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Liberating Dialogue: Literature Discussions of Sociopolitical Texts Among African American Students in an Inner-City School

Elizabeth Kearney
National Louis University

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LIBERATING DIALOGUE:
LITERATURE DISCUSSIONS OF SOCIOPOLITICAL TEXTS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN AN INNER-CITY SCHOOL

Elizabeth Kearney-Mulhern
Reading and Language Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education

National College of Education
National Louis University
September, 2016
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Education in the National College of Education

Elizabeth Kearney-Mulhern
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ABSTRACT

Although the Common Core State Standards have the potential to guide teachers toward literacy practices that emphasize authentic literature and its use in discussions, high-stakes testing associated with the CCSS has prompted some educators to implement curricula that mirrors the tests. Standards that address authentic literature and discussions are often pushed to the background. Teachers now have access to a plethora of quality young adult novels with sociopolitical themes; that is, themes like gender, culture, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, poverty, racism, oppression, and peace. Discussions about such themes can lead to liberating dialogue, which presupposes social action (Shor & Freire, 1987). The current case study utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis power (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2004) to uncover the critical talk of five African American eighth grade struggling readers, one male and four females during discussions about sociopolitical texts. Over a three-month period, 22 discussions were audiotaped and analyzed using Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy. Analyses revealed the students spoke critically about the text approximately 25% of the time with the talk being distributed somewhat evenly across the four dimensions. Strategies that promoted critical talk are discussed as well as the implications of the teacher’s role as the More Knowledgeable Other. Ultimately, this research shows examples of the liberating dialogue that can occur when students who struggle with reading are afforded the literacy opportunities of reading authentic literature, partaking in discussion around such texts, and receiving the guidance of a More Knowledgeable Other.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the inspiration and support of so many people. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my co-chairs, Dr. Susan McMahon and Dr. Ruth Quiroa for their constant guidance and for sharing their wealth of knowledge and insight about children, reading, and thinking with me. I am also most grateful to my committee members, Dr. Sophie Degener and Dr. Terry Jo Smith, for their ongoing support and encouragement as well as Dr. Donna Ogle for her advice. My most sincere gratitude to the principal and eighth grade language arts teacher of Jones Academy for opening their hearts and school to this work, and to the students, who allowed me to learn about abled-ness and prejudice with them. Finally, I am so blessed to have had the constant support and encouragement of my patient and loving husband Lawrence, and my parents, James and Carol Kearney, who raised me to believe I was capable of all things.
This work is dedicated to my brilliant daughter Rachel, whose love of learning is inspirational and whose ability to overcome obstacles amazes me daily.
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How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?

-E. M. Forster
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background and Statement of the Problem

Historically, schools have not been places where students are encouraged to think, discuss, and question. Even many of the “best schools” in our country do not employ curricula or practices that encourage students to “think deeply, to question fundamental social premises, or to discuss real issues with one another” (Peterson, 1999, p. xi). Therefore, it is no surprise that such practices are almost nonexistent in the schools of children from the most disenfranchised sections of our population (Kozol, 2007).

Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2000, schools across the nation, especially those in high poverty areas with large percentages of ELLs and students with special needs, quickly scrambled to find ways to help students perform better on state assessments for fear of their doors being closed forever, fear that is not unfounded: Large metropolitan public school systems such as New York City Public Schools and Chicago Public Schools have recently used school closings as a method for improving school quality (Chen, 2016). The problem is that the strategies these threatened schools usually employ often leave students further and further behind, given that they generally require little thinking and mimic test-taking behaviors such as filling in bubbles. As Alfie Kohn (2011) said, “The rich get richer and the poor get worksheets.”

As an educator for almost three decades, I feel disheartened and frustrated by the current conditions by which public school teachers and students are confined. In my work with inner-city, struggling students, my role has gone from that of a professional allowed to make educated and informed decisions about what works best with my students to a
teacher of segmented skills, or worse, script reader. Recently, I was told to analyze reading test data so that I could teach the isolated skills (i.e., main idea, sequence) on which my students scored lowest. I was also handed a scripted math curriculum, and told to follow it with fidelity. The curriculum needed heavy modification to meet the varied needs of my students, but to make those modifications, I had to defy the authority of my principal. These types of curricular situations discourage teachers and lead to inadequate learning experiences for students.

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts by forty states (Academic Benchmarks, 2016) has ushered in a new educational era – one that expects students to be engaged in activities that foster the development of their thinking. The nation is currently reaping the results of an overemphasis on phonics and fluency promoted by the National Reading Panel Report in 2000 (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The ACT Organization found that almost half of 2005 ACT-tested graduates were not ready for college-level reading (ACT, 2006). Literacy experts have proclaimed the need for reading to be seen as a complex process which deserves comprehension to be the focus from the beginning of instruction (Pressley, Duke, Fingeret, Halliday, Hilden, et al., 2009).

Prompted by a perceived need that schools should focus on preparing students for both college and future careers, the National Governors’ Association developed the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which concentrate on developing students’ abilities to think critically and comprehend from the moment they enter school (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). With the new standards in place, teachers are no longer expected to
focus solely on low-level skills. Rather, they are expected to teach language arts through complex texts; that is, books that challenge students in terms of relationships, richness, structure, style, vocabulary, cultural content, and purpose. Further, this instruction should focus on instructing students to analyze the interactions between individuals and events in narrative texts, evaluate the arguments and claims in informational texts, and assess whether the reasoning is sound across genres. It should also include collaborative discussions, focusing on posing questions, acknowledging new information, and modifying perspectives. This is certainly a change from the mind-numbing practices of filling in blanks and bubbles prevalent under NCLB. However, the Common Core State Standards have brought with them a focus on high-stakes assessment. The PARCC and Smarter Balance Assessments, which are aligned with the CCSS, have been adopted by most states to demonstrate students’ learning of the standards. These assessments are primarily a multiple choice format. Such assessments have limited worth in assessing the thinking promoted by the CCSS. Since assessment drives instruction, the adoption of these assessments has the ability to further restrict curricula to activities that focus on multiple-choice thinking.

It is my sincere hope that the CCSS prompt philosophies of learning that are student-centered and promote thinking, discussing, and creating in all schools, rather than simply preparing students for assessments. While this sort of student-centered education is appropriate for all children, it is essential for disadvantaged children (Kohn, 2012).
**Critical Thinking**

Although it is a respectable notion to carefully and purposefully design curricula which concentrate on those standards that encourage students to develop thinking skills such as analyzing, interpreting, assessing, evaluating, and arguing, it is not enough. Access to reading and writing does not automatically translate into empowerment (Comber & Nixon, 1999). Educators have a responsibility to encourage students’ development of their critical thinking skills by engaging with them in activities that cause students to question their ideas and values, to search out where these ideas come from, and to identify whose interests they serve (Peterson, 1999). This is real critical thinking, the kind of thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in knowledge without a fear of the risk. Instruction that enables students to think about equity and to question power structures is necessary to empower all students to work toward a more just and equitable world (Freire, 1993). My definition of a truly democratic education would involve the application of the CCSS to a curriculum grounded in critical literacy pedagogy.

As a literacy educator, I find helping students see themselves as change agents in their world a daunting responsibility. At times, it involves helping them become aware of oppression in their own lives and the inequities that are part of their society. This can involve serious, even uncomfortable discussions. However, such conversations can serve as “safe spaces” where students can analyze the inequities that exist in their own lives before encountering them first-hand (Brooks & Hampton, 2005). They can also serve as safe spaces to analyze the inequities students have already experienced. Ultimately, teachers can assist students in understanding that society is an ever-changing
phenomenon, one in which they can have a positive influence (Schiro, 2012); that is, through dialogue, teachers and students can “reflect on their reality as they make it and remake it” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 3). What an important and exciting responsibility it is to help students understand their ability to change their world! Of course, it would be much simpler for teachers to believe they have done their jobs if their students meet standards as evidenced by adequate scores on standardized tests. But as long as children are living in a society in which oppression still exists and breeds inequity to further the status quo, teachers must see their responsibilities as much larger than ensuring students pass tests.

The Importance of Talk

At issue, is the question of what constitutes learning. How can educators work to make sure students can analyze, interpret, and evaluate? How can we ensure that their thinking develops? These tasks begin with talk. This section describes the importance of oral language and the place of talk in most classrooms today.

Literacy is the ability to work with language on paper. Children’s oral language skills serve as the foundation for literacy development (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2013). In other words, reading and writing begin with talk. Words on paper only make sense if oral language is developed. Therefore, teachers who consciously provide time within the curriculum for students to talk as part of a comprehensive literacy program realize that it is vital for students’ reading and writing development.

Talk also leads to deeper thinking. Interaction with others awakens and utilizes the cognitive processes necessary for deep level understanding. Vygotsky (1986) notes that, “Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them”
(p. 218). Therefore, if we want to deepen our understanding about something, we should talk about it. When we talk, we share our thoughts, but as our thoughts become words, we are actually in the process of constructing meaning. Our thoughts find “reality and form” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 219). As people respond to others’ words, understanding might change. Johnston (2004) agrees with Vygotsky when he says, “Talk is not just representational (though it is that), it is also constitutive. It actually creates realities and invites identities” (p. 9). Therefore, literature discussions are not just sites where participants share their thoughts; rather they may also be places where new thoughts are born, knowledge is constructed, thinking develops, identities are formed, and students begin to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) in ways that empower and can lead to social justice.

Dialogue is more than simply talk, rather, it is the means by which one achieves significance as a human being. It is the way people try to make sense of the world (Freire, 1993). Liberating dialogue takes the idea of dialogue a step further, beyond a sole focus on identity and making sense of the world, as it presupposes social action. Liberating dialogue is also a challenge to the existing dominating mass culture (Shor & Freire, 1987).

