

What is Critical?: An Analysis of Small Group Critical Conversations with African American  
Second Grade Males

By

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different.*

(Wright, 1945, Ch. 13).

The author of this statement was Richard Wright, a Black young man who had to forge the name of a White co-worker in order to borrow books from the Memphis Public Library during the Jim Crow era. As he discovered books and literature, he began to understand reading as a social process that had an impact on one's view of the world. This study aimed to provide a space where students could critically explore texts—a place where students, like Richard Wright, could “be affected by something that made the look of the world different.” While the novelist Richard Wright was not a critical literacy theorist, he raised a point that many critical literacy theorists and practitioners currently explore. How can we foster literacy experiences that cause us to view the world differently? Leland, Lewison, & Harste (2013), in one of their guiding principles for critical literacy instruction stated, “Critically literate readers enjoy books, reflect thoughtfully about the issues raised, and then take action by repositioning themselves and figuring out how to talk and walk differently in the world” (p.13). Therefore, the focus of this study was to explore the ways in which critical literacy was enacted with young Black males during literature discussions. The study focused on six second grade Black males' participation in critical conversations—conversations in which issues of power and privilege are raised.

In this age of Common Core standards and a push for close reading, many might suggest that reading is a technical task, a task in which students spend time analyzing and evaluating what has been written in an effort to demonstrate the ability to comprehend what is on the written page. The quote above suggests that reading is more than that. Reading not only requires

an understanding of what the author has presented, but also to feel, react, and shape your view of the world. In many literacy classrooms today, children are learning rote procedures of reading. Reading has become increasingly skills-based, and opportunities for deep critical thought, where thoughts can be expanded and ideals challenged, are scarce (Knobel & Healy, 1998).

### **Black Males and Literacy Achievement**

There are some stark realities that we as educators, researchers, and society as whole must face when it comes to the literacy achievement of Black males. The underperformance of Black male youth is quite concerning. According to the 2011 NAEP report fourth-grade African American males have the second lowest reading comprehension scale score as compared to other racial groups. Even in subject areas where males tend to perform better than their peers (e.g., science and math), African American males are not exhibiting the same trend (Morrell, 2006). While the reading scores of young Black males are increasing, their results still trail behind their White counterparts. The achievement gap between Black males and their peers (Garibaldi, 1993; Morrell, 2006) is alarming, especially when considering the implications of this low academic achievement.

One major implication of low literacy rates is a high rate of high school dropouts (Howard, 2014; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). “If current trends hold true, 6.6 million low-income children in the birth to age 8 group are at increased risk of failing to graduate from high school on time, because they won’t be able to meet NAEP’s proficient reading level by the end of third grade” (Fiester, 2010). Dropping out of high school is not simply a single event; rather it is a procedural event that starts years before the ultimate decision is made. The difficulties that ensue from students’ academic disengagement begin to take a toll and eventually dropping out becomes a viable option (Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Kabbani, N., 2001; Barbarin, 2010).



According to the 2010 national graduation data, the graduation rate for Black males was fifty-two percent, in comparison to seventy-eight percent of white male graduates (Holzman, 2012). Howard (2014) claimed, “perhaps no other subject area is as critical to overall academic success as reading and literacy” (p. 13).

Many researchers have called attention to the deficit-oriented looks on Black male literacy achievement, or lack thereof (Ford, & Grantham, 2003; Milner, 2007; Lewis & del Valle, 2009). Deficit views, in and of themselves, become troubling when one begins to examine the ways in which Black young boys have been socially positioned and identified in and out of school. Howard (2014) argued,

One of the problems with the current literature on Black males is an almost exclusive focus on them as being poor and residing in urban communities, and on the challenges that are present in such environments. Many of the challenges that confront Black males in education go beyond their communities and their social class status, and are directly located in classrooms...” (p. 18).

Young Black children begin to notice inequities early in life and as they get older this awareness begins to intensify (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999). By the time young Black males become adolescents they have become keenly aware of how they have been positioned within the dominant academic institution that some have claimed to be the great equalizer (Noguera, 2003). Tatum (2005) furthered this point by stating:

The failure of institutions to acknowledge or adequately respond to the needs of black males, instead blaming these youths for what is really the institutions’ own failure, has caused black youths to respond to turmoil in their own way. (p. 28)

This is troublesome in that “given these alienating school contexts and consequences particularly those focusing on gender expectations, many African American males become both victims and participants in their own educational marginalization” (Polite & Davis, 1999, p.3). Many young African American males are not sensing acceptance in schools (Davis, 2003; Gay, 2000) and their multiple identities are often being shut off in academic settings. Barbarin (2010) noted that some schools view African American males as “incorrigible.” Viewpoints such as these lead to disengagement. Similarly, Orange and Horowitz (1999) claimed, “teachers’ culture, language, social interests, goals, cognitions, and values that are different [from students] could conceivably create a barrier to understanding what is best for minority students” (p. 38).

In addition, Tatum & Muhammad (2012) have further claimed that students’, especially young Black males, cultural and historical identities have been repeatedly marginalized in the classroom. Unfortunately, many academic institutions are failing to consider the whole child and this creates a chasm between school and student that sets the Black male aside (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Often the solution to students falling behind or being labeled as struggling readers is a “stripping down” of the curriculum. Tasks become increasingly less critical and more rote. Young students who struggle with reading are put into groups focusing solely on basic skill development and are often left out of the higher-level critical conversations that of which gifted students may be a part. The struggling reader then becomes marginalized and less likely to be exposed to critically rich conversations and texts.

In light of the troubling statistics facing our young Black males and the deficit views that often permeate the research literature, I became interested in the ways in which young Black males participate in small group critical conversations. Critical conversations are ones in which

participants focus on issues of power and privilege. During these conversations students are attempting to make meaning, as well as address critical issues (Pierce & Gilles, 2008). Rogers and Wetzel (2014) stated that, “language and literacy can be either oppressive or liberating and how it functions has a great deal to do with [teacher] decisions” (p. 56). With this in mind, I chose critical conversations as a site for young Black males to engage in talk about the critical issues of our world, to allow space for their voices and opinions to be heard, and to provide a literacy atmosphere that was, in some way, liberating for students. Due to the fact that young Black males often experience disengagement in school, in large part to the cultural divide that exists between cultural identities and school practices (Howard, 2014), it was important for me to consider a method of instruction that would allow for the students’ voice to be valued. Critical conversations supported the need for students’ identities to be used as a resource, as well as provided space for students to take up critical perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Quantitative data has been collected on how young Black males perform on standardized reading measures, but there is limited qualitative data on how young Black boys are engaging with particular literacy experiences; thus, it was important that in this study I take a closer look at *how* these particular students participate in critical conversations. Therefore, data analyzed in this study stemmed from a small book club with six second grade Black males. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the nature of young Black males’ engagements in small group critical conversations. I sought to understand the nature of discussion and the ways in which students took up critical topics. The analyses for this study sought to answer three major research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What is the nature of small group literature discussions focused on issues of power and privilege?

**Research Question 2:** How are students working to collectively build critical knowledge in a small group literature discussion focused on issues of power and privilege?

**Research Question 3:** In what ways do issues of racial identity emerge among a small group of African American males participating in a discussion about race, power, and privilege?

In the next chapter, I review relevant literature that undergirds and acts as the foundation for the research conducted with the six second grade African American males. In chapter 3, I give a detailed look at the methodology of this study, inclusive of data collection and data analysis methods. Chapters 4 through 6 relate the findings of this research, detailing the qualitative results of the sampled data. Finally, in chapter 7, I situate this work within the larger literacy landscape, addressing both this study's contributions, as well as its limitations.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Conceptual Framework**

This section will describe the conceptual understandings that undergird this dissertation. Provided in this section is a definition of critical literacy, as well as a brief discussion on current practices of schooled literature discussions and the need for critical conversations.

#### **Critical Literacy Defined**

Critical literacy, over the years, has manifested itself differently in different contexts; however, one consistent theme is its commitment to resisting the status quo. As this is a growing field, no one definition of critical literacy has been established. Researchers who take on a critical literacy perspective adopt a view that pushes participants to think critically about what and for whom information is presented. Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002) researched a range of definitions of critical literacy and synthesized them into four dimensions: disrupting the commonplace—seeing the everyday through new lenses, interrogating multiple viewpoints—understanding texts from the viewpoint of our own and from the viewpoint of others, focusing on sociopolitical issues—understand how sociopolitical systems and power shape our perceptions and response, and taking action and promoting social justice—taking informed action against oppression.

According to Bourdieu (1998), “one of the major powers of the state is to produce and impose (especially through the school system) categories of thought that we spontaneously apply to all things in the social world—including the state itself” (p. 35). One goal of critical literacy is to combat and unearth these power dynamics in an effort to challenge limiting and unjust uses of power.

Critical literacy theorists are especially interested in the social and cultural assertions of power embedded in everyday literacy engagements (Bourdieu, 1991; Janks, 2012; Luke, 2000). Much of the drive behind critical literacy is derived from conceptual work that examines societal power struggles. For example, Macedo (1994) posited

Because subordinate groups, through discriminatory policies, were made invisible and absent from history, their voices were either muffled or silent. This culture of silence served, by and large, to create the impression of a mythical common culture and to deny the existence of cultural difference. (p. 45)

In response to visible and invisible discrimination in our past and present history, critical literacy distinguishes itself from more traditional forms of literacy by spotlighting the power struggles that exist in our society, as well as power struggles that exist as part of one's learning. Shor (1997) distinguished literacy and critical literacy as follows:

*Literacy* is understood as social action through language use that develops us as agents inside a larger culture, while *critical literacy* is understood as 'learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations.' (p.2)

Critical literacy is also heavily rooted in Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of "reading the word and the world." Freire (1983) argued, "reading always involves critical perception, interpretation, and re-writing what is read" (p.11). Critical literacy draws heavily on Freire's critical perspective on reading pedagogy, but also pushes for readers to take up an agentive role in an effort to dismantle the social injustices woven into society's core.

Because social inequity has been normalized as a natural part of society, critical literacy theorists felt it necessary to develop ways in which students are taught to unearth the norms they

encounter daily. These perpetuating norms are evidenced in the stories we tell and in the narratives that are repeated over and over in our society and in our classrooms (Janks, 2012). Critical literacy argues that dominant narratives are being legitimized as they are continually being presented in literacy classrooms.

Green (2001) believed that when the pedagogical style, as a whole, continues to perpetuate these universal notions of truth, we are doing students a disservice. She stated:

Within the context of the school, literacy can limit students. When textbooks are selected that portray a mainstream view of the world, and when traditional literacy practices, which often reduce literacy to copying and the completion of worksheets or assignment questions, are used, literacy is far from liberating. (p. 8)

Fairclough (2001) argued that teachers are often taught to teach from particular texts and standpoints. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1991) claimed that canonical texts represent dominant ideologies and the language in which they are written also holds power. Therefore, he claimed “a particular culture or language causes all others to fall into particularity” (p. 46).

The nature of critical literacy is such that it demands readers to do more than just regurgitate what is on the written page. It requires that readers analyze and critique what is written within the context of society as a whole, as well as engage in dialogic exchanges with those in their local and global communities in an effort to address social issues (Freebody & Luke, 1990). Furthermore, it pushes the reader to wrestle with existing issues of power and injustice. Freire and Macedo (1987) remind us that learning is more than just acquiring facts and information from an authoritative source, such as a teacher, parent, or even a textbook, but learning is about reading and understanding the positioned nature of the world in which we live.

The work of critical literacy localizes literacy experiences to the extent that readers begin to engage with texts and world issues, as interpreted through their personal and cultural realities. For many students, their world experience is rarely incorporated or valued in today's classrooms (Luke & Kale, 1997). More specifically, when considering the needs of students from non-dominant cultures, Tatum argued, "we often foreclose the other identities that our students bring in, and that can become increasingly problematic particularly when looking for solutions that deal with reading" (A. Tatum, personal communication, Sept 7, 2012).

Critical literacy repositions students and classrooms as empowered participants. The ways students engage with texts are distinctly different from more traditional literacy engagements in classrooms. Students are now positioned as participants who are encouraged to take critical stances, knowing that in order to develop critical stances the voices of others should be heard. Shifting students' participation roles creates an opportunity to challenge the dominant discourse that is often present in texts. In critical literacy classrooms, there now becomes room for questions such as "Why are things the way they are? Who benefits from the status quo?" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 475). Not only are students working to question and push against the status quo, but the very act of repositioning students as critical and empowered participants is pushing against the status quo of dominant forms of student participation in traditional literacy classrooms. This shift, or repositioning, of students is not done simply for the purpose of being different, but rather to empower children to view and voice the world in ways not traditionally seen.

Furthermore, critical literacy activities position readers in such a way that they will begin to analyze and investigate how texts and words work as social tools, to shape and frame how readers view the world. O'Brien (1994) shares that "it is through language that our world is



constructed. We therefore need to consider critically what and how we learn about our world through reading, writing, and talking” (p. 36). Knobel & Healy (1998) have further argued that literacy should be considered more than “a fixed system of sounds and symbols” but instead should be understood as an “indissoluble part of everyday social practices” (p. 7).

**Critical conversations.** Pierce & Gilles (2008) describe critical conversations as “the kind of talk that supports meaning making and addresses critical issues” (p. 39). As students become readers, it is important that there be participation structures in place that will foster and allow room for critical stances. According to Lewison, Leland, & Harste (2008), a critical stance “consists of the attitudes and dispositions we take on that enable us to become critically literate beings” (p. xxvii). They further established that there are four dimensions of adopting a critical stance (1) consciously engaging—deciding how to thoughtfully respond to events in our lives; (2) entertaining alternate ways of being—creating and trying on new discourses; (3) taking responsibility to inquire—asking lots of questions; and (4) being reflexive—being aware of our own complicity in maintaining the status quo.

Harste, Breau, Leland, Ociepka, & Vasquez (2000) determined that “critical conversations are important because they highlight diversity and difference while calling attention to the nature and role of literacy in our society” (p. 507). Unfortunately, in contrast, many classroom cultures “instill in children a habit of privileging institutional beliefs and devaluing their own reactions and opinions” (McDaniel, 2004, p. 473). Therefore, classroom cultures and environments must provide opportunities for students to adopt and share critical stances, as well as encourage such stances and dialogue. For example, Harste, Breau, Leland, Ociepka, & Vasquez (2000) tell of third and fourth graders who, as a class, read a story about a 13 year old boy who walked into a convenience store and shot the elderly store owner. The book tells the story from multiple

perspectives (e.g. the boy's mother, a news reporter, classmates, etc.) and the third and fourth grade students spent time discussing the different social problems that arose in the text, along with discussing how they could stop violent crimes from happening in their own neighborhood.

As critical conversations are enacted in the classroom the nature of the participation changes—this includes the participation of the teacher as well. This means that it must extend beyond an occasional critical conversation, but that the culture of the classroom must be conducive to this type of activity (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006). Pennycock (1999) argued, “taking a critical approach...does not entail introducing a critical element into a classroom but rather involves an attitude, a way of thinking and teaching (p. 340). As students and teachers alike begin to ground themselves in the idea that the thoughts and opinions of all matter, and that there is strength in building upon the ideas of others (Pierce & Gilles, 2008).

In Marg Wells's work with second and third graders, she regularly encouraged students to “voice their concerns about contemporary life” (Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001, p. 457). The authors noted that the practice of taking up students' analyses as a launching point for curriculum building and inquiry is rare in these early grades. Cross discussion, discussion between and amongst participants, was important for the direction of the critical literacy agenda in this classroom. This discussion practice played a major role in how students viewed the topic at hand. As students were developing ideas for study and action it was clear “they had been influenced by their peer discussions because similar points were made across the students' artifacts” (p.457).

In a critical literacy focused classroom, critical conversations do not just occur during a formal instructional time. Because a culture must be developed in the classroom such that

students feel safe to discuss and share ideas in a critical way, students often engage in critical conversations throughout the day and with a variety of texts. Luke (2000) stated,

“if anything, critical literacy education involves a theoretical and practical ‘attitude’ towards texts *and* the social world, and a commitment to the use of textual practices for social analysis and transformation” (p.7).

For example, this culture and these attitudes toward texts had been developed in Muise’s (2001) classroom. Students felt free to launch critical conversations on their own. In one particular circumstance students got into a heated debate about the swimsuit edition of a *Sports Illustrated* magazine. Reflecting on this discussion the author stated that critical conversation “proved to be an opportunity where they could comfortably challenge and inform one another’s ideologies” (Muise, 2001, p. 3). These conversations are ever evolving and often lead students to take action to create social change.

### **Review of Existing Literature on Critical Conversations**

To gather materials for this review, I reviewed several databases using the search term “critical literacy.” The databases were ERIC, Google Scholar, Education Full Text, Wiley Online Library, and ProQuest. Due to the fact that this is an emerging field with much of the critical literacy classroom work beginning in the late 1990s, I did not find it necessary to put time boundaries on my search. This being said, the work considered for this review spans from the period 1996-2013. I required that the authors of each article use critical literacy as the theoretical base for their work—as a starting point. I read through abstracts and reviewed the theoretical backgrounds of each paper to make sure that authors were not simply employing a critical perspective on literacy instruction, but were leveraging critical literacy as a foundational theoretical guide for their research and practice. While some studies’ authors may recognize

some of the practices employed in their research as critical (e.g. critiquing texts, analyzing multiple viewpoints), these authors may have been leveraging these practices as skills of good reading, as opposed to rooting their theoretical frame in critical literacy. Studies and articles of this nature were excluded from the corpus of this review.

Because this review was limited to studies whose authors explicitly called their work critical literacy, I recognize that I have inevitably left out other lines of work that could in some way be related to critical literacy instruction in classrooms.

Critical literacy is a practice that has been employed on many academic levels from early childhood to adult education. I am most interested in the elementary context and originally only searched for studies in this setting. However, after further review of the articles I realized that it would be important to broaden my scope to include research conducted in PK-8 settings. This was due to the fact that the majority of the articles in the critical literacy field are reports of the use of critical literacy in classrooms, not necessarily empirical research. In an effort to locate more empirical work I broadened my scope to include studies conducted in middle schools as well.

This search resulted in a corpus of 42 peer-reviewed articles. Of the 42 articles, thirty-one articles focused on PK-5 (elementary) settings and 4 articles were situated in 6<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> grade (middle school) settings. Two of the articles were double-coded as elementary and middle due to the fact that participants in the articles covered both elementary and middle school ages. Nine of the articles were not focused on any particular grade level.

As a part of this review of literature, I further narrowed my search, looking most specifically at critical literacy literature that highlighted critical conversations. Of the 42 articles, I selected both practice and research literature that focused primarily on the voices of students in

a critical literacy setting. All articles that were selected for this review had to meet the following criteria: 1) authors used critical literacy as a theoretical base for their work with elementary students; 2) authors focused on discussion as a central part of critical literacy engagement; and 3) authors used the voices of students as evidence of critical conversations in their work. Using these criteria, 10 articles met this criteria. Five of the ten articles were reports of research, and 5 were practice articles—written primarily for classroom educators.

In order to identify patterns and categories that might be useful for this study, I selected these studies and coded specifically for ways in which critical conversations manifested themselves in the literature. As I analyzed these articles, I developed a set of research-based categories that were used to code articles that highlighted critical conversations. In Table 2.1, you will find a list of categories, their definitions, and a key study concordance. The key study concordance (Rowe & Wilson, in press) includes articles that contained direct evidence (e.g. definition, example, or description) of that category reported in the literature.

Table 2.1. Key Study Concordance

Category	Definition	Key Studies
<b>Centrality of texts</b>	Using texts as the center of/launching point of critical discussions	Bourke, 2008 Heffernan & Lewison, 2000 Labadie, Wetzel, Rogers, 2012 Chafel, Flint, Hammel, & Pomeroy, 2007
<b>Relevance of personal thought and experience</b>	Providing space for students to incorporate their lived experiences as well as their own opinions, as it relates to sociopolitical issues	Burns, 2009 Jones & Clarke, 2007 Wood, 2005 Wood & Jocius, 2013
<b>Building sociopolitical awareness</b>	Using conversations as a platform for educating students about sociopolitical issues, both historical and present day	Fain, 2008 Silvers, Shorey, Crofton, 2010

In the literature that highlighted critical conversations as a central part of critical literacy engagement, three main categories emerged from the literature: (a) centrality of texts; (b) relevance of personal thought and experience; and (c) building sociopolitical awareness. In the following sections I will describe each of these categories and provide examples of how each of these categories was evidenced in the literature.

**Centrality of texts.** Consistently throughout the literature the text was central to the development of critical conversations. In many cases, the authors reported use of books that discussed issues of power and privilege (Chafel, Flint, Hammel, & Pomeroy, 2007; Bourke, 2008; Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012). While some authors explained their book choices as texts that they thought would be powerful to the reader, or in some way “make sense of some important social issues and historical events, even when [the

reader is] separated from a text by historical or experiential distance” (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012, p.119), others described choosing books that would expand student knowledge and understanding (Bourke, 2008).

Book choice was important to critical conversations as it served as the launching point for discussion. In some reports authors stated that by simply choosing different texts the conversations became more critical (Labadie, Pole, Rogers, 2013; Wood & Jocius, 2013). In Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers’ (2012) study they purposefully chose texts that focused on issues of race and inequality. They shared, “the books that we chose supported students’ engagement with social issues because of their intertextuality—they provided new or extended story lines on existing themes” (p.120). For example, in Bourke’s (2008) description of his first graders’ critical conversations, he shared that while they were reading a text with which all of the students were familiar (*Three Billy Goats Gruff*), he chose to use the text as a launching point for a critical analysis of the characters and events. He described this as “the act of approaching texts wearing a set of eyeglasses through which the reader examines and questions the familiar and comfortable” (p. 304).

**Summary.** As students began to engage in critical conversations, the teacher used texts as the starting point for conversations. While room was left for students to take on these ideas and “try them on” for themselves and connect with them in personal ways, conversations were generally launched from issues that arose from the selected text.

**Relevance of personal thought and experience.** In much of the literature that focused on students and teachers engaging in critical conversations, students and teachers discussed how their own lived experiences connected or diverged from the experiences of those struggling with social issues. The key studies showed that students engaged with major sociopolitical issues of

our society through the lens of their own lived experiences (Burns, 2009; Jones & Clarke, 2007; Wood, 2005; Wood & Jocius, 2013). In a study with first graders, Burns (2009) had students connect their personal lives with a current global issue (e.g., war in Iraq). Burns had students connect the realities of war with their own personal lives and families. Students shared how their family members had been affected by war. Burns stated that students “used the language of critical literacy as they considered problems they discovered, designed solutions for these problems and enacted several solutions” (p. 429).

In Wood & Jocius’ (2013) article, students, in their reaction to the historical context of segregation, situated themselves as members of that time in order to personally engage and voice their concerns about social issues of the day. Through their dialogue, students exemplified a fusion between their opinions of social injustice, as well as their own personal reactions to these injustices.

Jones & Clarke (2007) offered an alternative view of connection making. In their study they focused on voice by “disconnecting,” or stating contrasts between self and that of the characters in a particular book. In this study the authors argued that the traditional teacher practice of asking students to make connections can actually “inadvertently [position students] to believe in the authority of texts instead of acknowledging, questioning, challenging, and critiquing them” (Jones & Clarke, 2007, p. 100). So in this way they provided opportunities for students’ voices to still be heard and their lived experiences expressed, without the additional pressure of having to “relate” synonymously with the characters in the texts.

