultural system at play when pre-teens enter the *Archie* world. For the purposes of this project, the interaction between writer and reader refers to the interaction between the *Archie* reader and the text (*Archie* comic) whereas the interaction between readers refers to the ways in which *Archie* readers, as a social network, interact with one another in reference to these texts. Willett (1995) summarizes social interaction as the way in which people construct, evaluate, and contest meaning as they struggle to share and at the same time carve out their own individual agendas.

The importance of social interaction within a culture connects to the idea that cognition is *enculturated,* or that learning is shaped within a specific culture, in this case the *Archie* culture. In other words, the way we choose to live our lives is dependent on a shared set of meanings and strategies or modes of discourse which are used for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation. Bruner's (1986) description of collaborative learning is quite appropriate in this regard:

I have come increasingly to recognize that most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture. It isn't just that the child must make his knowledge his own but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of culture. It is this that leads me to emphasize not only discovery and invention but also the importance of offering and sharing. (p. 127)

Another central construct in this study is the notion of *talk* as conceived by Vygotsky (1986). He believed that talk was essential to concept formation. The ability of children to discuss their reading with one another forms the foundation for future thinking and construction of meaning. This would be true whether the child is reading a book, a comic, or watching a video. Thus, the concept of talk further emphasizes the importance of the offering and sharing aspect of learning. We can see the importance of talk in connection with popular cultural forms such as *Archie* comic books. *Archie* readers share ideas, thoughts, and stories with one another on a regular basis and this undoubtedly has consequences for the development of certain literacy skills, for example, dialogue writing and vocabulary building.

This concept of talk connects to the theory of language socialization (Heath, 1983; Ochs, 1988; Rogoff, 1990; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Language socialization refers to the ways in which language socializes us and how we, as individuals, are socialized to use language. Language socialization theory sees language learning (a form of social interaction) as the process of becoming a member of a sociocultural group. As we act and react to one another we are in fact creating or constructing "social relationships, ideologies and identities" (Willett, 1995, p. 475). However, as mentioned by Weedon (1987), these relationships, ideologies, and identities are in a constant state of flux. Each interaction affects change. In other words, our daily interactions shape and re-shape who we are, or who we perceive ourselves to be, on the basis of socially constructed notions of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. These social relations determine who has power and who doesn't. When we examine the intersection of

popular culture and gender and/or childhood literacy, we cannot avoid the power relations embedded in these constructs. Children experience a sense of powerlessness in the adult world in much the same way as Females experience it within patriarchy.

Since I believe that the construction of gender is key to understanding the construction of the pre-teen identity, we will turn briefly to Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender as performative. According to this theory, the discursive effect of stability within and across genders is a consequence of their constantly repeated performance. In other words, repetition solidifies the gender roles we play. As such, the more we perform certain gender roles, the more we believe those roles define who we are. Butler believes that there is a distinction between sex and gender, and that gender must be seen as culturally constructed through language. Therefore it is language, not biology, that normalizes and perpetuates the gender stereotypes in our societies. Hence, I will explore insights into the performed gendered narratives in Archie comics, specifically in one *Archie* story as perceived through the eyes of my pre-teen readers.

I am also concerned with the construction of the reader. The relationship between these pre-teen readers and Archie stories can be considered dialectic, a negotiation of meaning between the subjects' multiple identities and the various interpretations the text engenders. In other words, this relationship is seen as the intersection of textual discourse and the reader's own subjectivity. According to Stephens (1992) "the meaning of a text is situated not in the text itself, but in a reader's construction of it" (p. 55). However, he points out that the process is more complex in that "the subject can represent the role of one who acts, but also one who is subjected to the authority of the text" (p. 80). Nonetheless, he believes the reader can select from a number of subject positions or occupy different subject positions in the course of the narrative ranging from passive to critical. Thus, the subject can be situated as both agent and object of the discourse. Davies (1993) also discusses the positioning of the reader within the text. She examines the ways

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in which children enter into text positioning themselves with particular characters and reading the story from that character's own position within the story. For the purposes of this study, I will investigate the multiple positions these pre-teens occupy when they engage in reading *Archie* comics.

Before proceeding, I would like to provide a brief overview of the remaining chapters in this thesis. In Chapter II, the research design and methods employed for this study will be examined. They include two key components: (1) the student questionnaires; and (2) the student interviews. Chapter III explores the literature that directly relates to this study. There are four themes in this section: (1) Popular culture, literacy and the socialization of children; (2) Gender and popular culture; (3) The socialization of the L2 learner in schools; and (4) Comics and the classroom. Chapter IV presents an analysis of the data which relates directly to the first research question, *In what ways does the reading of* Archie *comics among pre-teen* Archie *readers support their literacy in L1 and L2?* In Chapter V, I continue with an analysis of the data which responds to the second research question, *What do pre-teens' responses to the* Archie *story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," tell us about their identity and their ways of understanding the world?* Finally, in Chapter VI, the central findings of this research are discussed as well as areas for further research and development.

Chapter II: Research Design and Methodology

The research conducted for this master's thesis is part of an ongoing research project conducted by Dr. Bonny Norton. She is specifically interested in the ways in which children's engagement with popular cultural forms help us understand pre-teen identity and literacy practices. Her research will continue to develop and expand upon the research questions, key concepts, and analysis from this part of the project.

The rationale for using *Archie* comics for this project was mentioned in the introduction; however, it was also the result of Dr. Bonny Norton's preliminary research with a group of pre-teen *Archie* readers. After interviewing these readers, it became obvious that *Archie* comics were valued cultural artifacts in the lives of these particular children. Thus, we decided to conduct research in a local elementary school to see how important these comics were in the lives of pre-teens.

2.1 Sample and Site

The initial steps in designing this project entailed choosing a relevant site and sample which would enable us to investigate the two central research questions: (1) *In what ways does the reading of* Archie *comics among pre-teen* Archie *readers support their literacy in L1 and L2?* (2) *What do pre-teens' responses to the* Archie *story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," tell us about their identity and their ways of understanding the world?* There were a total of fifty-five participants in our sample. A brief rationale of the sample selected in this study will be given. There were two areas of identity that we felt were most central to this research: gender and L1/L2 identity. Since this study focused on pre-teens, age was pre-determined. First, it was our belief that the construction of gender and gender identity was central to how subjects position themselves in the world. Hence, the gender balance in this sample (27 females, 28 males) was an important component in this study. This allowed the researchers to explore gender differences in

responses to *Archie* comics by the readers, which revealed important aspects of their identities as pre-teens. Second, given the multilingual nature of most Canadian elementary classrooms today, we felt it was vital to the credibility of this research to include both L1 students (thirty) and L2 students (twenty-five) in our sample. We defined L1 students as those students whose first language was English and L2 students as those students whose first language was not English. Finally, due to the appeal of *Archie* comics among pre-teens in general, and specifically among eleven year olds, the age of our participants was also a factor. See Table 2.1 for a breakdown of the sample.

Table 2.1: Breakdown of sample

Female	L1	L2	Total
10yr old	2	4	**6**
11yr. old	10	7	**17**
12yr. old	2	2	**4**
Total Females:	**14**	**13**	**27**
Male			
10yr. old	2	6	**8**
11yr. old	10	3	**13**
12yr. old	4	3	**7**
Total Males:	**16**	**12**	**28**
Total	**30**	**25**	**55**

For the purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis for the site and participants in this study. The *Archie* research, which provided the framework for this thesis, was conducted at the Mountain Elementary School in Vancouver over a nine-month period, from May, 1998, to February, 1999. This site was selected for its culturally diverse student population as well as its large L2 population. The negotiation of this research site began

with a letter of introduction explaining the research project, sent to the school principal in May, 1998. The school principal proceeded to share the information with her staff and encourage teachers who wished to participate to come forward. This process resulted in four classroom teachers participating in the project: Mr. Black--grade 6/7; Ms. Stephens--grade 6/7; Ms. Waters--grade 6; and Ms. Christains--grade 5. All four teachers indicated that they had sizable numbers of L2 students in their classes.

Once we had received permission to conduct the research at Mountain Elementary School and we had the commitment from the four elementary teachers to the project, we began to draft a student questionnaire and design consent forms. The consent forms described the project, the objectives and the timeline in order to familiarize the parents and/or guardians with our research framework (see Appendix A). There were two types of consent forms: (1) for the parents and/or guardians of the students in the four classes and (2) for the four classroom teachers. Both sets of consent forms were sent out to the participant teachers in mid-September. Consequently, fifty-five students were given permission by their parents to participate in this study. Lists were compiled of all the participants according to their classroom teacher so that the researchers would have an efficient way of organizing the students when it came time to distribute the student questionnaires and conduct the student interviews. They included nine fifth graders from Ms. Christain's class, thirty-three sixth graders from Mr. Black's, Ms. Stephens's and Ms. Waters's classes, and thirteen seventh graders from Mr. Black's and Ms. Stephens's classes.

As mentioned, twenty-five of the participants were L2 students and thirty of the students were L1 students. The researchers made the determination of L1 or L2 based on student responses to a question which appeared on the first page of the student questionnaire: (1) *What was the first language you learned as a child?* Three additional questions, which revolved around the notion of language, were designed to determine how frequently, and under what

conditions, the students were speaking English. The questions were as follows: 2) *What language do you usually speak at home?* (3) *What language do you speak with your friends?* and finally, (4) *What language are you most comfortable speaking?* In addition, there were roughly equal numbers of male (28) and female (27) subjects in this study, which resulted in a gender balance. Working with approximately equal numbers of male and female students, and equal numbers of L1 and L2 students, provided an excellent opportunity to do a comparative analysis based on gender and L1/L2 identities.

2.2 Stage One: Student Questionnaires

Once the site and sample of the research was firmly established, the next step involved refining the student questionnaire. The questionnaire was framed using Janice Radway's 1984 model which was designed for adult female romance readers. This model was later modified by Willinsky and Hunniford (1993) in their research with adolescent female romance readers. However, due to differences in both the sample and the popular cultural form chosen, many of the questions in this model needed further modification as we refined the *Archie* questionnaire.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts (see Appendix B). Each section targeted a different aspect of pre-teen reader identity. In Part A, the students were asked general questions about the reading activities they engaged in for pleasure. It was designed as a way to begin constructing profiles on our pre-teen readers. We wanted to understand the kind of reading and frequency of reading these pre-teens were engaged in for pleasure. Examples of some of the questions from Part A are as follows: (1) *What types of stories do you most enjoy?* (2) *How often do you read for fun?*

In Part B, students were asked to read a carefully selected sample of an *Archie* story and respond to questions based on their perceptions of the discourse, such as: (1) *How would you tell this story to a friend?* (2) *Describe the last box of the story.* "Fairy Tale Land Revisited" was

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deliberately chosen because it presented two simultaneous storylines, an *Archie* story and the classic story of Little Red Riding Hood (see Appendix B). Moreover, it contained conflicting and ambiguous messages about gender roles. Part B gave the researchers an opportunity to investigate students' ability to critically reflect on and critique an *Archie* story by eliciting their opinions about the roles and feelings of the characters and the outcome of the story.

Three central questions elicited critical responses to this story: (1) *Describe the last box of the story;* (2) *How does Betty feel?* ; and (3) *What advice would you give to Betty?* The *Archie* version of this classic fairy tale both deconstructs and reconstructs the gender stereotype of the female as powerless. This is embodied in the characters of Betty and Veronica, respectively. The sampler positions a modern Little Red Riding Hood, played by Betty, as powerful in her ability to outsmart and overpower the wolf. She later rejects the help of the woodcutter, reinforcing her autonomy as a female and thereby deconstructing classical gender discourses. Meanwhile a second character dressed in a red cap, played by Veronica, seeks out the help of the woodcutter to be her protector against all those nasty wolves about, thereby conforming to a traditional gender stereotype of females as weak. In this study, we were interested in the subjects' ability to pick up the contradictory discourses embedded in this story and critically reflect on how gender was constructed inside the story.

Finally, Part C was directed only at the students who were regular *Archie* readers or had read *Archie* in the past with questions such as: *Why do you like reading* Archie *comic books?* or *How old were you when you started reading* Archie *comics?* Part C sought to achieve an enhanced understanding of the value and appeal these comics had in the lives of their readers. Our objective was to investigate the intersection of popular culture, specifically *Archie* comics, and pre-teen identity.

In both Parts B and C, the children were asked in subtle ways to examine the positive

and negative meanings and identities constructed in the text (*Archie* comic). This was explored on two different levels and with two distinct samples: First, all fifty-five of our pre-teen readers were asked to respond to a specific *Archie* story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," in part B of the questionnaire. Second, *Archie* readers only, which comprised a sub-set of thirty-four pre-teens, were asked to respond to questions about *Archie* comics in general in part C of the questionnaire. These questions were designed to gain a deeper understanding about the social network of *Archie* readers, the history of the *Archie* reader, the appeal of *Archie* comics, and any gender differences in who reads *Archie* and why. The aim of these questions was to access crucial aspects of the pre-teen *Archie* reader identity. Some of the question were as follows: (1) *Do your friends like reading* Archie *comics?* (2) *How did you find out about* Archie *comics?* (3) *How old were you when you started reading* Archie *comics? and* (4) *Why do you like reading* Archie *comics?*

The questionnaire included both open-ended and closed questions. Many of the questions outlined choices for the respondents, for example, *What kind of reading material do you most enjoy?* (chapter books, comics, magazines, information books, picture books). Others were yes/no questions, such as *Do your friends like reading* Archie *comic books?*. Still others required participants to comment on their initial responses, for example, *Do you ever read for fun at school? If yes, when and where do you do this?*

Before the questionnaire was distributed to the students at Mountain Elementary School, it was pre-tested by Dr. Bonny Norton with a group of eight pre-teens in September, 1998. The result of this pre-testing was an additional series of modifications. First, the language was altered in some of the questions to make them more accessible to our pre-teen audience. Question # 8a, for example, was changed from *Describe the last* frame *of the story* to *Describe the last* box *of the story*. Second, questions that appeared to be redundant or irrelevant to the research questions, such as *Do you have a favorite fairy tale? were eliminated.* It is also important to note that we

chose to use colour copies of "Fairy Tale Land Revisited" as a direct result of children's comments from the pre-test. They felt that colour copies were not only more appealing to read, but they were also a more accurate representation of an actual *Archie* comic.

After several revisions, the student questionnaires along with the coloured copies of "Fairy Tale Land Revisited" were distributed to the four teachers in early October, 1998. The teachers were provided with a list of the students in their class that were participating in this research. They were asked to hand out the questionnaires and answer any questions the students might have. The students were also given the option of keeping their copy of the *Archie* story or returning it to the researchers.

Once all the students had completed the questionnaires, the teachers were instructed to seal all the completed questionnaires in an envelope, and Mr. Black was designated to contact one of the researchers. Approximately one week later, we were contacted by Mr. Black and the questionnaires were collected immediately. Due to some unforeseen circumstances, not all the questionnaires were completed on the same day. Ms. Christain's grade five class completed their questionnaires one week after the other participants. Thus, the questionnaires from her class were collected the following week.

When all the completed questionnaires were in our possession, we began to categorize and code them according to age, gender, L1/L2, and *Archie* reader (AR)/non-*Archie* reader (NAR). *Archie* readers and non-*Archie* readers were determined on the basis of question #6a of the questionnaire. The students were asked to circle one of the following statements: (1) *I read* Archie *comics a lot,* (2) *I sometimes read* Archie *comics,* (3) *I have never read* Archie *comics before and* (4) *I used to read* Archie *comics but I've stopped.* If the student circled 1, 2, or 4, he or she was categorized as an *Archie* reader (AR). If the student circled 3, he or she was categorized as a non-*Archie* reader (NAR). Although, one could argue that choice #4 , *I used to*

read Archie *comics but I've stopped,* should position the student as a non-*Archie* reader, we felt that old *Archie* readers would add another dimension to the *Archie* culture by revealing what had initially attracted them to these comics and what had changed. As a result, thirty-four participants out of a total of fifty-five participants were categorized as *Archie* readers (62%). We also compiled tables and information charts using the data from the questionnaires.

We followed up with the school by sending letters to the four participant teachers in October. The letters thanked them for their assistance and cooperation in administering the questionnaires to their students and invited them to voice any concerns they might have had about the process.

We attempted to make the questionnaires as open-ended as possible to enable students to be actively engaged in the process and to acknowledge their capacity to interact with text and negotiate meaning from that interaction. In other words, we wished to encourage agency amongst our participants in both the design and implementation of these student questionnaires.

2.3 Stage Two: Student Interviews

Once the analysis of the student questionnaires was complete, we decided to proceed with a second phase of data collection: student interviews. The interviews were conducted with a sub-set of our original sample of fifty-five students. Twenty interviewees were selected as a representative sub-sample (considering gender, age, L1/L2) of the pre-teens in our study. In addition, we were interested in maintaining both gender balance and L1/L2 balance in the interview sample. Thus, we chose an equal number of males (ten) and females (ten) and L1 (ten) and L2 (ten) students.

Furthermore, out of a total of twenty interviewees, two were selected from grade five, thirteen were selected from grade six, and the remaining five students were selected from grade seven. This was roughly proportional to the age composition in the original sample of fifty-five.

Two additional grade six female L1 students were chosen as standby interviewees in the event that some of the subjects were absent for the interview. By the end of January, 1999, we had selected our twenty candidates for the interviews. We then wrote a letter to the four teachers to arrange a time interview times that were convenient for them and their students. They agreed to two dates in early February. The week before the interviews were conducted, we sent the teachers a list of the students we wished to interview in each class. On the dates of the interviews, all twenty of the students selected to be interviewed were present, thus we did not call upon the two standby interviewees.

It is important to note that all our student interviews were conducted with *Archie* readers so that the researchers could draw on data from all parts of the questionnaire. We chose interviewees who had responded to the questionnaires in a multitude of ways. The intention was to represent as wide a range of viewpoints as possible. Next, we constructed profiles of all our prospective interviewees based on their questionnaires (see Appendix C).

Once we had selected our twenty candidates and had been given permission by Mountain Elementary School and the participant teachers to conduct the interviews in early February, we began to construct our interview questions. The questionnaires and the profiles of prospective interviewees provided a framework for designing the interview protocols for each of the student interviews. The interview questions were designed to fill in any gaps or areas of ambiguity that emerged from the analysis of the student questionnaires.

The interview protocols consisted of four types of questions: (1) **generic questions**, which were general questions about *Archie* comics, for example *Why do you like reading* Archie *comics?* or *Do you like swapping* Archie *comics with your friends? If yes, which friends?* (2) **student-specific questions**, which were questions that emerged directly from student responses to the questionnaire, such as *You said that the beginning of this* Archie *story makes girls look like*

sissies. What do you mean? or *You said that Veronica was your least favorite character because she thinks she is rich and better than anyone else. Why do you think that she thinks she is better than anyone else?* (3) **literacy questions**, which were questions that examined the pedagogical possibilities of using *Archie* comics in school, for example *Do you think* Archie *comics help you in certain ways with school, such as with reading, vocabulary, spelling, writing?* or *Do you think you should be allowed to use* Archie *comics during silent reading?* (4) **culture/identity questions**, which were questions that addressed dimensions of culture, for example, *Do* Archie comics *teach you about Canadian society?*

The intent of the general questions was to acquire additional information about the *Archie* appeal and to gain additional knowledge about the reading habits of the pre-teens in this study that the questionnaires did not address. The student specific questions were designed to clarify any ambiguities or fill in any information gaps found in individual student responses to the questionnaires and which the researchers deemed relevant. The literacy questions were constructed as a means to get the students' insights on one of the central research questions: *In what ways does the reading of* Archie *comics among pre-teen* Archie *readers support their literacy in L1 and L2 ?* Finally, the culture/identity questions were designed as a way of understanding our participants' construction of cultural identity and the cultural assumptions they interpret in *Archie* comics. They were also designed in response to the second research question, *What do pre-teen responses to the* Archie *story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," tell us about their identity and their ways of understanding the world?*

Individual interview protocols were designed for each of the participants as a guideline for the researchers. However, during the interviews, questions arose from responses that were not outlined in the protocols. In other words, we, as researchers, approached the interviews with a set of questions and yet were open to exploring any comments that came strictly from the students

during their interviews. Thus, the interviews could be defined as a combination of the nonscheduled standardized and the nonstandardized model (Denzin, as cited by LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). The former involves questions that are used in random order but consistently with all students whereas the latter is a relatively informal approach which does not involve a set of specified questions but merely requires the interviewer to have a general direction or outline in the interview. The latter approach also allows researchers to develop questions based on the respondent's comments and insights as the interview is in progress.

The interviews were conducted on two separate days. The rationale for conducting the interviews in two sessions was to provide the researchers with the opportunity to revisit and possibly revise interview questions if necessary based on questions or concerns that might have arisen from the first set of interviews. Two rooms were allocated in Mountain Elementary School for the purposes of the interviews: the nurse's room and the Vice Principal's office. On the second day, some interviews were conducted in a third room as the nurse's room was occupied in the morning or the Vice Principal's office was occupied in the afternoon. In addition, on both days there were occasional interruptions while the interviews were being conducted in the nurse's room due to students feeling ill. This necessitated a certain degree of flexibility and sensitivity on the part of the interviewers regarding the school environment, schedules, and routines.

The first interview was conducted jointly by Dr. Bonny Norton and me to ensure that both researchers would employ a similar methodology in the interviews. All the other interviews were conducted separately, one on one. This was done for two reasons: (1) to establish rapport with the individual participants; and (2) to create a more relaxed environment for the respondents. In addition, we took a conversational approach (Lofland, 1971 as cited by LeCompte and Preissle, 1993) and dressed casually for the interviews. Furthermore, we often adopted the children's

language in the interviews, redirecting or reframing questions using their own terminology. In other words, we tried to ensure that the students felt that whatever they said would be acceptable and significant. Our objective was to make the students feel as comfortable as possible in order to elicit trust, confidence, and ease. This, we felt, was vital in collecting subtle and valid data from the respondents for this study.

Cassettes were purchased and labeled. Each tape was designated for a specific student interview in order to simplify the transcription and data analysis which followed. In addition, each student was photographed and their picture was attached to their interview protocols. The rationale for photographing the children was to personalize the data and allow us to visualize our participants during the analysis. The researchers tape-recorded all the interviews and took field notes as the interviews were in progress. Each interview took no longer than thirty minutes. At the end of each interview the students were invited to make any additional comments about *Archie* comics they wished. Finally, the students were given an *Archie* comic as a token of thanks by the researchers for their participation in the project.

Once all the interviews were completed, all twenty tapes were transcribed for the purpose of analysis. All the data was then coded according to two key themes: (1) literacy, in response to the first research question, *In what ways does the reading of* Archie *comics among pre-teen Archie readers support their literacy in L1 and L2?* and (2) comments about the specific Archie story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," in response to the second research question, *What do pre-teens' responses to the Archie story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," tell us about their identity and their ways of understanding the world?* All of the transcripts were then analyzed for common themes (see Chapter IV & V).

To summarize, the objective of the student interviews was to investigate, in greater depth, the *Archie* appeal and its connection to pre-teen identity. We wanted to understand to what extent *Archie* comics connected to the lived experiences of these children.

2.4 The Researcher's Lens

As researchers, we cannot escape the fact that we are part of the social world we study and we cannot escape the common-sense knowledge that we bring to our research manifested through the choices we make throughout the research process (questions, methods, participants, sites, and theoretical frameworks). Thus, by explicitly stating my role as researcher and its implications, I am able to position my subjective self at every stage of the research. As a feminist, which I define as an individual who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the genders, utopia is grounded in the notion of gender equity. This foregrounds my underlying assumptions about the patriarchal power structures within which we live, work, and do research. As Weiler (1988) states:

> Feminist researchers begin their investigation of the social world from a grounded position in their own subjective oppression. This leads them to a sensitivity to power that comes from being subordinated. (p. 58)

Furthermore, in order to understand another human being's experiences and consciousness, I must first develop a critical consciousness of myself (p. 60). My interpretation of feminism leads me to draw on both poststructuralism and critical theory as a researcher. Poststructuralism, on the one hand, allows me to see meaning as constructed through social interaction and thus, I search for an interpretation of truth, rather than the existence of one absolute truth. Critical theory, on the other hand, allows me to examine issues of power and inequity in society.

In this *Archie* study, there were two key questions addressed. The first question revolved around the notion of childhood literacy and the extent to which popular cultural forms such as

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Archie comics support literacy for L1 and L2 students. The second question revolved around the construction of gender identity for pre-teen readers. These questions directly reflect my multiple identities as an ESL teacher and as a feminist. Therefore, my position, as researcher, is fundamental in determining the questions I ask as well as those I do not ask. Positioning and investing myself in the research is vital to the process. From the outset, it is vital to make my assumptions explicit about the people, settings, and phenomenon I am studying. Yet, I must also be conscious of the fact that those assumptions may change over time.

In addition to my position as researcher, it is also important to explore the way this study was conceptualized and consciously grounded in critical theory by the researchers. *Literacy, Archie Comics and Pre-teen Identity* is positioned as critical in that it satisfies the six tenets of critical research as outlined by Norton Peirce (1995). First, it positions the researcher within the research and acknowledges the effect of his/her subjectivity in the process. Second, it attempts to examine the complexity that exists between the social world and the individual. Third, it presupposes that society creates and is created by inequities among various groups based on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Fourth, it focuses on the participants' construction of meaning and their ways of understanding the world. Fifth, it is positioned within a historical context, in that it examines the background knowledge and experience of its subjects. Finally, there is a transformative agenda to the research; in other words, there is a desire for social and educational change.

Chapter III: Literature Review

I have chosen to divide this section into four distinct themes for the purposes of clarity; nonetheless, there will be overlap between them. The four themes are as follows: (1) Popular Culture, Literacy and the Socialization of Children; (2) Gender and Popular Culture; (3) The Socialization of the L2 Learner; and (4) Comics and the Classroom. Due to the limited resources available on the topic of popular culture and L2 learners, I drew primarily from the L1 literature. However, I have included L2 theorists whenever possible.

3.1 Popular Culture, Literacy and the Socialization of Children

This project is centered around developing a better understanding of pre-teen identity and the role of popular culture in the construction of that identity; thus I will begin with research that seems most directly connected to that theme.

I will begin by exploring the work of Anne Haas Dyson (1993, 1994, 1996, and 1997). In 1997, she wrote a book based on her ethnographic study in an urban classroom of seven to nine year olds: *Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Childhood, Popular Culture and Classroom Literacy*. She explored how young school children use popular culture in the unofficial peer social world and the official school literary curriculum. The classroom teacher introduced an *Author's Theatre* into the curriculum where children were encouraged to role-play and create their own scripts based on popular television series, for example. Power Rangers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and comic books, such as X-Men.

Gradually, through this process, the children were transformed into critical thinkers and were able to deconstruct notions of gender, race, and class in popular culture (comics, fairy tales, and television shows) and then reconstruct their own storylines based on their lived experiences and meanings. In other words, they were encouraged to construct, negotiate, resist, and finally act

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out their own texts based on popular culture heroes and heroines. For example, some of the African-American girls in the class positioned themselves as main characters in stories that were generally reserved for white, male characters. As a result, the children went through conflict and controversy as they negotiated their identity with one another and the discourse. They demonstrated their capacity to be active agents of change by constructing and deconstructing popular cultural forms (characters and stories). They were able to move beyond text, question its limitations and expand on its possibilities for learning and sharing. These possibilities extended beyond the official social ground (classroom) to the unofficial social ground (playground) where children's identities were in a constant state of flux as they re-negotiated their roles. Her findings present exciting possibilities for pedagogy in the elementary classroom using popular culture that children are deeply passionate about.

As aforementioned, the story we chose ""Fairy Tale Land Revisited"" in Part B of the student questionnaire was based on the classic tale of Little Red Riding Hood. Thus, I will discuss the work by Zipes (1997), who explores the connection between fairy tales, children, and the culture industry. He is particularly concerned with the role of the fairy tale in the socialization of children, past and present. Certain questions permeate his work, for example *How is happiness constructed in these stories?* and *How does this affect children's perceptions of themselves and others?* He believes that we have become instrumentalized and commercialized in Western culture. We may have the illusion that we are free to say and do as we like, but he believes that our ideas are often culturally prescribed and our words are often a result of social conditioning. However, Zipes offers this hope: "The storyteller must realize that he or she is not *free* to tell stories but has the power to liberate himself or herself and others through a genuine exchange of experience" (p. 139). In others words, stories and their tellers have the power to subvert the culture industry or at least challenge it. Zipes is convinced that only through changes in early

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childhood education practices and in the socialization of children will children begin to critically reflect on a culture industry that permeates their world, and break free to create new stories and thus, new possibilities.

