

# Critical Literacy in Canada: A Systematic Review of Curricula and Literature

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Article abstract

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# *Critical Literacy in Canada: A Systematic Review of Curricula and Literature*

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## *Abstract*

Critical literacy is a pedagogy that serves to mediate social justice issues and educate for transformative social action. We present a systematic review of how critical literacy has been incorporated in Canada's provincial/territorial curriculum documents since the late 1990s and integrated in K-12 classrooms in the last decade. Our analysis shows that critical literacy has been addressed with varying degrees of explicitness in curricula among provinces and territories, and that there is an imbalance in the implementation of critical literacies in studies from the last decade. We discuss implications and encourage stakeholders in education to explicitly embed critical literacy into curricula and promote critical literacy practices in the classroom.

*Keywords:* critical literacy, literacies, equity, social justice, social action

## *Introduction*

Globally, news headlines continue to highlight the need to educate about and reduce societal inequities often associated with culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Additionally, headlines remind us of the dangerous echo chambers created when individuals and social groups (un)knowingly spread misinformation and disinformation. One pedagogical response to these matters is to engage in critical literacy practices that allow educators and learners “to undertake transformative social action that contributes to the achievement of a more equitable social order” (Janks & Vasquez, 2011, p. 1). Critical literacy pedagogies underscore ways of engaging and empowering learners from all backgrounds by equipping them with analytical and action-oriented toolkits to identify, challenge, and transform unjust and normalised practices.

## *Critical Literacy Practices*

A crucial starting point when engaging in critical literacy practices is to explore a variety of texts to analyse the author's *language*. Language, as Bourdieu (1991) explains, is not neutral, as it is an integral part of social life and a medium of power through which

people pursue their own interests and seek to sustain domination. Therefore, critical literacy pedagogies view language, texts, and discourse structures as vital means for representing and transforming the world (Luke, 2014). Teaching through a critical literacy stance prepares students to pay attention to language and power relations by critically analysing, among other aspects, the author's potential bias and intended message; the social groups represented, misrepresented, or unrepresented; the ways in which different social groups are portrayed; and the social groups that are likely to benefit from texts (Bainbridge, 2010; Janks, 2014; Lewison et al., 2002). This means that people use language to produce or critique texts, challenge inequitable and unjust social practices, and take actions that promote social justice (Freire, 2005; Luke, 2018). As such, critical literacy educators capitalise on language study as one aspect of engaging students in critical practices.

When teachers practice critical literacy, they create spaces to help students engage with texts. Lewison et al. (2015) suggest that teachers, along with their students, engage in four key dimensions of critical social practice which they frame as disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice. Critically literate teachers understand how such critical practices can impact their own classrooms and society (Comber, 2015; Janks & Vasquez, 2011; Lenters & Whitford, 2020; Vasquez, 2014). They understand the role of education in reproducing or disrupting social power hierarchies (McLaren, 2015). Eventually, they analyse their own social positions and power and use that power to prepare informed and justice-oriented citizens (Janks et al., 2013). Critically literate teachers design lessons informed by critical literacy principles to address issues of social justice by engaging students in exploring and discussing different topics such as discrimination, bullying, immigration, and hunger.

Critically literate teachers also employ student-centered approaches to facilitate classroom practices that can position students to analyse texts in ways that ask critical questions (Janks et al., 2013; Luke, 2018; Vasquez, 2014; Vasquez et al., 2019). Vasquez (2014) explains that teachers and students can read all texts from a critical perspective, asking questions such as:

What is the text trying to do to me? Whose interests are marginalized or privileged by this text? Whose account of a particular topic or issue is missing? Said differently, whose voices are silenced? Whose voices are dominant? Whose reality is presented? Whose reality is ignored? What are the positions from which I am reading this text? What experiences am I drawing from to make meaning from this text? (p. 4)

In critical literacy practices students engage in individual and/or collective inquiry. They read extensively, critically analyse texts, and reflect. They become not only analysts and cautious consumers of text, but also its producers. They use digital and/or non-digital media to “produce texts that matter to them in different formats and for different audiences and purposes” (Janks, 2010, p. 156). Students become more invested in their writing when they become producers of texts that inform their communities (Comber, 2013; see also Vasquez et al., 2019). Therefore, creating spaces for students to produce multimodal texts is an important aspect of a language arts classroom focused on critical literacy.

### *Unpacking Critical Literacies*

Our view of critical literacy takes into account the reality of information overload in this digital age. People are increasingly getting access to multiple sources of information in a variety of domains such as health and environment (Bawden & Robinson, 2020; Marques & Batista, 2017). Along with this access comes the necessity to critically analyse the credibility of sources (see Garcia et al., 2015; Polizzi, 2020) while identifying the purpose of and potential bias in the message. What this means is that individuals need to develop literacies in multiple areas; they need to become critically literate in analysing health and visual information. Therefore, as shown in the findings, we consider these components of literacy (e.g., visual literacy, media literacy) as part of critical literacy.

Given its role in challenging and transforming dominant and normalised sociocultural and sociopolitical practices, we view critical literacy as a pedagogy for social justice and life in a multi-media, socially networked world that needs to be integrated in curricula and practiced continuously. Janks (2010) puts it eloquently when she states that even in “a peaceful world without the threat of global warming or conflict or war, where everyone has access to education, health care, food and a dignified life, there would still be a need for critical literacy” (p. 203). According to Janks, even after succeeding in flattening the socially constructed relations of power, we still need critical literacy as we navigate our daily lives. From this perspective, critical literacy needs to be understood as a way of knowing, living, being, teaching, and learning (Pandya & Ávila, 2014; Vasquez, 2017a; Vasquez et al., 2019). As such, critical literacy becomes a culture where communities or nations engage in constant pursuit of equity, social justice, and democratic practices. Since sociocultural and sociopolitical issues and practices may differ from one national or regional context to another, critical literacy scholars (e.g., Lenters & Whitford, 2020; Luke, 2018; Vasquez et al., 2019) have highlighted the importance of context or place when exploring critical literacy in action.

Given the vast societal rifts and upheavals in the past five years, particularly in the ways social media has contributed to and reinforced disinformation and polarization in how we ‘read the world’ (Freire & Macedo, 1987), there is an urgent need for renewed focus on critical literacies and pedagogies in K-12 contexts across Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s calls to action for education, (racially driven) mass murders, and climate disasters such as drought, fire, and flooding coast to coast, for example, are among Canadian issues of concern for critical literacies. In this study we analysed what has been included explicitly or implicitly in English language arts (ELA) curricula in the past two decades, and what has been researched in the field of critical literacies in the past 10 years in Canada to map what has been attended to and identify a research and teaching agenda for what needs new or renewed focus in education for critical literacies at this time. In doing so, we answer the following questions: (a) In what ways do Canada’s provincial and territorial curriculum documents address critical literacies? (b) What empirical evidence is available on critical literacy pedagogies in Canadian K-12 classrooms in the 2010-2020 decade?

### *Method*

To answer the above research questions, we conducted a) a content analysis of provincial and territorial ELA curricula and b) a systematic review of critical literacies studies in Canadian K-12 classrooms within the 2010-20 decade. The purpose of these analyses was to build an agenda for critical literacy pedagogical research based on an understanding of how critical literacy was being understood and promoted (or not) in provincial and territorial ELA curricula and how teachers and researchers were taking up critical literacy in Canadian classrooms. We recognised that the actions of teachers and researchers may have been independent of the place of critical literacy in provincial and territorial ELA curricula, but viewed this as a starting point for establishing an overview of critical literacy pedagogical research in Canada.