**Summary.** Throughout the literature it is evident that in order to have a critical conversation about any sociopolitical issue, credence must be given to the lived experiences and opinions of students. Chafel, Flint, Hammel, & Pomeroy (2007) stated,



In the spirit of critical literacy, teachers should grant children, the freedom to express themselves and weave life experiences into learning, while seriously addressing issues of social justice, equity, and diversity in developmentally appropriate language. (p.74)

**Building sociopolitical awareness.** Critical conversations were not only opportunities for students to express opinions and explore texts, but they provided opportunities for students to build an understanding of the larger sociopolitical issues that exist in the world. Through conversation, teachers allowed students to explore social issues of the past and present (Fain, 2008; Labadie, Wetzel, Rogers, 2012; Silvers, Shorey & Crofton, 2010).

In Fain's (2008) study, she used texts to help students understand issues of racism, linguisticism, and oppression. They analyzed and deconstructed derogatory terms from the text and discussed the potential meaning of the term and why it was used (e.g. wetback). Through discussion of the lived experiences of characters in the text, students became more aware of the sociopolitical issues that were being exhibited in the text and then began to connect them with issues that still exist in the world today. Therefore, critical conversations provided opportunities for students to build knowledge and an awareness of sociopolitical issues existing in the past and present.

In the critical conversations described in Silvers, Shorey & Crofton's (2010) work, they analyzed how conversations about Hurricane Katrina not only led to a more developed understanding of the hurricane's effect, but further study on the hurricane. In this case, critical conversation led to further knowledge development outside of the discussion event.

**Summary.** Across the articles it was evident that students often entered the discussion unaware of some of the explicit sociopolitical issues that exist in the world. This is not to say that students were oblivious to inequity in our world, but they did not always know the different ways

in which inequity had manifested itself in society. Critical conversations often provided opportunities for participants, teacher included, to build knowledge of sociopolitical issues.

**Gaps in the Existing Literature.** The articles included in this literature review illustrated three major themes relates to critical conversations: 1) centrality of texts; 2) relevance of lived experiences and opinions; and 3) building sociopolitical awareness. How authors have gone about reporting information about conversations has, in many cases, been reported for practitioners, therefore the research data is often absent from these reports. There are limited research reports that take an empirical approach to understanding the conversations. As noted earlier, five of the studies were reports of research. More research is needed on both the process, how critical conversations are conducted, as well as on the critical nature of these conversations.

Finally, it is imperative that we take a closer look at the intersection of who is participating in the critical conversation in relation to the conversation themselves. Throughout the literature authors regularly talk about the importance of having students discuss sociopolitical issues and use texts that can lead to these deep critical dialogues (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison & Vasquez, 1999). The literature, however, pays little attention to the ways in which students of different backgrounds engage in these conversations. With the exception of Fain (2008) who looked particularly at how students of Latina(o) descent connected with issues of culture and/or language, and Wood & Jocius' (2013) account of Black males' critical conversations, much of the work that specifically highlights critical conversations analyzes classroom interaction without a focus on who is talking, with the exception of grade level. In some cases, the authors did not even report the demographics of the students that took part in the critical conversations, beyond specifying their grade level (Bourke, 2008; Heffernan & Lewison, 2000).

## **Summary**

With the understanding that there are gaps in the literature focused on critical conversations, it is the goal of this study to help broaden the literature landscape. The primary goal of this study is take a closer look at the nature of critical conversations with elementary age Black males. Critical literacy theorists call for an approach to literacy that is radical, and that seeks to change the perspective of what literacy instruction can be in the classroom today. This being said the selection of texts and the ways students and teachers engage with texts are at the center of this work. This study sought to examine what some might consider the revolutionary principles of critical literacy, and see how young Black males participate in texts and conversations dealing with systems of injustice and power. As you will see evidenced in the findings, these critical conversations were opportunities for young Black males to use critical perception and interpretation (Freire, 1983) to engage with texts. In this study, I closely analyzed the critical nature of the conversations, as well as highlighted the nature of participation in critical conversations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Critical literacy, while fundamentally based in critical pedagogy, also is connected strongly to sociocultural perspectives on literacy. Furthermore, when considering the how and why of critical conversations, I would be remiss not to consider the contributions and role that reader response theory plays in this work. Finally, due to the nature of engagement—small group book discussions—I will also ground this work in the literature on talk in the classroom, most specifically around children’s texts.

## **Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy**

Critical literacy takes a sociocultural, yet critical, approach to literacy learning; therefore this literature review is situated at its core, in sociocultural perspectives on literacy. Sociocultural perspectives on literacy posit that the participants, as well as the social interactions in which literacies are developed, shape literacy (Gee, 2002; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). According to Enciso & Ryan (2010), “Literacy, in this view, develops through relationships within social practices, across locations, and is expressed and refined through participants’ references to specific social histories, tacit knowledge, and opportunities for problem-solving” (p. 133). Sociocultural theory seeks to understand how one’s learning and mental functioning is connected with social, historical, and cultural practices (Wertsch, 1998).

The ways in which students and teacher participate in literacy classrooms have been shaped by “traditional” norms of classroom interaction. Students and teachers develop what Gee (2001) called a “socially-situated identity”—identities constructed based on the social context in which an individual participates. Over time a culture has been formed, such that its participants repeatedly enact the learned norms and structures of school. Therefore, in this section I will explore two major facets of sociocultural theory: social learning and mediation. I focus on social learning and mediation because they are important to providing an in-depth analysis of literature on critical literacy. A brief description of each will be presented, as well as its connection to literacy learning.

**Social learning.** A social learning view is based on the idea that there is a social component to mental functioning and learning. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that “every function in a child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the individual level” (p. 57). Here Vygotsky is highlighting, not only the fact that social interaction is a part of

the mental functioning of children, but that the social interaction is in the forefront. The social level is the first level of encounter. He further believed that people learn through social practices and experiences, or apprenticeship. He posited, “the internalization of socially rooted and historically developed activities is the distinguishing feature of human psychology, the basis of the qualitative leap from animal to human psychology” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). The notion that social learning was central to human psychology and learning was indeed foundational to many future sociocultural theories of learning and interaction.

For example, Lave and Wenger (1991), built their concept of communities of practice, using sociocultural perspectives. Lave & Wenger (1991) believed that those within a certain profession or work group shared that profession or craft based on their shared knowledge, practices, and experiences. They asserted “...the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This sociocultural process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills” (p. 29).

The foundational work of Vygotsky (1978) and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) empirical work, make a compelling argument that individual learning is not solely manifested through one’s own acts of personal cognition, but instead learning occurs as part of the social practices in which the learner takes part.

***Social learning and literacy.*** The Vygotskian notion that learning is mediated by social interaction has been taken up in the field of literacy as a way of understanding how language and literacies are leveraged in different social settings (Au, 1998; Gee, 2001; Heath, 1983). A number of ethnographic studies have shown links between social environments and the learner. Take for example Heath’s (1983) work with young children and their families. Heath laid out a descriptive analysis explaining the ways in which children and families of culturally diverse

backgrounds engaged in literacy differently. The environment and culture with which children were socialized into language accounted for differences in language engagement, attainment, and use.

Luke & Elkins (2002) further argued that literacy practices in which educators now participate are heavily influenced and guided by politics and biases. For example, the policy decisions that call for the universal implementation of basal-style reading programs that formulate for teachers what is best for their readers, regardless of cultural background or linguistic diversity are having major impacts on the ways in which educators are brought into the practice of teaching literacy. This in turn has major influences on the ways in which students begin to understand the purpose and goal of literacy.

In their discussion of the meaning of literacy as a social construction, Luke & Elkins (2002) stated:

Different readings, textual practices, and interpretations have acted as the divining rods, the boundaries between communities for many centuries. We participate in communities—real and imagined, virtual and corporeal—in part because of our sharing of knowledge, discourses, and textual practices. Should one hold the belief that the social world, including mind and text, is integral to the literacy process it is necessary to consider the recursive nature of mind and society. (p. 671)

**Mediation.** Another paradigmatic shift in the understanding of learning came when theorists began to understand the necessity and prominence of tools in the learning process. Vygotsky (1978), in his work with young children, began to explore and examine the productive relationship between language, learning, and society. He argued that language often acted as a

mediating tool in the learning process. Through his work, tools began to be understood as transformers of human action.

Wertsch (1998), prominent theorist in the area of mediated action, has been especially interested in not only agents, but also their cultural tools, or what he called the “mediators of action.” He explained, “An appreciation of mediational means or cultural tools...forces us to go beyond the individual agent when trying to understand the forces that shape human action” (p. 24). Wertsch now is expanding the notion of learning to not only include the people involved, but the tools that mediate the learning. This is not to say that theorists previously ignored tools. What Wertsch (1998) sought to do was “give the relationship between agent and instrument a privileged position” (p. 24). Building from Wertsch’s notion of mediated action, Enciso & Ryan (2010) argued that what people in fact know is “mediated by socially-culturally developed tools and signs that could be used to interpret and act with others in the world” (p. 133).

***Mediation and literacy.*** As one considers literacy from a sociocultural perspective it is important to examine the tools that mediate the literacy learning experience. Enciso & Ryan (2010) stated, “Descriptions of literacy learning, therefore, depend on close observations of social life involving mediating artifacts in formal and informal settings” (p. 133). Language and the cultural environment within which literacy is being taught mediate literacy learning.

Bloome & Egan-Robertson (1993) provide evidence that learning can be mediated through environment and culture, as well as through language. In their study, they argued that literacy learning was mediated by particular cultural ideologies. While Vygotsky focused heavily on the mediation of learning through language, Bloome & Egan-Robertson further explained how other cultural mediating tools are evidenced in the literacy learning process. Their analysis of the data provided evidence of the ways intertextuality helped show how students and teachers

define themselves and others, how social groups are formed, and how to construct, maintain and contest existing cultural ideologies. In defining intertextuality they stated,

Our view of intertextuality is grounded in a broader view of social interactions as a linguistic process. People act and react to each other, and they do so primarily through language. Intertextuality describes one of the social (and cultural) processes involved in how people act and react to each other. (p.308)

In their work, the culture of school, as well as the objects within that environment, were seen as mediators.

Often mediation is thought of as physical artifacts, or tools, that work to mediate learning; however culture can also act as a mediator of learning. Bloome & Egan-Robertson were not the only researchers to unearth culture as a mediating factor, Street (1997) described what he called “social literacies” as literacy that is inherently social and pluralistic—leaving room for multiple and new literacies. He posited:

The school, like other contexts, has its own social beliefs and behaviors into which its particular literacy practices are inserted. The notion is, in this sense, also profound in that it leads to quite new ways of understanding and defining what counts as literacy and has profound implications for how we teach reading and writing. If literacy is a social practice, then it varies with social context and is not the same, uniform thing in each case. (p. 48)

According to sociocultural perspectives on literacy learning, theorists have argued that learning and literacy development are based on the social and cultural contexts with which they are being established and practiced. The social environment and the mediators of action all play a part in literacy learning.



In this study, the role that discussion participants played was crucial to the interaction exhibited from session to session. The ability to posit and challenge each other's ideas was paramount to the understandings that students constructed. A sociocultural approach aligns well with a critical literacy approach, in that both the voices of the individual students, and the interaction between participants, are central to the understanding of critical literacy learning. Janks (2014) described the social implications well when she stated, "we have seen how where we are in space and how we are located socially affects both how we produce texts and how we interpret them. WHERE is part of the context. We also need to know who is saying what to whom, when, where, and why" (p. 23). This then raises questions about how students and teachers are able to engage in literacy experiences that value the voices, cultures, and experiences a participant brings with them. In the following sections, I will outline how reader response theory contributes to the foundational frame of critical conversations, as well as the ways in which student voice is leveraged in classrooms around literature.

### **Reader Response Theory**

Reader response theorists have argued that for many years the reader was considered invisible (Karolides, 1997; Rosenblatt, 2004). The reader was the one who received information from texts read, but had little role in the reading process other than to receive the words that were on the written page. This passive way of viewing the reader was vehemently challenged by Rosenblatt (1978).

**Transaction.** According to Rosenblatt (2004), reading is a transaction between the book and the reader. "'Meaning' is what happens during the transaction [between text and reader]: hence, the fallacy of thinking of them as separate and distinct entities instead of factors in a total situation" (p. 1369). Karolides (1997) expounded on this idea of transaction by stating,

the central premise of the reading process is that the literary work exists in the transaction between a reader and a text. The active participatory role of readers encompasses—in conjunction with comprehension—discovering meaning, responding emotionally, developing interpretation. Readers are not passive spectators of the text but are active performers with the text. (p. 8).

The concept of transaction shifts the focus to what is happening between reader and text, instead of meaning being fully housed in the text.

Prior to Rosenblatt & Karolides' work with reader response, Iser (1979), in "The Act of Reading," spoke about the text acting as a "living organism" that communicates and interacts with the reader. He wrote, "If we view the relation between text and reader as a kind of self-regulating system, we can define the text itself as an array of sign impulses (signifiers) which are received by the reader" (p. 2). In Iser's (1979) description of the transaction between text and reader, he views the text as a mediator. The text acts as a cultural tool that is used to mediate understanding for the learner (the reader). Furthermore, he makes it clear that comprehension is a result of the reader inserting "his own ideas into the process of communication" between text and reader.

Overall, there is a unifying view among reader response theorists, that the text is not the sole container of understanding. Reader response theorists agree that the role of the reader is central to construction of literary meaning (Galda & Beach, 2001; Sims, 1983; Sipe, 1999).

**Response Continuum.** Rosenblatt (2004) discussed two stances a reader can take when responding to, or engaging with, a text—efferent stance and aesthetic stance. These stances are a reflection of the reader's purpose for reading. When one reads from an efferent stance, he or she is reading to gain information on which to act on soon after the reading event. When reading

from an aesthetic stance the reader is focused mainly on the feeling the text conveys. A reader does not have to fall in the extreme of either stance, but can fall along the continuum. Therefore, when walking into more traditional literacy classrooms you may see responses to readings that might fall somewhere along the Efferent-Aesthetic Continuum (Rosenblatt, 2004).

Rosenblatt (2004) stated that texts are often labeled as either efferent or aesthetic. She warned against this, stating,

Confusion about the matter of stance results from the entrenched habit of thinking of the *text* as efferent or aesthetic, expository or poetic, literary or non-literary, and so on. Those who apply these terms to texts should realize that they actually are reporting their interpretation of the writer's intention as to what kind of reading the text should be given. The reader is free, however, to adopt either predominant stance toward any text. *Efferent or aesthetic* apply, then, to the writer's and the reader's selective attitude toward their own streams of consciousness during their respective linguistic events. (p. 1373).

In Rosenblatt's attempt to prevent a false dichotomy between text and reader she argued that the Efferent-Aesthetic Continuum was not purposed to devalue the text, but rather as a way of beginning to understand the relationship between text and reader. This is important to note due to the fact the same text can be read in multiple ways—or from multiple stances. For example, when a student is reading a novel for the purpose of preparing for an exam, that student may take a predominantly efferent stance; however if that same student checked this same book out from the library for extra-curricular purposes—the text would probably be read with a predominantly aesthetic stance. This is not to say that in order to prepare for an exam a student must use the efferent stance, it is rather suggesting that individuals can leverage different stances for different purposes.

**Inclusion of the critical.** Because meaning resides in both the reader and the text it is important to understand the views/stances of the reader. Rosenblatt (2004) offers two possible stances aesthetic and efferent, however Wade, Thompson, and Watkins (1994) describe two additional stances: critical/analytical and personal/narrative. Critical/analytic responses, according to the authors, are strongly ideological and are often evaluative, whereas personal/narrative responses are more aesthetic in nature and focus on the narrative aspects of a text. The authors define the personal/narrative response as “personal, aesthetic responses that focus on the narrative aspects of the text” (p. 282). While personal/narrative responses align quite well with Rosenblatt’s description of aesthetic response, the authors suggest that the critical/analytic stance provides an additional reader stance.

Lewis (2000), pushes reader response to include the cultural and not just the linguistic code. She argued, “we must broaden our view of reader response to acknowledge the social and political dimensions of response in particular contexts” (p. 258). When considering reader response for a critical standpoint, one has to not only concede to the fact that the reader is a part of the meaning making process, but also that the reader is also being acted upon by the social and political forces that exist in society (Bennett, 1979; hooks, b., 1991; Surber, 1998). Therefore, a critical stance requires an understanding of text, reader, and social world.

### **Talk as a Mediator for Meaning**

Many researchers have been arguing for more opportunities for students to talk and discuss texts in school settings (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Foreman-Peck, 1985; Hoffman, 2011). Teachers are being urged more and more to open up opportunities for questioning, by both teacher and student, as well as allowing for students to discuss texts together. While text discussions can occur during read aloud and shared reading, I have chosen to focus on talk in

small group book club settings, as this is the setting in which I worked with my students. In the following sections I will explicitly discuss the use of questioning in the classroom, as well as the use of small group discussions, as they relate to generating dialogue and making meaning.

**Questioning.** In this section I will specifically discuss questioning as a way of creating dialogue. In the literacy classroom, questioning is one of the primary participation structures. Questioning is used for a variety of purposes: as a comprehension strategy and as a way of creating dialogue around content and text. Historically, teacher questioning has been used to evaluate what students know and understand (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Van Zee, E. & Minstrell, J., 1997)—the most common form of classroom discourse being the three-part IRE structure (Cazden, 2001). This structure occurs in a three-part sequence where the teacher first *Initiates* a question, the student in turn *Responds*, and finally the teacher *Evaluates* the students' responses. In many classrooms "IRE is the default pattern—what happens unless deliberate action is taken to achieve some alternative" (Cazden, 2001, p.53). This default way of participating often leads to stilted conversations that can lead students to believe that their responses and thoughts are only valuable or credible if approved or evaluated by the teacher (Baker & Freebody, 2001; Lehman & Scharer, 1996).

In the early years of schooling, children are encouraged to embody what it means to look and sound like a reader (Cochran-Smith, 1985; Sulzby, 1985). Baker and Freebody (2001) stated

So the pressure is on teachers to produce "literate" who read like, write like, and sound like school books. Classroom literacies will always be "contrived" to the extent that they are theorized, planned, taught, and evaluated... (p. 60)

As students begin developing their reader identity it is important that there be participation structures in place that will foster and allow room for discussion.

**Small group discussions as catalysts for meaning making.** One major advantage of small group discussions is students' ability to work collaboratively, through discussion, to build understandings of texts and the world. Sloan (2002) argued,

Responding to literature through discussion, preferably in small groups, is a time-honored way to promote literary growth through reading, reflecting, and reevaluating one's response in light of the responses of others (p.28)

This is much like Burns (1998) argument that it students need to have the opportunity, "to verbalize the content, to listen to other modes of thinking, and to hear other perspectives all contribute to deepening comprehension" (p. 126). She further argued that it is not simply the ability to have discussion that impacts student comprehension, but it also matters the size of the discussion group. She posited that it is necessary to have smaller groups, as that allows for more active involvement. Similarly, Leal (1993) found that "the acquisition of knowledge is not only found in the personal construction of meaning but also in the context of social interactions with peers" (p. 115).

As mentioned in this section, researchers have argued that small group discussions are beneficial for student meaning making, the question then becomes how does this happen? What role does the teacher play in these small group discussions? In the next section I will outline how research has addressed the teacher's role in small group literature discussions.

***Small group discussions and the teacher's role.*** One of the most popular small group book discussion strategies is what Daniels (2002) describes as literature circles. Literature circles, according to Daniels (2002), are described as,

small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text (either in or

outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. (p. 2)

Daniels and his team began experimenting with literature circles in the mid-1980s. Their objective was to allow students opportunities to engage more deeply in a rich literary experience. Daniels (2002) strongly believes that the teacher's role in a literature circle should be minimal. The teacher should only act as a facilitator and not as a group member or instructor. In other uptakes of small group reading discussion groups there are varying opinions on the teacher role.

While Daniels (2002) outlines literature circles as student-led groups, Eeds & Peterson (1991), found the role of the teacher as participant to be important. The teachers in their study had the opportunity to share their own feelings and interpretations as fellow participants with students. Worthy, et al (2012) took on both Daniels' (2002) perspective and Eeds & Peterson's (1991) view by stating, "A facilitator can help mitigate these issues in the early stages of a group's work, not by directing the talk but by setting up the process and commenting and recapping when appropriate. Eventually the facilitator can become a participant in the dialogue" (p. 309). Worthy, et al (2012) are of the opinion that eventually the teacher can move from facilitator to participant.

Even with variations around teacher participation, one thing was clear across the board—students should be at the center. In occasions where the teacher acted as a participant, they always left room for students to be the primary leaders of the group. In Jewell & Pratt's (1999) work they made an intentional decision to move out of their central roles, as questioners, to a more facilitative role—leaving room for students to become the primary questioners.

This is not to say that teachers and researchers shift roles with no fear (Certo, et al, 2010). Jewell & Pratt (1999) very candidly stated, "we feared that without direct questioning, students

would not probe deeply enough when they read” (p. 843). This is a common fear of teachers, and the fear that students will not engage on a deep enough level often leads to teacher dominance in small group literature discussions. Leal (1993) argued that the removal of teachers from the small-group setting actually provided a less threatening atmosphere for students to be able to freely engage in dialogue and explore meaning. She claimed,

It is natural for children to interact with each other. Because children’s relationships are both important and natural to them, peer group discussions provide an excellent opportunity to discuss and explore learning topics in order to see if ideas are being understood correctly. (p. 117)

Ultimately, regardless of the teacher’s role, students must be invested and engaged in the process of small group discussions (Mills & Jennings, 2011). Furthermore, the research unanimously states that students should be at the center of this work. This may look like peer-led groups, teacher as facilitator groups, or even teacher as participant groups—in whatever way small group discussions are taken up, students must have the primary role, and be given the space to converse and construct meaning collectively with peers.

### **Reading as a Social and Critical Act and its Impact on the Literacy Classroom**

Reading as a social act is central to the examination of critical conversations with students—more specifically, for this study, young Black males. In order to conduct an in-depth analysis of literature discussions it is vital to get a grasp on the sociocultural nature of literacy and the impact that environment and cultural tools have on student learning. Furthermore, research has called us to rethink the ways in which we think about the construction of knowledge, and more deeply consider what individuals and tools are a part of the learning experience.



First, there must be an understanding that learning happens socially, and that those involved in learning, as well as their cultural backgrounds, matter. Second, one must also consider the tools that are being used to mediate learning—in this case, texts and talk. Research has highlighted the importance of talk for literary understanding and engagement while also outlining the ways in which discussions should happen in classrooms. It is not enough for a teacher to move through a laundry list of questions as a means for discussion in the classroom. Throughout this review it has become clear that students should be at the center of the discussion, and have the primary role of asking and fielding questions.

In addition, critical literacy theorists would argue that book discussions alone are not sufficient and that critical conversations are essential. As students begin developing their reader identity, it is important that discussion participation structures are in place in order to foster and allow room for critical stances. Unfortunately, many classroom cultures “instill in children a habit of privileging institutional beliefs and devaluing their own reactions and opinions” (McDaniel, 2004, p. 473). Therefore classroom cultures and environments must be established that not only allow students to discuss texts, but also allow room for students to adopt and share critical stances in dialogue.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **The Research Paradigm**

This study was theorized, developed, implemented, and analyzed based on Denzin & Lincoln's (2008) definition of qualitative research: "Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world....Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 4). Furthermore, I have chosen to take on Charmaz's (2006) constructivist view on grounded theory. Charmaz chooses the term constructivist "to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of data" (p. 14). In an effort to create an in-depth description of the phenomenon in question, it was my role as researcher to triangulate multiple sources of data (Patton, 2002) in order to make sense of the phenomena at hand.