In examining the socialization and popular culture of children, it is important to acknowledge that children experience the world in very different ways from adults. The emergence of a popular culture industry focused primarily on children's needs supports this claim. Kline (1993) traces the origins of children's fiction in his book *Out of the Garden*. He notes the importance of comics in the development of a children's cultural industry. With the advent of Detective Comics in 1937, publishers became aware of children as potential consumers and began producing their comics on cheaper paper so children could purchase them at ten cents a copy. The creators of comics delved into the popular cultural repertoire in search of modern characters and themes. They borrowed from radio, cinema, and magazines. It is interesting to note that when comics first appeared in the late 30's and early 40's, there were heated debates about their value and appropriateness as reading materials:

> Wertham, in *Seduction of the Innocent*, asserted that comic book reading interfered with learning to read and with language development, claiming that severe reading difficulties and maximum comic book reading go hand in hand, that far from being a help to reading, comic books are a causal and reinforcing factor in children's reading disorders. (cited by Krashen, 1993, p. 50)

Thus comics, as highly visualized form of sequential story-telling, were deemed detrimental to children's learning. Nonetheless, they symbolized the beginnings of a children's cultural market and by the 1950's became the most important medium with which to communicate with children. The production of comics grew into a business that capitalized on childrens' love of stories. "The comic book played an important role in defining the boundaries of a mass market for children's culture and the framework for debates about it" (p. 104). Given

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that comics have continued to symbolize an important cultural commodity for children, it follows that an examination of these cultural forms will reveal aspects of the pre-teen identity.

Hilton (1996) discusses the notion of narrative desire in relation to pre-adolescents and popular culture. In her book *Potent Fictions*, she explores the forces at work in children's cultural lives and the role of the teacher and literature in relation to those lives. Hilton defines narrative desire as the pleasurable and autonomous space in a familiar story where we act as agents and authors of our own satisfaction. She locates popular culture in this space in which children are able to fantasize about other worlds and realities. Therefore, popular cultural materials are seen as providing the perfect medium and school the perfect context in which to share and reflect on these texts. She believes that these materials can serve as a conduit to other texts. In this way, narrative desire nurtured by popular cultural forms such as comics can be seen as a starting point for learning. She argues that teachers need to respect children's narrative desires, appreciate the process involved when students are engaged with popular cultural forms, and try to include that process in the classroom. Thus, for the purposes of this study, *Archie* comic books, as a popular cultural form, could form a bridge between the narrative desires and literacy of pre-teen readers.

In all areas of a child's life home, school, and community, socialization occurs, albeit in different ways and for different purposes. In a book titled *Ways with Words*, Heath (1983) focused her research on one fundamental question: "What are the effects of preschool home and community environment on the learning of language needed in classroom and job settings?" (p.2) Heath conducted an ethnographic study between the years of 1969 and 1978 in two small, working class communities in the Southern United States: Roadville and Trackton. Her research followed the children of both communities from their home and community experiences into their classrooms and schools. Her analysis revealed that children's learning follows community paths of socialization. Thus, the community, at least to some extent, determines what the child

will or will not learn, and therefore yields a tremendous amount of power and influence over children. She believes that the knowledge children bring into the classroom based on these life experiences is vital to the educational process.

In our study, we are also concerned with the world outside school and its effect in the construction of pre-teen identity. For the purposes of this research, identity is defined according to Norton (1997) as "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (p. 410).

According to Hilton (1996), it is vital to encourage active learning in language and literacy that connects with the children's interests in the cultural world outside the classroom. The world outside school embodies home culture and/or peer culture. In other words, family and friendship networks are interwoven into children's lives and are therefore intimately connected to their sense of self. The importance of these networks is examined in this project. We will also explore the ways in which children position themselves in multiple and contradictory ways inside and outside school.

This section has examined the ways in which children are socialized into their worlds inside and outside school. It also points to the messages which are embedded in the popular cultural texts that children read. Through the work of Anne Haas Dyson, we are able to see the possibilities that children create to deconstruct stereotypes in ways that reflect their lived experiences. It is important to remember that children experience the world in different ways than adults and as such their interests and desires as well as the rich background knowledge they bring into schools have important implications for classroom practices.

3.2 Gender and Popular Culture

One of the fundamental objectives in this research is to gain insight into pre-teen identity.

The construction of gender lies at the heart of that understanding, and thus, this section is devoted to exploring the intersection of popular culture and gender.

Over the last three decades, feminists have been concerned about questions of gender and gender stereotypes which popular culture appears to perpetuate. Masculinity and femininity are stereotyped according to the power relations between them. Masculinity is typically characterized by power, authority, aggression, and technical competence, while femininity is associated with sociability, sexual passivity, and acceptance of domesticity and motherhood and is seen as compliant with subordination to and accommodation of the interests and desires of men (Urquhart, 1996). The following research deals directly with gender as a sub-text in popular cultural forms such as romance fiction, comics, children's fiction, and teen magazines.

I will begin with a discussion of two studies which dealt with romance fiction and directly informed the research design and methodology of the *Archie* study. First, Janice Radway (1984) in her book titled *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* conducted research with forty-two female adult romance readers in Smithton, U.S.A. most of whom were married and had children. She distributed questionnaires and conducted interviews with sixteen of her subjects. As previously mentioned, the design of Radway's questionnaire was instrumental in the design of the *Archie* questionnaire (see p.14). Radway was interested in the multiple and contradictory social forces at play in producing, reading, and critiquing romance fiction for women.

Radway explored the ways in which this genre has been advertised, marketed, and distributed to their readers and the implications of that process. She uncovered the readers' belief that romance reading serves two distinct functions: (1) It is a form of resistance to family duties and responsibilities; and (2) it provides a safe escape and fulfills an emotional need in its reader.

Given that reading is an active process, Radway discovered that some of these romance readers consciously resist, change, and reconstruct mass-produced cultural forms which have been specifically designed for them. Interestingly, none of the women involved in this study enjoyed reading the Harlequin romance series; they preferred historical romance fiction or contemporary romance fiction (modern stories about modern women, for example, working mothers with children, single-mothers). She attempts to sketch out the reading process of romance readers in terms of the strategies and operations they are invested in as part of a social network which shares common assumptions about romantic fiction.

Finally, Radway looked at some of the standard language and narrative discourse in romance fiction. She points out that although there may be an illusion of realism in these books, romance fiction is merely a mythic account of how women must achieve fulfillment in patriarchal society. She goes on to say that by deluding themselves into believing that these books are realistic, these romance readers are on some unconscious level reassuring themselves that their own conventional choices of motherhood and marriage are products of choice and not social conditioning.

Some of the most interesting findings to come out of the research involve the subjects' responses to the following questions: *Which of the following best describes why you read romances?* Among the participants, the responses ranged from most popular to least popular: (1) *simple relaxation*, (2) *reading is just for me; it is my time*, (3) *to learn about faraway places and times*, and finally (4) *to escape my daily problems*. A second question, *What are the three most important ingredients in a romance?* evoked interesting data. The most popular answer was *a happy ending*. The subjects were asked to rank the qualities they liked to see in a heroine: 45% said intelligence and 21% cited sense of humour as their first choice. Finally in response to the

qualities they liked to see in a hero, intelligence was number one, tenderness was second, and sense of humour was third.

One final point before leaving Radway's work is the contradiction she uncovered in the research between the subjects' perceptions of themselves as being liberated and independent in the activity of romance reading versus Radway's own views, as a feminist scholar, of romance reading as inherently conformist and conservative. Her subjects insisted that the act of reading romance was their way of declaring independence. It allowed them to claim their own space and time, away from family pressures and responsibilities. However, looking through a feminist lens, Radway argues that romance reading can be viewed as an act of conformity, in that it presupposes and passively accepts a wide range of gender, class, sexual orientation, and racial stereotypes as truths, truths which perpetuate rather than question patriarchal values.

The second study which directly informed our research was Willinsky and Hunniford's (1993) work with adolescent romance readers, titled *Reading the Romance Younger: The Mirrors and Fears of a Preparatory Literature*. This study was inspired by Radway's research. However, these authors chose to work with a younger group of participants: female adolescent romance readers in junior high school. The school was in a "lower middle-class neighbourhood which included a mix of single and multiple family home dwellings" (p.92). Initially, the researchers surveyed six classes of grade seven students but eventually narrowed the study to forty-two female students, modeled after Radway's sample. They also re-modeled Radway's questionnaire as deemed appropriate to their study. They also decided to interview eight of their subjects.

The researchers outlined three areas which they believed create the "self-directed literacy of the young reader" (p. 16): (1) the *economy of literacy* which publishes and markets these romances for young readers; (2) the *preparatory function* of romance fiction; and finally (3) the

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narrow view of life these books portray to their readers. In terms of the production of these texts, the industry involved in producing romances for teens market these books as *fashionable*. They cite Scholastic Book Service as masterful in this regard, launching some of the most popular series on the market, for example, *Wildfire Romance* series, along with Cloverdale Press with the series *Sweet Valley High* and *Sweet Dreams*. Willinsky and Hunniford are quick to point out, as did Radway, the formulaic approach and conservative outlook these books offer. They view the activity of reading the romance for young adolescent girls an entry point into "a new culture of literacy production and consumption which can not be divorced from life in the society at large." (p.88). They believe that it is as important for educators to understand how this culture operates, as it is to understand why teens desire or reject it.

The researchers outline some of the similarities and differences between their adolescent readers and the adult readers in Radway's study. Both groups are devoted to these romances on a daily basis. However, the adolescent girls tend to take more from the text than their adult counterparts. While adults tend to read to escape or relax from their daily lives, adolescent readers believe that these texts will somehow teach them about their future lives. Another difference is female adolescents' need for strong, virile and physically attractive heroes, which according to these researchers directly relates to their increasing consciousness of their own physical development. The teen readers also desire romance like the heroines they read about, and believe they will experience these situations in the future. In other words, there was a high degree of identification in these romances by the subjects in the study who take their world as seriously as their heroines. Thus, Willinsky and Hunniford point out the instructive function these books are perceived to serve as manuals about adolescence and womanhood, specifically, how to feel, what to say, and what to wear by their readers. Unlike the adult readers, teen readers

were not concerned about private time or intrigued by faraway places and times. However, like the adult readers, they did relish the idea of escape and excitement.

The responses to the questionnaires by the adolescent readers did mirror some of the responses by the adults in Radway's study. First, when asked which qualities they would most like to see in a heroine, the girls ranked intelligence and sense of humour high, and yet they substituted beauty for independence. When it came to the ideal hero, again they ranked intelligence and sense of humour quite high, yet selected a good boy over tenderness, and ranked physical appearance as more important than the adult subjects.

In the final section of their paper, Willinsky and Hunniford examine the teen romance text itself in an attempt to understand the appeal and power that captivates its audience. They go into some detail about a particular series entitled *Double Love*. They examine the text's construction of masculinity and femininity and they highlight some of the dangerous messages being transmitted to these readers, for example, beauty as the key to feminine power. The researchers suggest some of the strategies which can be used to encourage students to share, discuss, and bring these texts into the classroom. By bringing these texts into the class, they claim that educators and students can critically reflect, as partners, on these texts.

I will outline the ways in which these two previously mentioned qualitative studies relate to the research with *Archie* comics. First, all three are interested in examining the desires of the reader as well as the construction of reality as perceived by the reader; second, all three projects are dealing with the intersection of popular culture and identity; third, in each project the interviewees were selected amongst the avid readers of that cultural form; fourth, each project is dealing with a relatively small sample; fifth, in all three cases the construction of femininity is an underlying theme in the discourse; and finally, in all projects the researchers hold the belief that to understand the appeal and power of these texts, it is essential to go to the readers themselves to

elicit their understanding and meaning. One further point which connects Willinsky and Hunniford's study with this project is the desire on the part of all the researchers to bring these cultural forms into the classroom to acknowledge the interests of the learner while at the same time enabling the constructive and meaningful critical reflection of these texts by educators and students in partnership.

Walkerdine (1985) in her article *Some day my prince will come: Young girls and the preparation for adolescent sexuality* explores the ways in which adolescent sexuality is portrayed in children's fiction, particularly in girls' comics. She is concerned with how femininity is constructed to prepare girls for their future lives as women. This echoes the work of Willinsky and Hunniford in their reflections on the power of the young adult romance as an instructive manual for ensuing adolescence. Walkerdine also explores the relationship between the production of feminine desire and cultural forms and practices. She argues that young girls' construction of femininity is the result of a struggle where heterosexuality is positioned as the path of least resistance, a solution to "a set of conflicts and contradictions in familial and other social relations" (p. 163). Walkerdine views girls' adoption of classical role models not as a reflection of their identities, but rather a reflection of the power of the cultural practices that attempt to position girls in the world. In regard to comics, she argues that the stories in boys' and girls' comics vary tremendously and point to a gender division between public and private spheres:

> In girls' comics the heroine is generally constructed as the target of wrong-doing privately fighting against injustice by privately enduring it. She is always triumphant in the end. Whereas with the boys' comics, public bravery and public fights against injustice are openly rewarded. Comics offer in both cases possibilities of what might be. The theme that is most pervasive in these comics is the portrayal of girls engaged in selfless acts of helpfulness and courage in the service of others. (p. 167, 170)

In other words, girls are seen as passively responding to violence. The themes which appear in

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the comics act as powerful signifiers keying into the struggles which are central to the production of femininity and female sexuality. They reinforce the ideologies of sexuality as female submission to male force. Walkerdine urges us to examine the practices which create gender positioning by understanding how hegemonic notions of masculine and feminine are created and how these practices produce identities in girls that are contradictory. She explores the classic fairy tale and deconstructs gender within the text to illustrate her argument.

Another feminist researcher, Bronwyn Davies examines children's construction of gendered identities. *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales* (1989) and *Shards of Glass* (1993) are the result of her work with primary school children and their constructions of gender. She attempts to disrupt male/female dualism for children by looking for viable alternatives as well as the obstacles to change. Since children spend a large part of their day in school, she examines the way that knowledge is constructed in classrooms for and by elementary boys and girls from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, specifically the construction of masculinity and femininity. A common thread that runs through her work is the desire to help children find new ways of being. She encourages children to break down structures which oppress and limit their possibilities as learners and as human beings. Davies takes on multiple identities in her books: writer, reader, mother, child, researcher, and daughter. As a feminist, poststructural thinker she encourages us to critically reflect on meaning and develop "discourses of resistance" (1993, p.4). While we acknowledge the pervasive sexual stereotyping in *Archie* comic books (Glasberg, 1992), our primary focus in this study is to validate the interests of our pre-teen students. Thus, before we can develop a discourse of resistance and help them to search for alternative ways of being, we must first respect their desires. We must also understand how those desires are constructed and interwoven into their identities as gendered, raced, and classed beings.

Another relevant example of the construction of gender in popular culture was research centered around a teen magazine called *Jackie* (McRobbie, 1982; Talbot, 1992). McRobbie came up with two important themes from her research: First, she found that sex and not romance was the key to sexuality as portrayed in the magazines; and second, that girls' lives were largely dictated by their emotions, in particular jealousy, possessiveness, and devotion. The second theme, she concluded, often results in conflict between girls. A classic example of the second theme, in light of our study, is the love triangle and ensuing rivalry between Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge for the attention and affection of Archie Andrews that is a fundamental feature of the *Archie* world. Talbot also sets out to show how femininity is constructed for teenagers in *Jackie*. She concludes that our identities as gendered consumers are constructed for us in magazines like *Jackie* under a guise of sisterly friendship:

> As readers we can ask who is speaking to me? What identity does she set up
> for herself in different segments of the text? What sort of identity does she set
> up for me? Who does she think I am? (Talbot, 1992, p. 176)

Talbot points out that the writer's ideology impacts the construction of the reader's identity. In other words, each text has an implicit ideology defined as a set of cultural assumptions and social structures, and the reader is positioned in that vision or ideological orientation both consciously and unconsciously. Thus, the writer sends his or her cultural assumptions to the reader through the written discourse. In other words, the reader is, to some extent, constructed by the text. According to Hollindale (1988), there are three aspects of ideology embedded in text intended to be internalized by the reader:

> (1) Overt or explicit elements in text which disclose the writer's social,
> political or moral beliefs; (2) Passive ideology which translates into the
> implicit presence in the text of the writer's unexamined assumptions about the
> world; and (3) ideology which is inherent in language characterized as the
> words, the rule-systems and the codes which constitute text. (Hollindale as
> cited by Stephens, 1992, p. 9-11)

Venn (1996) conducted a small-scale study in East London which focused on the attitudes and perceptions of girls in years seven and eight (ages 11-thirteen) and of female English teachers regarding media images of femininity. The subjects were from diverse cultural backgrounds: white, Afro-Caribbean, Asian, Turkish, Italian, and dual heritage. Most came from working-class backgrounds. All the subjects were asked to list their favorite TV programs, films, and magazines and to give reasons for their choices. Their favorite choices included soaps, teen drama, and comedy. They favoured storylines that centered around teenage angst. Among the eleven and twelve year olds, *Sugar* and *Just Seventeen* were cited as the most popular. Teen magazines were overall favorites among all ages in the study. The reasons given for their popularity were the following: (1) they reveal other people's lives; (2) they focus on teen-type interests; and (3) they explore a whole arena of feelings and problems (p. 134). Venn discusses the way in which some of the girls responded to the images of girls and women as portrayed in the magazines. The girls noted that nearly all the models used by the magazines were white. One subject responded in the following way: "It's racist. All the girls are white and blonde and they all look the same." Many of the subjects in the study did not see themselves represented in the popular culture they were exposed to and enjoyed.

Venn's research focused on how differing images of femininity impacted on girls' notions of themselves and their relationship to the world. Specifically, he was concerned with the relationship between the views these young girls had of themselves and the texts they were exposed to which bombarded them with a range of images of femininity in the first two years of secondary school. One of the research questions that was of particular relevance to this study was, *How are young girls encouraged to resist or accept images of femininity via their reading and writing?*

Venn noted an important and persistent difference between the year seven and year eight students. In general, the eleven year old girls were open and had strong opinions of themselves, their images of women, and their favorite magazines. They appeared quite self-confident about their position in the world and their future. In contrast, the twelve and thirteen year old subjects appeared far less confident on all levels. They did not assert the same strong opinions as their eleven year old counterparts, nor did they display the same degree of self-confidence vis-a-vis their position in the world or aspirations for the future. Many of their answers were prefaced with "I don't know, or I'm not sure" (p. 131).

Venn concludes his study by encouraging teachers to empower girls from all cultural backgrounds to resist stereotypical images of femininity found in popular culture. He believes that the high school English class is the ideal place to deconstruct the images that students come into contact with on a daily basis. He also acknowledges the importance of validating the materials that students read for pleasure and encourages discussion around these cultural forms in the classroom.

In an action research project concerned with boys' construction of masculinity, Urquhart (1996) wondered whether or not the boys she taught learned masculine identities partly through popular fiction, identities that would lead to aggressive and violent behaviour in their current and future lives. She wanted to see if there was a place for popular fiction in school and what the implications were for herself as a woman teaching young boys. She asked herself how her gender influenced what she valued, or deplored, in her male students' writing and the popular fictions they enjoyed. She believes that children make active choices in how they use the offer of masculine identities as portrayed in popular culture: "Film, television and comics provide armatures on which boys can wind all kinds of fantasy and provide structures which amount to boyhood rituals of entry into manhood" (Middleton as cited by Urquhart, 1996, p.166). However,

for some boys, where other circumstances attest to their powerlessness and failure in school and society, their fantasies of power and success become part of their desires and at the same time reflect their very real inadequacies.

Urquhart acknowledges that gender alone does not define who we are, but rather is part of our multi-layered selves which includes race, social class, age, sexual orientation, and so on, all of which create our complex, multiple and sometimes conflicting identities. She explores the social aspects of reading popular fiction among boys and believes that boys' deep personal desire to know who they are and what they are in the world inevitably leads them to test out multiple social representations of masculinity. During the course of her research, she began to examine her own gendered practices as the classroom teacher.

According to her findings, gender tended to influence the way students responded to the text. The girls' talk about stories centered on feelings and relationships. They were interested in the development and understanding of the characters in the book. The boys, however, were most concerned with the action and how the story worked: "The boys found meaning in the coherence of the plot and action of the story, and defined characters by what they did rather than by any insight or change experienced by the characters" (p. 158). Furthermore, she explains that it is no coincidence that children between the ages of ten and twelve are drawn to adventure fiction, given their relative powerlessness in the adult world and their desire to see themselves as independent and powerful in the world. Once boys move into full-blown adolescence they tend to discard fantasy as a template for real life.

Urquhart sees reading as a shared social practice. She encourages teachers to work with boys' experiences and boys' desires for competence and self-representations as masculine by taking an interest in the types of popular fiction they are engaged in, particularly their fascination with adventure fiction and "warrior-fantasies" (1996, p.182). She believes that this is an

important way to assist boys in widening their reading repertoire and at the same time gaining a deeper understanding of their desires and lived experiences.

I have explored some of the ways in which gender and popular culture intersect for children. This research represents a cross-section of popular cultural forms which focus on the construction of masculinity and femininity of readers. We can see that gendered narratives are central in many of these texts.

3.3 The Socialization of L2 Learners in Schools

Most elementary schools in Vancouver are filled with children from a multitude of cultural and social backgrounds. In recent years, the number of elementary L2 students mainstreamed into local classrooms has dramatically increased, and yet many teachers do not necessarily have the tools to deal with this diversity. In our effort to understand the pre-teen identity, we also seek deeper insight into the dynamics between the L1 and L2 learners in classrooms. We are looking for ways to bring L2 children from the periphery into the center. The following research gives some insight into the L2 learner identity and how these learners are socialized into their new realities. They also provide us with suggestions for fostering a sense of community in schools between L1 and L2 students.

McKay and Wong (1996) conducted a longitudinal, ethnographic study focused on four adolescent Chinese-speaking immigrant students: Michael Lee, Jeremy Tang, Brad Wong, and Jessica Ho, and their interactions with their classroom teachers. Three of the students were from Taiwan and one was from Mainland China. All of them had recently arrived in the U.S.A. and had very limited English proficiency as determined by placement tests conducted by their school district. The researchers followed the students' progress through grades seven and eight in a junior high school in California. They focused primarily on the interrelations of discourse and power in the learner's social environment and identified the multiple and contradictory

discourses at play as the language learners negotiated and constructed their identities. They were particularly interested in why some learners in certain contexts draw on all their available resources in order to succeed in their target language, while in other contexts they do not. They highlight the apparent powerlessness these students feel, the awareness of their lack of proficiency in the dominant language, the impacts on their identities, and the strategies they use to cope with their new environment.

The researchers isolated five important discourses which they believed helped shape the investment their subjects had toward learning their target language, English. These were; (1) colonialist/racialized discourses; (2) model-minority discourses; (3) Chinese cultural nationalist discourses; (4) school discourses; and finally, (5) gender discourses. The strategies that each of the subjects used to cope with their new language and culture were also explored and found to be quite diverse. They included resistance, accommodation, guessing, transfer from native-language literacy, and code-switching between English and Chinese with varied levels of success. It becomes obvious from this research that students juggle many identities and employ many strategies to cope with new and sometimes difficult situations.

Two important themes to emerge out of this research which directly connect to the *Archie* project include: the desire of the L2 learner to fit in and be accepted by his/her peers, and the learners' personal histories as being key in understanding their desires and needs and determining their investment in learning the target language. Finally, the strategies used by the students in McKay and Wong's study may prove very useful when we begin to analyze our own interview data from the Asian L2 participants in the *Archie* study.

One final point was McKay and Wong's rejection of the idea of motivation as too simplistic in understanding the success or failure of the language learner in their L2. Instead they turned to Norton Peirce's (1995) concept of *investment*, which takes into account the

complexities of language learning within inequitable power relationships based on race, gender, and class. As language learners are acquiring their new language, they are constantly renegotiating their identity over time and space. Since part of this project is concerned with the construction of the L2 as compared to the L1 pre-teen identity, we wish to observe to what extent English popular culture empowers the L2 learner and to what extent L2 learners are required to renegotiate their identities as they enter that culture.

Norton Peirce's (1995) research with language learners has led to a theory of investment derived in part from Bourdieu's (1977) conception of cultural capital. Norton Peirce writes:

> If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on that investment, a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources. This return on investment must be seen as commensurate with the effort expended on learning the second language.
> (p. 17)

Investment is important in this research insofar as it helps us to understand why certain learners learn under certain conditions while others do not. If we wish to access the L2 pre-teen identity as part of this research, our subjects' investment in English, and how popular culture (for example, *Archie* comics) may enhance that investment, is worth exploring. It is also vital to understand how feelings of powerlessness, as experienced by the L2 learner, impact their success in their target language. Perhaps by using a common popular cultural form like comics in the classroom, L2 learners may begin to reclaim some of their power by drawing on their background knowledge as a resource, for example, their knowledge of comics from their L1 or previous exposure to L2 comics.

As this research is concerned with pre-teen students (L1 and L2), it is necessary to explore patterns of interaction within a multilingual, elementary setting. Toohey's (1998) work with L2 children using a community of practice perspective examines the classroom practices

which contribute to the socialization of elementary children. Three grade one classrooms were investigated and reported to stratify learners (or communities) from one another. These practices were in part a result of the teacher's organizational practices in the classroom and the children's own racialized and gendered practices. She observed the children's interaction and highlighted the lending and borrowing rituals within these classrooms. She noted that certain children were consistently ostracized by others and that certain patterns of interaction became normalized. These patterns reflected inequity among the students. Toohey urges us to look for alternative practices that build community in classrooms by validating all learners:

> Coming to understand how our research practices as well as our classroom practices collaborate in constructing L2 students as individuals who, on their own acquire or do not acquire the capital of the classroom language may go some way toward helping us find alternative practices that will permit those students to become and be seen as beings for themselves. (p. 82)

In addition to patterns of social interaction among elementary students, it is also important to examine the language curriculum for ways that (1) empower the students and (2) engender literacy. Elley and Mangubhai (1983) did research with elementary students in Fiji to see if using high-interest reading material in the curriculum would effect a positive change in L2 literacy skills. Using a sample of three hundred and eighty students from class four and five (nine to eleven year olds) from eight rural Fijian schools, each class was provided with two hundred and fifty high interest storybooks (containing many visuals) in English. Sixteen teachers participated in administering a pre and post-test to students. There was also a control group of eight classes that were instructed to follow the standard English curriculum in their schools for comparative analysis.

The researchers isolated five factors which highlighted the differences between their L1 and L2 learning environments: (1) strength of motivation, (2) amount of exposure to language, (3) emphasis on meaning versus form, (4) type of exposure to language, and (5) the quality of

models. Of particular interest to our project is the fourth factor. Type of exposure to language refers to the structure of the second language learning classroom and instruction. In these settings, it was characterized as planned, restricted, gradual, and largely artificial. Thus, learning English, for these students, was disconnected from their lived experiences outside the classroom. However, Elley and Mangubhai found that the introduction of high-interest books diminished the differences between the L1 and L2 learning experiences. Using the shared book experience method developed by Holdaway in 1979, the teachers were able to engage the students in lively group discussions around the books presented. Follow-up activities included role playing, word study, art work, and writing activities as dictated by the story. The teachers also employed sustained silent reading periods in the classroom with these high-interest materials. After eight months, the researchers found that students exposed to high interest stories progressed in reading and listening comprehension at twice the normal rate. Furthermore, after twenty months, they found that the increase was even more dramatic and began to spill over into other language skills, for example, writing and speaking.