### *Data Sources and Analysis*

Data for this study came from two sources: Canada's provincial and territorial curriculum documents and studies on critical literacy in Canadian K-12 schools. First, we searched the ELA curriculum documents of the ten provinces and three territories and conducted a qualitative content analysis of these documents based on specific dimensions of our coding frame (Schreier, 2012). Second, we conducted a systematic review of the literature, following Jesson et al.'s (2011) key phases of a systematic review: map the field through a scoping review, do a comprehensive search, do quality assessment, extract data, and synthesise data before the write up.

In the content analysis of provincial and territorial ELA curricula, our aim was to identify whether the curriculum document addressed critical literacies *explicitly* or *implicitly* or it *did not address* critical literacies. Critical literacies were considered to be "explicit" if the following terms were used: "critical literacy," "critical literacies," "information literacy," "visual literacy," "(critical) media literacy," or "critical health literacy." Critical literacies were considered to be "implicit" if we identified descriptions such as "students identify bias in texts," "students know that multiple perspectives enrich understanding and recognize that some perspectives may be missing in text," "students learn how language can empower them to make a difference in their personal, peer, family, and community lives," and "students develop literacies that facilitate an individual's ability to participate fully and equitably in a variety of roles and contexts." Where neither the terms nor the descriptions were present, we deemed the document to "not address" critical literacy. This content analysis served to inform our understanding of the prominence of critical literacy within provincial and territorial ELA curricula.

In conducting the systematic review of literature, we used the search terms "critical literacy," "litt ratie critique," and "Canada" in the Title OR Abstract fields of the databases we searched (e.g., EBSCOhost Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost Education Resource Information Center, ProQuest Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts, Journal Storage – JSTOR, and Google Scholar Advanced Search). This search took place between December 2020 and January 2021. This systematic review enabled us to review the studies of critical literacy practices taken up in Canadian K-12 schools in the 2010-2020 decade.

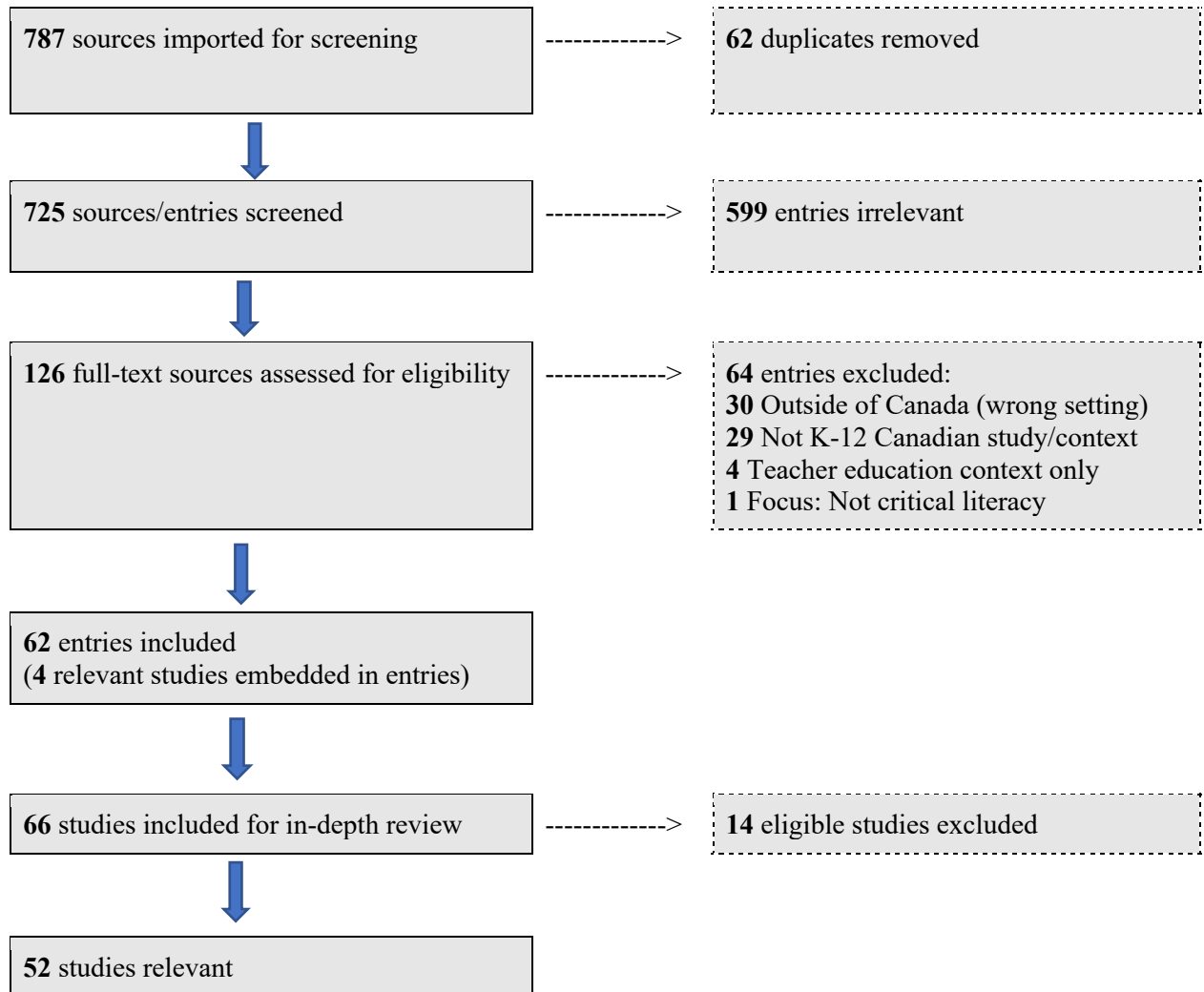
The search identified 787 sources or entries (see Figure 1) – including articles, books, handbooks, book chapters, doctoral dissertations, masters’ theses, and conference papers – that we imported into Covidence (Covidence Systematic Review Software, n.d.). The software automatically removed duplicates (N=62), leaving 725 sources to be screened. Within the software, we established inclusion and exclusion criteria for a title and abstract screening (see Table 1). A study was included if it were K-12 education in Canada, regardless of the subject area in which it took place, and centered around critical literacy in general or some aspects specifically (e.g., (critical) media literacy, (critical) health literacy, information literacy, digital literacy, anti-racism, decolonialization, social justice, indigeneity, citizenship, civic engagement, equity, diversity, inclusion, etc.). A study was excluded if the title or abstract indicated it was: not a K-12 Canadian context, teacher education or university context only (as such a study did not allow us to examine critical literacy in schools to inform agendas of critical literacy research in K-12 contexts), not related to the research question, or published before 2010 or after 2020. These inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured that we were capturing studies that were taking place in Canadian K-12 classrooms, whether with teachers, pre-service teachers, or the students themselves, and excluding those taking place in another country or just in the university classroom. The title and abstract screening identified 126 sources for full-text review.

Table 1  
*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
K-12 education in Canada critical literacy publication year: 2010-2020	Not K-12 context outside of Canada teacher education context only university context only publication year: before 2010 or after 2020

At the full review level, we read full papers, deciding whether the papers were IN or OUT of review and documenting the reasons for excluding papers (see Jesson et al., 2011). In this way we identified papers that we had included in the previous step because they appeared to fit the criteria and ruled them out upon closer examination. We excluded 64 studies for four reasons (i.e., wrong setting or studies outside Canada, studies not in Canadian K-12 context, studies in teacher education context only, studies whose focus is not critical literacy). Because some entries (i.e., books/handbooks) embedded multiple studies, the title and abstract screening resulted in inclusion of 66 studies that we extracted out of the 62 sources. Upon completion of the in-depth analysis, we found 52 studies relevant to the purpose of the study (34 articles, 7 book chapters, 5 doctoral dissertations, 5 masters theses, and 1 conference paper).