As a qualitative researcher, I am most interested in how individuals (participants) make sense of their world in very particular contexts (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of the proposed study was to examine the ways in which young Black boys participated in critical conversations about children's literature. The data to be analyzed was drawn from the Critical Conversations study. This research was conducted as a substudy of the Close Reading study. Dr. Jeanne Fain was principal investigator of the larger study, and was my collaborator in designing and implementing the Critical Conversations substudy. Below, I provide a brief overview of the larger study and then provide a detailed description of the Critical Conversations substudy, including plans for analyzing data to answer the research questions presented in Chapter 1.

## **Research Context: The Close Reading Study**

The Close Reading Study took place during the 2013-2014 academic school year, and focused on the implementation of close reading techniques in classrooms. This study was conducted at Canyon Reed Elementary (pseudonym), an urban public school in the southern region of the United States. As a part of this study, participating classroom teachers received monthly professional development on discussion strategies, close reading, and critical literacy, weekly instructional coaching, and supplemental instructional resources such as an iPad mini and children's picture books.

While critical literacy was not the primary focus of the Close Reading Study, teachers were encouraged to support children in taking critical perspectives on book discussions throughout the year. In February and March, teachers participated in two professional development sessions specifically focused on critical literacy and on supporting students' participation in literature discussion. The February professional development session focused on literature discussion. Topics included the importance of talk in the classroom and instructional strategies teachers could use in their classrooms to help increase the amount of talk during book discussions.

During the March critical literacy professional development session, Dr. Jeanne Fain conducted a one hour session that focused on Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys' (2002) Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy (disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice). Teachers discussed the four dimensions and applied them to the reading of a children's picture book. Following this activity, teachers participated in a discussion about how critical literacy could be integrated into their classrooms.

In addition to attending professional development sessions, classroom teachers also worked with a literacy coach on a weekly basis. I served as the literacy coach for two of the second grade teachers, and the Critical Conversations substudy was conducted with students selected from their classrooms. In my coaching role, I conducted model lessons with their classes that would lead to increased student talk about texts. I also co-facilitated critical conversations about children's books with each of their classes. In the spring, teachers began to incorporate some elements of critical discussions in their own lessons. Therefore, students in the Critical Conversations substudy participated in literature discussions and had some exposure to critical perspectives and topics as part of classroom instruction.

### **The Critical Conversations Substudy**

The Critical Conversations substudy was a constructivist study that used systematic, yet flexible guidelines for the collection of data (Charmaz, 2006). The design of the substudy provided 6 African American male students with additional opportunities to participate in critical conversations about children's books. Below I describe the selection criteria for participants, the research site, researcher roles, instructional activities and data collection methods used in the Critical Conversations substudy. In a final section, I describe the specific analyses I conducted on the Critical Conversations data.

**Participants.** Student participants in the Critical Conversations substudy were selected from the two second grade classrooms at Canyon Reed Elementary and all Critical Conversation sessions were facilitated by myself and Dr. Jeanne Fain.

**Teachers/Facilitators.** I, along with my co-facilitator (Fain), acted as full participants in the small group literature discussions sessions. As Marshall & Rossman (2006) stated, we had "firsthand involvement in the social world chosen for the study" (p. 100). Drawing from Eeds &

Peterson's (1991) stance that teacher as participant is important, we played both the role of data collector and facilitator. Our role as facilitators included: preparing readings, developing response activities, and managing discussions. During discussion events, we focused on asking probing questions and providing background information to support meaning of the historical events in the text. Naturally, as we were the adults present, we also spent portions of the discussion managing behavior.

As a part of the study design, we selected books that had a theme of power and equity (see Book Selection for further details). We facilitated discussions, by using questioning to probe students' thinking about the stories being read and encouraging students to discuss the questions and thoughts that they had about the stories. In addition we provided opportunities for students to engage in a variety of response activities. As facilitators, we made sure that all the materials were present during these events, as well as explained and modeled procedures for reader response activities. Below I will describe the individual roles and responsibilities of each of the facilitators.

*Wood.* I, an African American female, came to this study with previous experience facilitating critical conversations with elementary students. Prior to this study, I conducted both small group and whole group sessions with children around issues of power and equity. In addition, my experiences as a teacher and instructional coach in an urban school setting further provided me with a lens through which I viewed my interactions with students.

As co-facilitator in the Critical Conversations study, I was primarily responsible for reviewing and selecting books that would be used for literature discussions, preparing and launching the response activities, collecting audio and video data, creating field notes, taking pictures of student work, and communicating schedules with the classroom teachers. Overall, I acted as lead researcher on this substudy.

*Fain.* Fain, a White female literacy professor, had a special interest in literature discussions using global texts, or texts that represent the people, language, and life experiences of those from a variety of cultures. She spent many years facilitating critical conversations with students. She is a former elementary school teacher. Her experience working with students, as young as pre-K, around issues of power and equity had a major impact on the group.

Her role in the study was to launch discussions around the selected texts. She often started the discussions with probing questions or by inquiring about what the students liked or did not like about the book. She also did the initial screening of the children's books that would eventually be incorporated throughout the study.

***Student participants.*** Six Black second grade boys participated in the Critical Conversations substudy. Three students from each class were selected by their classroom teachers to participate in the Critical Conversations Study. Criterion sampling was used to determine the participants of this study. The criterion put forth for study participation was that each participant be: (a) African American; (b) male; and in (c) 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, regardless of their individual reading level. I used this criteria for student selection due to the fact that it aligned with my research interests and questions.

Due to the fact that this study was a substudy of the Close Reading study, permission to audio and video record the students was already granted. To launch the study and inform parents of their student's participation, I sent home an informational letter on the critical conversations substudy (see Appendix A).

The following sections give a brief description of each student. The short biographies are descriptions of their literacy experiences in and out of school.

*Anthony.* Anthony was, generally quiet student who kept to himself. According to his teacher, when it was time to participate in whole or small group discussions he may or may not choose to participate, depending on his mood that day. At times he would raise his hand to be a part of the conversation, while at other times he would simply lay his head on the desk and refuse to participate. However, when Anthony was asked whether or not he liked to participate in class discussions he stated that he enjoyed sharing and talking about books that he had read.

Anthony was a student that believed he was a good reader, because he liked books. He really enjoyed books about cars. When he was at home he read often, and his mother even reads books to him regularly. When asked if he wrote at home, he shared that he would sometimes write about his favorite things. At home, Anthony would share information about what he had read with his siblings. When he needed help reading or writing something his mother or brother would assist him.

While Anthony stated that he enjoyed reading, his teacher did not necessarily see this positive attitude exhibited in the classroom. When it was time for independent reading in class, the teacher noted that Anthony typically laid his head on his desk. His teacher, however, noticed that Anthony, during guided reading, seemed to have an affinity for non-fiction texts, which aligned with Anthony's strong interest in books about cars.

When describing his reading ability, his teacher shared that Anthony was one level behind in reading. She shared that he, however, was not very motivated to read, which she correlated with his reading level.

*Kenny.* Kenny was an active participant in class. According to his teacher, he loved to participate. During class discussion, Kenny made personal connections with stories, as well as made connections with other texts he had read in class or on his own. When Kenny was asked

whether or not he enjoyed participating in discussions about books, he stated that he did enjoy it, because others can tell him about stories he had never heard of and he could tell others about stories they had never heard of. He stated that he liked talking about books because he wanted to tell more people what he had learned about in the books he had read.

Kenny's favorite types of book were what he called "funny" books. He had read a lot of funny stories and enjoyed reading these stories to his three year old little brother, whom he said he taught a lot. Kenny considered himself to be a good reader, because his mom told him he was. When asked who he thought was a good reader he stated that his eleven year old brother and sister were good readers, because they read louder than he did. At home, Kenny's parents read to him at night before he went to bed. Kenny also shared that he generally read at home on Saturday, Sunday, and Tuesday. When asked why, he shared that those were generally days he had no homework.

According to Kenny's teacher, he was reading well above grade level. She also noted that he was very motivated to read, and from her observations, enjoyed reading a variety of books.

*Jordan.* Jordan liked to participate in class discussions. His teacher shared that he loved to make connections with other events from stories or his personal life. He enjoyed having his classmates listen to him speak. When in a small group setting, Jordan tended to participate more. At times he had so much to say that the teacher had to tell him to stop or the group would run out of time. Interestingly enough, when Jordan was asked whether or not he enjoyed discussing books with others he shared that he did like to, but not all of the time. He stated that he didn't like sharing his ideas with other people and giving his ideas away. He also stated that he wanted to read and keep it to himself because he did not like to talk a lot.



Jordan considered himself to be a good reader, because he read books wherever he went. His favorite books were Judy Moody books. He shared that he thinks reading at school during free time is “a little bit” enjoyable. When asked why just a little bit, he shared that they do not have the very cool books sometimes, books like Judy Moody, Junie B. Jones, or Magic Tree House. Jordan said he read every day because he has two older brothers. When he was at home he enjoyed reading chapter books. He said no one at home reads to him because he can read to himself all of the time. One thing Jordan stated that he did not like about reading was when a book started off very cool and then the end was very boring.

Jordan enjoyed writing about the books he had read. When it came to writing, Jordan mentioned receiving help from one of his brothers, but he stated that he did not need him a lot, because his mom taught him how to write.

Jordan’s teacher noticed that he was highly engaged during independent reading time. When he was excited about a topic he did his best to read everything he could get his hands on about that topic. She also noticed that Jordan seemed to be very interested in nonfiction books, which was interesting considering the books he considered his favorite were fiction chapter books.

Jordan’s teacher provided a considerable amount of time working with Jordan due to some struggles that he had with reading. While in first grade, Jordan received special services from the literacy coach to help with his reading, because he was so far behind.

*Ethan.* Ethan did not participate much in class literature discussions. According to his teacher, he did not make personal connections or have opinions about the text being discussed. Generally, when talking with a partner about a text he would just let his partner tell him the answers. She noticed that most of the time he was not even paying attention or following along as the class read. Ethan, when asked whether he liked to talk with others about what he had read,

said that he did enjoy class discussions about books. He said it is fun to talk about what he has read with other people, because “you can talk to people.”

Ethan really enjoyed books about “snowboarding, skateboarding, monster trucks, that’s all”. He really liked a monster truck book he was reading because the truck was doing flips, jumping, “doing backwards,” going upside and spinning around. He also stated that he once read a book about skateboard people flipping and doing jumps, and it was so interesting to him that he told two of his male classmates about it. Ethan shared that he enjoyed reading during his free time at school, but he did not really consider himself to be a good reader. His teacher shared that Ethan would get books to read during independent reading time, however he seemed to just flip through the pages and not really read, although the books in his book box were on his level. Interestingly enough, his teacher noticed that Ethan liked to read chapter books although they are way above his reading level.

Ethan stated that he did not think he was a good reader, because he did not know a lot of words and some words are hard. He did, however, think that his 12 year old and 10 year old sisters were good readers, along with his mom and dad. He said he knew they were good readers because they could read fast.

Ethan liked to read “wimpy kid” books, superhero books, snowboarding, skateboarding, and monster truck books. At home he would read every day. Sometimes his mom and dad read to him, or his sisters read to him.

According to his teacher, Ethan was multiple grade levels behind in reading and had a reading disability. She often found that he was not motivated to read because it tended to frustrate him.

*Nathan.* Nathan was a very active participant during whole class literature discussions. His contributions were usually thoughtful and deep. He tended to make personal connections with the text and with other texts that have been read in class previously. The teacher noticed that at times Nathan could be very critical of other's ideas to the point of coming off disrespectful.

Nathan participated in a class book club with some of his classmates who were reading at a similar level and he usually loved to go and discuss what they were reading. He often liked to write in his journal about what he had read and then share his thoughts with those in his book club. Nathan also stated that he enjoyed talking about what he had read with others, because those with whom he shared may have read the same book before and might want to talk about it. He also reiterated the fact that he really liked class activities about books and that they are really fun.

Nathan, at the time, was extremely interested in a book he was reading about Ancient Egypt. When asked what his favorite type of books were, he spent quite a bit of time telling about the book he was reading about Ancient Egypt. He also shared that he liked DC Superhero books, books about his favorite football team—the Lions, books about his favorite basketball player—Dwight Howard, and books about Spider Man. He enjoyed reading during free time at school because “it gives me time to relax and gives me a break.” This coincided with his teacher's observation of him during independent reading. His teacher noticed that he seemed to love independent reading and she often had to stop him from reading when independent reading time was over. She would even find him reading a book in his desk when he was not supposed to be reading.

At home, Nathan shared that he liked to read “when I’m comfortable. Reading is comfortable.” He did share that he did not read at home every day. In the evenings his mom, aunt, or sister might read him a book before he fell asleep.

Nathan considered himself to be a good reader, because “I have heard a lot of words, because I know some words that are very long.” When asked who he knew that were good readers, Nathan pointed out some of his classmates. He stated that they were good readers because they know words, know how to sound out words, and they know words that he’s never heard of and they know the meaning of those words.

According to his teacher, Nathan was a student that was reading well above grade level. He was a very fluent reader and was very motivated to learn new words while reading. He was always asking her about words and what they meant.

*Devon.* Devon was a very reflective student. During class discussions Devon was a very active participant. He enjoyed participating in both small and whole group discussions with his classmates. During discussions he enjoyed connecting with his personal life as well as other books he had read previously. He thoroughly enjoyed participating in book club and discussing books with other students that were on his level. Devon shared that he enjoyed talking with others about things he’d read because he had the opportunity to share what he had learned, as well as his ideas about the books he had read. He thought it particularly fun to share his opinion about books with others.

Devon considered himself to be a good reader, because only his last standardized test he “got all blue. I got a green, but mostly blue.” In this case the colors he mentioned coincide with levels on the standardized tests. He really enjoyed reading chapter books and reading things in his National Geographic books. He enjoyed reading books that were funny, as well as books that

helped him learn new things. He even shared that some books can help you read better, like Dr. Seuss—his favorite author. These books, he shared, would make it easier to learn how to read. Devon reads daily at home. Typically, he read chapter books. He stated that he does not need help reading, but occasionally he will ask his mother to help him with a word he may not know. He also wrote in his journal daily. He liked to write about his family. If he ever needed help writing in his journal he would ask his mother or grandmother. They helped him “write better words than the words I used.”

His teacher shared that she believed Devon enjoyed reading, often asking if he can read a book when he finished his work early. She shared that she learned that Devon’s mom took him to the public library regularly, and has done this since he was very young. During class, the teacher often had to stop him from reading when independent reading time was over and every once in awhile she would catch him reading in his desk when he was not supposed to be reading. Devon was a student that read above grade level, who was extremely motivated to read.

### **Instructional Plan**

The instructional plan that was developed for this study was built from the analysis of research in the existing critical literacy field. As I reviewed the existing literature, I found that centrality of text, inclusion of personal thought and experience, and building sociopolitical awareness were recurring themes in the literature. With this in mind I chose to build the small group discussion events around these ideas. I chose to make the text a launching point of each discussion, while also choosing texts that would focus students on sociopolitical issues that exist, or have existed, in our society. The design of this study was specifically targeted at providing room for students to express their own thoughts and experiences, as it related to the ongoing discussion of critical issues.

**Home book reading and response.** As a part of this study, students were given picture books to take home and read with a family member each week. They were given a tote that consisted of the book for the week, a journal, post-it notes, and a pencil. They were instructed to read their book with a family member and to generate a response in their journal about the book. They were allowed to respond in whatever way they felt most comfortable, whether it be writing, drawing, or both. They were also encouraged to construct their journal entry with a family member. The post-it notes were for them to mark a page(s) for further discussion with the group when they returned to school.

**Critical Conversation Sessions.** The Critical Conversation small group met over a span of three months (March-May), during the school day for approximately 30 minutes twice a week (Monday & Wednesday). A total of 14 sessions were held, including the introduction to the book club session. Mondays were devoted to book discussion, while Wednesdays were devoted primarily to response activities. On occasion, Wednesday’s response activity ended up being discussion-based activity. All sessions were held in a technology storage room located off of the school library.

We selected books that addressed issues of equity, based on a theme “What is Fair?” “What is fair”, as a theme, allowed for texts and discussions to focus on a variety of social issues (e.g. class, race, gender, etc). Discussions, however, were not limited to this theme, as students were encouraged to connect and respond to these texts in ways they found intriguing and natural. As facilitators we worked to highlight the four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002)—disrupting the common place, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice—throughout book discussions. Books were sent home on Wednesdays, giving students the opportunity to read the

book with family members or friends over multiple days. Monday sessions were discussion sessions. On discussion days we spent 30 minutes talking about the book or book related topics. Students were able to continue to keep their books until our session on Wednesday. Wednesday sessions provided an opportunity for students to participate in a variety of ways (e.g. writing, art, drama), while also providing an opportunity for additional discussion about the text.

The design of this study was emergent. Initial plans were established in regard to what texts might be used, as well as possible response activities on the onset of the study; however, as the study emerged we made final decisions based on the students' interests and conversations. In this way, students were engaging in response activities that linked directly with questions or comments raised during previous discussion sessions.

**Book Selection.** The books chosen for this study were selected based on the following criteria: (a) grade-level appropriate; (b) story presented issues of power and/or equity; (c) student preference.

Students had choice in deciding which books would be used throughout our time together. Initially, the two facilitators selected a preliminary set of books for students to choose from. Jeanne compiled a list of books that she thought might be appropriate based on the theme "What is Fair?." I conducted the second pass of book selection and parsed it down to 11 possible books, leaving the final selection to the students.

Once the facilitators had done an initial screening of books, the boys participated in a book browse (i.e. reviewing the cover, scanning the pages). After browsing the 11 texts, each student selected their top three books. These rankings were used to determine which books would be used throughout the duration of the Critical Conversation substudy. Furthermore, each facilitator selected one children's picture book to be included in the book list for the study.

As the study emerged there were occasions when alternate texts were selected based on conversations we had as a group. The facilitators determined that an alternate text (not originally presented) might provide additional information related to questions and comments posed by students. Furthermore, facilitators decided to take it upon themselves to incorporate texts that might fill knowledge gaps for students (e.g., Is segregation just a Black & White issue?). Table 3.1 lists the books used for the study, as well as the response activity conducted with each text. Titles followed by an asterisk were preselected by the facilitators, other titles were selected by students prior to the launching of the book club.

*Table 3.1. List of Books and Response Activities*

<b>Session</b>	<b>Text</b>	<b>Response Activity</b>
2 & 3	Each Kindness (Woodson, 2012)*	Fotobabble (iPad application) <i>Took a picture of an illustration and gave voice to voiceless characters</i>
4 & 5	The Cart that Carried Martin (Bunting, 2013)	Watched video of 1968 Poor People's Campaign <i>Created campaign messages</i>
6 & 7	Testing the Ice (Robinson, 2009)	Watched video about National Jackie Robinson Day <i>Drew pictures and wrote reasons why Jackie Robinson was brave/hero.</i>
8 & 9	Nelson Mandela (Nelson, 2013)	Watched video about Nelson Mandela and the South African apartheid <i>Colored the South African flag, explained the meaning of each color, and wrote why Nelson Mandela was a hero.</i>
10 & 11	Wings (Myers, 2000)*	Discussion <i>Further discussion of text.</i>
12	Jesse Owens: Fastest Man Alive (Weatherford, 2006)	<i>Only one session was spent on this book, therefore a separate response activity was not included.</i>
13	A Nation's Hope (Pena, 2011)*	Discussion <i>Further discussion of text.</i>

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected for a total of 13 Critical Conversation sessions held between March and May. In this section I will describe: interview procedures and collection of video data and artifacts.



**Interview procedures.** I conducted three semi-structured interviews with each study participant. These interviews occurred before Session 1, after Session 10, as well as after the final session—Session 13. I followed a semi-structured interview protocol for all student interviews. The pre- and post- interviews were conducted in an effort to understand students’ thinking about reading and literature discussions. As a part of the emergent design of this study, an additional interview was added after Session 10. This additional interview was conducted in the midst of the study due to the critical and intense nature of the discussion in Session 10. It was my purpose to get a better understanding, from the students, about why that discussion event was different. For the purposes of this proposal I will refer to these interviews as pre-, interim, and post interviews.

In addition to the student interviews, written pre-surveys were completed by the two classroom teachers. The teachers completed the surveys at two time periods: before the literature discussion events began and another after the literature discussion events concluded.

***Pre- interview.*** During the pre- interviews (Appendix B), students were asked questions about the ways in which they participated in literature discussions at school, whether or not they enjoyed reading, whether they considered themselves to be good readers or not, along with other general questions relating to their reading interests.

***Pre-survey.*** Classroom teachers were also asked to complete a written pre-survey (Appendix C) on each of their student participants. In this pre-interview teachers were asked to comment on the ways in which their students participate during whole group and small group discussions, whether or not they perceived the student as liking to read, along with other general questions about the students’ reading behaviors in the classroom.

***Interim interviews.*** Interim interviews (Appendix D) were not a part of the initial study design. These interviews came about due to a very contentious critical conversation that occurred during Session 10. In response to the fact that the students were so passionate and animated during this conversation (markedly different than previous conversations), I wanted to get a better understanding of why they felt this session was different. Furthermore, I sought to gain knowledge on their perspectives of how they thought the session went and what they took away from the conversation. I inquired about the ways in which they felt conversations should or should not be conducted, along with what they learned after this particular critical conversation.

***Post interviews.*** During post interviews (Appendix E), students were asked to compare how Critical Conversation sessions were similar or different from literature discussions held in their respective classrooms. I asked questions that related to their feelings about being a part of the group and whether or not they enjoyed it, as well as their opinion of the books selected.

***Post survey.*** The teachers' written post-survey questions (Appendix F) focused on the ways the students' participation in class may have changed since participating in the Critical Conversations small group discussions.

***Collection of video data and artifacts.*** Twelve of the thirteen sessions were audio and video recorded. One session was not video recorded due to technical issues with the computer being used to capture video data. In addition to audio and video recording each session, after each session I wrote detailed field notes on each session, documenting theoretical and methodological notes as I went along.

For each of the discussion events, I made note of the students' and teachers' participation—taking note of order of participation, as well as frequency of participation. Using my grounded understandings of the event and also giving further opportunity to review the video

data multiple times, I was able to create an expanded account of each discussion event. Field notes included gist summaries (extended summaries that included major portions of dialogue), theoretical, personal and methodological notes. The processes for creating field notes were as follows: a) review the video recording of the discussion event; b) generate gist summaries for each turn at talk; c) document theoretical connections present in the data; d) review the gist summaries for the given event and make overarching theoretical notes; e) document any methodological or personal notes.

These notes were written after each session (for a full list of sessions see Appendix G). Watching the videos after each session proved useful as I thought about how to make adjustments to the instructional plans for upcoming sessions. I would take notice of what seemed to be productive for conversation building, as well as what seemed to detract from productive conversations. The video recordings acted, not only, as tools for data analysis, but were also useful in the development and ongoing instructional design of the Critical Conversations discussions. After each session I also communicated with my co-facilitator, Jeanne, to gain insight on the direction of future sessions.