I will also examine research that connects the use of visuals to language learning and assessment. In 1976, Andrew Wright wrote *Visual Materials for the Language Teacher* in which he outlined the possibilities for visuals in all areas of the language curriculum: listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, testing, and culture. He stressed that the visual character, which is defined as the type of visual, should be meaningful and appropriate to the age group of the learner. In regards to comics specifically, he noted that these types of visuals contribute positively to the motivation of the reader. Furthermore, he contends that comics can also support writing as a non-verbal prompt to composition. He cites an example of a strip cartoon activity that was created by students for a classroom activity by cutting up a comic, remounting the drawings and having the pupils either write their text and dialogue on the strip or in their books. According to Wright, there

are many aspects to the construction of meaning which can only be accomplished by experiencing language in a variety of contexts. Furthermore, he argues that meaning is not conveyed through single words in isolation but rather groups of words "whose association and relationship conveys meaning" (p. v). He views visual materials as an invaluable part of the construction of meaning for language learners and advocates the use of comics in all areas of the language curriculum.

Mohan (1986) advocates the use of key visuals in language teaching and discusses the importance of visuals such as graphics in his book titled *Language and Content*. He demonstrates the effectiveness of using visuals to teach situational language and situational information and cites examples such as learners' manuals or photostories where visuals are helpful to access meaning in certain cases.

Perhaps the strongest argument for using visuals in the language curriculum comes from the area of assessment. The use of visuals is quite common in language testing and particularly in the assessment of oral proficiency. Although Slater (1998) suggests that visuals are open to interpretation and therefore may be problematic as an assessment tool for judging language ability, there are nonetheless a number of assessment tools that use visuals in testing language proficiency. I will discuss three of these instruments in this section. First, Finocchiaro and Sako's (1983) used visuals in one section of their book on foreign language testing. They cited five key skill areas in which visuals could be effective in the area of assessment which included: naming the quantity of discourse, vocabulary choice, grammatical accuracy and paragraph development.

The Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) which was developed by Burt Dulay and Hernandez Chavez in 1973 is another assessment tool which is used to measure children's English and/or Spanish grammatical structure while they are in the process of becoming bilingual (as cited by Slater, p.28). The BSM uses cartoon-style coloured illustrations as a basis for questions. The test is meant to be administered in a conversational style in which there are no prescribed answers and

thus, children are able to respond differently depending on their background and knowledge. (as cited by Slater, p. 28) This supports our belief that learning should validate and incorporate the interests and experiences of the learner whenever possible.

Finally, there is an assessment tool which uses comics specifically to stimulate oral discourse. It is called the Eiken Pre-first Grade test, developed in Japan by The Society for Testing English Proficiency Inc. Four pictures are provided in a comic book format as a prompt for oral story narration which is then evaluated in three areas of language proficiency: (1) comprehension, coherency and volume; (2) pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, and fluency; and (3) vocabulary, grammar, and word usage.

The work presented in this section focused primarily on the language learner and the strategies or obstacles that promote or prevent learning. By investigating and critically reflecting on classroom practices and discourses, educators may be able to transform the obstacles into opportunities for children. The theory of investment in language learning provides us with a framework with which to understand why students learn or do not learn in certain contexts and how feelings of powerlessness can manifest themselves in the language learner. In addition, I have briefly discussed some of the work that has been done using visuals in language learning and testing. The fact that visuals are a common feature in language testing does lend credibility and legitimacy to the use of visuals such as comics in the teaching, learning, and testing of L1 and L2 for both oracy and literacy. It is only through a sensitivity to the complex nature of the language learner that educators can begin to empower these students.

3.4 Comics and the Classroom

Since we are investigating the pedagogical implications of using *Archie* comics in the elementary curriculum, this section focuses on research that addresses the strengths and limitations of comics for students.

Glasberg (1992) wrote an article about the sexual and cultural assumptions inherent in what he terms the *Archie* code (p. 25). He contends that *Archie* comics relay dangerous messages to their audience about gender roles and adulthood. They present a choice to the main protagonist, Archie, between interpersonal intimacy and material success, embodied in the characters of Betty and Veronica, his two love interests. The fact that Archie is never made to choose between the two symbolizes his perpetual youth and freedom. According to Glasberg, there is an inherent formula in *Archie* comics that reflect a clearly defined system of sexual stereotypes and cultural assumptions. Each of the main characters remain virtually static, seen as symbolizing an underlying concept or principle. He sees the fundamental structure of the *Archie* code as the love triangle between the three central characters: Archie, Betty, and Veronica. Each Female represents a different set of values:

> Betty is portrayed as a middle-class girl next door. She adores Archie, to whom she offers a pure and innocent love. Veronica, on the other hand, tends to want *Archie* when someone else (usually Betty) does. Both women tend to vanity, but Veronica's is more extreme in that it has been corrupted by money. For being attracted to both, he is also attracted to what they represent. Blondness (as in the Betty character) represents goodness and pure love. Veronica, with her dark hair, suggests wealth--with its attendant and potentially corrupting temptations--and social status. (p. 28)

Thus, according to Glasberg, the underlying message of *Archie* comics is freedom as crisis where the main protagonist is faced with the cultural dilemma of choosing between happiness and power. In pursuing wealth and power, his personal relationships will be superficial and/or temporary, and yet in prioritizing meaningful, loving relationships in his life, he may be forced to sacrifice power and money. Glasberg also articulates three central tensions in the positioning of *Archie* characters: (1) between male characters as the choosers and female characters as the chosen; (2) between desirable women and undesirable ones; and (3) between potent youth and impotent adulthood. He concludes by offering the following reflection:

One cannot help but wonder how many girls have grown up with the idea that individuality is a sign of unattractiveness and how many boys have grown up with the idea that maturity is an inevitable defeat. (p. 32)

Our second research question, *What do pre-teen responses to an* Archie *story tell us about their identity and ways of understanding the world,* is in part a response to the arguments put forth by Glasberg. While we recognize the existence of an *Archie* formula and the inherent assumptions of its writers, we attempt to share the complexity of understanding that our pre-teens bring to these texts as they construct their own meanings from the *Archie* world.

Krashen's (1993) book, *The Power of Reading,* focuses on the concept of free voluntary reading as the key to literacy for students (L1 and L2). He contends that comic books, as a form of light reading, could be viewed as a cure for children who are currently unmotivated to read. He has found that "comic book reading can lead to more serious reading" (p. 50). He specifically cites *Archie* as one of the comics to emerge out of the Golden Age of Comics (1937 to 1955), one which still possesses considerable appeal today as evidenced by its presence at local supermarket checkout counters.

Krashen claims that if teachers are looking for high interest/low vocabulary reading for older students (for example, pre-teens or teens), *Archie* comics make an excellent choice. The beauty of *Archie* is that it is about high school students but written at a grade two level, making it easily accessible to L2/EFL students.

Another important point which is fundamental to this research is the notion of the comic book as a *hook* into literacy for L2 students. This is evidenced in the voice of Mark Mathabane, a South African writer speaking of his early exposure to comic books as a way of accessing English:

> Having never owned a comic book in my life, I tirelessly read them over and over again the parts I could understand. Such voracious reading was like an anesthesia, numbing me to the harsh life around me. Soon comic books became the joy of my life, and everywhere I went I took one with me reading it

furtively when the teacher was busy at the blackboard. Midway into my eleventh year, Granny started bringing home strange-looking books. The books were Mrs. Smith's son's schoolbooks: Aesop's fables and the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm. At this point, because of my reading comics, my English had improved to a level where I could read sentences. I found the books enthralling. (Mathabane, 1986, p. 170, as cited by Krashen, p. 59)

Arlin and Roth (1978) conducted a study with third graders (L1) and concluded that reading educational comics (*Archie* was part of this group) helped them show some gain in reading comprehension. However, there was also some evidence that poor readers would gain more from reading books than comics due to the amount of visual *versus* textual content. Nevertheless, Swain's (1978) research indicated that avid long-term comic readers were just as passionate about their book reading, and in many cases proved to be among the strongest readers in their class.

Another interesting study was conducted by Dorrell and Carroll (1981). The school library placed comic books on reserve for a period of seventy-four days. The purpose of the project was to find out if the circulation of books would increase or decrease as a result of having the comic books available for the students to read. What they found was that the presence of comics in the library dramatically increased the overall library traffic and circulation of other books in the library by 82% and 30% respectively.

In an Irish study by Greaney (1980), the researcher wanted to investigate the relationship between amount of time devoted to leisure reading (books, comics, and newspapers) and a series of personal home and school variables. Among these variables were gender, level of reading attainment, leisure activities, socio-economic status, family size, choice of television programs, and location and type of primary school attended. In the final analysis, gender was the strongest discriminator, with girls tending to devote more time to books and boys more time to comics. This was consistent with a later American study by McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1991) in

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which a sample across ninety-five school districts and in thirty-eight states reported that there were substantial proportions of elementary students in the United States reading comic books. Nevertheless, boys were reading comics more often than girls. For boys the range was from 69% in grade one to 75% in grade six, and for girls it was 50% to 60% respectively. Unfortunately, I could not locate any similar studies conducted in Canada.

Skorapa (1994) advocates the use of popular cultural texts in the classroom to analyze and critique from a variety of sources which include magazines, newspapers, television, movies, and videos. She finds that comics are particularly useful in that they represent some kind of shared culture outside the official world. She views comics as a layering of meaning which occurs on at least three levels: (1) dialogue between the characters; (2) dialogue between the characters and readers when the characters are engaged in thought; and (3) through the visual representations. These layers provide the readers with rich and complex signs they must negotiate while engaged in reading. She notes that as comics are a visual-narrative form of reading, there is an underlying cultural assumption that they are only for children. This suggests that children are only quasi-literate. She believes that comics "create opportunities for students to understand and analyze critical readings of existing social institutions and the potential for resistance and critique of the forms of schooling and popular culture" (p.226).

In sum, the literature review represents an overview of some of the themes I felt to be most pertinent in this research. It attempts to address the socialization of children and the role that popular culture plays in that process. The construction of gender is highlighted in popular culture and reflects the ways in which society conceptualizes identity. Through mediums such as romance fiction, comics, teen magazines, and fairy tales, children are positioned in certain ways which, to some extent, impact the way they see the world. Feminist researchers such as Davies (1993), Dyson (1997), and Walkerdine (1985) advocate classroom practices which open up

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possibilities for children to engage with text as critical thinkers, thereby deconstructing traditional stereotypes based on gender, class, or race.

Another function of this literature review was to examine the process of language learning through the discourses and the classroom practices that promote or prevent access to the target language. In that regard, we can see the importance of using visuals in accessing meaning for students, which supports both literacy and oracy in L2. Since comics are highly visualized forms of storytelling it stands to reason that this genre of popular culture could legitimately be supported in the language curriculum. Moreover, the research on comics seems to emphasize the positive effects they have on students' academic performance. I will now proceed with the data analysis which is informed by the theory and research from this section.

The following two chapters present the analysis of data in response to our two key research questions. Chapter IV examines the data from our *Archie* readers only (thirty-four students) as well as the interview data for the twenty interviewees; again they were strictly *Archie* readers. I am concerned primarily with the ways in which *Archie* comics support literacy for L1 and L2 students, with a particular focus on the L2 students. Chapter V explores student responses to the *Archie* story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," from all fifty-five of our participants as a way to understand how pre-teens construct their identities, particularly as gendered subjects.

Chapter IV: Literacy and the Pre-Teen Archie Reader

This chapter examines the data that relates directly to the research question *In what ways does the reading of* Archie *comics among pre-teen readers support their literacy in L1 and L2?* I investigated responses from the student questionnaires of our thirty-four *Archie* readers (six L2 and nine L1 males, and seven L2 and twelve L1 Females) as well as the twenty students interviewed, looking for the emergent themes that connect the activity of reading *Archie* comics to literacy. There were five general themes that came out of this data:

1) General trends and the pre-teen *Archie* reader
2) *Archie* comics and language learning
3) *Archie* comics and education
4) The social world of the *Archie* reader
5) Two dimensions of *Archie* appeal

For the purposes of this study, *Archie* readers were defined as any students who circled one of the following for question #6a of the student questionnaire:

1) I read *Archie* comics a lot
2) I sometimes read *Archie* comics
3) I used to read *Archie* comics but I've stopped

There were a total of thirteen L2 students and twenty-one L1 students that were categorized as *Archie* readers. Thus, the focus of this section is twofold. It revolves around two questions: (1) *Who reads* Archie *and why?* and (2) *To what extent does this activity support the development of language skills?* It is important to note that while I focused primarily on *Archie* readers for this section, I began with an investigation into the reading activities of all our fifty-five participants in general, looking for gender or L1/L2 trends yet there is also a particular emphasis on the thirteen L2 *Archie* readers.

This research takes a sociocultural approach to reading, viewing it as a social practice. It supports the notion that literacy is a complex interplay between both individual skills and social knowledge (McKay, 1996). Thus, I will explore the ways in which reading *Archie* comics can be

viewed as a collaborative process, a reflection of values and traditions about text, and as a reflection of social relationships which help engender literacy for students.

4.1 General trends and the Pre-Teen Archie Reader

Before moving to *Archie* comics specifically, I explored our pre-teen participants reading activities in general looking for gender or L1/L2 trends. The analysis of the questionnaires, particularly Part A, which dealt with reading activities of our pre-teens, suggested that girls were reading for pleasure more often than boys. While approximately equal numbers of girls and boys were reading most days, none of the girls read less than once or twice a week. There was, in contrast, a small group of boys that were reading rather infrequently. See Table 4.1 for the results.

Table 4.1 : Participants response to question #1: How often do you read for fun ?

	Female	Male	Total
Most days	19- 15AR/4NAR	17- tenAR/7NAR	36
Once or twice/ week	8- 5AR/3NAR	6- 2AR/4NAR	14
Once or twice/ month	0	4- 3AR/1NAR	4
Hardly ever	0	1- 1NAR	1
Total	27	28	55

Key: AR = Archie reader   NAR= Non-Archie reader

While our sample is relatively small, it is interesting to note that 74% of our *Archie* readers (twenty-five out of a possible thirty-four) are reading most days while only 52% of our non-*Archie* readers are reading most days (eleven out of a possible twenty-one).

Although we did not intentionally select a sample of *Archie* readers from among our pre-teens, we found that 62% (thirty-four out of fifty-five) of our total sample were categorized as

Archie readers (see p. 17 for definition). This supports the argument that *Archie* comics are an important cultural artifact for pre-teens. See Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Number of *Archie* readers according to L1/L2 and gender

Subject category	Total	Total no. of Archie Readers
Male L1	16	9
Male L2	12	6
Female L1	14	12
Female L2	13	7
Total	55	34

It is striking from this table that an overwhelming number of L1 females in this sample are *Archie* readers. This may be an important indication of the gender and L1/L2 composition of the *Archie* culture. In other words, 82% (twelve out of a possible fourteen L1 females) read *Archie* comics as opposed to the other groups (L1 males, L2 males and L2 females) which were divided somewhat equally between *Archie* and non-*Archie* readers. This may signal important characteristics of the typical *Archie* reader.

Next, we then began to explore gender themes that emerged from the data. One of the themes that surfaced from the questionnaires completed by twenty-six *Archie* readers was a general consensus that *Archie* comics have greater appeal for girls than boys. These *Archie* readers were asked in question #17 to circle one of the following statements:

1) I think *Archie* comics are more popular with girls than boys.
2) I think *Archie* comics are more popular with boys than girls.
3) I think *Archie* comics are equally popular with boys and girls.

Table 4.3 below illustrates the results.

Table 4.3: The popularity of *Archie* comics based on gender

Subject	Girls> Boys	Boys > Girls	Girls = Boys
Female	10	0	5
Male	5	1	5
Total	15	1	10

The participants gave a variety of reasons for classifying *Archie* as a girl comic. These responses reflected two key points: (1) Boys are seldom seen reading *Archie* comics and (2) girls are seen reading *Archie* comics more often than boys. Among the female respondents, ten out of sixteen girls felt girls read *Archie* more than boys, none of them felt boys read *Archie* comics more than girls, and five of them felt girls and boys read *Archie* comics equally. Among the male respondents, five out of eleven felt girls read *Archie* comics more than boys, one of the students felt boys read *Archie* more than girls, and five of them felt it was equal between the boys and girls. Some examples of these responses are as follows:

> Extract 1:
> *I have not heard of one boys who likes* Archie *mags.* (Female, L2)

> Extract 2:
> *Because I have seen girls read* Archie *more.* (Male, L2)

> Extract 3:
> *Because I never really see boys reading* Archie *comics.* (Female, L1)

> Extract 4:
> *I'm not sure but I know lots of girls who read* Archie *comics but no boys.*
> (Female, L1)

> Extract 5:
> *Because I've seen only two other boys reading* Archie. (Male, L2)

This may connect to the other trends in the data which seem to point to a stronger devotion or passion towards *Archie* comics for girls than boys.

Another trend that emerged from the data was gender differences in choices of leisure activities. This seemed to suggest that in general, girls enjoy reading more than boys, which includes the reading of *Archie* comics:

> Extract 6:
> *Boys don't read it as much as we girls do.* (Female, L1)

> Extract 7:
> *Because girls like to read and have fun, but boys like to play and have fun.*
> (Female, L2)

Extract 8:
I: Do you think that girls read Archies *more than boys?*
S: Yeah, for sure.
I: So why do you think that?
S: Like the girls are mostly the main characters and like I think they like it 'cause it's about teens and everything.
I: But why would girls like it because it's about teens and boys not because I mean both of you, boys and girls are going to become teen, right?
S: Because boys would probably like rather be playing sports and stuff.
I: You mean, um instead of doing what?
S: Instead of reading Archie *comics, sometimes. That's why I think like girls read it more.* (Male, L1)
* Please note that for the purposes of the interview extracts in this thesis, **I** refers to the interviewer and **S** refers to the student interviewee.

A few respondents cited romance as the key to *Archie*'s greater popularity amongst girls than boys. Thus, for many pre-teen readers, romance is deemed a Female genre. This is illustrated in the the next three extracts:

Extract 9:
Because there is a lot of romance in Archie *comics.* (Female, L1)

Extract 10:
I: Do you think boys read Archie *comics differently from girls?*
S: Yes, the boys wouldn't go for the romantic types, like Veronica and Betty fighting for Archie The girls really like the romantic ones, like all my friends do. (Female, L1)

Extract 11:
S: Well, the romantic ones should be in grade 5 or 6 around girls.
I: OK, so romantic -- You think more of girls liking them or you don't really think that boys would go for them -- for the romantic stuff?
S: Yeah. (Male, L2)

Two other students alluded to the gender separation in friendship networks amongst pre-teens as the central reason for the gender differences in the popularity of these comics. In other words, the fact that boys are seen to dramatically dis-associate from girls at this age results in a rejection by males of any activities enjoyed by females, including *Archie* comics. The following extract from a female L2 student interviewed illustrates an awareness of the gender separation at this age:

Extract 12:
S: Boys don't really read Archie *comics in our school.*

I: Why don't you think boys read Archie *comics? Is there anything about the comics that boys wouldn't like?*
S:Well, the girls are sometimes funny but guys are too, 'cause like Archie he's always clumsy and stuff. There's no reason for guys not to read Archie comics, but girls mostly read Archie *comics so guys probably think it's like girls stuff.*
(Female, L2)

For those students that circled (3) I think *Archie* comics are equally popular with boys and girls, they touched on the content, equal appeal, and gender equality as their rationale. The following eight extracts from the student questionnaires reflect this view:

Extract 13:
Because they are about boys and girls. (Female, L1)

Extract 14:
It's about girls and boys so it would be equal. (Female, L1)

Extract 15:
I think this because every boy and girl like Archie *comics and everybody likes Archie comics.* (Female, L1)

Extract 16
Because they are good for everyone. (Male, L1)

Extract 17:
Because both boys and girls like 'em. (Male, L2)

Extract 18:
Because lots of my friends that are boys like Archie *and lots of my friends that are girls like* Archie. (Male, L1)

Extract 19:
Because I see both boys and girls reading them. (Male, L1)

Extract 20:
Because boys and girls are equal. (Female, L2)

Some of these students are operating under an a priori assumption that there is no difference in boys and girls and therefore boys and girls are the same: equal.

We also explored the history of *Archie* comics in the lives of our pre-teen *Archie* readers (thirty-four participants) in Part C of the student questionnaire. The majority of our L1 *Archie*

readers began reading these comics at nine years old or earlier whereas the majority of L2 students started reading *Archie* comics at nine years old or later. Since most of our *Archie* readers were either eleven or twelve years old (twenty-five out of thirty-four), the majority of the students had been reading *Archie* comics for at least two-three years. In several cases, the L1 *Archie* readers had been reading these comics for a minimum of four years, beginning at six or seven years old. A number of L2 *Archie* readers, on the other hand, began reading *Archie* comics in the last year or two. This is illustrated in Table 4.4:

Table 4.4: Age *Archie* readers started reading *Archie* comics

Subjects	6-7yrs old	8-9 yrs old	10-11yrs old	No response	Total
Male L1	3	2	1	3	**9**
Male L2	0	2	3	1	**6**
Female L1	3	6	1	2	**12**
Female L2	1	2	2	2	**7**
Total	**7**	**12**	**7**	**8**	**34**

We also asked some of the students in the interviews about the time they spent reading *Archie* comics and the quantity of *Archie* comics they owned. This information would gave us a sense of the investment both in terms of time and money that was associated with being an *Archie* reader. The following three extracts (21 to 23) convey the passion or devotion associated with being an *Archie* reader for some of these pre-teens:

Extract 21:
S: I have quite a few at home and so sometimes at night, I'm just bored and there just reading that they're something to do.
I: Do you read Archie *every night before you go to bed?*
S: Yeah, pretty much.
I: When you say you have a lot of Archies *at home, how many are we talking about?*
S: Hundreds. (Female, L1)

Extract 22:
I read a comic everyday. I read Calvin and Hobbes and Archies *and adventure things.* (Male, L2)

Extract 23:
I: So how many do you have at home?
S: I have a whole drawer full of them.
I: Do you, eh? Do you read them over and over again?
S: Yeah, I read the same ones twice like lots of times.
I: That's great.
S: Till I get more like if I'm in the middle of one that I've already read and I
get a new one, I'll read the new one and then I'll swap with the other one until
I've finished reading it and then go back to the other one that I was reading.
(Male, L1)

This devotion connects to the studies conducted by Radway (1984) and Willinsky and Hunniford (1993) who also found their romance readers to be devoted to their texts on a daily basis.

In addition, two of these *Archie* readers consider themselves both readers and collectors. This relates to the work by Skorapa (1994) who defines comics as popular cultural commodity texts (PCCT's) which are bought, sold, and traded regularly amongst avid readers of this genre.

4.2 Archie Comics and School

In regard to comics and school achievement, some of the research claims that comics do not have any negative effect on language development and school achievement (Krashen, 1993; Hilton, 1996). In fact, in some cases they appear to support literacy in L2 (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen, 1993; Wright, 1976) and in L1 (Arlin and Roth, 1978; Dorrell and Carroll, 1981; Swain, 1978). Amongst the *Archie* readers in this particular study, several mentioned that they were strong readers and enjoyed books of all kinds. This supports the argument that comic book readers do at least as much book reading as non-comic book readers (Krashen, 1993; Swain, 1978). Several of the *Archie* readers in the study mentioned that they enjoyed other books at least as much as *Archie* comics. Extracts 24 to 27 from the student interviews illustrate this point:

Extract 24:
I like reading historical um books, educational and I also like science fiction,
ah and I also have lately gotten into historical fiction. (Male, L1)

Extract 25:
I: Do you read a lot of other books as well?
S: Yeah.

I: Do you read chapter books?
S: Yeah, chapter books.
I: But do you consider yourself quite a good reader in terms of like reading all those other books? Do you read a lot?
S: Yeah, I read a lot. (Female, L1)

Extract 26:
I: Do you read a lot of other books as well?
S: Yeah.'
I: Yeah, you like that?
S: Yeah, I'm a pretty strong reader, like say it was a really thick book. I could at least read it in two weeks if I have the time.
I: Great, so what do you prefer to read, chapter books or comic books?
S: Chapter books and comic books. (Female, L1)

Extract 27:
I: So if you had to choose between reading an Archie *comic and a chapter book, do you?*
S: Well, it depends what kind of mood I'm in "cause I read both a whole bunch.
I: Oh you do? You read a lot of chapter books as well?
S: Yeah. I read like a book a week, like a hundred and thirty page book a week as well as Archie *comics.* (Female, L1)

All four of these participants were among the twenty-five pre-teens who said they read most days. The three female respondents also said they read *Archie* comics a lot and the male respondent said he sometimes read *Archie*. Thus, for the females who claim to be avid readers, *Archie* comics are a regular part of their reading repertoire. Incidentally, the male student in extract 24 made reference to his involvement in several special academic programs for gifted students.

Swain (1978), in her article *Using comic books to teach reading and language arts*, asked the question *Do comic books have educational value*? In this regard, we asked the twenty students interviewed, *Do you think Archie comics can help you in certain ways with school, for example,with reading, writing, vocabulary, or spelling*? The aim of this question was to see whether or not pre-teen *Archie* readers felt *Archie* comics would be helpful in a school setting. Table 4.5 on the next page illustrates the results.

Table 4.5 : Student responses to *Archie* comics as a literacy tool

Subject	Reading	Vocab.	Spelling	Writing	A bit	Don't know	Nothing
Male L1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1
Male L2	3		1				2
Female L1	0	2	1	0	0	1	2
Female L2	4	2	1	0	0	0	0
Total	**9**	**6**	**4**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**5**

Notice that there are more that twenty responses in this table. This is because some of the students selected more than one choice in response to this question. Although the interview sample was quite small, it is important to note that seventy percent of the students interviewed (fourteen out of twenty) felt that *Archie* comics could benefit students in certain areas in the language curriculum while twenty-five percent (five out of twenty) thought they could not. In addition, a slightly higher number of the L2 students interviewed felt *Archie* comics would be helpful in these four areas (reading, vocabulary, spelling, and writing) than the L1 students. In fact, all five of our L2 female interviewees felt that *Archie* comics could enhance learning in one of the skill areas. In addition to the table, extracts 28 to 32 from the interviews with *Archie* readers emphasize the educational value of *Archie* comics on a cultural level:

Extract 28:
I: Why do you read Archie comics?
S: 'cause it's like funny and people learn stuff there.
I: So what kind of stuff can you learn.
S: Um like friendship and stuff. (Female, L2)

Three students in our sample (extracts 29 to 31) cited specific social issues that *Archie* comics deal with, for example, shoplifting, drugs, and pollution. They clearly approved of the way in which the comics were used as a medium to relay important messages to their readers:

Extract 29:
One of them was about this kid who was shoplifting and Archie somehow
tricked him into going back into the store thing and that made him really
scared and um he had to like put it back and the kid had no way of getting back

to home or ah take the bus home. So Archie lent him money to do that. So it's just kind of like and then they have stuff on drugs and they have stuff on yeah you know Veronica and how she's always mean to Betty sometimes and like her father say like, 'Well, that's not right.' (Female, L1)

Extract 30:
They [Archie comics] *often have good comics about drugs and stuff.* (Male, L1)

Extract 31:
In one comic, they started to live underwater, because the land was so filthy and polluted. But then they came to land and saw that life took one giant leap forward. So they could live on land again. (Female, L1)

Furthermore, one of the students discussed the story we had selected for the questionnaire with her parents and she shared these comments with us:

Extract 32:
S: They say that that will sort of help me with my problems like say in Little Red Riding Hood, Betty has to think for other people and when I told them about that story when I finished reading it in October they said it's pretty educational in a way.
I: Did they!
S: Yeah and they said it's pretty educational when they have stuff for kids to read and figure out for themselves. (Female, L1)

Thus, there are important messages or morals that children and their parents perceive in these comics. These messages reflect the values, beliefs, and identities of the writers and are reflected upon by some pre-teen readers.