Other studies (N=14) eligible for in-depth analysis were excluded at this point for the following reasons: document unavailable, not K-12 study or context, theoretical or opinion paper, review of literature, or review of policy and curriculum documents. While we had excluded studies of pre-service teachers in the university context, we included studies that involved pre-service teachers collaborating with teachers or doing field work in K-12 schools. Our final analysis included studies from K-12 education in Canada, from all disciplines, and addressing critical literacy practices or investigations of issues of power and social justice.



*Figure 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Flowchart of Studies*

*Note.* Figure 1 is produced from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) generated in Covidence.

As shown in Figure 1, we included 52 studies in the systematic review (see References Included in Systematic Review of Literature). Next, we analysed data qualitatively using content codes (see Saldaña, 2021) to identify the emphases of the studies, the activities students and teachers engaged in, and the findings of these studies. To conclude the analysis, we coded for patterns and categorised the findings as synthesised in the next section.

### *Results*

In this section, we first present the findings from the content analysis to describe how critical literacy has been addressed (or not) in curriculum documents across Canada. Next, we synthesise the findings from the systematic review of the literature, highlighting the emphases of studies and the activities that students and teachers undertook to learn about or practice critical literacy. We also point to the ways these activities impacted student and teacher learning.

#### *Critical Literacy in Provincial and Territorial Curricula*

The concept *critical literacy* and other literacies appeared in Canadian curriculum documents over two decades ago. The Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation (1996), which established the regional English language arts (ELA) common curriculum for New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, prompted explicit reference to multiple literacies in curriculum documents (e.g., critical literacy, information literacy, media literacy, and visual literacy). Therefore, the concepts of these literacies are not new in the Canadian literacy education context. The content analysis showed that critical literacy has been explicitly or implicitly addressed in provincial and territorial curricula (see Table 2 for overview).

*Table 2*

Overview of Explicit and Implicit Mentions of Critical Literacy in Curricula

	NS	PEI	NB	NL	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	NU	NT	YT
Explicit	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			X			
Implicit								x	x		x	x	x

#### *Explicit Mention of Critical Literacy in Curricula*

As shown in Table 2, critical literacy was explicitly mentioned in eight provinces. This section provides an elaborated overview of the extent to which critical literacy was addressed in each of the eight provinces, which we present geographically, from the east to the west.

*Nova Scotia.* The common curriculum established by the Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation (1996) referred to critical literacy as “a tool for addressing issues of social justice and equity” and stressed that “critical literacy equips students with the



capacities and understanding which are preconditions for effective citizenship in a pluralistic and democratic society” (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, 1997, p. 157). It also provided suggestions on how to nurture critical literacy in classrooms. As a result, the respective Atlantic provincial curriculum documents emphasised these literacies. Later versions of Nova Scotia curricula, for example, maintained that “Students need explicit instruction in various aspects of critical literacy” (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013, p. 283). Of five curriculum documents analysed, all but one document discussed critical literacy explicitly. That one document, however, emphasised critical literacy practices such as examining texts through multiple perspectives and developing competencies in becoming responsible citizens and can thereby be included as mentioning critical literacy, albeit implicitly (see Table 3).

*Table 3*  
Nova Scotia Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Nova Scotia	Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture. (1997). <i>Atlantic Canada English language arts curriculum guide: Grades 10 to 12.</i>	x	
	Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2019). <i>English language arts P-6: At a glance.</i>		x
	Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2013). <i>English language arts 7-9: Guide.</i>	x	
	Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2013). <i>English 10: Guide.</i>	x	
	Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (1997). <i>English language arts 10-12: Guide.</i>	x	

*Prince Edward Island.* Prince Edward Island (PEI) contributed to the development of the regional ELA common curriculum guide which addressed critical literacies. As a result, PEI ELA curriculum documents released in 1997 and subsequent years incorporated critical literacies (see Table 4). For example, PEI Department of Education (1997) indicated that “critical literacy is the awareness of language as an integral part of social relations” (p. 157). Later, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2011) wrote that “critical literacy involves the ability to question, challenge, and evaluate the meaning and purposes of texts in order to learn how they are used to construct particular historical, social, cultural, political, and economic realities” (p. 76). PEI 2015 ELA

curriculum guides also drew on the common curriculum and highlighted aspects such as media and visual literacy, which showed how the province demonstrated the importance of critical literacy over years by incorporating these literacies into curricula.

*Table 4*  
Prince Edward Island Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Prince Edward Island			
	Prince Edwards Island Department of Education. (n.d.). <i>English language arts: Grades 4-6.</i>	x	
	Prince Edwards Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2011). <i>English language arts: Grades 7-9.</i>	x	
	Prince Edwards Island Department of Education. (1997). <i>English language arts: Grades 10-12.</i>	x	
	Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2015). <i>English language arts: Grade 10.</i>	x	
	Prince Edward Island Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture. (2015a). <i>English language arts: Grade 11.</i>	x	
	Prince Edward Island Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture. (2015b). <i>English language arts: Grade 12.</i>	x	

*New Brunswick.* New Brunswick updated its Grade 7 to 9 ELA curriculum in 2011. However, it still used its 1998 versions of ELA curricula for Grade 4 to 6 and high school. All the documents were developed on the basis of the ELA common curriculum and addressed critical literacy explicitly. The elementary curriculum, for example, highlighted that “critical literacy involves questioning ... taken-for-granted assumptions. It involves helping learners come to see that a text constructs and makes meaning of them” (New Brunswick Department of Education, 1998a, p. 176). Grade 7 to 9 curriculum also discussed how power is used in texts to privilege some groups over others and argued that “critical literacy addresses issues of social justice and equity in an effort to facilitate positive change” (Government of New Brunswick, 2011, p. 417). All of New Brunswick’s curricula that we analysed for this study incorporated critical literacy explicitly (see Table 5).

Table 5  
New Brunswick Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
New Brunswick			
	New Brunswick Department of Education. (1998a). <i>English language arts curriculum: Elementary 4-6.</i>	x	
	Government of New Brunswick. (2011). <i>English language arts 7-9.</i>	x	
	New Brunswick Department of Education. (1998b). <i>English language arts curriculum: High school.</i>	x	

*Newfoundland and Labrador.* Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) substantially updated its curriculum documents (see Table 6) and, similar to other Atlantic provinces, the documents discussed critical literacy explicitly. For example, NL Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2016a) argued that “critical literacy requires students to question assumptions and examine power relations embedded in language and communication” (p. 66). The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2017a) expected students to become critical text analysts able to question such assumptions from elementary grades. Its elementary ELA curriculum stressed that “Critical literacy involves questioning assumptions that readers often take for granted” (p. 98). By emphasising critical literacy practices throughout its curricula, NL demonstrated how it valued social justice and equitable practices.