Each session was conducted in a technology storage room in which we sat on the floor (see Figure 1 for a screenshot of the setting) and discussed the texts. During discussion events we sat in a circle formation. On days where students were working on response activities they were welcome to use different parts of the room to do their individual or partner work.

*Figure 1. Screenshot of a Typical Discussion Event Session*



An iPad was used to collect audio data, using the app Voice Recorder HD (eFusion, 2014). The iPad was located in the center of the group in an effort to collect audio data that the video recordings may not have captured clearly.

Video recordings were collected using a MacBook Pro, using the QuickTime application. The laptop was placed on a computer cart to get a vantage point that allowed all students and facilitators to be seen, though the circular arrangement also meant that some students or teachers had their backs to the camera. I also took photographs and scanned all of the student products created during response activity sessions mentioned in Table 3.1.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data collection and analysis are inherently a transactive process in which both coexist throughout the data collection period. Data analysis was ongoing throughout data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The design of this study was such that theory and existing empirical literature worked to inform curricular and instructional choices. This is not to suggest that categories were determined a priori, but rather, as a researcher, I began to look for emerging patterns as the data were being collected.

**Initial data analysis.** Subsequent to the close of data collection, and the ongoing development of major themes and ideas gathered in field notes during data collection, my next step was to sample the existing data. I employed two main sampling techniques: extreme case sampling and typical case sampling (Patton, 1990). Extreme case sampling requires the researcher to conduct detailed analyses of important events that shape the course of participation. These events often differ from usual participation patterns, but are recognized by participants as important in shaping their understanding and practices as they move forward in time. As Patton

(1990) states, “In many instances more can be learned from intensively studying extreme or unusual cases than can be learned from...depictions of what the average case is like” (p. 170). I chose this method of sampling due to the unusual, or atypical, nature of the discussion event occurring in Session 10. In this discussion event, the conversation quickly got contentious and students became very defensive in their talk and reacted to opposing views as if they were personal attacks. The nature of this conversation was vastly different from any other discussion event that occurred prior to or subsequently. The discussion event started off in a typical manner—general conversation about students’ personal lives, questions about the task for the day, and a launch of the book discussion by the facilitator—but soon emerged into a unique event uncharacteristic of any other discussion event throughout the data collection timeframe.

Following the selection of the extreme case, I employed typical case sampling to identify two additional events. These focus discussion events were selected as examples of a typical discussion event that occurred before (Session 6) the extreme case (Session 10) and a typical discussion even that occurred after (Session 11) the extreme case. Session 6 and Session 11 were selected as typical events due to the fact that students, in these two sessions, much like other sessions throughout the data, discussed critical issues through dialogue consisting of questions, comments, and personal reflections. These sessions, however, were not contentious and, even when there was disagreement it was cordial.

Once the three focus discussion events were selected, each was transcribed from the audio recordings. I personally transcribed Session 10 and had Sessions 6 and 11 transcribed by a professional transcriber. I chose to transcribe this event myself, because of my knowledge of student voices and the uniqueness of this particular discussion event. The other events had clear enough recordings and the nature of the discussion was such that a professional transcriber

would have less difficulty transcribing. Once these three events were transcribed I went back over the transcriptions with the recordings to check for accuracy. Verbatim portions of transcripts are included in the findings section of this text in order to highlight patterns and themes, and to provide thick descriptions of the phenomena.

Before I began coding, I removed all dross from the transcript (Burnard, 1991). Dross was defined as any talk that was not pertinent to the critical conversations, such as: managing behavior and restating behavioral expectations. Furthermore, talk that was transcribed before the official launch of the discussion for the given day was not coded.

Due to the fact that I was interested in the individual ideas and contributions of students, I chose to use conversational turns as my unit of analysis. This is not to suggest that the role of the facilitator was not important; however, for the sake of this study, primary attention was focused on students in an effort to better understand their content and discussion patterns.

For the purposes of defining a conversational turn, I used Martinez-Roldan's (2000) definition: "an utterance(s) expressed by a single person before a second speaker began to talk" (p. 103). Utterances that were unintelligible were marked as inaudible, this was often due to overlapping speech. There were a total of 581 codable conversational turns in the three discussion events selected for analysis. Table 3.2 defines the transcription conventions used throughout the dataset.

Table 3.2. Transcript Conventions

Convention	Definition
ALL CAPS	Words were spoken at a very loud volume
wo:rd	Colon shows that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound
((word))	Double parentheses represent the transcribers effort to represent something hard or impossible to describe with words <b>Example: ((sigh))</b>
(inaudible)	Represents words that were indiscernible in the audio data

**Coding.** A review of field notes, video and audio recordings was conducted with the goal of further exploring initial themes that emerged throughout data collection. Initial themes included: less facilitator talk may lead to increased student talk; allowing students to primarily manage discussion may lead to unexpected participation structures; and when met with conflicting views by fellow participants students would push for rationales for divergent views.

In order to establish codes, I employed grounded coding methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I reviewed the transcripts of the three focus sessions and developed coding schemes to address each research question (details about each of these schemes will be provided in the following section). Once the list of codes had been developed, I conducted a second analytic pass through the transcripts—applying the final set of codes that pertained to the research question at hand. I conducted this same process (develop list of codes and applying final codes to transcripts) for each of the research questions (see Appendix H for a list of all codes).

**Addressing the research questions.** The next sections outline the analytic methods used to answer each of the three major research questions: 1) What is the nature of small group literature discussions focused on issues of power and privilege?; 2) How are students working to

collectively build critical knowledge in a small group literature discussion focused on issues of power and privilege?; and 3) In what ways do issues of racial identity emerge among a small group of African American males participating in a discussion about race, power, and privilege? Due to the different aspects present in the discussion events I designed analytic frameworks that would address the research questions at hand. These frameworks were built on qualitative analytic methodologies already established in the field (Patton, 1990; Saldana, 2009; Strauss & Crobin, 1990). Table 3.3 provides an overview of how I addressed each research question—detailing the data used for analysis, as well as the analytic method employed. I address, in more detail, the nature of each analysis subsequently.

*Table 3.3. Research Questions, Data Sources, and Methods of Analysis*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
What is the nature of small group literature discussions?	Transcripts 3 focus sessions	Grounded Theory Open-coding Descriptive statistics (percentages)
How are students collectively working to build critical knowledge?	Transcripts 3 focus sessions	Grounded Theory Open-Coding Descriptive Statistics (percentages)
In what ways do issues of racial identity emerge among a small group of African American males participating in a discussion about race, power, and privilege?	Transcript Extreme Case discussion event	Grounded Theory Open-coding Thematic Analysis

**Research question 1.** To address the first research question (what is the nature of small group literature discussions focused on issues of power and privilege), I sought to document a) the structure of discussion events, b) the ways participants accessed the discussion, c) the connection between talk and text, and d) the types of student talk. I used open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as a way of developing codes used throughout the transcripts of the three focus events. While understanding that the teacher plays a role in the discussion event, I was most interested in the ways in which students’ roles in discussion.



*Structure of discussion events.* I sought to understand the common structural elements of the focus discussion events. After reviewing all three-focus discussion events, the data showed that the discussion events were characterized by multiple discussion strands. A discussion strand is a collection of sequential conversational turns that are grouped based on topic (see Appendix H.1). In order to address this observation more systematically I divided the focus transcripts into units—conversational turns. Next, I noted the topic of each turn. Topic, in this case, is defined as the primary theme or idea being conveyed by the speaker. For example, topics ranged from types of books to issues of power and oppression. Once each turn was assigned a topic, I grouped together sequential turns based of the same topic. The collections of sequential turns that were based on the same topic were determined a strand. Finally, each strand was reviewed in order to determine whether a student or facilitator launched the discussion strand. A discussion launch is the initiating conversational turn of a discussion strand. I collected descriptive statistics to determine the frequency of strands initiated by students and facilitators for each focus discussion event.

*Accessing the discussion.* After analysis of the structure of the discussion event, I looked more closely at how students were entering the discussion event. An attempted entry is defined as a conversational turn in which a student, who was not already active in the present portion of discussion, attempts to enter the discussion space. In order to do this I conducted three passes through the data. During the first pass, I identified all attempted entries in the transcript. I looked most specifically at the ways in which students attempted to enter the discussion space. I then categorized these attempts based on two codes: announcements and inquiries (see Appendix H.2).

During the second coding pass through the transcripts, I coded each entry attempt as either an announcement or an inquiry. An announcement was a moment in the discussion where

a student would announce to all of the participants that he had something he would like to say to the group. Another strategy for entering the discussion was through inquiry. In this case, instead of announcing to the group that there was a question or comment to be made, the participant would enter the discussion with a question.

Finally, on the last pass of the transcripts I categorized all of the attempts as either failed or successful entry attempts. A successful entry attempt would be characterized as one in which the participant entering the discussion gained the attention of the fellow participants, as denoted by a response to the participant attempting to enter the discussion. Therefore I coded all announcement and inquiry attempts as either successful or failed attempts. A failed attempt is defined as an attempt to enter the discussion with little to no acknowledgement by the group. The lack of acknowledgement was signaled by the continuation of the previous discussion topic.

Finally, I determined the frequency of announcements and inquiries made by students for each focus discussion event.

*Connection between talk and text.* Using the same unit of analysis, the conversational turn, I sought to document the relationship between student talk and the text. In order to do this, I conducted an analysis of each turn of student talk to determine whether or not the talk was text-based or text-inspired. Text-based talk is defined as responses where students were primarily focused on the words or illustrations of the book. Text-inspired talk included all responses that were related to a topic or theme that the text inspired, but was not directly about the words, illustrations, or author's central theme of the book (see Appendix H.3).

*Types of student talk.* As is common in literature discussion events, students responded to the text and each other in a variety of ways; therefore, I chose to take a microanalytic look at the types of talk students performed in the discussion events. In my analysis of the transcripts, I

looked for emerging themes and categories of talk. The process of coding the transcripts was iterative. During the first phase of coding and code development, I used open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to develop preliminary codes and record my first impressions (Saldana, 2009) of the data. During this phase, I went through each conversational turn of the focus data and wrote a first impression phrase or word. Saldana (2009) states that, “first impressions may help provide a transitional link between the raw data and codes” (p. 17). After first impressions were noted on the transcript, I analyzed the first impressions and preliminary codes in an effort to categorize the data. Saldana (2009) stated, “coding is thus a method enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share some characteristic—the beginning of a pattern” (p. 8).

Once patterns began to emerge in the data, I went through a process of coding the data, or applying or reapplying codes (Saldana, 2009). In qualitative data analysis, it is often the case that the initial sets of codes are not fully developed and categories and codes must be reworked and applied again. This was especially the case in my coding of the literature discussion data, as I first attempted to apply codes that focused on talk as it related to the text. As I continued to code, I realized that the nature of my data was different from many other coding schemes used for literature discussions, as most of the students conversational turns were not directly related to the events of the text, therefore the nature of my codes needed to be adjusted. I, however, did draw on the work of Martinez-Roldan (2000), whose study focused on bilingual literature discussion events. Her work is especially meaningful for this study because of its focus on student talk. Martinez-Roldan’s categories were further developments of Sipe’s (1996) discussion categories established in his work with first and second grade students’ literary understandings of storybooks. Therefore, the categories established for this study built on the work of both of these

researchers, as they looked closely at the discussions that young students were having in response to children's literature. Finally, five major categories of student talk emerged. Of these 5 categories, 1 category contained subcategories. Using the turn as my unit of analysis, I applied the final codes (see Appendix H.4) to the transcript data. Forty percent of the 581 turns of talk were double coded to ensure the reliability of the codes. This double coding resulted in an inter rater reliability of 96%. These five categories will be discussed and defined in further detail in chapter 4.

**Research question 2.** The second research question, how are students working to collectively build critical knowledge in a small group literature discussion focused on issues of power and privilege?, was also addressed using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this analysis, I used the constant comparative method to develop grounded categories describing the ways in which students responded to one another, trying to determine student methods of collective knowledge building.

The conversational turn was again the unit of analysis for addressing the second research question. However, analyses focused on the ways in which students were interacting and building knowledge *collectively*. An initial pass through the transcript was taken and preliminary jottings (Saldana, 2009) were made on how students engaged with and responded to one another. Notes such as: "questions were asked," "claim being made," "challenge another's idea," and "confrontation" were made throughout each focus session transcript.

After the first pass of the data, I decided to use van Eemeren, et al's (1997) definition of argumentation: "Argumentation uses language to justify or refute a standpoint, with the aim of securing agreement in views" (p. 208), as a way of developing codes that are more adequate to capture the nature of children's interaction. I chose this definition due to the fact that during the

initial pass of the data an overarching category was developed that indicated that students spent much of their time justifying and refuting claims.

Using argumentation as my lens for refining codes, I developed initial codes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) for five types of argumentation moves: claim, counterclaim, challenge, evidence in response, and self-provided evidence (see Appendix H.5). I then applied these codes to the transcript data. Not every turn in the transcript data was coded using the five argumentation moves. I only coded the turns for which these codes applied. In some cases turns were double coded. Double codes were restricted to instances when a student made a claim, or counterclaim, and immediately provided evidence to support that claim in the same turn. For example, Anthony stated, “Whites are better than Blacks because that man on the bus uh told her told told Rosa Parks right from wrong.” In this turn, Anthony, stated his claim “ Whites are better than Blacks,” and immediately follows up with self-provided evidence. Multiple turns at talk were also coded as one argumentation move, when it took multiple attempts for a student to state a full thought. For example, in the following exchange both of Nathan’s turns at talk were coded as one challenge.

N: Not even

SW: He told the soldiers

N: But he’s not he’s not (inaudible) in charge of the state

Finally, I applied the argumentation codes to the transcript data from all three focus sessions.

**Research question 3.** In order to answer the third research question, in what ways do issues of racial identity emerge among a small group of African American males participating in a discussion about race, power, and privilege, I conducted a thematic analysis of Session 10 (extreme case). This discussion event was, in many ways, an atypical discussion event.

*Context of the event.* This particular discussion event was initially based on the text, *Wings* (Myers, 2000). *Wings* is a fictional story about a young boy named Icarus that struggled emotionally and socially because he was different from everyone else. Icarus had wings and this difference created much turmoil in his life—both at school and in his neighborhood. At the beginning of the discussion students were able to make inferences about Icarus’ emotional state throughout the text (e.g. “When he he was sad so he like he flew around”), as well as question injustice in punishments meted out (e.g “How are you going to get in trouble when you’re flying up in the air? What are you going to get hit by a pigeon?”). The discussion shifted when I asked, “Do we know anyone who’s been arrested for being different?” This launched a conversation about Black History, specifically during the time of the Civil Rights Movement. Five of the six student participants agreed that people were arrested for being different citing individuals like Martin Luther King, Jr. & Rosa Parks. One participant, however, felt very strongly that being arrested for being different was impossible. This led to a very tense discussion, often voices raised, about the validity of the statement “arrested for being different.” This discussion was markedly different from any other discussion event, due to the fact that the nature of the student challenges shifted. In this event, students’ interpretations of others’ claims were directly connected with student identities. This was most specifically evidenced when talking about issues of race, and what it meant to be a Black individual in society, as well as in the unfolding conversation.

*Analysis.* Throughout the discussion students began challenging each other’s notions of what it meant to be Black. These challenges about race were rooted in 5 of the students’ interpretation that people during the Jim Crow Era were arrested based on race. Due to the fact that one student did not agree, others began to challenge his “Blackness.” Consequently, I sought

to better understand participants' views of "blackness," and how they drew on historical events to inform these views.

The choice to analyze this session was based on the way this particular event surfaced racial identity as an important facet in students' critical reflections about the texts selected for this study.

## CHAPTER 4

### UNDERSTANDING THE STRUCTURE OF DISCUSSION EVENTS

Analysis of the focus discussion sessions showed that there were reoccurring patterns in the ways participants approached and navigated discussions. Similar to other literature discussion work (Martinez-Roldan, 2000; Sipe, 2008; Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011), the participants in this study had characteristic ways of talking and participating during discussion events. This chapter presents results of analyses addressing the question: What is the nature of small group discussion events? In the following sections I will outline a) the structure of discussion events, b) the ways in which participants access the discussion, c) the connection between talk and text, and d) the types of student talk.

#### **Structure of Discussion Events**

Each discussion event was made up of discussion strands. Analyses of the three focus sessions showed that the average number of discussion strands, per discussion event, in the sampled data was 23 strands. There were a total of 79 discussion strands across all three sampled discussion events. Example 4.1 is an example from Session 1 in which participants were discussing Hitler and the Nazi regime, as a part of our discussion of the book *Jesse Owens Fastest Man Alive* (Weatherford, 2006). In this example, turns 293-300 are eight consecutive turns on the same topic—understanding of the type of person Hitler would like. At turn 301 a topical shift was made by Anthony—shifting the topic to the treatment of the Jewish people—who were forcibly removed from their homes.

#### *Example 4.1 Discussion strand transition*

293 **Fain:** Look at them. So if he's getting if he only likes people that are White with blonde hair, is he going to employ Black people?

294 **Devon:** No



295 **Fain:** No he's not

296 **Nathan:** But what if but what if

297 **Wood:** So why do you think

298 **Nathan:** But what if he saw but what if he saw but what if he saw a Black person  
not with blonde hair but he saw them with blue eyes?

299 **Wood:** But what color is their skin?

300 **Jordan:** Black

### *DISCUSSION STRAND TRANSITION*

301 **Anthony:** These two people got pulled out all the

302 **Wood:** All thousands and thousands of people did mhm but that that's what these mhm

Throughout each discussion multiple topics were discussed, resulting in many strands. The data across all focus sessions, showed that students launched more strands than facilitators (see Table 4.1). Of the 79 discussion strands, facilitators launched 27 strands and students launched 52 strands. The ability to launch a discussion strand speaks to students' power to control critical conversations in this discussion space.

*Table 4.1. Strand Launches by Facilitators & Students*

Session	Strand Launch		Total
	Facilitator	Student	
Session 6	10	18	28
Session 10	9	11	20
Session 11	8	23	31
<b>Total</b>	27	52	79

## Accessing the Discussion Space

In the next two sections, I will discuss the ways in which students and facilitators attempted to access the discussion space. When a student was not an active participant in a discussion strand, data showed that students attempted to enter the discussion space in two primary ways: announcements and inquiries. Across the focus sessions, there were a total of 60 student attempts to enter the discussion (see Table 4.2).

**Announcement.** Announcement was the primary way in which students attempted to enter a discussion. There were a total of 45 announcements made across all three focus sessions. In Example 4.2, Kenny attempted, multiple times, to enter the discussion by announcing that he had a question for the group (turns 179 & 180). Devon and Jordan were discussing what they thought it would take in order to break ice on a frozen lake (turns 177 & 178).

### *Example 4.2 Announcement Entry Attempt*

177 **Devon:** Unless he went hard enough, like he fell enough or he was heavy enough to if he were hard enough he would have drowned. Like a sumo wrestler

178 **Jordan:** Suma Sumo

179 **Kenny:** I have a question for everybody, including the teachers

180 **Wood:** Say what?

181 **Kenny:** I have a question for everybody, including the teachers

Announcements generally came in the form of students announcing that they would like to ask a question. This was a discourse move that attempted to allow students entry into the discussion.

**Inquiry.** In the sampled data, students attempted to enter the discussion space. When students used inquiry as a method of entering the discussion, they would often interrupt an already established discussion strand in an attempt to gain access to the discussion space.

In Example 4.2, Kenny, announced that he had a question as an attempt to enter the discussion. In Example 4.3, in contrast, Jordan chose to enter the discussion by asking a question. In this example, Jordan attempted to enter the discussion with a question multiple times. In turn 18, I, as the facilitator, provided space for Jordan’s question to be asked at turn 19.

*Example 4.3 Inquiry Entry Attempt*

13 **Fain:** You know what, you’re right. It’s a biography and a graphic novel.

14 **Jordan:** Ummm Why? [Inquiry Attempt 1]

15 **Nathan:** It’s what they call them when they mix them together?

16 **Fain:** Yep

17 **Jordan:** Why did Jesse Owens [Inquiry Attempt 2]

18 **Wood:** Let’s give J our attention so he can say what he wants to.

19 **Jordan:** Why did Jesse Owens [Inquiry Attempt 3]

20 **Ethan:** Why did Jesse Owens do what?

Students used inquiry as a way of attempting to access the discussion space on 15 occasions throughout the data set.

*Table 4.2. Student Entry Attempts by Type*

Session	Attempted Entries		Total
	Announcements	Inquiry	
Session 6	6	0	6
Session 10	11	1	12
Session 11	28	14	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>60</b>

**Failed entry attempts.** It is important to note that not all entry attempts were successful. This is evidenced, most clearly, in Example 4.3. In Example 4.3, it took Jordan three attempts, as well as the assistance of the facilitator, to access the discussion space. In instances when a student tried multiple times to enter the discussion without initial success, either one of the

facilitators would provide space for the student to enter the discussion, or the student would cease the attempt.

*Facilitator entry attempts.* Facilitators and students used the same two strategies for attempting entry into the discussion space (announcement and inquiry). Facilitators, however, primarily used inquiry as their method of entering the discussion. Students often had to attempt multiple times to enter the discussion. Facilitators, on the other hand, were able to successfully enter the discussion on almost every attempt. These finding suggests that the role that facilitators played in this environment was similar to that of a classroom teacher, although we did not do the majority of the talking during discussion, our role lent us power. Due to the fact that we were operating within the figured world (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) of school, as adults we had power students did not. As much as we attempted to be members of the discussion group, being adults in this space gave us access to power that provided us opportunities that students did not have. Therefore, when we asked a question, students often felt compelled to listen and provide a response to the inquiries we put forth.

## **Summary**

Discussion events are social encounters in which individuals must vie for space. This is especially true in discussion events that do not pre-structure the order of talk, or how much each participant is allowed to talk during a discussion event. Due to the organic nature of these discussion events, understanding how students enter the discussion scene is valuable. These findings make explicit the ways in which the group chose to enter discussions and how group members negotiated these entries. Furthermore, it was also made clear that facilitators, due to their role, held power that allowed easier entre into the discussion; however the data showed that students were the primary launchers of discussion strands. Students had the liberty, and took the

opportunity, to navigate the discussion as they saw fit. This was shown consistently across each sampled discussion event. What this suggests is that students can, and will, take up the role of being discussion leaders even in the presence of adult facilitators.

### Connection Between Talk and Text

Text-based talk is defined as talk that relates directly to the words or illustrations of the text; while text-inspired talk is talk that may relate to the critical theme of the book, but is not solely about the details or main themes outlined in the story. Each discussion event was analyzed in an effort to determine how much of the student talk was text-based or text-inspired. Across the three focus sessions, it was found that 249 out of 581 (43%) total turns of student talk were coded as text-based talk. Furthermore, 332 out of 581 (57%) total lines of student talk were coded as text-inspired talk. These results confirm the claim that the majority of student talk was inspired by the text, but not focused on specific parts of the print or illustrations.