Unfortunately, schools in low-income areas serving mostly children of color that most urgently and critically need changes in the way students are taught reading, and particularly comprehension, generally allow the least amount of talk. These schools often have inexperienced, unprepared teachers who are expected to use counterproductive teaching methods focused on the silent practice of rote skills (Darling-Hammond, 2004). They often operate within the banking philosophy described by Freire (1993), namely,
that teachers are experts who fill the empty vessels of their students with information. Students then prove they “know” the material through their performances on written tests (Haberman, 2010). The recent importance placed on standardized test scores under NCLB intensifies these teaching methods. Worst of all, students in such schools can actually be “successful” without being thoughtful (Kozol, 2007), and when their standardized test scores go up, the aforementioned methods are praised, creating a continuing cycle. True learning occurs when students interpret and integrate new experiences, based on what they already know and understand (Bruer, 1994). This situation of passive students recording and replicating what teachers tell them does not reflect learning.

The effects of a long-held reverence for “functional literacy” by people in power is evidenced in a strong emphasis on reading instruction as basic decoding and encoding skills, rather than a literacy curriculum concerned with independent, analytical and deconstructive skills that prepare students for the needs of America’s labor force (McLaren, 2003; Apple, 2005). Interestingly, the continuing growth of high-technology jobs in the U.S. is set against a paid labor market that will become increasingly dominated by low paying, repetitive positions that do not require high levels of literacy. In other words, someone must wash hotel floors, give consumers their change, and serve meals to the public. As an educator who identifies with critical theorists, my aim is to be part of a movement that identifies the link between poor literacy education and poor children, and demonstrate that student-centered literacy methods encourage critical thinking and can empower disenfranchised students. All students have the right to an education that honors them as thinking individuals whose futures are filled with choices.
Thus, quality literature discussions should not be reserved for high-achieving students in high-achieving schools. In order to ascertain a future America free of oppression, with increased equality, and quality literacy instruction, changes must take place in schools situated in highly diverse, low-income areas, and with students who find reading difficult. Moreover, such quality literacy instruction must include time for dialogue. As James Paul Gee (2008) notes, “But what about the question as to whether literacy can be used as a tool for liberation, or are we endlessly trapped in replicating the given social status quo through enacting the social practices that instantiate it?” (p. 49).

Using Novels with Sociopolitical Themes as a Basis for Liberating Dialogue

As a literacy educator, my hope is not only that literature will be understood and enjoyed by students, but that their thinking about themes and topics within the text will be liberating. Freire defines liberating dialogue as that which leads to the remaking of reality (Shor & Freire, 1987). Glasser (1941) states that when one thinks critically, s/he “reconstructs one’s patterns of beliefs.” *This* type of critical thinking is liberating as it moves beyond examination to reconstruction. In a classroom, it can make itself known through dialogue which demonstrates changed thinking or/deeper understanding. When participants respond critically during literature discussions and begin to think in liberating ways, seeds of change are often planted within the hearts and minds of students; that is, students grow in the belief that they are capable of “alter(ing) grounds upon which life is lived” (Giroux, 2010, p. 15) and exercising the kind of courage needed to change the social order where necessary (McLaren, 2003).

Liberating dialogue can evolve in a number of ways in a classroom. One option is to discuss problematic themes from students’ cultures. In this case, the teacher researches
her students’ cognitive and political levels to see what type of themes might be of interest to explore reality (Shor & Freire, 1987). From a literary perspective, I believe this method can be powerful. Currently, there is an abundance of quality, complex, sociopolitical texts available for young adults which explore issues such as gender, culture, race, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, oppression, and peace. Matching a sociopolitical text to the cognitive and political awareness of students can result in liberating dialogue. For example, *Kira-Kira*, the 2005 Newbery Medal winner, is told from the point of view of a young Japanese American girl growing up in the southern United States during the 1950s and 1960s, and recounts her experiences with poverty and prejudice. Reading such a text with these themes can serve to prompt liberating dialogue with students who have a cognitive and political awareness of poverty and/or prejudice.

In contrast to the early 1990’s when the practice of literature discussions was on the rise, today’s teachers who wish to invite liberating dialogue into their classrooms have access to a wealth of options in terms of novels with sociopolitical themes. Based on my unpublished analysis of themes presented in Newbery Medal and Honor books published during the 1990s, only 54% of these texts presented complex social and political issues, while 72% did so in 2000 to 2016. Further, while many Newbery award books published in the 1990s that can be categorized as presenting sociopolitical themes included only one sociopolitical theme, 38% of the novels with these themes from the past decade actually presented more than one social or political theme or topic. This analysis shows that while the “best texts” often used during what might be considered the literature circle era of the 1990s primarily concentrated on identity and multiculturalism, the “best texts” of today add themes of abled-ness (Curwood, 2013) and gender issues.
(Rockefeller, 2007; Wickens, 2011), and are thematically layered and complex. Because of their themes, such texts with sociopolitical themes can be a rich, thought-provoking source of a critical literacy curriculum. They can serve as an effective foundation from which students can participate in the process of self-understanding and envisioning the world as a more just place for all (Giroux, 2005). At times, reading literature with characters who face sociopolitical issues allows students to identify with these protagonists and relate their experiences to their own lives. As noted by Bishop (1990), such books can serve as mirrors to see their own reflections, or as windows onto lives, experiences, and perspectives different from their own. Reading about others often enables students to grapple with issues as they present themselves in their own lives. From there, students can begin to question and complicate these life issues in order to ultimately engage in transformative ways with the world (Kress, 2007). Because of their qualitatively complex textual features, many of the books with sociopolitical themes also meet the Common Core State Standards’ (CCSS) criteria for complex texts. Therefore, while such books are a fitting choice to ignite liberating dialogue, many also align with the CCSS’ recommendation for a wider use of complex text in an effort to prepare students for college and careers.

The Role of the More Knowledgeable Other in Discussion

While discussions are vital for liberating thinking to occur, student-led literature circles may not always promote the kinds of deep discussions necessary for this to occur when students are dealing with novels with sociopolitical themes (Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011). At times, youth may lack the necessary experience and background knowledge required for in-depth talk about the themes and topics in such texts. Many books also
present themes that are new to students, or about which students may have limited or stereotypical ideas. Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2011) found that teachers have difficulty critically engaging students in these texts without teacher guidance. Therefore, any research investigating the role such texts can play on the development of students’ thinking related to sociopolitical issues should also consider the role of the teacher; that is, changes in thinking, particularly that related to the sometimes sensitive and/or politically charged issues that may emerge in such texts, may need to be supported, enhanced, and monitored by teachers. The goal is to empower students in productive ways; therefore, the teacher’s role must also be carefully considered and described.

Vygotsky (1978) stated that, “…human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life around them” (p. 88). In his sociocultural theory, all members of a group work together in an apprenticeship model in order to construct meaning. Here, a novice or novices work with a More Knowledgeable other in a Zone of Proximal Development, or an area in which the novice can benefit from the guidance of an expert. A More Knowledgeable Other refers to someone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept. The More Knowledgeable Other may be a teacher, parent, another adult, or a peer who understands where the learner is in the developmental process (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990). In regards to literature discussions about sociopolitical themes, the presence of a More Knowledgeable Other can be effective in confirming a student’s thinking, challenging it, expanding it, or steering the discussion in a direction that students may not have otherwise gone (Vygotsky, 1978).
Teacher-Students and Student-Teachers

Freire (1993) defines true education as freedom, and notes that education is a process in which individuals partake in critical dialogue aimed at transforming their worlds. Thus, in this study, I will attempt to create safe spaces where students and teachers “develop a shared understanding of reality that reflects all members’ contributions” (Spears-Bunton & Powell, 2008, p. 50). Within a Critical framework, it is necessary to recognize the fluctuation of roles that occurs during learning activities. In justice-oriented classrooms, teachers and students take on the identities of teacher-students and student-teachers (Freire, 1993); that is, the students and the teacher all partake in learning and teaching that occur. This study will explore the role of the MKO within the context of justice-oriented activities.

The Purpose of the Study

Literature discussions about complex sociopolitical themes present in children’s literature are sites where students can grow in their understanding of texts, themselves, their places in society, and their abilities to change society (Brooks, 2004, 2006). Discussion around such texts provides opportunities for conflicts, “resulting in ruptures releasing potential and promise for change” (Blackburn & Clark, 2011, p. 26). One vital goal of this research is to uncover and analyze these moments with students our educational system has had little faith in – African American students living in a low socioeconomic area who struggle with reading.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to describe eighth grade students’ thinking about issues of social justice evidenced in their oral responses to literature.
These students will participate in a semester-long literacy unit focused on discussions about complex texts with sociopolitical themes. The research questions are as follows:

- When discussing books with sociopolitical themes, what issues and ideas are expressed as related to social justice (i.e., gender, culture, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, poverty, racism, oppression, and peace)?
- In what ways does the presence of a More Knowledgeable Other affect the issues and ideas that are expressed as related to social justice (i.e., gender, culture, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, poverty, racism, oppression, and peace)?
- How do middle school students perceive literature discussions about complex sociopolitical text?