Table 6  
Newfoundland and Labrador Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Newfoundland and Labrador			
	Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2017a). <i>English language arts 4: Curriculum guide.</i>	x	
	Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education. (2014). <i>English language arts: Grade 6.</i>	x	
	Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.	x	

	(2016a). <i>English language arts 7: Curriculum guide 2016.</i>		
	Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2016b). <i>English language arts 8: Curriculum guide 2016.</i>	x	
	Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2017b). <i>English language arts 9: Curriculum guide 2017.</i>	x	
	Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2017c). <i>Literacy 1204.</i>	x	
	Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education. (2014). <i>English language arts: English 2202.</i>	x	

*Québec.* Early Québec ELA curricula referred to critical literacy implicitly for both early and later grades (see Table 7). Québec Education Program (2001), for example, described that “no text has a single correct meaning” and that students must learn to recognise the meanings that others construct (p. 74). Similarly, the secondary curriculum emphasised the importance for students to develop an understanding of language as social practice. It discussed “the connection between the learner’s world and the social purposes that are served by language, discourse and texts” (Québec Education Program, 2007a, p. 85). Later versions of Québec curricula, however, addressed critical literacy explicitly, discussing the need for students to explore how power relationships are constructed in texts and how language shapes the ways information is presented. Québec Education Program (2007b), for example, described critical literacy in action and suggested “monitoring the development of critical literacy” (p. 7). It discussed how “critical literacy in SELA2 has been defined as reading the word and the world [and how] each of its competencies focuses on the connections between texts and the worlds of students” (Québec Education Program, 2007, p. 5). Québec was an example of the gradual integration of critical literacy into curricula.

*Table 7*  
Québec Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Québec	Québec Education Program. (2001). <i>Preschool education, elementary education</i> (approved version). Ministère de l'Éducation.		x

	Québec Education Program. (2007a). <i>Secondary English language arts, cycle one</i> . Government of Québec.		x
	Québec Education Program. (2007b). <i>Secondary English language arts [cycle two]</i> . Government of Québec.	x	
	Québec Education Program: Progression of Learning in Elementary School. (2009). <i>Progression of learning English language arts</i> . Éducation, Loisir et Sport Québec.	x	
	Québec Education Program: Progression of Learning in Secondary School. (2010). <i>Progression of learning at the secondary level: English language arts</i> . Éducation, Loisir et Sport Québec.	x	

*Ontario*. The previous versions of Ontario ELA curricula addressed critical literacy implicitly. For example, Ontario Ministry of Education (2000) expected students in Grades 11 and 12 to be able to apply critical thinking in analysing media. Subsequent curricula, however, explicitly introduced multiple literacies from early grades (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). Ontario Ministry of Education (2007a) discussed the importance of critical literacy, arguing that students needed to develop competencies in identifying bias in texts and taking transformative actions, as “critical literacy also involves asking questions and challenging the status quo, and [it] leads students to look at issues of power and justice in society” (p. 34). Integration of critical literacy outcomes into Ontario curricula demonstrated the province’s commitment to educate youth capable of challenging socially constructed structures within the province and beyond. The following table shows the documents that we analysed.

*Table 8*  
Ontario Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Ontario			
	Ontario Ministry of Education. (2000). <i>The Ontario curriculum, Grades 11 and 12: English</i> .		x
	Ontario Ministry of Education. (2006). <i>The Ontario curriculum, Grades 1-8: Language (revised)</i> .	x	
	Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007a). <i>The Ontario curriculum, Grades 9 and 10: English (revised)</i> .	x	
	Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007b). <i>The Ontario curriculum, Grades 11 and 12: English (revised)</i> .	x	

*Manitoba.* Manitoba ELA curricula released between 1996 and 2000 addressed critical literacy implicitly (see sample documents in Table 9). The newest ELA curriculum (see Manitoba Education, 2020), conversely, addressed critical literacy explicitly and was being phased in (K-8: 2016-2021; Grades 9-12: 2018-2022) to replace the 1996-2000 standards. It highlighted issues of social justice, equity, indigeneity, diversity and inclusion, and substantially referenced critical literacy scholars (e.g., Comber, 2001; Janks et al., 2013; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). The curriculum also underscored the importance of drawing upon students’ funds of knowledge (Moll, 2014), emphasising the need for teachers to capitalise on the knowledge and cultural/linguistic resources that students bring to the classroom to enrich learning experiences. Manitoba Education (2020) framed language and literacies as “symbolic socio-cultural systems through which human beings create and share meanings” (p. 5). Students needed to “flexibly and dynamically draw upon their ways of knowing, including their other languages, as they make and communicate meaning in English language arts” (Manitoba Education, 2020, p. 23). In doing so, students were expected to enact four ELA practices using language as sense making, system, power and agency, and exploration and design.

*Table 9*  
Manitoba Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Manitoba	Manitoba Education and Training. (1996). <i>Senior 1 English language arts: Manitoba curriculum framework of outcomes and senior 1 standards.</i>		x
	Manitoba Education and Training. (1998). <i>Senior 2 English language arts: Manitoba curriculum framework of outcomes.</i>		x
	Manitoba Education and Training. (2000). <i>Senior 4 English language arts: Manitoba curriculum framework of outcomes and senior 4 standards.</i>		x
	Manitoba Education. (2011). <i>Grade 9 English language arts (10F): A course for independent study.</i> Government of Manitoba.		x
	Manitoba Education. (2020). <i>English language arts curriculum framework: A living document.</i> Government of Manitoba.	x	

As can be seen, the shift from implicit use to explicit mention of critical literacy in curricula may take time. This means that the provinces and territories that currently describe components of critical literacy might have ongoing work on integrating critical literacy explicitly into curricula. It also implies that the provinces/territories that have not

done so may undertake the work of explicitly incorporating critical literacy outcomes into curricula.

*British Columbia.* Unlike different provinces that shifted from implicit use to explicit mention of critical literacy in curricula (cf. Québec, Ontario, Manitoba), British Columbia (BC) presented a new case. The previous learning standards explicitly addressed critical literacy, but the newest shifted to more implicit applications of it (see Table 10). For example, by discussing how “critical literacy promotes the view that texts are not neutral in intention or effect,” BC Ministry of Education (2007) stressed the importance of discovering how texts position us and becoming more self-consciously aware of the ways texts work to represent, give voice to, or silence different social groups (p. 20). The content of new learning standards, however, switched to descriptions of critical literacy practices. For example, students in K-9 need to be able to “recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts” and develop competencies in recognising “how language constructs personal, social, and cultural identity” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 25). Students must demonstrate their abilities to think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts. In Grade 10 to 12, students “explore the relevance, accuracy, and reliability of texts,” “construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world,” and “identify bias, contradictions, and distortions” (BC Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 2). They also explore ways to appreciate diversity. By shifting to more precise language – the doing of critical literacy – rather than relying only on the definition of critical literacy, the BC curriculum could be seen as actually making progressive steps.

*Table 10*  
British Columbia Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
British Columbia			
	British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2006). <i>English language arts, 8 to 12: Integrated resource package 2007.</i>	x	
	British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2007). <i>English language arts, Kindergarten to grade 7: Integrated resource package 2006.</i>	x	
	British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2016). <i>Area of learning: English language arts [K-9].</i>		x
	British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2018). <i>Area of learning: English language arts [Grade 10].</i>		x
	British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2018). <i>Area of learning: English language arts, grade 12 (New media).</i>		x

*Implicit Mention of Critical Literacy in Curricula*

At the time of this study, the curriculum documents we analysed showed that in two provinces (Saskatchewan, Alberta) and the three territories (Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Yukon), critical literacy was not addressed explicitly. We identified, however, elements of critical literacy in these documents. We present an overview of these findings geographically, from the east to the west, starting with provinces.

