ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects that critical literacy instruction had on comprehension in a seventh grade reading class. Numerous studies have examined critical literacy instruction in the classroom, as well as effective methods of comprehension instruction; however, few studies have combined these two lines of inquiry. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to bring together cognitive and critical paradigms to examine critical literacy instruction in terms of its cognitive benefits.

The study took place in a seventh grade classroom in a racially diverse, urban school; nearly all students received free or reduced lunch. Twenty-two students participated in the treatment group, and 19 students participated in the control group. The treatment group received an hour of critical literacy instruction, taught by the researcher, approximately 4 days a week from January through May. This study implemented a single-subject design in combination with case study methodologies, employing discourse analysis, as well as qualitative and quantitative analysis of student assessments and class work. Data sources included the following: five researcher-constructed comprehension tests (two administered at baseline then every six weeks); a writing task administered as a pretest and posttest; five think aloud protocols administered to six students (two administered at baseline then every six weeks); the Test of Inference
Ability (TIA) administered as a posttest; a reading attitude questionnaire administered as a pretest and posttest; posttest interviews; daily video; classroom samples; and a research journal.

Repeated measures ANOVA of students’ performance on the researcher-constructed comprehension tests revealed statistically significant improvement in comprehension over time. Repeated measures ANOVA of students’ performance on the writing tasks revealed statistically significant improvement in scores of students in the treatment group over scores of students in the comparison group. Students’ responses in the think alouds revealed that students increased in their variety of responses over time; however no pattern emerged concerning critical literacy. On the TIA, mean scores of students in the treatment group were higher than those of students in the comparison group but the difference did not reach statistical significance. Results were mixed concerning students’ attitudes toward school literacy, although posttest interviews indicated students held positive attitudes toward critical literacy and its practice in school. Discourse analysis revealed students engaged in higher-order thinking and high-level comprehension during critical literacy discussions, suggesting critical literacy might act as a vessel for higher-order thinking. Overall, results showed promise for the possible benefit of critical literacy for comprehension.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my grandmother, Dolores J. Scott.

Without your encouragement, I would never have dared to do this. I miss you every day.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A project of this size is not the product of just one person. I would like to acknowledge and thank the people who helped me along the way.

I would like to thank all of my professors on my committee for their support and guidance. I would like to thank my advisor, Ian Wilkinson, for his mentorship throughout this entire process. I sincerely appreciate his high expectations for scholarship, as well as the vast amount of time he lent to both encouraging me and pushing me. I would like to thank Lea McGee. Without her mentorship, I would not have pursued the PhD. I am hugely grateful for her guidance and support. I would like to thank Caroline Clark for her enthusiasm and encouragement about my research—her encouragement came at a crucial point and helped me to keep going. And I would like to thank Mollie Blackburn for her support and encouragement as well. I greatly appreciate the time she committed to providing feedback and guidance, and I am grateful for the ways she always pushed me and helped me further my work. I would also like to thank Dr. Elaine Richardson who served on my candidacy committee. Dr. E has been hugely supportive of my work, was encouraging when I truly needed it, and has challenged me and asked the hard questions all along the way.

I would like to thank my friend and colleague, Maria, for trusting me with her class of fabulous seventh graders. And I want to thank all of the students at Westland
Middle School; I am extremely grateful for their willingness to welcome me as their teacher. Their incredible insights, their enthusiasm, and the way they challenged me was truly inspiring.

I would like to thank my many friends and family who have supported me throughout this process. Thanks to the Byrums, Joneses, Hodgeses, and Spriestersbachs. I am incredibly lucky to have such supportive friends in my life. Thanks to Rob Drewry and Sarah Iler for their support along the way and all our countless study groups. This would never have been written without you guys! Thanks to my family, The Scotts, for all the laughter that kept me sane. Thanks to Joanie Delph and Michael Love for always providing a sanctuary from the craziness and teaching me to find my own inner strength and peace. Thanks to my mom for always being my cheerleader and biggest fan. Thanks to my sister, Jess, for her support, humor, and love. And thanks to my dear friend, Hilary Brewster, for her endless encouragement, answering panicked phone calls, and for always being willing to help.

And finally, I would like to thank my husband, Nick Nelson. Without his tireless support, I would never have completed this project. My thanks for his love and encouragement. There are no words, sp.
VITA

2004 B.S., Middle Childhood Education, Miami University, Oxford, OH.

2004-2005 Middle School Language Arts Teacher, George Washington Carver Middle School, New Orleans, LA.; Crescent City Baptist School, New Orleans, LA.

2006-2008 Middle School Language Arts Teacher, St. Gabriel School, Washington, D.C.

2008-2015 Graduate Teaching Assistant and Graduate Research Associate, Department of Teaching and Learning, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Education: Teaching and Learning

Minor Field: Literacy
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................ ii

Dedication ...................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................... v

Vita ................................................................................................................ vii

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................... 1
  Rationale for examining the cognitive demands of critical literacy ............ 2
  Critical literacy as political, critical thinking ......................................... 5
  Present study .............................................................................................. 7
  Tensions within the study .......................................................................... 9

Chapter 2: Review of the literature ................................................................. 12
  Theoretical and historical foundations of critical literacy ......................... 12
  Tenants of critical literacy ....................................................................... 14
  Comprehension ......................................................................................... 16
  Critical thinking as a link between critical literacy and comprehension ...... 19
  Studies that link comprehension and critical literacy .............................. 23
  Pedagogies of critical literacy .................................................................. 30
  Use of popular culture ............................................................................. 31

viii
Discussion-based critical literacy………………………………………………..32
Critical literacy through the use of guided reading……………………………..35
Community-based critical literacy pedagogy.................................36
Critical literacy through drama pedagogies........................................39
Book-based critical literacy pedagogy...........................................42
Critical literacy through scripted curricula........................................44
Present study...............................................................................47

Chapter 3: Method........................................................................51
Participants and context....................................................................51
Design.......................................................................................52
Measures....................................................................................54
Think aloud protocols.....................................................................54
Researcher-constructed comprehension tests..............................57
Writing tasks...............................................................................59
Test of inference abilities in reading comprehension................60
Reading attitude questionnaire and student interviews..................61
Procedure...................................................................................63
Coding and analysis.....................................................................66
Treatment Group instruction......................................................73
Comparison group instruction.....................................................76

Chapter 4: Enacting critical literacy...............................................77
Setting and researcher positionality.............................................77
Westland Middle School............................................................78
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher positionality</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texts</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial resistance to instruction</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy discussions</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and intersectionality</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and power dynamics</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty and critical consciousness</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-initiated critical literacy</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy and comprehension</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 5: Findings** ........................................................................................................ 116

**Question 1:** Does critical literacy instruction change middle school students’
cognitive processes during reading, and if so, what is the nature of the
change ........................................................................................................................................ 117

**Question 2:** Does critical literacy instruction improve middle school students’
literal, inferential, or higher-level reading comprehension? .................. 129

**Researcher-constructed comprehension tests** .............................................................. 129

**Test of Inference Ability (TIA)** .................................................................................. 131

**Writing tasks** .................................................................................................................. 131

**Critical literacy class discussions** ............................................................................ 133
Question 3: Does critical literacy instruction influence middle school students’ attitude toward school literacy? What are students’ attitudes towards critical literacy practices?

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Findings related to question 1

Findings related to question 2

Findings related to question 3

Pedagogical implications

Limitations

Suggestions for future research

Concluding thoughts

References

Appendix A: Think Aloud Protocols

Appendix B: Researcher Constructed Comprehension Tests

Appendix C: Writing Task
LIST OF TABLES

3.1 Readability scores of texts used in think alouds.................................................................56
3.2 Readability scores of texts used in researcher-constructed comprehension tests........................................................................58
3.3 Summary of assessments..................................................................................................................63
3.4 Order of tests.........................................................................................................................................65
3.5 Categories for codes for scoring think alouds..................................................................................68
3.6 Think aloud coding examples from student transcripts...................................................................69
3.7 Percent agreement in coding thinking alouds..................................................................................70
3.8 Writing task rubric: comprehension..................................................................................................72
3.9 Writing task rubric: critical literacy....................................................................................................73
5.1 Means and standard deviation on the five researcher-constructed comprehension tests..........................130
5.2 Results of ANOVA of students’ comprehension scores on the researcher-constructed comprehension tests ..................130
5.3 Means and standard deviation (in parentheses) for writing tasks for treatment and comparison group..............................................................................................................132
5.4 Results of ANOVA of students’ scores on writing task......................................................................133
5.5 Higher-order comprehension displayed in class discussions.............................................................134
LIST OF FIGURES

5.1 Mean percentage of responses for categories of student comments across five rounds of think alouds.................................................................118
5.2 Mean frequency of inferences reported by students across five rounds of think alouds.........................................................................................119
5.3 Mean frequency of wondering questions reported by students across five rounds of think alouds.................................................................120
5.4 Mean frequency of clarifying questions reported by students across five rounds of think alouds...........................................................................120
5.5 Mean frequency of evaluations reported by students across five rounds of think alouds....................................................................................121
5.6 Mean frequency of commentary reported by students across five rounds of think alouds....................................................................................122
5.7 Mean frequency of connections reported by students across five rounds of think alouds....................................................................................122
5.8 Mean frequency of no response after prompting reported by students across five rounds of think alouds.................................................................123
5.9 Mean frequency of categories for baseline rounds and treatment rounds of think alouds.........................................................................................124
5.10 Frequencies of categories reported by Autumn during the first round of think alouds, prior to instruction.................................................................125
5.11 Frequencies of categories reported by Autumn during the final think aloud, after five months instruction.................................................................125
5.12 Frequency of critical literacy responses related to race, gender, and class across the five rounds of think alouds.............................................................127
5.13 Mean comprehension scores across five rounds of researcher-constructed comprehension tests..................................................................................131
5.14 Mean frequencies of students’ turns across 26 whole-class discussions.................................................................................................................143
5.15 Number of students participating in whole-class discussions.........................................................................................................................144
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Students are expected to achieve increasingly high levels of comprehension. For instance, the new Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA; National Governors Association for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School, 2010) emphasize high-level comprehension in its standards, requiring processes such as making inferences, analyzing themes, analyzing structure, determining the effects of an author’s purpose, evaluating arguments and analyzing validity of reasoning. Basic comprehension is a given; standards explicitly demand that children engage in higher order thinking with texts. Goldman (2004) claimed that this kind of high level comprehension is necessary in what she calls a knowledge society, saying “A knowledge society implies a world where, routinely, connections are made among multiple sources of information, choices are made about what information to ‘trust’ and what to question,” (p. 318). This requires schools to place an emphasis on literacy skills “associated with synthesizing, integrating, and evaluating the quality of information. These literacy skills enable critical analysis of information and constitute the cognitive activities of reading” (p. 318). Thus, in order to prepare students to meet the demands of our “knowledge society,” as well as to meet the ELA standards, teachers must work to engage students in high-level comprehension and critical thinking.
Clearly, there are high cognitive demands made of our students, as critical thinking and analysis become higher priorities in our national curriculum. Meanwhile, there is a pressing need for students to learn to critique and challenge texts in order to combat, or at the least, become aware of power at work in texts. Luke (1995) stated, “Written texts are not neutral, transparent windows on the realities of the social and natural world; rather, they...actively construct and represent the world…and they position the reader to read or interpret that possible world in particular ways” (p.106). In other words, texts are a part of our social and inherently political world. They position certain groups as “other” while privileging dominant groups and dominant ideology. Therefore, students must learn to uncover hidden ideology.

This means they must understand “what does [this text] do to me?” (Freebody & Luke, 1990, p.7). Luke (1995) argued that even a literacy act as simple and seemingly innocent as filling out a job application is laden with power at work, positioning the reader in ways he or she needs to be aware of. Thus developing a critical competence—an ability to identify ways in which language is used to position, privilege, and oppress—is a necessary part of reading and literacy. In other words, critical literacy, in addition to critical thinking, should be a part of any reading curriculum.

**Rationale for Examining the Cognitive Demands of Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy practice is an orientation toward literacy that could answer two demands—the need to increase critical and analytical thinking during reading, while simultaneously increasing students’ critical awareness of power at work. A great deal of classroom research has examined how students take on critical literacy perspectives in language arts classrooms (e.g., Lewis, 2001); however, little research has examined how
critical literacy practices affect comprehension. In the current environment, with heavy pressure for high stakes testing, teachers need to know that their pedagogy yields results. Therefore, in order for critical literacy to gain widespread use in the classroom, educators need to know its effectiveness regarding comprehension and critical thinking.

Scholars assert that in order for students to achieve success today, they must acquire advanced literacy skills that were not always necessary. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) claimed that in the 1950s, it was possible to obtain employment and achieve middle class status with little more than third grade level reading skills. However, that is no longer the case today. They stated, “Literacy demands have increased and changed as the technological capabilities of our society have expanded and been made widely available…America’s schools need to produce literate citizens who are prepared to compete in the global economy” (p. 9). This aligns with Goldman’s (2004) claim that we live in a knowledge society that requires individuals to be able to locate multiple sources of information and critically analyze these sources to determine what information is accurate. Like Biancarosa and Snow, Goldman claimed that advanced literacy skills are necessary for success in today’s world.

Educational policy has answered these new demands by increasing the sophistication of literacy required by national standards. The 2010 Common Core State Standards include standards that require higher-order, critical thinking. For instance, the seventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) standards include critical analysis such as: (1) “Analyze[ing] the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone,” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.4); (2) “Analyze[ing] the argument an author uses to organize a text” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.5); or (3) “Determine[ing] an author’s point of view or
purpose in a text, and analyzing how the author distinguishes his or her position from that of others” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.6). Clearly, high levels of comprehension are required to meet these standards.

As the Common Core reading standards demonstrate, adolescent literacy requires sophistication and critical thinking skills that move beyond what is required in elementary years. Lee and Spratley (2010) further explicated the specific demands of adolescent literacy in the content areas. They discussed the demands of literacy within historical texts, citing the need to carefully examine word choice, the author’s situated context and the consequence of her/his point of view, examining what is included and what is excluded, as well as seeking validation across multiple sources. In reading literature, they noted the need to understand rhetorical tools and how authors employ such tools and tactics to shape their fictional worlds. In science literacy, they noted the need for students to analyze scientific argument, and investigate how data were collected and if conclusions were logical (i.e. interrogation of cause and effect claims). Clearly, the content areas of middle and high school require complex literacy skills, and each content makes different demands of its readers.

Lee and Spratley’s (2010) explanation of the highly contextual, highly sophisticated literacy demands of adolescents is not new. It is what Lewis (2001) referred to as a situated social practice (i.e., interpretation). Lewis stated that interpretation is a “deeply social act” (p. xii). Moreover, she claimed that all interpretation (i.e., literacy) is ideological and social in nature (p. 10). That is because literacy is governed by institutions and power relationships, and all literacy serves a particular purpose and cannot be divorced from its broader social context.
One common thread amongst the demands of literacy in our “knowledge society” (Goldman, 2004), the ELA Common Core State Standards, and the content areas is the need for critical thinking. In *A Time to Act* (2010), critical thinking is defined as “higher-level thinking about texts that might include critiquing texts, making comparisons between authors’ points of view, and synthesizing information across multiple texts. Critical thinking is a skill that requires direct instruction” (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, p.79).

**Critical Literacy as Political, Critical Thinking**

If critical thinking consists of critique, questioning the author’s point of view, seeking multiple views across various texts, and learning to understand a message beyond its surface, then critical literacy could be considered a kind of critical thinking—a political, critical thinking. Critical thinking skills are applied in critical literacy to examine power at work—to scrutinize how a text positions the reader, whose story is told, who is privileged and who is silenced, who is “othered” and who is normed, if stereotypes are perpetuated or challenged. As Pennycook (2010) stated, “a crucial component of critical work is always turning a skeptical eye toward assumptions, ideas that have become ‘naturalized,’ notions that are no longer questioned” (p. 7). With this kind of “skeptical eye,” a reader might not only ask what arguments were made, but why they were made, who benefits, and or who is harmed. Critical literacy then, requires a high level of comprehension and a great deal of sophistication. It requires the high levels of literacy demanded by the Common Core and our so-called knowledge society.

But critical literacy also requires more than just cognitive, critical thinking skills. It is a way of thinking about the world. It is a move toward concern for social justice and
how others are represented. It is not only a skill that is beneficial to students in a knowledge society but a way to engage with the world. Gallagher (2004) seems to align with this thinking, promoting the idea that more than just comprehension should follow the reading of texts; he termed it deeper reflection. He claimed that deeper reflection occurs when readers “move beyond the text and consider its implications to them as human beings who live in the world today…we must answer the question, ‘We read the book—so what?’” (p. 20).

A way to answer the “so what?” Gallagher (2004) proposed is through critical literacy. Luke (2012) defined critical literacy as “the use of technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (p.5). That is, critical literacy is reading with critical thinking and in-depth comprehension, but with a “skeptical eye” for the ideology behind the text. It is also reading with a mindset that the world around us can and should change. Therefore, critical literacy brings a purpose to reading, a “so what” that leads readers to compassion for others and moves toward social justice.

Moreover, adolescent literacy itself presents its own set of difficulties, demands, and pressures. Curriculum demands have evolved, requiring high levels of sophistication. Testing pressures have increased as students not only must meet state standardized test requirements, but they must also prepare and succeed with ACT and SAT college entry exams. Furthermore, adolescents are learning their role in the world, negotiating personal relationships, as well as coming to terms with realities such as racism, classism, and sexism. As Warton-McDonald and Swiger (2009) noted, “As
students move out of the primary grades and into the middle school years, they not only encounter more complex texts and greater expectations for learning new content, they are also becoming more invested in their interests outside of school” (p. 514). These interests outside of school include their relationships. These interests also include the ways in which they are beginning to engage with a world replete with ideology and inequity.

These factors are difficult to navigate, and adolescents are struggling to meet this matrix of new demands, interests, and difficulties. For example, a national report states that in 2007, “only 31 percent of eighth-graders performed at proficiency on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), and score gaps between white and minority students have not budged since 2005” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2009, p. 1). Another national report claims that U.S. students’ literacy scores begin to drop in eighth grade, compared to fourth grade scores, and by the tenth grade, our students rank among the lowest in the world in literacy (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010). Biancarosa and Snow (2004) stated, “Some 70 percent of older readers require some form of remediation. Very few of these struggling readers need help to read the words on a page; their most common problem is that they are not able to comprehend what they read” (p.3). The picture here is clear; adolescent literacy is not what it needs to be. Our students struggle to meet the literacy demands placed upon them in middle and high school grades.

**Present Study**

In the present study, I propose critical literacy as a means to address the multiple demands of adolescent literacy. It is a form of literacy that requires nuanced, critical
thinking, and could help students and teachers meet Common Core curriculum standards. But critical literacy goes further, providing an opportunity for students to engage civically and compassionately with the world. As they prepare for adulthood, critical literacy can (1) help students become aware of both privilege and oppression, (2) help students become aware of how power is used for and against them, and (3) bring about opportunities for students to engage in social justice.

This study aims to bring together critical literacy and comprehension by examining what effect critical literacy has on reading comprehension. The current body of literature regarding critical literacy has not yet examined the consequences of critical literacy in terms of comprehension; nor has the scholarship regarding comprehension examined critical literacy. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate what cognitive benefits may result from critical literacy instruction; namely, how does critical literacy affect comprehension? Practically speaking, this is an important question since teachers are not likely to employ a pedagogy unless they know it will benefit their students’ comprehension skills as a result of the testing culture of education. Therefore, if critical literacy is going to be put to practice in the classroom, scholars need to be able to assure teachers it will benefit students’ comprehension. In order to do this, researchers need to examine what happens to comprehension when students practice critical literacy.

Thus, while current literature on critical literacy has documented how students and teachers take up critical literacy perspectives, this study examined the consequences of critical literacy practices for students’ cognitive processes during reading. There are numerous questions to explore. For instance, do students appropriate critical literacy practices into their independent reading? Does critical literacy deepen or improve
students’ comprehension? What happens to students’ attitudes towards reading in school when critical literacy is a part of instruction?

In order to address such questions, I taught critical literacy in concert with comprehension strategies in a seventh grade reading class in an urban, low-SES school. I employed various methods of assessments such as think aloud protocols, researcher-made comprehension assessments, standardized comprehension assessments, and writing tasks to track if and how students’ comprehension changed over the course of the study. I also used a reading attitude questionnaire and interviews to determine if and how students’ attitudes towards reading in school changed, and I video-recorded daily instruction and discussions in order to capture the critical literacy work of the students.

The present study addressed the following questions:

1) Does critical literacy instruction change middle school students’ cognitive processes during reading, and if so, what is the nature of the change?

2) Does critical literacy instruction improve middle school students’ literal, inferential, or higher level reading comprehension?

3) Does critical literacy instruction influence middle school students’ attitudes towards school literacy? What are students’ attitudes towards critical literacy practices?

**Tensions Within the Study**

This study addressed an important gap in the literature concerning critical literacy and comprehension. For the most part, the field has not addressed how critical literacy affects comprehension. Although there is rich scholarship concerning pedagogy and critical literacy, as well as analysis (mainly discourse analysis) of ways in which students
take up critical literacy in their own lives, there are few studies that examine the link between critical literacy and comprehension. It is not known what happens to students reading processes *cognitively* as a result of critical literacy instruction in the classroom. Although the way in which students take on critical perspectives is inarguably important, teachers need to know how effective critical literacy pedagogy is in terms of addressing state standards and the Common Core in the current climate. If critical literacy is to be used in the classroom, teachers need to know it is a pedagogy that will enhance students’ comprehension and critical thinking, in addition to fostering a critical perspective.

Yet, this approach is fraught with tension. Critics might argue that evaluating the effects of critical literacy is problematic because I am using measures that index an autonomous model of reading and applying them to an ideological model of instruction (Street, 1985). I do not refute such an argument. However, I argue that I am taking a pluralistic view of literacy. Literacy is both a cognitive and a sociocultural process; therefore, it is important to examine the cognitive, social, and critical dynamics. Moreover, whether or not a so-called cognitive or critical literacy approach is taken, power is always at work. Therefore, the Four Resources Models (Freebody & Luke, 1990) served as the theoretical skeleton of this study. Freebody and Luke make a concerted effort to acknowledge all aspects of literacy: the cognitive, social, and political (critical).

I recognize that I am taking a pragmatic approach. I assert that in order for critical literacy to gain traction in the classroom, educators need to know how it will affect comprehension and whether teachers can satisfy curriculum and testing demands through critical literacy pedagogy.
Finally, I assert that viewing a *critical literacy* paradigm in conflict with a *cognitive* literacy paradigm is a false dialectic. Literacy is not one or the other; it is both. As Luke and Freebody (1999) argue, literacy is a complex process. Their model, The Four Resources Model, is situated neither in a cognitive, social, nor critical paradigm. Rather, it is a model designed to be situated in multiple paradigms. Literacy cannot be conceptualized as either *this or that*. It is a cognitive process because it takes place within our minds. It is a social process because humans are inherently social, and literacy is a means with which to communicate. And it is a political process because power is always at work in any form of literacy. Although this study uses the terms *cognitive* and *critical* as though they are separate and separable, this is simply a result of the limits of language. This study is in fact, an attempt to marry terms, paradigms, pedagogy, and research.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I review the literature on critical literacy, comprehension, and pedagogy. I first introduce the theoretical foundations of critical literacy and tenets of critical literacy, according to scholars in the field. Next, I introduce a cognitive model of reading comprehension and argue that critical thinking is an important aspect of deep comprehension. Furthermore, I argue that critical literacy involves critical thinking; it is a political critical thinking. I argue that both critical and cognitive stances toward literacy are important, and that a model that incorporates both paradigms, such as Freebody and Luke’s (1990) Four Resources Model, is important to literacy instruction. I discuss a small set of studies that combine the cognitive and critical paradigms as well as various critical literacy pedagogies. Finally, I note the gaps in the literature that lead to the present study.

Theoretical and Historical Foundations of Critical Literacy

Luke (2012) defined critical literacy as “an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological, and sociolinguistic content of the curriculum. It is focused on the uses of literacy for social justice in marginalized and disenfranchised communities” (p. 5). Luke claimed the goal of critical literacy is to critique and transform ideologies and political systems. He cited Freire (1970) as the theoretical foundation for critical literacy. Freire’s view of literacy was grounded in
Marxism, and he critiqued the current system of education. He claimed schooling was based on a “banking model” in which students were viewed as empty vessels into which teachers deposited their knowledge. Students were passive participants, viewed as ignorant and devoid of their own knowledge base. Freire (2010) asserted that such a model of education dehumanized and oppressed students. As a solution, Freire proposed a problem-posing model of education. Describing this model, Freire stated

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught, also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which they all grow…The students—no longer docile learners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher (pp. 80-81).

Thus Freire’s problem-posing model involved dialogic teaching and learning in which students’ knowledge and culture are honored and valued, and teachers and students together critique their world. Critical literacy, in its current practice, embraces Freire’s call to reject a banking model of education in exchange for a problem-posing model. (Luke, 2012). Giroux (1993) asserted that this problem-posing model is a central part of literacy, claiming that literacy is about “disrupt[ing] and rupture[ing] existing textual, epistemological, and ideological systems” (p. 367). He asserts that teachers should organize their curriculum to enable students to question issues of power and privilege surrounding race, gender, and class. Shor’s work (1992) echoes the importance of problem-posing education, challenging teachers to make it central to their pedagogy. He emphasized the need to develop critical consciousness by examining how power is at work socially and historically, by moving beyond the surface of texts to uncover hidden
assumptions, values and stereotypes, and by challenging the existing status quo. It is this notion of problem-posing education that is at the heart of critical literacy.

**Tenets of critical literacy.** Just as literacy can take on different definitions depending on the paradigm invoked, critical literacy can also be defined in various ways. The following are core tenets of critical literacy.

One important tenet is the belief that literacy, regardless of how it is defined, is never neutral (Alvermann, 2006; Aukermam, 2012; Freebody, & Luke, 1990; Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez. 1999; Luke, 2000; Luke, 2012; O’Brien, 2001). By stating that literacy is not neutral, scholars argue that it is inherently tied to power and ideology. Luke stated that to understand critical literacy, educators must understand that all reading and writing is about social power. In order to engage in critical literacy, a reader must look for ways in which power is at work. Asking questions such as “Who benefits? Who’s voice is heard? Who’s voice is silenced?” is one way to look for power at work (Leland et al., 1999). A reader can also ask herself “What is this text doing to me?” In other words, how does this text position me? What ideologies must I accept in order to comprehend this text? (Freebody & Luke, 1990).

Another important tenent of critical literacy is that it is a kind of literacy that challenges stereotypes and/or tells counter-narratives with the hope for social change (Dyson, 2001; Harris, 1999). Rosario-Ramos (2012) asserted that counter-storytelling “requires the ability to identify and challenge the ways in which master-narratives contribute to the reproduction and perpetuation of inequality…Counter-storytelling involves…construct[ing] new narratives that represent and give voice to the experiences of those whose voices have been traditionally silenced” (p. 104). Dyson focused on this
kind of counter-storytelling in an elementary classroom she worked in, noting the important work of identifying stereotypes and constructing counter-narratives. She argued: “Surely that activity furthered children’s skills in interpreting, analyzing, comparing and contrasting texts...But most important...it provided children with a participatory forum...the children grappled with gender roles, beauty and race, and physical strength and power” (p. 17). Dyson asserted that it was the wrestling with issues of gender, and learning to see beyond stereotypes, that was most important in the children’s literacy learning.

Finally, another tenet of critical literacy is that it is problem-posing. This problem-posing stance is the crux of critical literacy. Again, this is engaging in a Freirian stance towards reading—one that seeks to problematize texts and subsequently the world. Problematizing involves asking questions or interrogating assumptions. For instance, one might ask, what values are communicated about particular groups through this story? Do I agree with these values? Or even, why does it matter that the princess is beautiful? Such questions problematize values and ideas that are often taken for granted and left unchallenged. Writing specifically about critical literacy, Mellor and Patterson (2001) concluded that investigating multiple meanings of the same text does not need to be the goal of critical literacy in the classroom. Instead, the goal should be to problematize texts and adjust initial readings, when applicable. This kind of problematizing (learning to see ideology and power when it is not explicit in the text) is a kind of critical thinking. It is learning to see what is unsaid and to make such assumptions visible in order to challenge them. It is a political, critical thinking.
Pennycook (2010) also supported a stance of explicitly teaching students how to recognize and challenge ideologies of texts. He claimed that widening participation by including histories and experiences of minorities is not enough; nor is teaching de-privileged students the essay-text genre, or any other privileged genre of reading or writing. Though these practices may be useful, and they may contribute to a more equitable approach in education, Pennycook asserted that critical literacy should center around teaching what Gee (19992) called a meta-discourse, a way of thinking, reading, and writing, that critiques ideology.

In sum, I am defining critical literacy as literacy that recognizes its own political nature, seeks to understand power and how texts position us as readers, challenges stereotypes and/or tells counter-stories, is problem-posing in nature, and critiques dominant ideology.

Comprehension

While early literacy learning, such as decoding, fluency, and phonics is often a focus in cognitive research in reading, many scholars, such as Pearson (2009) have focused on comprehension. Some scholars work to find a model of comprehension that explains what occurs in the brain as we read (e.g., Kintsch, 1998), while others have focused on the kind of instruction that enables successful comprehension (e.g., McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009). Regardless, the aim is to understand reading comprehension in order to better enable the teaching and learning of literacy. The literature on comprehension is diverse and expansive, with research starting in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century and continuing throughout the decades. Despite the vast scholarship on the
subject, a clear definition of comprehension is difficult to find. As Paris and Hamilton (2009) noted:

There are many definitions of comprehension, but little consensus, perhaps because the boundaries of the topic are so broad and so poorly marked. Reading comprehension is only a subset of an ill-defined larger set of knowledge that reflects the communicative interactions among the intentions of the author/speaker, the content of the text/message, the abilities and purposes of the reader/listener, and the context/situation of the interaction (p. 32).

As evidenced from the quotation above, comprehension is a complex process.

Sweet and Snow (2003) defined comprehension as

The process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning…figuring out how print represents words and engaging in the translation of print to sound accurately and efficiently (extracting), at the same time formulating a representation of the information being presented, which inevitably requires building new meanings and integrating new with old information (constructing meaning)” (p. 1).