Table 4.3. *Text-Based vs. Text-Inspired Talk*

04.14.14 Session 6 “Testing the Ice”		04.28.14 Session 10 “Wings”		05.07.14 Session 11 “Jesse Owens Fastest Man Alive”		Total		Overall Total
Text-Based	Text- Inspired	Text-Based	Text- Inspired	Text-Based	Text- Inspired	Text-Based	Text- Inspired	
67	127	33	109	149	96	249	332	581

The data in Table 4.3 shows that in Session 6, 67 turns were coded as text-based turns of talk; while 127 turns were coded as text-inspired talk. Session 10 had 33 turns coded as text-based turns and 109 as text-inspired turns. The last event analyzed, session 11, shows an inverse result. Instead of the text-inspired talk being the majority, the data showed that 149 of the students’ turns of talk were coded as text-based and 96 turns coded as text-inspired. During Session 11, students focused primarily on the events that occurred in the story, while still addressing the sociopolitical issues addressed. While the text is entitled *Jesse Owens Fastest*

*Man Alive*, students spent much of their time discussing Hitler—who was introduced in this text. These lines were coded as text-based, due to the fact that the discussion about Hitler was based on information found in the text.

This data indicates that students were less concerned with sticking close to the text, but were more interested in discussing what interested them, as well as discussing topics that the book inspired.

### **Types of Talk**

Included in the 581 coded turns of talk there were 6 different talk categories (Appendix H.4). In the following sections, I will provide examples and descriptions of each of these categories, and their corresponding subcategories (when applicable).

**Category 1: Language of the text.** Language of the text, a category borrowed from the work of Martinez-Roldan's (2000) work, included all responses that directly referenced words of the text. In Example 4.4, Nathan, in turn 92, tried to determine, based on the information presented in the book, who has Jackie Robinson for a father. This question lead participants back to the text to search for the answer to this text-based comprehension question.

#### *Example 4.4 Language of the Text*

92 **Nathan:** Who who has Jackie who has Jackie Robinson as a father in this book?

93 **Wood:** Oh, who

94 **Nathan:** This page, it says it says (inaudible)

95 **Wood:** I'll give you a hint, it is on it's on this page. He names he said the daughter's name on this page.

96 **Nathan:** Found it.

97 **Wood:** What's her name?

98 **Devon:** Found it.

99 **Wood:** He said her name

In turns 94, 95, 96, and 98, Nathan, Devon, and I (facilitator), used the text to answer a literal comprehension question posed by Nathan. Nathan and Devon, with my assistance, used the text to determine who Jackie Robinson's child was (turns 94, 96, & 98). The text in this strand of conversation became the authority for meaning making.

**Category 2: Reference to illustrations.** When students used what was depicted in text illustrations as points of discussion, it was coded as reference to illustrations. In Example 4.5, students were studying an illustration to try and determine how many players were on Jackie Robinson's baseball team. They used the illustration as a way of confirming or denying their own assumptions about the number of players on a baseball team.

*Example 4.5 References to Illustrations*

- 7 **Ethan:** Please tell me that's not all of them.
- 8 **Anthony:** That's eight players, that's eight players.
- 9 **Jordan:** That's not all of them.
- 10 **Ethan:** That can't be all of them.
- 11 **Nathan:** That's eight.

In this example the illustration became a tool for comprehension and a mediator of meaning. Due to the low percentage of turns coded in the language of text and reference to illustration categories, I calculated them together as representations of text-based categories. These two categories, language of the text and reference to illustrations, were the only two categories in which all turns at talk were coded as text-based talk. This is due to the fact that these two categories required that students attend to either the written text or the illustrations. Of the 581 turns at talk coded 94 turns (16%) were coded as either language of the text or reference to illustrations.

**Category 3: Background knowledge.** Background knowledge, encompassed all responses in which participants contributed information that was not explicitly found in the text. This talk was based on an individual's own understanding of the topic at hand.

One hundred and eighty eight out of the total 581 (32%) turns at talk were coded as background knowledge. In Example 4.6, Nathan relied on his background knowledge, and what he knew about geography, to argue his point that there should be someone else whose power superseded Hitler's (turn 274). In this case, the background knowledge he relied on was not factual and led to a misinterpretation of events; however, this was what he drew on in order to participate in this discussion.

*Example 4.6 Background Knowledge*

270 **Nathan:** But what about the people who are in charge of the whole state?

271 **Wood:** He's in charge he the country's bigger than the state.

272 **Nathan:** What? That's impossible.

273 **Jordan:** There's a country (inaudible)

274 **Nathan:** This state is supposed to be bigger than the country.

Talk coded as background knowledge represented talk that showed students' ability to leverage their own understandings of topics and bring them into the discussion space.

**Category 4: Opinion.** The opinion subcategory included all responses in which participants provided value based judgments and/or a personal viewpoint. Twenty-six percent of the total coded talk was categorized as opinion. In Example 4.7, Kenneth made a statement expressing his opinion of the text to be discussed for the day. In this statement he shared his opinion regarding his favorite portion of the book.



*Example 4.7 Opinion*

1 **Kenneth:** My favorite part of the book is when they show all his teammates

In this example, Kenneth relied on his own viewpoint to make a value statement regarding the text.

**Category 5: Personal connections.** Personal connections, which made up 3% of all coded talk, were responses where a participant made explicit connections between the text, or the topic of discussion, and his own life. Turn 88, in Example 4.8, shows how Kenny connected the text with his personal life by stating the potential influence the text may have on his future career outcome.

*Example 4.8 Personal Connections*

84 **Fain:** So what did you think of this book?

85 **Jordan:** Good. It was good.

86 **Kenny:** It was pretty awesome.

87 **Fain:** Because why?

88 **Kenny:** Because like maybe when I grow up, I might be a runner or maybe a boxer, I don't know yet.

**Category 6: Inquiry.** Inquiry was a central part of discussion events, as many discussion strands were launched through the use of inquiry. Nineteen percent (111 out of 581) of the turns were coded as inquiry. The inquiry code was used for talk that posed a question. There were three types of inquiry used throughout discussion events: probing, clarifying, and comprehension.

**Probing questions.** Probing questions were questions that were posed as thought questions for the group—a question that would get the group thinking and pushing to deeper levels of

understanding or reflection. Probing questions were not follow-up questions seeking clarity on information, but rather were questions used to get the group thinking more critically.

In Example 4.9, Kenny launched a new discussion strand by asking the members to think critically about the physical traits needed in order to gain acceptance from Hitler.

*Example 4.9 Probing Questions*

424 **Kenny:** I was going to ask if a Black person had blue eyes and blonde hair, would he like them?

Kenny returns to a topic that we had briefly discussed previously, in an effort to push on participants' thinking.

**Clarification questions.** Clarification questions were questions in which participants were following up on a statement in an effort to gain more clarity on information shared by another participant.

Example 4.10 shows how Anthony followed Jordan's statement with a clarifying question (turn 222). Anthony sought to more clearly understand who Jordan was referring to in his statement in turn 221.

*Example 4.10 Clarification Questions*

221 **Jordan:** Those were the people he captured.

222 **Anthony:** Those were the people he pulled them out of houses and stuff?

Anthony sought clarification as he tried to build meaning from, not only Jordan's statement, but also attempted to align that information with what had been discussed previously.

**Comprehension questions.** Another method of inquiry was comprehension questioning. This was much like what you would see in an IRE question structure in a traditional classroom. In many ways the comprehension questions were a reflection of the ways in which the figured

world of school is persistently present when working within a school setting. Comprehension questions were questions in which students asked other participants questions that required them to recall information directly from the text. In Example 4.11, Ethan asked the students about why particular people are present in the book illustration.

*Example 4.11 Comprehension Questions*

65 **Ethan:** I've got a question for you. Why does I got two questions for you. Why is this like White people over here and White people over here?

Students used comprehension questions in an effort to determine what other participants remembered from the story. These questions generally were tests of knowledge of the text or the main character in the story.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of critical conversations is to allow students opportunities to focus on issues of power and privilege. Furthermore, these discussions create space for students to make meaning, as well as address critical issues (Pierce & Gilles, 2008). The analysis of the data showed the ways in which students engaged in critical conversations—specifically highlighting the conversational moves of the participants and the ways in which they navigated the discussion space. The findings in this chapter can be categorized in three ways: 1) power and access in critical conversations; 2) the role of text in critical conversations; and 3) use of comprehension strategies in critical conversations. In the following sections, I will summarize the findings as it relates to these three major categories.

## **Power and Access in Critical Conversations**

The data show that students were active agents in the flow of the critical conversations. They exercised power, that in turn, allowed them to take on leading roles in the discussion space. This was evidenced in the way students regularly took on the responsibility of being the primary launchers of discussions strands. In this way, they took ownership of the discussion space.

Due to the fact that students took on major roles in the directing and development of the critical conversation, traditional roles of school were in some ways shifted. Within the figured world of school (Holland, et al, 1998), teachers typically hold the primary roles of power in the discussion space—but the data showed that, in these discussion events, students were beginning to take up roles of power in the discussion space.

As Fairclough (2001) argues, “On one hand, power is exercised and enacted in discourse, and on the other hand, there are relations of power behind discourse...in both cases, power is won, held and lost in social struggles” (p. 61). Throughout, the discussion events it became obvious that the struggle for space and access was constant. The data indicated that when students did not previously hold the floor they developed methods of attempting to enter the discussion space, through announcements and inquiries. These attempts were not always successful and students often had to vie for space in discussions, which was further evidence of the social struggle Fairclough discusses. In many instances when student participants were unable to access the discussion space, facilitators used their more powerful position to provide space for student participants. While students, overall, were taking on more powerful roles, and facilitators were often taking up less vocal positions, facilitators still held their more powerful statuses that allowed for them to provide space for student participants who were attempting to gain access to the discussion space. Facilitators in these moments were providing space for

student voices that might not otherwise be heard, in an effort to push for a more equitable discussion space.

### **The Role of Text in Critical Conversations**

As stated in the methods section, the reading of the text was done prior to discussion events. Books were sent home with students and students were instructed to read the books prior to coming to book discussions. The books, during our discussion time, were used as a resource for book discussion, in the event participants wanted to cross-reference the text. There, however, was no initial requirement that all discussion had to be based on the details presented in the text. This is important to note, due to the fact that the data indicate that students spent the majority of the discussion discussing text-inspired themes. The text, during small group discussion time, was, in essence, our inspiration for talking.

The books selected for this study were intentionally selected due to the critical themes they presented (e.g. issues of power and privilege). Text-inspired talk linked with the larger critical theme presented in the text. Critical conversations have a goal of raising issues of power and injustice—not so much always a close analytic reading of the text. In this light, discussions often focused more on the text-inspired discussion of critical themes the texts presented than on the more specific details of the storyline presented by the author. The themes that emerged from the text, or portions that students found interesting, were discussed. Facilitators did not discourage this type of talk, and in some cases asked probing questions that encouraged students to consider the larger critical themes that the text addressed.

While on the surface it may seem as though text-inspired talk did not require that students attend closely to the text, one must consider what readers are required to do with texts in the school setting. According to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), explicitly identifying

the theme of a text does not become a requirement until the fourth grade. At the fourth grade level, the CCSS only requires that students be able to identify the theme. It is not until the 5<sup>th</sup> grade that students are required to be able to identify the theme and then be able to elaborate on that theme. So in fact, the students in this study were engaging in very sophisticated, while emergent, method of book analysis and engagement, usually only required for older students.

### **Comprehension Strategies in Critical Conversations**

There were six categories of student talk employed during discussion events: language of the text, reference to illustrations, use of background knowledge, opinion, inquiry (probing questions, clarification questions, comprehension questions), and personal connections. These categories were used as ways of understanding and constructing knowledge during the discussion event. These categories are evidence of students' use of reading strategies that have been identified as important for comprehension.

Duke & Pearson (2002), share that “For good readers, text processing occurs not only during ‘reading’ as we have traditionally defined it, but also during short breaks taken during reading, even after ‘reading’ itself has commenced, even after ‘reading’ has ceased” (p. 206). The structure of this study was such that students were given opportunities to continue to process, collectively, after the reading of a text. During the post-reading discussion events, the types of talk used were directly connected with what research states as beneficial strategies for developing readers. The data showed that students, during book discussions, leveraged background knowledge and questioning—two of the individual comprehension strategies discussed by Duke and Pearson (2002). Furthermore, personal connections (Short, 1993) were used to construct meaning in the discussion space. I point out these particular comprehension strategies due to the fact that they directly connect to the research on effective reading

comprehension strategies. These strategies are documented as strategies that are employed by developing and proficient readers. It is important not to overlook the academic resources students leveraged throughout book discussions.

## CHAPTER 5

### SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS: A SITE FOR COLLECTIVE BUILDING OF CRITICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

While identifying the categories of talk and the ways in which discussion events were structured is vital, it is important to note that collaboration led to the development and use of the strategies employed throughout the discussion event. Students saw these reading comprehension strategies demonstrated by their peers, as well as experienced peers challenging one another in ways that pushed participants to respond and engage in a variety of academic ways. In this chapter, I will lay out the ways in which discussion participants worked to collectively build knowledge.

Working from a sociocultural view on literacy, this study relied heavily on the understanding that knowledge is constructed collaboratively. As Chang & Wells (1987) noted, giving students the opportunity to talk collaboratively provides opportunities for students to build knowledge collectively. Previous research has shown that students' primary objective, during small group discussions, was to negotiate the meaning of the text (Jewell & Pratt, 1999). Analysis of the focus sessions of this study, however, showed that participants spent much of their time working to collectively build knowledge on the critical issues that the text inspired (Miller, 2014). This often led to questions that the text could not answer, and left room for participants to begin building and collaboratively constructing knowledge. In this study, critical understandings were built through the use of argumentation.

In the following sections, I will define argumentation, as it is being used in this study, describe the argumentation framework, as well as how argumentation was used and how it lent itself to the collective building of critical knowledge. In this chapter, I will address the following research question: In what ways do students collectively build critical knowledge?



## Argumentation

Due to the fact that the texts used for the small group discussions highlighted critical social issues, there was much room for students to express their own understandings of these social issues, as well as question and challenge thoughts and ideas presented, both by the text, and other participants. Students relied on their own knowledge and the knowledge of their co-participants to build new understanding of critical themes.

The analysis of this data showed that argumentation was the primary way in which critical knowledge was collectively built and negotiated. It is important to note that argumentation is skill that appears in the Common Core State Standards for upper elementary and middle school students. In this study, students were beginning to display emergent uses of this higher level skill.

Argumentation consisted of four conversational moves: claim, supporting evidence, counterclaim, and challenge (see Appendix H.5 and Table 5.1 for codes). In the following sections, I will define each of these argumentation conversational moves, followed by the ways in which participants used them to collectively build critical knowledge.

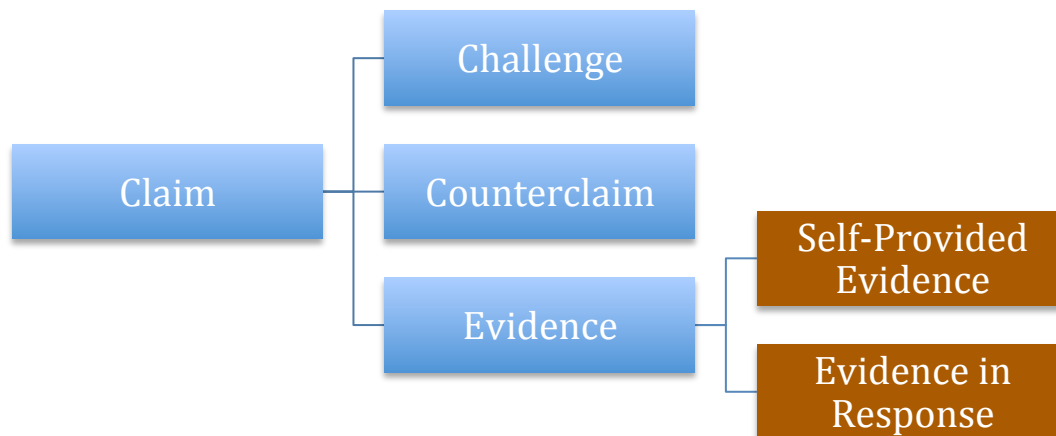
*Table 5.1. Argumentation Conversational Moves and Corresponding Codes*

Category	Code
Claim	C
Counterclaim	CC
Challenge	CH
Evidence in Response	ER
Self-Provided Evidence	SP

**Argumentation framework.** Hillocks (2011) states, “Argument is not simply a dispute, as when people disagree with one another or yell at each other. Argument is about making a case in support of a claim in everyday affairs” (p. xv). Argumentation, in this study, was characterized as a discussion in which a claim was made, respondents then either challenged the claim, or

generated a counterclaim. In some instances, participants responded to a claim by requesting that the initiator of the claim provide evidence to support that claim. In some instances, the initiator of the claim provided evidence immediately following his claim (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Argumentation Framework



**Claim.** In this study, a claim was defined as a statement of belief—stated as a fact. For example, in Example 5.1, participants began to discuss how racial tensions would affect Jackie Robinson emotionally.

*Example 5.1 Claim*

36 **Kenny:** How do you think, Jackson, Jackie Robinson felt?

37 **Jordan:** I think he I think he was okay because when he signed his contract, his coach said he had to keep his temper and I think he kept his temper a lot of the times. C

Jordan has generated a fact statement in response to Kenny’s inquiry (turn 36) about Jackie Robinson’s feelings. Jordan makes the claim that he thought Jackie was “okay.” In this case, the claim statement could be rephrased as, “Jackie Robinson felt ‘okay’ about being the only Black on his team/Major Leagues,” as Kenny’s question was asked as a part of a discussion about Jackie Robinson being the only Black on his baseball team. In the next section I will discuss the ways in which claims are supported.

**Supporting evidence.** Supporting evidence is categorized in two ways: self-provided evidence or evidence in response. Evidence is defined as information that supports a claim. In this study, I looked most specifically at evidence provided by the initiator of the claim. Self-provided evidence is support that is provided immediately after a claim is made, without a request from another discussion participant. Evidence in response is support that is provided upon request.

*Self-provided evidence.* To get a better understanding of self-provided evidence, I return to the exchange between Kenny and Jordan. Jordan, in turn 37 of Example 5.2, immediately followed his claim with supporting evidence. This was signaled by the word “because.”

*Example 5.2. Self-Provided Evidence*

36 **Kenny:** How do you think Jackson Jackie Robinson felt?

37 **Jordan:** I think he I think he was okay because when he signed his contract, his coach said he had to keep his temper and I think he kept his temper a lot of the times. **C/SP** Jordan claimed that Jackie Robinson was “okay,” followed by a causal statement justifying the claim.

*Evidence in response.* Evidence in response is defined as support that is provided subsequent to a request for evidence from a fellow discussion participant. In Example 5.3, the discussion focused on the punishment that Hitler’s soldier should receive for their violent acts. After Anthony shared his opinion in turn 244 that he believed the soldiers were supposed to go to jail, I prompted him to support his claims (turns 247 & 250).

*Example 5.3 Evidence in Response*

244 **Anthony:** I think I think they posed to go to jail. I think that's supposed be jail. **C**

245 **Wood:** Who? The soldiers?

246 **Anthony:** Yeah

247 **Wood:** Tell me why.

248 **Jordan:** They can't cause they're already soldiers.

249 **Anthony:** They're supposed to be in jail for a long time even even  
more than 20 years **C**

250 **Wood:** Why do you say that?

251 **Anthony:** Because they did they did a really bad thing. **ER**

In this example, rather than Anthony providing his supporting evidence or reasoning on his own (self-provided), he provided evidence (turn 251) in response to my (turn 245 & 247) request to provide support for his claim.

**Counterclaim.** A counterclaim is a statement of belief—stated as fact—that is in conflict with a previous claim. During a discussion, claims were made and evidence was provided; however not all discussion participants always agreed with claims that were made by other participants, and in turn responded with counterclaims. In the following dialogue (Example 5.4), participants debated the superiority of one race over another. On this issue there were conflicting views. Conflicting views were often expressed in the form of counterclaims. In turn 168, Nathan refuted Anthony's claim, in turn 167, that Whites are superior to Blacks, and responded with a counterclaim.

*Example 5.4 Counterclaim*

167 **Anthony:** Whites are better than Blacks. **C**

168 **Nathan:** but they want to make a war. Because Black people don't want  
to make a war **CC**

Nathan, in this excerpt first challenged Anthony's claim that "Whites are better than Blacks," by stating that "they" (White people) want to make war. He continued his counterclaim by contrasting the actions of Whites and Blacks ("Black people don't want to make war."). Therefore, Nathan's counterclaim can be interpreted as, White people want to make war and Blacks don't. It is important to understand that Nathan is drawing his conclusions based on his background knowledge and personal interpretation of historical events. Claims and counterclaims, much like the other parts of the discussion, were often framed around students' personal understandings of events.

**Challenge.** A challenge is when a speaker disagrees with another speaker without providing an alternate claim. In Example 5.4 a discussion about an illustration in the text *Jesse Owens: Fastest Man Alive*, Ethan challenged Jordan about what is being depicted in an illustration. In turn 68, Jordan claimed that the picture on the front of the book is depicting the same place as the picture on the back of the book. Ethan, not agreeing with this statement, challenged that claim.

*Example 5.4 Challenge*

68 **Jordan:** That's the same picture on the back. **C**

69 **Ethan:** uh uh. **CH**

70 **Nathan:** Yes it is

71 **Ethan:** No it's not

Ethan repeatedly challenged (turns 69 & 71) the notion that the illustration on the front and the back are the same. He refuted Jordan's claim that the picture on the front and back are the same, but does not present an alternate claim. It is simply expressed as a disagreement.

*Argumentation in dialogue.* In Example 5.5, all four argumentation conversation moves are used within one discussion segment. In this conversation, Fain asked the participants why no popular super heroes were Black. Students used argumentation to discuss whether or not Black characters have major roles in superhero movies and comics.

*Example 5.5 Argumentation in Dialogue*

152 **Fain:** I know, but how come Falcon doesn't have his own movie?

153 **Nathan:** Because he uh

154 **Devon:** Oh, there's a The Avengers, the Avengers where where where the dude who he played the dude who has only one eye patch, he brought all the Avengers together, so he's really important.     **C**

155 **Wood:** Oh, that's a good point. You're right.

156 **Nathan:** (inaudible) never heard of him because he was

157 **Jordan:** Nick Fury     **C**

158 **Nathan:** Maybe because he's not maybe because he's not in the you know that team called the Justice League? He's probably not in that team and he's probably     **CH**

159 **Devon:** He's not one of the Marvel superheroes. **CH**

160 **Ethan:** What about the red one?

161 **Devon:** He's on the Marvel team. **C**

162 **Jordan:** But he's still a superhero because he's **CC**

163 **Nathan:** He's not **CH**

164 **Devon:** Yes he is **CH**

165 **Nathan:** How is he a Marvel superhero?

166 **Devon:** Because he got all of them together. **ER**

167 **Ethan:** What about the red one?

168 **Devon:** (inaudible) save the world and they if he didn't get them all together because one superhero couldn't do all that work. **C/SP**

169 **Fain:** But how many superheroes are White?