*Saskatchewan.* None of the Saskatchewan curricula analysed in this study addressed critical literacy explicitly (see documents in Table 11). The curricula, however, emphasised diversity, (in)justice, and social action. Both the elementary and secondary curricula expected students to become aware of the power of language. In secondary school, “students learn how language can empower them to make a difference in their personal, peer, family, and community lives” as well as the world in which they live (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 2; see also Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011). Curricula described how students needed to become socially responsible and engaged citizens who would contribute to their physical, social, and cultural environments to improve the lives of all people. Students were expected to develop literacies that “facilitate an individual’s ability to participate fully and equitably in a variety of roles and contexts – school, home, and local and global communities” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 4). These descriptions showed how different components of critical literacy were addressed implicitly in curricula.

*Table 11*  
Saskatchewan Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Saskatchewan			
	Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2010). <i>Saskatchewan curriculum: English language arts 5.</i>		x
	Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2008). <i>Saskatchewan curriculum: English language arts 9.</i>		x
	Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2011). <i>Saskatchewan curriculum: English language arts 10.</i>		x
	Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2012). <i>Saskatchewan curriculum: English language arts 20.</i>		x
	Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2013). <i>Saskatchewan curriculum: English language arts 30.</i>		x

*Alberta.* In Alberta curricula, critical literacy was not explicitly acknowledged, but the curricula highlighted outcomes such as thinking critically, appreciating diversity, recognising others’ perspectives, and becoming “active and responsible citizens” (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 1). Students needed to “respond critically to texts, by making



interpretations and evaluating ideas” (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 17). They were expected to examine the people and characters represented in texts and “develop respect for cultural diversity and common values” (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 1). Students were also expected to connect themselves to texts and their cultures and milieux and “respond personally and critically to the ways in which cultural and societal influences are reflected in a variety of Canadian and international texts” (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 27). In addition, students needed to be able to respond to texts creatively, visualising people or characters inhabiting these texts. With such desired outcomes in different documents (see Table 12), Alberta demonstrated possibilities for explicit mention of critical literacy.

*Table 12*  
Alberta Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Alberta			
	Alberta Learning. (2000). <i>English language arts (K-9)</i> .		x
	Alberta Learning. (2003a). <i>English language arts (senior high)</i> .		x
	Alberta Learning. (2003b). <i>Senior high school English language arts: Guide to implementation</i> .		x
	Alberta Education. (2006). <i>Knowledge and employability: English language arts 10-4, 20-4, 30-4</i> .		x

*Nunavut.* Nunavut schools used the Northwest Territories ELA curricula for K-9 since 2014 and “English Language Arts courses offered in Nunavut secondary schools follow[ed] the Alberta curriculum” (Nunavut Department of Education, English Language Arts, n.d., para. 2). Therefore, Nunavut curricula referred to aspects of critical literacy but implicitly. Given potential changes in Northwest Territories and Alberta curricula, Nunavut considered new directions, including establishment of a Literacy Framework that underscored that “Nunavut is a culturally and linguistically rich territory” and that “the Department of Education is mandated to provide an education that reflects this diversity” (Nunavut Department of Education, 2019, p. 9). The Framework stressed that schools needed to value the knowledge that students brought from their “experiences from their homes, the homes of Elders, the land, and diverse community activities” (Nunavut Department of Education, 2019, p. 18). It also highlighted the criticality of creating inclusive classrooms. Considering new directions with focus on students’ funds of knowledge, Nunavut showed potential for applying critical literacy. As can be seen in Table 13, most documents used for our analysis were from different provinces.

Table 13  
Nunavut Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Nunavut			
	*Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. (2011a). <i>Grade 4 to grade 7 English language arts curriculum.</i>		x
	*Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. (2011b). <i>Grade 7 to grade 9 English language arts curriculum.</i>		x
	*Alberta Learning. (2003a). <i>English language arts (senior high).</i>		x
	Nunavut Department of Education. (2019). <i>Nunavut literacy framework K–12.</i>		x

Note. \*Nunavut schools followed the Northwest Territories ELA curriculum for K-9 and Alberta ELA curriculum for senior high school.

*Northwest Territories.* Some curricula in Northwest Territories (NT) were informed by other provinces and territories, including Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Yukon. Although not identified as critical literacy, outcome 5 of ELA curricula included elements of critical literacy. The outcome emphasised that Canada is “a multicultural country” and “students need to value diverse ideas and show respect for various languages, cultures, customs, and beliefs” (NT Education, Culture, and Employment, 2011, p. 1). By Grade 9, students needed to be able to recognise and appreciate diversity, know that multiple perspectives enrich understanding, and “recognize that some perspectives may be missing” (NT Education, Culture, and Employment, 2011, p. 36). Therefore, teachers and students were encouraged to keep in mind the importance of the languages, cultures, multiple perspectives, and ways of living of different social groups when interacting with others and/or exploring diversity. The following table shows the documents we analysed.

Table 14  
Northwest Territories Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Northwest Territories			
	Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. (2010a) <i>English language arts: Learner Outcomes, grade 10.</i>		x

	Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. (2010b). <i>English language arts: Learner Outcomes, grade 11.</i>		x
	Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. (2010c). <i>English language arts: Learner Outcomes, grade 12.</i>		x
	Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. (2011a). <i>Grade 4 to grade 7 English language arts curriculum.</i>		x
	Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. (2011b). <i>Grade 7 to grade 9 English language arts curriculum.</i>		x
	Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. (2012). <i>Literacy with ICT across the curriculum: Guide to infusion.</i>		x
	*Alberta Learning. (2003a). <i>English language arts (senior high).</i>		x

*Note.* \*Northwest Territories senior high schools use Alberta’s senior high ELA curriculum.

*Yukon.* The Government of Yukon (2022) explained that “Yukon schools follow[ed] the British Columbia (BC) curriculum, with adaptations” (para. 1). Yukon schools started using BC’s new curriculum starting with Kindergarten to Grade 9 (in 2017-2018), Grade 10 (in 2018-2019), then Grades 11 and 12 (in 2019-2020). This meant that similar to BC’s latest curriculum documents, Yukon curricula referred to critical literacy implicitly. Adaptations by Yukon indicated aspects of critical literacy because they valued and promoted Indigenous perspectives through integration of “Yukon First Nations language, history, culture, and ways of knowing, doing and being into all subject areas and grade levels” (Government of Yukon, 2022, para. 3). The Yukon Department of Education (2016) expected students to recognise and appreciate diversity and develop competencies in recognising and identifying the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts. Students also needed to demonstrate the ways people construct multiple identities. As explained above, documents in Table 15 are from British Columbia.

*Table 15*  
Yukon Curriculum Documents Analysed

Province	Curriculum document	Mention of critical literacy	
		Explicit	Implicit
Yukon	*British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2016). <i>Area of learning: English language arts [K-9].</i>		x

	*British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2018). <i>Area of learning: English language arts [Grade 10].</i>		x
	*British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2018). <i>Area of learning: English language arts, grade 12 (New media).</i>		x

*Note.* \*Yukon schools started using British Columbia ELA curriculum in 2017.

As we have seen, critical literacy was explicitly addressed in eight provincial curriculum documents (Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Québec, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia). The other two provinces (Saskatchewan and Alberta) and the three territories (Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon) referred to critical literacy somewhat implicitly. The 2016 and 2018 ELA curricula of British Columbia, for example, did not use the words *critical literacy*. However, the content of the learning standards embedded critical literacy outcomes (see British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016, 2018). Curricular competencies in Grade 6, for instance, required students to “recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts” and “recognize how language constructs personal, social, and cultural identity” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, Grades K-9, 2016, p. 25). Recognising the profound significance of language is the result of critical literacy competencies that leads to an understanding that “language produces us as particular kinds of human subjects and that words are not innocent, but instead work to position us” (Janks, 2013, p. 227). Therefore, curriculum components such as those described above in reference to language and perspectives in texts indicated implicit inclusion of critical literacy, even if these outcomes were not labeled as such.