It is important to acknowledge the students' perceptions vis-a-vis the appropriateness and inappropriateness of *Archie* comics in an educational setting. The following comments (extracts 33 to 36) reveal four students' assumptions about the appropriate audience for these comics in schools:

Extract 33:
S: Well, Archie *comics I would recommend it for grade 4 and 5.*
I: What grade are you in?
S: I'm in grade seven.
I: So by the time you get to grade seven, what do you think?
S: You think it's just totally boring. (Male, L2)

Extract 34:
I: Do you think it's [an Archie comic] *something that could be used in the classroom?*
S: Well, if it depends what kind of Archie *it is. Well, there's different* Archie's-- *romantic and some of them are just regular trying to have fun that sort of thing. Well, the romantic ones should be in grade about 5 or 6 around girls and ah the fun, okay ones should be about grade 4 and 5 for boys and girls.*(Male, L2)

Extract 35:
I: Would it be ok to have them in the classroom?
S: I don't think so, not in grade 5 because I think it would be too easy.
(Female, L2)

Extract 35 above reveals an underlying assumption that students are graded based on

difficulty and not ideas or concepts.

Extract 36
I: Can you think of any reasons why you shouldn't bring Archie's *to the classroom?*
S: For like maybe, grade 5's not for things lower than grade 5's. I think it would be bad. Grade 5's and lower in my opinion it would be good not to have them. (Male, L2)

4.2.1 School Culture Versus Home/Peer Culture: An *Archie* Reader's Dilemma

I would now like to turn to one of the most interesting themes to emerge out of the

student interviews, the separation of real reading from "fun reading." Students seemed to draw a

line between what is considered acceptable reading in school versus what they enjoy reading.

This came out strongly in many of the interviews where students separated school culture and

school activities from home/peer culture and pleasurable activities. This emerged in comments

they made about parents and teachers in regard to *Archie* comics. The separation of school

culture versus home/peer culture was also reflected in how these pre-teens have come to

understand educational institutions and the objectives of schooling. Interestingly, there was a

noticeable tension between two key questions that were posed in the student interviews: *Do you*

think Archie *comics would help you in certain ways with school, for example, reading,*

vocabulary, spelling and reading? and *Should you be allowed to read* Archie *comics during silent reading?* As aforementioned, many of the students thought *Archie* comics could help in certain ways with school (see Table 4.5) and yet many of the same students did not think *Archie* comics were appropriate in the classroom and especially during silent reading. Table 4.6 summarizes student responses to the latter question.

Table 4.6 : *Archie* comics during silent reading

Subjects	No	Yes	Sometimes	Don't Know
Male L1	2	2	1	0
Male L2	1	3	1	0
Female L1	2	1	0	1
Female L2	1	3	0	1
Total	6	9	2	2

There were three key reasons that student felt *Archie* comics were inappropriate for silent reading: (1) teacher's/school disapproval, (2) parent's/home disapproval and (3) student's disapproval. First, several students, both L1 and L2, felt *Archie* comics were not suitable for the classroom because they believed their teachers viewed these comics as inappropriate reading material. The following four extracts (37 to 40) reflect this perception:

Extract 37:
S: They could get taken away if you read them in class.
I: Oh, I see so you're not really supposed to read them in class.
S: No, ''cause that's not proper reading material.
I: I see. Do you think it's not proper reading material?
S: Not really, ''cause like lots of pictures, not really too much text and there's a whole bunch of slang. So not really. (Female, L1)

Extract 38:
I: What about being able to use Archie *comics during silent reading, do you think that's a good idea?*
S: Um I don't know, but our teacher usually never lets us.
I: Why don't you think she lets you?
S: Maybe she thinks there's lots of junk.
I: What do you mean by junk?
S: I don't know. Maybe she wants us to read a novel. (Female, L2)

Extract 39:
I: I wanted to know what you think about Archie *in terms of school, do you think that they can help you in certain ways, for example reading, vocabulary, spelling, writing?*
S: Yeah, but we're not allowed to read comics in school.
I: Oh really? Why are you not allowed to?
S: I brought a few comics and then I um like they stole them from me.
I: Oh, they took them away from you?
S: Yeah, and then gave it back after school.
I: Were you reading comics during other activities?
S: No, at reading time.
I: What do you think the teachers think about comics?
S: Bad.
I: Why would they be bad?
S: Because, um I think they think that there's few words and a lot of pictures.
(Male, L2)

Extract 40
I: About comics in the classroom, do you think you should be allowed to use Archie *comics during silent reading for example?*
S: Yeah.
I: Why?
S: Um I mean you read and stuff, right. Well, there are some comics, some popular comics that people were allowed to read like in my old school,.but they're not allowed to read Archie *comics for some reason. There's like no swearing or anything so we could probably but teachers say that its like not challenging.* (Female, L2)

Extract 39 reveals the extent to which children separate school from fun activities. It also reflects the conception children have of proper or real reading, a conception that appears to be constructed and reinforced through the curriculum. The notion that comics do not qualify as real reading is a powerful message that children pick up from their teachers, parents, and community. Thus, novels and chapter books are held up as examples of real reading and comics are considered junk. As extract 39 illustrates, the illegitimacy of comics is in part a function of its content and structure. In other words, there is a general cultural assumption that this genre contains too many visuals and too few words to be taken seriously for academic purposes. This suggests that the focus of learning is on words or written discourse and not necessarily ideas. There is an underlying tension between school and play which is reflected in these extracts. It is

interesting to note that three out of the four extracts came out of student interviews with L2 students which may indicate a belief in teacher as authority for some of these L2 pre-teens.

Secondly, two of the students interviewed mentioned that their parents did not approve of them reading *Archie* comics (extract 41 and 42). In fact, these comics were viewed as a distraction from the child's school work or simply a waste of time:

> Extract 41:
> *S: My mom just doesn't want me to read comics anymore.*
> *I: So why do you think your mom doesn't like you to read comics?*
> *S: She said it's like I'm wasting my time like I could do something better, like instead of reading comics, like actually doing homework.*
> *I: Now um do you think teachers think the same way about comic books?*
> *S: Yeah, probably, but not always but usually they do because they want you to focus on your homework.* (Female, L2)

For this parent, what seems to be important are the rituals involved in learning and not necessarily the engagement. In other words, the routines and structures in education are prioritized over the students' interest in the reading material.

Extract 42:
I: Do you think that you should bring Archie *comics to school?*
S: My mom doesn't like me bringing comics to school "cause one day I was trying to bring Calvin and Hobbes to read at recess and mom didn't let me bring comics because if I bring comics then I won't concentrate on what I'm doing. (Male, L2)

The underlying assumption from the last comment is that reading *Archie* comics has no value. The message this child is receiving from his mother is that reading *Archie* comics is equivalent to doing nothing. *Archie* comics do not, therefore, constitute real reading material for this parent.

Third, many of the students themselves separated their *Archie* reading from school reading. They considered reading activities inside school to be serious compared to those reading activities that occur outside school. For many of our subjects, reading *Archie* comics was strictly an extra-curricular activity which was not to be mixed with school work. This indicates the

contradictory and multiple identities of our pre-teen *Archie* readers. They are positioned as both students and *Archie* readers and yet in order to be successful in school the two must remain separate in light of the official school curriculum. According to Dyson (1997), children's problematic relationship to the official school world is central to their social lives. She also believes that it is vital to understand "how children use stories to orient themselves to each other within the institution of school" (p. 4). Some of our respondents' comments in the interview revealed these sentiments quite clearly when asked, *Should you be allowed to use* Archie *comics during silent reading?* See extracts 43 to 49 below.

Extract 43:
S: Um no I don't think so because I don't because if you can read them at home for quite a while and then if you bring them to school you're not really reading book, books.
I: What do you mean by book, books?
S: Like um school books. Like um chapter books and stuff. (Male, L1)

Extract 44:
S: Well, ah I don't really think so because I mean this is more of a free time thing instead of
like silent reading is more like novels and books that are educational.
I: So you think it's better to like keep them separate?
S: Yeah. (Female, L2)

Extract 45:
I just read them for fun not to like study but if I meant to, like read it studying, then like you know books like on David that look at the dictionaries and stuff but these, if I don't know the words from here, I just go by 'cause I read them for fun. (Male, L2)

In other words, the student above in extract 45 is focused on achieving fluency rather than accuracy when engaged in reading *Archie* comics. Thus, he is, albeit unconsciously, developing his fluency skill in English while reading these comics despite the fact that he views *Archie* comics as fun and not therefore for school.

Extract 46:
S: I don't know about that, because I think, you know, they're like extra-curricular. They relax you but silent reading in class is not really to relax you but to use your mind more 'cause that's what school's for. (Female, L1)

Extract 47:
I: Should you be allowed to use Archie *comics during silent reading? What do
you think?*
S: No.
I: And why not?
*S: Because that time, if you're doing it at school, it's supposed to be
educational reading not like reading about that kind of stuff.* (Female, L1)

Extract 48:
*S: Well, um these probably aren't the type of learning material as maybe ah
novel.*
*I: Well, 'cause it's a comic and um it's the voices that they're just saying and
um in the fiction stories of novels it got a lot more description they're longer
the stories are not just a few pages and you get more into the book sometimes.*
(Male, L1)

Extract 48 seems to suggest that quantity is equated with quality in reading. Thus, the larger the

word count the better the book. The assumption is that in order for reading materials to be

considered educational they need to be lengthy and contain a lot of description. Using these

guidelines, comics are therefore considered neither educational nor valuable.

Extract 49:
I think that like school work is really important, right? And I wouldn't want to do it [read Archie
comics] *at school 'cause I think that's just like a waste of time and I could be working on a
different assignment so I think I would probably do it after I finished my homework at home.*
(Female, L1)

Extract 49 above illustrates the ways in which teachers are able to reproduce their values

and beliefs in their students. This student has managed to integrate the ideology of the

school authorities in the ways in which she views *Archie* comics in an educational setting.

In the last seven extracts, there has been a recurrent theme about the educational value of

Archie comics. Comics are positioned in opposition to real books such as novels. In other words,

they are not considered challenging to readers. As one girl mentioned, you are not required to

"use your mind" when reading *Archie* comics. Thus, reading comics is segregated from official

school activities and designated a free-time or extra-curricular activity, positioning it outside

school discourses. As the student in extract 49 remarked, *Archie* comics are something children engage in after they have completed their school work.

According to Urquhart (1996), part of the appeal of popular culture lies in the fact that it is not about school and that it is not considered work. This sentiment was reflected in the responses of many of these pre-teens. They distanced school activities from fun activities. For example, one student (extract 50) considered *Archie* a *treat* or *reward* to be savoured after completing her school work:

> Extract 50:
> *I read a chapter book 'cause that's my excuse when I don't want to do my homework, but when I'm finished my homework I can read* Archie.
> (Female, L1)

For another student it represented a *break* or *rest* away from his school studies:

> Extract 51:
> *I: What is it that you like about* Archie*?*
> *S: Well, it's just that it's not that difficult or it's not that bad to read. I do a lot of studies at home and really lots of studies and when I need to get rest or something I just get the comics I just read them because it's fun.* (Male, L2)

Once again, these extracts reveal the separation of *Archie* comics from school culture.

I would like to turn briefly to two instances in the student interviews where there were moments of tension due to the complex, contradictory identities of the pre-teen reader. In the first case, an L2 student revealed an important contradiction in his perceptions of *Archie* comics. On one hand, he advocated the use *Archie* comics during silent reading and viewed *Archie* comics as beneficial to student learning in spelling and reading. However, he also suggested that reading these comics was not real work and that real work was a waste of his time (extract 52).

> Extract 52:
> *I: Do you think you should be allowed to use* Archie *comics during silent reading?*
> *S: Yes! I don't really know what my teacher would care but like I would love it! I would love not wasting time working just reading* Archie *books. Because like on my spare time I read* Archie *books just like not doing work and reading*

Archie *books. I'd like to do* Archie *books for entertainment. So it'd be just like having entertainment at school.* (Male, L2)

In the second case, a student felt that *Archie* comics did not stretch the mind which, in her opinion, was the ultimate goal of schooling. However, later in the interview, upon further reflection, she reconsidered her earlier comment and illustrated that *Archie* comics could indeed stretch one's mind under certain conditions. See extract 53 below.

Extract 53:
S: They relax you but silent reading in class is not really to relax you but to use your mind more 'cause that's what school's for.
I: So school's for what exactly?
S: Stretching your mind. Doing what you can do with your mind.
I: And Archie?
S: You can just relax your mind. You don't need to use it.
I: So you're not stretching your mind when you use Archie?
S: Yeah.
I: Why is Archie *not a mind-stretching activity?*
S: Well, because it's not something that's life-threatening what they do, you know or just their life and they have troubles and you just read them and figure them out.
I: Could there be ways of using them in the classroom?
S: Yeah, maybe comics 'cause well usually all comics they're funny. So like if you wanted to do something humorous instead of some long, sad book, you know, you could get you could just read an Archie *and you know, I mean you can read an* Archie *and look at it like you can stretch your mind while looking at it. You can think about the problems more and what would happen if this happened.*
I: So you think it would be a positive thing to have them in the classroom and do something with them educational?
S: Yeah, maybe once, you know like once and a while. Just like say like do a book report on your favorite two stories of Archie *and explain what you would do with the situation that like Betty, Archie, or Veronica sometimes have to.*
(Female, L2)

This seems to reveal the central tension that exists between how students are socialized in school and how they are socialized outside of school. In other words, there is an inherent struggle in how rules operate under different conditions for these pre-teen *Archie* readers. In a sense this connects the multiple and often contradictory purposes of education. In this particular study, it is highlighted in the ways that *Archie* comics do or do not fit into the official school

curriculum as interpreted by teachers, parents and students. Pre-teen *Archie* readers are expected

to distance themselves from these comics for the purposes of higher learning, which presupposes

that reading *Archie* comics are neither educational nor valuable in school. This positions the

school as a site of struggle for some *Archie* readers who may be asked to reject the texts they

value in order to achieve academic success.

There were, however, a number of students who resisted the official line. They argued

that any reading is beneficial to student learning as long as it does not contain offensive language.

Extracts 54 and 55 from the student interviews illustrate this point:

> Extract 54:
> *I: Do you think that some people should be allowed to use* Archie *comics*
> *during silent reading time?*
> *S: Well, I think any reading is acceptable as long as it doesn't have profanity*
> *or not really good language or as long as they don't burst out laughing.*
> (Male, L1)

> Extract 55:
> *S: Well, I don't know really because my teacher says we can read anything as*
> *long as it's not bad, doesn't have any weird language in it.* (Female, L2)

Some students also emphasized the importance of choosing reading materials for

children that are both enjoyable and educational. In other words, for children to be fully

engaged in reading, the content should be stimulating and meaningful to them. The next three

excerpts highlight this argument (extracts 56 to 58):

> Extract 56:
> *I: Do you think that you should be allowed to use* Archie *comics during silent*
> *reading?*
> *S: It should be okay.*
> *I: Why should it be okay.?*
> *S: 'cause it's still reading but like in a fun way and same as like reading*
> *chapter books and stuff. (Female, L2)*

> Extract 57:
> *I: Do you think that* Archie *comics can help you in certain ways with school,*
> *for example reading vocabulary, spelling*
> *S: Vocabulary, not too much vocabulary but kind of spelling 'cause like*

everything you read is spelling and yeah reading they help me too, 'cause
anything I read would help me.
(Male, L2

Extract 58:
S: I would like to use them [Archie comics] *during silent reading.*
I: And why would you like to?
S: Because sometimes in chapter books, they don't make you laugh and you
want to be and if you're sad you want to read something that makes you happy.
(Male, L2)

It is interesting to note that all three of these excerpts come from student interviews with L2

learners. These students desire a learning environment that is interesting and pleasurable at the

same time. This points to the importance of choosing reading materials that captivate the

students' imagination in order to engage them in reading.

4.3 *Archie* Comics and Language Learning

I will now turn to student responses as they relate to *Archie* comics and language learning

specifically. First, I will begin by revisiting some of the claims made by Stephen Krashen (1993)

vis-a-vis the benefits of free voluntary reading. Free voluntary reading is defined as time set aside

to allow students to read what they want to read. For the purposes of this study we are concerned

only with the reading of comics, and specifically *Archie* comics. In Krashen's final analysis, he

summarizes three important points which validate the use of comics in the curriculum: First, he

states that comics are (1) linguistically appropriate for L2 learners given the easy vocabulary, and

(2) comprehensible for L2 learners given the abundance of visuals. Both the questionnaires and

the interviews from our subjects confirmed this belief. All the L2 students interviewed (ten) were

asked, *Do you think* Archie *comics would be helpful in teaching students English?* 90% (nine out

of ten) felt that these comics would be helpful. They cited two central reasons: (1) the easy

vocabulary; and (2) the plentiful visuals. The following five L2 students cited the vocabulary in

Archie comics as the most helpful in accessing or building English:

Extract 59:
Definitely, because they use easy language. (Male, L2)

Extract 60:
Yeah, because it doesn't have very hard vocabulary. It would be perfect. (Male, L2)

Extract 61:
Because the wording there is not too hard. (Female, L2)

Another student response illustrates *Archie* comics as a vocabulary builder:

Extract 62:
I: Why do you like reading Archie *comics?*
S: Because it's funny and they all use different words. (Male, L2

Extract 63:
Yeah, because they use quite easy words that you could learn that could help you and as you grow older you can learn harder words by yourself. (Male, L2)

The last comment indicates the importance of scaffolding in language learning, a term defined by Donato (1994) as "a situation where, in social interaction a knowledgeable participant can create, by means of speech, supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in, and extend current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence" (Donato as cited by Swain, 1995, p. 137) Scaffolding provides the language learner with a rudimentary structure from which his or her language skills can be enhanced and developed. Thus, by using a basic, low level vocabulary in *Archie* comics, students are able to access meaning from the written discourse. This provides the language learner with a foundation of competency upon which more complex structures can be built.

In regards to the second point, the importance of visuals in facilitating understanding of the content, three L2 students felt the pictures were an integral part of their comprehension of these texts and offered the following comments (extracts 64 to 66):

Extract 64:
I like reading Archie *comic books because they have a lot of pictures so I can see what's going on.* (Female, L2)

Extract 65:
Well, they got pictures can help them, colourful pictures can help the reader to understand like how, what is happening, going on. (Female, L2)

Extract 66:
I: What is it about comics that would be easy for kids?
S: The stuff that I did was that I first looked at the pictures and then I made up my own words. (Female, L2)

These comments all reflect the importance of visuals in language learning. As aforementioned in the literature review, visuals are commonly used in assessing language proficiency, both oracy and literacy. They can be used to stimulate skills in all areas of the language curriculum: reading, writing, speaking, and listening as well as grammar and culture (Wright, 1976). Therefore, these students' responses attest to the role of visuals in the acquisition of English for second language learners. In general, visuals are considered non-threatening as they do not prescribe a correct response but rather create the possibility of constructing multiple meanings from the discourse based on background knowledge and lived experiences. (Dulay and Burt, as cited by Slater, 1998) Thus, comics, as highly visualized forms of storytelling, could be used as an effective tool in accessing meaning and stimulating language development for some L2 students.

Although I focused primarily on L2 student responses as to the usefulness of comics in accessing English, it is important to note that two of the L1 students were also asked whether or not they felt *Archie* comics could be used to teach English and provided similar insights.

Extract 67:
Yeah, 'cause it's usually three-quarters pictures and just a bit of writing and the pictures show what's happening what she's saying or what they're thinking. (Male, L1)

Extract 68:
Well, yes because the writing's pretty nice and bold so they could read it and it's very pictorial so they can get a general idea of what's going on even without reading it. (Male, L1)

There is also some evidence which suggests that comics serve as a conduit to book reading for students (Hilton, 1996; Krashen, 1993). One L2 student made reference to this claim in his interview:

> Extract 69:
> *S: I was reading Calvin and Hobbes when I first came here.* [Canada]
> *I: Do you read comics now?*
> *S: No, well sometimes.*
> *I: What do you like to read now?*
> *S: Books, just novels.* (Male, L2)

Comics have also been viewed as a hook into reading for L2 and L1 children who may be struggling in this area of the language curriculum. Interestingly, one of the L2 students we interviewed used the same metaphor in reference to *Archie* comics:

> Extract 70:
> *S: It* [Archie comics] *hooks you.*
> *I: Why do you think it hooks you?*
> *S: 'cause it's funny and it's like interesting 'cause most like novels in the beginning it hooks you but then it gets boring, right? Archie comics don't really because you want to know what happens at the end without all that boring detail.* (Female, L2)

Hence, L2 students are looking for materials that engage and motivate them to read. They want to interact with texts that capture their imaginations and interests. For this particular student, *Archie* comics engage her from the beginning to the end of the story while novels often lose their appeal before the reader reaches the end. If one of the aims of the language curriculum is to encourage students to read, then for some pre-teen readers, *Archie* comics may engage them more than the standard materials used in the language curriculum, for example, novels.

In one specific case, an L2 student attributed his progress/improvement in English to comics, citing *Archie* comics among his comic repertoire:

> Extract 71:
> *I: What has helped you to learn English?*
> *S: Reading comics.*
> *I: Seriously?*
> *S: Yeah, I read a comic everyday. I read Calvin and Hobbes and* Archies *and*

adventure things.
I: Why do you think it helped you?
S: Because if you don't know the words I look up on the dictionary and then
make up a word and then keep going. (Male, L2)

Clearly, this L2 student attributes some of his second language acquisition to comics. It appears

that his desire to understand these comics motivates him to build his English vocabulary. This

illustrates the importance of choosing reading materials for children that are meaningful and

interesting to them in order to engage them in their second language.

Five of the L2 students felt that *Archie* comics could help people learn about Canadian

society. The cultural differences between North America and the students' birthplaces clued some of

the L2 readers into the cultural context of the *Archie* world. The following extracts (72 to 75) from

the student interviews illustrate this point:

Extract 72:
Yeah, it does. Like when they go to the swimming pool or restaurant and not a
lot but a little about swimming pools, I mean the beach it tells a bit. In Korea,
they don't like spend time a lot going to the beach or something because
they're like busy or they got a lot of work to do. (Male, L2)

Extract 73:
Yes like dancing and like problems as be careful because he might attack you
or something and like protection there is like a sin to do that, most of those
countries like Arab and these things it's different they're not really attracted by
these things. (Male, L2)

Extract 74:
S: They express the nature over North America. They put, it's always outdoors,
outdoors things, usually the sports are in Canada and United States.
I: Do you think there's a difference between Americans and Canadians?
S: I think they're pretty much the same. (Male, L2)

Another student explained that her mother suggested that she lend her cousin, who had

just arrived from China, some of her *Archie* comics to help him acquire his new language as well

as a bit about Canadian culture. She offered the following insights in her interview :

Extract 75:
S: I'm lending some of them [Archie comics] *to my cousin. He just came here*

from China and like then the words he can't understand and then he could learn about the society here.
I: And he's learning?
S: He's learning My mom gave me a suggestion to give, lending them to my cousin Well first she just said it's kind of easy to understand and he could learn more. I think he can learn about something, about school. (Female, L2)

Hence, these L2 students recognize the intimate connection between language and culture. In other words, language is more than a way of communicating, it is a way of being. Research in anthropology confirms the correlation between the vocabulary of a language and the belief, values, and needs present in the culture of its native speakers (Hill and Mannheim, 1992). The term culture can be defined according to Kachru (1995) as "shared knowledge, that is, what people must know in order to <u>act</u> as they do, make the things they make, and interpret their experience in the distinctive way they do" (p.173). Act refers to verbal acts, spoken and written. Therefore, by using *Archie* comics, one can acquire certain language skills while simultaneously discovering some of the cultural assumptions embedded in these texts which may reflect some of the values and beliefs reflected in society.

4.3.1 The Role of Prior Knowledge in Language Learning: Comics in L1 and L2

Given the importance of background knowledge in second language acquisition (Mohan, 1986), we explored the connection between reading comics in L1 and L2 among our participants. We found that the majority of the students (60%) read comics in their first language as well as *Archie* comics in English. This was determined based on the interview question, *Do you read comics in your L1?* See Table 4.7 below for the results.

Table 4.7 : How many L2 *Archie* readers read comics in their L1?

Gender	Yes	No
Female	4	1
Male	2	3
Total	6	4

Despite the small sample of L2 interviewees, it is interesting that in most cases, the students were reading comics in their first language and reading *Archie* in their second language, English. The following four extracts (76 to 79) from the interviews give some additional information as to the types of comics these pre-teens are reading in their L1:

> Extract 76:
> *I: Do you read any comics in Chinese?*
> *S: Yeah, there is like this really famous one called Domoran. In Chinese it's called* [she uses Chinese word]. *It's just like this black, I mean blue robot cat.*
> *I: A blue robot cat?*
> *S: Yeah, with no ears and like he just helps this boy do his like when he gets like bullied and everything like when he had to do tests the cats helps him. It's really funny.*
> *I: So, you still read those, eh?*
> *S: Yeah.*
> *I: And you read them in Chinese?*
> *S: Ah, I don't really understand Chinese because I ahknow how to speak but I don't exactly know how to read it.*
> *I: So how do you read these comics?*
> *S: I usually just look at the pictures. I don't usually read them anymore 'cause just like* Archie *comics the pictures tell more than the words.* (Female, L2)

The student in extract 76 has reinforced the importance of visuals in accessing meaning in both her L1 and L2 comics. Although she is not able to understand the written discourse in the Chinese comic *Domoran*, it is clear from her description of the comic that she has managed to derive meaning from the visuals which enables her to comprehend some of the storyline.

Another student talked about reading comics in Korean in his student questionnaire and thus, when it came time for the interview, I referred to this comment. Extract 77 represents that segment of the interview:

> Extract 77:
> *I: Now you talked about reading comics in Korean what kind of comics do you read in Korean?*
> *S: There's just like fighting things.*
> *I: How do they compare to* Archie *comics?*
> *S: This* [Archie comics] *is like new life and that's* [Korean comics] *like old life.*
> *I: So Korean comics are more like old life?*
> *S: Yeah.*

*I: Do you have a preference, do you like both equally or do you like these
[Archie] more or those [Korean] more?
S: Those. [Korean comics]
I: Why do you like those more?
S: Because I can understand them easily.
I: It's easier because it's in Korean?
S: Yeah. (Male, L2)*

Although this student enjoys comics in both his L1 and L2, he is clearly more comfortable with comics in L1, which indicates that his first language is still the place where he feels most secure when reading. Nonetheless, it is important to note that he enjoys comics in both Korean and English.

Another student also prefers Korean comics but recognizes that the violent content may not be appropriate for younger kids and thus feels that *Archie* comics would be better reading material for some children:

Extract 78:
*I: Did you read any Korean comic books when you were younger?
S: Yeah.
I: Which are those?
S: Dragonball.
I: Oh is that a Korean one, eh?
S: Yeah.
I: Do you still read those Dragonball ones?
S: [gestures yes]
I: So how is Dragonball different from the* Archie *comics?
S: Like Korea doesn't make any comics like this [Archie comics]. Um.. this is
based on environment, I mean nature but Dragonball and stuff it's like um it's
like a place that's not real it's fake, it's all fake. All the stuff in there is fake in
there but it's all real in here [Archie comics] like swimming and beach and all
those stuff are real but in Dragonball it's fighting so they take fighting stuff
and how much they get stronger.
I: So you read both these kinds of comics?
S: Yeah.
I: Which do you prefer?
S: Well, I like Dragonball better than this [Archie] but for little kids not to
learn how to like fight, little kids see the Dragonball stuff and they actually like
copy them and fight with other people. So, I um if they're old enough to
understand the Korean Dragonball, if they're not they should read Archie.
Yeah. (Male, L2)*

Many concepts emerge from this student's response. First, the idea that *Archie* comics portray

real life situations in relation to the Korean comics is quite interesting. Second, that the student

prefers Dragonball to *Archie* and yet acknowledges the violent content and the fact that this may

be inappropriate for younger children. This suggests that *Archie* comics may be safer for children

to read because they are non-violent.

Another student stated that the comics in his L1 (Farsi) were adult-oriented instead of

geared towards children or pre-teens:

> Extract 79:
> *I: Did you ever read any comics in Farsi?*
> *S: Yeah.*
> *I: How do they compare to English comics, comics like this for example*
> [Archie]*?*
> *S: Well, they're like adult comics. I don't usually read ah children comics. So*
> *they're mostly for adults.* (Male, L2)

For this respondent, who incidentally no longer reads *Archie* comics, these comics are viewed as

childish or geared for younger children and thus not as appealing as some of the comics in Farsi.