170 **Devon:** All of them except one. **C**

In this excerpt, argumentation was used as a way of determining whether or not any of the most popular superheroes were Black. When in disagreement, participants challenged each other's claims. For instance, in turn 161, when Devon claimed that Nick Fury was on the Marvel team, Nathan, in turn 163, challenged that claim by stating, "He's not." Nathan challenged Devon's claim, whereas Jordan, in turn 162 provided a counterclaim stating "but he's still a superhero because he's..." Jordan presented a counterclaim and the word "because" suggests that he was beginning to provide evidence, however the flow of the conversation continued on. As the transcript, continued students went back and forth positing their own claims and challenging claims that were not in alignment with their personal understanding, or viewpoint. This theme of defending one's own ideas was consistent throughout the transcript data, and was the primary discussion strategy employed by students. In the following section, I will discuss the nature of claims as they appeared in the dataset.

## Nature of Claims

Analyses showed that there were a total of 239 claims made across the dataset (see Table 5.2), therefore 41% of the turns at talk were claims. This is further proof that claim making and argumentation, in general, were a central part of the discussion events. In Session 6, 63 claims were made out of 194 (32%) turns of coded talk, and in Session 10, 83 claims were made out of 142 (58%) turns of coded talk. In Session 11, 93 claims were made out of 245 (48%) turns of coded talk.

*Table 5.2. Claims by Focus Session*

<b>Focus Session</b>	<b># of Claims</b>	<b>Total Turns Coded</b>	<b>% of Total Turns Coded</b>
<b>Session 6</b>	63	194	32%
<b>Session 10</b>	83	142	58%
<b>Session 11</b>	93	245	48%
<b>Total</b>	239	581	41%

## Argumentation as a Way of Collectively Building Critical Knowledge

During literature discussions, meaning was derived not only from the text, but also from interactions between peers (Leal, 1993). In this study, interaction between peers acted as a catalyst for meaning making. In similar studies reviewing students' collaborative talk, teachers model how to connect to and elaborate on one another's ideas during discussion (Jewell & Pratt, 1999). Additionally, in other instances, students are provided with stems (e.g. "I agree with...", "This reminds me of...") to assist with the connection of ideas between students (Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2007). In this study, however, students were not prompted to use explicit connecting phrases to build on each other's ideas, nor did the facilitators explicitly modeling how this should be done. This is not to say that the ways in which the facilitators participated did not act as a type of model for students. Due to the nature of the events, and the power facilitators



held in this space, it is highly likely that student participants took up some of the conversational practices of the facilitators.

Consistently, throughout the data, student participants conveyed ideas by making claims and counterclaims, as opposed to using explicit connectors (“I agree,” “I disagree,” “I have a connection with...”), as seen in some small group literature groups. Furthermore of the 79 discussion strands, 70 strands (89%) included at least one of the argumentation conversational moves. The data also showed that, in the three focus sessions, all six students made claims. This suggests that argumentation was a primary way of interacting during literature discussions. In this section, I will unpack the ways in which argumentation worked as a method of critical knowledge building.

**Building critical knowledge through conflict.** In Example 5.6, Anthony claimed, “It is a free country”. This claim was made as a part of a larger dialogue about the harsh racial conditions existing in the Jim Crow South, most specifically as it related to the events surrounding Rosa Parks’ arrest. Anthony’s claim that “It is a free country,” led to a strand of argumentation in which students challenged one another’s claims, demanded evidence and presented counterclaims. In Example 5.6, students were working together to build an understanding of what it meant to be a raced being (White or Black) during the Jim Crow era.

*Example 5.6 It’s A Free Country*

187 **Anthony:** It’s a free country. **C**

188 **Nathan:** How is it a free country if the Black people can’t do what they want to do? Huh? How is that a free country? **CH**

189 **Anthony:** No, if the Blacks do something bad that’s not they not going to do everything. **C**

190 **Nathan:** Well, what if the Whites do something bad? **CH**

191 **Jordan:** They’re not going to get in trouble. **C**

192 **Anthony:** If the Whites do something bad they would get in trouble TOO CC

193 **Devon:** No, they won't CH

194 **Anthony:** But still but still

195 **Nathan:** If the police saw them they would say I don't care if they are White people. I am White people too. I'm on their side. I'll let them do what they want to do. CC

In this discussion, students made claims, counterclaims, and provided evidence for their claims in order to defend their point of view. Participants used argumentation as a way of unpacking and delving into critical racial issues. As students responded to one another, they negotiated their interpretations of crime and punishment and racial injustice.

In Example 5.6, both Anthony and Nathan tried to persuade the other of their own personal views and interpretations of race relations during the events surrounding Rosa Parks' arrest. Anthony claimed, in turn 187, "It's a free country." Nathan immediately challenged that claim, in turn 188, pushing Anthony to support his claim with evidence, "How is it a free country if the Black people can't do what they want to do? Huh? How is that a free country?" Nathan's response was not simply a request for evidence from Anthony, within his request Nathan embedded his own counterclaim, "...if the Black people can't do what they want to do?" This portion of Nathan's question presents a viewpoint that is contrary to Anthony's understanding of a free country. Although phrased as a question, Nathan is making the statement, or counterclaim, that "Black people can't do what they want to do." This is where the eristic nature of dialogue begins to become apparent. According to Walton (2005), eristic dialogue is one in which the speaker's goal is to "verbally hit out at an opponent." Nathan, in his response, is not only challenging Anthony, but is choosing to use sarcasm as a way of showing disagreement. In his questioning (turn 187), "Huh? How is that a free country?" He is not only seeking to have Anthony explain himself, or provide evidence, but he is also putting forth a challenge—in a sarcastic way. In this line of dialogue there is both persuasion and personal conflict. While

students are engaging in dialogue in an effort to get others to hear and receive their own ideas and viewpoints, the fact that there are contradicting viewpoints often leads to eristic dialogue (Walton & Krabbe, 2005). A participant's desire to persuade other members within a discussion of his viewpoint is not an uncommon dialogue type during argumentation (Walton, 2005) and was commonly seen throughout the transcript data.

As participants go back and forth using this argumentation style they are further building and concretizing their understanding and viewpoints on critical issues. Their own beliefs are being challenged by their peers, and often times they are required to justify their personal viewpoints.

**Argumentation as a test bench for collective knowledge building.** In Example 5.7, argumentation was the method by which students were collectively building critical understandings. Participants in this discussion strand were discussing how evil Hitler was, and were building critical knowledge about the power of law enforcement and whether or not those that can enforce the law must abide by a moral law themselves. Again, the students used argumentation to negotiate meaning.

*Example 5.7 Jail or Not?*

244 **Anthony:** I think I think they posed to go to jail. I think that's supposed to be jail. **C**

245 **Wood:** Who? The soldiers?

246 **Anthony:** Yeah **C**

247 **Wood:** Tell me why.

248 **Jordan:** They can't cause they're already soldiers. **CC**

249 **Anthony:** They're supposed to be in jail for a long time even even more than 20 years. **C**

250 **Wood:** Why do you say that?

251 **Jordan:** They can't CH

252 **Anthony:** Because they did they did a really bad thing. ER

253 **Jordan:** They can't go to jail cause they're already soldiers. Another soldier can't take another soldier to jail. CC/SP

254 **Fain:** So it was an issue of power, right?

255 **Jordan:** Yeah because they're the same people ER

256 **Anthony:** They can take their outfits off and police can put them in jail for like a thousand years ER

257 **Kenny:** A police can take another police to jail. C

Through a series of inquiries, claims and counterclaims students unpacked critical ideas brought up by the text. For example, in turn 244, Anthony claimed, "I think they posed to go to jail." Jordan, in turn 248, presented a counterclaim stating, "They can't because they are already soldiers." This excerpt presents students engaged in the process of working together to reach a joint understanding of what it means to have power as a Nazi soldier, and what that power meant when it came to the meting out of punishments.

Following Anthony's line of argumentation, one can see how, through hearing other participants' claims, he eventually altered his original claim. Anthony presented the same claim three times (turns 244, 246, & 247). In turn 246, Anthony responded to the question I posed in turn 245 asking who should be arrested. His affirmation, "yeah," confirmed and was a restating of his original claim. He was insistent that the soldiers' rightful punishment was to go to jail. Even when asked to clarify who it was that should be imprisoned he restated that the soldiers should be in jail (turn 249). In turns 251 and 253, Jordan challenged Anthony's claim, and I as

facilitator, probed Anthony to explain why he thought the soldiers should go to jail (turn 250). Anthony provided evidence in response to a request, but he also was attuned to the claims that other students were making that conflicted with his original claim that the soldiers should be jailed. Due to the fact that there was space for students to air out their ideas, and share them with a group of peers, Anthony was able to hear what others thought about his claim, receive additional information, and adjust his claim. Jordan was insistent, in turn 253, that taking the soldiers to jail was not an option due to the power that they held in their position. “Based on this reasoning, Anthony’s final claim, presented in turn 256, was adjusted based on his interaction with Jordan and the views Jordan brought forth. In response to Jordan addressing the fact that soldiers hold power that could impede them from being arrested, he therefore chose to address what he believed to be the source of their power—their uniforms. His new claim (turn 256), “They can take their outfits off and police can put them in jail for like a thousand years,” took into account the challenges and counterclaims of other participants which eventually led him to a new understanding. In this interaction, the presence of varying thoughts had an impact on how Anthony came to view a critical issue. In this instance, Jordan presented information that Anthony had not considered previously, and the entrance of new information led to an adjusted claim.

## **Conclusion**

The findings presented in this chapter support the notion that students need opportunities to listen to one another and negotiate ideas. Providing students occasions to take part in these types of discussions is not a new phenomenon and researchers and classroom teachers alike have found collaborative talk to be a key avenue for student learning (Leland, et al, 1999; Worthy, et al, 2012). This study in particular, however, exemplified how students negotiated ideas during critical conversations.

### **Argumentation: The Heart of Critical Conversations**

Argumentation was not a form of dialogue that the facilitators taught students, but was rather the students' natural method of negotiating ideas. Consistently, throughout the data, students were generating claims, providing and seeking evidence, challenging one another's ideas and presenting counterclaims. In this way, the knowledge that was being formed derived from the participants' constant volleying of critical ideas. This is important because in many literature discussions students are often asked to perform predetermined conversational roles (Daniels, 2002), therefore leaving little room for authentic participation. Furthermore, the nature of many literature discussions is such that students must consistently stay close to the text throughout the whole literature discussion, leaving very little room for personal thoughts, opinions, and claims. However, in the current study, the argumentation style of dialogue left room for critical issues and viewpoints to be questioned and challenged. This led to a collaborative space where multiple voices and thoughts led to collective critical knowledge building. The very nature of the dialogue style acted as a catalyst for students to form new understandings of critical issues.

In these discussions, students made claims and challenged one another to support those claims. Hillocks (2011) argues that argumentation is at the core of critical thinking. I would argue that while there was much room for growth in these second graders' ability to form and support arguments, they were engaging in emergent forms of argumentation that are often reserved for middle and high school students. Hillocks' (2011) further stated, "Argument is at the heart of critical thinking and academic discourse; it is the kind of writing students need to know for success in college and in life" (p. xvii). While Hillocks' speaks directly about the writing of argumentation, he makes it abundantly clear that the genre of argumentation is vital to life itself.

Due to the fact that the majority of the talk was categorized as text-inspired, it can be concluded that the text, in most instances, was not used as the primary source of evidence for claims. According to Hillocks (2011), more sophisticated uses of argumentation require that evidence provided be relevant and verifiable. This is an area of argumentation that the second graders in this study had not fully mastered. The process of providing evidence for and requesting evidence from peers was evident, however, the evidence was not always rooted in a verifiable source, as would be expected in more sophisticated uses of argumentation.

I would argue that the students in this study exhibited emergent uses of argumentation, as they challenged each other to think more deeply, to support their claims with more and varied evidence, and as they acted as models for one another in claim generation and the supporting of claims. This is not something to be overlooked. Student participants were taking up leadership roles in the argumentation setting, by pushing back on other students' thinking and pushing for more valid supports for claims made.

## **Conflict as a Part of Critical Conversations**

Throughout this chapter, there was evidence of students testing out ideas and adjusting them based on the collaborative use of argumentation. Students, in fact, were building new knowledge together. Long & Gove (2004) suggested, “in an ideal literature circle students would engage in critical response...and would question one another, change their minds, and push one another’s thinking” (p. 355). The co-construction of new knowledge, however, is not absent of conflict. In this dataset, conflict arose due to the fact that students took opportunities to challenge each other’s claims, present counterclaims, and demanded that other participants provide support for their claims. As Long & Gove (2004) point out, critical response requires that students navigate, negotiate, and challenge their peers’ thinking. Evidenced throughout this chapter, was students’ willingness to challenge one another’s thinking. These moments of challenge did not always lead to smooth or peaceful discussion. In the next chapter, I will discuss how conflict amongst students led to a discussion in which students took the opportunity to negotiate critical understandings about race.



## CHAPTER 6

### CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSTRUCTING, NEGOTIATING, AND DISCUSSING RACE

In this study, students were navigating and negotiating critical issues through literature discussions. Discussions extended beyond the book as students grappled with issues of power and privilege. “Critical literacy means engaging with issues that are often controversial, certainly contemporary, and perhaps quite volatile” (Knobel & Healy, p.4). The analysis presented in this chapter, will show how students not only were able to take up critical issues of power and privilege, but also how tensions played a significant role during critical conversations. Two of the four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys, 2002): disrupting the commonplace and interrogating multiple viewpoints, will be used as a lens for analyzing the critical nature of this discussion session.

Opportunities to discuss race, and issues of racism, were permitted and encouraged throughout this study, as the researchers believed that when these topics are silenced they are still being heard. What we choose to speak about, in fact, actually speaks volumes. Bolgatz (2005b) posits that students are having conversations about race in many other spaces, and it is time for teachers to allow these conversations to occur in the classroom. No longer can we be “silent” on this topic. With this in mind, it was with intentionality that texts were chosen that presented issues about race.

Discussions about race, and racial injustice, can in part, be attributed to the curricular choices made for this small group book club. Most of the texts selected for this study, addressed racial injustice in some way. For instance, texts about Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, and Nelson Mandela were read and discussed throughout this study—and in each discussion surrounding these books issues of race were surfaced by students and facilitators alike.

This is important to note, due to the fact that although *Wings* was not a text whose central critical theme was race-based, space for discussions about race had been established over time; therefore when students began to discuss a critical theme emerging from the *Wings* text (being arrested for being different) it was not surprising that students integrated issues of race into the discussion.

In this chapter, I seek to address the following research question: In what ways do issues of racial identity emerge among a small group of African American males participating in a discussion about race, power, and privilege? In the following sections, I will outline ethnographic themes that emerged from Session 10's discussion that foregrounded racial identity as the central topic of talk: colorblind interpretations of an historical event, and White supremacy and its impact on views of racial identity

### **Colorblind Interpretations of an Historical Event**

At the onset of the Session 10 discussion, Anthony was adamant about dismissing race as a primary factor in Rosa Parks' arrest. Throughout this section I will provide portions of dialogue that help build the argument that Anthony's colorblind worldview led to a divergent way of interpreting this historical event, as compared to fellow discussion participants.

In a discussion about how being different can have an impact on one's life, I asked the students the following question, "Have we read any stories where people have been arrested for being different?" Anthony balked at the notion and repeatedly stated that that was impossible. Anthony held firm to the belief that people are only arrested for "being acting up and stuff". In Example 6.1, Anthony made it clear that he did not agree that difference led to Rosa Parks' arrest.

*Example 6.1 Arrested for Being Different*

66 **Wood:** Have we read any stories where people have been arrested for being different?

67 **Multiple boys:** Yes

68 **Anthony:** No

69 **Wood:** In real life?

70 **Jordan:** Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks

71 **Anthony:** Being arrested for being different NNNNOOOOO

72 **Wood:** You think anybody has ever been arrested for being different?

73 **Anthony:** No

74 **Devon:** Ok What about

75 **Anthony:** They've been being arrested for being acting up and stuff.

Jordan, however, challenged this notion by citing evidence of historical figures in Black history who were arrested based on the color of their skin (turn 70). One student later asking, “Do you remember when it was Black history?” As the facilitator, I was also curious about Anthony’s stance on people being arrested only for “acting up,” therefore I asked him about his thoughts on Rosa Parks and whether or not he felt she was arrested because of her difference. Anthony responded that, “Rosa Parks she got arrested for not taking her seat.” He further stated that, “doing something wrong and acting up are the same thing. It wasn’t different.” According to Anthony, her arrest was not about her difference, it was about her refusal to get out of her seat—doing something wrong. In this exchange we begin to see how Anthony is espousing a worldview that ignores race, highlighting the individual act of Rosa Parks—her refusal to leave her seat. Anthony’s position does not take into account the role culture and race played in her

arrest, but instead he focused on the individual actions of the person involved. He stripped the event of the cultural and racial significance and focused primarily on the individual action of Rosa Parks. For Anthony, she was simply a human being who was told to move and did not move, therefore to him her arrest was a result of her disobedience, not her racial difference. To him, obeying the law trumped the moral rightness of the disobedience. As the discussion continued and other participants began to challenge Anthony's focus on the individual act, without taking into account the racial tensions of the time and its impact on the arrest of Rosa Parks, Anthony continued to press the fact that Rosa "refused to get out of her seat."

For Anthony, Rosa Parks' racial identity in the Jim Crow South, during a highly contentious battle for Civil Rights for African Americans, was not a considerable enough factor to conclude that she was arrested because she was different. To Anthony, it was mostly about what she did not do (get out of her seat). Other group participants began to challenge Anthony on this notion by reversing the scenario (see Example 6.2).

*Example 6.2 Refused to Get Out of Seat*

104 **Devon:** What happened if a White person was in that seat? Would they get in trouble for not getting up and not giving their seat to a Black person?

105 **Anthony:** She refused to get out of her seat.

106 **Devon:** The white people refused to do that too and that means and they wouldn't even get arrested so:

It is clear that Devon does not subscribe to this a-racial view of the events that took place surrounding Rosa Parks' arrest. Unlike Anthony, Devon concluded that race was a primary factor—if not the only factor—in her arrest. This became evident in the alternate scenario he presented to Anthony (turn 104). According to Devon, this was more about race than it was

about refusing to get out of one's seat. Furthermore, Devon is pointing out injustice in the meting out of punishments for crimes based on race (White people would not get arrested for the same actions). In Anthony's response (turn 105), however, we can still see his refusal to acknowledge race as a primary factor in the arrest of Rosa Parks. He continues to state that her action of refusing to get out of her seat was the sole reason for her arrest.

As this discussion continued, Anthony focused on the ethics of the situation. Were the actions of Rosa Parks right or wrong? He felt very strongly that Rosa's arrest was a result of her disobedience of the law, or "doing something bad" (see Example 6.3).

*Example 6.3 Doing Something Bad*

127 **Anthony:** I said if you do something bad

128 **Wood:** So you think

129 **Anthony:** you get arrested.

130 **Devon:** ((loud sigh))

131 **Anthony:** And you get arrested for like a month

This was not about being different. For Anthony, this was not about the color of one's skin. This was about a breach of the legal system. To Anthony, the focus should not be on race, but on the fact that Rosa Parks broke the law, and it was her responsibility to get out of her seat when told. According to Anthony choices have consequences. Rosa made the choice not to obey the law, and when you disobey the law there will be subsequent consequences. Later in the dialogue, Anthony further stated, "But Rosa Parks just didn't even move. Rosa Parks was just being so: hard headed to get out of her seat when she knew she was she was supposed to get out of her seat."

As responses from these participants suggest, there were opposing worldviews at play. In the case of Anthony, we have a student who viewed events absent of race and focused mainly on the acts of an individual. While in contrast, Devon argued that a person's race, specifically in the case of Rosa Parks, was the predominant factor in her arrest. Each participant's worldview positioned him to interpret the events surrounding Rosa Parks' arrest differently. Because their views were so oppositional this led to tension and discord throughout the discussion.

### **“Whites are better”: White Supremacy and its Impact on Views of Racial Identity**

In this section, I will discuss the way in which issues of racial identity were brought to the foreground of the discussion event. I will outline how a student who initially disregarded race as an integral part of discussion, shifted away from this silence. Additionally, I will unpack how students' viewpoints on race became a threat to the ways in which individual racial identity was interpreted.

**Breaking the silence on race.** At the beginning of the discussion about Rosa Parks' arrest, Anthony did not acknowledge race as a mitigating factor in her arrest. Furthermore, he repeatedly expressed that race, or being different, was not an influential factor—spending much of the conversation downplaying or ignoring other participants' attempts to forefront race in the discussion. As fellow participants continued to address the racial tensions between Whites and Blacks, Anthony chose to take a stance on race. This dialogue between Anthony and Nathan, in Example 6.4, represents a shift away from Anthony's silence on race.

#### *Example 6.4 Breaking the Silence*

121 **Anthony:** Whites. I think Whites are better than Browns and Blacks.

122 **Nathan:** Why?

123 **Anthony:** Whites do the most.

Anthony decided to not only address race, but to took a strong stance about the superiority of one race over another. In turn 121, Anthony stated, “Whites are better than Browns and Blacks,” because he believed “they do the most” (turn 123). This statement, coming from an African American young male, implies a negative view of his own race. Anthony’s comments suggest that White dominant culture is “right” or superior to that of Blacks and Browns. Furthermore, he made a definitive statement that White people in general are superior to Blacks and Browns.

Throughout the conversation, Anthony continued to espouse the belief that Whites are better than Blacks.

*Example 6.5 Whites are Better*

176 **Anthony:** Whites are better than Blacks because that man on the bus uh told her told told Rosa Parks right from wrong. She knew to get out of her seat, but she did not listen.

In this statement not only did Anthony reiterate that Whites are better than Blacks, he also implied that Whites hold the standard for “rightness.” In this case, “the man on the bus,” or White man, was the keeper and enforcer of the moral standard that should be adhered to.

As the discussion progressed, Anthony stated, “Whites are better than Blacks because Blacks do not do everything.” In this response, one can see how Anthony became defensive. To this point, Anthony’s fellow participants have been trying to explain reasons for why Rosa Parks stayed in her seat, while also providing additional examples of what Black people had done (e.g. Martin Luther King, Jr.) to try and help make the United States a more just society. Anthony, in this statement, became defensive stating “Blacks do not do everything.” Once again, putting those of the White race at a higher stature than Blacks.

While previously, Anthony had ignored the presence of race and focused primarily on the individual actions of Rosa Parks, he broke this racial silence and promoted the idea that Whites are better than Blacks. Anthony went to great lengths to continually express the notion that Blacks are inferior. Espousing these viewpoints led others in the group to question Anthony's "Blackness." In the next section I will explore the ways in which participants' individual racial identities were challenged.

**Challenging individual racial identity.** This expression of White superiority served as a launching point for a discussion that would explore issues of individual racial identity. In the following exchange, it became evident that according to some group members, one's personal belief about the superiority of a particular race was a reflection of the individual's own racial identity.

*Example 6.6 Challenging Racial Identity*

133 **Wood:** Anthony, you said that Whites are better than Blacks.

134 **Anthony:** Yeah

135 **Devon:** So you think?

136 **Wood:** Do you believe that?

137 **Nathan:** WHAT? How could you do that? You're also Black!

Anthony's statement claiming the superiority of Whites, according to Nathan, was a contradiction to Anthony's identity as a Black person. To Nathan, the belief that Whites are superior to Blacks is a direct threat to one's classification of being Black. Nathan, in turn 137, made it clear that he saw this admission by Anthony as a betrayal to his racial identity, incredulous to the fact that a Black person could believe in the supremacy of Whites.



In Example 6.7, it became evident that Nathan strongly adhered to the notion that, when dealing with matters of race, there are “sides” that can be taken.