In this regard, explicitly or implicitly, critical literacy can be seen as included in the curriculum documents of all Canadian provinces and territories. It should also be noted that because the present review looked solely at ELA curricula across Canada, provinces in which aspects of critical literacy are taken up in other subject areas (e.g., Social Studies or Media Studies) were not identified. While outside the scope of this article, we acknowledge the immense importance of such cross-curricular inclusions in Canadian curriculum documents.

In some provinces and territories, curricula were being revised, and it remained to be seen whether the term *critical literacy* would appear in new documents. In cases where critical literacy (or its encoded description) was not used in newly drafted curricula, the new documents tended to be critiqued. For example, Alberta literacy scholar, Maren Aukerman (2021), critiqued Alberta’s 2021 draft of the ELA curriculum, arguing that it failed to incorporate essential components (e.g., critical thinking, digital literacy development, and attention to the diverse contemporary Canadian authorship). Given that the 2003 Alberta ELA curricula already highlighted critical literacy outcomes, requiring students to “respond personally and critically to cultural and societal influences presented in Canadian and international texts” (Alberta Learning, English Language Arts – Senior

High, 2003, p. 35), the critique highlighted a proposed movement away from critical literacy outcomes.

Now that we have reported on the content analysis, we turn to presenting the results of the systematic review of the literature.

### *Critical Literacy in the Literature Reviewed Systematically*

Fifty-two studies met the purpose of this study to answer the question “What empirical evidence is available on critical literacy pedagogies in Canadian K-12 classrooms in the 2010-2020 decade?” The findings suggest that most studies were conducted to a) engage students in multiple literacies using multimodal texts to raise their awareness on language and societal and global issues with expectations that students would eventually take action for a better society or b) explore teachers’ integration of multiple literacies into their pedagogies. Some studies addressed a variety of other pedagogical purposes such as examining students’ development of multiple literacies competencies, analyzing teachers’ critical practices with diverse students, or investigating the benefits, challenges, and possibilities of critical literacy pedagogies and democratic global citizenship education. Few studies examined teachers’ attitudes towards and conceptualizations of multiliteracies pedagogy or interpreted the portrayal of colonialism and Indigenous people in curricula and textbooks and evaluated the influence of media literacy lesson plans. Together, these studies shed light upon the critical literacy pedagogies in Canadian classrooms.

### *Activities in Studies Focused on Students*

In studies with students, researchers or teacher-researchers either assisted them in developing competencies in multiple literacies, or they investigated such competencies. Students used a variety of digital technologies such as iPods and iPads (see Pellerin, 2017) and software such as iMovies and Green Screen to create images and videos on various topics (see Begoray et al., 2014; Begoray et al., 2015). They collaborated and created short health advertisement videos, digital story units (Begoray et al., 2015), graphic novels, posters, and visual arts (see Begoray & Brown, 2018; Lau, 2012; Lau, 2020; Salter, 2013). In other projects, students created different kinds of books such as ABC photobooks (Lau et al., 2015) and picture books (Gwekwerere & Buley, 2011). In one study, students took photographs of their neighborhoods, which they analysed in class and created a book on the history of their neighborhoods (see Poyet, 2018). In Wilmot et al. (2013), Indigenous students discussed media-perpetuated health messages and created a culturally relevant critical media health literacy (CMHL) health education graphic novel. Students’ work served to construct and deliver ways of understanding health media messages.

Students learned about critically analysing the impact of media on health and challenging media stereotypes (Begoray & Brown, 2018), differentiating oppressor and oppressed in texts (Bennett, 2012), renegotiating relationships with Indigenous perspectives and knowledges (Douglas et al., 2020), critical inquiry (Lau, 2020), and the importance of criticality in curricula (Arshad-Ayaz et al., 2017). These activities with students appeared to address critical literacies substantially. As a result, students highlighted the benefit of participating in different activities, having social justice clubs in

schools, receiving guidance to explore diverse social issues from multiple perspectives, and being able to take actions for the betterment of their schools and communities.

In other studies, students engaged in reading multimodal texts, including literature related to multiple literacies, stories, historical comic books (e.g., David, 2018; Lacelle, 2012), and different sorts of poetry such as spoken word poetry written mainly by youth (Douglas et al., 2020; Lopez, 2011). In different studies, students completed a variety of activities related to the multimodal readings (e.g., role playing, novel studying, journaling, explaining, discussing, critically analysing and critiquing texts, and writing opinions, essays, and blogs on course websites). Relatedly, students developed competencies in evaluating and understanding media messages, assessing nutritional content of packaged foods (see Begoray et al., 2015; Truman & Elliott, 2020), and creating multimodal texts (e.g., books, videos) (e.g., Gwekwerere & Buley, 2011). They also developed social interaction and intercultural competencies as well as a sense of membership to school communities (see Gagné & Gordon, 2014). In addition, students demonstrated competencies in translanguaging to create new possibilities as well as analysing data and discourse (e.g., Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014; Burke & Hardware, 2015). Through questionnaires, writing activities, and/or interviews, students also expressed that they developed a better understanding of children's rights, gained confidence while expressing their perspectives, and increased their abilities to assess nutritional content of packaged foods (see Lau, 2015; Truman & Elliott, 2020).

Looking at other studies, students engaged in different stages of inquiry (i.e., planning, searching, and using information). In Lau (2020), for example, students read literature and undertook a yearlong inquiry into the issue of refugees through discussing stories of migration and interviewing students with refugee backgrounds in two languages while engaging in visual arts for deepened understanding and embodied reflections. Other studies suggested that students interview family members (see Pirbhai-Illich, 2010). In Pirbhai-Illich's study, students conducted critical literacy projects where they investigated topics such as Indigenous identity. The goal of the project was to "enable each student to interview a family member who had been in a residential school and write a recount text that would document the family member's historical and cultural experiences with residential schools" (Pirbhai-Illich, 2010, p. 261). Relatedly, students were to reflect on different literacy sessions and topics (e.g., their relationships to their lands) and engage in evidence-based reasoning and creative problem-solving.

In addition to their own inquiries, students were asked to participate in teachers' action research or other researchers' projects. They completed surveys and questionnaires, asked questions to the Elders of their lands, and participated in individual and group interviews in which they were asked, for example, about their multimodal competencies (Begoray & Brown, 2018; Douglas et al., 2020; Trigiani, 2015). Trigiani (2015) developed an eight-week project during which students brought devices (e.g., laptops, tablets, phones) to school (or used the school's computers), searched information, and blogged as part of a "take action" project that used a critical digital literacies approach to support an anti-bullying movement. Similarly, Begoray and Brown (2018) developed a six-week study project during which they taught students the principles of critical media health literacy. Douglas et al.'s (2020) study provided students with the opportunity to attend a guest

lecture, by an Indigenous traditional knowledge keeper, which they described as “a particularly powerful way for them to become personally connected and to work through disruption” (p. 317). As described, through different projects, students read and analysed texts, challenged certain practices, used digital technologies, created or produced different modalities of texts, conducted inquiries, helped teachers and researchers with projects, and reflected on different issues. Teachers also engaged in a variety of activities.

#### *Activities in Studies Focused on Teachers*

Some of the studies in this review focused on in-service teachers. As part of their professional learning about critical literacies, in-service teachers took part in professional learning communities (PLCs) and/or different kinds of projects, as either participants or co-researchers. These studies shed light on the learning that teachers did *about* critical literacy to make them better teachers *of* critical literacy.