Sweet and Snow go onto to acknowledge that comprehension takes place within a sociocultural context, stating that this context “both shapes and is shaped by the reader” and that the ways in which readers engage with texts are “influenced by, and in some cases determined by, the sociocultural context” (p. 2). Since a sociocultural context is never neutral, I would add that comprehension takes place within an ideological, political context as well.
One model of reading widely referenced within the field of comprehension is Kintch’s Construction Integration model (Kintsch, 1998). Kintsch and Rawson (2005) asserted that text processing (comprehension) occurs at different levels during reading. They emphasized that reading processes are highly integrated and orchestrated, but that these processes are not at the conscious level when reading is going well. It is when comprehension is difficult that the various processes become apparent. McNamara and Magliano (2009) explained that in the Construction Integration model, there are four sources of input which a reader may draw from (mostly subconsciously) during reading: current input (the sentence or proposition), the previous sentence or proposition, knowledge of the topic, and reinstatements from the prior text (though this is only a potential, not automatic source). During reading, these sources are drawn upon to make sense of text at the surface level (the text’s words and their syntactic relationships), the textbase (the idea units within the text), and the situation model (the ideas of the texts integrated with prior knowledge, imagery, emotions, and inferences). Key to the Construction Integration model is the concept of the micro and macrostructure. The microstructure is the local word meanings that come together to create idea units, and the macrostructure is the “global,” higher organization of the text. The concepts of the textbase and the situation model are also fundamental concepts of this model. The textbase represents the literal meaning of the text, but is a shallow level of comprehension, allowing for simple recall of the text but little else. For deeper understanding, a reader must use their prior knowledge and make inferences to construct a situation model. The authors describe the situation model as
A mental model of the situation described by the text. Generally this requires integration of information provided by the text with relevant prior information and the goals of the comprehender…One important fact to note about the process of constructing the situation model is that it is not restricted to the verbal domain. It frequently involves imagery, emotions, and personal experience (p. 211).

In other words, the textbase represents the most literal meaning of the text while the situation model represents the textbase plus prior knowledge, inferences, emotions, and imagery. McNamara and Magliano (2009) emphasized that these two levels, the textbase and the situation model, are not disparate processes occurring separately; instead they are integrated and influence one another. To relate this model to the current study, it is the situation model, or perhaps a level beyond the situation model, that represents the level of comprehension that students need to reach in order to meet expectations of comprehension. I argue that deeper understanding and critical literacy can only occur at the more global, inferential level of comprehension.

Equipping students to meet the complex demands of comprehension and grasp this deeper level of understanding is one of the essential calls for educators. Paris and Hamilton (2009) support this notion, stating “Making sense of printed words and communicating through shared texts with interpretive, constructive, and critical thinking is perhaps the central task of formal schooling around the world” (p. 32). This last aspect of comprehension, critical thinking, is one that bears further examination.

**Critical Thinking as a Link Between Critical Literacy and Comprehension**

Critical thinking, in the neutral sense, is an area of focus within the domain of comprehension. It is a process that, like critical literacy, occurs at the level of the
situation model or beyond. Many scholars who investigate comprehension believe critical thinking during comprehension is essential (e.g. Anderson, Chinn, Waggoner, & Nguyen, 1998). They assert that a vital aspect of reading is learning to assess the validity of arguments of texts, whether literary or nonfiction. In A Time to Act (2010), critical thinking is defined as “higher-level thinking about texts that might include critiquing texts, making comparisons between authors’ points of view, and synthesizing information across multiple texts” (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, p. 79).

Goldman (2004) claimed that due to the demands of knowledge society, children must learn to access, understand, integrate, and critique multiple sources of information for career success. In other words, they must learn to think critically. Goldman wrote:

Emphasis must be placed on a broader array of literacy skills and competencies, specifically those associated with…evaluating the quality of information. These literacy skills enable critical analysis of information and constitute the cognitive activities of reading. They make it possible for individuals to take a critical stance toward information they encounter (p. 318, emphasis added).

Anderson, Chinn, Waggoner, and Nguyen (1998) also argued for teaching students to take a critical stance towards texts in their model of instruction, Collaborative Reasoning. The authors asserted that by teaching argumentation explicitly, children will learn the “habits of mind” (p. 172) needed for making rational decisions regarding texts and ideas. Children learn this habit of mind when teachers pose central ideas, teach children to take up positions regarding the text, to evaluate and challenge each other’s positions, and to adjust their positions as needed. Such a model embodies the English
Language Arts Common Core standards (2010) and Goldman’s (2004) call for students to learn to take a critical stance towards information.

There are those, however, who argue that critical thinking alone is not enough. Pennycook (2010) asserted “Critical thinking is used to describe a way of bringing more rigorous analysis to problem solving or textual understanding…This [critical thinking]…can be broken down into a set…of rules for thinking that can be taught to students” (p.4). Pennycook acknowledged that critical thinking is valuable; however, he does not agree that critical thinking, when approached in this purely neutral manner, is actually critical. Instead, he adheres to a definition of critical derived from Critical Theory of the Frankfort School. In this sense of “critical” issues of injustice, power, and inequity are taken up. But in addition to being attuned to social justice, this form of critical analysis is geared towards interrogating ideology in order to truly wrestle with a topic. According to Pennycook, “a crucial component of critical work is always turning a skeptical eye toward assumptions, ideas that have become ‘naturalized,’ notions that are no longer questioned” (p. 7). With this kind of “skeptical eye,” a reader might not only ask what arguments were made, but why they were made, and who benefits (or who is harmed). Thus, Pennycook argued that educators must also explicitly teach children to become critical thinkers in a political sense.

Critical thinking is an important component of comprehension, according to Paris and Hamilton (2009) and Anderson et al. (1998). When applying critical thinking practices to texts, readers gain a more nuanced, informed understanding of the text. However, many scholars argue that readers must also practice critical literacy, moving beyond critical thinking by interrogating arguments to reveal the ideology behind them
(e.g., Pennycook, 2010). It is my position that deep comprehension occurs when both critical thinking and critical literacy take place. Because critical literacy requires the same skills as critical thinking—critiquing texts, interrogating an author’s point of view, comparing ideas across texts, synthesizing information, or interrogating an argument, I assert that critical literacy is a political critical thinking. And if critical thinking promotes deeper understanding of texts, then it follows that so too would critical literacy.

One model of literacy that embraces both the cognitive aspect of literacy, as well as the social and political aspects, is Freebody and Luke’s (1990) Four Resources Model. Their model recognizes the cognitive skills required of a reader and writer, as well as the social and political nature of reading. One role is that of the code breaker, a role that indicates a reader’s ability to utilize the alphabetic code. Additionally, a reader must also be a text participant, meaning he or she can engage with systems of meaning—using background knowledge and inferences—to comprehend the text. This role would require a reader to construct both a textbase and a situation model. A reader must also be a text user, meaning that he or she knows how to use a text appropriately in various social settings; this brings a sociocultural aspect to reading, recognizing that different contexts require different ways of using texts. And finally, a reader must be a text analyst, meaning he or she understands that all texts are written by authors with personal agendas and are rife with ideologies. This role carries the critical, political aspect of reading, requiring readers to investigate underlying values, recognize power at work in texts, and reflect as to how a text positions the reader. The current study aligns with the Four Resources Model, attempting to take into account all aspects of literacy—cognitive, cultural, and critical.
In sum, literacy is a cognitive, cultural, social, and political practice. Cognitively, readers must understand how to utilize the alphabetic code as well as combine their background knowledge with the text and make appropriate inferences in order to understand the meaning of the text. But because these cognitive processes take place within a sociocultural context, a reader must also learn how to use the text appropriately according to the context. Moreover, a reader must learn to examine the ideology within the text, problematizing what is written in order to recognize power at work. This involves not only critical thinking, but critical literacy as well. Therefore, literacy is a highly sophisticated cognitive process while it is also a cultural and political process. And when one reads against the text, questioning its positioning of reader and world, it is an agentive process that can bring about change—change in terms of the reader’s sense of self and world, as well as change in a social justice sense.

**Studies that link comprehension and critical literacy.** Though uncommon, there are scholars who bridge paradigms and perspectives when approaching literacy. The scholars in this section draw from various camps within both the cognitive and critical perspectives concerning literacy. I discuss work by Rogers (2002; 2007) and Rogers and Mosley (2006) in which Clay’s (2001) complex theory of the reading process is used in combination with a critical stance. I also discuss Rosario-Ramo (2012), who examined the correlation between comprehension and critical literacy. Finally, I discuss Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, and Degener (2004), who asserted that literacy is a sociocultural and cognitive process.

Rogers and Mosley (2006) bridged cognitive and critical paradigms in their approach to literacy instruction by combining a guided reading approach with critical
literacy. They noted the importance of bringing together frameworks of critical literacy and cognitive perspectives and recognized that this is rarely done. They called their approach “teaching for literacy acceleration within a critical framework” and focused on “developing flexible, strategic reading and writing in students’ zone of proximal development” while “attend[ing] to matters of power, justice, and race” (p. 465).

Rogers and Mosley’s (2006) goal was to implement critical literacy practices within guided reading groups, specifically to help students gain racial literacy and recognize their white privilege. Their participants were 10 white, second grade students. For reading and comprehension instruction, the authors drew from Clay’s (2001) theory of reading, which focuses on the simultaneous integration of word recognition, fluency, and comprehension to construct a self-extending system of literacy. The children in their study met in small groups, read at their instructional level, had running records taken, and the teacher addressed skills of decoding and comprehension based on the needs that arose during guided reading sessions. Additionally, the authors and teacher focused on the issue of race and white privilege, choosing books specifically for their opportunity for discussions and insights into racial issues.

Although developing cognitive skills in reading was part of the purpose in this study, Rogers and Mosley (2006) did not track the progress of their participants in terms of these cognitive skills. Assessments typical to the cognitive field, such as pre/post tests of comprehension, decoding, writing tasks, or tests of their approximate reading level were not used in the research. Instead, they focused on how their participants’ daily literacy evolved over time. Critical discourse analysis was used to examine the social and cultural ways in which literacy changed. At the end of the study, they concluded that
these children did in fact gain racial literacy as they utilized problematizing practices such as “questioning the author” or “noting absences and contradictions” (p. 483) to redefine whiteness and become critically, socially aware.

Rogers (2002, 2007) also focused on combining Clay’s (2001) theory of reading with critical literacy frameworks. In her 2002 study, Rogers worked with a group of African-American adolescents who met for a literature group conducted by Rogers. Rogers took a guided reading approach to these literature groups in that she used instructional level texts and focused on fluency and comprehension. But in addition to Clay’s (2001) and Fountas and Pinnell’s (2006) approach to literacy, Rogers also attempted to engage the adolescents in critical discussions about oppression, freedom, and issues of power. Rogers chose books well suited for critical literacy and attempted to engage the adolescents in critical responses at the societal level (as opposed to only at the level of personal response). Again, Rogers’ approach was unique in that she combined Clay’s cognitive perspective of literacy with a critical literacy perspective.

In a two-year study, Rogers (2002) analyzed the adolescents’ discussions using critical discourse analysis and concluded that the adolescents did engage in critical analysis, though it was difficult. Rogers asserted that the students were at the “edge of critical competence,” thus viewing critical competence as a continuum. These students were at the beginning stages of critical literacy, giving evidence of making gains in analyzing texts critically at social, systemic, or historic levels.

Rogers (2007) again combined Clay’s (2001) theory of literacy processing with critical literacy. In this study, she was teaching a masters level course for teachers working towards becoming reading specialists. Rogers realized she typically taught both
cognitive literacy instruction methods (focusing on comprehension, fluency, word recognition and so on) and critical literacy, but she did so separately, in two different courses. Hence, she set out to bring the two approaches together with this group of teachers, as they worked one-on-one with struggling readers. She used a case study methodology, relying on interviews, field notes, a reflective journal, and analytic memos throughout her research. Using inductive analysis, she selected one particular teacher/student pair as her “telling case.”

Throughout the course, Rogers (2007) noted that the teachers struggled more with the critical literacy aspect of instruction than they did with teaching for fluency or word recognition. Rogers noted a gradual progression on the teachers’ part into a practice of critical literacy. She called this initial progress the *emergent* stages of critical literacy, borrowing from the emergent reading perspective, in which it is believed there is no particular point at which a child is “ready” to read but instead, a child begins practicing literacy with novice attempts at writing symbols or demonstrating book-handling skills. These skills frequently emerge prior to entering school. Under the guidance of instruction, this emergent literacy becomes reading skills as the literacy knowledge the child has already begun constructing is applied to print. In the same way, Rogers’ teachers demonstrated emergent critical literacy practices—practices that were not entirely a truly critical, problematizing literacy, but practices that would lead to such literacy. For instance, a teacher began to use multicultural books for her tutoring sessions and asked her student to respond to issues such as racism at the personal level, whereas the ultimate goal of critical literacy is to respond at a societal level.
It is interesting to note that in all three of these articles (Rogers, 2002; Rogers 2007; Rogers & Mosley, 2006), the author(s) attended solely to the critical literacy aspect in the assessment of their research. In Rogers and Mosley (2006), and Rogers (2007), critical discourse analysis was used to analyze the discussions to gain a sense of how students interrogated ideology and issues of race. There were no reports or analyses of the students’ progress in the cognitive aspects of reading, such as decoding or comprehension.

Rosario-Ramos (2012) also integrated cognitive and critical perspectives in her research and drew from Freebody and Luke (1990) for her theoretical model. She argued that critiquing social structures and how they are represented in texts is a crucial component of critical literacy. Furthermore, she claimed that reading, and specifically comprehension, is an important part of this critique, leading her to the question of “what is the relationship between critical analysis and comprehension?” (p.177). Using think aloud protocols, she assessed both comprehension and critical analysis then applied correlation and linear regression to determine the statistical relationship between comprehension and critical literacy, controlling for reading ability. Essentially, Rosario-Ramos sought to examine how comprehension skills affected students’ ability to engage in critical literacy.

Rosario-Ramos’ (2012) study involved 19 high school students with varying reading abilities, and the text she used was modified to fit an 8th grade level of difficulty. Important to the current study was her finding that comprehension and critical analysis were highly correlated ($r=.714$ significant at the $p<.01$ level). Not surprisingly, she found a linear pattern emerged indicating that students who exhibited higher
comprehension skills were able to engage in more thorough critical analysis. Causal relationships cannot be generated from correlations. Nevertheless, if the higher order thinking that is required for critical literacy is taught specifically, it is possible that comprehension may also improve since the two processes are correlated.

Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, and Degener (2004) also attempted to bridge two perspectives of literacy—cognitive and sociocultural. At the start of their book, they defined reading and writing in a comprehensive manner, indicating it is a cognitive, social, and political process. They wrote

Print literacy is the reading and writing of some form of print for communicative purposes inherent in peoples’ lives. Thus, it involves decoding and encoding of a linguistically based symbol system and is driven by social processes that rely upon communication and meaning. Because it is social, its practice reflects sociocultural patterns and purposes as well as power relationships and political forces (p. 26).

In this definition, they recognized that cognitive skills such as decoding and encoding are necessary to read and write print; they also explained that these processes are socially constructed and have political implications. The purpose of their book was to examine why “some individuals are successful in becoming fully literate while countless others fail” (p. 1). They asserted that individuals are social as well as cultural participants and analyzed how social and cultural interactions affect literacy.

Throughout the book, Purcell-Gate et al. (2004) drew from a large study that examined adult literacy practices and adult literacy instruction. They gathered information from 271 adult literacy programs across 42 states, collecting data on classes
through class observations, teacher and student questionnaires, and student interviews. They coded the data and transferred them to a database for analysis using Item Response Theory. They found that the degree to which literacy activities in classes were authentic, and the degree to which power was evenly distributed between the teacher and student contributed greatly to students’ literacy success. They also found evidence that when literacy practices within classes matched literacy practices in students’ daily lives (thus making them authentic), adults were more successful in becoming “fully literate.” Like Rogers (2002, 2007) and Rogers and Mosley (2006), cognitive assessments, such as pre/post tests of comprehension, decoding, writing tasks, or tests of their approximate reading level were not used in the research.

Interestingly, this book focused on some cognitive perspectives of literacy as well as the importance of social context, but the political (or critical) aspect of literacy was not truly addressed. Towards the end of their book, they noted this absence, saying “We end with a final thought about issues of power and literacy practice. We have not dealt much with these issues in this book but have always assumed them as a backdrop to our discussion” (p. 171).

In conclusion, there are few studies that purposefully attempt to utilize both cognitive and critical perspectives of literacy. In the case of Rogers (2002, 2007) and Rogers and Mosley (2006), the author(s) very clearly brought together Clay’s (2001) cognitive model of literacy with a critical stance. However, they did not report the cognitive gains made. Instead they used critical discourse analysis or case study methodology to explain how critical literacy was taken up. Rosario-Ramos (2012) noted the importance of both a critical stance and comprehension and used Freebody and
Luke’s (1990) Four Resources Model to support her position. Using statistical analysis, she found that comprehension and critical literacy were highly correlated, and she concluded that poor comprehension was a limitation on the extent of a students’ critical analysis. In other words, if students were not able to comprehend at a sufficient level, they also were less likely to engage in deep, critical analysis of the text. This indicated that comprehension processes and critical literacy processes were correlated and influenced one another. However, because of the design of her study, a causal pattern cannot be inferred. Purcell-Gates et. al (2004) also positioned themselves as scholars who acknowledge the importance of social, cognitive, and critical aspects of literacy. They stated “[W]e begin with the commonsense standpoint of cognitive activity being shaped by and shaping the social world, and the social world shaping and being shaped by the cognitive” (88). However, their study focused on the sociocultural aspect, examining how literacy practices in participants’ daily lives changed due to participation in an adult education program.

These scholars all recognized that literacy is not simply cognitive, social, or political, but all of these things combined. They each have conducted research that integrated paradigms, and they used various methodologies to assess aspects of literacy. But what they did not do is present research that examines how critical literacy affects comprehension. It is this gap in the literature that I wish to explore.

**Pedagogies of Critical Literacy**

In this section, I review a literature regarding the use of critical literacy in the classroom. I attempt to organize the studies around similar approaches for implementing critical literacy. With one exception, I am not critiquing pedagogies, but am simply
examining the ways in which teachers and researchers attempted to engage students in critical literacy. Some studies involved multiple pedagogies and so could fit in numerous categories; my attempt is to categorize the studies according to the pedagogy that seemed to be most prominent. Therefore, the categories of pedagogies are not mutually exclusive. As a disclaimer, this is not an exhaustive review of the research. There are numerous studies regarding critical literacy, and I am presenting those that I have found useful in informing pedagogy and/or research. I have divided this section into the following pedagogical categories: use of popular culture, discussion-based approaches, critical literacy through guided reading, community-based pedagogy, critical literacy through drama pedagogy, book-based critical literacy, and critical literacy through scripted curriculums.

**Use of popular culture.** Alvermann and Xu (2003) advocated the use of popular culture in order to implement critical literacy practices. They defined popular culture as “everyday culture,” specifying that they see audiences as “understanding that media-produced popular culture contains images, sounds, symbols, and the like that appeal to different audiences in different ways” (p. 147). They asserted that benefit of using popular culture in the classroom is that it allows children to bring their interests and knowledge to the classroom and can be a way to implement culturally responsive teaching. Alvermann and Xu advocated the “reflexive” use of popular culture; that is, both allowing students to enjoy the popular culture texts while also teaching them to critically investigate values promoted in such texts. Their article documented various ways in which teachers can use popular culture texts to promote critical literacy and
language arts instruction, providing anecdotes from teachers’ classrooms as examples. They do not cite methodology or outcomes.

Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) also implemented the use of popular culture for literacy (and specifically critical literacy) instruction. Instead of popular culture in general, they advocated specifically using hip-hop texts in classrooms, juxtaposed with curriculum-required texts (or they call canonical literature). They worked in a 12th grade English class in a public high school in northern California. Their method for implementing critical literacy involved application of critical theories such as Marxism, structural theory, or feminist theories in order to problematize and analyze hip-hop texts. Not only did they make a case for the importance of students learning to critically interrogate hip-hop texts, they also asserted that students can then transfer these critical analytical skills to canonical literature. Again, this promoted a culturally responsive kind of teaching, allowing home and school literacies to inform one another. It also allowed students to learn the difficult practice of critical analysis in a familiar genre, before transferring it to the sometimes unfamiliar genre of canonical texts. In this particular article, the focus was on sharing their pedagogical approach; they did not cite research methodology or outcomes.

Discussion-based critical literacy. The following studies focus on discussion-based approaches to critical literacy in the classroom. By discussion-based, I mean pedagogies that focus on facilitating discussion that bring about high levels of student engagement, privileging students’ voices (even if it is a teacher-led discussion), and disrupting the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) format so common in classrooms.
Wilkinson and Son (2011) give theoretical support to discussion-based approaches for literacy instruction (though not critical literacy instruction) by stating:

From a sociocognitive perspective, discussion enables students to make public their perspectives on issues arising from the text, consider alterative perspectives proposed by peers, and attempt to reconcile conflicts among opposing points of view (Almasi, 1995). From a sociocultural perspective, discussion enables students to co-construct knowledge and understandings about the text and internalize ways of thinking that foster the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to transfer to the reading of new texts (Wells, 2007). And from a dialogic prospective, the tension and conflict between relative perspectives and competing voices in discussion about a text helps shape the discourse and students’ comprehension (Nystrand, 2006).

The authors in this section draw from one or several of the above perspectives; all seek to use discussion to further students’ literacy.

Aukerman (2012) advocated a dialogic, discussion-based approach to critical literacy. She promoted what she called a “critically literate reader” through the “unruly ‘unfolding of social heteroglossia’ (Baktin, 1981, p. 278)” (p. 46). But it was not simply the multiple students’ voices emerging in a conversation that Aukerman promoted, but students’ critical analysis of the perspectives presented in discussions and texts. She gave examples of discussions that exemplified pitfalls common to critical literacy discussions, as well as an example of a discussion she argued moved towards “Critical Literacy as dialogic engagement” (p. 46). This was a theoretical essay in Theory into
that focused on the kinds of discussions that teachers should strive for; she did not report results of an empirical study.

Lewis (2001) documented the use of critical literacy instruction through teacher and peer-led discussions. Using a case study design, her study took place in a 4th/5th multi-grade classroom for the academic year. The teacher conducted whole-class discussions in which she posed critical questions and pushed students to problematize the texts they read. Additionally, the teacher set up literature groups, and Lewis also documented the small group, peer-led discussions as well as the whole class discussions. Her analysis revealed that while there were some examples in which students critically problematized texts in their peer-led groups, generally, students did not transfer their critical analysis from the teacher-led, whole-class discussions to their small-group discussions. But critical analysis did take place with the teacher’s guidance during whole-class discussions.

Lewis (2001) also noted the “gendered” ways in which children read, noting the influence of culture and media on children’s book choices. For instance, girls in the class liked R.L. Stine books in which the girl is frequently in danger and the male lead rescues her. Meanwhile, boys often gravitated to books with violence. However, there were some instances in which students resisted these gender stereotypes. For instance, when asked why she thought the female characters were so often killed in R.L. Stine’s books, a girl said she thought perhaps the author was sexist, adding, “I think maybe they like to show the male as being more the hero or something…the boyfriend always comes, and, like, rescues the girl in the end” (168). Thus Lewis (2001) revealed that fourth and fifth
grade students can engage in critical analysis of texts; however, they were more likely to do so under the guidance of the teacher, or when probed by the researcher.

Lewis (1998), using the same data presented in her book, focused on two students as case studies. In these discussions, Lewis provided examples of students’ challenging sexism and problematizing a text without the teacher’s guidance. While reading *Number the Stars*, some students in a small-group noted that it was especially tragic that a character died because her death occurred right before the character’s wedding. Nikki, one of the case study students, asserted that a girl dying is tragic in and of itself—the fact Lise (the character) died right before her wedding did not make her death more tragic. In this argument, Nikki was challenging a cultural value that promotes the idea that the day of a woman’s wedding is the pinnacle moment of her life. In another discussion regarding a book about the Revolutionary War, the same girl brought up the idea that the Redcoats were not necessarily bad but that the students viewed them as evil because the students themselves were Americans. Nikki noted that the Redcoats probably felt justified in their reasons for fighting, just as the Americans did. Here again, Lewis provided an example of a student problematizing values and a text without the guidance of a teacher.

**Critical literacy through the use of guided reading.** Fountas and Pinnell (2006) defined guided reading as “an instructional approach in which you bring together a small group of students who are similar enough in their reading development that they can be taught together for a period of time” (p. 373). The purpose of guided reading is to explicitly teach students the comprehension, decoding, and fluency skills needed as they read increasingly difficult texts. Fountas and Pinnell’s (2006) model of guided reading is
based on Clay’s (2001) theory of reading, in which reading is viewed as a complex process, involving multiple systems of knowledge that are applied flexibly as children make progress in reading. This approach to teaching reading can be applied to one-on-one sessions as well.

As was discussed previously, Rogers (2007, 2002) and Rogers and Mosley (2006) used guided reading to implement critical literacy. But in addition to Clay’s (2001) and Fountas and Pinnell’s (2006) approach to literacy, the author(s) also attempted to engage students in critical discussions about issues of equity, power, oppression, and freedom. Books well-suited for critical literacy were selected to provide opportunities for engaging students in critical responses at the societal level. Both case study design and critical discourse analysis were used in these studies to analyze the data. Generally, the author(s) found that implementing cognitive oriented literacy instruction (comprehension, decoding, and fluency) was less difficult for both teachers and students than engaging in critical literacy instruction. However, in all studies, students showed growth in critical literacy practices, learning to invoke critical perspectives while reading. As was mentioned, growth in cognitive skills was not documented.

Community-based critical literacy pedagogy. Many practitioners implement critical literacy pedagogy through projects surrounding social justice issues. Some examples of social justice issues could be homelessness, racism, environmental issues, gentrification, the closing of libraries, and so on. These issues often lend themselves to critical literacy practices, such as investigating power at work, questioning assumptions, or challenging stereotypes. Pedagogy that approaches critical literacy through social justice issues focus on specific problems in the community and are action oriented as
opposed to abstractly interrogating critical literacy issues in a text or classroom discussion. Often, this approach will involve community-based projects in which students research a problem and take action. The following studies are examples of studies in which critical literacy is achieved through a social justice curriculum.

Burns (2004) shared her experience as a first grade teacher using the Gore/Bush campaign for the 2000 Presidential Election as an inroad for critical literacy. She guided her students in taking critical stances towards campaign issues such as drilling for oil in Alaska, health care for the elderly, and gun control. Students practiced investigating multiple perspectives for these issues, learning how to look beyond rhetoric. Burns detailed her lessons and units that grew out of the campaign issues, giving examples of class discussions and student work to support her claims that her first graders engaged in truly critical practices. To culminate the year, the students moved beyond critical dialogue into action for social justice. For instance, the children researched the destruction of the rainforest and presented their findings to their families; they also purchased and planted four trees on their school grounds. A case study design was used, and progress of critical literacy was tracked through student samples of various work throughout the year. Cognitive benefits were not reported.

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) also implemented critical literacy instruction through social justice pedagogy. In their book, they detailed the history of urban education and why they believed it has not been successful. Their solution was what they called “critical, counter-cultural communities of practice” (p. 11) in which a curriculum was created that directly responded to the community’s needs. The authors proposed five steps for creating such communities of practice: 1) identifying a problem in the
community; 2) researching the problem; 3) developing a collective plan of action; 4) implementing the plan; and 5) evaluating the process (pp. 12-13).

In addition, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) argued that for students to be effective within these communities of practice, they must be able to read and write in the language of the wider community, comprehend texts, and have knowledge of canonical literature, all of which they call “literacies of power”. Consequently, the authors explored canonical literature alongside hip-hop texts, cultural films, music and sports. Again, with the goal of becoming effective change-makers, the authors were explicit in teaching students to write in the academic register. Whether focusing on a community-based social justice project, or reading canonical literature, the authors continually worked within a critical lens, concentrating on issues of power. They gave detailed examples of units taught and how the students responded. They were explicit in terms of what they believe critical literacy looks like, gave a framework within which to use it, and provided examples from their work with high school students.

Singer and Shagoury (2005) also implemented critical literacy instruction through social justice oriented pedagogy. In this study, Shagoury worked with high school English teacher, Jessie Singer, who taught in an urban public school in Portland, Oregon. Singer’s concern was with providing opportunities for her students to develop agency. Social activism was a central theme in her curriculum throughout the entire year. Singer alternated between reading books as a whole group and allowing students to read together in literature groups with books of their choice. As they read, critical literacy was foregrounded while Singer used workshops and mini-lessons to address writing instruction and strategies for reading difficult texts. As a culminating project, Singer
asked students to select activist projects to research and share “in an accessible way with others, and to offer solutions or suggestions for change” (p. 330). Thus throughout Singer’s pedagogy, she emphasized not only problematizing, but seeking ways to address the problems students uncovered through critical literacy practices.

Singer and Shagoury (2005) provided numerous samples of student work to provide evidence that students were engaging in social justice issues and anecdotally reported on progress in cognitive skills such as reading fluency and writing. They thoroughly described their teaching units and activities, making their research aspects useful for practitioners. There are no details regarding the research design or the corpus of data.

**Critical literacy through drama pedagogies.** Much research has been conducted on the use of drama pedagogies, in literacy learning (e.g. Schneider, Crumpler, and Rodgers, 2006). Drama pedagogies involve the use of movement, or putting a text on its feet, in order to understand and examine the text in nuanced ways. There are numerous, specific drama strategies that can be used for this kind of teaching. But at its heart, this pedagogy emphasizes the dialogic nature of literacy and learning. Edmiston and Enciso (2002) explained the dialogic use of drama, saying

> As [children] invent and elaborate on the text’s potential, they generate multiple perspectives based on their knowledge of stories and life. Rather than moving through the text in a linear, literal, and ultimately monologic manner, the text’s narrative is reshaped to make room for additional narrative pathways, perspectives, images, and positions. (p. 870)
Understanding multiple viewpoints is important to critical literacy, since multiple-perspective taking often leads us to understanding problems such as stereotyping or ways in which others are oppressed. Consequently, it is easy to see how drama pedagogies can lend themselves well to critical literacy practices. Moreover, investigating issues of power, stereotypes, or other problems that lay beyond the surface level can be easier for students once they experience the text more viscerally by placing themselves inside the text via drama.

Dyson (2001) promoted the use drama pedagogy in order to engage in critical literacy practices. In this ethnographic study, Dyson observed a classroom of 7-9 year olds for 2-5 hours weekly for six months. The teacher used drama to stage the stories children were writing, thus using drama as a scaffold for writing. In these student-created dramas, Dyson was particularly interested in how students constructed gender in their own stories. Through the children’s drama and their writing, Dyson found that they both recreated and challenged gender roles that were modeled in their lives and in the media. She gave examples in which a girl simultaneously worked against and within the marginalized role of women in popular culture. Dysson’s research is unique in that drama pedagogy was not necessarily used to promote critical literacy practices; it was used for assisting students in their writing. However, through drama and the subsequent writing, critical literacy happened. That is, children problematized and challenged sexism. Thus they engaged in issues of power at work while writing and enacting their dramas.

Medina (2010) also offered dramatic pedagogy as a way to implement critical literacy. She presented an instrumental case study from larger, ethnographic study,
examining a 5th grade class in the Midwest. She focused one student, George, and his journey of using drama to explore multiple meanings and perspectives in texts. Medina helped facilitate a drama pedagogy using Latina literature from a critical literacy perspective. This research focused on texts about border-crossing, and she used drama strategies such as hot-seating, tableaux, creating a news show, and writing-in-role. Her goal was to problematize issues of border-crossing, particularly for the Latina community, as well as to problematize constructions of gender. She found that through drama, as well as through carefully selected texts, George’s notions of gender and immigration became nuanced, challenged, and in some instances, changed. She stated, “Voice and body worked in the drama, allowing for the creation of complex, interpretative spaces that facilitated exploration of Latina literary texts, culture, identity, and diversity” (p. 159).