However, it is perhaps even more surprising to note that one of the L2 students began

reading comics in English before he began to read comics in his first language. The following

extract attests to this fact:

> Extract 80:
> *I: You talked about comics -- there was a comic that you mentioned and I*
> *wanted to know if it was a Chinese comic, called Pokeman Power. Is that*
> *right?*
> *S: Yeah.*
> *I: What kind of comic is that? Is that a Chinese comic?*
> *S: Japanese-Chinese.*
> *I: Is it in Chinese characters?*
> *S: Yeah.*
> *I: How does it compare to* Archie *comics, for example?*
> *S: The drawings are different.*
> *I: Are the stories similar or about totally different things?*
> *S: About totally different things.*
> *I: OK, like what kinds of stories would you have in the Japanese-Chinese*
> *comic?*
> *S: Adventure.*

I: And these comics [pointing to an Archie comic] *are about what do you think?*
S: Our lives in the future.
I: Which comics did you start reading first--the Chinese comics or English comics?
S: English. (Male, L2)

This respondent sees the themes in both comics as fundamentally different. He shares his belief that *Archie* comics tell us about our future lives, presumably about his future life as a teenager. The fact that this student began to read comics in Chinese after beginning to read *Archie* comics in English may suggest that reading comics in a student's L2 could support his or her literacy in L1.

4.4 The Social World of the Archie Reader

I would like to refer directly to the theoretical framework of this study in the next section. First, we explored Vygotsky's notion of *talk* in the student interviews. If, as Vygotsky asserts, talk is crucial to concept formation in that it creates the foundation for future thinking and construction of meaning (see page 8), then it is important to examine the *Archie* talk that takes place amongst these pre-teens: (1) How much of this talk is conducted in English amongst L2 students, supporting their oral communication skills in L2? and (2) How much talk is conducted within and amongst L1 and L2 groups which could reinforce their oral fluency and engender social relationships among the students? Wells (1987) points out the inherent social nature of oral language. He sees conversation as collaboratively constructed, "in a shared social context in which the participants can assume a considerable amount of shared information" (p. 113). Thus, oral communication creates social relationships. As individuals, we have "unique points of view. But, as we look around in the world of diverse others, we experience our own perspective, our own particular place in the world, in dialogue with others" (Bakhtin, as cited by Dyson, 1997, p. 11). There is a considerable amount of interaction that takes place among *Archie* readers,

particularly the female participants, where oral language is not only generated but also fosters

social networks. Table 4.8 below illustrates that the majority of the subjects (75% or fifteen out

of twenty) interviewed discuss *Archie* comics and stories with friends on a regular basis.

Table 4.8 : Discuss Archie comics with friends

Subject	Yes	No	No Response
Male - L1	2	2	1
Male - L2	4	1	0
Female - L1	5	0	0
Female - L2	4	1	0
Total	15	4	1

Two of the L2 subjects in our study mentioned that they chose to use English with friends that

spoke their L1 when discussing *Archie* comics. The following two excerpts from their interviews

illustrate this point:

> Extract 81:
> S: *When I started reading it* [Archie comics] *when I was reading it I used to always talk about it*
> *with my friends who had them and we used to switch and read them.*
> I: *But that you did in English?*
> S: *Yeah, even like with most of my Chinese friends.* (*Female*, L2)

> Extract 82:
> I: *So some of your Korean friends read Archie also do you speak in Korean*
> *with them about* Archie *or is it in English?*
> S: *English well sometimes Korean.*
> I: *How much of the time is in English and how much in Korean?*
> S: *90% English.* (Male, L2)

This illustrates that some of the L2 pre-teens in our study were engaged in English conversation

around the topic of *Archie* comics and that this talk may reinforce oral fluency in English for

these students even when they are with their L1 friends. According to McGroarty (1996) social

attitudes about another language is dependent on two key factors: (1) the duration and quality of

teaching; and (2) the social context of instruction. She emphasizes the affective element of

second language learning, urging educators to create a positive learning experience for children. From the previous extract, we see that students can be engaged in their second language when the social context is stimulating and familiar. Being part of a community of *Archie* readers may provide L2 students with opportunities to use English with all members of that group even if some members share a common language other than English.

In addition to talk around *Archie* comics, all twenty students that were interviewed were also asked whether or not they swap *Archie* comics with their friends or family. We were interested in whether or not *Archie* comics could promote literacy within friendship or family networks. In other words, we wanted to know to what extent these pre-teens were reading and sharing their comics with others. Table 4.9 shows that the majority of interviewees (75%) swap *Archie* comics with friends and/or relatives.

Table 4.9 : Swap Archie with friends/relatives

Subjects	Yes	No
Male L1	4	1
Male L2	3	2
Female L1	5	0
Female L2	3	2
Total	15	5

Another important point that ties into the inherent social interaction of *Archie* readers is the notion of a community of readers. I will define a community of readers as a social network made up of people who share common knowledge about a particular text or texts, in this case, *Archie* comics. This connects to Gee's (1992) socio-cultural perspective on literacy which views reading and writing as social acts that one engages in within a community. In our study, a majority of our pre-teen *Archie* readers said that their friends also enjoyed reading *Archie* comics. Table 4.ten outlines the friendship networks within the *Archie* readership.

Table 4.10 : Community of readers: Friends who read *Archie*

Subjects	Yes	No	No Response
Male L1	4	1	0
Male L2	3	2	0
Female L1	5	0	0
Female L2	4	0	1
Total:	16	3	1

The students seemed to recognize their *Archie* community and one of the students in the study

talked about this community in the following terms:

> Extract 83:
> *I: Do a lot of your friends read them too?*
> *S: Um yeah some of the kids in my class read them and some of the other kids*
> *in other parts of the school read them and some of the kids in my*
> *neighbourhood do.* (Male, L1)

In other words, *Archie* comics, in a sense, represent a common resource or cultural

artifact for these students, and the activities surrounding these comics symbolize a space where

students support one another. This also highlights the role of peers in determining young people's

reading choices and literate practices. The desire of the L2 learner to fit in or to be accepted by

his/her peers echoes the research by McKay and Wong (1996) with their Chinese adolescents. In

fact, extract 84 illustrates how an L2 student explicitly linked his reading of *Archie* comics to the

influence of peers :

> Extract 84:
> *I: Why did you start reading* Archie?
> *S: Well, lots of people in our class, last year they were reading it so I thought*
> *it's good to borrow it from my friends and started reading it.* (Male, L2)

Another L2 student mentioned that she was introduced to *Archie* comics by one of her Canadian

friends which illustrates the possibility of creating positive social relationships between L1 and

L2 student using popular cultural forms such as comics:

Extract 85:

I: Do they [all your friends] *read* Archie *comics?*
S: Yeah We go to each others' houses like after school time and then, and we
sometimes talk about characters, about their personality and stuff.
I: So how did you get to read Archie *comics, who introduced you to* Archie
comics?
S: My friend.
I: Your friend, a Canadian friend?
S: Yeah. (Female, L2)

Thus, the social interaction generated by *Archie* comics between and amongst L1 and L2 learners

creates a sociocultural network which extends beyond the schoolyard.

4.5   Two Dimensions of the Archie Appeal

I would like to conclude with two dimensions of *Archie* comics that make them appealing

among pre-teen readers: humour and a happy ending. First, the student responses in the

questionnaires and the interviews point to the importance of humour in texts for pre-teen readers.

Out of a total of thirty *Archie* readers who responded to the question, *Why do you like reading*

Archie comics, twenty-five (83%) cited humour as the key to the *Archie* appeal. The students

characterized *Archie* comics as either fun, funny or humorous. See Table 4.11 for results.

Table 4.11 : The importance of humour in *Archie* comics

Subject	Used fun, funny or humorous as key to *Archie* appeal	Used other adjectives as key to *Archie* appeal	Did not respond to the question
Male L1	6	0	3
Male L2	5	1	0
Female	8	4	0
Female	6	0	1
Total	25	5	4

Second, a happy ending was quite important to a number of our female pre-teen readers.

This is reminiscent of both Walkerdine's (1985) research with the construction of gender in fairy

tales and Radway's (1984) study with adult romance readers. Despite the troubles the *Archie* gang is

faced with, the characters in these stories always managed to resolve their conflicts in a peaceful and harmonious way. This is extremely appealing to many of our female *Archie* readers in particular. It may signal some important differences in the ways pre-teen girls and boys respond to particular texts and how desires can be reflected in these texts in order to draw in certain readers. The following three extracts (86 to 88) from the student interviews highlight the importance of a happy ending:

> Extract 86:
> *S: You know the writer thinks of some story to write and that's what they do and they have dances and they have homework. There's school trouble. They have girlfriend trouble. They have parent trouble.*
> *I: A lot of troubles?*
> *S: Yeah, but it always ends up good though.* (Female, L1)

> Extract 87:
> *I guess they cheer me up 'cause they always end well.* (Female, L1)

> Extract 88:
> *I: What specifically do you like about those romantic ones?*
> *S: I like the way they turn out at the end.*
> *I: They seem to be happy endings?*
> *S: Yeah, happy endings.* (Female, L1)

In sum, many of the themes that emerged out of the data connected to the theme of literacy in both L1 and L2 and point to some of the ways that the reading of *Archie* comics among pre-teen *Archie* readers support their literacy in L1 and L2. The findings indicate that students enjoy reading *Archie* comics on a regular basis and yet they do not necessarily see it fitting into their official school curriculum. While many acknowledge the benefits of reading these comics in terms of the development of certain literacy skills, for example, reading, vocabulary, spelling and writing, they wish to keep them separate from their school culture. Instead, they prefer to savour these cultural artifacts at home or with friends and relatives outside of school. Much of this data points to the value of sharing, swapping, and discussing *Archie* comics within a community of peers. These practices undoubtedly support literacy and oral fluency for both L1 and L2 students. In addition,

many of the L2 students along with some of the L1 students agree that *Archie* comics would be helpful in teaching English to L2 students. The majority of these students indicated two key reasons: (1) the easy vocabulary and (2) an abundance of visual prompts to facilitate understanding. Most students agreed that they read *Archie* comics because they are humorous and enjoyable, and for many of these pre-teen *Archie* readers, *Archie* comics represent an important and enjoyable part of their regular reading activities.

I will now proceed to Chapter V which is a second part of the analysis centered around our second research question, *What do pre-teen responses to the Archie story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," tell us about their identity and their ways of understanding the world?* In this section, the data from our entire sample of fifty-five students was analyzed from part B of the questionnaires entitled *"An Archie Sampler."* This was comprised of twenty-five L2 (fourteen females and eleven males) and thirty one L1 (fourteen females and sixteen males) participants which included both *Archie* and non-*Archie* readers. In addition, I examined the evidence from the twenty student interviews with *Archie* readers. This sample was equally divided by gender and L1/L2 (see Chapter II). This section is primarily concerned with the construction of pre-teen identity and how responses to an *Archie* story can reveal some important insights about how these students understand and position themselves in the world. The construction of gender is of particular importance in Chapter V.

Chapter V: "Fairy Tale Land Revisited" and Pre-teen Identity

This study positions pre-teens as active agents in meaning making. In other words, they are seen as architects of their own subjectivity (Davies, 1993). They are able to construct meaning from texts and these interpretations reflect the construction of their identities as gendered, classed and raced beings. "Fairy Tale Land Revisited" embodies two parallel storylines by blending an *Archie* version of the classic fairy tale, Little Red Riding Hood with the original. It is my contention that students are able through reading this particular *Archie* story to engage with gender issues which position them in a multitude of ways within society.

The construction of gender does not take place in isolation but rather in social networks, and thus, much like the children in Dyson's (1997) study, these pre-teens explore social roles and social identities using a popular cultural text, in this case, *Archie* comics. As a result, they are able to develop gender subjectivities that both conform to and resist the ways in which they are positioned as males or females. For Bronwyn Davies (1993), it is more meaningful to introduce children to discourse in such a way that it enables them to discover for themselves the ways in which discourses and storylines construct gender. She believes that children should be empowered to learn a culture as producers of culture rather than as passive recipients. In other words, they should be encouraged to be "readers and writers who make themselves and are made within the discourses available to them" (p. 2). Thus, the objective of this section is to respond to the second research question, *What do pre-teen responses to the Archie story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," tell us about their identity and their ways of understanding the world?* by illustrating the multiple identities of these pre-teen readers.

This *Archie* story has been constructed by the writer and interpreted by these readers in such a way as to position it as a site of struggle. It is a space where pre-teens are asked to travel inside and outside the story in order to interpret and subsequently evaluate the actions of

the main protagonist. These interpretations and evaluations reveal the multiple and contradictory identities of the readers as gendered subjects.

The analysis for Part II was divided into two sections. First, I begin with a discussion of three specific questions from Part B of the questionnaire that I felt most directly connected to our second research question: (1) *Describe the last box of the story.* (2) *How do you think Betty feels?* and (3) *What advice would you give to Betty?* As previously mentioned, the three specific questions from the questionnaire were completed by all fifty-five participants in our study (fourteen female and eleven male L2 participants and fourteen female and sixteen male L1 participants). Second, I examine six themes that emerged from the analysis of the twenty student interviews which dealt specifically with the story, "Fairy Tale Land Revisited."

5.1 Student Responses to Question #8a, *Describe the last box of the story.*

The first question I examined was question # 8a of the student questionnaire: *Describe the last box of the story.* It is important to begin this analysis by positioning ourselves as researchers into the discussion and as such share our understanding of the last frame of the story. Our background knowledge of *Archie* comics and particularly the romantic triangle which exists between the three central characters Archie, Betty, and Veronica was reflected in our interpretation of this last frame. Thus, given our prior knowledge, we were aware of (1) Betty's affection for Archie and (2) the rivalry between her and Veronica for Archie's affection in the *Archie* storylines. In addition, we interpreted the use of the word gulp in the final frame of the story as a signal of Betty's regret or panic at seeing Archie and Veronica united. This too, was in part to do with the use of gulp in other *Archie* stories. Thus, for both researchers, Betty appeared ambivalent in the last scene. While she celebrates her autonomy and power as a modern woman, she also witnesses her rival, Veronica--portrayed as weak and dependent-- walk away with the object of her affection, Archie. Thus, the final box reveals an ironic

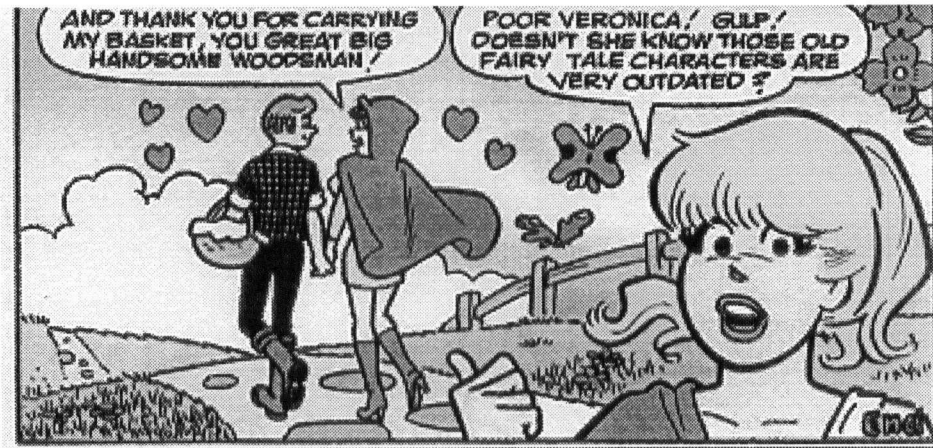dimension to the story when Betty loses Archie due to her strength/power.

Figure 1. This is a black and white copy of the last box of the story "Fairy Tale Land Revisited" from the Betty and Veronica Double Digest Magazine #60 as it appeared in October, 1996.

Turning now to the student responses, there were three codes I found to be most useful for analyzing the data from this question. They were unfavourable comments which attribute the outcome of this story to: (1) Veronica's actions; (2) Betty's actions; and (3) Archie's actions. Unfavourable comments are defined as any thoughts and/or opinions that questioned the motives and/or wisdom of the characters' actions in the final frame. The purposes of these codes was to understand how these pre-teens made sense out of this final frame. I was also interested in the ways in which they positioned these three characters (Betty, Veronica, and Archie) in relation to one another. The rationale for concentrating on the negative or unfavorable comments made about these characters was that they seemed most able to reveal gender practices and the power relations within and across gendered lines and therefore, directly connected to the research question.

It is surprising to note that most of these unfavourable comments were directed at the two female characters. The comments about Veronica characterized her as manipulative and/or weak and all of the comments revolved around her pursuit of Archie. This reflects Davies' (1993) conception of the construction of gender in fairy tales. In reference to the classic fairy tale,

Snow White, she argues that the hero's attraction to the heroine is a function of her passivity and vulnerability . The following five extracts from the questionnaires categorize Veronica as manipulative and/or weak:

> Extract 1:
> *Veronica is acting helpless or she's totally sucking up to Archie.* (Female, L1)
>
> Extract 2:
> *Betty is trying to console herself after Veronica steals Archie away.* (Female, L2)
>
> Extract 3:
> *Because Veronica acted weak Archie helped her.* (Male, L1)
>
> Extract 4:
> *Betty is the one who have to go with woodman but Veronica go with him by pretending she is weak.* (Male, L2)
>
> Extract 5:
> *The woodsman* [Archie] *walks away with Veronica holding her basket, hand in hand down the path. Betty just thinks Veronica is pathetic.* (Female, L1)

Comments about Betty portrayed her slightly differently. She was positioned as too smart for her own good. In other words, her strength worked against her in light of her romantic desires. This connects to Walkerdine's (1985) argument that heterosexuality generally positions females as passive or submissive in relation to males. The following three comments (extracts 6 to 8) signal students' perception of Betty's mistake or regret:

> Extract 6:
> *Veronica takes Archie away from Betty who has outsmarted herself.*
> (Female, L1)
>
> Extract 7:
> *I think she's* [Betty] *sorry that she didn't act weak when Archie came to save her.* (Female, L1)
>
> Extract 8:
> *Archie goes off with Veronica and Betty gets mad.* (Male, L1)

One student interpreted the way the characters were physically positioned in the final frame as indicative of Betty's vindictiveness towards Veronica and shared this comment in extract 9:

Extract 9:
Betty is talking behind Veronica's back. (Male, L1)

Two students made unfavorable comments about Archie vis-a-vis the outcome of this story which defines his character as either insecure or insensitive. The response that reflects Archie's insecurity is as follows:

Extract 10:
Archie sucks up to Veronica, and Betty doesn't care. (Male, L2)

The response that reflects Archie's insecurity is as follows:

Extract 11:
Archie [the woodcutter] *walks off in front of Betty when he was talking to her, with Veronica making Betty jealous.* (Female, L1)

Hence, while comments were made about all three characters, the tone and implications of these comments were quite distinct from one another. This indicates that the students positioned each of these *Archie* characters in the story in different ways. Moreover, the fact that only two of the twelve critiques were aimed at the male character may signal who possesses the power in the story, according to these readers. Many of these comments reflect the peripheral positioning of the male character in relation to the centrality of the female characters in the story. There is a sense that the female characters are actively asserting their desires while the male character is passive in his desires. This also illustrates the fundamental paradox of the story, that feminine weakness is seen as a source of power. We will come back to this theme later in this section.

In addition, this story illustrates both the deconstruction in the characterization of Betty and reinforcement, in the characterization of Veronica and Archie, of traditional gender practices. Traditional gender practices can be defined as: (1) a notion of femininity that is associated with sociability, sexual passivity, domesticity and motherhood and is seen as compliant with subordination to and accommodation of the interests and desires of men and (2) a notion of masculinity that is characterized by authority, aggression and power (Urquhart, 1996).

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5.2 Student Responses to Question #8b, *How do you think Betty feels?*

Next, I analyzed question #8b *How do you think Betty feels?* with two objectives in mind: (1) to investigate whether the participants had noticed any ambivalence on the part of the main protagonist in the story, particularly at the end; and (2) to explore the participants' understanding of the gender positions portrayed in this story. The two codes that were most helpful were feelings that reflected Betty's powerfulness and feelings that reflected Betty's powerlessness. Powerfulness (PF) was defined as any feelings that signaled Betty's comfort and/or confidence about her actions in the story. Powerlessness (PL) was defined as any feelings that signaled Betty's regret or discomfort with her actions in the story. I focused on these two codes as I felt they were most helpful in understanding how gender is conceptualized by these pre-teens. In other words, the ways in which the participants positioned Betty in the story, as powerful or powerless, gave tremendous insight into their views of gender.

5.2.1 Betty as Powerful

I will begin by sharing student responses that reflect Betty's feelings as powerful. These responses were quite varied. There were three students who positioned Betty as more powerful in relation to Veronica. The first two extracts refer directly to the language used in the last frame of the story, *Poor Veronica! Gulp! Doesn't she know those old fairy tale characters are very outdated?* Clearly, they did not interpret the word gulp as indicative of Betty's regret or ambivalence. The following two extracts illustrate this point :

> Extract 11:
> *Betty feels sorry for Veronica.* (Female, L2)

> Extract 12:
> *Betty might feel pity for Veronica.* (Female, L2)

Extract 13 is an interpretation of Betty's feelings which may reflect this student's views of gender. The use of the word *sissy*, in reference to Veronica, has negative connotations and suggests that

she is weak and lacks power. Thus, Betty, in contrast, is positioned as powerful:

>Extract 13:
>*She feels Veronica is a sissy.* (Male, L1)

The next four extracts (14 to 17) focus on Betty's autonomy and her desire for gender equity. These students acknowledged her desire for change in gender practices that position females in submissive or oppressive roles.

>Extract 14:
>*Betty can take care of herself.* (Female, L2)

>Extract 15:
>*Proud of herself.* (Female, L1)

>Extract 16:
>*Feels that when something is wrong you have to take action.* (Female, L2)

>Extract 17:
>*Feels that girls should have more equal rights with boys.* (Male, L1)

It is interesting to note that more of our female respondents commented in this way than the males. This may illustrate the ways in which girls resist traditional gender practices more than boys at this age.

The next two extracts draw on traditional notions of femininity in which selflessness is held up as an ideal feminine virtue. I am reminded of Walkerdine's (1985) insights in this regard when she claims that the most pervasive theme in girls' comics is "the portrayal of girls engaged in selfless acts of helpfulness and courage in the service of others" (p. 170). In other words, these two students see helpfulness as a key to Betty's self-worth in this story, which lends insight into their notions of femininity:

>Extract 18
>*I think Betty feels good to help others.* (Male, L2)

>Extract 19:
>*Very helpful--gave advice to crying girls and brought food to granny.*
>(Female, L2)

Extracts 20 to 22 illustrate the complexity of gender. While these students

acknowledged Betty's power, they did not necessarily see this power in a positive light. There

was a certain contempt for her actions in the story. She was characterized as too confident or too

proud as evidenced in the following three comments:

> Extract 20:
> *She feels nobody can do nothing for themselves except her.* (Female, L1)
>
> Extract 21:
> *Proud, she knows everything and too confident.* (Male, L2)
>
> Extract 22:
> *Betty thinks everyone is a baby and she's the only one standing up for themselves.* (Male, L1)

Thus, for some pre-teens powerful and confident female characters are not necessarily

desirable in stories. Despite the small number of extracts of this nature, there were more

boys who commented in this way than girls. This may indicate a stronger sense in boys

that female power is a threat to male power.

5.2.2 Betty as Powerless

I will now turn to a discussion of student responses that reflect a sense of Betty's

powerlessness. These comments reflected two key emotions, sadness and jealousy, both of which

were attributed to losing Archie to Veronica. This connects to McRobbie's (1982) insights about

Female positioning in the teen magazine, *Jackie*. She found that girls were portrayed as being

controlled by their emotions and in particular were jealous, possessive, and devoted. She also

noted that these emotions inevitably led to conflicts between girls. Thus, in a similar fashion,

Betty's positioning as powerless, according to these pre-teen respondents, is a function of losing

Archie to her rival, Veronica. First I will share student responses that characterize Betty's feelings

as jealous in extracts 23 to 25:

Extract 23:
I think Betty feels so jealous of Veronica that she has to mask it with a sense of power. (Male, L1)

Extract 24:
Betty is jealous. (Male, L2)

Extract 25:
I think she feels bad and a little bit jealous. (Male, L1)

Notice all the comments of this nature come from male respondents. Although the numbers are small, this may illustrate the ways in which boys interpret the emotions of feminine characters in competition with one another.

Next, are the student responses that characterize Betty as sad. While all students who responded in this way felt Betty's sadness was a result of losing Archie, the students expressed varying degrees of sympathy. Extracts 26 to 30 suggest that Betty had been somewhat masochistic in the story. In other words, she had sabotaged her own romantic desires by acting a certain way in this story:

Extract 26:
Sad and wishing that she had said she needed him. (Male, L1)

Extract 27:
Very sad, probably wishes she didn't say it. (Female, L1)

Extract 28:
Sad that it happened again and that she made such a mistake. (Female, L1)

Extract 29:
Sorry she didn't act weak when Archie came to save her. (Female, L1)

Extract 30:
Maybe foolish 'cause she was wrong about it. (Female, L2)

Notice that four of the five comments originate from female respondents. These comments help us as researchers to understand the ways in which some girls construct gender relations. In other words, there is an underlying assumption in these remarks that girls should act weak in order to attract boys.

The next five extracts (31 to 35) presume Betty to be passive in this story. In other words, she is positioned as the loser in the story, the one that was *not chosen*, which ultimately results in her unhappiness:

Extract 31:
I think she feels lonely. (Male, L2)

Extract 32:
She's supposed to be Archie's girlfriend so I think she's feeling a little bit sad.
(Female, L1)

Extract 33:
Sad and is annoyed at Veronica. (Male, L1)

Extract 34:
Sad 'cause Archie chose Veronica instead of her. (Male, L1)

Extract 35:
Sad 'cause Archie is going out with Veronica again. (Male, L2)

Once again, it is striking that most of these comments originate from one gender, in this case, the boys. This may highlight gender differences in the way boys and girls view the power relations in heterosexual couples. For the girls, there is a sense that Betty has control over her fate, whereas the boys view her role as somewhat more passive. While there appears to be no indication from the majority of these boys that Betty had control over the situation, many of the girls felt she could have altered her actions to change the outcome of the story. See Table 5.1 below for the overall results of this analysis.

Table 5.1 : How Betty feels

	Powerful	Powerless	Other Responses	No Response
Females	13	10	4	0
Males	8	13	5	2
Total	**21**	**23**	**9**	**2**

Notice that the majority of comments that reflect Betty as powerful come from female respondents whereas the majority of comments that reflect Betty as powerless come from male respondents. This may indicate that gender roles are constructed and interpreted differently depending on the gender of the pre-teen reader. As aforementioned, it is interesting to note that some of the participants who characterized Betty's actions as powerful did not necessarily view this power as desirable, which lends insight into how some of these pre-teens construct notions of masculinity and femininity. Thus, the readers grapple with multiple identities as they move from inside the story to their lived experiences outside the story. These multiple identities create tension in how students understand and interpret the stories they read and more importantly, for this study, how they position themselves as gendered beings in the world.

5.3 Student Responses to Question # 8c, *What advice would you give to Betty?*

The third question, *What advice would you give to Betty?* was identified from the *Archie* sampler to be fundamental in answering the second research question. It was of particular relevance as it directly connected the story to the respondents' values and understandings of the world. Thus, this *Archie* story was used as a vehicle to investigate these readers' perceptions of gendered actions. The objective of this question was to provide the opportunity for readers to evaluate the actions of the main character based on their own lived experiences. In other words, it enabled the children to share their personal insights about the story with us. Thus, this question was crucial in accessing these readers' values, beliefs, and identities.