In Ast and Bickmore (2014), teachers in the PLC met to “co-construct, compile, and disseminate promising principles and practices in critical global citizenship education” (p. 42). Teachers also participated in specific events on global issues (e.g., Lamoureux, 2020) or multiple-day workshops (e.g., Wilmot et al., 2013). Burke and Collier (2017) used teacher inquiry groups as professional development opportunities that “provided a needed supportive space where classroom teachers’ struggles were shared alongside their beliefs and pedagogical approaches so that a social justice agenda could be achieved” (p. 269). Teachers indicated the benefits of communities of practice where they addressed multiple literacies.

Different studies described various teaching approaches or practices such as incorporating Indigenous content into practice, approaching students’ bilinguality as asset, and co-constructing knowledge with colleagues and students through inquiry (e.g., Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014; Martel et al., 2018; Memon et al., 2014; Nardozi et al., 2014; Pirbhai-Illich, 2010; Priven, 2010). They outlined ways of teaching from a critical literacy perspective, which included connecting text to students’ lives, encouraging dialogue on critical issues, empowering student voice, sharing multiple perspectives, and inviting students to use their funds of knowledge. Findings also underscored, on the one hand, the positive impact of literacy interventions, university-school partnerships, and professional learning communities in implementing critical literacies (see Hughes & Laffier, 2016; Kapoyannis, 2018; Mady, 2019; Truman & Elliott, 2020). On the other hand, neocolonial ways of thinking and doing appeared to persist. Schaepli (2018) noted “the depth, and perniciousness of epistemologies of ignorance” which required “sustained involvement of First Nations, Metis and Inuit educators at all levels of curricular and text design” in Ontario (p. 80). Implementing critical literacies also presented challenges such as engaging students in critical discussions. Schaepli’s analysis showed the endurance of colonial modes of thought and how these hindered efforts to decolonise certain practices. Each of these studies highlighted the hope and possibilities with critical literacy pedagogies.

Teacher-participants in research projects completed surveys – e.g., survey on knowledge of Canadian children’s literature (Burke & Collier, 2017) – and participated in interviews where they described their own pedagogical actions or other issues (e.g., Higgins, 2011; Lau, 2015; MacDonald, 2013). In-service teachers also engaged in their

own inquiry. As teacher-researchers, they undertook collaborative activities or projects. They planned or co-planned and implemented lesson plans that integrated critical literacy. They taught various critical issues, including critical global citizenship (Ast & Bickmore, 2014), critical media health literacy (Begoray et al., 2014; Wilmot et al., 2013), historical and contemporary Indigenous issues (Hughes & Laffier, 2016), and the relationships between environmental issues and Indigenous perspectives on land (Douglas et al., 2020). The main purpose in these lessons was to engage students in critical literacy practices.

As teacher-researchers or teacher-participants, study participants assessed domination and power of the political economy (Lamoureux, 2020). They introduced units related to multiple literacies and engaged students in reading and exploring multimodal texts, doing inquiry, using digital technologies, producing multimodal texts, critically analysing multimodal texts, and discussing and reflecting on critical local and global issues (e.g., Begoray et al., 2014; Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014; Burke & Collier, 2017; Chambers & Radbourne, 2014; Higgins, 2011). Through exploration of different topics, teachers generated conversations about Indigenous ways of knowing while also reflecting on and articulating their personal conceptions of indigeneity (e.g., Memon et al., 2014). Teachers learned about ways of examining privilege as crucial step toward incorporating Indigenous perspectives into teaching practices (Nardozi et al., 2014), probed notions of perspective and difference (Pluim et al., 2014), and connected their beliefs with the principles of social justice (Lamoureux, 2020). Teachers demonstrated, to a great extent, competencies in integrating critical issues into their practices and facilitating students' critical learning.

#### *Studies Focused on Pre-service Teachers*

To a lesser extent, pre-service teachers working directly with K-12 students were a focus of some of the studies we reviewed (e.g., Ast & Bickmore, 2014; Gwekwerere & Buley, 2011; Hughes & Laffier, 2016; Kapoyannis, 2018; Nardozi et al., 2014). Gwekwerere and Buley (2011) reported on how pre-service teachers reflected on the way they were taught science before assessing science literacy trade books and creating picture books in collaboration with students in Grades 5 and 6. They explored ways to “enhance the development of critical science and literacy skills” (p. 36). In addition to the above, pre-service teachers wrote reflective journals, participated in literacy sessions and community meetings, and were observed by researchers. Despite some challenges for those without prior exposure to critical literacies, these activities contributed to teachers' integration of critical literacies into their pedagogies.

#### *Bringing the Curricular and Literature Reviews Together*

The curricular review revealed inconsistency in explicitness of critical literacy in curricula across the nation. The review of the literature revealed the benefits and challenges of integrating critical literacy in classrooms, and most importantly the knowledge and competencies that students and teachers develop when engaged in critical literacy praxis. Bringing the two reviews together allows for a comparison of the prevalence of critical literacy studies among provinces and territories and the potential connection between this prevalence and critical literacy in provincial and territorial curriculum documents. We provide an overview of this information in Table 16.



Table 16

Critical Literacy in Curricula and Prevalence of Studies among Provinces and Territories

Provinces and territories													
	NS	PEI	NB	NL	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	NU	NT	YT
Explicit	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x			
Implicit								x	x		x	x	x
Studies	0	0	0	2	11	26	0	1	4	5	0	0	0

*Note.* Three (3) studies, including two conducted with participants from multiple provinces and one anonymous (referred to as “central province of Canada”), do not appear in this table.

We found no critical literacy studies in seven of the provinces and territories, regardless of whether critical literacy was explicitly (e.g., Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, or Manitoba) or implicitly (e.g., Nunavut, Northwest Territories or Yukon Territory) addressed. Of the six provinces remaining, the comparison shows Ontario with the highest number of critical literacy studies – half of the total – followed by Québec. The curriculum documents in these two provinces also addressed critical literacies explicitly, which could indicate that teachers effectively implement curricula. However, there are also a few studies on critical literacy that were conducted in schools where provincial curriculum documents addressed critical literacy implicitly. This indicates that implicit use of critical literacy in curricula does not necessarily result in the absence of critical literacy pedagogy research and practice in K-12 schools. Taken together, this curricular and literature review paint a picture of critical literacy across Canada.

### Discussion

In contributing to international literacy education research, it is important to situate literacy research regionally as “literacy education is always a situated response to particular political economies of education” (Luke, 2018, p. 169). The content of Canadian K-12 curriculum documents showed that since the late 1990s critical literacy has been addressed explicitly in curricula for the eastern-most provinces in Canada and implicitly in curricula for the western-most provinces and northern territories. This disparity contributes to our understanding of the matter of context in educational practices and the related unsuitability of generalising educational approaches from one regional context to another (Luke, 2018). Yet, it may in the long run become one of the causes of variation in critical literacy competencies among Canadian students in different provinces and territories. The literature reviewed highlighted opportunities and challenges for critical literacy pedagogies in Canadian K-12 classrooms. Following from our findings, we now discuss these matters.

### *Why Explicit Reference to Critical Literacy Might Matter for Canadian Classrooms*

The connections between explicitness of critical literacy in provincial curricula and prevalence of studies on critical literacy in the classrooms may suggest that explicit integration of critical literacy in curricula has the potential to influence implementation of critical literacy in classrooms. Implicit use of critical literacy in provincial and territorial curricula, however, should not be equated with absence of critical literacy practices in classrooms because provinces and territories might simply miss indexing criticality in curricula. A few studies in this review were conducted in provinces where critical literacy was addressed implicitly in curricula (e.g., Kapoyannis, 2018; Lamoureux, 2020; Pirbhai-Illich, 2010). Additionally, researchers' activities in schools are not necessarily connected with or influenced by K-12 curricula.