**The Value of This Research**

The findings of this study offer ideas about how a specific type of literature impacts student thinking in relationship to sociopolitical themes, while also revealing important literacy practices involving discussion for marginalized middle school students. It also demonstrates ways to ensure that such students are empowered to think critically. Thus, it is my goal to study alternatives to the literacy practices common in schools serving disenfranchised and struggling student populations, practices which give teachers the control, allow students little time to talk, and result in disengaged students who rarely view their educational experiences as empowering. All students deserve meaningful curricula and literacy practices that encourage critical thinking that can lead to empowerment.
CHAPTER TWO

The Review of Literature

Introduction

This study aims to explore the discourse that occurs during literature discussions about sociopolitical text by African American middle school students who struggle with reading. It attempts to offer literature discussions as an alternative to more teacher-directed practices for marginalized groups. Both sociocultural theory and critical literacy theory apply to this research. This chapter investigates relevant research as it applies to classroom talk within both a sociocultural and critical literacy theoretical frameworks. A history of classroom talk is discussed, as well as the possible positioning of classroom talk within this new educational era guided by the Common Core State Standards. Finally, a description of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis and how they relate to this research is provided.

The Importance of Talk from a Sociocultural Theoretical Perspective

A sociocultural view of learning argues that society and culture shape cognition, and that children grow into the intellectual life around them (Vygotsky, 1986). According to this perspective, discussion is an integral part of any learning community since intellectual growth is dependent upon language use in social contexts. It is through language use in social contexts that learners construct and eventually internalize meanings (McMahon & Raphael, 1997, Vygotsky, 1986). Within these social contexts, the More Knowledgeable Other plays a significant role, that of guiding others through appropriate tasks to optimize learning. Further, language use in social contexts plays a
part in the construction of participants’ identities. As individuals participate in social contexts, they actually construct who they are (Bakhtin, 1981).

**Discussion as a stimulator of intellectual growth.** Vygotsky (1986) believed the following fact to be of great importance, “Thought development is determined by language, i.e., by the linguistic tools of thought and by the sociocultural experiences of the child” (p. 94). If Vygotsky is correct, the power of discussion within educational settings cannot be underestimated. If thought and language are connected in this way, when students discuss literature, they are not simply sharing their thoughts, rather, thoughts come into existence through words that are spoken. In other words, thought is not just expressed through speech, it is realized. Vygotsky believed that “a thought may be compared to a cloud shedding a shower of words” (p.251). To take this analogy a step further, just as a rain shower is collected by the oceans and the earth, individuals’ words are assimilated by others during discussions. Just as that same water evaporates and brings the water into the cycle again, others share their thoughts, growing and expanding upon the first shared words, and the cycle continues. Vygotsky terms this type of learning process *internalization*, and the more opportunities students have for using language in this way, the greater the development of higher order thinking (McMahon & Raphael, 1997).

To accentuate the active and reciprocal nature of this process, Leont’ev (1981) and Bakhtin (1981) refer to it using the term appropriation, that is an active, continuous mental work (Cazden, 2001). Unlike physical tools, which produce a change in the object toward which they are directed, language is reciprocal in that it may also be inwardly directed with the goal of self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1997). Through discussion with
others, the speaker sees the value of how her partial perspective may appear from the perspective of another. At times, this might be unsettling, at which point the speaker reconsiders her own point of view. She then “absorbs and works with language, putting it to use, then interrogating it through interpretation, analysis, reflection, and revision” (Landay, 2004, p. 111). Thus, real learning occurs when students are given the opportunity in class to share their views, to listen to the views of others, and to reconfigure their own perspectives.

**Discussion as a creator of identity.** As people participate in social contexts, such as literature discussion groups, they construct a sense of self (McMahon, 1997b). Bakhtin (1981) explains the process in this way, “The ideological becoming of a human being…is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others” (p. 341); that is, when engaging in conversations with others, individuals choose the words they wish to appropriate from others, attach their meaning to those words, and choose the stances they wish to take in relationship to them. It is through this choice-making process, that identities are formed (Bakhtin, 1981; Landay, 2004). In literature-based discussions, as students talk about the themes and topics in the text, they actually partake in the construction of their own identities and the identities of others.

Literature discussions provide opportunities for students to question the authoritative discourses of teachers, text, and society in order to form their own internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin, 1981). Authoritative discourse is that of those whose authority has already been established in the past (i.e., religious dogma or scientific “truth”). Internally persuasive discourse is that which is “half ours and half someone
else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 346). It is only half ours because this discourse did not emerge from ourselves; rather it is discourse that we have appropriated.

In classrooms where the teacher is the authority who transfers fixed knowledge to students, children are expected to absorb and believe “preset formulations” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 16) spoken by the teacher. As previously stated, this type of pedagogy is most common in urban schools, especially in schools comprised of children of color who are also poor (Haberman, 2010; Kohn, 2011). Also common in these schools are practices that give text the authoritative power. When students spend their days reading and finding the right answers, the message conveyed is that there is only one answer, and it is in the text. What the reader thinks about the text is not relevant, nor is it valued.

Educational practices such as these create individuals who believe what society has already shown them - their thoughts do not matter, their opinions do not count, and their language is inferior. The recreation of inequality continues (Apple, 2004). This kind of teaching mimics the historical practices of the leaders of the slavery movement in the United States in the early nineteenth century; that is, keeping a section of the population ignorant so they better fulfill the economic needs of others within that society. In the same manner, it does not behoove the current dominant culture to teach children of color to think critically because this might upset the existing economic and political inequalities enjoyed by the dominant culture. While education should be a practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to understand and explore what it means to be a citizen in a democracy (Giroux, 2010), the aforementioned practices reduce education to filling students with just enough “knowledge” to keep them in their current social, economic, and political positions (Freire, 1993).
In contrast to practices that give teachers and text authoritative power, the mere practice of literature discussions in a classroom acknowledges that the teacher and text are not the sole holders of authority. The use of dialogue as a practice within the literacy curriculum assumes the classroom is an environment where knowledge is constructed by many, not transferred by one (Shor & Freire, 1987). When sociopolitical topics such as gender, culture, race, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, oppression, and peace are discussed, students are given opportunities to remake authority. They are given the opportunity to consider authoritative discourses and create their own. This is quite a lofty event. They are considering and questioning “truths” of the past and choosing their “take” on them. Again, this is key to the formation of identity. What we hear, what we think, what we believe, and what we say – this is who we are.

James Gee (2008) speaks of the strong link between identity and dialogue. Referring to dialogue as discourse, he compares it to an ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to “take on a particular role that others will recognize” (p. 537). Primary discourses are acquired through socialization within the family. In other words, a person’s identity is first shaped by the family into which she is born; whereas, secondary discourses are acquired through socialization within other institutions. Thus, by simply attending school, a student is involved in the acquisition of a secondary discourse: that of a student. True literacy, Gee argues, involves control over these secondary discourses. However, because all literacy tools are not equally valued, when a non-mainstream student attempts to master a dominant secondary discourse that looks very different from her own, conflict can occur. Because secondary discourses are acquired rather than learned, Gee argues
that classrooms should provide natural settings which include modeling and authentic practice of secondary discourse, given that the direct teaching of secondary discourses will probably not prove successful.

For non-mainstream students, literature discussions can provide these naturalistic language settings with opportunities to acquire secondary discourses, and more importantly, the possibility to challenge the dominant discourse. The next section further explores the idea that talk *always* involves power, and that talk is the best way in which to consider and challenge existing power structures.

**The Importance of Talk from a Critical Literacy Theoretical Perspective**

The previous sections explained the importance of talk from a sociocultural perspective. While sociocultural research attends to the relationship between literacy and identity, it does not usually focus on the conflict and tension that often arise in such identity formation (Lewis & Moje, 2003). Critical literacy realizes and emphasizes that education must take into account the struggles involved in identity formation for students, especially students of color. From a critical literacy perspective, education should value the tools and discourses of students from non-dominant discourse(s), offer naturalistic settings for other discourses to be attained, and purposefully and consistently address issues of power and agency.

From this perspective, the personal is considered to be political; that is, through literacy activities, a student can develop a self-understanding that can lead to action against oppressive practices. It is a process in which students and teachers participate together in literacy practices that push them to grow in understanding of themselves, society, and society’s view of them, as well as work toward self-actualization against
oppression (Clem, 2005; hooks, 2010). Within a critical literacy framework, the teacher is not seen as the ultimate source of knowledge. However, as Giroux (1993) explains, it is not so much that the teacher’s authority is lessened; rather, it is “transformed into an emancipatory practice that provides the conditions for us to speak and be taken seriously” (p. 369). In other words, the teacher sets the tone for working side by side with students to deepen understandings about racism, sexism, class discrimination, and other related issues. The teacher should speak self-reflectively about these issues. In fact, Giroux (1993) speaks to the teacher’s role as follows:

I can speak self-reflectively from the politics of my own location about the issues of racism and sexism as ethical and political, and public issues which implicate in their web of social relations of all those who inhabit public life, though from different spheres of privilege and subordination. Such a position reconstructs teachers as intellectuals whose own narratives must be situated and examined as discourses that are open, partial, and subject to ongoing debate and revision (p. 369).

Within a Critical Literacy perspective, students are seen as gendered, raced, classed, and of a certain age, sexual identity, and abled-ness, rather than as neutral beings (Rockhill, 1993). These identity markers are recognized as variables in how students view the world, and literacy activities. Therefore, such identity markers are considered when organizing literacy work. Students are also acknowledged as human beings who have had experiences with media, family, community, and prior schooling, all which have shaped their knowledge, beliefs, values, and identities.
In addition, students are not seen as passive recipients of knowledge within this framework; rather they are viewed as co-constructors of knowledge whose voices are valued as much as that of the teacher’s. They are “active and critical subjects who work collaboratively to construct historically - and politically - sensitive analyses of existing social practices in order to transform them” (McLaren, 2003, p. 251). From a critical literacy perspective, talk within a literature discussion should consciously attend to issues of identity, power, and agency. It should address the conflict and tensions that arise as identities are formed in activities such as literature discussions. In other words, it is impossible for students to understand who they are without also understanding who they are in relation to others: identity is contextual.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) have synthesized critical literacy into four dimensions that can help teachers gauge the amount and type of critical talk occurring in their classrooms. When students Disrupt the Commonplace, they see the everyday through new lenses. They problematize subjects and understand existing knowledge as a historical product (Shor, 1987). When students Interrogate Multiple Viewpoints, they stand in the shoes of others in order to reflect on multiple and contradictory perspectives (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000; Nieto, 1999). When students Focus on Sociopolitical Issues, they attempt to understand sociopolitical systems and the unequal power relationships that exist within them (Boozer, Maras, & Brummett, 1999). Finally, when students Take Action and Promote Social Justice, they achieve social justice through the following: engaging in praxis- reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1972), using language to exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question practices of privilege and injustice (Comber, 2001), and challenging and
redefining cultural borders, encouraging students to be border crossers in order to understand others, and creating borderlands with diverse cultural resources (Giroux, 1993). Thinking about critical literacy using this framework can help teachers set critical literacy goals within their classrooms and implement activities toward those ends.