*Example 6.7 Whose Side Are You On?*

140 **Nathan:** Are you even on the Black side? WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?

141 **Anthony:** Whites are better than Blacks.

142 **Nathan:** WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?

Nathan, insinuated that within particular racial groups there should be unified thought. He left no room for a person claiming to be Black, to have an alternative way of viewing the events surrounding Rosa Parks’ refusal to get out of her seat. His comments further suggested that Black people should never state or subscribe to the notion that Whites are superior. His question, in turn 142, suggested that Anthony’s declaration, “Whites are better than Blacks,” was a direct threat to Anthony’s “blackness;” therefore putting Anthony at odds with the all Black group of students.

When Anthony later stated that Rosa Parks was just being “soooo hard headed,” fellow participants had a difficult time coinciding his statements with his race. For fellow group participants, Rosa Parks’ refusal to get out of her seat was in support of the injustice that was being enacted on people of her race. It was an act of social justice on her part, not sheer disobedience without a cause, which Anthony’s comment suggested. Nathan responded to Anthony’s statement by stating “WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?! SHE HELPED YOU!” In Nathan’s response, he used the pronoun you. The use of the pronoun you is a referent to Anthony, but not just Anthony the person—but Anthony a Black person.

Anthony’s statements became a polarizing factor in the group discussion, such that comments about race began to take a personal tenor. As was stated previously, Nathan began to

challenge Anthony and his own identity as a Black person by questioning Anthony's allegiance to "blackness" (Whose side are you on?). Consequently, Anthony became defensive in his remarks as well.

150 **Anthony:** Whites are better than Blacks and Browns and Tans including YOU

((points to Nathan))

151 **Nathan:** What?!

Nathan, continued by once again interrogating Anthony,

200 **Nathan:** Well, whose side are you on? Are you a Black person? Are you an actual Black person?

Yet again, Nathan tried to reconcile how a Black person could take on a viewpoint that does not align with the dominant narrative of Rosa Parks refusal to get out of her seat—the narrative that she refused to move for the betterment of her people (Black people). He goes as far as to directly question Anthony about his "Blackness."

Issues of skin tone and its relation to racial identity also became a point of discussion.

Once again, troubling this notion what being "Black" means.

*Example 6.8 Skin Tone and Racial Identity*

241 **Devon:** Ok so say you were a Black

242 **Anthony:** Rosa Parks is tan.

243 **Devon:** No she's not

244 **Anthony:** Yes she is

245 **Wood:** She's about our color maybe Nathan's color, ok?

246 **Devon:** She's colored. She's colored.

Anthony challenged the idea that Rosa Parks was Black, and instead called her tan. In Example 6.8, there appears to be two definitions, or interpretations, of “Black” at play in this exchange. Anthony is interpreting black in its most literal sense—the actual color; whereas Devon is interpreting Black as a racial identity. In most cases, the social construct of race is often tied to the color of one’s skin, especially in the African American community. By not acknowledging Rosa Parks as Black, but instead tan, Devon interpreted Anthony’s remarks as a challenge to Rosa Parks’ membership as being a part of the Black racial community. Devon considered Rosa Parks as a Black person—belonging to the Black race or community. Devon still unwilling to relinquish the fact that Rosa Parks is not Black, finally compromised with “she’s colored.” In this exchange there was a negotiation of what Black meant—is it a racial identity or a skin tone? For Anthony, black is literal, for Devon Black, while it does relate to skin color (turn 246), is a declaration of who a person is—their identity.

As the discussion continued, Anthony challenges Nathan’s racial identity,

*Example 6.9 Challenging Racial Identity*

247 **Anthony:** Nathan is NOT Black.

248 **Nathan:** Yes I am.

249 **Wood:** We all are.

250 **Nathan:** I’m mixed. I’m still Black.

Once again, individual racial identity is being challenged. Furthermore, the multiple definitions/interpretations of “Black” were still at conflict. Anthony continued with his literal definition of black—the color. Nathan, who viewed “Black” as a membership in a racial community rejected the notion that he was “NOT Black,” no matter how light his skin tone. Nathan, however, recognized that his skin tone was what Anthony used to determine his

“blackness;” therefore he provided a reason for the lightness of his skin (turn 250), but reiterated with whom he identified (turn 250). Like Devon, Nathan saw “blackness” as membership in a community. For him, being “Black” was an identity and not just about the lightness or darkness of one’s skin tone.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, it is clear that allowing students the space to discuss critical issues played a powerful part in the development of critical conversations. This discussion event, while based on the text, *Wings*, provided further evidence of the fact that critical conversations can sometimes happen on what some would call the periphery of the text (text-inspired). The majority of this conversation was not based on the main idea or central theme of the text, nor was it a retelling of the events of the text; however, it was a discussion based on a critical theme that the text addressed. As the facilitator, I chose to provide space for students to express their beliefs and viewpoints—allowing the text being discussed to shift from the children’s book, *Wings*, to a reading of the historical event of Rosa Parks’ arrest. Short, et al (1996) stated,

Through conversation and dialogue, readers have the opportunity to explore their own half-formed ideas, to expand their understandings through hearing others’ interpretations, and to become critical and inquiring thinkers. (p. 479)

The students in this group, although they had divergent viewpoints, were all provided the space to express these views. Ferdman (1990) also believed that “The ethnic group to which any specific student belongs should matter little, so long as the opportunity to participate is available equally to all” (p. 184). The students in this discussion group were able to experience a type of open dialogue that many do not encounter until their adulthood.

## **Critical Literacy Dimensions as a Lens for Viewing Discussions on Race**

In this chapter, I addressed the ways young African American male students' worldviews impacted their interpretations of the role race played in Rosa Parks' arrest. Furthermore, this chapter brought to light the ways in which these young boys interpreted what it meant to be "Black," and how these interpretations affected the tenor and dynamics in the group discussion. I will use two of Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys' (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy as lenses for discussing the findings in this chapter—as these two dimensions showed themselves most prevalently in the data.

**Disrupting the commonplace.** Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002) define disrupting the commonplace as "seeing the 'everyday' through new lenses" (p. 383). Throughout this dialogue, disruption of what is considered normal for individual group members became the central narrative of the discussion. In this event, we can see how, perspectives some considered commonplace for a member of the Black community were challenged by Anthony. And to Anthony, the norm that law and order should always be upheld was disrupted when the fellow participants argued that the moral grounding of injustice could trump the law.

Throughout this discussion, it was found that membership in the group, in this case the "Black" group, not the discussion group, was being challenged. Nathan was baffled as to how Anthony could consider himself Black and hold the opinion that Whites are superior to Blacks. This was a disruption to what Nathan held as commonplace for members of the Black community.

In this data, it was evident that while Anthony would be considered, and more than likely would identify as a Black male, he had very divergent views than the rest of the group, that also identified as Black males. The data show that diversity in thought, among these young boys was

not well received; most specifically when the viewpoint was interpreted as oppositional to the way in which the majority of the group felt a member should think or believe. Anthony found himself to be on the periphery of group thought and this led to a contentious discussion on the role race played in Rosa Parks' arrest.

While there was tension, there is evidence that new frames, ways of viewing and interpreting events, were being presented in the discussion about Rosa Parks' arrest. What students considered as commonplace in their existing worlds was challenged when other participants held different ideas about what was commonplace. Some may see this as problematic for the classroom setting, because it leads to challenging conversations that, at times, may lead to strong personal responses. Critical conversations, however, allow students the opportunity to "recognize implicit modes of perception and to consider new frames from which to understand experience" (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383).

**Interrogating multiple viewpoints.** Critical literacy theorists and practitioners recognize that multiple perspectives exist when considering one event, and it is necessary to interrogate these perspectives when taking a critical stance. During this process you engage in examining competing narratives and constructing counternarratives to more dominant discourses. I would argue that this was what Anthony was doing throughout this discussion event. He was developing a counternarrative of his own, however, that narrative was not readily accepted by his peers. Due to the fact that racial identity was a central part of this discussion event, I will discuss multiple viewpoints in light of the students' differing views on racial identity.

What caused variation among the group members were the ways in which group members interpreted Rosa Parks' arrest. At the onset of the conversation one might read Anthony's statements as a representation of Frankenburg's (1993) notion of colorblindness.

Anthony seemed to take on one particular aspect of racial colorblindness Frankenburg calls color-evasion—placing an emphasis on racial sameness. Through his dialogue, it became apparent that Anthony intentionally interpreted the events of Rosa Parks arrest absent of race; therefore, suggesting that no matter the race of the individual the result would be the same. Based on a colorblind perspective, “potential racial differences are minimized in favor of universal or human experiences” (Neville, 2011, p. 1064). In Anthony’s case, the purposeful evasion of race was made apparent in his argument that Rosa Parks’ arrest was primarily a result of her acts, therefore, minimizing the effect of racial differences in this situation. In contrast, other student participants held fast to a contrasting belief that race was central to Rosa Parks’ arrest. As the discussion continued, those in the group continually challenged Anthony, espousing their own views of the role that race played in her arrest and in the time of Jim Crow laws in general. As one could imagine, not viewing Jim Crow laws through a racial lens ended up being very difficult for these young Black boys to grasp. Anthony’s position, though not popular, was not of less importance. What truly led to a critical conversation was the ability for all students to present their perspectives. These tensions led to a critical discussion in which students had the opportunity to share their own perspectives and hear the perspectives of others.

When Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) discuss the interrogation of multiple viewpoints, they are doing so with the understanding that the views of others should be heard and understood. The objective is to understand the multiple perspectives and experiences of others in an effort to understand one another better. The students in this study were not at the point where they were seeking to place themselves in each other’s shoes. During this discussion event, they were expressing their own viewpoints and listening to the viewpoints of others—but they were not at the place where they were understanding of each other’s ideas. As Lewison,

Flint, and Van Sluys' (2002) stated, they were "reflecting on multiple and contradictory perspectives" and "making difference visible" (p. 383). While the ultimate objective of this dimension is to place yourself in another's shoes, these participants were still seeking to be understood.

Bolgatz (2005b), conducted a study exploring the ways in which issues of race were introduced and discussed in the classroom, and similar to the results of this study, found that discussions about race are complicated and often shied away from in the classroom. Bolgatz study showed the teacher's role is to separate intellectual arguments from personal attacks. Much like the interaction between the boys in this study, the teachers, Bolgatz's study, found that when race was discussed "knee-jerk responses" were common. Allowing students the opportunity to speak their views was vital. Therefore, one can conclude that when uncomfortable views surface (e.g. racist, sexist, etc), it is still necessary to hear them and to begin to unpack the multiple viewpoints shared. Bolgatz (2005b) states, "Putting the issue of race on the table is not a matter of charisma. Rather it is about taking risks, being open to hearing what students think, and maintaining an atmosphere of respect" (p. 34). Bolgatz speaks specifically about race, and I further argue that this same atmosphere of listening to the viewpoints of others while maintaining an environment of respect is necessary. This does not suggest that every moment throughout a critical conversation is one of peace and calm resolve; however, it does mean that an atmosphere must be established such that students know that the purpose is to seek to be understood and to understand. Therefore, in the case of Anthony and his peers, it was Anthony's right to hold his own perspective, and that right must be protected in the classroom forum; however, Anthony must also understand that it is also the right of fellow classmates to critically examine his perspective.



## **Personal Identity & Critical Stances**

Throughout this chapter it became evident that students' personal views of their own culture and ethnic identities had an important influence on their interpretations of a major historical event. Each member had his own understanding of how individuals of a particular racial/ethnic group, in this case Black people, should interpret racial events. Ferdman (1990) argued that cultural identity—the ways in which each of us, “ maintains an image of the behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms—in short, of the culture—appropriate to members of the ethnic group(s) to which we belong” (p. 182)—is a derivative and amplifier of literacy—therefore these two factors, culture and literacy, were at work simultaneously.

Consequently, the ways in which the boys in this literature discussion interpreted the event were reflections of their cultural identities converging with their literacy experience, in this case the way in which they “read” the account of Rosa Parks. How each student identified culturally, was not separate from how they read this event. In this case, the topic was that of race and how race was interpreted, but what was most significant was the fact that students' claims and arguments were based on their own worldviews—evidencing the fact that one's cultural and racial background strongly influences the critical nature of conversations. The critical stances taken up in this discussion were strongly connected to how individuals defined themselves and others as raced beings. This, in fact, became a central element of the discussion at hand.

This discussion about racial identity and perspectives on race was an opening to hear how students viewed the world differently. Vasquez (2010) acknowledges that we each read from particular positions, so our reading of texts are never neutral. This was evidenced in the ways that the boys attended to text of Rosa Parks' arrest. Each student carried his own viewpoint on the role that race played in this event. Each person's reading of that text was influenced by his

own past experiences and understandings of race relations. We remove the critical when we try to force the reading of a text to be one-track or neutral. We never approach texts from a neutral standpoint and our personal perspectives always influence our readings of texts. This critical conversation further evidenced that as educators we cannot treat individuals of the same race as homogenous, but that communities can be both homogeneous and heterogeneous simultaneously. The reality that there are within culture differences among individuals of the same race became an important critical moment for all discussion participants. There must be room, however, left for the identity of the individual (Hall, 1990). It is important to recognize that, what might be considered “valid” group level characterizations are not necessarily applicable to all, or even most, of the members of a particular group (Ferdman, 1990).

### **Critical Conversations about Race**

This conversation further proved that race cannot be separated from schooling. Critical conversations, and their emphasis on sociopolitical issues that often are race related, provided space for students to address race from the lens of their own cultural background. Students, as they read texts with critical themes, were able to identify and draw on notions of race presented directly or indirectly in texts. Bolgatz (2005a) stated,

I believe the reasons to talk about race and racism outweigh the arguments against doing so. Moreover, we have a particular responsibility to raise these issues with our students. Talking about race and racism in schools is a uniquely meaningful activity for four reasons:

- School is a place where students learn to live democratically
- We have a moral imperative to teach students about social responsibility

- Race and racism are critical aspects of the school curriculum
- Talking about race and racism helps students understand their worlds (p. 4)

As this discussion so clearly exemplified, discussing race in the classroom can be “messy, awkward, and tense” (Bolgatz, 2005a, p. 9), but it is not a topic, or reality, that we can continue to push behind closed doors. In this study, students were the perpetrators of the discussion on race. When asked if anyone has been arrested for being different, they surfaced those that had been arrested due to their racial differences. As stated in the introduction, students had become accustomed to discussing matters of race in this space, therefore it was not necessarily up to the facilitator to launch the critical theme of racial injustice, but rather to provide space for it to occur. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) stated, “there are times, especially when dealing with difficult issues such as racism, that it is easier to start with something out there and then eventually have students start making personal connections to the issue at hand” (p. xxvii). Students in this study had the opportunity to explore and share their own personal connections, as well as interrogate and hear the viewpoints of others. This merging of one’s own personal ideas and those of fellow participants led to clashes due to varying worldviews. In this study, the students expressed their reading of the world with others and began to understand the ways in which we negotiate, interpret and challenge one another’s views. Leland, Lewison, & Harste (2013) sum this up well, “critically literate citizens explore alternate ways of being in the world. What better place than school to take these risks and try on these alternate ways of talking and acting?” (p.14). Furthermore, the authors stated that because students bring with them a wide range of experiential, cultural, and linguistic resources, it is our responsibility to allow opportunities for these resources to be used in the classroom setting.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

This study set out to determine the ways in which six Black second grade boys engaged in critical conversations based on children’s books that addressed issues of power and privilege. The findings of this study suggested that there were particular ways in which these young boys participated, and these ways of engaging had an impact on their critical understandings and expressions. Where most research, has looked at the outcome data and conclusions that predict various outcomes—this study provided a grounded description of the six boys’ participation strategies. Absent from much of the critical literacy research, is a thick description of how critical literacy—primarily discussions—happen. The findings presented in this study took a close look at the structure of conversations, the ways in which students attended to critical issues, as well as the ways in which knowledge was constructively built. I posit that having increasingly more descriptions of the structure and nature of critical conversations will help to push the critical literacy field forward, as many educators wonder *how* critical literacy, or more specifically—critical conversations happen.

In this chapter, I will address the ways in which this work connects to and extends the current literacy landscape, the conditions that support critical conversations, critical literacy as social justice, as well as future directions for research.

#### **Connections to & Extensions of the Current Literacy Landscape**

Throughout this study, critical conversations were defined by the ways in which students engaged in discussions about texts. It was found that students did not always focus on the story details presented by the text, but more often attended to the critical themes the text inspired. In this section, I will address the ways in which critical conversations connect with reading comprehension strategies, as well as critical conversations within the close reading landscape.

**Connections to high-level literacy strategies.** In this study, participants showed engagement with sophisticated literary genres. Most clearly evident throughout the data was students' ability to use argumentation, as well as draw on critical themes. In this section, I will discuss how critical conversations connect with existing literature on both of these literacy strategies.

***Argumentation and critical literacy.*** Students exhibited the ability to build arguments, provide and request support for claims, as well as challenge other students' claims. The argumentation genre is not one we see appear in Common Core State Standards (CCSS), until students enter the middle school grades. Wiley & Voss (1999), argue that the ability to build and support arguments leads to deeper understandings of subject matter. As a result, they further argued that tasks must be selected that require students to knowledge-transform and not just knowledge-tell. In this study, critical discussions allowed students to transform and interpret knowledge. In critical conversations, students were drawing on critical themes, not to retell events that coincided with the theme, but to take that knowledge and work together to generate ideas and interpretations.

***Theme and critical literacy.*** Students also explored textual themes throughout their critical conversations. As stated previously, students' requirement to identify theme, according to the CCSS, does not appear in the standards until the fourth grade. At the fourth grade level, the standard states that students must be able to determine the theme, but does not require that students expound upon that theme. It is not until fifth grade, that students are required to begin to substantiate themes with coinciding evidence. The second grade participants of this study, were identifying critical themes established by the text, while also taking the time to discuss and

expound on these themes. When exploring the second grade CCSS literacy standards, you will find that there are no reading standards that require students to attend to major themes of the text.

Both theme and argumentation are literacy understandings expected of students in much higher grade levels. It is important to acknowledge that the boys in this study were working on an emergent level in both of these areas, but they were engaging in practices typically reserved for older students—and critical conversations are curricular structures that invite this kind of discourse and thinking.

**Critical conversations, close reading, and the Common Core.** Since the gradual adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), there has been a concerted effort to implement close reading strategies in the elementary classroom. According to Fisher & Frey (2012), close reading is “an instructional routine in which students critically examine a text, especially through repeated readings. Close reading invites students to examine deep structures of a piece of text” (p. 179). The authors further stated that close reading’s primary purpose is

to afford students with the opportunity to assimilate new textual information with their existing background knowledge and prior experiences to expand their schema. The challenge is in not becoming so focused on background knowledge and prior experiences such that we end up spending little time on the textual information. (p. 179)

The primary purpose of close reading comes in stark contrast with the data presented in this study. Some reviewing this study, might even suggest that in this age of CCSS, that carrying out of these discussion events is contrary to effective literacy instruction. Close reading places less emphasis on students’ use of background knowledge and previous experiences. This could be cause for concern when considering whether or not critical conversations are appropriate in a literacy landscape that currently places such heavy emphasis on the use of close reading. The

current study showed that background knowledge and opinions were among the primary categories of student talk when responding to a text. Furthermore, the data indicated that text-based talk, occurred less frequently than did text-inspired talk. This raises the question, of whether there is a place for critical conversations in our current classrooms.

Serafini (2013) noted that in many cases close reading has been touted as the right way to teach reading, often implying that educators have spent far too long focusing on personal response. However, after reviewing the data presented in this study, it is important to clarify that the text-inspired talk was not off-task or off-topic discussion. Students were grappling with critical issues such as: prejudice, power, privilege, and racism. Students often leveraged their own understandings to help facilitate comprehension of ideas that the text inspired. While it is vital that students are able to read and comprehend text, there should also be room for discussion that is built from students' background knowledge, opinions, and questions. The data in this study was a representation of students' ability to move beyond the text, yet stay focused on issues that the text inspired. Serafini (2013) asked a vital question, "How will a focus on the text itself change the way readers are asked to make sense of literary and informational texts?" (p. 301). This question is pertinent to the findings of this study, in that the nature of this work suggested that text-inspired talk could lead to deep critical interpretations and rich discussion. Nevertheless, in elementary classrooms today, as a result of pressure for high-stakes testing, fewer opportunities are made available for students to participate in literature experiences that are not directly rooted within the four corners of the text.

Beers & Probst (2013), while supporters of close reading, make an important distinction when considering the personal responses of students. They argued that many proponents of close reading may continue to push students toward finding answers to questions within the four

corners of the text in an effort to “deny the lazy student an opportunity to avoid the text, tell us about his own feelings, and pretend that he has read when in fact all he has done is remember” (p. 35). They state that a popular conception of close reading “denies the reader the chance to use the very resources he or she needs to do the reading and forbids the processes that might make sense of the text” (p. 35). The findings of this study, showed students’ tendency to use background knowledge and opinions to engage with issues that the text inspired, and this provided opportunities for students to leverage their own experiences and ideas as ways of interpreting readings from the text.

### **Conditions for Supporting Critical Conversations**

This study further proved that second grade Black males can, and will, be engaged when there are certain academic conditions present. Across the literature on critical conversations, there were three major themes that emerged: centrality of text, relevance of personal thought and experience, and building sociopolitical awareness. These overarching categories from the larger body of literature also appeared in the results and methods of this study.

Valuing the personal thought and experience of students was important for rich critical conversations, as evidenced in the larger critical literacy literature, as well as this study. In order for voices to be heard it was necessary that the discussion space be accessible to all participants. During critical conversations it was important that students felt as though their contributions are valued.

In the following sections, I will discuss three primary conditions that worked to support critical conversations in this study: facilitators providing space for less powerful participants; text selection; and inviting students to raise different perspectives.



**Providing Space for Participants.** When working with students in a small group discussion setting, there are always power dynamics that emerge. Facilitators may notice that some participants are more talkative than others, or there are participants that more readily participate. The role of the facilitator is to ensure that the discussion space is equitable, and on occasion, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to leverage their power in this space to open up spaces for other, more marginalized, students to participate. Moller (2002), in her literature discussions about social justice conducted with fourth-grade students shared that she allowed students the freedom to navigate their own discussions; however she stated, “there were times, however, when students needed my support to open a space for them to share” (p. 468). As facilitators, it is important that we are increasingly sensitive to the individual participation habits of group members, and we must be willing to take use our more powerful role to advocate for voices less heard.

**Inviting Multiple Perspectives.** Chapter 6 provided examples of the importance of allowing, and encouraging multiple perspectives. When students expressed their varied viewpoints, it allowed students to begin to see the ways in which varied interpretations can impact discussions. Both facilitators and students, need to become accustomed to the fact that critical conversations are not absent of tension. In fact, many times the tensions push discussants to think more deeply about the critical issue at hand. Lewison, Leland & Harste (2011) acknowledge that, “The common-sense notion of tension is negative in our consensus-driven culture. It is often seen as something to be avoided at any cost. To us, tension is a plus that goes hand in hand with diversity and difference and opens up spaces for more voices to be heard” (p. 67). As participants in small group critical conversations, we have to recognize and value people’s right to have different stances. Moreover, it is the role of the facilitator to ensure that we

are inviting students to share their viewpoints, even when these viewpoints may not seem to be the most popular. As educators begin providing space for students to share their views, it is important that students are encouraged to express themselves respectfully.