5.3.1 Support for Betty's Actions

The data was coded, and two codes emerged that were particularly important with reference to our research question: (1) advice that was supportive of Betty, and (2) advice that was critical of Betty. Both the support and criticism revolved around two overall themes:(i) Betty's relationship with Archie and her desire to transform classical gender stereotypes in this

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story. I will begin by sharing student responses that were supportive of Betty's action and connected to her relationship with Archie. The following six extracts (36 to 41) reflect this theme:

> Extract 36:
> *Ignore Veronica and the woodcutter.* (Female, L2)

> Extract 37:
> *To tell her to probably break up with Archie because he's always chasing other girls.* (Female, L1)

> Extract 38:
> *Forget Archie.* (Female, L1)

> Extract 39:
> *Never go out with Archie.* (Male, L2)

> Extract 40:
> *Forget about Archie.* (Male, L1)

> Extract 41:
> *Who cares about Archie.* (Male, L1)

This type of advice came equally from the boys and the girls. It reveals a certain distaste for traditional gender roles that position women as weak. By encouraging Betty to move on and separate herself from Archie, the students are acknowledging her autonomy and self-worth as an individual irrespective of a romantic relationship with Archie.

Extracts 42 to 45 encourage Betty to be herself and resist traditional gender stereotypes as portrayed by Veronica. They support her actions in the story and see the possibilities open to Betty as a strong, independent Female. This illustrates the ways in which gender positions are shifting in the world around them:

> Extract 42:
> *Be yourself and if Archie doesn't like it find a new guy, Archie's not the only one.* (Female, L1)

> Extract 43:
> *Don't act like Veronica. I think Veronica's a bit of a wimp.* (Female, L1)

Extract 44:
If she wants Archie be herself, don't try to compete with Veronica.
(Female, L1)

Extract 45:
Keep doing it. (Female, L2)

It is striking that all of these comments came from female participants. By resisting the dominant

discourses of gender, these pre-teen students are engaged in what Bronwyn Davies (1993) terms

"discourses of resistance" (p. 4). They are able to move beyond gender stereotypes to a space

where they can create new ways of being.

The following two extracts illustrate the complexity of gender. These two male

respondents, albeit supportive of Betty, suggest that her self-worth is somehow connected to her

romantic status. Although they felt *Archie* was not her ideal man, they did not question her need

for a male partner. Thus, females are constrained by rules and structures in the social world that

dictate their status. As such, females are also, to some extent deprived of agency:

Extract 46:
Forget that loser there are plenty of other fish in the sea. (Male, L1)

Extract 47:
Drop Archie and find a new boyfriend. (Male, L1)

In addition, two of the other boys suggested that Betty seek retribution for losing Archie. The

following two extracts illustrate this point:

Extract 48:
I would tell her to push Veronica in the mud. (Male, L1)

Extract 49:
Go and get revenge. (Male, L1)

These comments may signal gender differences in dealing with problems. In other words, the

boys may suggest more aggressive ways of resolving problems than the girls. The last two

comments reflected a generic sense of support:

Extract 50:
She (Betty) should be supported. (Female, L1)

Extract 51:
I would give her a cake. (Male, L2)

5.3.2 Criticism of Betty's Actions

I will now move to examples of students whose advice reflected a critique of Betty's

actions in the story. There were a total of ten participants who critiqued Betty's actions. Eight of

these responses reflected one of two themes: (1) getting Archie back by whatever means

necessary including acting powerless; and (2) maintaining the status quo. First, I will share the

five student critiques (extracts 52 to 56) that recommend Betty employ a strategy of

powerlessness in order to reclaim Archie:

Extract 52:
She should of acted helpless when the wolf attacked so Archie could've saved her instead of Veronica. (Female, L1)

Extract 53:
Act like Veronica to get Archie. (Male, L2)

Extract 54:
I think Betty should have run up to Archie and Veronica and grabbed Archie from Veronica. Then she should have run away with Archie if she really wanted him. (Female, L1)

Extract 55:
Never talk to a boy like that, especially Archie in front of Veronica and other girls. (Female, L1)

Extract 56:
Take any help Archie gives you. (Male, L2)

These comments support the idea that girls need to act helpless or weak in order to attract

boys. This suggests an inherent male insecurity that requires female submissiveness or

vulnerability in order to reinforce a sense of male power.

Extracts 57 to 59 critique Betty and support maintaining the status quo. These students do

not want to disrupt the traditional discourses that are represented in stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood*. They are comfortable with their understanding of the world and their place in it and are resistant to changing traditional gendered practices:

> Extract 57:
> *Try not to change things it's not always good.* (Female, L2)

> Extract 58:
> *Don't change the course of a real story.* (Male, L1)

> Extract 59:
> *Shouldn't be so extreme.* (Male, L1)

Although the sample was quite small, there was a slightly higher number of females who suggested tactics of powerlessness and a slightly higher number of males who wished to maintain the status quo. Thus, the girls tended to offer Betty alternatives while the boys tended to view her as a trouble-maker or a radical.

5.4 The Multiple Identities of the Pre-Teen Reader

I will briefly revisit the data from the questions *How do you think Betty feel*s and *What advice would you give to Betty*, in order to point out the tension these questions evoked in many of the participants. The struggle was located between the gender roles portrayed in this particular story and the reader's understanding and positioning of gender in the real world. It signaled the multiple and sometimes contradictory identities of these readers. A number of students felt that Betty regretted how she had acted in that it had forced her to sacrifice romance for power, and yet they ultimately supported her actions. One girl commented that Betty felt *"sad that it happened again and that she made such a mistake,"* and yet the advice she offered was for Betty to *"be yourself and if Archie doesn't like it find a new guy, Archie's not the only one."* Another female participant responded in a similar fashion. She thought Betty felt *"sorry she didn't act weak when Archie came to save her."* Then she went on to say that Betty shouldn't *"act like Veronica. I*

think Veronica's a bit of a wimp." One of the male respondents wrote that Betty felt *"sad 'cause Archie chose Veronica instead of her,*" but then went on to offer this advice: *"who cares about Archie.*" Another boy felt Betty was sad and *"wishing she had said she needed him,*" yet his advice to her would be to *"drop Archie and find a new boyfriend.*" A third boy thought Betty felt *"jealous of Veronica that she* [Betty] *had to mask it with a sense of power*" and yet he advised her to *"forget that loser there are plenty of other fish in the sea.*"

There were roughly equal numbers of boys (five) and girls (four) that responded to these questions in a contradictory manner. This illustrates the multiple messages that these pre-teens processed as they constructed meaning from this particular *Archie* story. Who they were as gendered readers influenced the way they understood the story and how meaning was reflected through their own lives as pre-teen readers. Glasberg (1992) discusses the prevalence of sexual stereotyping in *Archie* comics and argues that stereotypes which portray female individuality as unattractive relay dangerous messages to their readers. However, we have found that while the pre-teens in this study recognize the gendered narratives in this story, some of them are able to move beyond those stereotypes and reveal a complex understanding of gender by problematizing those practices.

5.5 Six Emergent Themes from Student Interviews

I would like to proceed with the general themes that emerged from the twenty student interviews with *Archie* readers that have particular relevance to the connection between "Fairy Tale Land Revisited" and pre-teen identity. These interviews allowed us to re-examine this story with some of our participants so that they would have an opportunity to elaborate on their comments and thereby enhance our understanding of their responses to this particular *Archie* story.

5.5.1 Power Versus Romance: Betty's Dilemma

The first theme revolves around the notion that women relinquish their power in heterosexual relationships. According to Walkerdine (1985), young girls' construction of femininity is the result of a struggle in which heterosexuality is considered the path of least resistance. She sees that girls' adoption of classical role models are a reflection of the gendered and cultural practices that seek to position them in the world and are not necessarily their own desires. This is clearly reflected in this *Archie* story as Betty is forced to choose between her autonomy and her relationship with Archie. According to the following student, Betty can have her independence but she will sacrifice her romantic interests to achieve this goal:

> Extract 60:
> *Well, she can take care of herself but she just won't have Archie really by her side all the time.* (Female, L1)

Another student suggests that Betty's strength positions her as the loser in this particular story:

> Extract 61:
> *I:You said that Betty was proud because she thinks she knows everything and has too much confidence. Okay, so what did you mean by that?*
> *S: Well, she beat up the wolf and then Archie comes in and says do you need any help and then the wolf says no it's me crying for help because the woodsman was supposed to help the girl, but Betty didn't need to--need any help.*
> *I: Okay. So proud, do you think this is a good thing that she was proud or not so good?*
> *S: Not so good.*
> *I: Why is it not so good?*
> *S: Because she could've been Veronica at the end.* (Male, L2)

In other words, there is a sense that getting Archie is the desired goal in this story and thus, Betty, who has obviously lost Archie to Veronica, must be viewed as the loser and Veronica as the winner in this story.

Extracts 62 to 66 from the student interviews highlight the participants' understanding of

the irony in the story in which female strength, while celebrated earlier in the story, ultimately defeats the main protagonist's romantic agenda. Thus, female subservience triumphs over female autonomy when the weak one (Veronica) succeeds in luring Archie away from the strong one (Betty):

Extract 62:
S: At the end it's really that's what gets you is that the end is really fun because she's all talking about how weak um--feminine story characters and then the weak one gets the guy in the end.
I: So there's a certain irony in that, right?
S: Yeah, irony. Yeah she's talking about how it's not good to be weak and then the weak one gets the boy.
I: Is this realistic or not?
S: Well, not in general but going back to this fairy tale but the realistic part is about what she's talking about and what guys tend to jump for. A woman they can impress with their macho that kind of thing. (Male, L1)

Extract 63:
I: You said that Betty outsmarted herself in the story. I want you to explain what you mean.
S: Okay, well she sort of helping all those people and like dealing with their problems and she was sort of the cool girl that knew everything and like 'I know what to do now,' right and then so she, when the wolf was dressed up like her grandma, right and she tackled him, 'Oh I can deal with this, I'll tackle him myself,' and Archie came running and she said, 'Oh I don't need your help. I'm fine. I don't need you', but then Veronica said, 'Oh I need you,' and then Betty thought well I want you too now. So she sort of, she doesn't think before but I guess it's kind of hard to think before. (Female, L1)

Extract 64:
He [Archie] *sees Betty beating up the wolf and he goes 'what's going on' and well then the wolf says like it was me who said help and they go outside and Archie's just like admiring Betty and then they go outside and Veronica comes along in her Little Red Riding Hood suit and it's all short and stuff and then right away Archie just thinks of her money and stuff so he goes with her.* (Female, L1)

Extract 65:
She [Betty] *beats up that wolf and did everything good and she deserved to go out with this guy* [Archie] *but at last this girl* [Veronica] *comes and just takes him away.* (Male, L2)

Extract 66:
Betty's the nice one but Veronica's the one that gets her way so Betty feels bad. (Female, L1)

In all five of these excerpts, the participants noted a twist at the end, this paradox that although female strength and helpfulness are portrayed as noble qualities in the story, the final frame seems to favour female weakness and vulnerability. Moreover, many students felt that Betty's feminism had lead to her unhappiness as evidenced in the critical nature of the advice offered to her by many of our participants.

Connected to this theme are student responses that address the strategy of weakness employed by Veronica in this story. The next four extracts from the student interviews symbolize a continuum of responses to this strategy. The first two male students felt that this strategy was highly effective and necessary, albeit for different reasons. The first student, in extract 67, contends that female weakness allows men to feel strong which reinforces patriarchal power relations. In contrast, the second student, in extract 68, judges Betty and disapproves of her strength, which seems to suggest that Betty's actions are in opposition to his notions of femininity. He suggests that girls *should be* dependent on boys; according to him this is, in fact, the natural order of things. The third student, in extract 69, views the strategy of weakness as highly effective and yet problematic for females, and thus attempts to distance herself from it. Finally, the fourth student, in extract 70, strongly disapproves of this strategy. She considers it highly problematic for both genders.

> Extract 67:
> I: *Did you like the way she* [Betty] *behaved?*
> S: *Yeah, I liked the way she behaved.*
> I: *How did she behave?*
> S: *She behaved like she doesn't need any help or something. So she doesn't care about boys helping her but like boys like somebody who needs help more, ah they show more attention to them but girls who need help, not the brave girls, girls who like act weak and stuff.*
> I: *What is it about girls being strong that you don't think boys like?*
> S: *So, it makes boys look weaker then.*
> I: *And why is that a problem for boys?*
> S: *Probably because boys that's what they say. Probably boys are stronger.*
> (Male, L2)

Thus, while this reader is supportive of Betty, he defers to an ideology that views female power as a threat to male power. The reader touches on an important point in gender relations when he argues that there is an underlying assumption that female strength results in male weakness. The assumption is that there is only a finite amount of power and if females possess more power, males must therefore possess less. Furthermore, he suggests that patriarchal power relations are justified on the basis of physical strength.

> Extract 68:
> *When um--he's asking for help she's just like too brave or something. Girls have to say that they need help and stuff but she's not. She's [Betty's] too proud of herself and she just thinks she could do all this stuff herself without the help so she's too proud.* (Male, L2)

The reader in extract 68 supports the idea that modesty is a desirable female trait. In other words, women that show strength and power are too proud and thus, considered undesirable. Thus, for this student weakness is more desirable in females than strength.

> Extract 69:
> *I: How were they* [the Archie characters in the story] *acting?*
> *S: Well, Betty, she doesn't like really need help and everything she just can take care of herself. Veronica she doesn't need help either but she wants to be with Archie so she just like, you know, pretends to be helpless.*
> *I: So what do you think about that? What do you think about people who pretend to be helpless to get a boy. Do you think that's a good idea or?*
> *S: That's a good idea, but I don't think its like, you know, like girls would not really do that sometimes unless they're like really desperate. I wouldn't do that because it's like kind of like girly-girl type, because I'm not really helpless or anything because I can take care of myself,*
> *too!* (Female, L2)

The extract above highlights the tension within this pre-teen reader's identity. On the one hand, she argues that female submissiveness is an effective strategy in attracting boys. In fact, she contends that the more desperate you are, the weaker you should act. Yet, she also views the strategy of weakness as a problematic practice for girls and thus feels the need to distance herself from it.

Extract 70:
I: How did Veronica manage to steal him away?
S: since Betty says she'll just like take matters into her own hands um..
Veronica just says, Oh, well, it's better if he saves us.
I: So Veronica was acting a little bit weak to try and get Archie. What do you
think about girls who act weak to get boys?
S: I don't think that's really good because if they, like you should be strong for
what you are, um if like they don't like you it doesn't matter because you have
like your reputation and everything to worry about and It's always better to be
yourself because when you're like acting weak and everything they just think
like she's really weak and everything You have to like stay weak and it's not
really good for you. (Female, L2)

Clearly, this reader disapproves of acting weak to attract boys. She sees a real danger in a strategy

that potentially positions a female in a perpetual state of submission.

5.5.2 The Passive Hero: Archie as Impotent

A second theme to emerge out of this data is the impotence or powerlessness of the

central male character in the love triangle between Betty, Veronica, and Archie. In general,

Archie was characterized by students as prey to the whimsical desires of Betty and Veronica. He

was positioned as a passive rather than active player in this story. This links to a notion of

females as manipulative or deceptive in their interpersonal relationships. It evokes biblical

images of Adam and Eve in which Adam is seduced by Eve in the garden of Eden. Archie is

similarly positioned. In this story, Veronica is portrayed as a seductress or trickster who lures

Archie away from Betty and thus Betty is considered the loser. Therefore, the children tended to

cast Archie as the victim and Veronica as the villain. The following eight extracts (71 to 78)

illustrate this point:

Extract 71:
She [Betty] *beats up that wolf and did everything good and she deserved to go*
out with this guy [Archie] *but at last this girl* [Veronica] *comes and just takes*
him away. (Male, L2)

Extract 72:
She (Betty) shouldn't like let Veronica just like get Archie, right. She could still
act like herself but not let Veronica get Archie. (Female, L2)

Extract 73:
Betty is trying to console herself after Veronica steals Archie away.
(Female, L2)

Extract 74:
I: And what about Betty you said she doesn't really care about Archie. So she could take him or leave him type of thing?
S: Yes, she says if Veronica wants him she can have him. (Male, L2)

Extract 75:
I: I guess what I'm wondering is why would she [Betty] feel sad [in this story], do you think?
S: Because this Veronica character always ends up whiling away her boyfriend. (Male, L1)

Extract 76:
Veronica always ends up taking Archie away. (Female, L1)

Extract 77:
Archie kind of goes into a trance when he sees Veronica, what Veronica's wearing is like everything except this mini skirt would be what Little Red Riding Hood was wearing, right and of course Archie goes for like what she wears and stuff, her appearance. So Betty, of course Betty's just wearing a normal, casual thing and so it ends up with Veronica going with Archie 'cause he just looks at her and it's, he's just mesmerized. (Female, L1)

Extract 78:
I: Why do you think Archie goes with Veronica? Why do you think he decides to go with this girl and not Betty?
S: Because, um this girl needs help because there are many wolves in the forest.
I: Do you believe this girl when she says she needs help? Do you think it's true?
S: Um no.
I: Why not?
S: Because I think she's tricking him by like um she's weak. (Male, L2)

There were an equal number of male (four) and female (four) respondents that noted

Archie's powerlessness. He is not viewed as actively asserting a choice between these two

female characters. The use of words such as mesmerized, taken away, whiled away, and stolen

away clearly points out how this character's actions were interpreted by these pre-teen readers

and points to the gendered messages embedded in this story and the complexity of power relations between these three characters. The irony of the story lies in the fact that the character who acts weak is the same character who appears to hold the power. Thus there is a complexity to the gendered practices and power relations in this particular story as none of the *Archie* characters in this story are positioned strictly in classical gender roles. First, Archie is not characterized as the stereotypical, powerful hero. Although, there are elements of the story that locate him as powerful, for example, cutting wood or running to save Betty from the wolf. Second, Betty is not portrayed as the passive heroine even though she may regret her strength. Finally, Veronica, albeit masquerading as a traditional Little Red Riding Hood, cannot realistically be considered either weak or passive in this particular story.

5.5.3 The Importance of Background Knowledge

A third theme from the student interviews is the importance of background knowledge in the interpretation of this story. The students drew on their understanding of the *Archie* characters to respond to some of the questions in the interview and questionnaire. In particular, their knowledge of the romantic history between the three central characters, Archie, Betty, and Veronica, was reflected in the opinions and advice that was offered. Here are five extracts from the student interviews with *Archie* readers which make direct reference to their exposure to *Archie* comics in understanding this particular story:

> Extract 79:
> *I: We asked the question what advice would you give Betty and you said to take any help Archie gives you.*
> *S: Yeah.*
> *I: Why do you think that?*
> *S: So she can go on a date with Archie because in the last comics I read, um what's her name.*
> *I: Betty?*
> *S: Betty, she wanted to go out with Archie.*
> *I: So if she had taken his help, then she could be going out with him instead of Veronica, is that what you're saying?*
> *S: Yeah. (Male, L2)*

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Extract 80:
I: What does she think about Archie and about Archie and Veronica going off?
S: Maybe jealous.
I: What makes you think she might be jealous?
S: Like in some of the other ones, she's always like jealous, that's why.
(Male, L1)

Extract 81:
I: We asked what kind of advice would you give Betty given this situation and you said 'tell her to say what she really feels and needs like she always does.' What do you think Betty really feels and needs?
S: Well, like she shouldn't like let Veronica just like get Archie, right. She could still act like herself but not let Veronica get Archie. So try and keep Veronica away like she did in some of the other Archie comics. (Female, L2)

Extract 82:
I: the advice you gave to Betty is that she should've acted helpless when the wolf attacked so Archie would have saved her instead of Veronica.
S: Yeah, that's so that way Veronica wouldn't get him 'cause she always gets him. (Female, L1)

Extract 83:
Well, usually in all the books they fight [Betty and Veronica], *but this one doesn't seem like she* [Betty] *likes Archie. In the other ones it seems like it.*
(Male, L2)

5.5.4 The Two Images of Little Red Riding Hood: Old and New

A fourth theme that came out of the student interviews was the juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary gender roles in this storyline. The *Archie* version of the story attempts to present a contemporary version of Little Red Riding Hood in the character of Betty, and yet there are elements of the story that reflect more conservative gender practices, for example, Archie as the woodcutter, the sexual overtones of the wolf, Veronica's attire, and her feigned helplessness. Five of our respondents (extracts 84 to 88) picked up on these images and subsequently revealed their own understandings of contemporary gender roles. They also lent insight into their perceptions of how these roles have shifted or changed over time:

Extract 84:
It just seems well just how the story is set back and so he's [Archie] *obviously not like her because he was surprised when she was like tackling him* [the wolf], *but normally, like in the nineties he would, I don't know what he would*

think about her tackling a wolf, but he was just [in this story] *Wow, that's really a man thing to do, why are you doing that?* (Female, L1)

Extract 85:
I: If we look at Betty's character and the fact that she beats up the wolf. Is that something modern or old-fashioned, what do you think?
S: I think that's kind of new, it's modern.
I: Do you think that girls are stronger now than they used to be?
S: Yeah.
I: Do you think that you're quite a strong girl?
S: Yeah.
I: And what do you think about that, is that a good thing?
S: Um huh.
I: Why is that a good think for girls?
S: Because if boys um maybe think they're better than girls you can show them that they're not. (*Female*, L2)

Extract 86:
I: What is it [the story] *basically about?*
S: Like switching the problem, instead of Georgie Porgie kissing the girls, a girl kisses the boy and like Little Miss Muffet used spider spray and it's like more modern. (Male, L1)

Extract 87:
I: What are the words that make you feel that Betty is disgusted?
S: Like um the characters are really outdated that means that's not how it is in this time and she says, 'Poor Veronica' because she's so helpless.
(Female, L1)

Extract 88:
I: You said Betty changed fairy tale land to make girls look stronger and more intelligent. Um do you think this is a good thing?
S: Yes, 'cause I mean like if you're like just reading this, I mean that I personally think that it makes girls look kind of really weak, not very strong or intelligent. I mean they're just sitting there crying and talking about how a guy came and kissed them and then ran away. I mean like that's not a girl!
I: Get a grip!
S: Exactly! So it's just like why don't you just forget about it and move on in life and not stand there and do nothing. (Female, L1)

Four out of the five excerpts came from female students, which may indicate that in general, as a group, they are more acutely aware than the male students of the ways in which gender roles for females have shifted over time. The fact that girls can take care of themselves,

take the initiative with boys, and solve their own problems demonstrates the ways in which these pre-teens perceive shifts in traditional gender roles for girls and boys. In all these cases, it is clear that the female respondents do not feel the classic Little Red Riding Hood image fits the girls of their generation. Rather, they see a more independent and autonomous female character that is adept at dealing with everyday problems without male intervention. This was also revealed when the students were asked the following question, *Which version of Little Red Riding Hood do you prefer: the Archie story or the classic fairy tale story? Why do you think this?* See Table 5.2 below for the results.

Table 5.2 : Student responses to question #9b: Which story do you prefer ?

Subjects	Archie Story	Fairy tale Story (Little Red Riding Hood)	No Response
Female-AR	13	5	1
Female-NAR	6	1	1
Male- AR	9	6	0
Male- NAR	6	6	1
Total	33	19	3

Key :   AR   = Archie reader   NAR = non-Archie reader

An overwhelming number of girls (76%) preferred the *Archie* version of Little Red Riding Hood while the boys were split approximately equally between the two stories. In addition, a majority of *Archie* readers preferred the *Archie* story (69%) and yet, from the table you can also see that a majority of non-*Archie* female readers also preferred the *Archie* story.

Bronwyn Davies in *Shards of Glass* (1993) comments on the sexual imagery in the classic tale of Little Red Riding Hood. She looks at the conversation between the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood and points out the way in which the central female character is positioned as naive. She also notes the red hood and covered basket as symbols of girls' innocence and vulnerability. The wolf (male) is seen as a sexual predator. She notes that the girl is punished as a

direct result of disobeying her mother's instructions. In the *Archie* version, Betty, the Little Red

Riding Hood character, is not so easily deceived by the wolf and proceeds to confront him and

overpower him. This *twist*, as many students termed it, brought the classic tale into the 21st

century and reflects the gender images these female pre-teen readers preferred.

One of our males respondents noted the sexual undertones of the *Archie* version of Little

Red Riding Hood story by citing the language used by the wolf to lure Betty into bed:

> Extract 89:
> *I: You said that the* Archie *story of Little Red Riding Hood is weird. Why do you think it's weird?*
> *S: Because it makes kind of fun of the real one, um because it's like the wolf in the real one it goes What big teeth you have. What better to eat you with and like What big eyes you have or something like that. I don't really know the real one, but um. in this one it says What big eyes you have. The better for looking at you, hot chicks and um What big lips you have. The better to put them on your lips. It's kind of weird.* (Male, L1)

This may indicate an increasing awareness on the part of this pre-teen of his sexuality

and the intersection of sex and power in which men are positioned as the aggressors.

5.5.5 The Ticket to a Girl's Success: Beauty and Sex Appeal

A fifth theme that surfaced in this story was the importance of physical appearance and

sexual appeal for girls. Three of our subjects pointed out the significance of the short skirt

Veronica wore at the end of ""Fairy Tale Land Revisited"" and/or her looks as key to her power

over Archie. These messages were both acknowledged and challenged by the readers, as

evidenced in the following extracts from their interviews and questionnaires. When asked how

they would tell this story to a friend, one female respondent wrote:

> Extract 90:
> *In the end Veronica comes as an old-fashioned Little Red Riding Hood in a very short skirt and takes Archie away as always.* (Female, L1)

In the interview with this student, I probed a little deeper to try and understand the importance of the very short skirt. Consequently, she shared her insights into how Little Red Riding Hood had been sexualized in the *Archie* version:

> Extract 91:
> *I: What do you think about girls that wear very short skirts? What's that all about?*
> *S: I think well maybe they just like the style of it, you know, and it's like fun to get all dressed up but sometimes you know like Little Red Riding Hood should just like be a little girl and she's wearing a little short skirt and platform boots and you know it's making it more teenage like which is kind of good and kind of bad, 'cause we can relate to it more than a little girl in a little frilly dress but then it's also kind of destroying the image.*
> *I: Why do you think girls wear short skirts?*
> *S: Um boys.*[giggles] (Female, L1)

Another female interviewee commented on how Veronica's outfit and overall good looks affect the Archie character. She suggests that he goes off with Veronica instead of Betty based solely on her physical appearance. This may reflect the way girls understand boys' romantic desires.