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) provided work that also demonstrates how drama can aid critical literacy. This work could easily fit into the previous category of critical literacy through social justice, or even the next category of critical literacy through book-based pedagogy. However, I have chosen to place it here as it provides a useful example of how drama can scaffold children’s ability to engage in critical literacy.

Lewison et al. (2002) worked with 13 teachers who expressed a desire to deepen their understanding and practice of critical literacy in their classrooms. Their study set out to examine the ways in which teachers, both novices and veterans of critical literacy practices, engaged in dimensions of critical literacy with their students. One of the two teachers selected for this case study focused a great deal on teaching his students to take on multiple perspectives when reading a text or considering an issue. As has been noted,
drama is a powerful tool for engaging children in multiple-perspective taking. In Lewison et al.’s example, the class had read a magazine article about fish dying due to polluted river water. To help his students understand the complexity of the issue, the teacher assigned students various community roles, such as factory workers, environmentalists, or concerned citizens. They set their drama in a court room, and through stepping into an imagined space and playing out their various roles, the children realized the complexities of environmental issues, such as workers’ need for income, the community’s need for the products manufactured by the factory, as well as the need for clean water for both people and animals. The authors found that in addition to drama, students engaged in multiple-perspective taking and interrogation of power through written reflections. The authors concluded that teachers new to the practice of critical literacy often focus on disrupting stereotypes and assumptions whereas veterans, like the teacher described here, focused on taking on multiple perspectives.

**Book-based critical literacy pedagogy.** Book-based critical literacy pedagogy refers to pedagogies that focus mainly on the choice of texts, using particular kinds of texts to provide opportunities for exploring the issues of critical literacy. Books that lend themselves to critical literacy practices frequently have minorities as main characters, and they often focus on complex issues such as poverty, sexuality, or racism. It should be noted that books do not have to have these characteristics to be used for critical literacy; any text can be problematized, and much can be gained through applying critical literacy perspectives to texts that do not overtly deal with critical literacy issues (for instance, social studies texts are often replete with hidden ideologies, warranting the use of critical literacy). I would also add that much of the research described in this literature review
could fall under the category of book-based pedagogy since most practitioners and researchers carefully choose their texts. The following works, however, have at their core the careful selection of critical literacy-friendly books.

Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, and Vasquez (1999) provided an annotated bibliography of books that provide opportunities for critical literacy via social justice issues. They worked with teachers who used these books in their classrooms and, in addition to providing a summary of both picture books and young adult literature, the authors included ways in which teachers of various grades used these texts and their children’s responses. Furthermore, the authors provided a framework for defining critical literacy, based on Freebody and Luke’s (1990) Four Resources Model. This framework can be used as a guide for teachers as they select other texts for critical literacy purposes. The authors made a compelling argument for the use of critical literacy in the classroom, and they provided a useful resource with which to do it via the bibliography. The argument for the use of these texts is best summarized in the first sentence of their article, quoted from a third grade teacher: “‘One thing about these books is that I can hear a pin drop when I’m reading them to my class’” (p. 70).

Pierce et al. (1993) presented an annotated bibliography of books that provide opportunities for critical literacy practices. Their bibliography was divided into the following topics: family conflict; homelessness; social challenges; political conflict; leaders; and issues and challenges: caution, despair, and hope. Their annotations included a summary, a brief, critical analysis, and some suggestions for the classroom. In some instances, there were examples of what teachers or students did with particular texts, though not to the extent of Leland et al. (1999).
While these two works are not empirical studies, they are useful in that they provide insight as to the kinds of books that promote critical literacy practices, as well as pedagogical moves that assist children in engaging in critical perspectives and taking action for social justice. For instance, in Leland et al. (1999), students decided to create posters to place in their community about firearms safety after reading a book related to the issue. In another example, students interrogated assumptions in school rules and advocated for the rights of younger children through persuasive writing. I maintain that such examples are powerful because when researchers and teachers learn about literature and pedagogy that provide opportunities for critical literacy, our understanding of what it is and how it is enacted in schools can be deepened.

**Critical literacy through scripted curricula.** In this last section, I offer examples of a pedagogy that is not recommended. I include it because scripted curricula are common in U.S. schools, and based on my teaching experience in Louisiana, Washington, D.C., and Ohio, are becoming increasingly so. I define scripted curricula as those in which the text and topic is predetermined, so that a teacher does create her or his own questions and activities but uses what is in a textbook instead. In a sense, there is a script that the teacher can follow; he or she does not practice his or her own decision-making regarding where to take conversations, what activities to implement, or even at what pace to conduct his or her teaching. The level to which a curriculum is scripted and how rigidly the teacher is expected to stick to the script varies with curricula, schools, and districts. The following works demonstrate that even when theory and pedagogical frameworks are strong, when they are implemented in a scripted fashion, they are not generally effective.
Janks (2001) studied the implementation of a curriculum she created that included specific worksheets for teachers to use while addressing specific issues of power Janks had decided upon. For some, this fits the definition of a scripted curriculum. Janks documented the experience of high school teachers in a mixed race school in South Africa in 1993, an especially turbulent point in the country’s history. Janks had published six workbooks designed to help students understand the relationship between language and power called the *Critical Language Awareness Series*. It should be noted that Janks did not describe her workbooks as scripted curriculum; I have interpreted them as such. I have done so due to the pre-selected texts with accompanying questions and activities that, in my judgment, resulted in teachers losing decision-making power in what texts were used and how. The workbooks included selections of texts spanning various topics with questions and exercises intended to help the students develop and practice Critical Language Awareness.

However, in my judgment, not all the topics selected, nor the questions that were meant to uncover and challenge ideologies, were sensitive to the students’ own culture and ways of being. In one example, the students read a text concerning gender roles and family responsibilities. The CLA exercise was meant to open up a very contested topic in order to expand students’ ways of thinking. The authors noted that the black boys in the classroom reiterated responses such as “Coming from an African family or society the woman is expected to look after the children and do chores like that” (p.143). Meanwhile, the black girls in the classroom did not speak at all regarding the topic. In an interview, the teacher reported “The Black girls don’t say a word…for once the White kids were on the side of the Black girls against the Black boys. After class, the Black
girls said they’re right [the boys]; that is what we are” (p. 143-144). The teacher reported that the atmosphere was angry and charged and did not seem to feel that the argument was productive.

In this case, the scripted curriculum had a clear agenda: challenging gender roles. This is a common agenda in critical literacy practice, and certainly this is not a topic that should be avoided. However, the way in which it is approached is crucial. I assert that there is a fine line to walk when challenging long-held, cultural ways of thinking and respecting the experience, beliefs and cultural knowledge of your students. In Janks (2001), it seemed as though the teacher, via the workbook, was attempting to force the students into a different way of thinking without attempting to understand the way the students thought. It is my position that with topics as controversial and personal as gender roles, it is the teacher who should select the texts and guide the questions, not the creator of a workbook. This is because it is the teacher who should best know his or her students and thus be able to select a text that will both honor students’ knowledge and experience while also providing opportunities to problematize their thinking. Perhaps the above example would have gone poorly with or without a scripted workbook; however, I argue that the chance of productively engaging students in such a controversial topic would be higher were the discussion not based on a workbook.

Pandya (2012) also demonstrated that critical literacy cannot be implemented via scripted curriculums. The purpose of her article was to critique a popular scripted curriculum called Open Court and its attempt to engage students in critical thinking and critical literacy. She spent a year observing a fourth-grade teacher in a district in Southern California. A language arts coordinator had noted the school and teacher as
exemplary; the teacher was trained in the use of Open Court and was provided a literacy coach to further assist her in its implementation.

Pandya (2012) noted that one aspect of Open Court’s curriculum, entitled “Inquiry,” was meant to help students understand how to critically go about conducting research. The inquiry aspect includes a series of steps to engage students in critical thinking and inquiry and are the following: defining the problem; formulating “conjecture” (p. 21) regarding the problem; devising a plan for research; reevaluating the problem and possibly redefining it; and creating a new plan if needed. Pandya asserted that this can be considered a critical literacy aspect of the curriculum. Although it is not political, it does embody the critical literacy practice of problematizing an issue: defining a problem, conceptualizing what the problem is, and working to rethink or reframe the problem. Ultimately, however, Pandya concluded that critical literacy cannot be implemented via a scripted curriculum. She stated “The critical thinking skills…and potential for critical literacy development…are lost in the standardized, step-by-step implementation characteristic of the entire language arts curriculum [Open Court] itself” (p. 20).

Present Study

There are many strengths and affordances of the current research on critical literacy in the classroom. Much of the research is helpful for teachers, giving examples of how concepts can be implemented, as well as providing resources such as suggested books for critical literacy practice. The vast literature also recommends a variety of useful pedagogies, such as drama or the use of hip-hop to implement critical literacy. It
also indicates some pitfalls that can occur when attempting to implement both research and practice of critical literacy.

Moreover, there is some research, such as Rogers (2002, 2007) and Rogers and Mosley (2006), Rosario-Ramos (2012) and Purcell-Gates et al. (2004) where multiple paradigms are brought together, which Lather (2006) advocates as a generative, refining characteristic of good research. Rogers, along with Rogers and Mosley highlighted the importance of bringing together both a cognitive and critical framework in literacy instruction, while Rosario-Ramos demonstrated that critical literacy and comprehension were highly correlated. Meanwhile Purcell-Gates et al. focused mainly on sociocultural aspects of literacy but advocated a stance that recognized both the cognitive and cultural aspects.

However, despite the numerous benefits of the current research, there are still questions to answer regarding how critical theory affects students’ reading comprehension. The educational community does not yet know how critical literacy practices affect students’ performance on standardized tests of reading. Although measuring students’ learning via such tests is not what I want to advocate, the extreme focus on test scores is a reality of our current educational climate. Test scores are tied to funding for both researchers and schools, and teachers are measured by the scores of their students. It would behoove those who wish to see critical literacy pedagogy in our schools to examine its effects on students’ performance and cognitive reading processes. How does a students’ cognitive processes during reading change as a result of critical literacy pedagogy? Do students transfer the critical literacy pedagogy to their independent reading or writing? Is comprehension improved?
To address the cognitive benefits of critical literacy practice, this study incorporated methods such as think-aloud protocols, student interviews, researcher-constructed comprehension tests, standardized comprehension assessments, and writing assessments. I taught a seventh grade reading class, implementing critical literacy pedagogy along with comprehension strategy instruction while documenting the learning experiences and literacy growth of the students. Finally, this study combined paradigms. It is my hope that in combining two different perspectives, I can refine my own and others’ thinking about literacy learning.

I recognize that the very question I am asking in this study may be problematic. To ask what are the cognitive dividends of critical literacy may be viewed as imposing an autonomous model on an ideological model of literacy (Street, 1985). The researcher-constructed and standardized comprehension tests measure comprehension as though literacy were simply a neutral process that can be quantified without taking into consideration issues of power. I used statistical analysis for multiple assessments, and these statistics do not account for the complex nature of literacy, the politics of literacy, or the inequalities experienced by my students. To this, my response is that it is a pragmatic approach that acknowledges that the current education system values the cognitive, skill-based view of comprehension. Standardized tests and statistics are what have value when assessing literacy in the current educational climate. And so, while flawed, I used these methods in order for my study to have relevance.

Furthermore, Lather (2006) claimed “[P]roliferation [of paradigms], like deconstruction, happens. This is a historical and ontological claim, not an epistemological one…the sort of uncontainable proliferation that I am suggesting as a
characteristic of contemporary research…is more in its tensions” (p. 43). By stating that proliferation is “in its tensions,” I believe Lather meant that the places where different paradigms clash can generate better research. When paradigms, including the theories and methodologies typical of that paradigm, rub up against one another, they can refine one another. I find the potential friction between paradigms useful, and I hope to bring together multiple paradigms in my own literacy research.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Participants and Context

Forty-one seventh grade students participated in the study: 22 students participated in the treatment group, and 19 students from another seventh grade class in the same school participated in the comparison group. I was both the researcher and the primary teacher of reading for students in the treatment group from January-May 2014. I created the curriculum and provided instruction while the homeroom teacher was present and assisted with monitoring behavior. Students in the comparison class were taught by their regular homeroom teacher, who worked in collaboration with me to select texts and develop lesson plans.

The study took place at Westland K-8 School in an urban district in a large Midwestern city. The school was 46% White, 29% Black, 15% Hispanic, 8% Multi-racial, and 1% Asian. All students in the study received free or reduced lunch. Seventh grade was selected as an appropriate grade due to the nature of literacy for middle school students, as well as the interpersonal and intrapersonal changes adolescents undergo. According to the Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy (2010), middle grade students are expected to “interpret, critique, and summarize” the texts they read, as opposed to mostly summarizing in the elementary grades (p. 10). As explained earlier,
critical literacy offers the opportunity to interpret and critique texts at a nuanced level, thus assisting students’ move into the deeper comprehension required in middle grades. Moreover, the Carnegie Council of Adolescent Literacy (2010) highlights the personal changes that take place during adolescents, stating, “adolescence is a period in which young people are trying to forge a sense of identity, imagining and preparing for future goals and roles as adults, and navigating complex social and emotional relationships” (p.13). Additionally, adolescents are becoming more interesting in justice as they are becoming aware and interested in the world around them. Thus, as students focus on forging their identities, working through relationships, and envisioning their role in the world, critical literacy can aid them in widening their lens, learning to see the struggles of others, helping them practice empathy in their relationships, and possibly affecting how they view their role in bringing about change.

**Design**

A hybrid research design was employed combining single-subject (Neuman, 2011) and case study (Yin, 2014) methodologies. Neuman cited the following as common characteristics of single-subject design: (1) Use of a baseline and treatment conditions, with “baseline” referring to a time in which the target behavior is observed and recorded, typically with 3-5 data collection points. The same subjects are then used in the treatment condition, allowing subjects to serve as their own controls. (2) Repeated and frequent measurement in order to gain a fuller picture of how change over time occurred, as opposed to simply using pre/post tests. (3) Use of a single variable rule. This refers to the fact that only one variable is manipulated at a time. (4) Increased internal validity. Because subjects serve as their own controls, there is less threat to
53

internal validity. (5) Visual analysis of data. Unlike typical experimental designs, there is no pre-determined level of significance. Instead, the researcher uses visual analysis of the data to make decisions about the effectiveness of the treatment.

Baseline assessments were administered prior to treatment, and subsequent repeated measures with these assessments occurred three times during treatment. The repeated measures aspect of this design allowed documentation of how students’ comprehension and critical literacy stances changed over time, capturing these changes more accurately than pretests and posttests alone.

Because the A-B single-subject design suffers from a number of threats to internal validity (e.g., maturation, history, testing), case study methods were used to strengthen any claims regarding the role of critical literacy in improving comprehension. Yin (2014) asserted that case studies can be used “to explain the presumed causal links in real-world interventions that are too complex for…experimental methods” (p. 19). He defined case study research as “an empirical inquiry that a) investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within a real-world context, especially when b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). The second half of Yin’s definition is particularly appropriate in this instance due to the complex nature of literacy; it is a social phenomenon, a cultural construct, as well as a cognitive process. But this cognitive process cannot be extracted from its context, the social and cultural aspects of literacy, thus making case study methodology appropriate. Additionally, the comparison group was employed to help bolster conclusions regarding the effects of critical literacy on comprehension.
One aspect of the design that is typical of case study research is that I took on the role of participant observer, meaning that I participated as the primary instructor while observing and documenting literacy practices in the classroom. As a participant-observer, reflexivity was an important goal, which Glesne (2006) defined as “critical reflection on how researcher, research participants, setting, and phenomenon of interest influence each other” (p. 6). One method of becoming reflexive was through keeping a research journal, reflecting on theories of literacy and education and how they appeared to be embodied in the classroom, how critical literacy was taken up, what happened in terms of comprehension, and how power seemed to be distributed between the participants and the instructor. Furthermore, multiple data sources were used to triangulate data and to achieve a thick description of the literacy taking place in the classroom. Yin (2014) argued that triangulation is an important aspect of case study research, providing the opportunity to collect evidence from multiple sources. Triangulation of data provides for more accurate and convincing findings.

Measures

This study made use of multiple measures to gain a window into the nature of students’ cognitive processes during reading, whether or not their reading comprehension improved, the ways in which students took-up critical literacy practices, and the interaction between critical literacy and comprehension. These measures included think aloud protocols, researcher-constructed comprehension tests, a standardized comprehension test, written tasks, a reading questionnaire, and student interviews.

**Think aloud protocols.** This assessment was used to address the first question of the study, which examined whether students’ thought processes during reading changed.
over time due to instruction, and if so, what was the nature of the change. Students were asked to read aloud, pausing every few sentences to comment on their thinking. Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) noted that think aloud data have been used throughout the 20th century to examine cognitive processes during reading. They reported that think aloud protocols have been used in reading to investigate processes such as problem-solving, reading comprehension, and examination of strategy use during reading. They stated that “the elegant description of reading that emerges from protocol analysis is proof enough of the utility of the method” (p. 2).

The think alouds were administered to a group of six students from the treatment group. Initially, 10 students were administered the think alouds, then six students who demonstrated a level of comfort with the protocol and a willingness to respond verbally while reading were selected from that group. The six students selected represented a range of reading levels, with two high-level readers, two mid-range readers, and two below-average readers. Their reading levels were determined through scores collected from a computerized reading program. I administered two think alouds at the baseline along with a colleague; the remaining three think alouds were administered every six weeks by the same colleague.

Texts read during the think alouds used excerpts of passages that addressed issues of sexism, racism, or classicism and thus allowed opportunities for critical literacy. Each passage was approximately 400-500 words. Using the Fry Readability Formula and reading graph (Gunning, 2006), as well as the Flesch-Kincaid formula (Gunning, 2006) that is available with Microsoft Word, passages were controlled for readability. All passages were modified to read at a fifth grade level to ensure that decoding was not an
obstacle for below-average readers. Complex sentences were simplified and single-syllabic words were substituted for multisyllabic words in order to reduce the level of text difficulty. Table 3.1 shows the scores for each think aloud passage according to the Fry Readability and Flesh-Kincaid formulas. Because the Fry Readability formula tends to score passages on the high end, while the Flesh-Kincaid formula tends to score them on the low end, a passage was deemed appropriate if the average between the two was at a fifth grade level.

Table 3.1
Readability Scores of Texts Used in Think Alouds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Flesch-Kincaid</th>
<th>Fry Readability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born Worker</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>mid-6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinatown</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>mid 6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Names</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>mid 5th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ta-Na-E-Ka</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>high 5th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Woman in the Snow</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>mid 6th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) noted that because reading is such a highly automated process, researchers must find ways to slow the reading down so that participants can report their thinking. One option is to parse texts into smaller parts by presenting it sentence by sentence. Another option is to include signals in the text to interrupt processing. In this study, small stars were inserted after every several sentences to act as reminders for students to pause and report their thinking. All think aloud protocols were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Last, a protocol for directions for implementation was constructed. After trialing these think alouds in a middle school classroom, it was found that students generally did not report a great deal of their thinking. This was due to their unfamiliarity with the think aloud protocol; thus a scripted model, demonstrating what a think aloud sounds
like, was included. Although the use of a model is often contested as it may influence the way in which students respond in their think alouds, there is precedent for its use in Goldman, Braasch, Wiley, Graesser, and Browdawinksa (2012). To avoid biasing students toward reporting critical literacy practices, no issues of sexism, racism, or classism were addressed in the model. The model appeared to have helped familiarize students with the task.

It must be noted that the use of think alouds, particularly those that interrupt the reading process, have been contested. The argument is that, because think alouds often involve an interruption to the reading process and require a verbal response, they do not provide useful data regarding participants’ thought-processes (Smagorinsky, 1989). For this study, it was decided that the use of think aloud data had been studied and documented extensively enough to provide some utility (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

**Researcher-constructed comprehension tests.** These tests addressed the second research question, which examined the possible effects of critical literacy instruction on comprehension. Five researcher-constructed comprehension tests were administered to all students in the treatment group. These tests consisted of a short passage from *The Language of Literature* for grades 6, 7, and 8 (Applebee, Bermudez, Blau, Caplan, Elbow, Hynds, Langer, and Marshall, 2002). Sentence structure and vocabulary were simplified to control for readability using the Fry Readability (Gunning, 2006) and Flesch-Kincaid formulas (Gunning, 2006). Table 3.2 shows the readability scores for each passage used in the tests. Because the Fry Readability formula tends to score passages at a higher grade level, whereas the Flesh-Kincaid formula tends to score them
at a lower grade level, a passage was deemed appropriate if the average between the two was at a fifth grade level.

*Table 3.2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passage</th>
<th>Flesh-Kincaid</th>
<th>Fry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American History</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>mid 6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Directions</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>mid 6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Princess</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>mid 6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Censor</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>mid 6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dinner</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>mid 6th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each test consisted of eight comprehension questions constructed by the researcher. Questions were designed to fit one of three categories: *literal* (meaning the answer is derived explicitly from the text), *inferential* (requiring prior knowledge as well as ability to synthesize across sentences and paragraphs), and *evaluative* (meaning a reader must construct a supported opinion to evaluate the text with critical thinking and/or critical literacy). Each test included four inferential questions, two literal questions, and two evaluative questions. By using an equal number of each type of question in each test, an attempt was made to control for the difficulty of the test as much as possible.

These classifications were derived from Palincsar and Brown (1984) who used the terms *text explicit* to refer to questions in which the answer is stated explicitly in the text, *text implicit*, meaning the question required the reader to make an inference, and *script implicit*, meaning the reader had to employ prior knowledge. Palincsar and Brown derived these terms from Pearson and Johnson (1978).

In addition to modeling comprehension tests after Palinscar and Brown’s (1984) assessments, aspects of Woods and Moe’s (2007) Analytical Reading Inventory (ARI)
were incorporated into the questions used in the researcher-constructed comprehension tests. The ARI is an informal reading inventory that assesses multiple aspects of reading, including comprehension. Woods and Moe asserted that in order to assess comprehension, an educator must look for indicators such as construction of the literal meaning, construction of implied meanings, the ability to retain information across paragraphs, and the ability to evaluate a text and construct a supported opinion regarding the text. These aspects, in combination with Palincsar and Brown’s (1984) categories of text explicit and script implicit categories, were used.

These comprehension assessments were trialed in a middle school classroom prior to the study to assure they were appropriate for seventh grade students. In addition, a reading professor familiar with middle school language arts was consulted and her feedback was taken into consideration when the comprehension tests were constructed.

**Writing tasks.** A writing task was administered to address research question two, examining whether students’ comprehension improved as a result of the introduction of critical literacy instruction. This assessment was also used to assess whether students’ critical literacy changed over time. This assessment consists of a short reading passage followed by a writing prompt and was administered as a pretest and posttest to assess critical thinking. Reznitskaya, Kuo, Clark, Miller, Jadallah, Anderson, and Nguyen-Jahiel (2009) used a written task to assess argumentation following discussions, and Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) used written tasks to analyze students’ levels of elaboration and abstraction in reflective essays.

To create the writing task, a passage was selected from *The Language of Literature* for grades 8 (Applebee, Bermudez, Blau, Caplan, Elbow, Hynds, Langer, &
Marshall, 2002). The passage was about a woman who challenged gender norms and the assumptions that people in her small town made about her. Vocabulary and sentence structure were simplified to control for readability. Again, single-syllabic words were substituted for multi-syllabic words and complex sentences were simplified. The Fry Readability (Gunning, 2006) and Flesch-Kincaid formulas (Gunning, 2006) were used to ensure the passages were appropriate for a fifth grade reading level. After modifications, the passage had a readability score of 5.1 according to the Flesh-Kincaid formula, and the Fry Readability formula produced a mid-6th grade reading level. The writing prompt required both critical literacy and critical thinking: “Reflect on what this passage says about women. What assumptions are made about how women are supposed to look and act? What are some of the assumptions people in the town make about Dolores? Do you think those assumptions are accurate? What do you think about Dolores? How are stereotypes regarding women taking place in this story?” This prompt required students to examine unspoken assumptions about gender made in the text, and to interrogate ideology.

**Test of Inference Ability in Reading Comprehension.** To address the second research question, the Test of Inference Ability (TIA; Phillips & Patterson, 1987), a standardized reading comprehension test was administered to both classes as a pretest and posttest. The TIA is somewhat different from typical standardized comprehension tests which include questions that require literal comprehension where the answer is stated explicitly in the text. The TIA specifically assesses students’ inferencing abilities. The questions cannot be answered using the text alone; the text information must be combined with prior knowledge to arrive at an answer. It was selected because inferences
are an important part of critical literacy practices. Because critical literacy requires the interrogation of often unstated assumptions and values, it requires inference-making. Thus the TIA most closely matched the kind of thinking that took place during instruction with the treatment group and the test was deemed more appropriate than other more widely used standardized tests. The test is also geared toward sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, making it suitable for the current study.

The TIA is a test that consists of three sections, each using a different passage containing inferential questions specific to the passage. Only the first and last sections were used in this study. The reasons for including only the first and last sections were manifold: (1) the validity of the middle section was not as high as the first and last sections; (2) the teachers of the school felt that the first and last sections of the test were appropriate for their students in terms of content, but not the middle section; (3) there was not time to administer all three sections in one class period; (4) the students had already undergone extensive and repeated testing required by the state.

Phillips (1989) reported a Kuder-Richardson 20 reliability coefficient of .79 for the entire TIA. Philips also briefly described the Thinking Rating Scale developed to analyze the validity of the TIA. Students’ scores on the TIA were correlated with their Thinking Rating Scale scores using Pearson’s Correlation Coefficients. The two sections used in this study had a validity score of .77 using Pearson’s correlation coefficients.

**Reading attitude questionnaire and student interviews.** Finally, McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth’s (1995) reading attitude questionnaire was administered as a pretest and posttest to assess the students’ attitudes towards school literacy to address question three: Does critical literacy instruction influence middle school students’
attitude towards school literacy? What are students’ attitudes towards critical literacy practices? McKenna et al. reported coefficients ranging from .74 to .89 using Cronbach’s alpha for reliability, with 16 of the 18 coefficients reaching at least .80. The authors reported that construct validity was determined through a series of tests “in which subjects were grouped according to various criterial variables” (p. 944) and in all tests, scores were as was predicted.

Additionally, an interview was used as a posttest to determine students’ attitudes towards critical literacy and school literacy. The six students selected for the think aloud protocols completed the interview after their final think aloud. In addition, three students from the treatment group were selected for the interview due to a noted increase in their level of participation in the classroom; the interview was used to examine what may have motivated this change. The following questions were included in the interview: 1) How do you feel about the reading and writing you do in school? 2) Have your feelings about the reading and writing you do in school changed since the start of the school year? 3) Do you talk about issues of race, gender or wealth with the books you read in school? 4) How do you feel about talking about issues of race, gender or wealth in school? 5) Do you think we should talk about issues of race, gender and wealth in school? 6) What sort of reading or writing do you do outside of school? 7) Why do you read or write outside of school? 8) Has talking about issues of race, gender, or wealth in school made you think about those issues outside of school? The interview was administered by a colleague to minimize bias in the students’ answers.
**Procedure**

Table 3.3 summarizes the assessments administered, the construct assessed, to whom they were administered, the frequency of administration, the research question they related to, and the type of analysis used. The think aloud protocols were administered to six students from the treatment group. The researcher-constructed comprehension tests were administered to the entire treatment group, as were the reading questionnaires.

**Table 3.3**  
*Summary of Assessments.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Students Assessed</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Think aloud</td>
<td>Cognitive and critical processes used during reading</td>
<td>6 case study participants in treatment group</td>
<td>Approx. every 6 weeks after baseline</td>
<td>Question 1 Question 2</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of comprehension and critical literacy through coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher constructed comprehension tests</td>
<td>Reading Comprehension</td>
<td>All students in treatment group</td>
<td>Approx. every 6 weeks after baseline</td>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of comprehension using a rubric; qualitative analysis of critical literacy, using a rubric. ANOVA and Independent t tests, visual analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Task</td>
<td>Comprehension and critical literacy</td>
<td>All students in treatment and comparison group</td>
<td>Pre and post</td>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of comprehension and critical literacy using a rubric; repeated measures ANOVA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test of Inference Ability</td>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>All students in treatment and comparison group</td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>Independent t-test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Continued*
The writing tasks were administered to both the treatment group and the comparison group, as were the TIAs. The interviews were administered to the treatment group only. As this study employed a single-subject design, the think alouds and the researcher-constructed comprehension tests were administered at five different points during the study. This baseline was more than a single pre-test; it was a period of time in which multiple measures were taken. Therefore, for the first three weeks of the study, no critical literacy instruction took place until a minimum of two think aloud assessments and two comprehension tests were administered. Afterwards, the think aloud protocols and researcher-comprehension tests were administered approximately every six weeks. To avoid the influence of the researcher, a colleague administered the think aloud assessments after the baseline, as well as the post-interviews. The pretest reading interest questionnaire was also administered during the baseline, then again in May at the end of the study.
To control for text effects on the researcher-constructed tests and the think aloud protocols, they were administered to randomized blocks of students who received the tests in different orders. The order of tests followed a Latin Square design (Stevens, 2009) and is described in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4
Order of Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group #</th>
<th>Order of Tests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2, 3, 4, 5, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3, 4, 5, 1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4, 5, 1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5, 1, 2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reading interest questionnaires were administered as pretests and posttests to the treatment group to determine if and what changes occurred. The writing task was administered as a pretest and posttest to both the treatment and comparison groups. The TIA was administered to both groups as a posttest only. However, the think aloud assessments and the researcher-constructed comprehension assessments were administered repeatedly to track the nature and progress of change in students’ reading processes over time. The intent for this study was to establish a chain of evidence that points to critical literacy as the source of improvement in comprehension. To establish this chain, first it must be clear that critical literacy instruction took place. To demonstrate this, discussions were recorded and analyzed for evidence of critical literacy practices among students. Evidence of critical literacy was found in small-group and whole-class discussions in which students problematized assumptions, questioned values, recognized stereotypes, or noted a bias or prejudice taking place a systemic level. The expectation was that critical literacy practices would first become evident in classroom
discussions before becoming evident in students’ think aloud protocols as a reflection of their cognitive processes during reading. If it could be shown that students participated in critical literacy discussions, followed by evidence of critical literacy thinking in students’ think aloud protocols and improvement in comprehension, one could logically, though tentatively, attribute comprehension changes to critical literacy. In Palincsar and Brown’s (1984) study of reciprocal teaching, the researchers used a somewhat similar design, assessing students’ comprehension daily, while also recording students’ discussions. They found that improvements in students’ comprehension scores occurred after improvements in their dialogues, thus indicating that reciprocal reaching had a positive impact on comprehension.