Research methods that combine both a sociocultural perspective and a critical perspective to analyze literature discussions consider student talk on many levels. This type of research realizes that talk is configured, as well as restrained by the personal, social, cultural, historical and political. It attempts to explain the “dynamic and dialogic power relationships between the social and the individual, the global and the local, the institutional and the everyday” (Lewis & Moje, 2003, p. 23). Ultimately, it works to facilitate deeper understanding of how teachers might engage students in literacy talk that is meaningful and empowering – literacy talk that is liberating.

A Brief History of Classroom Talk

Although the use of discussion-based emphasis and approaches is a high predictor of literacy achievement, most classrooms are dominated by teacher-directed, didactic talk. Observing 64 middle and high school classrooms, Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) found that fewer than 2 of every 60 minutes is devoted to open discussion. Further, this classroom talk often follows a distinct discourse pattern known as IRE, or Initiation-Response-Evaluation (Mehan, 1979; Cazden, 2001). It begins with a question posed by the teacher, followed by a response from a student, and then an evaluation by the teacher. This discourse pattern is eventually expected by students, so
that they dutifully answer questions posed by the teacher, who knows the answers to the questions before she asks. In this context, the teacher holds both the knowledge and the power, and students’ thoughts, opinions, and queries are often not valued.

**Talk in schools of marginalized populations.** Teacher-dominated talk is even more prevalent in inner-city, underperforming schools, which are often attended by children of color (Applebee et al.; Kohn, 1999; Kozol, 2007). In the name of “raising standards,” the teaching of students of color is often reduced to drill and practice exercises (Kohn, 1999) and multiple-choice test-taking practice (Kozol, 2007), giving little time and attention to student talk.

**Talk and struggling readers.** As is the case with English Learners, students who see themselves as struggling with literacy often talk less in literacy-focused discussions. Leigh Hall (in press) found that when these students consistently use discussion as a strategy consistently, they are able to grow in their identity as readers, as well as in the amount of contributions they make in discussions.

**The Emergence of Literature Discussions during the Late Twentieth Century**

Literature discussions evolved during an era which began to understand the benefits of students making meaning together. As the work of Vygotsky (1978) became more widely published, research in sociocultural theory began to show how social learning precedes individual learning. A number of different types of literature discussions emerged during the last two decades of the twentieth century, each having its own take on characteristics, such as the role of the teacher. Generally speaking, there is a relationship between the role of the teacher and the stance taken toward the text in the discussion. Different reader stances include efferent, aesthetic, (Rosenblatt, 1978) and
critical-analytical (Wade, Thompson, & Watkins, 1994). An efferent stance refers to a text-centered stance while an aesthetic stance refers to a more reader-centered focus. A critical-analytical focus refers to a stance that questions the text in search of underlying arguments, assumptions, worldviews, or beliefs. Discussions in which students have the most control, often referred to as literature circles, happen in contexts that foster a more expressive or aesthetic stance toward the text, whereas discussions in which the teacher holds most of the control generally happen in contexts that foster a more efferent stance toward the text (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). Finally, discussions in which students share control, tend to give prominence to a critical-analytic stance. In these discussions, teachers often have control over text and topic while students control turn-taking and interpretation of text. Rosenblatt sees the role of the teacher as a catalyst for discussion rather than the authoritative voice in the classroom. The teacher’s voice is “at once that of a shepherd and of a partner participant” (Roen & Karolides, 2005, p. 60).

It is important to note that Rosenblatt asserts that much of reading falls in the middle of the continuum (Roen & Karolides, 2005). A reader can react both cognitively and with emotion to almost any text. Generally speaking, however, certain types of literature discussions have been associated with certain stances. The following sections describe approaches that fall into each category.

**Literature discussions promoting an aesthetic stance.** The following types of literature discussions take an aesthetic stance toward reading. They tend to focus on the reader’s interpretation of the text.

**Grand Conversations.** In 1989, Eeds and Wells published their findings on fifth and sixth grade literature study groups. While teachers were part of the groups, they
were encouraged to be fellow participants rather than comprehension monitors; that is, teachers worked to be “other readers with whom to talk” (p. 28) rather than authorities on meaning. Eeds and Wells found that students were capable of sophisticated literate behaviors such as changing their views based on others’ interpretations and evaluating the text as literature. Further, they found a link between what they thought to be high quality literature and insightful discussions.

**Literate Communities.** In 1990, Short and Pierce published *Talking about Books* offering guidelines for meaningful literature discussions as opposed to promoting a dictated program. They advise readers of key factors such as discussion group size, amount of teacher participation, and selection of text, emphasizing the importance of the teacher-student relationship. Of particular note is their discussion on ways the teacher helps students to be more autonomous as literate members of a community. Further, their suggestions for other key factors, such as discussion group size, revolve around making decisions based on the goals of each specific situation.

**Book Clubs.** In 1997, McMahon and Raphael published research on student-led book discussions in *The Book Club Connection*. Working from a sociocultural perspective, the researchers’ primary goal for the program was to “create a context within which students could engage in meaningful conversations, on their own, about the texts they read” (p. 4). The program consists of the four following components: community share (i.e., whole-class setting), reading, writing, and book club (i.e., small student-led discussion groups). Their research was conducted with a variety of student groups including early elementary students, English Learners, and special education students. They found that all students were able to hold coherent thematic discussions
without teacher involvement (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). In 2004, Book Club Plus was published (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, George, Hasty, and Highfield, 2004), adapting the Book Club framework to address new problems of practice that emerged with the onset of standards-based education. It also addressed the need for students in primary grades to receive instruction at the word level. Still maintaining its core components, the new framework made connections with the practice of guided reading and literacy in the content areas. Ultimately, Book Club Plus provided a comprehensive primary literacy curriculum in which to embed the Book Club program.

**Literature Circles.** In 1994, Daniels introduced the idea of assigning roles to students during literature discussions. In his book, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*, Daniels says that student role sheets are the most important ingredient of a literature circle, other than the kids or books; however, he admits in a later book (2002) that role sheets may be abandoned by students well versed in discussing literature, and that they are most useful when students are learning how to discuss literature. The goal of literature circles is to “have natural and sophisticated discussions of literature” (p. 100).

**Literature discussions promoting an efferent stance.** The following types of discussions promote an efferent stance toward reading. The concentration is on understanding text information through conversation.

**Instructional Conversations.** Instructional Conversation is a methodology proposed by Tharp & Gallimore (1991) intended to promote learning through conversation. The teacher’s role is to strategically prod or challenge at times, and to keep quiet at other times. Important features here include: conversations about topics
which are interesting, engaging, and relevant; a discernible focus; high levels of participation without dominance by one individual, particularly the teacher; and engagement in extended discussions between students and teachers (Goldenberg, 1992/1993). Instructional Conversations seem to be suited toward certain instructional goals, including analyses of literary themes and understanding of complex concepts (Goldenberg, 1991).

**Questioning the Author.** The instructional intervention known as Questioning the Author focuses on figuring out what the author of a text is trying to say while stressing the role of the reader as the author’s critic (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1996). Although the teacher plays a dominant role here, the emphasis is on creating participatory conversation rather than an IRE pattern of discourse. First, the teacher provides a thought-provoking passage of text and designates stopping points. Students read the text, asking themselves questions such as, “What is the author trying to say? Is the author being clear?” Finally, the teacher leads a discussion around students’ responses to the questions. In a fourth grade social studies class, the researchers found that the use of this method decreased the quantity of teacher talk, while simultaneously increasing the quality of the teacher talk that occurred. Further, they argued that students began to see themselves as capable thinkers who had ideas worth sharing.

**Literature discussions promoting a critical-analytic stance.** The following discussion highlights literature discussions that promote a critical-analytic stance. A critical-analytical focus refers to a stance that questions the text in search of underlying arguments, assumptions, worldviews, or beliefs.
Collaborative Reasoning. Collaborative Reasoning is an instructional method designed to engage students in collaborative discussions about controversial questions raised by text (Anderson, Chinn, Chang, Waggoner, & Yi, 1997). After the teacher asks a question, she leaves the floor open for students to deliberate together as a class. As with Questioning the Author, there is an open participation structure. The role of the teacher is not to judge the correctness of the response; rather, s/he is a co-inquirer, exploring complex concepts and discovering new meanings. Researchers have concluded that dialogues such as those created by Collaborative Reasoning methods are effective in promoting the development of individual argumentation (Kuhn & Udell, 2003).