> Extract 92:
> *Veronica's wearing is like everything except this mini skirt would be what Little Red Riding Hood was wearing, right and of course Archie goes for like what she wears and stuff, her appearance, so Betty, of course Betty's just wearing a normal casual thing and so it ends up with Veronica going with Archie 'cause he just looks at her and he's just mesmerized.* (Female, L1)

Similarly , one of the male students cited Veronica's looks as the key to attracting *Archie* and that looks are important for girls :

> Extract 93:
> *I: What about talking about the end* [of the story]*? We were really interested in what Betty did, she beat up the wolf and--*
> *S: Well, I guess it's that Archie likes Veronica better than Betty.*
> *I: Why do you think he likes Veronica more than Betty?*
> *S: I don't know, maybe looks.*
> *I: The advice you said you'd give to Betty was to try and get Archie, right? So how could she do this?*
> *S: Well, show her side, like that she can be beautiful, too!* (Male, L1)

However, later in the interview this particular student resists these messages. In other words, he challenges the notion that looks are the key to a girl's appeal:

> Extract 94:
> *I: If you had a choice between Betty and Veronica as a girlfriend, who would you choose?*
> *S: Betty.*
> *I: Why would you choose her?*
> *S: Well, Veronica she doesn't really appeal to me 'cause she's just a girl that has looks but that's all she's proud of.* (Male, L1)

5.5.6 And the Moral of the Story is: The Messages

The sixth theme is the construction of an underlying message or moral in the story, ""Fairy Tale Land Revisited"," by nine of our readers. This story was understood in a variety of ways by these pre-teen readers which lent insight into their values. One student discussed the story with her parents who felt that the story was quite educational insofar as it highlighted the importance of solving your own problems:

> Extract 95:
> *They say that that will sort of help me with my problem like say in little Red Riding Hood, Betty has to think for other people and when I told them about that story when I finished reading it in October they said it's pretty educational in a way. They said it's pretty educational when they have stuff for kids to read and figure out for themselves.* (Female, L1)

Similarly another student felt that the story was about taking initiative and helping people with their problems:

> Extract 96:
> *She's* [Betty] *taking matters into her own hands and just like correcting things that are like making her feel good and just like straightening up the people.* (Female, L2)

Six of the students, including both male and female participants, saw gender equality as the underlying message in the story. They felt the story had a feminist agenda as its sub-text. The following six extracts (97 to 102) from the interviews reflect this interpretation:

> Extract 97:
> *It's feministic in the way that it's saying the truth that in fairy tales the*

feminine characters are not always portrayed realistically. (Male, L1)

Extract 98:
It (the story) like tells girls not to be like stereotyped and like stay home and do the dishes and stuff. (Male, L1)

Extract 99:
I think she's [Betty] *trying to say in her position don't be afraid to do something about it. Don't just sit there and kind of take it that something's gone bad, like do something about it.* (Female, L1)

Extract 100:
I think it's saying that, um that girls can be strong and they can have a right to do certain things and that they are intelligent as well, boys can't always get away with everything they want. (Female, L1)

Extract 101:
S: It's sort of like a moral like she says what's good for the goose is good for the gander.
I: What do you mean by that?
S: If a boy can do it, a girl can do it. (Male, L1)

Extract 102:
I: What do you think about the fact that the girl's beating up the wolf? Is that cool or not cool?
S: Well, it's better that like it's not sexist, it's better because usually the boys always do it. It's better for it not to be sexist for the girls to kind of do it.
(Male, L2)

In contrast, one female student felt that the central message of the story was the

centrality of romantic relationships in girls' lives and clearly disapproved of this message:

Extract 103:
S: In general, the message that I get from this [Archie comics] *is that girls should have a relationship with boys and do things to impress the boys and I think that's what they're trying to say in this.*
I: You mean like Archie's *in general?*
S: Yeah, but I don't think that's like good 'cause I mean like that's not always the thing that you should do. Like if this guy is some really bossy person, I mean you wouldn't go out and try and impress him or anything 'cause that would be just plain stupid and I mean like also girls shouldn't be the weaker sex. I mean we should also be able to be strong and so this is kind of using Archie *are kind of using the way it was in the old days and women were undermined and I really don't like that.* (Female, L1)

Thus, while the message may be a reinforcement of sexual stereotypes, this student is able to engage in a process of critical reflection that allows her to deconstruct this message according to her own lived experiences. Glasberg (1992) argues that *Archie* comics send dangerous messages to their readers which impact the way they position themselves in the world. I would, however, argue that this particular reader creates new possibilities that go beyond the text and reveal her understanding of the complexities of gender practices within society.

In sum, all of the themes that were explored in Part II of the analysis illustrate the effectiveness of using popular cultural forms such as *Archie* comics in accessing the construction of pre-teen identity. This story was particularly helpful in drawing out the readers' construction of gender. "Fairy Tale Land Revisited" illustrated both traditional and contemporary gendered practices and the complexity that is inherent in these practices. While Glasberg (1992) raises concerns about the highly stereotyped gendered narratives in *Archie* comics, it seems from this data that the students were able to respond to this particular *Archie* story from multiple positions. Thus, these readers possess multiple identities which enable them to construct meaning from this text and resist or challenge some of the ways in which the characters were positioned, thereby lending insight into their own values as pre-teens. This follows Urquhart's (1996) claim that through learning the gendered discourses in society, children are able to position themselves within gender practices in multiple ways. Thus, they develop gender subjectivities that are both in accordance with and in opposition to the ways in which others choose to position them.

In addition, there were two cases in the student responses from the interviews that illustrated the reader's ability to deconstruct gender positioning in stories and thereby create possibilities for transformation in these gendered practices. First one female student saw the possibility for girls to be strong and *also* have a partner. Second, one of the male participants suggested that physical appearance was not the key to a girl's appeal. Part II also highlights the

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importance of reading position in the ways in which texts are read as outsiders (non-*Archie* readers) and insiders (*Archie* readers) as well as gendered subjects. Finally, this section confirms our claim that stories can help uncover the narratives of identity. Unless we can understand how children feel and how they position themselves in the world, we cannot hope to engender a transformative agenda for our students.

Chapter VI: Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications of the Research

> The popular cannot be ignored because it points to a category of meanings and affective investments that shape the very identities, politics, and cultures of the students we deal with. Subjectivity and identity are in part constituted on the grounds of the popular, and their force and effects do not disappear once the students enter school. (Giroux and Simon, 1989, p. 24)

What it means to be literate is dependent on the social, economic, and historical context in which children are born and raised. Pre-teens are able to develop, to some extent, a society of their own which lies outside the control of adults who care for and teach them. In that space, they learn about social relationships beyond the family and the school. It is incumbent upon us as educators to value these spaces and encourage children to share their insights into that society if we wish to connect with them in meaningful ways.

This study is partially grounded in sociocultural theory, and thus reading is seen as a social practice. It is through the analysis in Part I and Part II that we are able to access and understand the social networks that revolve around the reading of *Archie* comics. It is important to note that although we did not intentionally choose *Archie* readers for our sample, the majority of the pre-teens in this study were *Archie* readers. This supports the claim that *Archie* comics are important cultural artifacts for many pre-teens. In Part I, we explored the ways in which the reading of *Archie* comics can support literacy in L1 and L2 for pre-teen readers.

6.1 The Ten Central Findings from Part I: Literacy and the Pre-Teen Archie Reader

I will summarize the central findings for Part I into ten general themes. First, there were indications throughout the data which suggested that girls were more passionate or devoted to *Archie* comics than boys. The evidence to support this claim came from many sources in both the questionnaires and the interviews: (1) We found that there were a higher percentage of girls categorized as *Archie* readers in the study than boys; (2) Among our *Archie* readers, more of the girls said they read *Archie* comics a lot; (3) There was a general perception among the majority

of these pre-teens that *Archie* comics were more popular with girls based on their experiences and observations; (4) Girls seem to talk about *Archie* comics with their friends and family more often than boys; and (5) Girls seem to swap *Archie* comics with their friends and family more often than do boys.

Second, there is a history or longevity to the reading of *Archie* comics. Many of the pre-teens in our study have been reading *Archie* comics for at least two years and some as many as five or six years. This is important in that it shows not only a devotion to these texts by their readers but also that *Archie* comics serve as a long-term reading resource for many pre-teens.

Third, Krashen claims that *Archie* comics are perfect tools for L2 students in developing their language skills for two key reasons: (1) They are low vocabulary/high interest reading; and (2) There is an abundance of visuals. The evidence from this research seems to support both those claims. From the L2 responses, in both the student questionnaires and the interviews, four students cited the vocabulary and three student cited the visuals as important aspects in accessing meaning from these texts. Thus, one can see the importance of visuals and accessible vocabulary when choosing appropriate reading materials for language learners.

Fourth, it appears that *Archie* comics can also serve as an entry point into reading for many L2 students. For example, one of the male students in this study referred directly to comics as an entry point into novels and other forms of literature while another male student cited *Archie* comics as one of the tools he used when he started to learn English. Still another student referred to *Archie* comics as a type of scaffold from which he could build higher level skills in English. Thus, these comics seem to support pre-teen literacy in a multitude of ways by helping students access their second language.

Fifth, we found that many of our *Archie* readers (twenty out of thirty-four) considered themselves to be strong readers and enjoyed reading a range of materials. Four of the students

interviewed referred to book reading in their interviews and mentioned that they read both books and comics on a regular basis. This supports the claim made by Swain (1978) that avid long-term comic readers are just as passionate about their book reading and may even be among the strongest readers in the class. In fact, one of the male L1 *Archie* readers made mention of the fact that he was in special academic programs for gifted children at his school.

Sixth, we asked the students if they felt that *Archie* comics could benefit them in the language curriculum, and 70% said they thought these comics would be beneficial in at least one of the following four areas: reading, writing, spelling, and vocabulary. The strongest support was in the area of reading. This illustrates the importance of validating children's desires and interests in learning. In other words, if the children feel that these materials could benefit them in some areas of the language curriculum, there may be a stronger sense of investment or agency in their own learning by bringing these comics into their classrooms.

Seventh, students were somewhat ambivalent when asked whether they felt *Archie* comics should/could be used during silent reading. Many of the children did not necessarily see *Archie* comics as appropriate for silent reading. The rationale for not allowing *Archie* comics to be used during this activity originated from three sources: (1) teachers' attitudes; (2) parents' attitudes; and (3) their own personal attitudes about the educational value of these comics. The underlying assumption was that comics were not considered proper or real reading. Thus, they were not deemed appropriate according to the official school curriculum. As a result, there was a noticeable separation between school culture/school activities and home/peer culture/fun activities for many of these pre-teens. This separation highlighted the ways in which children have come to understanding the objectives of education. In other words, education is serious business and not meant to be enjoyed. This poses a dilemma for many pre-teens in that it requires students to reject texts *they value* in order to pursue academic success. Nonetheless, some

students are able to resist "cultural assumptions that position comics in opposition to real books or high-culture texts" (Skorapa, 1994, p. 213). They argue that any reading is good for students. In other words, the fact that children are reading is valuable in and of itself regardless of the genre.

Eighth, many of the pre-teens gave us insight into the *Archie* appeal. They characterized the books as funny, exciting, educational, interesting, and motivational. Although, there were a number of students who did not feel these comics would be accepted in schools, by teachers or parents, they did enjoy reading them. In other words, it is vital that we as educators choose reading materials that capture the imagination of our students. We also need to be mindful of the importance of humour in texts for pre-teens as 83% of the pre-teen *Archie* readers who responded to the question *Why do you like reading Archie comics?* used the adjectives "fun," "funny" and "humorous" as the key to their appeal. Another important point made by one of the female students in the study is the importance of using texts which allow children to engage in critical thinking. After discussing the story, ""Fairy Tale Land Revisited"," with her parents, one female student felt that the story highlighted the possibilities open to children when they "figure things out for themselves."

Ninth, many of our L2 students read comics in both their first language and English. This supports the claim that L1 literacy or background knowledge can help support L2 literacy. In addition, one of the male participants began reading English comics before reading comics in his first language, Chinese. This may suggest that in some cases reading comics in L2 can support literacy in L1. It is also important to note that when students were asked to compare the comics they read in their first language and *Archie* comics several mentioned that the latter were far less violent. In fact, one male student thought that *Archie* comics would be more appropriate for younger L2 children than some of the comics in his L1 [Korean] because *Archie* comics

are non-violent.

Finally, the tenth theme is the importance of social networks for these pre-teen *Archie* readers. In the interviews, we asked the student three key questions that were crucial in understanding the *Archie* culture, or in other words the social interaction that results from reading *Archie* comic books within a distinct community: (1) *Do your friends like reading* Archie *comics?* (2) *Do you talk about* Archie *comics with your friends/family?* and (3) *Do you swap* Archie *comics with your friends/family?* We found that an overwhelming number of our pre-teens had friends who also read *Archie* comics (75%), talked with their friends/family about *Archie* comics (80%), and swapped *Archie* comics with their friends/family (75%) (see Tables 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10 on pp. 83-85). As was mentioned in Chapter I of this thesis, *talk* according to Vygotsky and social interaction according to Bakhtin are essential in language learning and concept formation. We are inherently social beings and thus reading is viewed as a social practice. It is our contention that the community of readers that revolves around *Archie* comics helps support literacy for all *Archie* readers, both L1 and L2.

6.2 The Ten Central Findings from Part II: "Fairy Tale Land Revisited" and Pre-Teen Identity

In Part II of the analysis we explored the ways in which pre-teens construct meaning out of a particular *Archie* story and how this meaning gives insight into their identities and ways of understanding the world. In a sense we wanted the participants to embark on a journey with us that would help us to understand where they positioned themselves, particularly as gendered subjects, in the world. I will proceed by outlining the ten central findings in response to our second research question, *What do student responses to the* Archie *story "Fairy Tale Land Revisited," tell us about their pre-teen identity and their ways of understanding the world?*

First, the students were asked to position the *Archie* characters in the story. This story contained both traditional and contemporary role models and thus their positioning of the main protagonist, Betty, as either powerful or powerless in this story depended on their notions of gender and conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity. Many of the students positioned her as powerful in her role in the story and applauded that power. In other words, these students supported female autonomy and strength. In contrast, there were also several students that positioned her as powerless and felt that she had ultimately made a mistake or felt regret in sacrificing Archie for power. In other words, for these students the desired goal in the story was for Betty to have a male partner and thus Betty's autonomy was not considered valuable.

Second, four students commented on Veronica's strategy of weakness in the story. There was a spectrum of responses ranging from two male students who felt this approach was both effective and necessary in order to attract a male partner, to a female student that felt it was highly effective and yet a problematic practice for girls, to a female student that felt this strategy was highly problematic for females. Where students positioned themselves on this continuum gave us, as researchers, insight into their notion of gender power relations. It also illustrated the ways in which some pre-teens have come to understand femininity and masculinity and the extent to which they, as readers, are able to deconstruct these images. In other words, it is important to understand who resists certain gender practices and why in order to access their values, beliefs, and identities as pre-teen readers.

Third, given that this particular story symbolized both contemporary and traditional gender discourses, student responses and rationales in regards to their preferences of story gave insight into their own positioning vis-a-vis these discourses. A preference for the *Archie* version of Little Red Riding Hood signaled a rejection of traditional gender practices, to some extent. Many of the girls could not relate to the Little Red Riding Hood image as it did not reflect their

reality as girls of the nineties. In fact, one student felt that Betty's mission in this particular story was to bring the characters "into the nineties," up to date on contemporary values and interpretations of gender. In contrast, there were those that preferred the traditional story and felt that Betty may have been "too proud" or "too confident" in the *Archie* version. They argued that she should not have tried to change the status quo. One male student positioned her as somewhat of a radical remarking that she wanted girls and boys to have equal rights and was therefore "too extreme."

Fourth, the way that students responded to the question *What advice would you give Betty?* was fundamental in gaining access to their subjectivity as pre-teen readers. Again these responses ranged from students who supported Betty's actions in the story to those that criticized her actions. The support came in two forms: (1) support for her self-reliance and encouragement to be her own person; and (2) support for her actions and encouragement to seek out a romantic alternative to *Archie*. Thus, while some students valued Betty's autonomy, others revealed their underlying cultural assumptions about a female's need to have a male partner. There were also students who criticized Betty's action and their advice reflected two major themes: (1) She should have acted weak to attract Archie, or in order words, she should have adopted Veronica's position in the story; and (2) She should not have tried to transform the traditional stereotypes portrayed in either the nursery rhymes or the story of Little Red Riding Hood. The advice given by these students clearly supported the notion that powerful female characters in stories are not necessarily desirable in stories or in real life. Both the support and the criticism that Betty received pointed to the ways in which girls are valued by these pre-teens and the extent to which they support certain cultural stereotypes that position women as weak. For many of the boys, Betty's need for a male partner was never questioned. In contrast, the girls' responses conveyed a

feeling that Betty had control or power over her own destiny which may or may not include a male partner.

Fifth, several of the questions posed in both the student questionnaires and the student interviews highlighted the multiple and sometimes contradictory identities of these pre-teens. This tension was evident, particularly when students were asked to comment on Betty's feelings at the end of the story and then give advice based on her actions. For example, one student commented that Betty felt "sorry she didn't act weak when Archie came to save her" and yet she advised her "not to act like Veronica because Veronica's a bit of a wimp." Thus, students were able to position themselves within the storyline as one of the characters, adopting the stereotypes embedded in these texts, and then move outside the text to evaluate the character's actions from their own lived experiences. They were able to see the complexities in the gendered narratives encoded in this particular story and challenge those narratives.

Sixth, many of the students recognized a certain paradoxical or ironic element to the story given that the weak one (Veronica) gets the boy (Archie). Hence, female strength ultimately results in the loss of romance/power and thus unhappiness for Betty while female weakness results in romance/power and thus happiness for Veronica. The underlying assumption is that romance is the hidden agenda or desired goal for women and the key to their success/power. The fact that some of the children recognized this irony and critically reflected on these messages points to their ability to understand the multi-layered meanings in this story and resist these messages, moving beyond the text to create their own gendered possibilities and discourses. This may also reveal the ways in which boys and girls see patriarchal relationships as problematic for girls (Walkerdine, 1985) in that it forces them to choose between their automony and their romantic desires.

Seventh, one student illustrated a growing awareness of his sexuality by pointing out the sexual tension between the wolf and Betty in the *Archie* version of Little Red Riding Hood. He extracted the following piece of dialogue from the story:

Betty: What big eyes you have.
The wolf: The better for looking at you, hot chicks.
Betty: What big lips you have.
The wolf: The better to put them on your lips.

Thus, using this particular story we, as researchers, were able to access part of this pre-teen's identity.

Eighth, this story elicited comments by the students about the importance of physical attractiveness for girls in regards to attracting boys. These were messages that were both accepted and challenged by these pre-teen readers. One male student resisted this assumption and felt that physical appearance was clearly not the key to a girl's allure. He therefore created new possibilities that transcended this story. Similarly, another student asserted that Betty could be strong and also have Archie; this too created possibilities for these characters that were clearly not part of the original storyline. Hence, these two students highlight ways in which students are able to deconstruct text and re-construct new possibilities for themselves within these stories, possibilities that move far beyond the gendered narratives in these texts.

Ninth, the responses to these stories indicate the importance of one's reading position in the interpretation of a particular text. Our position as insider (*Archie* reader) or outsider (non-*Archie* reader) as well as our position as gendered subjects (male or female), has dramatic implication for how texts are read. Many of the students' responses in this study highlight gender as a key construct in pre-teen identity. As aforementioned, there were definite gender differences in how this story was read, particularly in terms of: (1) the positioning of Betty in the story; (2) the advice given to Betty; and (3) the students' reactions to the strategy of weakness in attracting boys.

Finally, six of the students interviewed understood the underlying message in this story to be gender equity, or in other words, the notion individuals should not be discriminated against on the basis of gender. Their belief was that girls should be encouraged to be as autonomous, independent, and confident as boys. This understanding reveals an awareness on the part of these pre-teens of gender issues and the values and opinions they hold vis-a-vis the power relations between the sexes. These values and opinions give us greater insight into their construction of identity as gendered beings and how they position themselves in relation to the opposite sex.

6.3 Pedagogical Implications of the Research

From our central findings in Part I and II of the analysis we can see evidence that clearly indicates how and under what conditions *Archie* comics support literacy in L1 and L2. This data also highlights the possibilities that emerge when students, teachers, and researchers are able to draw on popular cultural resources such as *Archie* comics to access pre-teen identity, in particular their gendered subjectivities.

Archie comics appear to be one popular form of culture that pre-teens are engaged in on a regular basis. In addition, these comics represent a cultural product or commodity which is bought, traded, and sold on a daily basis. In fact, Skorapa (1994) refers to comics as popular cultural commodity texts. They make up a daily part of many of our pre-teen students' reading repertoire.

If we agree that pre-teen students are drawn to these texts (*Archie* comics), creating a space for them in the classroom may facilitate learning in several important ways. First, it will validate students' interests and provide access through a familiar and comfortable medium, the comic book. Second, given that many L2 students have shown signs of being marginalization at school (Toohey, 1998) and the popularity of *Archie* comics amongst pre-teens in general (Glasberg, 1992), these comics could symbolize a cultural and social tool for L2 students wanting

access to their L1 classmates. Third, if we wish to engender critical thinking amongst pre-teen students, popular cultural forms such as *Archie* comics may provide a safe vehicle to examine such things as gender roles or stereotyping in the classroom. Finally, if we recognize the value pre-teens place on the comic book as a cultural commodity, their devotion to these texts (e.g., *Archie*), and their role as active agents in creating their own meaning, exploring their relationship and interaction with this cultural form will undoubtedly give insight into the construction of their identities as both readers and pre-teens.

From our analysis, we found that L1 and L2 *Archie* readers are discussing and swapping *Archie* comics on a regular basis. Thus, we can assume they are crossing cultural boundaries as part of a social network of *Archie* readers or 'community of readers'. Thus, if we allow students to bring their popular cultural materials into the classroom, we may enable L2 students to be full participants in their classroom and peer culture. Becoming full participants could enhance both oracy and literacy for these language learners while simultaneously engendering a sense of community among all the students:

> For students to invest their sense of self, their identity, in acquiring their new language and participating actively in their new culture, they must experience positive and affirming interactions with members of that culture.
> (Cummins, 1996, p. 73)

I acknowledge that conservative and traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity creep into virtually every facet of our daily lives and are powerfully reflected and perpetuated in popular culture. Nevertheless, we have provided examples in this study that demonstrate children's desire and capacity to de-construct and re-construct these discourses in ways that reflect their own lived experiences. This study also serves as an example of children's ability to be active and critical agents in their own learning.

This research merely represents a starting point into the pedagogical possibilities of introducing popular culture into the elementary L1 and L2 curriculum. Hopefully, this study will inspire community building amongst culturally and linguistically diverse pre-teen students in the elementary classroom. Viewing comics as cultural artifacts that children cherish and as a way of deepening our understanding of their multiple and conflicting identities may provide important social and cultural tools to enrich the classroom and celebrate the knowledge that our students bring. In addition, by allowing students to share their insights and perspectives on *Archie* comics in general, and ""Fairy Tale Land Revisited"" in particular, we celebrate their journey and their discovery of meaning in text. Moreover, we are able to access important dimensions of their multi-faceted subjectivities.

Acknowledging the importance of pre-teen's background knowledge or prior knowledge and their voice in the classroom involves not only respecting the child's desires and consciousness but also making it central to the learning process. The challenge is to incorporate popular culture into the curriculum in ways that are meaningful to students and that also enhance literacy skills. If we bring comics such as *Archie* into the classroom, we may provide an exciting and accessible medium for analyzing and developing students' skills as literary critics and also lead students to a wider range of texts and experiences which will ultimately enhance their intellectual growth and validate their desires. Nonetheless, we must be mindful of the students' ownership over these texts and their desire to keep them separate from school culture to some extent.

6.4 Directions for Further Research: New Questions, New Possibilities

The scope of this Master's thesis serves as a starting point to a multitude of questions that have arisen out of the rich data collected. Nonetheless, this thesis is valuable in that opens up the possibility for further research located at the intersection of literacy, popular culture, and identity.

Moreover, the researchers were able to identify and to address, to some extent, some important questions which include: (1) *Who reads* Archie *comics and why?* (2) *What are some of the ways that the reading of* Archie *comics support literacy for L1 and L2 students?* and (3) *How can student responses to an* Archie *story reveal aspects of their identity as pre-teen readers?*

Through an exploration of the research questions in this study, we have identified another set of questions which have yet to be addressed. These questions could include the following possibilities: 1) *In what ways could comics be incorporated into the curriculum that would be meaningful to the students and teachers?* (2) *What are teacher's and/or parent's attitudes towards* Archie *comics vis-a-vis school curriculum?* and (3) *What are the effects on children of separating school culture from home/peer culture?* In regard to the first question, as the evidence from this study and previous research shows (Davies, 1993; Dyson, 1997; Skorapa, 1994; and Walkerdine, 1985), comics can be used as a tool to engage students in critical reflection on the construction of gender in text. Engendering critical thinking skills could be valuable in all areas of the curriculum. In regard to the second question, we suspect that parents and teachers are somewhat ambivalent about the use of comics in the classroom, and yet there was evidence from our data of parents that supported their children's interest in *Archie* comics. Therefore, if we could access parent and teacher attitudes about these popular cultural forms, we would be able to add another dimension to the research. Perhaps this would also serve as a way to build partnership in the classroom between the teachers, parents, and students. The final question revolves around the question of pedagogy. *What is proper reading? Who defines it and for what purposes?* If students' desires are incompatible with the official school curriculum, the schools are rejecting those desires and positioning themselves in opposition to their students to some extent. Research which focuses on the intersection or separation of school culture and peer culture present exciting and meaningful possibilities for further investigation.

6.5 A Final Reflection

I will end with an extract from one of the interviews with a grade seven male L1 student which reflects the potential of using *Archie* comics in the classroom as a tool to build community among L1 and L2 pre-teens:

I: Is popular culture like Archie *comics a good way of bringing kids* [L1 and L2] *together? What do you think?*
S: Well, yes because I know that one reason most of the kids with English problems and kids with good English don't relate is because the English kids seem to think that either they [L2 students] *are stupid because they can't speak English which is totally a misconception or they're not like them and they're kind of pushed away by that.*
I: So that's what you think that it's a good way 'cause they can talk to each other?
S:'Cause it would give them something to realize that these kids like some things that they like, that they are kids who like things that other kids like which is a way of bringing them together.

Thus, by illustrating the points of intersection, or similarities between children as opposed to their differences, students and teachers in partnership may begin to cross cultural boundaries and build community in their classroom. It is our contention that popular cultural forms such as *Archie* comics could facilitate that process.

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Appendix A: Consent Forms

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Language Education
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: (604) 822-5788
Fax: (604) 822-3154

Letter of Consent: Teacher

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in a research project titled "Comics or classics? Pre-teens and the Archie world" which will also serve as the foundation for an MA thesis titled "Comics and the teaching of culture: A case study of elementary ESL students". I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Language Education at the University of British Columbia and my MA research assistant is Karen Vanderheyden. We hope to conduct our research over a six month period, from September 1998 to February 1999. We hope to visit the school approximately four to five times in order to conduct the following activities:

In mid October, we will ask the students to complete a questionnaire about their reading activities and their familiarity with Archie comics. This may take about 45 minutes to administer.

In November, we would like to interview a number of students to gain greater insight into the responses they have given in their questionnaires. In addition, we would like to take the opportunity to interview you on the subject of our research. These interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed.

In late February, we would like to conduct a classroom activity with the use of an Archie comic story. We will encourage both small-group and large-group discussion. We would like to invite you to participate in this activity. Once the research is complete, we would welcome the opportunity to share our findings with you at a time that is convenient for you.

If you have any questions about this research now or during the course of the study, you may contact me at my office (822-5236) or contact my research assistant via e-mail at kjoyv@unixg. ubc.ca If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject you may contact the Director of Research Services at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Richard Spratley at 822-8598.

Your signature on page 3 signifies that you have agreed to participate in this study and that you have received a copy of this letter. You may withdraw your consent at any time during the study, or refuse to participate in any part of this research without consequence.

Those students who do not consent will not be asked to fill out the questionnaire, be interviewed or participate in the focus/discussion groups.

Yours sincerely,

Bonny Norton, Ph.D.   Karen Vanderheyden

I, _____ do/do not agree to participate in the research project " Comics or Classics ? Pre-teens and the Archie World" and the connected MA thesis project "Comics and the Teaching of Culture: A case study of elementary ESL students" to be conducted by Dr. Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden. I acknowledge that I have received a letter describing the study. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and that pseudonyms will be used to protect my privacy.

_____

Signature   Date

_____

Signature of a Witness   Date

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Language Education
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: (604) 822-5788
Fax: (604) 822-3154

Letter of Consent: Parents/Guardians of Students

The purpose of this letter is to ask your permission to allow your son/daughter/ward to participate in a research project titled "Comics or classics? Pre-teens and the Archie world" which will also serve as the foundation for an MA thesis titled "Comics and the teaching of culture: A case study of elementary ESL students". I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Language Education at the University of British Columbia and my MA research assistant is Karen Vanderheyden. We hope to conduct our research over a six month period, from September 1998 to February 1999.

In mid October, we will ask the students to complete a questionnaire about their reading activities and their familiarity with Archie comics. This may take about 45 minutes.

In November, we would like to interview a number of students to gain greater insight into their questionnaire responses. These interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed.

In late February, we would like to conduct a classroom activity with the use of an Archie comic story. Small-group and large-group discussion will be encouraged. We will invite the classroom teacher to participate in this activity .

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact myself, Bonny Norton, at (822-5236) or my research assistant, Karen Vanderheyden on e-mail at kjoyv@unixg. ubc.ca . If you have any concerns about your daughter/son/ward's treatment or rights as a research subject you may contact the Director of Research Services at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Richard Spratley at 822-8598.

Your signature on page 2 signifies that you have given your permission for your daughter/ son/ward to participate in this study and that you have received a copy of this letter. You may withdraw your consent at any time during the study, or refuse to allow your daughter/son/ward to participate in any part of this research without consequence. Those students who do not consent will not be asked to fill out the questionnaire, be interviewed or participate in the classroom activity. Instead they will be given the opportunity to do sustained silent reading.