**Coding and Analysis**

The think aloud protocols were analyzed qualitatively using NVivo software (QSR International, version 10, 2012) to code students’ responses. Codes were not predetermined, but were derived from the data, based upon the various kinds of responses given by the students. This inductive form of coding was implemented in the fashion of Pressley and Afflerbach (1995), who conducted a broad analysis of 38 think aloud studies. The authors used a grounded analysis with “the intention [to] sift the data from the ground up in order to come to a theory of the data” (p.23). Based on their reading of the 38 studies, the authors created categories and subcategories to classify the various actions taken by readers in the think alouds. These categories were reviewed and refined until they reached saturation, meaning no new categories were needed to describe actions found in the think alouds.
In this study, a similar inductive process was implemented to code the think alouds. First, an anecdotal description was written to describe each response in the think alouds. For instance, the following is an example of a text excerpt and the student’s response during a think aloud:

Text: I am named after my mom, and they called me Hoo-lee-tah at home. But at my new school I was Judy or Judith. Once an English teacher mistook me for Juliet. ★

Student: Um, it sounds like she moved to a different, new school, and they're confusing her name.

The student’s response was initially described as “Retelling what happened in the previous sentences.” After each students’ response was anecdotally described, these descriptions were collapsed into broad categories. The above example was collapsed into the category “summarizing.” This process continued until no new broad categories were needed. Think alouds were analyzed several times to ensure that the classification system had reached saturation and no new categories were needed. Then a final analysis was completed to ensure that responses were coded accurately. Codes were not mutually exclusive; it was possible for a single response to be coded in multiple categories. For instance, the example below was coded both as “Critical literacy—race” and “inference” since the student noted an issue related to race while also making an inference about the motivations of the students who singled out the protagonist and treated her like a “foreigner.”

Text: They were just being curious, I knew. But I burned with shame whenever they singled me out as a “foreigner,” a rare, exotic friend. ★
Student: It's like they're picking on her because of her race and, and she can't belong. They don't want her to.

The final categories for this study are shown in Table 3.5. Note that in order to be included in the critical literacy categories, students needed only to notice an issue of race, gender or wealth; they were not required to expand upon the issue or challenge it.

Table 3.5
Categories for Codes for Scoring Think Alouds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Code</th>
<th>Definition of Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wondering questions</td>
<td>Student asks how or why something happened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing</td>
<td>Student retells what is happening in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicting</td>
<td>Student guesses what will happen next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noting a confusion</td>
<td>Student notes something that he or she does not understand in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>Student chooses not to give a verbal response even when prompted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferencialing</td>
<td>Student makes a statement that requires them to draw a conclusion that is not stated explicitly in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>Student provides a critique or offers an opinion on the actions of characters or statements of the author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy related to race</td>
<td>Student notes issues of race in a text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy related to gender</td>
<td>Student notes issues of gender in a text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy related to class</td>
<td>Student notes issues of poverty or wealth in a text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting</td>
<td>Student connects the text to another text, a personal experience, or a historical or world event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commenting</td>
<td>Student states that the text is funny, interesting, or boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying questions</td>
<td>Student asks what a word or phrase means</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After each transcript was coded, the data were analyzed to examine what kinds of responses took place, how often, and when, as well as any overlap between codes. Table 3.6 provides an example of each type of response provided by a student for each code.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Code</th>
<th>Student Example from Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wondering Question</td>
<td>I kinda wonder like, is he really Chinese?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing</td>
<td>So you're in a bathing suit, outside in the woods, where it's cold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicting</td>
<td>Oh, maybe he'll get in a crash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noting a confusion</td>
<td>I wonder how that, I don't even understand that. A rose by another name would smell as sweet. I don't even get that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>Researcher: Do you have something for that star? Student: [Shakes head and reads on]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferencing</td>
<td>It sounds like someone's getting married.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>That's messed up. If you wanted to be famous, you could be famous all you wanted to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy related to race</td>
<td>So that must mean he doesn't like colored maids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy related to gender</td>
<td>That's RUDE. Girls should have the same equal rights a guy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy related to class</td>
<td>It’s like, he, he has a job and he's not getting much money as [Arnie] and he feels like [Arnie's] teasing him about that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting</td>
<td>It sounds kinda like, uh, Rosa Parks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commenting</td>
<td>That is one crazy toilet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying questions</td>
<td>What does obesity mean?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inter-rater reliability for the coding of the think alouds was established with the same colleague who assisted in administering the think alouds. This colleague coded 20% of the think aloud transcripts (6 think aloud transcripts). The six think aloud transcripts were selected randomly. All transcripts were blinded. To determine the percentage of agreement between coders, each star in the transcript was considered an opportunity to code since the stars represented the places in the think aloud where students were asked to stop and report their thinking. Thus, the total number of stars in each think aloud was counted. The final question of the think aloud in which students were asked if they had anything more to add was not counted as a star since it was given
as an option, not a requirement, to comment. One point was awarded for overlapping codes. For instances in which there were multiple overlapping codes, only one point was awarded to avoid inflation of the percentage agreement. No points were awarded when there were no overlapping codes at a star. It should be noted that in the case that one code overlapped, it was possible for the coders to have additional codes that did not overlap. There was no punitive measure for discrepant codes.

The total number of points awarded for a transcript was divided by the total number of stars; the result was considered the percentage of agreement for the two coders. For instance, in the fifth think aloud transcript analyzed for inter-rater reliability, the total number of points was nine; the total number of stars was 10. This meant there was 90% agreement for the fifth think aloud transcript.

Coders discussed and resolved disagreements that occurred during coding training. The second coder then coded in isolation. The overall percentage of agreement was 90% (total number of points awarded divided by the total number of stars). Table 3.7 displays the percentage of agreement for each transcript, as well as the overall (mean) agreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript name in reliability study</th>
<th>Round and name of Think aloud</th>
<th>Percentage of agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating 1</td>
<td>Round 5; Names</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating 2</td>
<td>Round 4; Names</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating 3</td>
<td>Round 3; Chinatown</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating 4</td>
<td>Round 5; Woman in the Snow</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Agreement</td>
<td></td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher-constructed tests were scored in terms of the two domains of comprehension and critical literacy. For comprehension, questions that were literal
received one point if correct. Inferential questions received two points for the inference made and support given. For evaluative questions, a point was given for the claim, and a point was given for the reason given as support. For critical literacy, a point was awarded if the student noted an issue of race, gender, or wealth. Two points were awarded if in addition, the student gave an explanation as to why something was noted as related to race, gender, or wealth. An additional point was awarded if the student connected the issue to the abstract concepts of sexism, racism, or classicism, or if the student challenged the actions and made a case as to how it should be different. Students were assigned a number so that the tests could be scored blind. The raw comprehension scores were then analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA.

The writing tasks were scored according to a rubric. The rubric was modeled after that used by Rosario-Ramos (2012) who scored think aloud protocols in two categories: comprehension and critical analysis. Under the category of comprehension, she included constructs such as decoding, main idea, vocabulary, structure, and inferences. Under the category of critical analysis, she included constructs such as sourcing, contextualization, goals, evidence, and alternatives. In the current study, the following constructs were included in the comprehension category: details supporting claims, clarity, inference, and evaluation. These categories were derived from categories used by Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) in the rubrics used to score the written tasks, as well as skills required in the 2010 Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (National Governors Association for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School). For the critical literacy domain, the following constructs were included: problematizing assumptions, recognizing or challenging stereotypes,
recognition of power at work in a text, and noting abstract concepts of inequality or oppression. These categories had a theoretical basis as these were the basic tenets used to define critical literacy for this study. These tenets derived from the literature on critical literacy. Table 3.8 displays the rubric used to score comprehension; table 3.9 displays the rubric used to score critical literacy. The two rubric scores were combined to create an overall writing task score.

Table 3.8
Writing Task Rubric: Comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>High (3 pts)</th>
<th>Medium (2 pts)</th>
<th>Low (1 pt)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Details supporting claims</td>
<td>Details from text/reasons given to support claims made. Clear connection</td>
<td>Reasons given to support claims, but not necessarily from text. In some cases,</td>
<td>No details from text, few reasons given in support of claims. Largely unsupported claims are made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>between details/reasons and claim</td>
<td>connection between reasons/claim is explicit, but not always</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>Claims, reasons, and details are coherent and clearly connected. No inference</td>
<td>Claims are clear, but reasons/details not always explicitly connected. Reader</td>
<td>Writing is unclear, difficult to ascertain meaning intended, connections between statements are not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>needed on part of reader</td>
<td>must infer as to meaning. Some ambiguity.</td>
<td>explicit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inference</td>
<td>Writer draws inferences from text evidence, making clear how the text</td>
<td>Inferences made but not clearly connected to text evidence</td>
<td>Writer reports only literal facts from the text for the most part, few to no inferences made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>leads them to such conclusions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Evaluates the actions of characters/claims of author, and supports these</td>
<td>Writer evaluates author or characters, but without support</td>
<td>Writer does not evaluate author or character’s actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>evaluations with specific reasons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students were assigned a number so that writing tasks were scored blind. Scores from the treatment class and comparison class were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA to determine whether there was a difference in the level of improvement between students in the two classes.

The reading interest questionnaire was scored and analyzed using a dependent samples \( t \) test. These results were combined with analysis of the post interviews, as well
as students’ class participation in order to triangulate the data and fully examine students’
attitudes towards school literacy and critical literacy.

*Table 3.9*

*Writing Task Rubric: Critical Literacy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>High (3 pts)</th>
<th>Medium (2 pts)</th>
<th>Low (1 pt)</th>
<th>0 Pts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problematizing assumptions</td>
<td>Recognize assumption made; state problems with assumption or give reasons why it’s errant</td>
<td>Recognize assumption made; refute assumption without noting problems with logic or giving reasons why it’s wrong</td>
<td>Recognize assumption without challenging it</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing/challenging stereotypes</td>
<td>Recognize stereotype stated; challenge stereotype and provide reasons why it’s inaccurate and provide counternarrative example</td>
<td>Recognize stereotype stated; challenge stereotype and provide reasons why it’s inaccurate</td>
<td>Recognize stereotype without challenging it or providing any reasons against it</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of power at work in a text</td>
<td>Recognize the ways in which the author uses his or her own bias to position groups of people as inferior. Note specific language used</td>
<td>Question or challenge author’s biases; may ask if author is racist/sexist, etc. Recognize author’s purpose/message/intent for text</td>
<td>Noting how text makes one feel in terms of racism, sexism, etc. “I don’t like this text because I think girls should be able to do what they want.”</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noting abstract concepts of inequality/oppression</td>
<td>Note problems such as racism, sexism, classism and provide reasons/evidence to support claim</td>
<td>Note that something is racist, sexist but do not provide reasons/evidence in support</td>
<td>Note unfairness of text or circumstance</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The TIA tests of the treatment group and comparison group were scored blind and analyzed using an independent-samples *t* test to determine any difference between the two classes.

**Treatment Group Instruction**

I was the primary teacher approximately four days a week from January through May 2014. On Fridays, the class read the selected novel for the study independently under the supervision of the cooperating teacher. The Four Resources Model (Freebody & Luke, 1990) was the theoretical basis for instruction in that an effort was made to
address cognitive and critical aspects of literacy. Based on the literature regarding pedagogical approaches to critical literacy, the following approaches were used for instruction: drama pedagogy, discussion-based pedagogy, and book-based pedagogy.

Drama pedagogy included “Tableaux” (creating a frozen scene from a text); “Panel of Experts” (students become characters or relevant community members who are questioned by the class regarding a particular issue or problem); and “Teacher in Role” (teacher takes on the role of a particular character while students question the character and discuss particular issues related to the text).

To implement critical literacy through discussion, an effort was made to move away from teacher-dominated IRE structures and embrace a more dialogic stance (cf. Anderson, Chinn, Waggoner, & Nguyen, 1998) in teacher-led discussions. This meant that students had significant control of interpretation, considered others’ perspectives, explained positions, and collaboratively constructed arguments around a text in response to authentic questions (Wilkinson & Nelson, 2012). This discussion-based approach was easily integrated with critical literacy practices as it regularly provided students the opportunity to bring their interpretations to the fore in order to grapple with issues of race, gender, and class.

Finally, in implementing a book-based pedagogy, specific texts were selected for the opportunities they afforded for delving into critical literacy issues, as well as the appeal they held for students. Initially, excerpts from House on Mango Street (Cisernos, 1984) and Bronx Masquerade (Grimes, 2002) were used. Then students were given a list of books to choose from and took a class vote, selecting The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (Alexie, 2007). Alexie’s novel was the focus of instruction from
March through May. In addition, two articles from *Upfront Magazine* were used featuring the Little Rock Nine, and affirmative action.

To address specific comprehension needs of the students, comprehension strategy instruction (Raphael, George, Weber, & Nies, 2009) was interwoven into instruction. A small repertoire of comprehension strategies was modeled, with an emphasis on small-group discussions where strategies were practiced and texts discussed. These strategies included asking questions, drawing inferences, making predictions, making connections, and responded emotionally to the text. When reading independently, students used a reading code that correlated with the comprehension strategies, marking on post-it notes in order to engage with comprehension strategies while reading. Vocabulary instruction was also included, focusing on the use of context clues in order to determine the meaning of unknown words.

Finally, writing was also a focus of instruction. Students were assigned personal journals that were used daily and then collected at the end of the study. For the first five to ten minutes of class, students wrote in their journals. They had the option for a free write, although prompts were provided. Prompts alternated between those related to the text, connected to critical literacy issues, and creative-writing prompts. There were two essay writing assignments as well: students traced one pattern of stereotyping across three commercials or cartoons, and students wrote a letter to their principal, arguing to keep or ban the *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) from their school.
Comparison Group Instruction

Both the treatment group and the comparison group were taught during a 60-minute reading course. The reading course was required by the district; however, there was no specified curriculum, and the students did not receive grades.

The comparison group was taught by the regular homeroom teacher, and she worked in collaboration with me to select texts and develop lesson plans. Short fiction and nonfiction texts were selected from readworks.org (2015) that were written at a 5th to 6th grade reading level. Comprehension instruction such as main idea and supporting details, summarizing, and differentiating facts from opinions was the focus of instruction. There also was an emphasis on vocabulary. Each day, the cooperating teacher selected words to teach ahead of time, asking students to first guess at the meaning, using context, then look up the definitions and discuss prior to reading the text. Like the treatment group, the class was taught for 60 minutes a day. All students in both the treatment and comparison group then attended a 90-minute language arts class taught by the seventh grade language arts teacher. No critical literacy instruction took place outside of the treatment group’s reading class with the researcher. This was determined through interviews with the language arts teacher and cooperating teacher, as well as an observation of the courses.
CHAPTER 4
ENACTING CRITICAL LITERACY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a context in which to consider the findings of the research related to the three research questions. In this chapter, I describe the school, the students, and the instruction, and I provide examples of the critical literacy work conducted throughout the study. This chapter is divided into five sections: the first provides a description of the setting for instruction and my positioning as the researcher; the second section describes the pedagogy and texts used; the third provides excerpts of critical literacy discussions focusing on gender, race, and poverty and provides analysis of these discussions; the fourth section examines the intersection of critical literacy events and comprehension; the final section discusses conclusions drawn from the discourse analysis.

Setting and Researcher Positionality

The background of the students and description of the school environment is important when considering the experiential knowledge the students bring to conversations about race, gender, poverty, and issues of equity. It is also important to understand the context of the school when considering the instruction for the treatment group. The initial resistance to instruction is not surprising when considering the typical pedagogies implemented in most of the students’ classes, particularly their reading and language arts class; the pedagogies used in this study were a new experience.
The description of my positioning provides transparency as to the lens with which I interpreted the data and is an attempt to be reflexive in the reporting of the research.

The description of the treatment group’s instruction, detailing the critical literacy instruction, drama instruction, and comprehension instruction allows for transparency as to what took place. In order to interpret and understand the findings of the study, a clear picture of the instruction is needed.

The discussions provided demonstrate that 1) critical literacy instruction took place and principles important to critical pedagogy were implemented, and 2) that high level comprehension took place during the critical literacy discussions. Again, these example discussions allow for transparency, provide evidence that critical literacy was practiced, and are themselves important findings regarding the comprehension that took place during critical literacy discussions. With a thick description of the setting, students, and instruction, the results of the assessments can be considered.

**Westland Middle School.** Westland Middle School (all names are pseudonyms) is located in an impoverished, inner-city neighborhood. The area is known for the high incidence of drug and sex trafficking, as well as violence. Shootings are a regular occurrence in the area, and in the summer after the study, a student of Westland Middle School was shot and killed. Violence and poverty are simply a part of life for students at Westland Middle School. The students in the study all qualified for free and reduced lunch, and many students lived with one parent or a relative (aunt or grandmother). Still, most students did not consider themselves to be poor but identified as middle-class. Racially, approximately half of the participants were African-American, and half were white. There were a small number of Latino/a students, as well as biracial students.
Teachers at Westland Middle School were highly focused on discipline and behavior. In most classrooms, desks were kept in rows to discourage students from talking, and instruction consisted mainly of lecture and independent seatwork. Students did not typically participate in class discussions or small group work, as evidenced by the Language Arts teacher’s comment to me, “You should come videotape in my room—no one ever talks.” She saw silence in the classroom as evidence of good learning. However, off-task behavior, such as writing and passing notes or throwing various objects was common, and teachers frequently resorted to yelling in response to students’ behavior. Students were also regularly sent out of the classroom due to misbehavior. They were sent to a neighboring teacher’s classroom where they were expected to sit quietly for the duration of the period (thus missing classroom instruction). Another common response to behavior was being written up with a “190.” This was a report filled out by the teacher that was sent to the office and kept on file. After an accumulation of 190s, the dean of students would take disciplinary action, such as an in-school or out-of-school suspension. There was no other classroom management plan outside of chastising students orally, sending kids out of the room, or writing them up. As a result, a negative, punitive atmosphere permeated the classrooms.

It should be noted, however, that this punitive culture was not a result of teachers’ lack of caring for their students. Conversations with the homeroom teacher and the social studies teacher on the team revealed the teachers’ deep concern for their students’ well being and learning. The social studies teacher had taught in the school for over a decade, and the cooperating teacher would often seek his counsel with how to handle various situations for her students. These conversations revealed an understanding of the
students’ difficult situations outside of school and an earnest desire to do what was best for their students. In spite of this, the negative culture of the school permeated most classrooms, and teachers exhibited frustration and weariness regarding students’ behavior, as demonstrated by the amount of yelling, the quickness to send students out of the classroom, and the large number of 190s written for students. Students appeared to be aware of this culture. One student, who was quiet, rarely in trouble, and academically high-performing, enjoyed drawing caricatures of her teachers. Her cartoon of the social studies teacher depicted him yelling and writing a student up with a 190. Her view of him as a teacher was largely negative, despite his deep commitment to the school and community.

**Researcher positionality.** One important aspect of my positioning as a researcher is my background as a middle school language arts teacher in urban schools. I am familiar with the difficulties that come with teaching middle school students who can often be a challenge in terms of classroom management. I am also familiar with the challenges of teaching minority students from low-SES families. This background can make me both sympathetic to and more critical of urban teachers. On the one hand, I understand the difficulties they encounter as I encountered them myself; on the other, because I too taught in a similar environment, I may be quick to judge a teacher who may not seem to be giving his or her students the opportunities they deserve. I may also be more apt to criticize teachers who do not believe that poor, urban students are just as capable as students from more privileged backgrounds.

I am also a former resident of the school neighborhood, which provides me some insight into the lived experiences of the students. I lived next to drug dealers and
prostitutes, and regularly witnessed the high level of violence that took place in the neighborhood. As a result, I have empathy for the students as I have some understanding as to what they confront in their daily lives. This may cause me to have more patience with their disruptive behavior than a teacher who has never lived in the neighborhood.

I also bring both a cognitive and critical paradigm to my practice and research. I understand the importance of students’ attaining particular levels of reading comprehension and am interested in the various methods that help students become “successful readers” by the U.S. education system’s current standards. I also understand that these standards promote an autonomous view of literacy in which power structures are not considered (cf., Street, 1985). I understand that minority and impoverished students are often systematically disenfranchised in our education system, and I want to seek ways to uncover and correct inequalities.

I also believe that as an outsider, I have a different perspective and lived experience than the teachers of Westland Middle School. As an outsider who is not subject to the pressures of the district and does not have to answer to a principal or worry about test scores, I may view students’ learning and behavior differently than a teacher of the school. I may be uneasy with a teacher’s decision to eject a student from class because I sympathize with the student and do not have the pressures of standardized testing looming. Nor have I had to cope with students’ disruptive behaviors all year long. I believe that being a teacher at Westland Middle School day in and day out, taking on the daily pressures and difficulties would likely alter my perspective. Consequently, while I easily empathize with the students, I also have a great deal of respect for the teachers of Westland Middle School and attempt to view their teaching from a judgment-
free, respectful standpoint. It is with these perspectives and positioning that I come to the data and interpret the work that the students and I did.

**Instruction**

**Texts.** Critical literacy instruction began in January 2014. Initially, portions of *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1985) and *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002) were used with a focus on issues of gender. Next, a unit on stereotypes took place, using commercials and cartoons to investigate stereotypes of men, women, white people, people of color, and the rich and the poor. During Black History Month, several nonfiction articles were used from *Upfront Magazine* that focused on African American history and issues pertaining to race. March through May, the focus of instruction was the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) and issues of poverty and race that arose from the text.

**Initial resistance to instruction.** Initially, students resisted instruction, which included daily writing, discussions (both whole class and small group), and small group, collaborative work, and drama pedagogy. Instruction required active engagement, and students seemed initially to prefer to remain passive. Whenever given the opportunity to read quietly and complete an assignment, students readily participated. But when asked to discuss a topic or work collaboratively in a small group, they resisted and initially refused. Often, students put their heads down and declined to participate. At other times, they carried on unrelated conversations, passed notes, or threw pencils and paper-wads at one another instead of participating in the class work.

Upon reflection, I believe there were two possible reasons behind the students’ resistance. The first reason is that students initially resisted me as a white woman, which
I only realized later when I was transcribing video. Early on in the study, the camera was near Naje and David, who are both African American, and who were talking throughout my lesson instead of participating. At one point, I corrected Naje, saying, “Naje, I need you to turn around and stop talking.” When Naje continued talking, David quietly mimicked me, saying, “Naje, turn around and stop talking like the white lady said.” He matched my tone exactly, making it clear I was being mocked. At this point in the study, I had been working in the classroom for three weeks, and all of the students knew my name. David opted to call me “the white lady” instead of Ms. Nelson for a reason. The term “white lady” was used in a derogatory sense, naming me as one more white person who was in a position of power over the students. As was described earlier, often the middle school teachers (who all were white) yelled at students, sent them out of the room, and wrote them up. David’s calling me “the white lady” cast me as one more white person who expected their obedience and would likely exert her dominance through yelling and disciplinary action. David’s comment made it clear that I had not yet won the students’ trust, and there were significant racial barriers that I needed to overcome. With racism, there will always be barriers to overcome, both within myself and for others.

A second possibility for the students’ resistance is that the work of examining issues of gender in the two texts was initially too abstract. The students were asked to note and challenge underlying assumptions about gender after reading excerpts from *The House on Mango Street* and *Bronx Masquerade*. However, this was the first time students had engaged in explicit critical literacy in school, and they had difficulty articulating the unspoken values and assumptions inherent in the texts; I was asking them to name and understand abstract terms before I had helped them to first engage with the
concept of sexism concretely. Wood (1998) asserted that teaching that requires students to engage in abstract thinking or problem-solving without first drawing strong connections between the abstract and concrete problems is doomed to fail. I had not grounded the concepts of critical literacy and gender in anything concrete. The result was that students opted not to participate. They did not engage in discussions as a whole class or small group, and they did not complete writing assignments. Therefore, I decided to take a new direction that would help concretize the critical literacy work.

**Pedagogy.** The first successful critical literacy work was a unit on the media and stereotyping, based on a unit in Linda Christensen’s *Reading, Writing, and Rising up* (2000). I explained the concept of stereotypes before showing students clips of cartoons and commercials. By using cartoons, the students were able to see what had been invisible in the texts. The underlying assumptions about race and gender were more obvious in a visual medium, which made the critical literacy concepts more concrete. Together, the students and I charted the various stereotypes we observed according to gender, race, and class. Gradually, students recognized patterns across multiple cartoons and commercials. The unit culminated in a writing assignment in which students traced a pattern of stereotyping for one group of people across several examples of cartoons and/or commercials. This was the first written assignment that all students completed.

The first successful discussion surrounded the issue of segregation. Students read an article titled “The Little Rock Nine” (Roberts, 2012) in *Upfront Magazine* (a periodical for high school students created by the *New York Times*). After reading the article, I showed students demographics of various school districts in the surrounding areas. There were suburban districts with percentages as high as 90% for whites with no
African Americans, whereas urban districts showed much higher percentages of minorities. The students moved their desks to create a large circle, and I asked the question, “Do we still have a problem with segregation today?” While not all students spoke, all were engaged. They all appeared attentive, and there were no off-topic conversations, students with their heads down, or off-task behaviors. A larger number of students than usual spoke in the discussion, and students connected their thoughts to what the class had worked on in the previous unit regarding stereotypes. Students were able to bring their knowledge of the world and experience to the discussion, and many were passionate about the topic.

In March, the students were given a list of books to choose from and voted on the book they wanted to read as a class. The list of books were *Black and White* (Volponi, 2006); *Sold* (McCormick, 2006), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), and *Monster* (Myers, 1999). I read a few pages from each book, and they selected Sherman Alexie’s (2007) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* because they said they liked the style of writing and thought it was funny. Alexie is a Spokane Indian, and the young adult novel is highly autobiographical, telling the story of a boy who decides to attend a rich, white school 25 miles off his reservation.

Several days were spent providing students with background information about the history of Native Americans and the current reality on reservations using articles and video clips prior to starting the novel. Once the class started the novel, students received their own copy of the book and were given the period to read to simply allow them a chance to engage with the story. When asked their first impressions, many students noted that the book was both “sad and funny.” Several students also noted the theme of
race/racism, and nearly the entire class was enthusiastic about the book. One girl who had been resistant to instruction, frequently putting her head down or writing notes during class, asked if she could take the book home to continue reading. Throughout the novel, students read in small groups, and independently. There were regular discussions as a whole class about issues such as poverty, racism, the whitewashing of beauty standards, hopelessness and race/poverty, racial slurs, and rich schools versus poor schools.

Instruction surrounding the novel varied, incorporating regular discussions, small group work, journal responses, and process drama. Approximately once a week, the class engaged in drama strategies surrounding scenes rich for investigation of critical literacy issues. For instance, in a scene where a character used a racial slur, students created several tableaux to step into the scene, followed by a discussion about the author’s choice to use that word. A tableaux is a frozen scene where students step into the role of a particular character and create a silent, frozen moment from the text. I then tapped students to illicit a comment from their character’s point of view regarding what that character was thinking or feeling in the moment. Initially, I selected scenes for tableaux, but eventually, students began pointing out scenes in the novel they thought would be good for tableaux.

For the most part, tableaux was used for drama work, although occasionally ‘Teacher in Role’ and ‘Panel of Experts’ strategies were used as well. The Teacher in Role strategy involved me stepping into the role of a character (or the author) while the students asked me questions regarding a particular topic. I answered as though I were the character or author. In Panel of Experts, a small group of students stepped into the role
of various characters from the group while the rest of the class asked them questions regarding a particular issue. Students responded as though they were the character.

Students also wrote in their personal journals regularly, reflecting on the issues that were discussed or focused on via drama. Students were asked to write in response to a prompt for approximately 10 minutes and then were given the opportunity to share what they had written.

Comprehension instruction was implemented in concert with critical literacy instruction. According to the Four Resources Model (Freebody & Luke, 1990), literacy is multi-faceted, including critical and cognitive aspects. To embody this model of literacy, comprehension strategy instruction was implemented in addition to critical literacy: a small repertoire of comprehension strategies were modeled, with opportunities for students to practice and discuss strategies in small groups. Students’ use of strategies was scaffolded with a gradual release of responsibility (Raphael, George, Weber, & Nies, 2009). The strategies taught focused on making inferences, making connections, asking questions, making predictions, and responding emotionally to the text.

Students were assigned to small, heterogeneous groups of four. After initially learning a strategy, all students practiced the strategy together. As they learned more strategies, students were all assigned different strategies that they shared with one another. Eventually students were not assigned a strategy but were expected to engage with comprehension strategies and share their thoughts with their group. The small-group approach was used so students who struggled with decoding were given opportunities to read with others and keep up with their progress in the novel. These small-group sessions also provided students opportunities to discuss aspects of the novel.
they felt were important, allowing them to take ownership of their engagement with the text and to benefit from others’ perspectives.

Students also practiced the comprehension strategies during their independent reading. They were given post-it notes and a reading code to represent the strategies taught (such as marking a “?” for a question), and students posted notes throughout their book as they read. Students typically read in their small groups two to three days a week, read independently one day a week, and participated in drama pedagogy once a week. Small-group and whole-class discussions occurred throughout the week.

Some attention was also given to vocabulary knowledge. Students were encouraged to note words for which the meaning was unknown and to use the surrounding sentences to infer the meaning. When it was still too difficult to determine the meaning of the word, students were then encouraged to look up words in the classroom dictionaries. When reading nonfiction articles from *Upfront Magazine*, a glossing strategy was used as I selected vocabulary I anticipated would be difficult for the students. Students were asked to guess the meaning using the sentence from the text and share with a partner. Then, in partners, students looked up the words using a dictionary and discussed their meaning in the context prior to reading the article.

**Critical Literacy Discussions**

Critical literacy discussions were an integral part of instruction and took place multiple times a week. Discussions were both planned and organic. I selected topics to discuss, often tying these discussions to drama. Additionally, discussions arose organically from students’ comments and journal entries. Whole-class discussions were always conducted in a large circle to signify to the students that they were to have a
conversation with one another, instead of engaging in the typical Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern of classroom discourse (Wilkinson & Nelson, 2012) in which the teacher and students engage in a question and answer session with the teacher positioned as the expert who evaluates the responses of the students. I made the norms of discussion explicit to students, asking them to build on one another’s ideas, to use evidence from the text and their own lives to support their ideas, to challenge ideas, and to listen carefully to one another. I let students know the goal was for the class to grapple with issues presented in the book, such as racism or poverty, and for the class to come to a deeper understanding of the topic. Usually, discussions were centered around a central, authentic question, such as “Whose fault is it that the reservation schools are bad?”

**Gender and intersectionality.** The following excerpt from a whole-class discussion is taken from the unit focused on stereotypes using video clips of cartoons and commercials. In this excerpt, students had watched a clip from Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* in which the villagers call Bell strange because she likes to read. Students were prompted to examine gender stereotypes. The purpose of this excerpt is to demonstrate the way students engaged in critical literacy surrounding gender, noting underlying assumptions about women, and to examine the comprehension skills enacted during this excerpt.

Trevon: They say Bell is strange.
Kate: Why is she strange?
Kelly: Because she reads books.
Kate: So what’s the implication there?
Trevon: Girls shouldn’t read books I guess.
Kate: And what are they valued for?
David: Looks.
Others: Beauty.
Students noted how the villagers think Bell is strange because she reads books. When pushed further, they stated that this reveals an assumption that women should not read but are instead valued for their looks. Or in other words, a woman’s beauty is what matters, not her intelligence.