Paideia Seminars. Paideia Seminars, or “child rearing,” so named after the ancient Greek emphasis on teaching children to think. These seminars are collaborative conversations conducted by a leader, which focus on clarifying text and discovering new ideas (Adler, 1982). Adler purported that all students can learn, and that student learning should include basic values and ideas only acquired through extended discussion. In the classroom setting, the leader of Paideia Seminars is often a teacher, who is responsible to ask questions that define and direct discussion, examine or query the answers, and encourage a focus on conflicting viewpoints. Goals for the Paideia Seminar include increases in students’ understanding of ideas and values, and improved social and intellectual skills. Researchers have found Paideia Seminars to promote metacognition, conflict resolution, and interest in learning (Polite & Adams, 1997).
Literature Discussions about Texts with Sociopolitical Themes

In the past few decades, researchers interested in critical literacy have studied literature discussions using texts presenting sociopolitical themes with encouraging results. Students as young as first grade are able to read literature with themes of social justice, consider oppression from multiple perspectives, and examine oppression in terms of racism experienced by others (Fain, 2008). Students in Fain’s study examined 13 texts, including picture books and biographies. They first discussed the books in family-led literature circles in both English and Spanish. Next, they discussed the books in the classroom, primarily in English, in groups of four or five with a teacher facilitator. In analyzing sixteen of the forty classroom literature discussions, Fain found that the first and second graders were able to express empathy for characters and voice their intentions not to repeat the cycle of oppression they saw in literature.

Books can be mirrors in which readers see themselves and their lives (Bishop, 1990). When students read literature representing their ethnic backgrounds, they are able to relate to characters, analyze protagonists’ situations, and discuss meaningful connections (Brooks, 2006). Books can also be windows through which readers can see worlds that might be unfamiliar to them (Brooks, 1990). When students read literature with ethnic and racial backgrounds different from their own, they are able to radically shift their thinking through reacting, reflecting, voicing shifts in thinking, and finally, risk taking social action in their social spheres (Moller, 2012). Literature discussions about texts with sociopolitical themes can also serve as “safe spaces” (Brooks & Hampton, 2005; Fain, 2008) for students to confront their own opinions connected to social justice and relate them to unequal power relations in society.
**Tying It Together: The Role of the More Knowledgeable Other in Literature Discussions with Sociopolitical Themes**

Many sociopolitical topics and themes in literature are simply difficult to converse about as students may lack the vocabulary, experience, or willingness to enter into the critical discussions desired by teachers, or even to contemplate such complex topics and themes. Almasi (1995) and Thein, Guise, & Sloan (2011) acknowledge that students often have problems moving beyond the literal interpretation or even misinterpret themes when discussing texts that are sociopolitical in nature. Thein et al. (2011) describe literature discussions in a tenth grade classroom in which some students’ textual interpretations seemed to be problematic. In the study, groups of students met twice a week for 30 minutes to discuss books they selected from sociopolitical choices provided by their teacher. Students were assigned rotating roles, based on Daniels’ (2002) model (e.g. discussion director, literary luminary, and connector). One group in particular read the novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (Allison, 1993), commonly recognized as telling the little-told story of social class in the United States. While group members had no trouble identifying with characters from the text, they missed the author’s important, intended portrayal of poverty caused by oppression. Rather, they saw the characters in the book as hardworking, normal characters, who happened to have bad things happen to them. The students’ interpretations of the text were based on their lived experiences, and without guidance, their discussions were limited to such shallow understandings. Since students interpreted themes in the text in ways that reinforced their status quo understandings and beliefs toward social class, the teacher’s goals for critically engaging students with the sociopolitical themes in this novel were actually subverted. Thein et al. (2011) conclude that traditional, teacher-free literature circles are not likely an
appropriate context for students to discuss the sometimes complex, intended sociopolitical themes and topics in some texts. Thus, participation in a discussion with a More Knowledgeable Other present can help students become comfortable with this type of thought and language, which is essential for critical thinking and response to literature.

Lewis’s (2000) work aligns with Thein et al.’s (2011) work in that she also finds it limiting when readers quickly identify with the text rather than considering it in a more critical manner. Without minimizing the pleasure of identification, her work demonstrates how readers can diminish the author’s intended purpose by identifying with a portion of text rather than critically considering it. For example, in a teacher discussion of The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963 (Curtis, 1995), the White and Black teachers alike focused on how they had Buster Brown shoes as children just like a Black character in the novel. However, the book explains that the young narrator was secretly delighted by the idea of the Black character tramping on the White figure of Buster Brown imprinted on the shoes’ soles. Lewis points out that the author “took pains to set up these shoes as a symbol of secret resistance,” (p. 262) yet the teachers chose to share their common experience of having had Buster Brown shoes. A More Knowledgeable Other, whether it be a teacher or a student, may help to deepen the discussion by providing an insider’s view or posing questions that get at the social or political significance of an event.

Classroom Talk in a New Era

The No Child Left Behind Act enacted in 2001, argued for literacy practices that are scientific, reliable, and replicable in an effort to ensure all students are given the best opportunities to learn to read and write. Positivistic research methodologies were seen as valuable, and therefore, literacy learning could only be examined from one point of view
(Rogers, 2004). In the new era of education legislated by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), literacy learning can no longer be viewed solely from such a positivistic, measurable vantage point. Since the CCSS concentrate on learning marked by thinking, other forms of research must begin to guide literacy practice. Despite this, there is still a tendency to give more attention to specific, measurable English Language Arts standards through activities like close reading (Gerwetz, 2012), and less attention to the specific standards that call for activities that are more difficult to measure in multiple choice format. The latter include speaking and listening goals that focus on student discussion behaviors, or the writing standards in which students use technology to publish their work. It is evident from this review of scholarly research related to literary practices that promote students’ oral engagements with text that increasing focus must be given to research methodologies that are more interpretive in nature. This is critical to ensure that thinking, language, and the link between them can be accurately described and documented.

**Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is the study of language in use (Gee, 2011b). It is a tool used in qualitative research, useful in revealing how social identities are shaped by literacy practices (Moje & Luke, 2009). Gee (2011b) explains a discourse analysis as being “based on the details of speech (and gaze and gesture and action) that are arguably deemed *relevant* in the context where the speech was used *and* that are relevant to the arguments the analysis is attempting to make” (p. xi, emphasis in the original).

Discourse analysis allows research to delve into analyses of language that quantitative methods do not allow. Rather than reporting numerical findings, it seeks to
describe the speaking or writing of a person or group of people in order to provide useful information in terms of the details of language or the themes, issues, or ideas expressed in the language use. Discourse analysis is employed so as to focus on the structure of discourse, its functionality, social role, communicative features, or a combination of these foci (Rex, Bunn, Davila, Dickinson, Ford, Gerben, Orzulak, & Thomson, 2010).

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis is an approach to discourse analysis that views language as a social practice and argues that social practices always have implications for inherently political aspects such as status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods, and power (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2004). Gee (2004) explains that critical discourse analysis can combine “aspects of sociopolitical and critical theory with rather general (usually thematic) analyses of language not rooted in any particular linguistic background or theory” (p. 2). Gee (2005) also supports the idea that all discourse analysis should be critical since language cannot be separated from the power structures to which it is tied. Researchers using critical discourse analysis can attempt to explain complex relationships among entities such as economy, national policies, and educational practices (Rogers, 2004). As such, critical discourse analysis is the logical choice for use in this research since it has the capability of uncovering and analyzing students’ changing thoughts and ideas about themes and topics within texts with sociopolitical themes.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter restates the purpose of my research and the research questions, as well as describes the context and participants of the study, the research methodology and procedures, including data collection and analysis. Possible limitations of the study are also discussed.

Research Questions

The purpose of this case study is to uncover and describe the thinking regarding issues of social justice evident in the discussions of five eighth grade African American struggling readers, one boy and four girls, in an inner-city school with a diverse student population. It occurred during a semester-long literacy unit using complex sociopolitical texts and discussion, where the teacher took the position of the More Knowledgeable Other.

The study will explore the following research questions:

- When discussing books with sociopolitical themes, what issues and ideas are expressed as related to social justice (i.e., gender, culture, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, poverty, racism, oppression, and peace)?

- In what ways does the presence of a More Knowledgeable Other affect the issues and ideas that are expressed as related to social justice (i.e., gender, culture, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, poverty, racism, oppression, and peace)?
How do middle school students perceive literature discussions about complex sociopolitical text?

**Research Design**

This study is based on qualitative research designs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), using methods from case study research. “Case study is a study of the singular, the particular, the unique” (Simons, 2009, p. xiii). A case may be a child, a classroom, an event, an institution, a happening, a policy, or a system (Simons, 2009; Stake, 2008). This study focused on an ongoing event, literature discussions, that took place with a particular population: five Black eighth grade struggling readers (one male, four females) from a Midwestern inner city school, using unique texts, novels with sociopolitical themes. Finally, it focused on a specific type of talk--that which occurred in small group literature discussions with a More Knowledgeable Other present. Altogether, these aspects form a “specific, complex, functioning thing.” (Stake, 1995, p. 2) which merits study: literature discussions about sociopolitical themes in novels by eighth grade struggling readers from an inner city school.

Case studies serve different purposes. Some are meant to study the particular while others are meant to provide a small step toward generalization. Studies that are meant to provide a small step toward generalization are common when the case runs counter to a rule. Stake (2008) refers to this type of case study as an instrumental case study, as its purpose is to “provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (p. 123). The case examined in this study runs counter to a rule, and the goal of the research is to provide a small step toward generalization. Literature discussions are not a common practice adopted when teaching middle school struggling readers in inner-city schools.
This case is meant to explore the impact of literature discussions as a practice with this particular population.

In this project, the specific type of observation that was implemented was participant observation, a qualitative method used to understand the multiple perspectives held within a study population, as well as the interplay between them. It gives “a nuanced understanding of context that can come only from personal experience” (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 13). This approach allowed me to participate in the literature discussions and authentically be part of the process as I observed the discussions from within.