Yours sincerely,

Bonny Norton, Ph.D.   Karen Vanderheyden   page 1 of 2

I, _____ do/do not consent to the participation of my
         (parent's name)

daughter/son/ward _____ in this research project " Comics
               (name of student)

or Classics ? Pre-teens and the Archie World" and the connected MA thesis project "

Comics and the Teaching of Culture: A case study of elementary ESL students" to be

conducted by Dr. Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden. I acknowledge that I have

received a letter describing the study. I understand that I may withdraw my

daughter/son/ward from the study at any time without penalty, and that pseudonyms will

be used to protect her/his privacy.

_____
Signature   Date

_____
Signature of a Witness   Date

Appendix B:
The Archie Questionnaire and a Sample of "Fairy Tale Land Revisited".

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Language Education
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: (604) 822-5788
Fax: (604) 822-3154

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE
COMICS OR CLASSICS? PRE-TEENS AND THE ARCHIE WORLD.

Reading is an important part of school life. This questionnaire is divided into three parts. Part A will ask you questions about the reading you do for fun. Part B will ask you to read a story from an Archie comic book and answer questions about it. Part C is for students who read Archie comics regularly. It should take about 30 minutes to complete all three parts of the questionnaire. We are interested in your thoughts and ideas about Archie stories and Archie characters. We also want to know how the Archie world compares to your world. We hope this questionnaire will help teachers, parents, and researchers understand what is important to you at this stage in your life.

Please note: Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study at any time, without consequence. If you complete this questionnaire we will assume that consent has been given. To protect your privacy, we will not use your real name in this study. Once the questionnaire has been completed, it will be collected by your teacher and returned to Dr. Bonny Norton and her research assistant, Ms. Karen Vanderheyden. If you have any questions, you may contact Dr. Norton at 822-5236.

General Information

Name: _____ Sex: Male Female

Age: _____ Grade : Five Six Seven

What was the first language you learned as a child ? _____

What language to you usually speak at home ? _____

What language do you speak with your friends ? _____

What language do you feel most comfortable speaking? _____

Part A : Reading Activities

I. *Circle your answer to the following questions.*

1. How often do you read for fun ?

   most days   once or twice a week   once or twice a month   hardly ever

2. What kind of reading material do you most enjoy?

   chapter books   magazines   picture books
   comics   information books   other _____

3. If you read comics, please name the comics you read. _____

   _____

   _____

4. What types of stories do you most enjoy ?

   true stories   history   romances   adventure
   mystery   science fiction   fantasy   other _____

   Why you like these types of stories? _____

   _____

   _____

5. Do you ever read for fun at school ?   Yes   No

   If yes, **when** and **where** you do this? _____

   _____

   _____

6 a) Please circle **one** of the following statements:

   I read Archie comics a lot.
   I sometimes read Archie comics.
   I have never read Archie comics before.
   I used to read Archie comics but I've stopped.

   b) If you have stopped reading Archie comics, please explain why.

   _____

   _____

   _____

Part B : An Archie Sampler "Fairytale Revisited"

Read the Archie story attached. Answer the following questions and comment on your answers where possible.

7. How would you tell this story to a friend ?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

8a) Describe the last box of the story (marked "End" in the bottom corner).

_____

_____

_____

_____

b) How do you think Betty feels ?

_____

_____

_____

c) What advice would you give to Betty ?

_____

_____

_____

9 a) Have you ever read the fairytale "Little Red Riding Hood" ?   Yes   No

   b) If yes, which story do you prefer ?   Archie story   Fairytale story

Why do you think this? _____

_____

_____

Part C: The Archie Reader's Survey

If you regularly read Archie comic books, please answer the following questions. Circle your answers and explain where possible.

I. The Archie Adventure

10. How old were you when you started reading Archie comics ?

    6-7yrs old   8-9yrs old   10-11yrs old   12-13yrs old

11. How did you find out about Archie comics ?

friend (girl)	father	teacher (female)
friend (boy)	sister	teacher (male)
mother	brother	other _____

12. Why do you like reading Archie comic books?

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

13. Do your friends like reading Archie comics?   Yes   No

14. Do you think Archie comics tell you what your life will be like as a teenager ? Yes   No

Why do you think this?_____

_____

_____

15. When you read Archie comics, do your parents like it?   Yes   No   Don't know

16. When you read Archie comics, do your teachers like it?   Yes   No   Don't know

17. Please circle the statement that you agree with.

    I think Archie comics are more popular with girls than boys.
    I think Archie comics are more popular with boys than girls.
    I think Archie comics are equally popular with boys and girls.

Why do you think this? _____

_____

_____

II.   *The Archie Characters*

18. Are the characters in the Archie comics like real life people ?   Yes   No

Why do you think this? _____

_____

_____

19 a) Who is your **favourite** teenage character in the Archie comic books ?

      Archie   Jughead   Moose   Midge   Reggie
      Veronica   Betty   Ethel   other _____

Why did you choose that character? _____

_____

_____

b) Which character do you like the **least** ? (see the names above) _____

Why do you think this? _____

_____

20. Why do you think Betty and Veronica like Archie so much? _____

_____

_____

_____

21. Do you think **parents** are important in the Archie stories ?   Yes   No

Why do you think this? _____

_____

22. Do you think **Mr. Weatherbee** is a good school principal ?   Yes   No

Why do you think this? _____

_____

23. Do you think **Ms. Grundy** is a good teacher ?   Yes   No

Why do you think this? _____

_____
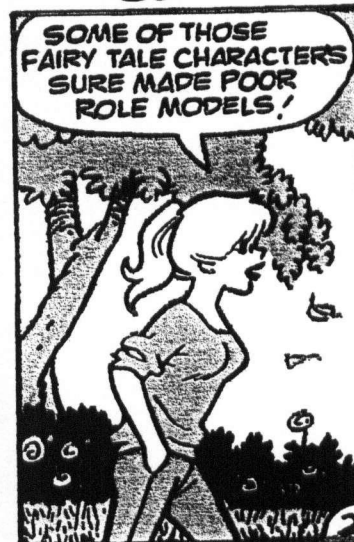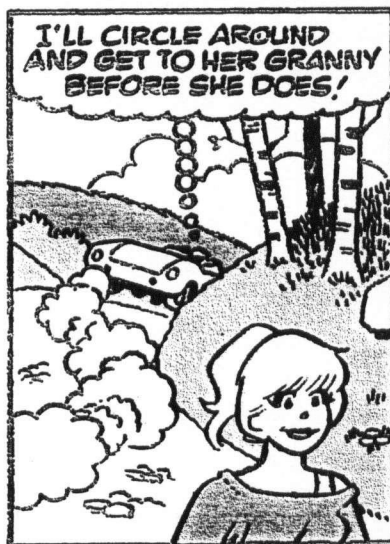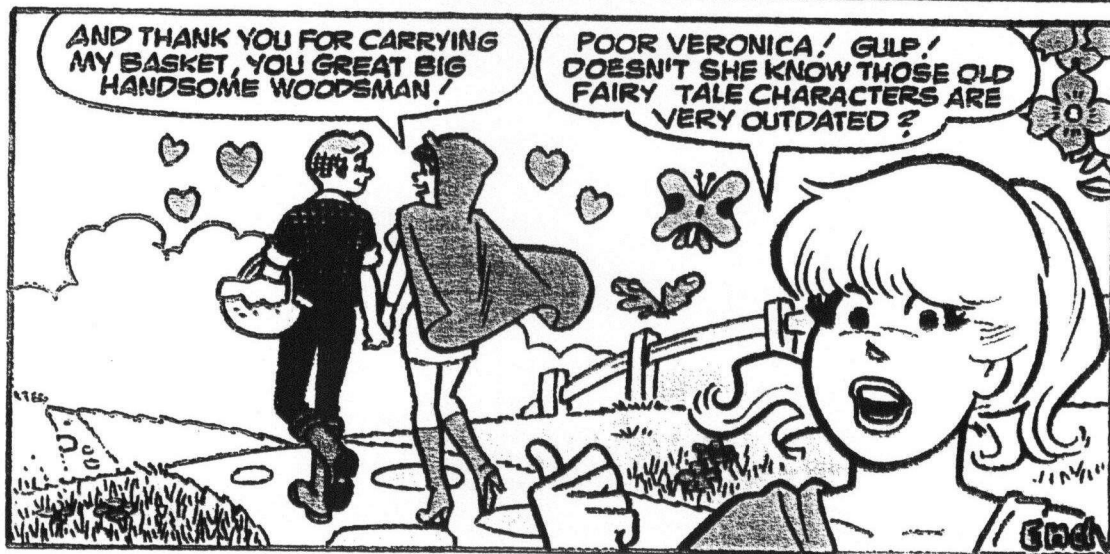
Appendix C: The Profiles of the Twenty Student Interviewees

Profiles of Prospective Interviewees:

* indicates issues to be addressed in the student interviews
It is important to note that the quoted material has been cited in its uncorrected form.

Female ESL Students:

Anne is a grade six ESL student whose first language is Mandarin. She speaks English with her friends and Mandarin with her family . She feels most comfortable in Mandarin. She sometimes reads *Archie* and so do her friends. She started reading *Archie* comics when she was 10-11 years old and found out about them through a girl friend. She enjoys the comics because they are funny and contain "nice colored pictures ." * She doesn't think that *Archie* comics tell you about life as a teenager because they are not true stories only comics. She thinks that *Archie* comics are equally popular with boys and girls, but doesn't give a reason. She doesn't think that *Archie* characters are like real-life people because "in real life Betty and Veronica won't overreact so much and they won't fight over a boy ." * Jughead is her favorite because he's funny and dumb. Veronica is her least favorite character because "she's thinks she's rich and better than anyone." She would rather live in her own world "because it is real but in the *Archie*'s world they are just stories."

Alice is a grade seven student. She speaks Korean at home, Korean and English with friends, but feels most comfortable in English. Sometimes, she reads *Archie* and so do her friends. She enjoys reading *Archie* comics because they are fun to read and contain a lot of pictures so she can see what's going on. She believes that *Archie* does tell you about life as a teenage because "some of the stories are about hard times in your life ." * She thinks that *Archie* comics are more popular with girls than boys because " girls like to read and have fun, but boys like to play and have fun. She sees the *Archie* characters as real-life people. Betty is her favorite character because she is a central character and has "a good and interesting personality." Jughead is her least favorite because she considers him weird and boring.* According to Alice, Betty and Veronica like *Archie* so much because he's cute and popular. Parents aren't important in the comics because the stories center around teenage characters and "they don't really care about their parents."* She prefers her life because "*Archie* comics are to cartoony and my life is fun and interesting. The comics are fake and my life is real. If *Archie* comics are real life I would like to live in *Archie* comics world. If I lived in the *Archie* world then I can't eat Korean foods my mom makes ." *

Namisha is a grade six student whose first language is Bengali. She speaks Bengali with her family and English with her friends. She is most comfortable in English.
She loves to use her imagination which is why she enjoys mystery and adventure stories. She reads *Archie* a lot. Her friends also read *Archie*. She thinks that Betty feels sad in the

story and she would tell her "to say what she really feels and needs like she always does."* (supportive of Betty) She thinks that *Archie* comics will tell her about life as a teenager and when asked why she responded, "Because if you're like Betty you should be ready for some bimbo to steal your boyfriend." * She thinks her parents like her reading *Archie*. She also thinks that *Archie* comics are equally popular with boys and girls because "boys and girls are equal". She believes the characters to be like real-life people given their various personality traits. She thinks that "Betty likes *Archie* because he is nice and cute and Veronica likes him because Betty likes him." In response to which world she would prefer to live in she said, " It doesn't matter because they are almost the same." *

Ping is a grade seven student whose first language is Chinese (Shanghai dialect). She speaks English with both her friends and her family and is most comfortable in English. She started reading *Archie* at 8-9 yrs old. She reads a multitude of comics including some Chinese comics.* She used to read *Archie* but stopped because "I don't have enough time to read them." However, her friends read *Archie*. When asked how she would tell the sampler to a friend she wrote, " Betty tries to change the fairytale's characters (girls) so they wouldn't be wimpy. At the end, things go the other way!" * When asked about the last box she explains that "Betty is trying to console herself after Veronica steals *Archie* away"* (she picks up on the ambivalence). She believes that Betty feels "maybe foolish because she was wrong about it." * Her advice to Betty is to "try not to change things (critical of Betty). It's not always good. * She prefers the fairy tale version of Little Red Riding Hood because " I don't think kids would learn a lot of good things from the *Archie* story." She doesn't think that the comics will tell you about life as a teenager because they are too fictional. She doesn't think her parents like her reading *Archie*. She thinks that *Archie* are more popular with girls than boys because "I have not heard of one boy who likes *Archie* mags." She sees some of the characters as real life and others as "downright strange." Betty is her favorite because she's "cool, doesn't complain much and has a good attitude." * Reggie is her least favorite because he's "too much of a show-off and is stupid. He is evil." * Betty and Veronica like *Archie* so much because he's funny and nice and would make a very good friend. She prefers her world because "*Archie*'s world is too loopy for me. Sometimes I get confused reading it, but it's so funny that I have to keep on reading."

Eva is a grade five student who first language is Swedish. She speaks Swedish at home with her parents and English at school with her friends. She is 10 years old and reads *Archie* comics sometimes. She also enjoys chapter books. She likes mysteries because she likes "solving things." She thinks that Betty doesn't care that *Archie* has gone off with Veronica. Her advice to Veronica would be to go and tell her that those "old fairy tale characters are very outdated." She prefers the fairy tale version of Little Red Riding Hood to the *Archie* version because it makes more sense to her. She didn't complete Part C of the questionnaire.

Male ESL students

Badar is a grade seven student. His first language is Farsi and it's also the language he speaks at home. With friends he speaks English and feels comfortable in Farsi and English. He used to read *Archie* but stopped because he found them boring. His friends don't read *Archie*, either. He thinks that Betty feels sad because "*Archie* is going out with Veronica again." * His advice to Betty is to "take any help *Archie* gives you." * (critical of Betty). In commenting about the *Archie* and fairy tale version of Little Red Riding Hood. He prefers the fairy tale version because "*Archie* is not funny and it's not good." * He doesn't like that these comics tell you about life as a teenager and when asked why he wrote, " because I am going to become a person with more personality." * He thinks that *Archie* comics are more popular with girls than boys because he sees more girls reading them. He doesn't think the *Archie* characters act like real-life people. Jughead is his favorite character because he's cool and Veronica is his least favorite because "she is not a nice person." * He thinks the reason Betty and Veronica like *Archie* is because he is handsome. He prefers his world because "*Archie* world is goofy."

Davis is a grade seven student whose first language is Korean and it's the language he speaks at home. However, with friends he speaks English and is most comfortable in English. Sometimes he reads *Archie* comics and reads a comic called Dragon Ball*. His friends also read *Archie*. He did not pick up on the ambivalence of the last box in the comic strip. He likes reading *Archie* comic books because "it tells about the happenings when I will be a teen," yet in question 14 when asked "Do you think *Archie* comics tell you what your life will be like as a teenager?" he answered no, then wrote, "well, some of them will but not all of them." * He thinks *Archie* comics are more popular with boys than girls because "most of the stories are about going out with friends." *Archie* was his favorite character and Betty his least favorite because "she's to pride." * He thinks he prefers his world. " I think my world. I think I'm happy where I belong now. and I don't like *Archie*'s world. I just like reading it."*

Parry is a grade six student whose first language is Korean. He speaks English at home and with friends and is comfortable in both Korean and English. He reads English and Korean comics* and prefers Calvin and Hobbes. Sometimes he reads *Archie* and began reading *Archie* at 10-11 years old. He found out from a female friend. He would tell his friend that in the *Archie* sample " all the things are opposite" from the original version of Little Red Riding Hood. In describing the last box, he wrote, "Betty is the one who have to go with woodsman but Veronica go with him by pretending she is weak."* He thinks Betty feels good helping others (possibly missed the point) and would give her a cake* (supportive of Betty). He prefers the fairy tale story because " it is a very old story." *His friends read *Archie*. He thinks that *Archie* comics tell him about life as a teen because "what ever I do I am going to be a teenager." * He thinks these comics are more popular with girls than boys because "there are a lot more girls than boys." He didn't response to

question #24 *Which world would you rather live in - your world or Archie's world? Please tell us why.*

Mohamed is a grade six student. His first language is Persian (Farsi) but now he speaks English with both his family and friends. He is most comfortable in English. Sometimes he reads *Archie* so do his friends. In the last box, Mohamed wrote, "*Archie* sucks up to Veronica and Betty doesn't care." * Betty "feels fine because doesn't like *Archie* and feels sorry for Veronica." His advice is "never to go out with *Archie*." * He thinks that these comics are equally popular with boys and girls. The *Archie* characters are like real life people because "they sound really down to earth kind of people." Jughead is his favorite because he eats a lot and is funny. *Archie* is his least favorite because he is not fun and has all the exciting falls. He has no idea why Betty and Veronica like *Archie* so much. He thinks *Archie* is "so ugly." * He would prefer to live in *Archie*'s world because "whatever happens to you it doesn't hurt and you won't be scared of anything. Nothing matters in *Archie*'s world."*

Alfred is a grade six student whose first language is Cantonese. He is 10 yrs old and reads *Archie* comics sometimes. He feels most comfortable in Cantonese but speaks English with friends. He enjoys all kinds of comics including Calvin & Hobbes, Garfield, Tintin, and Pokeman Power (a Japanese-Chinese comic). He like to read mystery and adventure stories because of the action and excitement. He thinks that Betty feels proud in this story because "she thinks she knows everything and has too much confidence." He prefers the classic version of Little Red Riding Hood to the *Archie* version. He started reading *Archie* comics when he was 8-9 yrs old and found out about the comics through his sister. He likes these comics because they are funny and interesting. His friends do not read *Archie* comics and he doesn't think his parents or teachers like him reading *Archie* comics. He feels that these comics are equally popular with boys and girls. He thinks the characters in these comics are like real life people. His favorite characters are Moose and Jughead because they are funny. His least favorite character is Veronica because he considers her a showoff. He prefers his world to *Archie*'s world because there are some things in his world that he "really, really likes."

Female anglophone students

Mary is a grade six student. She reads *Archie* a lot and her friends also read *Archie*. She started reading *Archie* when she was 8-9 yrs old and heard about *Archie* from a girl friend. She re-tells the story almost verbatim and then adds at the end, " As *Archie* and Betty walk out Veronica comes and take away *Archie* as usual." * She thinks Betty is "pretty disgusted." Her advice to Betty is the following: "She should of acted helpless when the wolf attacked so *Archie* could've saved her instead of Veronica" *(critical of Betty). She preferred the *Archie* version of Little Red Riding Hood because it is more

realistic. She doesn't think that these comics tell you about life as a teenager because "they care to much about relationships." She doesn't think that her parents or teachers like her reading *Archie*.* She thinks that *Archie* comics are more popular with girls than boys because she never sees boys reading them. The characters are so-so like real people (sometimes yes, sometimes not). Her favorite character is Betty because "she's the most normal." Reggie is her least favorite because he's so self-centered. Betty and Veronica like Archie because " he's the coolest guy in there gang." She thinks that Ms. Grundy is a good teacher because she's really down to earth and understanding just like real teachers. Finally she prefers her world because "I like MY friends and family and that way life just isn't a joke but it has real meaning and the problems are not fixed in a snap of your finger." *

Clara is a grade six student. She reads *Archie* a lot and her friends also read *Archie*. She started reading *Archie* when she was 6-7 yrs old. She would tell her friend that the story was about Betty going into fairy tale land and telling the characters to get with the nineties. * "In the end Veronica comes as old fashioned little red riding hood (in a very short skirt) and takes *Archie* away as always." In describing the last box, Claire wrote, "Veronica takes *Archie* away from Betty who has out smarted herself." * She thinks Betty feels sad that it happened again and that she made such a mistake.* Claire would tell Betty to "be yourself and if *Archie* doesn't like it then find a new guy, Archie's not the only one." * She likes reading *Archie* as a "way to relax and get cheered up when I'm down." * She believes that *Archie* comics tell you about what life as a teenage will be because "*Archie* and the gang are faced with real life problems that almost every human is faced with." * She believes her parents like her reading *Archie*. She thinks that *Archie* comics are more popular with girls than boys because she knows more girls that read *Archie* than boys. She also believe the characters are real, "they look like real people and they live like real people." * Her favorite character is Jughead. In fact she has a six-foot cardboard figure of Jughead in her room (mentioned in questionnaire).* Her least favorite is Mr. Wetherbee because "he gets so mad and gives Archie detentions just for flying paper airplanes." Ms. Grundy is a good teacher because she acts like a real teacher, fun but hard. She prefers her world, " I of course would like to visit Riverdale but I am glad I live in the real world. In *Archie* world a piano falls on your head and they just walk away with birds flying around their heads. Our world has everything we need." *

Suzanne is a grade six student. She sometimes reads *Archie* comics as do her friends. She started reading *Archie* at 8-9 yrs old and found out about them from a girlfriend. In telling the story, Sarah writes "Betty went into fairy tale land and changed all the fairy tales to make the girls look stronger and more intelligent." * Describing the last box she said that *Archie* walks off in front of Betty when he was talking to her, with Veronica making Betty jealous. She thinks that Betty feels very sad and angry. She thinks that Betty should have "run up to *Archie* and Veronica and grabbed *Archie* from Veronica. Then she should have run away with *Archie* if she really wanted him." *(females have the power) *Archie* version of Little Red Riding Hood is more appealing because Betty make Little

Red Riding Hood much stronger, intelligent and better.* She doesn't think that the comics tell you about life as a teen "because she isn't into boys that much." * She also thinks that *Archie* comics are more popular with girls than boys since she has only seen one boy read them. She thinks that the characters are like real-life people because she "sees people doing what they do." Betty is her favorite character because she's athletic, she likes her outfits and she's creative. Reggie is her least favorite because he's mean. Betty and Veronica like Archie because the other one does (competition).* Suzanne's parents don't like her reading *Archie*. "They think they are garbage."* Mr. Weatherbee is a good principal because he stops anything bad from going on in the school. She would rather live in her world because "I think it is more exciting and more challenging... it is very fun and thrilling."

Alexandra is a grade seven student who reads *Archie* a lot as do her friends. She started reading *Archie* when she was 6-7yrs old after finding them in the store. According to Alexandra, Betty feels "very sad and probably wishes that she didn't say it! * Her advice to Betty would be "never to talk to a boy like that especially *Archie* in front of Veronica and other girls." * She prefers the *Archie* story because it is "so much more like nowadays." * She likes *Archie* stories because they have morals. * She thinks that they tell you about life as a teen because she has a few friends in high school and she knows. She thinks teachers like her reading *Archie* comics. She thinks they are more popular with girls than boys because "Boys don't read it as much as <u>we</u> girls do!" * The characters are real. "It's an ordinary teenage life." Betty is her favorite character because she is quiet and she likes reading about her fantasies. Midge is her least favorite character because she is so bossy to Moose around the boys. * Betty and Veronica like Archie because he's cute and they think he's handsome. Mr. Weatherbee is a good principal because "he is very humorous! Also sometimes he tries to act a teenager at school rather than being." Ms. Grundy is a good teacher because "she is the type who really wants kids to learn." * She prefers her world: "its more real to me, and more understanding in different ways. But sometimes I prefer a bit of *Archie*'s world put in, because everybody likes each other." *

Katherine is a grade five student. She is 10 yrs old and reads *Archie* comics a lot. She also enjoys chapter books and reads most days. She likes mysteries and true stories in particular. She reads at school for fun during her free time. She felt that Betty was stressed out in the story, Fairy Tale Land Revisited, by telling everybody what to do. Her advice to Betty would be to let the fairy tale characters figure out their own problems. She prefers the *Archie* version of Little Red Riding Hood to the classic version. She started reading *Archie* comics when she was 8-9 yrs old and found out about the comics through a girlfriend. She likes *Archie* comics because they are funny and she likes the characters. Her friends also read *Archie* comics. She thinks that these comics will tell her about what life will be like as a teenager because they deal with some of the problems in life. Her parents like her reading *Archie* comics but she is not sure about her teacher. She thinks that *Archie* comics are equally popular with boys and girls because of the content of the comics. Her favorite character is Betty because she is smart and nice. Her least favorite

character is Reggie because he is very self-centered. She would prefer to live in her world than in *Archie*'s world because she feels that her world is easier than theirs sometimes.

Male anglophone students

Todd is a grade six student who sometime reads *Archie* as do his friends. He started reading *Archie* when he was 8-9 yrs old. He describes the story as a mixed up fairy tale. * Tom misses the ambivalence of the last box. He thinks that *Archie* comics tell kids about life as a teen because "they have the same kind of problems as us." * He believes that these comics are more popular with girls than boys. Jughead's his favorite because he'll eat anything, and Reggie is his least favorite because he taunts *Archie*.* Parents may be important in the "way that they [the kids] have limits." * Todd prefers our world because "there are some kinds of rules." *

Ned is a grade six student who reads *Archie* a lot. His friends also read *Archie*. He started reading *Archie* when he was 6-7 yrs old and found out about the comics from his mother. He doesn't think they tell him about life as a teenager; nor does he think the characters like real-life people because "its a comic book not real life." He believes these comics to be equally popular amongst boys and girls because they "are good for every body." * Jughead is his favorite character because "I like the food that he eats and I think he's funny." Reggie is his least favorite because "he is a snob." Both Mr. Weatherbee and Ms. Grundy get favorable ratings because they are both nice. Ned would rather live in his world because "there world is a comic book."

Dylan is a grade seven student. He sometimes reads *Archie*, but his friends don't.* He started reading *Archie* when he was 10-11 yrs old and reads them at his orthodontist's office. He would tell the story to a friend first by explaining that Betty goes through fairy tale stories and rhymes that "make girls look like sissies" * but in the end she uses "karate" on the wolf. He seems to miss the point about the last box, but when asked about how Betty feels he comments, " sad, and wishing she had said she needed him." * His advice is quite supportive: " Drop *Archie*, and find a new boyfriend." * He likes the *Archie* comics because they're funny and a lot of them have morals.* He doesn't think that these comics tell you about life as a teen because " I don't live that kind of life." * His parents like him reading *Archie*. He thinks that *Archie* comics are equally popular with boys and girls because he has seen both reading them. He believes that the character do and don't seem like real life people. " Yes, because they do real-life things in a real-life setting. No, because they talk about things and make things that are not real." Jughead is his favorite character because both he and Jughead like eating. Reggie is his least favorite because he's a bully and Dylan hates bullies.* He prefers his world and writes, "I have everything I need; a good house, a great family, my health, and a good life."

Dean is a grade six student who reads *Archie* a lot. His friends also read *Archie*. He started reading *Archie* when he was 6-7 yrs old and found out about them from a male friend. In describing the last box he said "Because Veronica acted week *Archie* helped her." * He thinks Betty feels sad because the woodsman went with Veronica. He doesn't think that *Archie* comics tell you about life as a teen because lots of it is unrealistic. He doesn't think the character are real either because "people don't act like them." He thinks that *Archie* is equally popular with boys and girls because lots of his male friends and female friends like *Archie*. Reggie is his favorite character because he's cool.* Moose is his least favorite because he's mean. * Betty and Veronica like Archie because he's cool (common theme). Ms. Grundy's not a good teacher because she's mean. * Dean would rather live in *Archie*'s world: "it is neat to live in a comic book." *

John is a grade six who reads *Archie* comics sometimes. He is 10 yrs old. He reads about once or twice a month for fun and enjoys comics, especially the Avengers. He doesn't read for fun at school. He felt that *Archie* and Veronica were in love in the last box of the story. He thinks that Betty feels jealous and the advice he would give is to try and get *Archie*. He prefers the classic story of Little Red Riding Hood because it contains more detail. He started reading *Archie* comics when he was 8-9 yrs old. He found out about *Archie* comics through his sister's friend. His friends like to read *Archie* comics. He doesn't think that *Archie* comics tell you about what your life will be like as a teenager. He doesn't think his parents like him reading *Archie* comics, but he is not sure about his teachers' attitudes. He thinks that *Archie* comics are more popular with girls than boys. His favorite character is Jughead because he eats all the time. Veronica is his least favorite character. He doesn't think parents are important in the *Archie* stories.