The following whole-class discussion took place during the same unit after viewing a video clip of Disney’s *Aladdin* in which Aladdin rescues Princess Jasmine from Jaffar. Again students were asked to examine gender stereotypes exhibited in the clip. The purpose of this excerpt is to demonstrate the students’ critical literacy practices noting stereotypes and underlying assumptions about gender and its intersectionality with race, as well as the comprehension skills of making connections and inferences.

Kate: [Asks about thoughts about men/women from clip]
TJ: Women are always princesses.
Kate: What kinds of things go along with being a princess?
Dylan: Men is always the one that saves the princess.
Kate: What does that imply about the princess?
Trevon: She’s weak.
Student: Hopeless.
Alina: For men, there’s a competition for who’s gonna marry the princess.
Trevon: True.
Kate: So it’s like the princess is seen as the prize.
Natasha: That’s how Olive Oil was (referencing Popeye cartoon viewed previously).
Kate: Thank you, Natasha, that’s how Olive was, the men were fighting over Olive, the men were fighting over her like she’s a trophy, not like she’s a person with her own will, but like she’s something to win.
Natasha: In the movie, it’s a movie called “White Chicks,” and they bid over the women.
Kate: They bid over the women, she said, just like she’s a prize, a thing to win.
Naje: Yeah, like that, what’s that called, it’s called—
Student: Roots.
Naje: Yeah, like in that movie, “Roots”.
Kate: That has implications about owning Africans. I like the parallel that Naje just drew there. She noticed that women being treated like they were
property is the same as how slaves were treated, like property. In both cases, it’s not treating them like they’re people.

In this second excerpt, students noted that women were always princesses. When pushed, they revealed that one typical trait of a princess is that she always needs to be saved by a man. Again, I challenged students to go beyond the surface, asking for the underlying assumption, and the students stated that this implies that princess are “weak” or “hopeless.” Alina added to this, saying that princesses are seen as a prize to win, and Natasha supported Alina’s claim with additional examples. Naje then deepened the analysis by comparing the view of women as objects to be won to the way Africans were viewed and sold (or “won” by the highest bidder). Thus she’s marked this view of women as unjust, similar to the injustice of slavery, rejecting this perspective of women. Her comment also highlights the intersectionality of race and gender. Whereas I, as a white woman, may be able to separate the oppression of women from the oppression of people of color, for Naje, an African American girl, the two are inextricably linked. By linking our discussion of gender and women to the movie Roots, she marked sexism as oppressive in the same way that racism is, and in particular, the way that slavery is. Drawing a parallel between slavery and the view that women are prizes is a strong critique of sexism. It also speaks to Naje’s lived experience as an African American girl who doubtlessly experiences racism and sexism in a complex, inseparable way.

In both examples, students were examining representations of gender in Disney cartoons. In these conversations, students name behaviors of characters, and I prompt for the underlying values or assumptions behind those behaviors. Lewis (2001) asserted that it is the role of the teacher to push discussions into the critical realm, to examine relations
between power and race, gender, and class, so that “the nature of the talk…invite[s] readers to take up a critical stance towards texts, one that [leads] to the probing of cultural norms and textual ideologies” (p. 120). The above excerpts demonstrate this teacher-role of moving conversations toward the critical realm by pushing students to examine the underlying assumptions behind characters’ thoughts and actions.

Moving from the concrete (the villagers don’t like Bell, or the princesses are always being rescued by men) to the abstract, critical realm is difficult and required scaffolding from me as the teacher. Several times, I re-voiced the students’ comments, helping to clarify their critique. For instance, when Natasha said, “That’s how Olive Oil was,” the I responded, saying, “Thank you, Natasha, that’s how Olive was, the men were fighting over Olive, the men were fighting over her like she’s a trophy, not like she’s a person with her own will, but like she’s something to win.” I re-voiced her comment, then expanded on it to make it explicit that women were being treated like “something to win.” This kind of structure in dialogue is consistent with what Shor (1992) defined as problem-posing education. In problem-posing education, the focus is on how power is at work in institutions and society, and the status quo is to be questioned. Shor claimed that this problem-posing curriculum occurs during discussions where the teacher uses the students ideas and words to move them towards critical practices “where the teacher poses questions, listens carefully, and re-presents to the students what they have said for further reflection” (p. 54).

Furthermore, the stereotyping unit itself falls under what Shor would consider problem-posing education as the purpose was to view media excerpts of cartoons and commercials to examine and question the underlying assumptions made about men,
women, and people of color. Shor (1992) claimed that “We are inundated with messages and models for human behavior, such as that men are tough and self reliant…or that women belong in the kitchen” (p. 117), and that when offering students problem-posing curricula, we allow students to challenge these values of the dominant culture.

Finally, it is interesting to note that in each excerpt, students made inferences when engaging in critical literacy. Trevon inferred that women are not supposed to read books, and later inferred that princesses are weak since they need to be saved by a prince. In both cases, he was interrogating an underlying assumption behind stereotypes about women. Thus while engaging in critical literacy, he was also engaging in higher-order thinking via inferences. Furthermore, Natasha and Naje made connections to other cartoons and movies in order to emphasize the claim that women are treated as trophies and objects to be won. Naje’s connection was also an analogy, linking a view of women to slavery. This is an analytical move that again denotes higher-order thinking.

These discussions regarding gender indicate that students had overcome the initial difficulty of moving into the abstract realm of critical literacy. With my facilitation, they were able to name the abstract assumptions of sexism—that women should be valued for the beauty, not their intelligence, and that they are a prize to be won by men. Furthermore, Naje took their analysis deeper, connecting the notion that women are prizes to slavery, adding the element of intersectionality. Her comment linked the view of women in an abstract sense to the oppression of slavery. It was a strong critique of the view of women as trophies, and it marked this view of women as a form of oppression. These excerpts indicate that students were delving into the critical realm as they realized cartoons they had watched countless times were steeped in messages about men and
women. Students not only were able to notice and name these below-the-surface assumptions, they critiqued them and marked them as oppressive by linking them to slavery.

**Race and power dynamics.** The next excerpt is from a whole-class discussion that took place during Black History month, after students read an article entitled “The Little Rock Nine” in *Upfront Magazine*. Following the article, I shared demographics from various school districts in and around the city. A clear pattern emerged showing that wealthy, suburban schools were largely white (one district had no African-American students), whereas inner city, poorer schools were more diverse. I posed the question of whether or not segregation was still a problem and the following discussion ensued. The purpose of this excerpt is to illustrate students’ critical literacy practices regarding issues of race and its link to poverty, to demonstrate the way students’ voices were privileged, and to demonstrate the increased participation that occurred during this critical literacy event.

Andre: I’m just thinking about, ‘cause the reason there’s so many white people at Upper Arlington is because they probably make more money than everybody else.

Trevon: Yes.

Andre: So the schools are more rich, and they can go to D.C. [for an 8th grade trip] while we have to sit here.

Kate: So you’re saying it ends up like all white schools because those people have more money? So what’s the correlation? What’s the connection between race and wealth?

Kelly: Like that old cartoon we watched where the white people had the power, and now, in that 10% place, they [whites] have the power.

Kate: Okay, are you saying there are more rich white people than other races?

Trevon: Yeah.

Taylor: There’s more rich white people because more richer, white people work at banks, and banks don’t wanna hire black people to watch their money, because they think they’re gonna steal it.
Kate: Okay, are you saying there’s prejudice just within the entire system so it’s harder for a black person to get a good job and make good money, is that what you’re saying Taylor? (nods yes)

Andre: Because grown-ups now have been watching those cartoons and stuff (referencing cartoons we watched that had racial stereotyping) and I think there’s still a little bit more segregation, so I think they’re keeping it going.

(later in discussion)

Andre: Richer schools, like richer people, they send their kids to more educated schools, they’ve got newer things, more technology, more updated, so they get a better education while everybody else has to stay at the bottom, read from books, use like, BOX computers, and then, the rich people get to go to a better college while everybody else has to go to community college, online, can’t their education in high school, 30 years later, they gotta go online and get their college degree.

Kate: So I’m hearing you saying that going to a rich school gives you an advantage and you get into a good college, and then when you don’t go to a rich school, it’s harder to get into college and get a good job? So you’re saying this has a long-term effect?

This excerpt again demonstrates Shor’s (1992) notion of problem-posing education. As the teacher, I did not evaluate students’ answers but probed and re-voiced their ideas in order to push students to elaborate. This discussion also examined power relations in society at large, another facet of critical literacy education according to Shor.

Here, the students examined the equality (or lack thereof) in our education system. Students noted that schools that are mostly white also tend to be rich schools. When asked for the connection between rich schools and white schools, two students referenced the previous unit in which students examined cartoons and commercials for racist and sexist stereotyping. Here, they hypothesized that these stereotypes may have a lasting impact on people’s perceptions of African Americans, making it difficult for blacks to attain high paying jobs, thus resulting in fewer wealthy African Americans. Andre then went onto explain the cyclical nature of both wealth and poverty.
Giroux (1993) asserted that critical literacy involves organizing “curricula in ways that enable students to make judgments about how society is historically and socially constructed, how existing social practices are implicated in relations of equality and justice as well as how they structure inequalities around racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression” (p. 374). This lesson began with students reading an article on the historical event of desegregation and the Little Rock Nine, then became a discussion in which students connected racism and poverty, and elaborated on the consequences of the inequality of U.S. schools. They recognized that segregation is not an issue of the past, but has not in fact ended. They noted that the ways in which we are socialized often result in racist perceptions and the economic consequences of these perceptions for African Americans. Thus, historical and social constructions of society and institutions were examined in connection to systemic inequalities in terms of race, class, and education.

Students’ voices were positioned as having authority, while the authority of the teacher was de-centered, which according to Aukerman (2012) is a key element of critical literacy dialogue. For instance, the discussion was led with an authentic question (“Is segregation an issue today?”) in which the students had full authority to answer according to their own interpretations. I did not evaluate answers (i.e., I did not hold interpretative authority), and for the most part, students held the floor, thus creating a student-centered discussion. This kind of discussion deviated from the typical teacher-centric IRE structure, in which the teacher knows the answers, does most of the talking, and evaluates students’ answers as correct or incorrect.
The discussion also stemmed from students’ experience since it centered around the issue of schools. As a result, students were quick to participate and speak from their own experiences. Scholle and Denski (1993) highlight the importance of allowing students to draw upon their own experiences and use those experiences to critique the dominant culture. Shor (1992) argued that drawing upon students’ experiences to practice critical literacy reduces student’s need to resist learning and allows them to embrace their education “without fear of boredom” (p. 54). As this discussion was one of the first successful discussions in which many students thoughtfully participated, this discussion is consistent with Shor’s claims.

The next example is not a discussion excerpt but a particular event that is important regarding the issue of race, my rapport with the students, and the de-centering of my power as the teacher. During a week of test preparation, the students had been engaged in a practice test for the entire morning prior to coming to my class. As they entered, students were shrieking, shoving, laughing, and were excessively loud. I decided to try to play a quick game of Ms. Nelson Says (my version of Simon Says) to allow them to move around a bit. However, the students largely ignored me, as they continued to shout and shriek.

Out of frustration, I said, “Now, I was more than happy to let you get up and move around and let you talk for a few minutes just to get it out, but that was completely disrespectful, totally ridiculous, so never mind. I can totally empathize with having to test all day and not wanting to do anything, but I didn’t say to stand up and act like a bunch of monkeys and be as loud as possible, and that’s what you did, so never mind.” Naje shouted, “Monkeys!” followed by Trevon, who shouted back, “That’s racist!” The
class quieted, and I froze. I immediately regretted my words and was momentarily at a loss as to how to respond, particularly since I was supposed to be teaching them to be critical about issues of racism. I responded by saying, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it in that way, Trevon. I’m sorry. I meant goofing around. I meant, you just stood up, goofed around, and were loud. I’m sorry. In no way did I mean it that way.”

This event is significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that students were sensitive to language, noting when something had racist connotations. Trevon recognized the term ‘monkey’ as racist when aimed at African Americans. Despite my intentions, the word was racially charged, and he was able to recognize that.

Furthermore, the fact that Trevon confronted me in front of the entire class is significant. As was mentioned earlier, the students initially resisted me as a white woman. However, they did not overtly confront me or name the issue of race; they passively resisted and called me “the white lady” behind my back. In this instance, however, Trevon confronted me openly. I believe this means I had earned his trust, and even though I am white, he felt he could publicly confront me about an issue of race and trust that I would be receptive. Instead of dismissing him, taking disciplinary action, or becoming defensive, I apologized for the words I used and tried to make it clear that I had not meant to use the word in a racial way. This event demonstrates that the students had moved beyond resisting me as a white woman to engaging with me openly about issues of race, even when my own words were the issue. This kind of confrontation required a great deal of trust on Trevon’s part and illustrates the rapport that had been built between us. Through our work on critical literacy issues, the classroom had become a safer place for students, where even the teacher could be challenged.
Lastly, this event signifies the power dynamic of the classroom was one that de-centered my power as the teacher and allowed for students to hold equal power. Trevon felt it was within his power to confront me in front of the class without fear of any consequences. In many traditional classrooms, his confrontation could be construed as disrespectful. But in this instance, the confrontation was accepted, and my response was to apologize. By apologizing, I was allowing students to have the power to correct me. I believe that this shift in power happened gradually over the weeks spent in critical literacy discussions where students regularly held interpretative power, as well as control over turn-taking. Students had internalized this power dynamic and had come to see themselves as having power within my classroom. So while I deeply regretted the words I had used, I took comfort in the fact that Trevon felt safe enough to confront and correct me.

These examples illustrate the ways in which students engaged with issues of race and power, both in society and within our classroom. In our discussion about segregation, students grappled with the issue of power at the macro level. They immediately recognized the link between race and wealth. They understood that the ways in which power was constructed for whites and blacks were unequal and unjust and that racial prejudices had long-term, economic consequences.

The example from the classroom in which Trevon confronted me for using racist language also explores the issue of power, but at the micro level. Trevon, an African American boy, confronted me, a white woman, about using racist language. In a school environment where white teachers regularly yelled at students, ejected students from their classes, and wrote students up, he felt safe enough to publicly confront me about an issue
of race. He trusted that even though I am a white woman, I would be receptive to an accusation of racism from an African American student. The racial tension between the students and me, which had previously been present but unnamed, was now called to the fore. In a society that students had previously recognized as allotting more power to whites, and in a school where students did not hold power in relation to their teachers, Trevon acted as my equal. His comment spoke volumes in terms of the power dynamic of our classroom, demonstrating that the teacher and students, and whites and blacks were seen to be on more of an equal ground than was typical in that school.

Poverty and critical consciousness. In this excerpt, I modeled how to engage in a small-group discussion surrounding a “big question,” using reasons and evidence to back up claims. The purpose of this excerpt is to demonstrate students’ critique of American actions and society regarding poverty and Native Americans, as well as to examine the comprehension skills employed during the critical literacy event. I read a section of the novel aloud prior to posing the big question.

“All right, so what we’re gonna talk about today is Junior makes a statement that I’m gonna put on the board. He said, “My parents came from poor people who came from poor people, all the way back to the very first poor people… It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor… Poverty doesn’t give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty teaches you how to be poor” (pp. 12-13).

Kate: So my question is, is Junior right when he says poverty only teaches you to be poor? Is Junior right?
Trevon: Yes. Because the place he’s living at is crazy. Don’t have friends, gets beat, has parents that drink a lot, he’s poor, they can’t even eat. In the book it said he didn’t eat for 18 hours, so—

Kate: So you’re saying his situation is so bleak, it’s so awful that there’s no real way to come out of it?
Trevon: mmhmm
Kelly: Why can’t they just move off? Like when they get older, why can’t they just move off the reservation?

Natasha: Because they can’t afford it.

Trevon: They don’t have any money. How would they be able to do that?

Natasha: Is it legal?

Andre: If they were here first, why do they have to be on property, in poverty?

Kate: Why are they in poverty?

Andre: I mean, why are they on property [the Rez] if they were here first? Shouldn’t the English be on the reserve [reservation]?

Trevon: Yeah, ‘cause they was here first. Probably because we was smarter. We was smarter and came and built like cities.

Andre: The Indians were smarter.

Kate: Well, why did whites have power? How did they end up having more power?

Trevon: They [whites] tricked them [Indians].

Kate: They tricked them.

Trevon: They also had guns.

Kate: Yep. So I’m asking you, the question about poverty, is it true? Not just on a reservation, if you grow up anywhere in poverty in any circumstance?

Trevon: Nobody explains it. Because like Andre said, if you go through the school, you can’t be smarter or have a good education and people doubt you, they think you’re weak.

Natasha: But sometimes when people doubt you, it makes you stronger, you can go off and prove them wrong.

Andre: But they don’t believe that, they believe the other things people say.

Again, this discussion meets key criteria of critical literacy dialogue according to Aukerman (2012) as it was a student-centered discussion in which the teacher “de-centered” herself as the authority, allowing students to grapple with the question with very little intervention. Furthermore, the students questioned the historical and contemporary practice of confining Native Americans to reservations, thus evaluating how society is “historically and socially constructed,” embodying Giroux’s (1993) notion of critical literacy. In this discussion, students wrestled with issues of oppression and generational poverty, questioning equality of opportunity for Native Americans, as well as the justice of the reservation system, meaning the focus of this dialogue denotes what Shor (1992) called critical consciousness.
In addition, the students demonstrated an ability to use text evidence to support their claims and make inferences and evaluations while engaging in this critical literacy dialogue, meaning that in order to discuss a critical literacy issue, students engaged in higher-order thinking. Trevon backed his claim that Junior is correct that poverty only teaches you to be poor with text evidence, citing all the ways in which Junior’s environment is oppressive, thus holding him captive in poverty. Later, Trevon and Andre indirectly used the text to support their claim saying that “People doubt you,” and “They believe the things that other people say.” Here they were referencing parts of the book in which a white teacher told Junior that Indians are taught to feel inferior and that Junior and his peers accept this message subconsciously. When Kelly challenged Trevon’s stance about poverty, both Natasha and Trevon made an inference that families living on the reservation don’t have the resources to move to a better environment. Andre then engaged in a critical critique by questioning the practice of placing Indians on a reservation, thus making an evaluation. These practices, using text evidence, making inferences, and making evaluations are markers of higher-order thinking and denote strong comprehension.

This discussion excerpt is important as it demonstrates the way that students not only engaged in a critical discussion about poverty, but critiqued the wider system. They rejected the common American narrative that individuals can pull themselves out of poverty. Instead, Trevon cited the oppressive circumstances of life as on a reservation as evidence that certain levels of poverty are too difficult to overcome. Furthermore, Trevon recognized that a person growing up in that level of poverty would not receive a strong enough education to overcome their situation, thus recognizing that education
opportunities and subsequent economic opportunities are not equal across economic classes. Andre also critiqued the historical practice of placing Native Americans on reservations, noting that it is Europeans who should be on the reservation. Trevon adds that the reason Europeans hold the power is because they “tricked” the Native Americans and possessed more destructive weapons (guns). Both boys critiqued the actions of the American government and its people, asserting that 1) American Indians have the true claim to the land and 2) Europeans acquired the land unfairly through deception and force. This discussion shows the way that students have moved beyond discussing surface level ideas to exploring abstract concepts such as oppression, inequality of opportunity, and the United States’ unjust treatment of the Native Americans. Though short, this discussion yields heavy critique against the actions of the U.S. government and demonstrates the students’ developing critical consciousness.

**Student-initiated critical literacy.** The following small group discussion among four students, is peer-led and demonstrates a student initiated discussion about race. This group met to read and discuss the book *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007). There is no teacher present in the discussion; a student in the group came up with the questions for their discussion. The purpose of this excerpt is to illustrate students’ use of text evidence and experiential knowledge to support a claim, and inference-making during a critical literacy event. It also demonstrates that students initiated a critical literacy topic independently as a student brought up the issue of race on her own.

Kelly: Wait, hold up, why would [the Spokane Indians] think [Junior’s] a traitor if he just went to a school, but he still lives on the reservation?
Camille: Because they probably had, because they probably never had anyone else do that before that on the Rez, he's the first person to do it so it's (inaudible).

Kelly: Okay do you think Eugene has any medical experience and if not, why do you think Junior would make him sew up his head?

Antoine: Maybe he learned [to sew stitches] when, maybe he wrecked his bike, maybe, remember it said he wrecked his bike, and like—

Camille: Oh, he says on page 147, I didn't shoot them “Of course because I was already in Eugene's ambulance with my mother and father on the way to Spokane.”

[later in discussion]

Kelly: Why do you think Rowdy is so mad that Junior went to the white school to make his life better?

Camille: Because I think that Junior was his own family member, the only person he cared about in his (???) and it says that somewhere in the book, in later, in past chapters.

Antoine: Mr. P [referencing where Mr. P tells Junior that he’s the only person Rowdy cares about]. He tells him that he’s the only thing [Rowdy]

Kelly (interrupts) cares about.

Antoine: Yeah.

Kelly: Okay. Do you think Penelope’s dad will ever accept Junior?

Andre: No.

Camille: I think he has to be like Roger for him to accept him. Especially if he’s racist. [Roger and Penelope are both white; Junior is Indian].

Kelly: How did you feel when Penelope's dad said, "Don't you come back if you get my daughter pregnant and make charcoal babies"?

Camille: He's racist! I felt like he's a racist person.

Kelly: Now, why do you think people are racist? What causes people to think bad things about people?

Antoine: Because their parents teach them like that.

Kelly: Okay, what if someone grows up in a non-racist house and they grow up and they're racist?

Andrea: Maybe because they see their friends being racist and they think it's cool for their friends to be racist, so they be racist.

Camille: And yeah, a lot of little kids look up to big people.

Andrea: Especially if they go over to their friend’s house, their friend’s house and they hear their parents talking about people, being like, racist, like saying "We don't want our kids going to a school with black people and stuff,” they're gonna grow up and be like that be like, "Oh look, my friends parents are like this, so I wanna be like this."
Camille: I think you can't, you can't expect a child to grow up different, you can't expect a child to grow different or be a different person without a different influence. You can't expect him to—

Kelly: So you're saying that the environment that you live in affects the way you grow up and the person you will be.

This discussion was entirely student led with no intervention from a teacher, thus altering power dynamics in the classroom (cf., Shor, 1992) by positioning students as leaders of their own discussion and learning. Not only did the students have interpretative authority, but they had authority over the topic as a student posed the questions to the group. Without question, this discussion demonstrates Aukerman’s (2012) principle of student-centered dialogue and the de-centered authority of the teacher.

In this discussion, students interrogated the issue of race, both in relation to the text, as well as abstractly. Interestingly, this issue was brought up by a student, not the instructor, indicating they may have been taking up critical literacy perspectives independent of the instructor’s guidance. Kelly first asked if students think a white character’s father, who is flagrantly racist, would ever accept Junior as her boyfriend (Junior is an Indian). Students briefly discussed the issue before Kelly asked how people become racist in the first place, inviting students to question the process of socialization that results in racism, or as Giroux says, “[raise] questions about how the categories of race, class, and gender are shaped within the margins and center of power” (375).

Students appear to draw upon their own experience in answering the question, noting the influence of a child’s environment in shaping his or her worldview.

As with the previous example, this discussion again demonstrates higher-order thinking in conjunction with critical literacy practices. When asked why the Spokane Indians are angry with Junior when he leaves the Rez to go to the white school, Camille
inferred that he is likely the first Indian to ever do such a thing, thus explaining the shock and sense of betrayal of the Spokane tribe. Again, when Kelly asked if Penelope’s dad (a white character) would ever accept Junior as her boyfriend, Camille inferred that Junior would have to be “like Roger” to ever be accepted. Seeing that Roger is a white, middle class boy, Camille inferred that Junior had to be white and middle class in order to gain acceptance from Penelope’s dad.

Throughout the discussion, students used text evidence and experiential knowledge to support their reasoning. Antoine and Camille both cited the text to support their claim that Eugene has medical experience. Camille again cited the text when explaining why Rowdy feels so betrayed when Junior goes to the white school, stating the text said he felt that Junior was family and that Junior was the only person Rowdy cared about. When addressing the question of how people become racist, Camille and Andrea relied on experiential knowledge, citing environmental influences. Thus there are indicators of higher-order thinking and strong comprehension as students integrated text evidence to support claims and made inferences throughout the dialogue.

The next excerpt is from a whole-class discussion focused on the U.S. education system and class. After a journal prompt asking students whether they would do what Junior did, transfer to the best school in Columbus, students shared their responses, and it became a discussion about rich schools versus poor schools—which were better and why. After approximately 10 minutes of discussion, David asked if we could circle the desks up and have “one of those discussions.” The remainder of the period was spent discussing the issue of rich schools and poor schools: were rich schools better, and if so, why? The purpose of this excerpt is to illustrate the student initiated critical literacy
practices engaging in issues of poverty, the increased participation, as well as to demonstrate the higher-order comprehension skills that took place during the critical literacy event.

Kate: So, what do you think? Are the rich schools better than poor schools?
Autumn: No. You may not learn the same things or get the same education, but you still have an opportunity if you take it, if you wanna get a job, or go to college.
Trevon: BUT, if you say you get a chance for the poor students, it’s not a BIG chance that you would do if you was at a white school, or rich school. You would get a better chance to be somebody if you was in a rich school.
TJ: Because you would have a better background.
David: Because they have a better education at the rich school, so
Autumn: See but look it, what was that teacher's name? [from the novel] Mr. P? Mr. P, he looked at Junior and said, "Take a chance," he took that chance and went to Reardon. It's all based on what your teachers are telling you too, if they're saying "You're never gonna have a chance" you're not gonna believe in yourself and you're not gonna know what you wanna do.
Trevon: That's not true.
Autumn: Yes it is! Because, let’s say, one of your teachers or all of your teachers are like, "You can't do that, it's too hard," are you really gonna wanna go for it?
Trevon: Yes!
TJ: Yeah, it's called a challenge.
Autumn: Some people who already have low self-confidence aren't gonna do it.
Trevon: Well, that's dumb.
Autumn: So if your teachers are saying you can do this, you have an opportunity, you should take it, and they believe in you, you'll believe in yourself more and you're gonna wanna take more chances.
Natasha: But that's for the people who have low self-esteem and don't know what they're gonna do with their life.
Trevon: I agree with that, I agree.
Autumn: A lot of these people that go to poor schools, do you really think they're gonna have high self-confidence?
Taylor: I went to poor schools all my life and I skipped freaking kindergarten because I knew how to read and write in preschool.
Kate: How'd you know, how?
Taylor: Just because it was a poor school, my teachers were still good.
David: That's a good one, good one
Kate: So how smart you are doesn't depend on where you came from?
TJ: No it depends on how your parents raised you, to be good or bad.
Kate: So Taylor, do you think that had anything to do with the fact that you were really smart? How your parents raised you?
Taylor: It was pretty much my mom. My mom was a lawyer, and then she got pregnant with my sister, so she stopped working, and she still read to me all the time and taught me how to write my name and tie my shoes.

Kate: Okay, so how does that affect what kind of students you are?

David: ‘Cause like, how her mom and stuff talked to her, that's how she got skipped because her mom always helped her and she learned from her mom, and that's how she makes her decisions.

Kate: Okay, what does Taylor's experience have to do with rich schools and poor schools and good schools and bad schools? How is that connected to what we were talking about?

David: Because like, the poor schools, the parents probably like, since they're poor, they always gotta try to get money and stuff so they probably don't have the time to teach them and stuff.

This discussion was initiated by a student, David, who wanted to turn their time of sharing what they had written in their journals into “one of those discussions,” meaning when students circled their chairs, and I participated as a facilitator, but not an authority. The fact that this was student-initiated and contains numerous student-to-student interchanges indicates this is a student-centered discussion, with the authority of the instructor de-centered. It is also significant that David initiated this discussion and was active throughout the entire 45 minutes as he is the same student who initially rejected my authority and called me “the white lady.” Finally, this discussion is problem-posing in nature as students were interrogating whether rich schools are better than poor schools, and why (Aukerman, 2012; Shor, 1992).

The topic of the discussion, the inequality between rich and poor schools aligns with Giroux’s (1993) claim that schools are not neutral; instead schools are sites that produce privilege or marginalization. As Giroux stated, “In effect, they [schools] both produce and legitimate cultural differences as part of their project of constructing particular knowledge/power relations” (p. 373). In the above discussion, the text that launched the discussion featured an American Indian who chose to attend a rich, white
school instead of his reservation school so that he could gain the privilege produced from such a school. In their conversation, students struggled with why rich and poor schools are so different and who or what is to blame for the inequality of U.S. schools. As with the discussion regarding segregation, the topic was closely tied to the students’ experience, thus allowing for greater student participation (Shor, 1992). Students who generally did not typically speak up in whole class discussions, such as David, TJ, and Taylor, all contributed.

As with previous discussions, there are examples of higher-order thinking in connection to a critical literacy topic. Autumn used sophisticated text analysis to support her claim that students in poor schools can do well as long as they have teachers who encourage them, using Mr. P and Junior from the novel as an example. When challenged by Trevon, who asserted that some people excel anyway because they like a challenge, she drew from her own experience attending an impoverished school to refute him, claiming that most students from a poor background will not have the self-confidence to do well without encouragement from adults. Taylor also drew on her own experience to defend the claim that students in poor schools can be high-achieving, stating that she skipped kindergarten because her mother taught her to read and write. David then inferred that the reason students in poor schools tend to perform worse academically is because most parents are too busy working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Here, he likely was drawing from his experiential knowledge to make an inference regarding the difference between rich and poor schools. Thus the use of text-evidence, experiential knowledge, and inference-making to support claims is evident throughout this critical literacy discussion.
These two examples provide further evidence that students engaged in critical discussions about race and poverty and that during these discussions, they employed higher-order thinking and comprehension skills. What is unique about these examples is that they are student-initiated. In the first example, the small group discussion was entirely student led, meaning that the issue of race was brought up by a student. This indicates that students may be beginning to think about critical issues such as race in their own reading, without the guidance of the teacher. In the second example, the topic was introduced by me; however, it was the students who initiated a full, whole-class discussion for the entire period. David asked if we could move the desks and have “one of those discussions,” seeming to recognize that the issue of rich and poor schools was an important issue worthy of class time. It also demonstrates David’s interest and engagement in the topic whereas previously, David had been disengaged from class activities.

Although it is not captured in the excerpt, at one point in the discussion, I asked if students wanted to continue to talk or if they wanted the remainder of the period for independent reading. At the start of the study, students resisted class discussions and asked repeatedly to be allowed to read independently instead of having to talk about the book. But in this example, the entire class voted to continue the discussion, which again illustrates the students’ investment in the issue. These two examples illustrate that critical literacy issues such as race and poverty were becoming important to the students as they initiated discussions about these issues without my guidance. These examples signify a shift from critical literacy discussions occurring under my guidance and with
my initiation to the students taking ownership of the issues, initiating and sustaining critical literacy discussions themselves.