**Text selection.** In this study, the selection of texts was crucial to the trajectory of the small group discussion. Texts drive discussion, while the story details may not always be what is driving the critical dialogue, the texts' critical themes have a major influence on the discussion. Leland, Lewison & Harste (2013), conclude that texts must be chosen that, "do not make difference invisible, but rather explore how differences in culture, language, history, class, gender, sexual orientation, and race *make* a difference" (p. 60). With these texts, you provide students opportunities to give voice to those that have, in many ways, been silenced. It is vital that texts are selected that have overarching critical themes that students will have the opportunity to unpack and discuss. In this study, it became clear that the critical themes that were addressed by the texts became central to the discussions. Students, in this study, did not spend as much time navigating the exact events presented in the text; instead, students spent more time discussing larger critical themes, and would at times link to the text to help them discuss the larger critical theme.

### **Directions for Research**

This study provided an in-depth look at how second grade Black males engaged in critical conversations. The analysis of this study, intentionally, focused on the voice of the student. Moving forward, it would be important to look more closely at the role of the teacher in small group critical conversations. It would be unfair, and inaccurate, to assume that students are working completely independent of adult participants, and that their choices are made without influence from these adult participants. This being said, it would be my goal, in future work, to

conduct an analysis of the data that focused more specifically on the voice and role of the teacher. Most importantly, it would be necessary to track the ways in which the content of teacher talk influenced the talk of students.

Further research is also needed as it relates to preparing teachers to have critical conversations with students. In order to continue to push the critical research forward, I think there needs to be a concerted effort focused on understanding best practices for preparing teachers to have critical conversations with students. This includes conversations that cross lines of difference. As data indicates, especially in our urban school districts, the majority of our teachers are White females, often teaching Brown and Black students. In what ways might teachers need to prepare differently for critical conversations in these settings? Research on teacher roles in critical conversations is needed.

### **Strengths & Limitations**

**Strengths.** The materials and participation structures were important factors in how students engaged in critical conversations. This study showed how the texts, as well as the choice to allow for discussion, provided opportunities for students to have critical conversations—discussing issues of power and privilege. As educators and education researchers, we must continue to analyze and understand the power that curriculum structures have on student engagement. The careful selection of texts in this study, as well as the choice to use discussion as a way of responding to texts had a major impact on how students participated.

Furthermore, this study showed examples of how the issue of race was addressed and processed by young Black boys. These are the kinds of conversations that our nation must learn to have in a positive way, and in a way that values the voices of the participants involved. Too often, issues of race are silenced in classrooms, and it is now time that the space be opened for

these discussions to happen. Students in this study were provided opportunities to express their own thoughts and opinions on racial tensions, as well as include their own racial identity into the learning space. For young Black males, these occasions are especially rare—and it was with intention that I chose to provide this outlet for these particular students.

**Limitations.** Due to the design of this study, and its focus on small group literature discussions, it was important that the number of participants be limited. While I strongly believe that the small size of the group provided for a more appropriate environment for small group literature discussions, I recognize that the findings from this study will not be generalizable, or representative, of all small group literature discussions with elementary Black males.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the interpretation of qualitative data (e.g. interviews and discussion events) is subjective in nature. As a researcher, I approach the data with certain personal and theoretical lenses that impacted the ways in which I viewed the data. This being said, I have tried to make a point of stating up front my position as a researcher and participant in this study, as well as laying out the theoretical frame through which I interpreted the data.

In addition, this study was confined to a particular group of students (elementary black males), reading particular types of texts (issues of power and equity), having a particular type of conversation (critical conversation). Though this was purposeful, the findings will be relevant to those interested in this particular type of data set.

### **Critical Literacy Research as Social Justice**

I take this research agenda as a personal act of social justice. It is indeed my goal to help develop a counter-narrative to the negative stereotypes that plague young Black males, as it relates to school—moreso literacy. As Howard (2014) stated, “the power of voice, the power of

listening, and the power of learning from youth cannot be overstated. . . . The call is before us now, when it comes to young Black males, to listen to them a lot more than we speak” (p. 110). This is a call that not only I, but other literacy and education researchers, must take heed. We have a responsibility to equalize the voices that are represented in the literature, especially in positive lights. No longer, can we continue to trumpet the failures of Black males, and marginalize their victories. I am of the strong belief that literacy education and research, specifically critical literacy, provides an opening for a new narrative to be constructed for young Black males.

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### **Children's Literature**

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## APPENDIX A

### Informational Letter to Parents

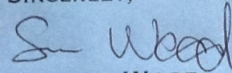
DEAR PARENTS,

OUR CLASS WILL BE HAVING LITERATURE CONVERSATIONS ON ISSUES OF POWER AND EQUITY. YOUR CHILD WILL BRING HOME A BOOK TO READ WITH A FAMILY MEMBER ON WEDNESDAYS, AND IT NEEDS TO RETURN WITH YOUR STUDENT ON MONDAY FOR OUR LITERATURE CONVERSATION. PLEASE READ THE BOOK TO YOUR CHILD THE FIRST DAY HE/SHE RECEIVES IT AND RETURN IT ON TIME.

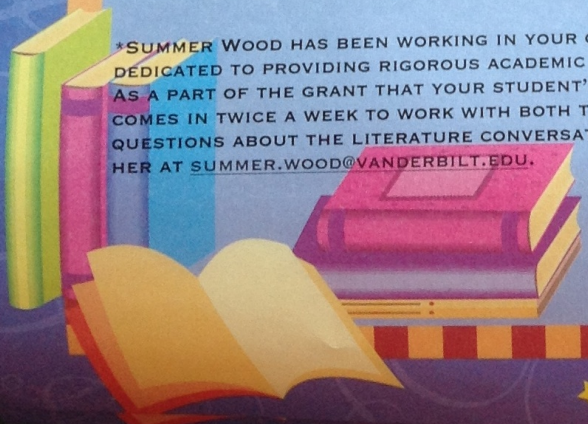
OUR LITERATURE GROUP WILL MEET ON MONDAY & WEDNESDAY MORNINGS FROM 10:00-10:30AM, DURING YOUR STUDENT'S CLASSROOM CENTER TIME. THE LITERATURE CONVERSATIONS WILL BE CONDUCTED IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY.

IN ORDER FOR YOUR CHILD TO BE READY FOR THE CONVERSATIONS IN SCHOOL HE/SHE WILL NEED TO READ AND/OR LISTEN TO SEVERAL READINGS OF THE BOOK. USE THE POST-IT NOTES INCLUDED IN THE BOOK BAG TO HAVE YOUR STUDENT TAG ONE OR TWO PAGES THEY FOUND PARTICULARLY INTERESTING AND WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS DURING THE LITERATURE CONVERSATION. FIND KEY AREAS THAT WERE OF INTEREST TO YOU AND YOUR CHILD AND YOUR CHILD CAN RESPOND TO THE BOOK WITH A DRAWING AND/OR WRITING IN HIS/HER NOTEBOOK. (FOR ADDITIONAL DIRECTIONS, SEE BELOW.) BE SURE THAT YOUR CHILD BRINGS THE BOOK AND COMPLETED NOTEBOOK RESPONSE BY THE MONDAY FOLLOWING.

SINCERELY,



SUMMER WOOD  
DOCTORAL CANDIDATE  
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY



\*SUMMER WOOD HAS BEEN WORKING IN YOUR CHILD'S CLASSROOM SINCE OCTOBER. SHE IS DEDICATED TO PROVIDING RIGOROUS ACADEMIC LITERACY EXPERIENCES FOR ALL CHILDREN. AS A PART OF THE GRANT THAT YOUR STUDENT'S TEACHER IS PARTICIPATING IN, MS. WOOD COMES IN TWICE A WEEK TO WORK WITH BOTH THE TEACHER AND STUDENTS. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE LITERATURE CONVERSATION CIRCLE PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CONTACT HER AT [SUMMER.WOOD@VANDERBILT.EDU](mailto:SUMMER.WOOD@VANDERBILT.EDU).

## APPENDIX B

### Student Interview Protocol

#### Pre Interview

**Researcher says:** *I'd like to get to know you a little better and talk to you about the different books you read and your interests in reading. It will be just like we're having a conversation. I'll ask you some questions and you respond how you feel most comfortable. Because I have a hard time remembering everything I will be videotaping and audio recording the session so that I can look back at see our conversation. Do you have any questions for me before we start?*

**Question 1:** *What are your favorite types of books?*

**Question 2:** *Have you ever gotten so interested in something that you didn't want to stop reading about it? What was it? What made it interesting?*

**Question 3:** *Can you tell me about time when you read a book and told someone else about it?*

**Question 4:** *Do you enjoy reading books at school during free time? Why?*

**Question 5:** *Who do you know who is a good reader?*

**Question 6:** *What makes \_\_\_\_\_ a good reader?*

**Question 7:** *Do you think you're a good reader? Why?*

**Question 8:** *Do you read books where the story reminds you of yourself or your family? How so?*

**Question 9:** *Do you enjoy talking about what you read with others? Why?*

**Question 10:** *When you have class discussions about books do you like to participate and share your ideas? Do you participate often? Why?*

#### Home Literacy:

**Question 11:** *Do you read when you are at home? What kinds of things? How often?*

**Question 12:** *Who reads things to you at home? What kinds of things? How often?*

**Question 13:** *Do you write when you are at home? What kinds of things? How often? What happens to these pieces of writing?*

**Question 14:** *Do you have a favorite author? Who?*

**Question 15:** *Who helps you write things at home? What kinds of things? How often?*

**Researcher says:** *Complete the following sentence:*

*The best thing about reading is...*

*Fun things about it....funny.*

*The worst thing about read is...*

*When something is sad in books.*

**Sources:** *Reading Miscue Inventory* (Goodmann, Watson, & Burke); *Literacy Assessment: A Handbook of Instruments* (Rhodes)

## APPENDIX C

### Teacher Pre-Survey

*I would like to hear from your perspective how they engage and participate in literature discussions during class, whether in whole group or small group, their in-class reading habits and attitudes, and your GENERAL thoughts about how they are performing in reading.*

**Question 1:** *During whole group literature discussions does \_\_\_\_\_ tend to participate? What are his contributions like (i.e. personal connections, critical of author or other's ideas, connections to other texts)?*

**Question 2:** *During small group literature discussions does \_\_\_\_\_ tend to participate? What are his contributions like (i.e. personal connections, critical of author or other's ideas, connections to other texts)?*

**Question 3:** *Would you say that \_\_\_\_\_ enjoys reading? Why?*

**Question 4:** *When it's time for independent reading what does \_\_\_\_\_ typically do? Do you have to stop him from reading at the end of the period?*

**Question 5:** *What type of material does \_\_\_\_\_ like to read?*

**Question 6:** *Does \_\_\_\_\_ usually get excited when it's time for him to read?*

**Question 7:** *How would you describe \_\_\_\_\_ reading ability? Please don't give specific grade levels or test scores. You can describe this as high, medium, or low reader. Or motivated to read or not motivated to read.*

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Student Interview Protocol**

#### **Interim Interview**

**Question 1:** What was the discussion about last time?

**Question 2:** How did you feel during that conversation?

**Question 3:** Sometimes we got loud, why?

**Question 4:** After we finished our conversation what were you thinking?

**Question 5:** If we could have had the conversation go longer would you have wanted that?

**Question 6:** Let's say trouble wasn't an issue would you want it to continue?

**Question 7:** Do you think our conversation went well?

**Question 8:** If you could change something about the conversation what would it be?

**Question 9:** Do you think you learned anything?



## APPENDIX E

### Student Interview Protocol

#### Post Interview

**Researcher says:** *Now that we've spent some time together I'd like you to talk to me about your experience as a member of our small literature discussion group.*

**Question 1:** *What did you like about being in the group?*

**Question 2:** *What did you not like about being in the group?*

**Question 3:** *How were our group discussions similar or different than how you talk about books in class?*

**Question 4:** *What did you like about the books we read?*

**Question 5:** *What did you not like about the books we read?*

**Question 6:** *If you had the choice would you participate in a group like this again?*

**Question 7:** *How are these books similar or different from books you read in class?*

**Question 8:** *Do you think you're a good reader? Why?*

**Question 9:** *Did any of these books remind you of experiences you've had at school or outside of school?*

**Question 10:** *Did you enjoy talking about what you read with others? Why?*

**Question 11:** *After being a part of this group do you think you participated more in class discussions?*

**Question 12:** *How are these books similar or different than the books you read at home before the literature discussion groups?*

**Question 13:** *Who did you read your books with at home?*

**Question 14:** *What was your favorite part about reading the stories with your family? Why?*

**Question 15:** *Which book did you like the best? Why?*

**Question 16:** *After reading these texts, what was the most important thing you learned?*

**Question 17:** *Is there anything you'd like to learn more about?*

**Sources:** *Reading Miscue Inventory* (Goodmann, Watson, & Burke); *Literacy Assessment: A Handbook of Instruments* (Rhodes)

## APPENDIX F

### Teacher Post Survey

Please complete the following questions for each one of the students that participated in the book club.

**Question 1:** *During whole group literature discussions does \_\_\_\_\_ tend to participate more or less than before? What are his contributions like (i.e. personal connections, critical of author or other's ideas, connections to other texts)?*

**Question 2:** *During small group literature discussions does \_\_\_\_\_ tend to participate more or less than before? What are his contributions like (i.e. personal connections, critical of author or other's ideas, connections to other texts)?*

**Question 3:** *Have you seen any change in \_\_\_\_\_ reading interests?*

**Question 4:** *What effects if any have you seen in \_\_\_\_\_ since participating in this study?*

## APPENDIX G

### Data Collection Calendar

Session #	Date	Book	Event Type	Activity
N/A	03.09.14	N/A	Teacher Pre-Interviews	Sent e-mails with interview questions
N/A	03.10.14	N/A	Student Pre-Interviews	Oral one-on-one interviews
1	03.12.14	N/A	Introduction to Book Club	Discuss protocol for book club
2	03.31.14	Each Kindness	Discussion	N/A
3	04.02.14	Each Kindness	Response	Fotobabble App <i>Giving voice to voiceless</i>
4	04.07.14	The Cart That Carried Martin	Discussion	N/A
5	04.09.14	The Cart That Carried Martin	Response	Video Reflection & Wagon Slogans
*6	04.14.14	Testing the Ice	Discussion	N/A
7	04.16.14	Testing the Ice	Response	Character Analysis
8	04.21.14	Mandela	Discussion	N/A
9	04.23.14	Mandela	Response	Significance of South African Flag
*10	04.28.14	Wings	Discussion	N/A
N/A	05.05.14	N/A	Mid-Interviews (students only)	Oral one-on-one interviews
*11	05.07.14	Jesse Owens Fastest Man Alive	Discussion	N/A
12	05.12.14	Joe Louis	Discussion	N/A
13	05.14.14	Joe Louis	Response	Video Reflection/Discussion
N/A	05.19.14	N/A	Final Session/Celebration Post-Interviews	Oral one-on-one interviews
N/A	05.28.14	N/A	Final Teacher Interviews	Sent e-mail with interview questions

\*Denotes focus events

## APPENDIX H

### Codebook

*Table H.1 Codes Related to the Structure of Discussion Events*

Category	Description of Category
<b>Discussion strand</b>	a collection of sequential conversational turns that are grouped based on topic
<b>Topic</b>	the primary theme or idea being conveyed by the speaker
<b>Launch</b>	the initiating conversational turn of a discussion strand

*Table H.2 Codes Related to Accessing the Discussion*

Category	Description of Category
<b>Attempted Entry</b>	a conversational turn in which a student, who was not already active in the present portion of discussion, attempts to enter the discussion space
<b>Successful Entry Attempt</b>	an entry attempt in which the participant entering the discussion gained the attention of the fellow participants, as denoted by a response from the participant attempting to enter the discussion
<b>Failed Entry Attempt</b>	an attempt to enter the discussion with little to no acknowledgement by the group
<b>Announcement</b>	a moment in the discussion where a student would announce to all of the participants that he had something he would like to say to the group
<b>Inquiry</b>	a moment in the discussion where a student would ask the fellow participants a question as a means of accessing the discussion

*Table H.3 Codes Related to the Connection Between Talk and Text*

Category	Definition of Category
<b>Text-Based Talk</b>	all of the responses where the children were trying to make sense of the stories by focusing on the text and its illustrations
<b>Text-Inspired Talk</b>	all responses that may not be directly related to the text, but whose initial conversational foundations were grounded in the text

*Table H.4 Codes Related to the Types of Student Talk*

Category	Definition of Category
<b>1. Language of text</b>	talk that focused on the actual words of the text
<b>2. Reference to illustrations</b>	talk that focused on the illustrations of the text
<b>3. Background knowledge</b>	responses in which participants <b>contributed information</b> that was not explicitly found in the text. This talk was based on an individual's own understandings of the topic at hand
<b>4. Opinion</b>	Responses in which participants <b>provided value based judgments</b> and/or a personal viewpoint
<b>5. Personal connections</b>	responses in which the participant <b>made explicit connections between the text, topic of discussion, and his own life</b>
<b>6. Inquiry</b>	talk that posed a question
<b>6.a Inquiry-Probing</b>	a question that would get the group thinking beyond the text
<b>6.b Inquiry-Clarifying</b>	questions in which participants were following up on a statement in an effort to gain more clarity for their own understanding
<b>6.c Inquiry-Comprehension</b>	questions used to tests participants' knowledge of the text or the main character in the story

*Table H.5 Codes Related to Argumentation*

Category	Definition of Category
<b>Claim</b>	a statement of belief—stated as a fact
<b>Counterclaim</b>	a statement of belief—stated as fact—that is in conflict with a previous claim
<b>Challenge</b>	a speaker contradicts another speaker, but without generating a counterclaim
<b>Evidence in response</b>	support that is provided by the claim initiator in response to a request for evidence by a fellow discussion participant
<b>Self-provided evidence</b>	support that is provided immediately after a claim is made, without a request from another discussion participant

*Table H.6 Codes Related to Race & Racial Identity*

Category	Definition of Category
<b>Colorblind interpretations</b>	potential racial differences are minimized in favor of universal or human experiences
<b>White supremacy</b>	belief in the supremacy of the White race above all other races or ethnicity
<b>Challenging racial identity</b>	challenging another participant on their belonging to a racial group

## APPENDIX I

### Letter to Student Participants

Dear Students,

What an awesome experience I had in my interactions with you during book club! You taught me so much about what it means to teach and to learn. You pushed and challenged me to be a better teacher and a better learner. I remember instances in which you presented information that I had no idea about. In those moments you inspired me to do my own research and bring it back to the group. In those moments, I remembered being so excited to share things that I had learned due to YOUR ideas and YOUR contributions. We truly made a space where all participants were learners.

There were moments throughout our time together that you made me take a moment to self-reflect on what it meant to be a teacher leader in this group space. I learned when to be quiet and let conversations emerge. I challenged myself to limit my level of “control” to ensure that I left room for you to share your thoughts and viewpoints. What emerged from these moments continues to inspire me. I was so amazed by the ways you interpreted critical issues, and your creative ideas for addressing these issues were so impressive.

I was awestruck with your raw honesty and willingness to unapologetically address issues of race, power, and privilege. There were many moments when I wished the mainstream dialogue about race, power, and privilege would be reflective of our book club sessions.

Each and every session you shared more and more about who YOU were, and I clearly saw how who you were, your cultural background, your value systems, and your worldviews contributed and influenced the ways in which we had discussions. The time I spent with you

convinced more and more that it is so important for more children to have the opportunity to share like this in classroom spaces.

My final call to you is to always let your voice ring out. Never let society's narrow view of you silence you, but continue to strive for justice for ALL. There will be times when you may not feel that your thoughts, your viewpoints, or your worldviews are accepted—even in spaces where you might think they should be (school), but continue to let your light shine. Your short time participating in this book club has contributed more than you might know. Your willingness to share in this critical space will act as an example for many as proof that we cannot continue to marginalize the voices of those who we often categorize as being incapable.

I'm proud of you! Continue to be the counternarrative to the negative story line that is constantly being crafted about young Black males. Your voices MATTER!

Much thanks,

Summer D. Wood

## APPENDIX J

### Memo to In-Service & Pre-Service Teachers

*The teacher froze. Unsure of what was going to be said or done next. The conversation was not supposed to go there. The teacher paralyzed with fear and anxiousness quickly rerouted the discussion to avoid any further discomfort. However, as she began to scan the group of students she noticed she was far more tense than they were.*

Having critical conversations in the classroom setting is often difficult for teachers, both novice and veteran. Being open to creating space for critical conversations means that there is a commitment on the part of the teacher to navigate areas in which they feel most uncomfortable, and to accept the unpredictable nature of discussion flow. The fear of including critical conversations in the classroom becomes increasingly more uncomfortable for teachers when the topic is race.

Let us be realistic! The common chain of events goes something like this: race comes up as a part of a conversation → teacher feels uncomfortable → teacher ends the conversation → topic never reemerges in the classroom. In this moment, the teacher has made a decision that a particular topic cannot be discussed in the classroom space. In an effort to make the classroom a safe place, the teacher has in fact communicated to students that discussions about race are taboo.

One major fear teachers have is they do not believe that students can handle such heavy conversations. As adults we often decide what children can and cannot handle, and in many ways we are wise to do so—after all we are charged with keeping our children safe and doing what is in their best interests. However, when we are determining whether or not to discuss critical topics, such as race, in our classrooms we cannot conflate personal preference with what we believe to be our students' best interests. Comber (2001), makes a strong argument for the inclusion of critical literacy with younger children by stating,



We like to think of young children as purely motivated and as unaware of the power relations at work in the world that produce injustice. This is despite the fact that most young children world-wide are only too aware of what's fair, what's different, who gets the best deal, long before they start school. They learn these lessons about power from everyday life. (p. 169)

Our children are witnessing critical conversations about race unfold on television screens, around the dinner table, and in their communities, yet we silence these exchanges in our classrooms. Teachers will sometimes state that it is the unpredictable nature of these conversations that causes them to refrain from implementing critical conversations about race, power, and privilege. As teachers, we often feel like we can't control what might be said, how someone might feel, or how an individual will react. The question is, how is that any different than any other classroom exchange? Can we really predict the ways in which children will respond to anything we bring up in the classroom? Not necessarily. Therefore, it is not the unpredictability of the conversation that deters teachers; in actuality it is the content.

My belief is that we as teachers have to step into the brave space. This is a space where our own reservations do not hold us back from providing students with opportunities to engage in tough critical dialogue. In the current education landscape, school has become the place where we tint all content with a rose colored hue. We challenge ourselves to find the good in everything. Well, what does this convey to children who experience the realities of injustice every day? What does this communicate to students whose classrooms are sites of marginalization for them?

Critical literacy is a heart work. It is a work that requires the teacher to hold certain values and understandings about the world. This is not a work that can be boiled down into a

curriculum and then shared with all as “the” guide for implementation. A teacher committed to the work of critical literacy must acknowledge that 1) there is injustice in our world, 2) this injustice is woven into the fabric of our lives; and 3) all individuals should have the right to be aware of and take action toward making this world a more just place—no matter what their age. We as educators must view ourselves as conduits for change and for justice. It is not our objective to ascribe our values onto our students, but rather we should provide space for students to critically examine the world around them and see the world through lenses of justice.