Nonetheless, explicitness of critical literacy in curricula may help teachers notice consistency between provincial/territorial expectations, researchers' activities in classrooms, and professional development activities that researchers may offer. While Canada is a nation with multiple education systems, and therefore multiple curricula, new conceptualizations that ensure explicitness of critical literacy in curricula across the country would contribute to advancing the Canadian critical literacy agenda. The lack of explicitness in curricula may hinder teachers' investment in preparing students to engage in critical literacy practices or their ability to do so. It may also prompt contradictory assumptions on curricula: one promulgating an epistemology of social justice and the other reinforcing an epistemology of unconsciousness about critical issues that matter in the world.

### *Situating Canadian Critical Literacy Research in the International Context*

Research studies on critical literacy pedagogy and practice in Canadian classrooms had similar aims to those conducted internationally. The purposes of different studies were to raise students' awareness on societal and global issues and assist them in developing competencies in multiple literacies using multimodal texts (see Arshad-Ayaz et al., 2017; Begoray & Brown, 2018; Lamoureux, 2020; Trigiani, 2015; Wade et al., 2020). Relatedly, students analysed texts and explored ways to challenge socially constructed norms and engage in equitable practices. Such practices are likely to promote equity and social justice. One of the goals of critical literacy pedagogy is to educate youth to analyse information, identify bias and power relations, and engage in transformative actions that change the world for the better (Freire, 2005; Luke, 2018; see also Kaya & Kitooke, 2022). As Janks (2014) elucidates, critical literacy practice is a project of deconstructing oppressive ideologies and reconstructing a better society.

A significant number of studies explored teachers' integration of multiple literacies into their pedagogies (e.g., Ast & Bickmore, 2014; Chambers & Radbourne, 2014; Gambarato & Dabagian, 2016; Moorhouse & Brooks, 2020; Pirbhai-Illich, 2010). Teachers incorporated Indigenous perspectives and encouraged the use of diverse learners' languages, providing a few opportunities for translanguaging in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. From this perspective, teachers challenged monocultural norms of literacy practices and became responsive to the linguistic and cultural demands of the twenty-first century classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to increase such opportunities

for students. The need for and benefits of these inclusive pedagogies that promote linguistic repertoires, diversity and equity, and view translanguaging and multiculturalism/multilingualism as assets have been documented (e.g., Dagenais, 2013; Dressler, 2018; Kaya, 2021; Kubota, 2016; UNESCO, 2017). Therefore, the studies demonstrating teachers' integration of critical literacies are vital because they provide insight into teachers' understandings of how critical literacy practices may impact their classrooms and eventually society (Janks, 2014; Luke, 2018).

By integrating critical literacy into their pedagogies, teachers engaged students in the use of technology and inquiry-based practices (e.g., Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014; Begoray & Brown, 2018; Cleovoulou, 2018; Pellerin, 2017). Students examined and critiqued texts in different modalities on varied topics (e.g., bullying, immigration, stories of names, discrimination). They used tablets, iPods, iPads, and created iMovies, advertisements, pictures, photobooks, books, and other modes of texts, which demonstrated their technology and critical literacy competencies and their preparation for transformative actions. In this way, students became simultaneously learners and producers of texts and knowledge, which is another important goal of critical literacy pedagogies (see Comber, 2013; Janks, 2014; Knobel & Lankshear, 2004; Vasquez et al., 2019). In this context, Luke (2014) refers to critical literacy as “the use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of institutions and everyday life” (p. 21). As such, critically literate teachers and students demonstrate competencies in a variety of areas, including technology and text analysis and production.

### *Opportunities and Challenges for Critical Literacy Pedagogies*

We recognize that, besides the possibilities that engagement in critical literacy practices offered, teachers faced challenges in integrating critical literacy pedagogies (see Burke & Collier, 2017; Pirbhai-Illich, 2010). Pandya (2019; see also Comber, 2016) acknowledges the difficulties ahead for teachers and teacher educators integrating critical literacies in different spaces and places. This issue reminds us of the need for continuous professional development for in-service teachers and the responsibility for teacher educators to prepare critically literate pre-service teachers. With increasing diversity, the next generation of teachers need to demonstrate competencies in integrating critical literacy into their pedagogies before they get into their own classrooms.

To grow into an equitable society necessitates that people practice critical literacy locally. In this review, students and teachers engaged in critical literacy projects and activities that helped them make sense of and practice ways of challenging the sociopolitical systems in their contexts. These kinds of projects and activities are crucial because they help raise youth's critical consciousness. Vasquez (2017b) reminds us that when students engage in critical literacy practices from their young age, they are likely to better “contribute to a more equitably and socially just world by being better able to make informed decisions regarding such issues as power and control, practice democratic citizenship, and develop an ability to think and act ethically” (p. 8). Therefore, we concur with scholarship that encourages students' early engagement in critical literacy practices.

### *Conclusions and Implications for Research and Practice*

With this call for renewed attention to pedagogies for critical literacies in Canadian K-12 education, it is crucial to update curriculum content on media and other literacies and integrate critical and multimodal literacies across subject areas – along with explicit attention to how polarization of bias functions in social media. Curriculum documents create a foundation for supporting teachers' integration of pedagogies into their practices in different spaces and places. In the Canadian context, this systematic review showed the extent and varying dimensions in which critical literacy has been addressed in curriculum documents and practiced in schools. While a national critical literacy strategy would counter provincial and territorial power and responsibilities to design appropriate curricula that meet local or contextual needs, given the importance and global support for critical literacy pedagogies, it appears necessary to update some curricula and establish common goals and guidelines to help ensure that students in all Canada's provinces/territories are adequately prepared to challenge social injustices and inequities and transform the world for the better. Future studies could analyse what has or has not been done at a policy level by the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE), the EdCan network, and the Canadian Teachers' Federation.

We recognise that systematic reviews may not capture all the literature of interest available, and our search engine may have missed viable studies as evidenced by our relation to one of our articles that did not surface using the search criteria (cf. Lenters & Whitford, 2020). As well, given the variety of aspects related to critical literacy, the explicit language that we looked for on critical literacies and pedagogies in older provincial and territorial ELA documents may be missing in these documents, while it may be found in more recently developed curriculum documents such as social studies, science, and health. Future research could expand search terms as well as focus on studying other K-12 subject curriculum documents and related research for examples of critical literacies in action. This suggests the need for more interdisciplinary research in subject area teaching in pre-service teacher education. Also, given the catastrophic effects of dis/misinformation in the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, this indicates the need for collaborations between literacy researchers and researchers in the field of health sciences education to develop a research agenda for critical health literacy.

It is an understatement to argue that what students learn depends considerably on what teachers introduce to them. The kinds of challenges that in-service and pre-service teachers are undergoing in attempting to implement critical literacy approaches serve as evidence that critical literacy needs to be a vital focus of teacher preparation programs as well as a framework for professional development for in-service teachers. Achieving the goal of having K-12 students who can critique and transform socially constructed practices starts with educating pre-service teachers on ways of doing critical literacy. As Canadian classrooms increasingly become culturally and linguistically diverse, it becomes imperative to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to promote social justice by engaging them in deconstructing and disrupting institutionalised and normalised systems to transform taken-for-granted perspectives that reproduce colonial and oppressive ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing.

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