**Critical Literacy and Comprehension**

These excerpts of critical literacy discussions illustrate the higher-order thinking that occurred during these discussions. These discussions all required students to grapple with difficult, abstract issues that required them to push beyond surface-level understanding. As a result, these discussions repeatedly call for students to engage in higher-order thinking and high-level comprehension. Throughout the discussions, students made inferences in connection to critical literacy topics. For instance, they made inferences regarding the values and stereotypes that lie behind comments made about women. They made inferences when connecting issues of poverty to low-performing schools, and they made inferences as to how racism permeates culture and creates long-term, economic consequences for people of color. Because the work of critical literacy so often deals with rooting out underlying assumptions and values, it often requires inference-making. In this sense, critical literacy can be considered a vessel for higher-order thinking and comprehension. It is a kind of thinking that necessitates inferences, and thus shifts students’ thinking into a higher gear, acting as a vessel or catalyst for higher-order thinking and comprehension.

Beyond inferences, these discussions demonstrate higher-order thinking skills such as supporting claims with text evidence and experiential knowledge, making connections to other texts, making analogies, and making evaluations and critiques. Even though discussion topics often went beyond the book’s plot to wider issues of poverty and racism, students still grounded their claims with evidence from the text. However,
students were not limited to text evidence only, and they often used their own experiences and knowledge of the world to support their claims. Throughout discussions, students made connections between the issues of the class novel to issues discussed in previous units and other classes, deepening their understanding by connecting it to what they had learned previously. Students also consistently made evaluations and critiques. They critiqued the practices of the U.S. government and its treatment of American Indians, and they made evaluations as to the lack of equality in the U.S. education system. Again, these practices all indicate that students were engaged in high-level comprehension and higher-order thinking. Thus these critical literacy discussions can be viewed as sites of rich comprehension as critical literacy issues seem to act as a catalyst for higher-order thinking and comprehension skills.

**Conclusions**

These discussions all illustrate the ways in which students consistently delved into the critical realm by uncovering unspoken assumptions and stereotypes, noting issues of inequality, and critiquing social constructions and institutions that perpetuate inequalities. Initially students required more scaffolding from me as the instructor in order to reach the beyond-the-surface level of assumptions and values. The discussions about gender were early on in the study, and they required a lot of facilitation from me to push students to look beyond the surface to the assumptions and values behind the stereotypes they noted. For instance, students noticed that one stereotype of princesses was that they were always needing to be rescued by a prince. Only when I asked what that implies about princesses did they note that it implied that they were weak or hopeless.
Later discussions about race saw less facilitation from me as the instructor, as I often simply used re-voicing moves to push students further instead of asking a direct question. These discussions interrogated how power is at work in regards to race, and students easily connected the problem of racism to poverty. Students also interrogated racism at a systemic level, recognizing that it is not simply a prejudice leveled at individuals, but is a problem that affects institutions such as schools and has serious, economic consequences.

In discussions about poverty, again, students required less scaffolding and I participated in a limited fashion as they engaged in multiple critiques of the U.S. government such as the unequal opportunities in education for the rich and the poor and unjust actions of the government concerning American Indians. Students reached the level of critique without guidance from me as the instructor, noting that poor students don’t receive as good of an education as rich students, or that the United States practicing in keeping Native Americans on reservations are unfair without me ever pushing the conversation that way. This illustrates that students were more easily able to engage with abstract issues and move beyond simply noting inequalities to openly critiquing the systems at play.

The examples of student-initiated critical literacy discussions indicate students may be beginning to internalize critical literacy perspectives and initiate these discussions without prompting or guidance from me as the instructor. In the small group example, a student asked several questions about racism, first tying her question closely to the text before broadening her question to examine the process of how people become racist. Both questions were readily taken up by her peers, and both occurred without any
prompting or guidance from me as the teacher. In the second example, students had been asked whether they would go to the best school in their city if given the chance, like Junior had from the novel. Students turned this question into a discussion about whether rich schools were better than poor schools, and if so, why. Although the topic was introduced by me, the students broadened it to examine a systemic class issue and initiated a whole-class discussion that lasted for the entire period. Although I was present for the discussion, the topic was led by the students. Again, these two examples provide evidence that students may have been internalizing a critical literacy stance, recognizing when issues such as racism or classism need to be examined. Thus the discussions show a progression in which topics were initially selected by me as the teacher and students needed significant scaffolding to engage in the abstract level of critical literacy to students needing less and less facilitation and even initiating critical literacy topics on their own.

Students had also begun to critique not just isolated or individual circumstances, but the wider systems at play when discussing segregation of schools, unequal opportunities in education, and unjust actions of American government. For instance, the discussions about gender remained isolated to the incidence in which they occurred: a Disney cartoon. However, the discussions about race and poverty moved beyond the book or article at hand and investigated broader issues in society at large. This too indicates growth in students’ critical literacy practices as they demonstrated the ability not only to see unspoken values and stereotypes in individual cases but also were able to uncover inequalities at work at a systemic level and even connected those systemic problems to individual prejudices.
Meanwhile, high-level comprehension consistently occurred during these conversations. As was discussed, students consistently engaged in inference-making, use of text evidence and experiential knowledge to support claims, making connections, and making evaluations. Thus, while students illustrated the ability to engage deeply into the critical realm, they were simultaneously practicing higher-order thinking and comprehension skills. In conclusion, these discussions illustrate students’ progressively critical stances, taking on stereotypes, assumptions, social institutions and government actions to examine how inequalities surrounding gender, race, and class were at work. And all the while, students engaged in high-order thinking as these critical literacy discussions appeared to act as a catalyst for high-level comprehension.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

This chapter is organized around the three research questions that were the focus of this study. These questions were:

1) Does critical literacy instruction change middle school students’ cognitive processes during reading, and if so, what is the nature of the change?

2) Does critical literacy instruction improve middle school students’ literal, inferential, or higher-level reading comprehension?

3) Does critical literacy instruction influence middle school students’ attitudes towards school literacy? What are students’ attitudes towards critical literacy practices?

In the first section, addressing question one, I use data from the think alouds to demonstrate the ways in which students’ cognitive processes changed over time. In the second section, addressing question two, I use data from the researcher-constructed comprehension tests, the TIA, and the writing tasks. I also include short excerpts from discussions to demonstrate the kind of comprehension that took place during critical literacy discussions. In the final section, addressing question three, I use data from the reading attitude questionnaire and excerpts from the posttest interviews to address students’ attitudes towards school literacy and critical literacy. I also discuss changes in students’ participation and engagement in class.
Question 1: Does critical literacy instruction change middle school students’ cognitive processes during reading, and if so, what is the nature of the change?

Two baseline assessments were administered during the first three weeks of the study, when no critical literacy instruction took place. Once the baseline assessments were completed, critical literacy instruction began. During critical literacy instruction, students were regularly prompted to interrogate issues of race, gender, or class. I taught students to note and challenge stereotypes and assumptions about race, gender, and class. Regular discussions were held surrounding these topics, drawing from various texts, media, current events, historical events, and students’ lives. Students were also encouraged to take on a critical literacy stance in their own reading and lives. In order to assess whether students transferred these critical literacy practices from the classroom to their independent reading, think aloud protocols were administered. These protocols provided a glimpse into the cognitive processes of students during their independent reading. In addition to critical literacy instruction, comprehension strategy instruction was also implemented, with a focus on making inferences, making connections, asking questions, and responding emotionally to the text. The think alouds were also used to assess if and to what extent students incorporated these strategies into their independent reading.

Six students were selected for the think aloud protocols. Initially, 10 students who represented a range of reading levels were administered the think aloud protocols. From this group, six students who were relatively comfortable responding verbally and reading aloud were selected. Two students were selected at each of high, medium, and low levels of reading. The first two think alouds were given during the baseline, prior to
critical literacy instruction; the following three think alouds were administered during the treatment portion of the study.

Figure 5.1 shows the mean percentages of responses students demonstrated for each category of comments across the five rounds of think alouds. Rounds one and two were the baselines; critical literacy instruction had not begun prior to the third series. As Figure 5.1 shows, the category of inferences decreased after the baseline; however despite its decrease, it was the category with highest mean percentages of responses, meaning that in spite of the decrease, there were still a high number of inferences occurring throughout each round of think alouds. Wondering questions, clarifying questions, and evaluations all showed an upward trend, increasing after the baseline. The category of commentary remained largely the same across the five rounds, and the categories of connections and no response showed no particular pattern.

![Figure 5.1 Mean percentage of responses for categories of student comments across five rounds of think alouds.](image-url)
Figure 5.2 Mean frequency of inferences reported by students across five rounds of think alouds.

Figure 5.2 shows the mean frequency of inferences per student over the five rounds of think alouds. The category of inferences showed a downward trend over the five rounds of think alouds. The first decline occurred from the first to second baseline, prior to instruction. The second decline took place between the second and third rounds of think alouds and coincided with the onset of comprehension strategy instruction; thus the decline may be a result of students employing other strategies that were taught. The frequency of inferences reported by students plateaued from the third to fourth round, then decreased again at the fifth round.
Figure 5.3 Mean frequency of wondering questions reported by students across five rounds of think alouds.

Figure 5.3 shows the mean frequency of wondering questions per student over the five rounds of think alouds, indicating an upward trend. Rounds one and two were administered during the baseline, prior to instruction. After round two was completed, critical literacy and comprehension instruction began. Apart from a decline between rounds three and four, there was a trend of increased wondering questions over time.

Figure 5.4 Mean frequency of clarifying questions reported by students across five rounds of think alouds.

120
Figure 5.4 shows the mean frequency of clarifying questions per student over the five think alouds, indicating an upward trend. After the baseline assessments of rounds one and two, the frequency of students’ clarifying questions increased once instruction began. There was a slight decline after round four to round five.

Figure 5.5 shows the mean frequency of evaluations per student over the five rounds of think alouds. There was an initial slight increase in evaluations reported by students from the first baseline assessment to the second baseline followed by a decrease in the third round. The third round assessment is the first for which students had received treatment instruction. After the third round, the mean frequency of evaluations reported slightly increased for the fourth and final rounds of think alouds.
Figure 5.6 Mean frequency of commentary reported by students across five rounds of think alouds.

Figure 5.6 shows the mean frequency per student of commentary responses over the five rounds of think alouds. Apart from a slight increase at the third round, the commentary category stayed largely the same across the five rounds.

Figure 5.7 Mean frequency of connections reported by students over five rounds of think alouds.
Figure 5.7 shows the mean frequency of connections per student over five rounds of think alouds. The category of connections showed no clear pattern across the five rounds, depicting no trend.

Figure 5.8 indicates the mean frequency of the no response category per student over the five rounds of think alouds. The category of no response also had no pattern, exhibiting no clear trend across the five rounds.

In general, most students showed an increase in the variety of their responses over time. Many students relied heavily on only one or two types of responses during the baseline, but over time and after instruction began, they demonstrated a wider range of responses. Figure 5.9 demonstrates this change over time and illustrates the contrast between the baseline and treatment conditions. It shows the mean frequency of responses for the two baseline assessments compared to the mean frequency of responses for the three treatment round assessments (rounds 3, 4, and 5). The grey bar indicates the mean of the baseline assessments (rounds 1 and two), prior to instruction; the black bar
indicates the mean of the treatment round assessments (round 3, 4, and 5), once instruction had begun. Prior to instruction, inferences were by far the highest category. After instruction had begun, inferences remained the highest category, although it decreased. For the treatment rounds, wondering questions was the second highest category, followed by clarifying questions. Figure 5.9 shows that most categories increased after the baseline and once instruction began.

![Figure 5.9 Mean frequency of categories for baseline rounds and treatment rounds of think alouds.](image)

Figures 5.10 and 5.11 indicate this trend at the individual level. These two figures show the frequencies of categories reported by Autumn in the first think aloud, prior to instruction (Figure 5.10) and the frequencies of categories she reported in the final think aloud, after five months of instruction (Figure 5.11). Autumn initially relied on inferences...
in her responses in the first round, giving no examples of predictions, noting confusions, evaluations, connections, clarifying questions, or any form of critical literacy. By the final round, however, she diversified her responses so that nearly every category of response was demonstrated in the think aloud. In the final round, after five months of instruction, evaluation was her highest category, followed by inferences and commentary.

Figure 5.10 Frequencies of categories reported by Autumn during the first round of think alouds, prior to instruction.

Figure 5.11 Frequencies of categories reported by Autumn during the final think aloud, after five months of instruction.
It was expected that students would show an increase in their critical literacy responses in the think alouds over time; however, that did not occur. Students reported critical literacy comments in both the baseline and treatment assessments with no clear pattern. In the first round, there were a total of 10 critical literacy responses across all students, eight in the second round, six in the third round, five in the fourth round, and eight in the fifth round. These numbers are the raw frequencies across all students. The means per student for critical literacy comments are as follows: 1.67 comments in the first round, 1.3 comments in the second round, 1 comment in the third round, .83 comments in the fourth round, and 1.3 in the final round. There were critical literacy responses given in the baseline protocols prior to instruction, indicating that students brought their own knowledge of critical literacy issues to the texts prior to instruction. Students did not increase their use of critical literacy once instruction began. One possibility is that critical literacy instruction had no effect on their independent reading as demonstrated by their responses during the think alouds. However, the discussions analyzed in chapter four suggest that students practiced critical literacy with increasing complexity and less guidance from me as the instructor; therefore, another plausible explanation is that the think alouds were not a sensitive measure of critical literacy and did not accurately capture the critical literacy processes of the students.

Except for the first round, critical literacy related to race showed the highest frequency of responses, whereas critical literacy related to class showed the lowest frequency of responses. Figure 5.12 shows the number of responses of each type of critical literacy comment across the five rounds. This figure shows the raw frequencies across all students, as opposed to the means, because the frequencies are so low that
displaying the means is not informative. Figure 5.12 demonstrates the way that the
different kinds of critical literacy comments changed across the five rounds. Instruction
was first introduced after the second round, meaning that only rounds three, four, and five
were implemented when actual critical literacy instruction was taking place.

![Figure 5.12 Frequency of critical literacy responses related to race, gender, and class across the five rounds of think alouds.](image)

Furthermore, students demonstrated what could be called an *emergent* critical
literacy stance, a term taken from Rogers (2007). In emergent literacy, a child may not
be able to decode and comprehend a text independently; however they demonstrate an
emergent literacy through their understanding that text reads from left to right, how to
hold the book and turn the pages, etc. In emergent critical literacy, a student may not be
able to name the abstract concept of racism, classism, or sexism, elaborate as to why
something is sexist, and challenge that sexism; but they may be *noticing* issues related to
race, gender, or class. For instance, they may note that certain people groups are treated
differently, or they may note events or practices that they find unfair. For example,
during the first baseline think aloud prior to instruction, in a story about a young Latina
girl trying to fit in at school, one student noted possible racism at work, saying, “It’s like they’re picking on her because of her race, and she can’t belong. They don’t want her to.” In another think aloud that took place after instruction had begun, another student recognized that gender roles exist and the characters were acting outside of those roles. She said, “I think that the girls were trying to be like, kind of like boys, do what boys do.”

In these examples, race and gender issues were noticed but not elaborated on, nor were the racist behaviors or gender stereotypes challenged. Thus, students demonstrated an emergent critical literacy: they recognized issues related to gender, race, and wealth, but without a great deal of complexity. The level of complexity reported in baseline assessments, prior to instruction, was not any different from the complexity of critical literacy comments reported during the instructional period. Again, this may indicate that instruction was not effective or that effects did not transfer to independent reading; however, it also may indicate that the instrument did not accurately capture the critical literacy processes of the students. This second interpretation may be more accurate in light of other data indicating students engaged in increasingly abstract and complex critical literacy work with less intervention over the course of the study.

It should be noted, however, that although most students demonstrated critical literacy processes and widened their range of responses over time, this was not the case for every student. Danny, for example, did not diversify his range of responses and only contributed one critical literacy response across all five think alouds. Danny relied mainly on wondering questions (questions asking why or how something happened) and clarifying questions throughout the five protocols. He also frequently gave no response
at all. There were very few instances of summarization, inferences, evaluations, connections, or critical literacy; there were no instances of predictions.

In sum, there were a variety of responses reported over the course of the five think alouds. The categories of responses changed in various ways over the five rounds. Evaluations, wondering questions, and clarifying questions all increased once instruction began, commentary remained the same, and inferences decreased once instruction began. However, despite the decrease, inferences were the highest category in most of the five rounds. Most students demonstrated an increase in the variety of responses they employed after the baseline and once instruction began. However, not all students demonstrated such changes, suggesting that the changes in students’ cognitive processes were not uniform across all six students. Emergent critical literacy was evident in both baseline and treatment assessments, and no change was evident after instruction took place. This may suggest that instruction was not effective, that the effects of instruction did not transfer to independent reading as demonstrated in the think alouds, or that the think alouds were not sensitive to critical literacy.

Question 2: Does critical literacy instruction improve middle school students’ literal, inferential, or higher level reading comprehension?

To address this question, various data were examined to address the effect of critical literacy on reading comprehension. These data were students’ performance on the researcher-constructed comprehension tests, the TIA, and the writing tasks, as well as their participation classroom discussions.

Researcher-constructed comprehension tests. These tests assessed students literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension. Two tests were administered to
students in the treatment group class at baseline, and the remaining three were administered to the students approximately every six weeks. Order of administration of the tests was counterbalanced to control for the effect of text. Table 5.1 displays the means and standard deviations for each round of assessment. Means were stable at the baseline prior to instruction and increased once instruction began from rounds two through four, plateauing at round five. Scores were analyzed using one-factor repeated measures ANOVA with Test (Round 1 through 5) as the within-subjects factor. The results of the ANOVA are reported in Table 5.2. They indicate that students’ comprehension showed a significant positive linear trend.

Table 5.1
Means and Standard Deviation on the Researcher-Constructed Comprehension Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Round 1</td>
<td>12.14 (2.92)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round 2</td>
<td>11.57 (5.41)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round 3</td>
<td>13.52 (4.03)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round 4</td>
<td>14.05 (3.06)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round 5</td>
<td>14.00 (2.47)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2
Results of ANOVA of Students’ Comprehension Scores on the Researcher-Constructed Comprehension Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Type II Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Squared</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within Subjects: Test</td>
<td>107.75</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>33.84</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error (Test)</td>
<td>636.258</td>
<td>63.68</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.13 shows the change in mean comprehension scores over the five researcher-constructed comprehension tests. The first two rounds make up the baseline, prior to when critical literacy and comprehension strategy instruction began. The last
three rounds took place once instruction began and indicate an increase from rounds two to four.

![Figure 5.13](image)

*Figure 5.13* Mean comprehension scores across five rounds of researcher-constructed comprehension tests

**Test of Inference Ability (TIA).** The TIA assessed students’ ability to make high-level inferences and was administered to both groups as a posttest. The mean score of the treatment group was 48.00 (SD= 7.80), and the mean score of the comparison group was 44.11 (SD= 8.60). Despite the higher mean for the treatment group, an independent samples *t* test indicated the difference did not reach significance (*t* = 1.50, *df* = 38, *p* = 0.14). The effect size was *d*=0.48. It is possible that the lack of statistical significance was due to the small sample size. Assuming the groups were equivalent in reading comprehension at the baseline, the slightly higher mean for the treatment group might indicate greater inferential comprehension for students in the group that received critical literacy instruction than for students in the comparison group.

**Writing Tasks.** Students in both the treatment group and the comparison group were given the writing task as a pretest and posttest. Students read a short passage
dealing with gender issues, then were asked to provide a written response addressing issues of gender stereotyping. The same writing task was administered in January as a pretest and in May as a posttest. The writing tasks were scored with a rubric assessing two domains: comprehension and critical literacy. For comprehension, students’ written responses were scored for their use of details supporting claims, clarity, inferences, and evaluation. For the critical literacy, students’ written responses were scored for problematizing assumptions, recognizing and challenging stereotypes, recognition of power at work within a text, and noting abstract concepts of inequality and oppression.

Data were analyzed using two-way repeated measures ANOVA where Group (Comparison, Treatment) was the between-subjects factor and Time (Pretest, Posttest) was the within-subjects factor. On the pretest, the treatment group and the comparison group means were comparable as indicated by Table 5.3. Table 5.4 shows the results of the ANOVA. The significant Group x Time interaction indicates that growth from the pretest to the posttest was significantly greater for the treatment group than for the comparison group. These data address the question as to whether the critical literacy instruction improved students’ inferential and higher-order comprehension. On the writing task, the treatment group improved over the comparison group in terms of making inferences, using details to support claims, and making evaluations.

*Table 5.3*
*Means and Standard Deviation (in Parentheses) for Writing Tasks for Treatment and Comparison Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pretest Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Posttest Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>5.32 (2.17)</td>
<td>8.54 (3.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>5.20 (1.99)</td>
<td>5.20 (3.40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 5.4**
Results of ANOVA of Students’ Scores on Writing Task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within Subjects:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>46.45</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>46.45</td>
<td>21.41</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group x Time</td>
<td>46.45</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>46.45</td>
<td>21.41</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error(Time)</td>
<td>75.93</td>
<td>35.00</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between Subjects:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>53.50</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>53.50</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>391.10</td>
<td>35.00</td>
<td>11.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Critical literacy class discussions.** As discussed in chapter four, critical literacy discussions suggest that high-level comprehension occurred in conjunction with critical literacy events. Students engaged in high-level inferences as they noted stereotypes and assumptions, and grappled with issues of race, class, and gender. They also demonstrated high-order thinking as they drew from the text as well as their own lives to support their claims, and they gave elaborated explanations. The following table shows excerpts from class discussions concerning critical literacy topics and indicates the higher-order comprehension skills displayed in the discourse.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Comprehension Skills Displayed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/19/14</td>
<td>Whole Class</td>
<td>Why did Sherman Alexie use a racial slur?</td>
<td><em>Autumn:</em> I think he did that because he wants to show how people can be racist towards certain types of people and how they just, since they’re white, they aren’t around people who are not white, so it’s like, they’re racist because they’re around new people  <em>Trevon:</em> I think that might’ve happened in his [the author’s] life</td>
<td>Inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/3/14</td>
<td>Whole Class</td>
<td>White-washing of beauty standards</td>
<td><em>Researcher:</em> Ok, according to her brother you’re pretty if you’re light-skinned with long flowing hair and you don’t have big lips, what’s that saying?  <em>Anthony:</em> It’s basically saying, that if you are white you are pretty and if you’re black, you’re not.</td>
<td>Inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/3/14</td>
<td>Small Group</td>
<td>From Alexie (2007) text. Did Junior like Penelope because she’s white?</td>
<td><em>Camille:</em> So people pay attention to things that they like about people, and they talk about them too and they DESCRIBE them. So, if he’s [Junior] says ‘white on white on white on white, she was like a vanilla dessert’ and ‘he wanna be her chocolate topping,’ that’s the thing he like about her because what’s one of the most important things that he had a crush on her  <em>Andrea:</em> Her whiteness.</td>
<td>Using text evidence to support a claim</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Continued*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Comprehension Skills Displayed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Natasha: He might like her in other ways, like she was nice to him on his first day, and the other people were like being rude and calling him names. Researcher: So there’s some evidence in the book that there are some real reasons that he might like her?</td>
<td>support a claim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/7/14</td>
<td>Whole Class</td>
<td>Discussing if students in poverty have the same chance as wealthy students</td>
<td>Researcher: But do you have an example of someone that happened to? [Someone who rose about being told they’ll never amount to anything and became successful?] David: What about Ray Lewis? ‘Cause, this guy named Ray Lewis, he plays in the NFL, and I found out when he was little, everybody used to doubt him, he was too small and stuff, and he wasn’t gonna be nothing, but now he’s in the NFL and he’s all big and he’s an MVP and now he’s in the hall of fame, and now he can save money. Everybody can hate him because now he’s rich and stuff. Connecting to world/use of knowledge of the world to support a claim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/10/14</td>
<td>Whole Class</td>
<td>Drama activity addressing question of why reservation stopped harassing Junior for attending the white school when he</td>
<td>Autumn: Me personally, I think they stopped calling him traitor because they knew he was in a world of grief, and the more they add on to it, it’s just gonna make his life worse, and they’re just adding on to it, and I think they were starting to feel bad that they were calling him traitor, and his grandma died, so that just made him feel worse, so if they would’ve continued Elaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In sum, these data indicate that inferential and higher-order comprehension improved among students in the treatment group. The researcher-constructed comprehension tests indicate growth in comprehension with a significant linear trend. The results of the TIA show a possible trend of improved inferential comprehension for the treatment group over the comparison group, although results did not reach statistical significance. In the case of the writing tasks, the difference in growth between students in the treatment group and students in the comparison group was statistically significant. When considering the results of the TIA and the writing tasks together, a tentative claim can be made that students in the treatment group demonstrated greater gains in inferential and higher-order comprehension over students who did not. However, it is not clear if improvements were the result of critical literacy instruction.

Similarly, class discussions surrounding critical literacy topics also indicated a high level of inference making and higher-order thinking. These data do not speak to how critical literacy instruction affected comprehension in a causal sense. But when examining the event of critical literacy on the students’ part, it is evident that rich comprehension occurred in conjunction with critical literacy work.
Question 3: Does critical literacy instruction influence middle school students’ attitude towards school literacy? What are students’ attitudes towards critical literacy practices?

A reading attitude questionnaire (McKenna et al., 1995) was administered as a pretest and posttest to the treatment group to assess students’ attitudes towards literacy. The pretest mean was 54.86 (SD=16.33) and the posttest mean was 56.48 (SD=15.08), suggesting that attitudes worsened (because of the way the questionnaire design was modified, a higher score indicated more negative feelings about reading). However, the difference was not statistically significant ($t(20)=-0.53, p=0.605$). The posttest was administered in the last week of school, so it is probable that students’ scores reflect a general negative attitude towards school at that time instead of a poorer attitude toward literacy specifically.

In addition to the questionnaire, the six students selected for the think aloud protocols, as well as three additional students from the treatment group, were given a posttest interview. The three additional students were selected because they demonstrated a change in their level of engagement in class over the course of the study; it was hoped that their responses to the interview might indicate the factors that contributed to the change in their engagement. Interviews were administered by a colleague to minimize response bias in students’ answers.

Analysis of responses to the interview conveys a different picture than that suggested by the reading attitude questionnaire. Six of the nine students expressed a positive shift in their feelings about reading or writing since the beginning of the year. For instance, when answering the question, “How have your feelings about reading and writing changed since the start of the year?” Nicole said, “At the beginning of school I
used to not read or write, but like, in the middle of school I started reading and writing, and started liking reading the books.” Similarly, Mia expressed a change in her feelings about writing, saying, “I actually like to write more [now]. In the beginning of the school, I wrote like three paragraphs, but now I kinda like writing, and like, more, and going over the limit.”

Several students mentioned, without prompting, the novel they read during the critical literacy instruction, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007). All four spoke positively about it. For instance, Nicole described the book as “really good,” and said that it helped her process the difficulties in her own life. She said:

It helps me with my feelings, it [the book] talks about feelings and death, I go through that, just like the book that we read, about how Junior was settling his grandma's death and his sister's death and Eugene's death, and he had anger issues like I do, and it helps me with it. Like, my cousin’s been dead for like a year and his birthday's coming up.

When asked for an example of a book he liked, Antoine named Alexie’s novel that was read during the treatment and Tyler also mentioned enjoying the book, although he skipped the “racey” parts. Trevon also mentioned the book and gave a 450-word summary with great detail, indicating he had paid very close attention to the book. These results from the interview suggest that, over time, students developed more positive attitudes towards reading, writing, and school literacy.
All students were able to accurately describe critical literacy practices, and eight of the nine students felt critical literacy issues should be discussed in school. For instance, in describing critical literacy, Antoine stated:

It’s teaching us about how people think about certain races and genders, and sexism and stuff like that. Like in the book *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, they talk about how Indians, [are portrayed] and like, stereotypes, like they think they're poor and retarded and stuff like that. And women can't do sorts of things, and if you're not a man, you're supposed to be like, weak, not strong.

Here Antoine described critical literacy as recognizing stereotypes about race and gender, which is an accurate portrayal of much of the critical work that was done in class.

In addition to being able to describe what critical literacy is, eight of the nine students felt positive about it and felt it should be taught in school. For instance, when asked what Trevon thought about critical literacy, he responded, “Oh, I'm, not uncomfortable, I like talking about it because it's fun.” When asked if critical literacy *should* be talked about in school, Trevon said:

Yeah because some kids, they might feel some type a way about [people of a different race], like, they don't know why… like, sexism, racism, classism, poverty, all that, it's like, some people treat people different about what their race, or their sex, or their class, like if they're rich or not, or if they're poor…And like, classism—I never knew what classism was. I never heard of it until Ms. Nelson gave us an example of it.
Andre also articulated the importance of talking about issues of race, gender, and wealth in school, saying:

People need to start being more aware of this because, kids start absorbing more stuff as they get older, so I think it's a good idea to talk about these ideas because there might be some kids who are poor, that are being treated unfairly, and we need to talk about these [ideas], and squash the beef [take care of the problem].

Moreover, eight of the nine students reported that they thought about issues of race, gender, or wealth outside of school. For instance, Andre said that learning about critical literacy has changed his awareness of issues pertaining to race, class, and gender “dramatically”. With regards to thinking about those issues outside of school, he reported he thinks about class, race, and gender. Regarding class, he stated:

With the class, like, I've seen that because around here there's a lot of poor people, and that made me realize that some people are poor because they messed up in school and did bad things, and other people are just poor because of how they're raised. Like, I seen this one kid, he was in the store with his mom in his slippers, and I thought that was kinda strange, like, I wear shoes everywhere I go outside of the house, and then I realized you know, not all people have like a whole bunch shoes or a whole bunch of clothes, so that made me feel kinda bad for that person. Andre indicated that after discussing issues of poverty in class, he had become aware of those issues in his own neighborhood, recognizing that not all people who suffer from poverty do so as a consequence of bad decisions, but may have been raised in poverty. His example of the boy in the store shows that he now tries to suspend judgment and is beginning to practice empathy.
Autumn recognized that issues of race, gender and class often permeate everyday conversations, although they may not be named explicitly or occur at the conscious level. She explained:

We pretty much do [talk about those issues] everyday. You might not realize it or even think about it, but you end up talking about like, ‘Oh look at her. Look at her shoes. She's rich.’ Or ‘she's white.’ Like, it doesn’t really come up, but it comes up, if you know what I mean… So like, ‘She's black, so either her parents are rich, or she stole it.’ They don't think about it when they say it, but if you're listening and actually paying attention, that's what they're saying.”

Overall, these results indicate that students had a positive attitude towards critical literacy practices and believed such practices to be important, both in and out of school. The interviews also suggest that students held more positive attitudes toward reading and writing after the study compared to their attitudes toward reading and writing prior to the study.

Students’ class participation also seemed to indicate positive attitudes towards both school literacy and critical literacy. During discussions surrounding critical literacy issues, such as the disparity between rich schools and poor schools, or the whitewashing of beauty standards, classroom participation improved compared to the students’ participation during the first weeks of instruction. As was discussed in chapter four, students initially resisted critical literacy instruction related to The House on Mango Street (Cisneros, 1984) and Bronx Masquerade (2002). Using these texts, students had difficulty grasping the abstract concepts of critical literacy. However, once critical
literacy concepts were concretized through examining issues of sexism, racism, and classism in the media, student participation improved.