**Context and Participants**

For approximately the last decade, I have worked with struggling students in a public school system in a large metropolitan area. Because my knowledge about critical literacy has increased in the past few years, I have become passionate about empowering struggling students through language-based activities. At the same time, I have witnessed these same students being subjected to pedagogical practices that are philosophically opposed to critical literacy in the name of data-driven instruction to improve high-stakes test scores. Rather than embedding skill and strategy instruction within the context of meaningful themes and using authentic literature, struggling students are often directly instructed in segmented reading skills in a way that is completely separated from authentic texts (i.e., main idea, fact and opinion, etc.) or subjected to scripted curricula that does not meet their various needs. While my graduate studies enlightened me to the link between poor schools and poor teaching, I was simultaneously witnessing the exact same poor teaching methods I so passionately opposed. Thus, I began to seek out an inner
city school whose administration and teachers would welcome research about empowering teaching methods that encourage deep thinking and discussion about authentic literature for struggling students. This proved to be a difficult task as there seemed to be little confidence for models of instruction that focused on authentic text and discussion for struggling students. After months of seeking a site, I finally found Jones Academy (a pseudonym).

Jones Academy is a kindergarten through eighth grade Roman Catholic school in a neighborhood located in a large, Midwestern metropolitan area of the United States. In 2013, the local newspaper reported that the population of 215 students is made up of 49% Black students, 25% Latino students, 7% White students, 7% Asian students, and 12% students of two or more races. Approximately 56% of the students come from what are considered low-income households. I met with the group three days a week, for 45 minute to one hour-long sessions, during their language arts block from February through April, 2016. We met in the science lab, which is down the hall from their homeroom. The room was large enough for students to find separate spaces to read independently and partner read. Discussions were held around a rectangular table. I placed the audio recording device, an iPhone, in the middle of the table. Prior to each session, I hung up the necessary anchor charts, and I took them down and stored them after each session. One reminded students of discussion guidelines, and one reminded students of one of the following literacy strategies we used:

- I.N.S.E.R.T. (The Interactive Notation System for Effective Reading and Thinking)

(Vaughan & Estes, 1986)
The five participants for this research project were chosen from the singular eighth grade classroom in the building. They were chosen to partake in this study by the eighth grade teacher and principal at Jones Academy because they struggle with the current eighth grade English Language Arts program and have below level NWEA (Northwest Evaluation System) reading scores, and the teacher welcomed the extra support. All five students are Black, four females, who chose the pseudonyms of Zion, Brenda, Michelle, and Jane, and one male student, who chose the pseudonym Derrick. They are part of a classroom with 18 students. None of the students had Individualized Education Plans; however, four received occasional services from a Title 1 teacher for both reading and math. While the students had very little experience with small group literature discussions, their teacher often read novels aloud to the whole class and sometimes posed questions afterward. The following are snapshots of each student.

**Brenda.** Brenda was very respectful to adults and seemed a bit of an outsider in the group at times. It seemed as though the other girls in the group had a friendship of which Brenda was not a part. She had a shy disposition and often needed encouragement to share her thoughts and feelings. At times, her statements sounded like questions, as if she was not sure if what she was saying was valid. Brenda also had a difficult time expressing herself at times, using filler words such as “you know” and “like,” and looking to others to find the words for which she was looking. Although Brenda liked reading realistic novels about relationships, she admitted she did not do much reading outside of school reading. Brenda received pull-out, small group support in reading and
math from a Title 1 teacher. Brenda was sure she wanted to attend college, but she was not sure about a career path.

**Derrick.** Derrick was a tall, lanky, outgoing student who also received Title 1 services in reading and math. At first, Derrick was ambivalent about joining the group, but after finding out the time consisted mainly of reading authentic text and discussing them, he joined. He was an asset to the group, providing honest insight from a male point of view. Derrick liked dystopian novels, especially the Maze Runner series by James Dashner. He had a diagnosis of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and often needed redirecting, especially when he attempted to read independently. He did much better reading with a partner or a group of three. Derrick was a talented basketball player and hoped to make that a career.

**Jane.** From the first day, Jane’s quick wit was apparent to me. She often joked with me and was quite interested in learning about my family and my animals. Jane seemed self-assured and comfortable with adults. She liked reading realistic fiction and fantasy novels. When I asked her to tell me about something she learned through reading recently, she told me about a novel, claiming she learns through the main character’s experiences. She also read the Twilight series by Stephenie Meyer. Jane’s life goals included going to college and possibly becoming a veterinarian. By the end of the project, Jane said she would like to write a book about violence in her city.

**Michelle.** Michelle was respectful in one-on-one situations, but often acted disinterested in the book and the discussions when her peers were present. Her teacher reported that she had behavioral issues, and to let her know if problems arose. There were two instances when Michelle’s disinterested behavior led to one on one conversations
with Michelle, in which I asked if she was sure she wanted to continue with the project. Both times, she said she wanted to continue. I encouraged Michelle to participate more, and her participation did indeed get better from that point. Michelle admitted she did not like to read and did not read for pleasure. Michelle also received Title 1 reading and math services. She was unsure about her future goals but knew she wanted to attend college.

**Zion.** Zion was outgoing and excited to be part of the project. She seemed very self-assured and confident, and had a rich, expressive vocabulary. She aspired to be a model and took pride in her many “looks.” Although students wore uniforms, she expressed herself through her changing hairstyles, nail designs, and shoes. Zion reported she liked to read about *real* things since *those are the things that matter*. She was the only member of the group that did not receive Title 1 services. Although her reading skills may have been close to grade level, her teacher reported that she was failing language arts.

**The Researcher**

I am a middle-aged, upper-middle class, White female, who has been teaching for approximately 25 years. Three of those years were in a predominantly African American community, while the other years were spent in a variety of communities, some with diverse populations. My recent disenchantment with instructional models and practices used predominantly with low-income populations, especially children of color, such as scripted curricula and the teaching of reading skills in isolation, has led to this study. It uses quality, authentic literature and discussions in an effort to foster liberating dialogue for students of color in an inner-city school. While I cannot claim to identify with the thoughts and feelings of the participants, it is my intention to create a safe space for
dialogue and assist them in forming reflective consciousness through social activities that expand their perceptions (Brooks & Hampton, 2005; Vygotsky, 1974). I have also attempted to keep track of my subjective self in order to understand how it might lead me to make certain interpretations (Peshkin, 1988).

Text Selection and Curricular Units of Study

The award winning texts selected for this study include sociopolitical themes and are considered to present high levels of literary quality, accuracy and thought-provoking presentations of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and abled-ness. Texts were also selected to meet Common Core State Standards’ text complexity requirements in terms of structure, language demands, and knowledge demands. The selected texts included two short stories, of which one was to be read; nine novels, of which three were to be read; and several informational texts, including articles and videos.

Short stories. Because I wanted to emphasize choice from the beginning, I offered the students two short story choices with which to begin the unit. The choices were, The Bracelet, (1996) by Yoshiko Uchida, and a short story from Langston Hughes’s (1958) collection, “Thank You, Ma’am.” Both stories are similar to the focal novels in their Lexiles (readabilities), sociopolitical themes, complexities, and age-appropriate themes for eighth graders. Table 3.1 describes the short stories in terms of qualitative features of text complexity. After sharing the stories’ main characters and introductions, students came to a consensus to read, The Bracelet.

Table 3.1

Text Features of Short Stories
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text and Lexile</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Language Demands: Conventionality and Clarity</th>
<th>Knowledge Demands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Bracelet</em></td>
<td>Straightforward</td>
<td>Use of flashback</td>
<td>Sophisticated Themes: imprisonment; oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Yoshiko Uchida Lexile: 810</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experiences portrayed may be unfamiliar to readers: prison camp; WWII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Thank You Ma’am”</td>
<td>The organization is straightforward Third person limited point of view: readers must analyze characters’ words and actions to infer thinking and motivation</td>
<td>Some archaic language: Half-nelson, blue-jeaned sitter, icebox, etc. Some figurative language: “a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails; shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet</td>
<td>Sophisticated and ambiguous themes: Trust, respect, and dignity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Langston Hughes Lexile 810</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Novels.** After considering many texts with sociopolitical themes, I chose nine titles, of which three were to be read: three realistic fiction texts with main characters who have disabilities (2 male and 1 female protagonist), three realistic fiction texts that focus on race (2 male and 1 female protagonist), and three historical/realistic fiction texts that focus on immigration (1 male and 2 female protagonist). However, we only completed the disabilities unit. This was due to time constraints resulting from unforeseen scheduling issues as well as the allowance of in-depth discussions and impromptu discussions, which will be discussed in later chapters.

**Unit One: Disabilities.** At the beginning of the unit, I gave book talks on the following three books that portray main characters with disabilities: *Anything but Typical*
by Nora Raleigh Baskin (2010), *Rules* by Cynthia Lord (2006), and *Wonder* (2012) by P. J. Palacio. These novels. Goals during this unit included a focus on societal perspectives and treatment of individuals with disabilities, together with the participants’ abilities to understand, empathize with, respect, and advocate for people who differ from them in terms of cognitive differences and/or behavior. I read the back of each title and passed the books around. When the students informed me their eighth grade teacher had read *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012) aloud to the class, they had the option of choosing between the other two novels. Students wrote their first choice on index cards, and the book with the most votes was *Anything but Typical* (Baskin, 2010). The other title was available for students to take home in order to encourage independent reading of sociopolitical text.

Two students took *Rules* (Lord, 2006) home.

All chosen novels range in Lexile level from 610 to 810, which corresponds to third to fifth grade, according to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, Appendix A, making them independently accessible to struggling eighth grade students. A Lexile level, however, refers only to the difficulty of a text, not the quality or content of the text. In terms of interest level, the book choices are all appropriate for middle school students. Table 3.2 provides specific information about the texts including annotated bibliographies and awards the books received.