Moreover, once discussions were no longer entirely dependent on the text, but related to critical literacy issues that students were personally invested in, participation improved. Examples of topics students were invested in were issues of segregation in present day schools, the education gap between the rich and the poor, and whether a book in which a racial slur is used should be allowed in schools. In these discussions, students who previously engaged in off-task behavior or simply were unengaged during the initial weeks of instruction became active participants. One student who had been consistently off-task during class during the initial weeks of instruction actually initiated a critical literacy, whole-class discussion about rich and poor schools. In these discussions surrounding critical literacy issues, a wider range of students spoke than was previously the norm. For instance, in the discussion about segregation in schools today, TJ, Taylor, David, and Deja all spoke when they previously abstained from discussions. This increased level of participation during critical literacy events may indicate that students had positive attitudes toward the critical literacy instruction that revolved around issues they felt passionately about and allowed them to draw from their own experiential knowledge.

To capture the phenomenon of improved participation quantitatively, the number of turns taken by students during each day of instruction that included a whole-class discussion was tallied over the course of the study. Only turns taken during whole-class discussions were tallied because the camera captured only one group during small-group discussions. Figures 5.14 and 5.15 show students’ participation over time. Figure 5.14
shows the means number of turns per student for each day of instruction that included a whole-class discussion. A linear regression line shows the increase in turns per student over time.

![Graph](image)

*Figure 5.14* Mean frequencies of students’ turns across 26 whole-class discussions.

In indicated in Figure 5.14, the first two discussions showed very little participation and took place during the initial weeks of instruction using *The House on Mango Street* (Cisernos, 1984), and *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002), when students were resistant to instruction. This initial resistance aligns with Shor’s (1992) claim that even in critical literacy instruction, students may initially display resistance as they are frequently accustomed to resisting instruction. The first spike in participation occurred during the fourth whole-class discussion during the unit about stereotypes in commercials and cartoons. Although participation varied across the 26 discussions, there is a trend of increasing participation represented in the mean number of turns per student per
discussion. Whereas the first discussion averaged only 0.13 turns per student, the fourth discussion averaged 1.65 turns per student, indicating an increase. This increase coincided with a shift in instruction to concretize critical literacy concepts after students initially displayed resistance to engaging in critical literacy. The shift in instruction also allowed students to bring their experiential knowledge of the topic to the discussion. The 22nd class discussion showed the highest participation with students averaging 6.78 turns.

Figure 5.15 shows the number of different students who participated in each whole-class discussion. This indicates that not only did the mean number of turns increase over time, but the number of students who actively participated in discussions also increased. A linear regression line shows the number of students contributing to discussion increased over time.

Figure 5.15 Number of students participating in whole-class discussions.

144
The first discussion to see a spike in the number of students who participated was the third whole-class discussion, which again occurred during the unit on stereotypes in cartoons and commercials, when critical literacy concepts were first concretized. This also allowed students to bring their experiential knowledge as they were familiar with many of the commercials and cartoons examined. The breadth of participation increased slowly and steadily across the 26 whole-class discussions, apart from the 15th discussion. This discussion was an anomaly as students were each asked to report their position on the topic discussed, which was related to the whitewashing of beauty standards.

In sum, results were mixed regarding students’ attitudes towards reading and writing. The reading attitude questionnaire indicated that students’ attitudes toward school literacy did not change, although this result may be a consequence of administering the posttest during the last week of school when students were generally weary of anything school-related. However, the posttest interviews indicated that students’ attitudes towards school literacy improved from the beginning of the school year for the majority of the students interviewed. Students also spoke positively about the class novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The interviews also indicated that students all understood the concept of critical literacy and nearly all felt it was important to discuss in school. The increased participation that occurred over time in conjunction with critical literacy instruction also points toward improved attitudes toward school literacy. Students participated more often, and a wider number of students engaged in discussions surrounding critical literacy.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand the effect of critical literacy instruction on reading comprehension. The central questions were:

1) Does critical literacy instruction change middle school students’ cognitive processes during reading, and if so, what is the nature of the change?

2) Does critical literacy instruction improve middle school students’ literal, inferential, or higher level reading comprehension?

3) Does critical literacy instruction influence middle school students’ attitude towards school literacy? What are students’ attitudes towards critical literacy practices?

In this chapter, I discuss the major findings of this study and relate these findings to the existing body of literature concerning comprehension and critical literacy. I also discuss the limitations of the study, as well as pedagogical and research implications stemming from the study.

Findings Related to Question One

Does critical literacy instruction change middle school students’ cognitive processes during reading, and if so, what is the nature of the change?

This question was addressed with the think alouds that were administered as a repeated measure to six students; two were given at the baseline, prior to instruction, and three approximately every six weeks after instruction had begun. It was expected that once critical literacy instruction began, students would begin to report comments related
to critical literacy in their think alouds. Instead, students reported critical literacy comments in the baseline assessments before instruction had begun, and there was no notable increase once instruction started. Based on the results of the think alouds, it appears that critical literacy instruction had no effect on whether or not students reported critical literacy in their independent reading. However, the think aloud assessments may not have been an appropriate instrument for measuring students’ critical literacy practices during independent reading. When conceptualizing literacy as a situated social practice (Lewis, 2001), this is reasonable. The think alouds were not a social norm for students; they only occurred a total of six times; and they were administered by a colleague with whom they had limited rapport.

Rosario-Ramos (2012) also used think aloud protocols in her year-long study to investigate students’ use of critical literacy during independent reading. She used think aloud transcripts to analyze both students’ comprehension of texts and their critical analysis of texts. The participants in her study reported higher levels of critical analysis than the participants of the present study did. However, Rosario-Ramos administered the think alouds herself, which may have influenced students’ use of critical analysis. In the present study, a colleague administered think alouds to minimize this bias. Her study also took place with high school students who had more exposure to critical literacy instruction than the middle school students of this study because her study took place in a school with an explicit goal of focusing on social justice issues and encouraging students to engage in critical literacy practices. In this study, the students had limited exposure to critical literacy because the treatment group was the only class in the school where critical literacy was practiced. Furthermore, in addition to the think alouds, Rosario-
Ramos interviewed students, directly asking them questions that required critical analysis. Their answers in the interview were analyzed as part of the think alouds. These differences may account for the higher level of critical analysis observed in the think alouds in Rosario-Ramos’ study compared to the low frequency of critical literacy comments observed in the present study.

One noteworthy finding from the think aloud protocols was that 85% of the time that students made a critical literacy response, they also made an inference. This is unsurprising since critical literacy often requires one to recognize issues that are not stated explicitly. For instance, in a think aloud during the treatment, a student said she felt a female character was “trying…to do what boys do.” This student was calling attention to an unspoken assumption that there are certain ways of behaving for boys and for girls. In order to recognize this below-the-surface issue, an inference was required. For the most part, it appears as though critical literacy requires inference-making, which is recognized as an important skill in comprehension (Kintsch, 1998). This finding relates to the question “Does critical literacy improve inferential comprehension?” It appears as though critical literacy most often requires inferences; it follows, then, that critical literacy practices should improve inferential comprehension because it provides an authentic context for students to practice inference-making.

This finding is somewhat problematic because inferences did not increase across the five think aloud assessments; in fact, they declined slightly. Critical literacy responses also did not increase over time as was expected. However, when critical literacy responses did occur, they were nearly always accompanied by an inference. As demonstrated in chapter four, excerpts of classroom discussions support this finding:
inferences occurred in conjunction with critical literacy comments. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that critical literacy often requires inference-making and could serve to improve inferential comprehension.

Think alouds are a form of assessment that can be used by cognitive theorists, such as Pressley and Afflerbach (1995). This study applied Afflerbach and Pressley’s approach to administering and interpreting think alouds. Therefore, a cognitive lens was used, although the goal was to find the use of critical literacy practices. It is not surprising, then, that what was found were cognitive markers of comprehension: predictions, connections, inferences, evaluations, etc. The lens used determined what was found. Although an attempt was made to allow the data to guide the interpretation, as it was in Pressley and Afflerbach’s work, the lens for interpretation was cognitive. Therefore, the findings from the think alouds in this study were cognitive, not critical.

On the other-hand, Rosario-Ramos (2012) used a critical lens in her approach to think alouds, both in administration and interpretation. She explicitly stated that she did not believe that think alouds represent an in-the-head picture of students’ thinking. This view is vastly different from that of Pressley and Afflerbach (1995), who stated that though flawed, think alouds can provide a glimpse into the otherwise in-the-head processes. Thus, it is not surprising that in Rosario-Ramos’ results, she found many more examples of critical literacy practices. This is because her paradigmatic lens conceptualized literacy as a situated social practice, and intensely ideological. Pressley and Afflerbach, on the other hand, did not conceptualize literacy in this way. For instance, they did not address issues of power; nor did they regard literacy as a predominately social practice. Yet, when taking a complex view of literacy, as Freebody
and Luke do (1990), neither power nor the social context can be extracted from the literacy process. They also recognize that the cognitive processes that are culturally situated as important must also be a part of the literacy process. In describing the Four Resources Model, Luke and Freebody (1999) stated

We wanted to develop a model that attempted to recognize and incorporate many of the current, well-developed techniques for training students in becoming literate. We wanted to shift the focus from trying the right method to determining whether the range of practices emphasized in a reading program was indeed…integrating the broad repertoire of textual practices required in today’s economies and culture (p. 3).

This description of literacy invokes a complex, nuanced, ideological, and cognitive take on literacy. One inherent flaw in using a predominately cognitive approach to interpreting the think alouds is that such an approach is at conflict with the Four Resources Model, the theoretical backbone of the study. Pressley and Afflerbach’s approach was not as complex and nuanced as the Four Resources Model. As a result, the data from the think alouds in this study did not reveal the complex issues of power as well as they could have. The strength of the findings for the think alouds was cognitive. However, the attempt to apply Lather’s (2006) call to bring together conflicting paradigms requires further qualitative analysis, which could then be compared to the current, cognitive findings.

**Findings Related to Question Two**

Does critical literacy instruction improve middle school students’ literal, inferential, or higher level reading comprehension?
To address this question, students’ performance on the researcher-constructed comprehension tests, the TIA, writing tasks, and in critical literacy class discussions were examined. Though results were mixed, there was a trend of increased higher-order comprehension for the treatment group in the researcher-constructed comprehension tests, the TIA, and the writing tasks. A connection between critical literacy work and rich comprehension was also evident in classroom discussions.

Scores on the researcher-constructed comprehension tests indicated that comprehension improved after the initial baseline assessments, once instruction began: students’ mean scores increased from rounds two to three and rounds three to four. Results of the ANOVA indicated that students’ scores showed a statistically significant, positive linear trend for comprehension. However, it was expected that students’ comprehension scores would improve in conjunction with students’ increased use of critical literacy responses in the think alouds. This would have allowed for a tentative connection to be made between improved comprehension and critical literacy. Unfortunately, no such increase in critical literacy responses occurred. Thus, while the researcher-constructed comprehension tests indicate comprehension improved, these gains cannot be attributed to critical literacy alone. These gains may be a result of the comprehension strategy instruction employed; they may also be a result of the critical literacy discussions that took place regularly.

The results from the TIA indicated that the treatment group’s comprehension improved, whereas the comparison group’s comprehension stayed the same; however, the difference in scores was not statistically significant. Additionally, the writing tasks indicated that the treatment group’s comprehension improved relative to that of students
in the comparison group. Taken together, students’ performance on these two measures indicated a trend toward increased higher-order comprehension among students in the treatment group relative to students in the comparison group.

When examining the critical literacy events that occurred in the classroom, the findings suggest that high-level comprehension work accompanied discussion of critical literacy topics. When students grappled with critical literacy issues in discussions, they engaged the following higher-order comprehension processes: students (1) consistently made inferences, (2) used text evidence and experiential knowledge to support their claims, (3) made connections to texts and concepts previously learned, as well as to their own lives, (4) gave elaborated responses, and (5) made evaluations. These skills are recognized as markers of high-level comprehension (Wilkinson, Soter, & Murphy, 2005).

Kintsch (1998) asserted that inferences are integral to comprehension, particularly for moving beyond basic, surface comprehension (i.e., the textbase). Using inferences, readers must integrate prior knowledge with the textbase in order to understand texts at a deeper, more integrated level, which Kintsch referred to as the situation model. Thus, the observation that critical literacy seems to require inferences might indicate that critical literacy benefits comprehension by providing students an authentic context for them to deepen their understanding via inferences. Using text evidence to support claims is also recognized as an aspect of high-level comprehension (Anderson, Chinn, Wagonner, & Nguyen; Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2005; Wilkinson, Soter, & Murphy, 2010), as is giving elaborated responses (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2005; Wilkinson, Soter, & Murphy, 2010), making connections (Fountas, & Pinnell, 2006; Wilkinson, Soter, & Murphy, 2010) and making evaluations (Fountas, & Pinnell, 2006). Therefore, the
higher-order thinking that occurred in conjunction with critical literacy provides some evidence of high-level comprehension.

One interpretation of these findings is that critical literacy acts as a vessel for high-level comprehension. Although it may not have been the cause of improved comprehension in this study, critical literacy provided an authentic context in which students could engage deeply with the texts in highly sophisticated ways. Students’ high-level comprehension skills may have improved as a result of practicing higher-order thinking during critical literacy discussions. The data from the researcher-constructed comprehension tests, the TIA, and writing tasks support this conjecture. These data indicate that students’ higher-order comprehension improved. It is possible that one contributing factor for this improvement was the repeated opportunity to engage in high-level comprehension skills during the many critical literacy discussions. Thus one new understanding is the idea that critical literacy may act as a vessel for high-level comprehension, suggesting that comprehension may be enhanced when students engage in critical literacy.

Findings Related to Question Three

Does critical literacy instruction influence middle school students’ attitude towards school literacy? What are students’ attitudes towards critical literacy practices?

To address this question, the results from the reading attitude questionnaire (McKenna et al, 1995), posttest interviews, and student participation were examined. Results were mixed with scores on the reading attitude questionnaire indicating that student attitudes did not change over the course of the study, whereas responses to the posttest interviews and data on in-class participation indicated that students’ attitudes
towards school literacy improved. Results from the posttest interviews and in-class participation also indicated that attitudes toward critical literacy were positive. One possible explanation for these mixed results is that the posttest reading attitude questionnaires were administered in the last week of the school year, when students were likely weary of school-related activities. Regardless, the posttest interviews painted a different picture. Six of the nine students indicated that their feelings about reading and writing improved, and many students spoke positively about the class novel. All students were able to accurately describe what critical literacy is, and all but one student felt it was important to discuss critical literacy topics in school. In addition, several students reported that they think about issues related to race, gender, and class outside of school as a result of instruction.

Another possible indicator of students’ attitudes towards school literacy and critical literacy was their in-class participation. The data indicate that students initially resisted participating in class discussions. However, once an effort was made to make critical literacy concepts concrete and relate the concepts to issues close to students’ experiences (such as issues of schooling), students’ participation increased. There was a steady increase in student turns in whole-class discussions and an increase in the number of students participating over time. This increased participation may be an indicator of improved attitudes towards literacy and a positive attitude toward critical literacy. This finding that students’ participation improved with critical literacy instruction is consistent with Shor’s (1992) argument that allowing students to draw upon their own experience to engage in critical literacy topics reduces their need to resist learning.
Because of the mixed results from the questionnaires and posttest interviews, further research is needed to answer fully the question as to whether critical literacy instruction affects students’ attitudes towards school literacy. However, results from the posttest interviews and data on in-class participation do suggest critical literacy had a positive impact on students’ attitudes towards school literacy. They also indicate that students felt critical literacy was important to teach in school.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Reading comprehension is an important skill for students in a literate society and is increasingly important in our current educational climate. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) claimed that adolescents need strong comprehension skills in order to go onto achieve economic success in today’s economy, whereas in the 1950s, students could reasonably achieve a middle class status without a high school degree. Due to the changing demands of our culture, however, students must move beyond the basic literacy skills of elementary school and learn to “read purposefully… integrate new information with information previously known, resolve conflicting contents in differing texts, differentiate fact from opinion, and recognize the perspective of the writer—in short, they must be taught to comprehend,” (p.1). The Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy (2010) also made the claim that skills required to make “a decent living” (p.2) have changed, requiring complex literacy skills such as evaluating the reliability of a source, evaluating arguments, synthesizing, and communicating complex information. Furthermore, Biancarosa and Snow claimed that a teacher cannot count on adolescents to have the same high level of motivation to improve their reading that their elementary counterparts have. This means teachers must teach more complex skills to students who
are less motivated. Critical literacy, therefore, has important implications for teaching as it provides an engaging context for students to hone the complex literacy skills required for success in American society.

This study has shown that critical literacy may be a vessel for complex comprehension skills. It was shown repeatedly that when students engaged in critical literacy, they also made high-level inferences, drew evidence from the texts and their lives, made connections to other texts, their lives, the world, and gave thoughtful, elaborated responses in discussions. Moreover, students showed increased participation when they engaged in critical literacy discussions and activities; and in interviews, students indicated they held positive attitudes toward critical literacy. Therefore, critical literacy pedagogy may teach important comprehension skills while also addressing the lower motivation of adolescents noted by Biancarosa and Snow (2004).

Not only are comprehension skills required for success beyond school, they are also important to the Common Core State Standards for English and Language Arts (National Governors Association for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School, 2010). Complex skills such as making inferences, determining the effects of an author’s purpose, evaluating arguments and analyzing validity of reasoning are now required. With a heavy emphasis on high-level comprehension skills, teachers must be assured that whatever instructional methods they use will be effective in terms of improving comprehension. This study provides evidence that critical literacy pedagogy may improve comprehension and provide an authentic and motivating context for students to practice complex literacy skills.
In conclusion, there are high demands for literacy in the classroom and beyond, requiring that students engage in complex literacy skills in order to be academically successful now, and economically successful later in life. Therefore, teachers must feel assured that the pedagogy they implement will be effective in terms of improving comprehension. This study suggests that critical literacy holds promise in terms of its benefits for comprehension.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, there was no control group; only a comparison group was used. The assignment of students to the experimental and comparison groups was not randomized, and students in the comparison group received only a portion of the assessments that students in the treatment group received. There was some evidence that critical literacy instruction was a factor in students’ comprehension gains; however, a true control group would provide stronger evidence that factors such as maturation, book choice, or the effect of the teacher were not responsible for the gains made. In order to better isolate critical literacy instruction as a crucial factor in students’ comprehension gains, a true experimental design is needed with randomized assignment of students to experimental and control groups, and a control group that undertakes the same assessments as the treatment group.

Second, this study employed a small sample size, limiting the power of the statistical analyses. Despite this limitation, data in the researcher-comprehension tests and the writing tasks reached statistical significance, indicating substantial higher-order comprehension gains. This may indicate that critical literacy pedagogy is a powerful tool
for benefitting comprehension; thus, it would be useful to examine its impact in a study with a larger sample size.

Third, I was both the instructor and researcher. Although I was a licensed language arts teacher, at the time of the study, I did not face the pressures that full-time teachers would. A study with full-time teachers implementing instruction would strengthen the ecological validity.

Another limitation of this study was that it included comprehension strategy instruction as well as critical literacy instruction. The theoretical foundation of this study included both cognitive and critical perspectives. The model underpinning this study was Freebody and Luke’s (1990) Four Resources Model. In this model, readers must be adept at cognitive aspects of reading such as decoding and comprehension, as well as critical aspects, such as interrogating ideology. Therefore the decision was made not to teach critical literacy in isolation, but in concert with comprehension strategy instruction. This allowed for consistency in pedagogy and theory, bringing cognitive and critical perspectives together in all aspects of the study. However, this limits the ability to attribute any gains in comprehension to critical literacy.

Finally, the assessments used in this study may not have been sensitive instruments for measuring students’ critical literacy abilities. Think alouds (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995), researcher-constructed comprehension tests (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), and writing tasks all have precedent for assessing comprehension (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Reznitskaya, Kuo, Clark, Miller, Jadallah, Anderson, & Nyguen-Jahiel, 2009). However, this does not mean these measures have utility for assessing critical literacy.
Again, this can be understood through the theory of literacy as a social practice (Lewis, 2001). As Lewis states, “interpretation itself is a deeply social act” (xii). Yet, the practice of think-alouds in the classroom was not a social norm due to the limited number of times they were performed, the one-on-one nature, and the fact that they administered by a colleague with whom the students had little rapport. Meanwhile, although reading tests were in fact a social norm, they were unable to capture the social context. Think-alouds (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995), researcher-constructed comprehension tests (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), and writing tasks all have precedent for assessing comprehension (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Reznitskaya, Kuo, Clark, Miller, Jadallah, Anderson, & Nguyen-Jahiel, 2009); however, this does not mean these measures have utility for assessing critical literacy.

For instance, students’ use of critical literacy in the think aloud assessments did not increase once instruction began. However, throughout the treatment portion of the study, students consistently demonstrated increasingly complex critical literacy practices in the classroom, as is noted in chapter four. Students required less intervention from me as the instructor to move beyond surface level observations to below-the-surface assumptions and values. Students also moved beyond critiquing an isolated instance in a text to the more abstract level of noting systemic injustices. Furthermore, they began to not only note injustices, but to critique them. However, the think alouds revealed only emergent critical literacy—that is, comments that noted prejudice but did not elaborate on or critique that prejudice. Therefore, it is possible that the think alouds were not sufficiently sensitive to changes in students’ critical literacy practices.
Finally, the prompt in the writing tasks provided opportunities for critical literacy comments. Because the measures used did not indicate any change in students’ critical literacy processes, it is difficult to ascertain the link between students’ improved comprehension skills and critical literacy. A more intensive, qualitative analysis of the writing tasks may provide greater insights into the critical literacy gains made.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study examined critical literacy instruction from a perspective that differs from that used in much of the extant research and scholarship. Although there is a plethora of research documenting the use of critical literacy pedagogy in the classroom (e.g., Lewis, 2001; Blaise, 2012), there is little research that examines the cognitive benefits of critical literacy in terms of comprehension. Therefore, this study sought to examine whether comprehension was improved through the use of critical literacy instruction. There is very little scholarship that addresses the question of how critical literacy pedagogy affects students’ reading comprehension. Rosario-Ramos (2012) examined the relationship between critical analysis of texts and comprehension, finding the two domains to be related. Using correlation and linear regression analysis of think alouds, she reported that students who showed high levels of comprehension also showed high levels of critical analysis. However, beyond her study, there is very little research exploring the connection between critical literacy and comprehension.

One direction for new research stemming from this study is to implement a larger sample size and an experimental design using randomized assignment of students to experimental and control groups. Due to limited resources, this study employed a comparison group that participated in only a few of the assessments administered to the
treatment group. A more robust study would include a larger sample size and multiple classes for treatment and control groups to maximize power and minimize the teacher as a confound in this study. Additionally, control groups should participate in all of the assessments administered to the treatment group to provide a clear comparison between those who received critical literacy instruction and those who did not. Such a study would provide stronger evidence that critical literacy can improve comprehension.

Another recommendation stemming from this study would be to examine the effects of critical literacy on comprehension in a suburban or rural setting. This study took place in an urban setting where all students were from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and approximately half the participants were minorities. These students had personally experienced racism and classicism and were consequently able to draw on their own experience and knowledge of the world when undertaking critical literacy issues. According to schema theory (Anderson, 1984), students’ prior knowledge about racism or classism would provide a scaffold for their understanding and would enable inference-making and elaboration. This may have provided an advantage for students in this study and could have contributed to the comprehension benefits that were demonstrated in the study. Conducting such a study in a different setting in which students are largely white and middle to upper class may yield different results, as students might not be able to draw from their own experience to engage with critical literacy issues.

Finally, it would be useful to explore further the utility of measures for assessing critical literacy practices in conjunction with comprehension. Critical literacy practices are typically observed in a qualitative manner, such as discourse analysis (e.g., Lewis,
This study attempted to quantify both comprehension and critical literacy gains to determine the effects of critical literacy on comprehension. However, the measures used may not have adequately captured students’ critical literacy practices. To further examine the benefits of comprehension for critical literacy, research regarding the assessment of critical literacy would be useful. A more qualitative approach, such as recording each small group’s discussion, more in-depth discourse analysis, or a deeper examination of student work might better capture critical literacy. A more robust study would have both richer qualitative aspects while administering specific, cognitive assessments. The data gathered in this study could also be further examined, using a sociocultural lens. This would include examination of student work samples and more vigorous, qualitative analysis of the think alouds and writing tasks.

In conclusion, the topic of critical literacy’s benefits in terms of comprehension is new and requires more investigation. The next steps for this area of inquiry would be to work with a small group of teachers who would implement instruction instead of a researcher, to work with a larger sample size to provide more power for statistical analysis, to use improved measures of critical literacy, and to explore how the setting affects the benefits for comprehension.

**Concluding Thoughts**

I argue that the practice of critical literacy holds great promise in terms of benefitting students’ comprehension. As has been discussed, sophisticated literacy skills are required for students in the Common Core standards as well as beyond school for economic success. I suggest critical literacy pedagogy is an effective means to equip students with the high-level literacy skills required. As this study demonstrated, students
who engaged in critical literacy also engaged in complex literacy skills such as making inferences, providing elaborated responses, using text evidence and prior knowledge to support claims, making connections to other texts, their own lives, and the world, and making evaluations.

The critical literacy practices investigated in this study repeatedly required students to look beyond surface meaning to investigate underlying assumptions and values promoted in texts. Students were required to evaluate the choices of characters and the ethics of authors. Students were asked to apply their experiential knowledge, connecting texts to their own lives in order to understand issues regarding poverty, racism, and education more deeply.

Furthermore, when students were engaged in discussing issues of critical literacy, they demonstrated increased participation. Students who did not normally engage in discussions participated and even initiated discussions, and off-task behavior decreased during critical literacy events. Therefore, it is possible that critical literacy instruction might increase student participation while also acting as a vessel for higher-order thinking and literacy skills. I suggest that teachers consider critical literacy pedagogy to improve students’ comprehension and attitudes towards literacy. I also suggest that further research is needed to investigate the link between critical literacy pedagogy and comprehension to better isolate critical literacy as a factor that improves comprehension.
REFERENCES


164


Dyson, A. (2001). Relational sense and textual sense in a U.S. urban classroom: The contested case of Emily, girl friend of a ninja. In B. Comber and A. Simpson (Eds.), *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms* (pp. 3-18). Mahwah, NJ:
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Edmiston, B., & Enciso, P. (2002). Reflections and refractions of meaning: Dialogic approaches to reading with classroom drama. In J. Flood, D. Lapp, J.R. Squire, & J.M. Jenson (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching English Language Arts* (pp. 868-880).


classroom and educational research (pp. 317-351). Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing.


QSR International (2012). NVivo (version 10) [qualitative software for Windows].


Rogers, R. (2002). ‘That’s what you’re here for, you’re supposed to tell us’: Teaching and learning critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 45*(8), 772-788.


APPENDIX A

THINK ALOUD PROTOCOLS

Think Aloud Model and Directions

The following script will be used when administering the Think Aloud assessment: “Today we’re going to do what’s called a Think Aloud. This means that you’re going to read aloud a short passage to me, and while you’re reading, you will comment on what you are thinking about. So, whatever comes to mind while you read the text, you’ll say it aloud. You can ask a question, tell your reaction or opinion, make a prediction, a connection to your life or something you’ve read or seen, make an inference, note something that was confusing—whatever comes to mind as you’re reading, I want you to tell me. I’d like to you comment about every two sentences. There are stars placed throughout the text to help you remember to comment on your thinking. You can comment when there’s not a star if you want. But when you come to a star, I want you to stop and comment. Also, I may remind you to tell me what you’re thinking by asking, “Can you tell me what you’re thinking?” Also, I will not respond to anything you say—it is like you’re thinking to yourself, only you do it out-loud.

Her parents had moved her to Cincinnati (Hey, Cincinnati is in Ohio! I wonder if the author’s from Ohio) to a large house with beveled glass windows and several porches and the history her mother liked to emphasize (I don’t know what beveled means. It sounds like s special type of window maybe for old houses. I think this house is old because it says it has “history.” You’ll love the house, they said. You’ll be lonely at first, they admitted, but you’re so nice you’ll make friends fast. (I wouldn’t want to be lonely at first. That doesn’t sound fun. And I wonder where she moved from). And as an impulse tore at her to lie on the floor, to hold to their ankles and tell them she felt like she was dying, to offer anything, anything at all, so they might allow her to finish growing up in the town of her childhood, they firmed mouths and spoke from their chests and they said, “It’s decided.” (I can really picture that scene with the girl lying on the floor begging. I picture the parents crossing their arms as they say “It’s decided.” It sounds like she really really doesn’t want to move. I’m wondering how old she is? Older kids don’t usually throw tantrums like that. I never had to move when I was kid—it must be pretty hard)
Mr. Bueller asked if anyone knew French. Victor raised his hand, wanting to impress Teresa. The teacher beamed and asked Victor a question in French. 

Victor didn’t know what to say. The teacher wet his lips and asked something else in French. The room grew silent. Victor felt all eyes staring at him. He tried to bluff his way out by making noises that sounded French.

“La me vave me con le grandma” he said uncertainly.

Mr. Bueller, wrinkling his face in curiosity, asked him to speak up.

Great rosebushes of red bloomed on Victor’s cheeks. A river of nervous sweat ran down his palms. He felt awful. Teresa sat a few desks away, no doubt thinking he was a fool. Without looking at Mr. Bueller, Victor mumbled, “Frenchie oh weewee gee in September.” Mr. Bueller understood that the boy didn’t know French and turned away.
Example

Her parents had moved her to Cincinnati, to a large house with beveled glass windows and several porches and the *history* her mother liked to emphasize.  

You’ll love the house, they said. You’ll be lonely at first, they admitted, but you’re so nice you’ll make friends fast.  

And as an impulse tore at her to lie on the floor, to hold to their ankles and tell them she felt she was dying, to offer anything, anything at all, so they might allow her to finish growing up in the town of her childhood, they firmed their mouths and spoke from their chests and they said, It’s decided.
Mr. Bueller asked if anyone knew French. Victor raised his hand, wanting to impress Teresa. The teacher beamed and asked Victor a question in French. Victor didn’t know what to say. The teacher wet his lips and asked something else in French. The room grew silent. Victor felt all eyes staring at him. He tried to bluff his way out by making noises that sounded French.

“La me vave me con le grandma” he said uncertainly.

Mr. Bueller, wrinkling his face in curiosity, asked him to speak up.

Great rosebushes of red bloomed on Victor’s cheeks. A river of nervous sweat ran down his palms. He felt awful. Teresa sat a few desks away, no doubt thinking he was a fool. Without looking at Mr. Bueller, Victor mumbled, “Frenchie oh weewee gee in September.” Mr. Bueller understood that the boy didn’t know French and turned away.
Think Aloud 1

This is an excerpt from Born Worker by Gary Soto

They said that Jose was born with a ring of dirt around his neck, with grime under his fingernails, and skin calloused from the grainy twist of a shovel. They said his palms were already rough by the time he was three, and soon after he learned his primary colors, his squint was the squint of an aged laborer. They said he was a born worker.