Table 3:2

*Texts about Disabilities*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Awards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ALA Schneider Family Book Award, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ALA Schneider Family Book Award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IRA Notable Books for A Global Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NCTE Notable Children’s Books in the Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children’s Book Award</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other Units: Race and Immigration** My hope was to have two more units in which students would read novels exploring themes of racism and immigration. These units were to focus on societal views toward differences of culture and ethnicity, past and present. Goals for these units were for students to grow in the ability to understand, empathize with, and respect individuals of different ethnic backgrounds, as well as confronting racism’s impact on the students’ realities.

**Common Core alignment.** As previously noted, I chose these texts based on a number of factors, namely that they all contain themes of social justice, are award winning, and represent quality literature. While all of these novels present reading levels
that allow participants to access them independently, they are also considered complex literary texts, and therefore, align with the Common Core State Standards.

The Common Core State Standards identify qualitative features of text complexity important for consideration when choosing texts that will be most effective in preparing students for college and career readiness. Table 3.3 describes the texts chosen for this research in terms of the qualitative features of text complexity. All have qualitative features that make them appropriately complex for eighth grade struggling readers.

Table 3.3

Qualitative Features of Text Complexity of Selected Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text and Lexile</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Language Demands: Conventionality and Clarity</th>
<th>Knowledge Demands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Rules</em> by Cynthia Lord</td>
<td>Somewhat straightforward with occasional interruptions: narrator’s lists of rules</td>
<td>Main character’s autistic brother has limited language use. Reader must infer meanings of this character’s dialogue at times.</td>
<td>Multiple complex, sophisticated themes: abled-ness, family, acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexile: 740</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
<td>Main character’s thoughts</td>
<td>Reader must have a metacognitive</td>
<td>Multiple complex, sophisticated themes:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Liberating Dialogue**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>by Nora Raleigh Baskin</strong></th>
<th>Embedded throughout and are italicized. Email messages are embedded throughout in a different font.</th>
<th>Understanding of language since words mean one thing to most people and another thing to the autistic main character.</th>
<th>Identity, disabilities, overcoming obstacles; use of technology in communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wonder</strong></td>
<td>Written from multiple points of view</td>
<td>Sections have different language demands - The section from Justin’s point of view uses no punctuation or capitalization; the section from Summer’s point of view contains advanced vocabulary</td>
<td>Multiple sophisticated themes: physical disabilities; acceptance; self-awareness; Experiences portrayed may be unfamiliar to readers: homeschooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>By R.J. Polacio</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexile: 640</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexile: 790</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Timeline.** I met with the students most Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays in February, March, and April of 2015, for 45-60 minutes. Students independently read the texts, both the novel and informational text, watched a video, and partook in discussions. Although we were scheduled to meet more often, obstacles such as field trips, suspensions, and graduation rehearsals got in our way. Figure 3.1 shows a calendar describing the timeline of the unit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2/3</th>
<th>Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Conversational Interviews</th>
<th>2/3</th>
<th>Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Conversational Interviews</th>
<th>2/3</th>
<th>Introduction of project; creation of discussion norms; choosing of text; instructional video (discussions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2/10</td>
<td>Teaching of INSERT strategy; reading and discussion of “The Bracelet,” Part 1.</td>
<td>2/11</td>
<td>Reflection of previous session’s discussion; re-teaching of INSERT strategy; reading and discussion of “The</td>
<td>2/13</td>
<td>Reading and discussion of chapter 1: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

46
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading and Discussion</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading and Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2/17</td>
<td>Reflection of previous day’s discussion; reading and discussion of chapter 2: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
<td>2/18</td>
<td>Reflection of previous day’s discussion; reading and discussion of chapter 3: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/24</td>
<td>2-25 Reading and discussion of chapter 6: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
<td>2/20</td>
<td>Reading and discussion of chapter 4-5: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-3</td>
<td>Reading and discussion of chapter 7-8: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>3-6 Reading and discussion of chapter 9-10: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-10</td>
<td>3-11 Introduction of <em>Save the Last Word for Me</em> strategy. Reading and discussion of chapter 11 <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
<td>3-18</td>
<td>3-13 Review of <em>Save the Last Word for Me</em> strategy. Reading and discussion of chapter 12-13: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-17</td>
<td>Discussion about police brutality</td>
<td>3-18</td>
<td>3-20 Reading and discussion of Facebook post related to police brutality, and chapters 14-15: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-24</td>
<td>Reading and discussion of message from Dr. Denisha Jones, and chapters 16-17: <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
<td>3-25</td>
<td>3-27 Viewing and discussion of “Carly Video”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-31</td>
<td>3-25 Viewing and discussion of “Carly Video”</td>
<td>4-1</td>
<td>4-3 Revisiting of chapters 16-17; reading and discussion of news article about autistic girl on plane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-14</td>
<td>Reading and discussion of <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
<td>4-15</td>
<td>4-17 Reading and discussion of <em>Anything but Typical</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3.1 Calendar of daily events. This calendar describes the events that occurred during each day of the study.

**Informational text.** At certain points in each unit, students were asked to read the following informational text: one news article, one video, one Facebook post, and one email correspondence that related to the theme of disabilities. The Common Core State Standards emphasize the need for students to become more adept at reading informational text in order for students to meet college and career readiness. Most importantly, the informational text is meant to connect fiction with reality. In other words, in the novels, the themes of abled-ness, race, and immigration are embedded within fictional text. Reading informational text related to the themes allows students to link the themes to the world in which they live. Bringing the informational text into the units is meant to encourage students to discuss how themes in the novels reflect authentic life experiences.

**Informational article.** A two page disabilities-related news article read, titled, “Woman Claims She and Daughter with Autism Were Kicked Off United Airlines Flight” (Shapiro, 2015), was about an autistic girl and her family who were told to depart a plane after an emergency landing because the pilot believed the passengers were in
danger. The article gives two sides to the story, that of the people who believed the autistic girl was dangerous and those who did not.

**Video.** Students also viewed a nine-minute video about a nonverbal, autistic girl named Carly, who recently discovered she could communicate using technology (Sensory Therapies and Research Center, 2012). Through her writing, Carly shares what it feels like to be autistic, explaining why she self-stimulates by waving her hands, rocking, and making noises, and how it feels when people assume she cannot understand them.

**A Facebook post.** During a discussion that turned to race and police brutality, I decided to read a related Facebook post to the students written by a friend, Dr. Denisha Jones, Teacher of Diversity Studies at Howard University. The post described the author’s thoughts and views on recent police brutality cases against Black people in the United States.

**Email.** After sharing the Facebook post with students, I emailed Dr. Jones and shared with her my recent discussion with the students. I asked if she had any words of advice for these young Black adolescents, living in a large metropolitan area where some of the police brutality cases occurred. Dr. Jones replied, and I printed her response and shared it with students with her permission (D. Jones, personal communication, April 28, 2015). Her response included advice as well as a paragraph from one of her favorite books, often portrayed as a poem, “Our Greatest Fear,” by Marianne Williamson (1996, p. 190) (See Appendix C).
Description of the Research Process

**Preparation.** In February, 2015, I interviewed the five students to learn more about them as readers using a reading motivation survey (appendix A) by Pitcher et al. (2007). Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. During the first group session, I explained that the students would be participating in an approach that includes the following: reading novels, participating in literature discussions, and writing about the novels. Students were also individually informed that they would be participating in research, and consent forms were distributed for parents and guardians to review and sign. All five students returned the consent forms.

Each student was asked to keep a binder for handouts, reading responses, and research. When reading responses were completed, they were kept in a file within the classroom. The first two sessions were devoted to helping students become experienced with the specific type of literature discussions in which we would partake. The following attributes were discussed:

- I would be present in the groups during each literature discussion period as the literature discussions are places where knowledge is jointly constructed by teacher and students. My role was to help the flow of discussion, ask students to clarify or elaborate points or positions, and aid in considering themes and topics.

- Students’ notions of power within the classroom were discussed in order to make thinking on this topic visible. Addressing and discussing these tensions was attended to validate any anxieties students have concerning this issue and allow for continued work to clarify understandings regarding shared power.
After watching a video of an exemplary literature discussion (Inquiry-Based Teaching: Discussing Fiction Texts, 2013), we developed discussion guidelines addressing issues such as participation, turn taking, staying on topic, and positive talk. These guidelines were listed on chart paper and hung in the classroom. They were also typed and distributed as handouts to be kept in students’ folders (Appendix B).

**The Beginning.** Before introducing the short story, *The Bracelet* (Uchida, 1996), I modeled a text interaction strategy, I.N.S.E.R.T., (Vaughan & Estes, 1986). Students were asked to use the strategy in order to read thoughtfully and be prepared for the literature discussion about the short story. Other strategies, which were introduced later, appear in Table 3.6., and were posted on chart paper as they were taught and hung in the classroom.

### Table 3.4

**Literacy Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I.N.S.E.R.T. (The Interactive Notation System for Effective Reading and Thinking) (Vaughan &amp; Estes, 1986)</th>
<th>While reading, students will use sticky notes to jot down symbols which stand for thoughts about particular passages. For example, a ? may be used to mark a passage the reader has a question about while a ☺ may be used to mark a passage the reader finds interesting.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Save the Last Word for Me (Vaughan &amp; Estes, 1986)</td>
<td>Students are given 3-5 index cards. While reading, students write a quote that interests them from the book on one side of an index card. On the other side, students write comments they wish to make about that quote. During the discussion, students take turns reading their quotes, allowing group members to comment first. Finally, the student who chose the quote shares his/her thoughts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After reading *The Bracelet* (Uchida, 1996), we held our first discussion using the insert notations as a guide. Students were then asked to reflect on their participation in the
literature discussion using a rubric that contained the statements from our discussion guidelines chart paper (Appendix D). These types of self-evaluation activities are an integral step given that a key factor of effective literature discussions is that students recognize and resolve their own interaction dilemmas (Almasi, O’Flahavan & Arya, 2001).