By seven he was drinking coffee slowly, his mouth pursed the way his mother sipped. He wore jeans, a shirt with sleeves rolled to his elbows. His eyes could measure a length of board, and his knees genuflected over flower beds and leafy gutters.

They said lots of things about Jose, but almost nothing of his parents. His mother stitched at a machine all day, and his father, with a steady job at the telephone company, climbed splintered, sun-sucked poles, fixed wires, and looked around the city at tree level.

“What do you see up there?” Jose once asked his father.

“Work,” he answered. “I see years of work, mi’jo.”

Jose took this as a truth, and though he did well in school, he felt destined to labor. His arms would pump, his legs would bend, his arms would carry a world of earth. He believed in hard work, believed that his strength was as ancient as a rock’s.
“Life is hard,” his father repeated from the time Jose could first make out the meaning of words until he was stroking his fingers against the grain of his sandpaper beard.

His mother was an example to Jose. She would raise her hands, showing her fingers pierced from the sewing machines. She bled on her machine, bled because there was money to make, a child to raise, and a roof to stay under.

One day when Jose returned home from junior high, his cousin Arnie was sitting on the lawn sucking on a stalk of grass. Jose knew that grass didn’t come from his lawn. His lawn was cut and pampered, clean.

“Jose!” Arnie shouted as he took off his earphones of his CD Walkman.

“Hi, Arnie,” Jose said without much enthusiasm. He didn’t like his cousin. He thought he was lazy, and worse, spoiled by the trappings of being middle class. His parents had good jobs in offices and showered him with clothes, shoes, CDs, vacations, almost anything he wanted. Arnie’s family had never climbed a telephone pole to size up the future.
This selection is a chapter from Laurence Yep’s memoir The Lost Garden. Yep grew up as a Chinese American in an African-American neighborhood of San Francisco. He attended school in Chinatown, although he did not speak or understand Chinese. His lack of Chinese, among other things, made him an outsider in Chinatown—sometimes even among his friends.

There is a stereotype that the Chinese lived in Chinatown because they wanted to. The fact was that before the fair housing laws they often had no choice. Out of some forty-five or so students in my class, I was one of the few who lived outside Chinatown. Now, thanks to the fair housing laws that were passed in the 1960s, almost none of my former classmates live there, and Chinatown itself has spilled out of its traditional boundaries.

When I was a boy, though, we could see the results of white money and power on three sides of us. To the east we could stare up at the high-rise office buildings of the business district; and to the west, up the steep streets, were the fancy hotels of Nob Hill. Southward lay downtown and the fancy department stores.

Grant Avenue led directly to downtown; but for years I always thought of the Stockton tunnel as the symbolic end to Chinatown. When it had been cut right through a hill, my father and his young friends had held foot races through it after midnight, hooting and hollering so that the echoes seemed to be the cheers of a huge crowd. The rich white world began on just the other side of the tunnel.
There were also invisible barriers that separated the wealthy whites from the Chinese who cleaned their apartments or waited on their tables. The Chinese could see and even touch the good life; but they could not join in.  

One of my classmates, Harold, had a paper route on Nob Hill. I still find it hard to believe that, up hills that angled some forty degrees or so, he carried a kind of poncho loaded with papers in front and back. But he did that every afternoon. Once I went along with him.  

When the poncho was flat, my friend and I returned to his tenement apartment where there was only one toilet to a floor; and the toilet lacked both a door and toilet paper. When you went, you brought in your own toilet paper.  

Nothing could be done about the door except changing your attitude about privacy.*
Think Aloud 3

This is an excerpt from *Names, Nombres* by Julia Alvarez, written about her experience immigrating to the United States.

At immigration, the officer asked my father, *Mister Elbures*, if he had anything to declare. My father shook his head no, and we were waved through. I was too afraid we wouldn't be let in if I corrected the man’s pronunciation, but I said our name to myself, opening my mouth wide for the organ blast of the *a*, a trilling tongue for the drumroll of the *r*, *All-vah-rrr-es!* How could anyone get *Elbures* out of that orchestra of sound?

At the hotel my mother was *Missus Alburest*, and I was *little girl*, as in, “Hey, little girl, stop riding the elevator up and down. It’s *not* a toy.”

When we moved into our new apartment building, the super called my father *Mister Alberase*, and the neighbors who become my mother’s friends pronounced her name *Jew-lee-ah* instead of *Hoo-lee-ah*. I, her namesake, was known as *Hoo-lee-tah* at home. But at school I was *Judy* or *Judith*, an once an English teacher mistook me for *Juliet*.

It took a while to get used to my new names. I wondered if I shouldn’t correct my teachers and new friends. But my mother argued that it didn’t matter. “You know your friend Shakespeare said, ‘A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’”

Our first few years in the States, ethnicity was not “in.” Those were the blond, blue-eyed, bobby-sock years of junior high and high school before the 60’s, ushered in peasant blouses, hoop earrings, *sarapes*. My initial desire to be known
by my correct Dominican name faded. I just wanted to be Judy and merge with the Sallys and Janes in my class. But inevitably, my accent and coloring gave my away. “So where are you from, Judy?”

“New York,” I told my classmates. After all, I had been born blocks away at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

“I mean, *originally.*”

“From the Caribbean,” I answered vaguely, for if I specified, no one was quite sure what continent our island was located on. “Really? I’ve been to Bermuda. We went last April for spring vacation. I got the worst sunburn! So, are you from Portoriko?”

“No,” I shook my head. “From the Dominican Republic.”

“Where’s that?”

“South of Bermuda.”

They were just being curious, I knew, but I burned with shame whenever they singled me out as a “foreigner,” a rare, exotic friend.
Think Aloud 4

This is an excerpt from Ta-Na-E-Ka, a memoir written by Mary Whitebird, a member of the Kaw, or Kansa Nation—a Native American group related to the Sioux.

Eleven was a magic word among the Kaws. It was the time of Ta-Na-E-Ka, the “flowering of adulthood.” It was the age, my grandfather informed us hundreds of times, “when a boy could prove himself to be a warrior and a girl took the first steps to womanhood.”

“I don’t want to be a warrior,” my cousin Roger Deer Leg, confided to me. “I’m going to become an accountant.”

“None of the other tribes made girls go through the endurance ritual,” I complained to my mother.

“It won’t be as bad as you think, Mary,” my mother said, ignoring my protests. “Once you’ve gone through it, you’ll certainly never forget it. You’ll be proud.”

I even complained to my teacher, Mrs. Richardson, feeling that, as a white woman, she would side with me. She didn’t. “All of us have rituals of one kind of another,” Mrs. Richardson said. “And look at it this way: How many girls have the opportunity to compete on equal terms with boys? Don’t look down on your heritage.”

Heritage, indeed! I had no intention of living on a reservation for the rest of my life. I was a good student. I loved school. My fantasies were about knights in armor and fair ladies in flowing gowns, being saved from dragons. It never occurred to me that being an Indian was exciting.
But I’ve always thought that the Kaw were the originators of the women’s liberation movement. No other Indian tribe—and I’ve spent half a lifetime researching the subject—treated women more “equally” than the Kaw. Unlike most of the sub-tribes of the Sioux Nation, the Kaw allowed men and women to eat together. And hundred of years before we were “acculturated,” a Kaw woman had the right to refuse a prospective husband even if her father arranged the match.

The Wisest women (generally wisdom was equated with age) often sat in tribal councils. Furthermore, most Kaw legends revolve around “Good Woman,” a kind of supersquaw, a Joan of Arc of the high plans. Good Woman led Kaw warriors into battle after battle, from which they always seemed to emerge victorious.

And girls as well as boys were required to undergo Ta-Nak-E-Ka. The actual ceremony varied from tribe to tribe, but since the Indians’ life on the plains was dedicated to survival, Ta-Na-E-Ka was a test of survival. We were to be sent, barefoot and in bathing suits, into the woods. Even our very traditional parents put their foot down when Grandfather suggested we go naked. For five days we’d have to live off the land, keeping warm as best we could, getting food where we could. It was May, but on northernmost reaches of the Missouri River the days were still chilly and the nights were fiercely cold.
Think Aloud 5

This is an excerpt from The Woman in the Snow retold by Patricia C. McKissack

The year-long Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott in 1955-56 was a pivotal event in the American civil rights movement. Blacks refused to ride the buses until their demand of fair and equal treatment for all fare-paying passengers was met.

Today the right to sit anywhere on a public bus may seem a small victory over racism and discrimination. But that single issue changed the lives of African Americans everywhere. After the successful boycott in Montgomery, blacks in other cities challenged bus companies, demanding not only the right to sit wherever they chose but also employment opportunities for black bus drivers.

Many cities had their own “bus” stories. Some are in history books, but this story is best enjoyed by the fireplace on the night of the first snowfall.

Grady Bishop had just been hired as a driver for Metro Bus Service. When he put on the gray uniform and boarded his bus, nothing mattered, not his obesity, not his poor education, not growing up the eleventh child of the town drunk.

Driving gave him power. And power mattered.

One cold November afternoon, Grady clocked in for the three-to-eleven shift. “You've got Hall tonight,” Billy, the route manager said, matter-of-factly.

“The Blackbird Express.” Grady didn’t care who knew his nickname for the route. “Not again.” He turned around slapping his hat against his leg.
“Try the *Hall Street Express,*” Billy corrected Grady, then hurried on, cutting their conversation short. “Snow's predicted. Try to keep on schedule, but if it gets too bad out there, forget it. Come on in.”

Grady popped a fresh stick of gum into his mouth. “You're the boss. But tell me. How am I s'posed to stay on schedule? What do those people care about time?”

Most Metro drivers didn't like the Hall Street assignment in the best weather, because the road twisted and turned back on itself like a retreating snake. When slick with ice and snow, it was even more hazardous. But Grady had his own reason for hating the route. The Hall Street Express serviced black domestics who rode out to the fashionable west end in the mornings and back down to the lower east side in the evenings.

“You know I can't stand being a chauffeur for a bunch of colored maids and cooks,” he groused.

“Take it or leave it," Billy said, walking away in disgust.

Snow fell steadily all afternoon. By nightfall the winding, twisting, and bending street was a driver's nightmare.

“Hurry up! Hurry up! I can't wait all day,” Grady snapped at the boarding passengers. “Get to the back of the bus,” he hustled them on impatiently. “You know the rules.”
APPENDIX B
RESEARCHER CONSTRUCTED COMPREHENSION TESTS

Test 1

*American History* by Judith Ortiz Cofer

The Puerto Rican tenement known as *El Building* was one block up from Straight street and was, in fact, the corner of Straight and Market; not “at” the corner, but *the* corner. At almost any hour of the day, El Building was like a monstrous jukebox, blasting out salsas from open windows as the residents, mostly new immigrants just up from the island, tried to drown out whatever they were currently enduring. But the day President Kennedy was shot there was a profound silence in El Building: even the abusive tongues of viragoes, the cursing of the unemployed, and the screeching of small children had been somehow muted. President Kennedy was a saint to these people.

On the day that President Kennedy was shot, my ninth grade class had been out in the fenced playground of Public School Number 13. Mr. DePalma, a short, muscular man with slicked down black hair, was the science teacher, P.E. coach, and
disciplinarian at P.S. 13. He was the teacher to whose homeroom you got assigned if you were a troublemaker, and the man called out break up playground fights.

That day, he stood in front of two rows of mostly black and Puerto Rican kids, brittle from their efforts to “keep moving” on a November day that was turning bitter cold. Mr. DePlama, to our complete shock, was crying.

“Listen,” Mr. DePalma raised his arms over his head as if he were about to conduct an orchestra. His voice broke, and he covered his face with his hands. His barrel chest was heaving. Girls giggled and laughed behind me.

“The President is dead, you idiots. I should have known that wouldn’t mean anything to a bunch of losers like you kids. Go home.” He was shrieking now. No one moved for a minute or two, but then a big girl let out a “Yeah!” and ran to get her books. The others followed in a mad scramble. It was still an hour to the dismissal bell.

Though I wanted to feel the right thing about President Kennedy’s death, I could not fight the feeling of elation that stirred in my chest. Today was the day I was to visit Eugene in his house. He had asked me to come over after school to study for an American history test with him.

In the next thirty minutes I changed clothes, put on a little pink lipstick, and got my books together. Then I went to tell my mother that I was going to a friend’s house to study. I did not expect her reaction.

“You are going out today? Hija, the President has been killed. We must show respect. He was a great man. Come to church with me tonight.”

“I have a test to study for, Mama. I will be home by eight.”
“You are forgetting who you are, Nina. I have seen you staring down at that boy's house. You are heading for humiliation and pain.” My mother said this in Spanish and in a resigned tone that surprised me, as if she had no intention of stopping me from “heading for humiliation and pain.” I started for the door.

I walked out to the street and around the chain-link fence that separated El Building from Eugene’s house. The yard was neatly edged around the little walk that led to the door. It always amazed me how small, neat, single residences like this one could be found right next to huge, dilapidated apartment buildings like El Building. I knocked softly. A few suspenseful moments later the door opened just a crack. The red, swollen face of a woman appeared. She had a halo of red hair floating over a delicate ivory face—the face of a doll—with freckles on the nose. Her smudged eye make-up made her look unreal to me, like a mannequin seen through a warped store window.

“What do you want?” Her voice was tiny and sweet-sounding, just like a little girl's, but her tone was not friendly.

“I’m Eugene’s friend. He asked me over. To study.” I thrust out my books, a silly gesture that embarrassed me almost immediately.

“You live there?” She pointed up to El Building, which looked particularly ugly, like a gray prison with its many dirty windows and rusty fire escapes. The woman had stepped halfway out and I could see that she wore a white nurse’s uniform with St. Joseph’s Hospital on the name tag.

“Yes. I do.”
She looked intently at me for a couple of heartbeats, then said as if to herself, “I don’t know how you people do it.” Then directly to me: “Listen. Honey. Eugene doesn’t want to study with you. He is a smart boy. Doesn’t need help. You understand me. I am truly sorry if he told you you could come over. He cannot study with you. It’s nothing personal. You understand? We won’t be in this place much longer, no need for him to get close to people—it’ll just make it harder for him later. Run back home now.”

I couldn’t move. I just stood there in shock at hearing these things said to me in such a honey-drenched voice.

“What’s wrong? Didn’t you hear what I said?” She seemed very angry, and I finally snapped out of my trance. I turned away from the green door, and heard her close it gently.

1) Why do you think Eugene’s mom’s face was swollen and her eye make-up smeared? Please explain.

2) What was Eugene’s house like, compared to the narrator’s apartment building?

3) What did Judith’s mom mean when she said “You are forgetting who you are”? Please explain your answer.
4) Why did Eugene's mom send Judith away? Please explain your answer.

5) How did Judith's mom know Judith was headed for “humiliation and pain”? Why do you think she didn’t try to stop Judith? Please explain your answer.

6) What would you have said or done in Judith’s place?

7) Do you think Mr. DePalma or Eugene's mom were racist? Explain why or why not.

8) Why do you think this short story is titled *American History*? Please explain your answer.
Test 2

*New Directions* by Maya Angelou

In 1903 the late Mrs. Annie Johnson of Arkansas found herself with two toddling sons, very little money, a slight ability to read and add simple numbers. To this picture add a disastrous marriage and the burdensome fact that Mrs. Johnson was a negro.

When she told her husband, Mr. William Johnson, of her dissatisfaction with their marriage, he conceded that he too found it to be less than he expected, and had been secretly hoping to leave and study religion. He added that the thought God was calling him not only to preach but to do so in Enid, Oklahoma. He did not tell her that he knew a minister in Enid with whom he could study and who had a friendly, unmarried daughter. They parted amicably, Annie keeping the one-room house and William taking most of the cash to carry himself to Oklahoma.

Annie, over six feet tall, big-boned, decided that she would not go to work as a domestic and leave her “precious babes” to anyone else’s care. There was no possibility of being hired at the town’s cotton gin or lumber mill, but maybe there was a way to make the two factories work for her. In her words, “I looked up the road I was going and back the way I come, and since I wasn’t satisfied, I decided to step off the road and cute me a new path.” She told herself that she wasn’t a fancy
cook but that she could “mix groceries well enough to scare hungry away and from a starving a man.”

She made her plans meticulously and in secret. One early evening to see if she was ready, she placed stones in two five-gallon pails and carried them three miles to the cotton gin. She rested a little, and then, discarding some rocks, she walked in the darkness to the saw mill five miles farther along the dirt road. On her way back to her little house and her babies, she dumped the remaining rocks along the path.

That same night she worked into the early hours boiling chicken and frying ham. She made dough and filled the rolled-out pastry with meat. At last she went to sleep.

The next morning she left her house carrying the meat pies, lard, and an iron brazier, and colas for a fire. Just before lunch she appeared in an empty lot behind the cotton gin. As the dinner noon bell rang, she dropped the savors into boiling fat and the aroma rose and floated over to the workers who spilled out of the gin, covered with white lint, looking like specters.

Most workers had brought their lunches of pinto beans and biscuits or crackers, onions and cans of sardines, but they were tempted by the hot meat pies which Annie ladled out of the fat. She wrapped them in newspapers, which soaked up the grease, and offered them for sale at a nickel each. Although business was slow, those first days Annie was determined. She balanced her appearances between the two hours of activity.
So, on Monday she offered hot fresh pies at the cotton gin and sold the remaining cooled down pies at the lumber mill for three cents. Then on Tuesday she went first to the lumber mill presenting fresh, just-cooked pies as the lumbermen covered in sawdust emerged from the mill.

For the next few years, on balmy spring days, blistering summer noons, and cold, wet, and wintry middays, Annie never disappointed her customers, who could count on seeing the tall, brown-skin woman bent over her brazier, carefully turning the meat pies. When she felt certain that the workers had become dependent on her, she built a stall between the two hives of industry and let the men run to her for their lunchtime provisions.

She had indeed stepped from the road which seemed to have been chosen for her and cut herself a brand-new path. In years that stall became a store where customers could buy cheese, meal, syrup, cookies, candy, writing tablets, pickles, canned goods, fresh fruit, soft drinks, coal, oil, and leather soles for worn-out shoes.

Each of us has the right and the responsibility to assess the roads which lie ahead, and those over which we have traveled, and if the future road looms ominous or unpromising, and the roads back uninviting, then we need to gather resolve, and carrying only the necessary baggage, step off that road into another direction. If the new choice is also unpalatable, without embarrassment, we must be ready to change that as well.
1) How did Annie’s husband respond when she told him she was unhappy with their marriage?

2) What does the author mean when she says “add...the burdensome fact that Ms. Johnson was a negro”? Please explain your answer.

3) Why didn’t Annie want to work as a “domestic” (a woman who cleans other people’s houses, cooks, and cares for their children)?

4) What might have been another reason that Annie’s husband wanted to move to Enid, Oklahoma, other than the fact that he thought “God was calling him”?

5) What does the author mean when she says, “She had indeed stepped from the road which seemed to have been chosen for her”? Please explain your answer.

6) What kind of model do you think Annie was for her children? Please explain your answer.
Poor Juan! One day they caught him with his guard down before he could even realized that what he had taken as a struck of luck was really one of fate’s dirty tricks. These things happen the minute you’re careless as one often is. Juan let happiness—a feeling you can’t trust—get the better of him when he received from a confidential source Mariana’s new address in Paris and knew that she hadn’t forgotten him. Without thinking twice, he sat down at his table and wrote her a letter. The letter that now keeps his mind off his job during the day and won’t let him sleep at night (what had he scrawled, what had he put on that sheet of paper he sent to Mariana?).

Juan knows there won’t be a problem with the letter’s contents, that it’s irreproachable, harmless. But what about the rest? He knows they examine, sniff, feel, and read between the lines of each and every letter, and check its tiniest comma and most accidental stain. He knows that all letters pass from hand to hand and go through all sorts of tests in the hue censorship offices and that, in the end, very few continue on their way. Usually it takes months, even years, if there aren’t any snags; all this time the freedom, maybe even the life, of both sender and receiver is in jeopardy. And that’s why Juan’s so troubled: thinking that something might happen
to Mariana because of his letters. Of all people, Mariana, who must finally feel safe there where she always dreamt she’d live. But he knows that the Censor’s Secret Command operates all over the world and cashes in on the discount in air fares; there’s nothing to stop them from going as far as that hidden Paris neighborhood, kidnapping Mariana, and returning to their cozy homes, certain of having fulfilled their noble mission.

Well, you’ve got to beat them to the punch, do what everyone tries to do: sabotage the machinery, throw sand in its gears, get to the bottom of the problem so as to stop it.

This was Juan’s sound plan when he, like many others, applied for a censor’s job—not because he had a calling or needed a job: no, he applied simply to intercept his own letter, a consoling albeit unoriginal idea. He was hired immediately, for each day more and more censors are needed and no one would bother to check on his references.

Ulterior motives couldn’t be overlooked by the Censorship Division, but they needn’t be too strict with those who applied. They knew how hard it would be for the poor guys to find the letter they wanted and even if they did, what’s a letter or two when the new censor would snap up so many others? That’s how Juan managed to join the Post Office’s Censorship Division, with a certain goal in mind.

By working hard, he quickly reached Section E, where the job became more interesting, for he could now read and analyze the letters’ contents. Here he could even hope to get hold of his letter, which, judging by the time that had elapsed, had gone through the other sections and was probably floating around in this one.
Soon his work became so absorbing that his noble mission blurred in his mind. Day after day he crossed out whole paragraphs in red ink, pitilessly chucking many letters into the censored basket. These were horrible days when he was shocked by the subtle and conniving ways employed by people to pass on subversive messages; his instincts were so sharp that he found behind a simple “the weather’s unsettled” or “prices continue to soar” the wavering hand of someone secretly scheming to overthrow the Government.

His zeal brought him swift promotion. Very few letters reached him in Section B—only a handful passed the other hurdles—so he read them over and over again, passed them under a magnifying glass, searched for microprint, and tuned his sense of smell so that he was beat by the time he made it home.

His basket for censored letters became the best fed as well as the most cunning basket in the whole Censorship Division. He was about to congratulate himself for having finally discovered his true mission when his letter to Mariana reached his hands. Naturally, he censored it without regret. And just as naturally, he couldn’t stop them from executing him the following morning, another victim of his devotion to his work.

1) Who is Juan afraid of in the beginning?

2) Where is Mariana?
3) Who do you think Mariana is (in relation to Juan)? Please explain why you think so.

4) Why does Juan apply for the censorship job?

5) What do you think might have been written in the letter?

6) Why do you think Juan censored his own letter, even though it would lead to his own execution? Please explain your answer.

7) Do you think most letters were censored fairly, or unfairly? Please explain your answer.

8) What do you think was the author’s purpose, or the message of this story? How do you think the author feels about censorship? Please explain your answer.
The country is India. A large dinner party is being given in an up-country station by a colonial official and his wife. The guests are army officers and government attaches and their wives, and an American scientist.

At one side of the long table a spirited discussion springs up between a young girl and a colonel. The girl insists women have long outgrown the jumping-on-a-chair-at-sight-of-a-mouse era, that they are not a fluttery as their grandmothers. The colonel says they are, explaining that women haven’t the actual never control of men. The other men at the table agree with him.

“A woman’s unfailing reaction in any crisis,” the colonel says, “is to scream. An while a man may feel like, yet he has that ounce more of control than a woman has. And that last ounce is what counts!”

The American scientist does not join in the argument, but sits watching the faces of the other guests. As he looks, he sees a strange expression come over the face of the hostess. She is staring straight ahead, the muscles of her face contracting slightly. With a small gesture she summons the Indian boy standing behind her chair. She whispers to him. The boy’s eyes widen: he turns quickly and leaves the
room. No one else sees this, nor the boy when he puts a bowl of milk on the verandah outside the glass doors.

The American comes to with a start. In India, milk in a bowl means only one thing. It is bait for a snake. He realizes there is a cobra in the room.

He looks up at the rafters—the likeliest place—and sees they are bare. Three corners of the room, which he can see by shifting only are empty. In the fourth corner a group of servants stand. The American realizes there is only one place left—under the table.

His first impulse is to jump back and warn the others. But he knows the commotion will frighten the cobra and it will strike. He speaks quickly, the quality of his voice so arresting that it sobers everyone.

“I want to know just what control everyone at this table has. I will count three hundred—that’s five minutes—and not one of you is to move a single muscle. The persons who move will forfeit 50 rupees. Now! Ready!”

The 20 people sit like stone images while he counts. He is saying “two hundred and eighty…” when out of the corner of his eye, he sees the cobra emerge and make for the bowl of milk. Four or five screams ring out as he jumps to slam shut the verandah doors.

“You certainly were right, Colonel!” the host says. “A man has just shown us an example of real control.”

“Just a minute,” the American says, turning to his hostess, “there’s one thing I’d like to know. Mrs. Wynnes, how did you know that a cobra was in the room?”
A faint smile lights up the woman’s face as she replies. “Because it was lying across my foot.”

1) Why did the boy put a bowl of milk outside?

2) What is your opinion of the evidence the colonel gives for why he claims women have less nerve control? Is this strong or weak evidence? Explain.

3) How are women being stereotyped in this story?

4) How does the hostess prove the colonel’s theory about women’s lack of nerve control wrong? Please explain your answer.
5) What do you think was the author’s theme, message, or lesson was for this story? Please explain your answer.

6) Do you believe the colonel was sexist? Why or why not?

Test 5

_The Princess and the Tin Box_ by James Thurber

Once upon a time, in a far country, there lived a king whose daughter was the prettiest princess in the world. Her eyes were like cornflower, her hair was sweeter than hyacinth, and her throat made the swan look dusty.

From the time she was a year old, the princess had been showered with presents. Her nursery looked like Carier’s window. Her toys were all made of gold or platinum or diamonds or emeralds. She was not permitted to have wooden blocks or china dolls or rubber dogs or linen books, because such materials were considered cheap for the daughter of a king.

When she was seven, she was allowed to attend the wedding of her brother and throw real pearls at the bride instead of rice. Only the nightingale, with his lyre of gold, was permitted to sing for the princess. The common blackbird, with his boxwood flute, was kept out of the palace grounds. She walked in silver-and-samite slippers to a sapphire-and-topaz bathroom and slept in an ivory bed inlaid with rubies.
On the day the princess was eighteen, the king sent a royal ambassador to the courts of five neighboring kingdoms to announce that he would give his daughter’s hand in marriage to the prince who brought her the gift she liked the most.

The first prince to arrive at the palace rode a swift white stallion and laid at the feet of the princess an enormous apple made of solid gold which he had taken from a dragon who had guarded it for a thousand years. It was placed on a long ebony table set up to hold the gifts of the princess’s suitors. The second prince, who came on a gray charger, brought her a nightingale made of a thousand diamonds, and it was placed beside the golden apple. The third prince, riding on a black horse, carried a great jewel box made of platinum and sapphires, and it was placed next to the diamond nightingale. The fourth prince, astride a fiery yellow horse, gave the princess a gigantic heart made of rubies and pierced by an emerald arrow. It was placed next to the platinum-and-sapphire jewel box.

Now the fifth prince was the strongest and handsomest of all the five suitors, but he was the son of a poor king whose realm had been overrun by mice and locusts and wizards and mining engineers so that there was nothing much of value left in it. He came plodding up do the palace of the princess on a plow horse and he brought her a small tin box filled with mica and feldspar and hornblende (common minerals) which he had picked up on the way.

The other princes roared with disdainful laughter when they saw the tawdry gift the fifth prince had brought to the princess. But she examined it with great interest squealed with delight, for all her life she had been glutted with precious stones and priceless metals, but she had never seen tine before or mica or feldspar.
or hornblende. The tin box was placed next to the ruby heart pierced with an emerald arrow.

“Now,” the king said to his daughter, “you must select the gift you like best and marry the prince that brought it.”

The princess smiled and walked up to the table and picked up the present she liked most. It was the platinum-and-sapphire jewel box, the gift of the third prince.

“The way I figure it,” she said, “is this. It is a very large and expensive box, and when I am married, I will meet many admirers who will give me precious gems with which to fill it to the top. Therefore, it is the most valuable of all the gifts my suitors have brought me and I like it the best.”

The princess married the third prince that very day in the midst of great merriment and high revelry. More than a hundred thousand pearls were thrown at her and she loved it.

*Moral: All those who thought the princess was going to select the tin box filled with worthless stones instead of one of the other fits will kindly stay after class and write one hundred times on the blackboard “I would rather have a hunk of aluminum silicate than a diamond necklace.”*

1) Why wasn’t the princess allowed to have wooden blocks?
2) Why do you think the king had the princess choose a suitor based on what gift he brought?

3) Do you think that was a good way to choose a husband? Please explain your answer.

4) Describe the princess’s upbringing (the way she was raised).

5) What is your opinion of the princess’s upbringing (the way she was raised)?

6) Why might a reader think the princess was going to choose the fifth prince?

7) What is your opinion of the princess’s decision to marry the third prince? Please explain your answer.
8) What do you think was the author’s lesson, theme, or moral was for this story? Please explain your answer.
APPENDIX C

WRITING TASK

This is an excerpt from the story A Crush, by Cynthia Rylant.

A Crush

When the windows of Stan’s Hardware Store started filling up with flowers, everyone in town knew something had happened. Large amounts of flowers usually meant someone died. But funeral flowers were usually fake. These were all real flowers, so everyone knew nobody had died. They all figured somebody had a crush...

Dolores was the assistant manager at Stan’s Hardware Store. She had worked there for 20 years. She knew the store like a mother knows her baby. So the manager, who didn’t know the store as well as Dolores, tried to keep himself busy in the back and let Dolores run things in the front. This worked fine because the carpenters and plumbers in town trusted Dolores. They took her advice to heart. They also liked her tattoo.

Dolores was the only woman in town with a tattoo. On the days she went sleeveless, you could see it on the tanned skin of her upper arm. It said, “Howl at the Moon.” Underneath the words was a picture of a howling coyote. It must have been
dark gray in its early days, but its color had faded. Now, it was the color of spackling paste.

No one thought that the flowers in the front of the store had anything to do with Dolores. As far as anyone knew, Dolores had never been in love. And as far as anyone knew, no one had been in love with her. Some people thought it was because of her tattoo. They also thought it could be because of the fine, dark hair above Dolores’s upper lip. Dolores was just more of a man than most of the men in town. Fellows couldn’t figure out how to date someone who knew more about a car than he did.

Others thought Dolores simply didn’t want love. This was a popular theory with the women in town. Many of them sold Avon and Mary Kay make-up. Whenever one of them ran into the store for a package of light bulbs or some batteries, she would mentally pluck every black hair above Dolore’s lip. Then she’d think about washing that grease out of Dolores’s hair. They’d imagine dressing her in a nice, silk blouse with a skirt from the Sports line. And finally, they’d think about toning down her dark, dock-worker looks. They’d use some foundation make-up, some frosted lipstick, and a good gray liner for her eyes.

**Writing Task:** Think about what this story says about women and men. What assumptions do people in the story make about how women/men should be? What assumptions did people make about Dolores? What do you think about Dolores? Describe any stereotyping you see.