Next, students were introduced to the first novel selected for the disabilities unit. I read part of the assigned section to students, stopping to ask questions along the way, such as, “Who do you think is telling this story? What do you think he means when he says, ‘neurotypicals?’” Students then independently or buddy-read the rest of the assigned section, using the I.N.S.E.R.T. Strategy. In the following class session, students participated in a literature discussion.

**Literature discussions.** Prior to each literature discussion, students were reminded to use the discussion guidelines as well as the literacy strategy to guide their discussions. The structure of the discussion depended on the literacy strategy used. Regardless, my role was not to judge their responses, but to assume the role of a co-inquirer, exploring complex concepts and discovering new meanings. My intention was to encourage participation or elaboration and assist students to stay on track, or see an alternative perspective. I kept in mind the findings of Eeds & Wells (1989), whose research on literature study groups found that the most “successful” discussion group to be one in which the teacher asked the fewest questions. It was my role to let dialogue emerge, and then seize teachable moments. Students were encouraged to “fine tune” the discussion guidelines, as these should reflect the unique needs of each group (Almasi, O’Flahavan & Arya, 2001).
Students partook in 22 literature discussions throughout the three-month long study, and I participated in and audio-taped every session. The recorder was set in the middle of the participants. Prior to each discussion, I stated the date, which book the participants were reading, and the chapter(s) that were discussed. I also identified the participants whose names were changed to pseudonyms during transcription of the recordings. I also kept field notes to supplement the taped discussions.

**Field notes and conceptual memos.** Field notes are descriptions of people, places, events, activities, and conversations recorded by a researcher during the data collection period (Glesne, 2011). In addition to the notes I took during each class session, I also kept retrospective field notes after each session. I then developed conceptual memos from these field notes, identifying generic ideas that came from particular events, along with queries raised (Heath & Street, 2008). My conceptual memos were divided into two sections. The first, “Problems and Setbacks,” focused on unexpected occurrences during the research. The second, “Patterns, Insights, and Breakthroughs,” discussed patterns detected, insights, and “aha” realizations. The field notes and conceptual memos were helpful in two ways. First, during the research, they helped guide decisions in terms of upcoming sessions. Conceptual memos allow the researcher to be reflexive, considering the appropriateness of methods, including concerns regarding data collection (Madison, 2005). They also challenge the researcher to continually question her own subjectivity and positionality, in an effort to guide future decision-making and understand how and/or why certain interpretations have been made (Glesne, 2011). Second, reviewing the memos after the data is collected added to my data analysis and resulted in new findings. As Heath and Street (2008) explain,
Ethnographers who maintain their conceptual memos on a regular basis find that when they plan their final written report, chapter topics fall into place through a phrase or a word search of conceptual memos. Themes, trends, and insights become chapters and their subheadings in the final dissertation or book (p. 81).

**Audiotaped interviews.** During the last week of the class (May, 2015), I conducted semi-formal, face–to-face individual interviews of participants and transcribed them. My questions were designed to elicit students’ thoughts about the activity time, especially the literature discussion portions. Interviewing is an ethnographic research tool that allows for insight into individuals’ perspectives (Fontana and Frey, 2008). In this case, my aim was to understand students’ thoughts and feelings about the literature discussions in which they participated. The following interview questions were asked:

- How did the book compare with other books you have read this school year?
- How did the literature discussions compare with other literacy activities you have participated in this year?
- Let’s talk about the discussions you had.
  - What in particular do you remember talking about? Why do you remember this?
  - I remember your group discussing… Can you tell me anything interesting you recall from that discussion?
  - In what ways do you think the discussions differed because I was present?

**Data Analysis**
This research relies on the following five data sets: (1) audio taped discussions, (2) transcripts of the discussions, (3) audio taped interviews, (4) transcripts of the interviews, and (5) field notes and conceptual memos. I used the method of critical discourse analysis to analyze all six data sets (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2011a). Critical discourse analysis uniquely attends to inequity, privilege, and learning and allowed me to combine sociopolitical and critical theory with general analyses of language (Gee, 2004). Specifically, I was interested in themes, issues, or ideas expressed as related to social justice, such as such as gender, culture, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, poverty, racism, oppression, and peace. I framed these expressed ideas using Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy, which can be used to analyze oral and written text (Fain, 2008) and include:

- **Disrupting the commonplace**: Challenges learners to closely examine the familiar through new lenses; includes considering new ways of looking at old ideas.

- **Interrogating multiple viewpoints**: Requires learners to put themselves into the positions and perspectives of others.

- **Focusing on sociopolitical issues**: Challenges learners to consider institutional systems and the power relationships within these systems.

- **Taking action and promoting social justice**: Takes an “informed” stand against oppression or promoting social justice.

Figure 3.2 shows these elements in a hierarchical fashion in order to suggest my understanding of the dimensions, that one must generally experience one of the bottom elements before experiencing the top element of *Taking Action and*
Promoting Social Justice. These specific tools were chosen since framing discourse in this way provides information on the research themes of this study.

Figure 3.2. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’s (2002) Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy. This figure depicts my thinking regarding the typical occurrence of critical discourse.

Finally, since I was interested in the way the role of the More Knowledgeable Other within literature discussions about novels with sociopolitical themes affected the discourse, transcripts were analyzed to examine the role of the More Knowledgeable Other within the discussions, as evidenced in the data.

Conclusion

This case study utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis power (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2004) to uncover the critical talk of five African American eighth grade struggling readers, one male and four females, during discussions about sociopolitical texts. Over a three-month period, 22 discussions were audiotaped and analyzed using Lewison, Flint,
and Van Sluys’s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy. The role of the More Knowledgeable Other was also considered.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

The purpose of this case study is to uncover the thinking of African American eighth grade struggling readers about issues of social justice evidenced in their oral and written responses to literature. This chapter provides key data obtained through 22 discussions and 10 interviews, all of which were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy. In this chapter, I present data relevant to each research question, complete with relevant transcript excerpts from discussions and interviews.

Navigating and Negotiating Issues of Social Justice during Literature Discussions

The analysis in this section focuses on the following research question:

*When discussing books with sociopolitical themes, what issues and ideas are expressed as related to social justice (i.e., gender, culture, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, poverty, racism, oppression, and peace)?*

As noted in chapter 3, all discussions were analyzed using Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy, which can be used to analyze oral and written text (Fain, 2008) and include:

- **Disrupting the commonplace**: challenges learners to closely examine the familiar through new lenses; includes considering new ways of looking at old ideas.
- **Interrogating multiple viewpoints**: requires learners to put themselves into the positions and perspectives of others.
• **Focusing on sociopolitical issues**: challenges learners to consider institutional systems and the power relationships within these systems.

• **Taking action and promoting social justice**: takes an “informed” stand against oppression or promoting social justice.

The findings are presented by discussing the talk that occurred during the 22 discussions that fit within each domain.

**Disrupting the commonplace.** Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002), describe “Disrupting the Commonplace” as a dimension of critical literacy which asks a participant to engage in “seeing the everyday through new lenses.” (pp. 382-383). Approximately 21% of students’ critical talk fell into this category. Below are the questions used to discover whether student talk reflected this dimension, which are recommended by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2006).

• Do participants question “everyday” ways of seeing?

• Do participants use language and other sign systems to interrogate “how it is”?

• Does activity question textual intentions or consumer positioning by exploring underlying messages and/or histories that inform constructed meanings?

Through discussion, students consistently demonstrated their ability to use language to interrogate terms and topics such as autism, power, and the word *normal*. They continually questioned “everyday ways of seeing” these concepts as they sought to develop informed understandings. There was no evidence of students questioning textual intentions or consumer positioning by exploring underlying messages and/or histories that inform constructed meaning.
Autism: Does anyone overcome it? When first reading and discussing the focal novel, students sought to connect new information about autism to what they already knew. The following transcript illustrates students relating the autistic character’s actions to those of characters with similar disabilities in movies students previously viewed. I wrote down connections on the board as they spoke.

Zion: He’s so used to being on his computer.

Brenda: Yeah. He thinks that there’s a difference between his computer and another one?

Teacher: So, why does he think that? Why do you think he thinks they are different? Could he go on the story thing on any computer?

Derrick: Yeah.

Teacher: So, could that be a part of his autism?

Zion: Yeah. Ooh – I got it. Have you seen the movie I Am Sam?

Teacher: No.

Zion: With, uh-

Teacher: Ooh! Yes, I have! With – I forget his name. The actor. I remember that. It was out years ago.

Zion: Yeah, he was at IHOP and he usually gets this pancake with a face on it, and then the daughter’s like, “I wanna go somewhere else,” and they went somewhere else and he asked for the thing he gets at IHOP and they was
like, “We don’t have it.” And he started screaming and all this stuff.

Teacher: And that’s hard for the daughter to understand, right?

Zion: Yeah.

Derrick: Oh, (inaudible – shares about a movie in which an autistic girl needs to do the same thing every day.)

Teacher: And if she didn’t do the very same thing, what would happen?

Derrick: Uh, she got mad.

Teacher: Yeah. So I’m gonna put right here, connections… Is he autistic in I Am Sam? I don’t know if he was autistic, or mentally handicapped, or…

Zion: Yeah, he was autistic.

Teacher: Okay. The connections we’re having are to I Am Sam and what was yours? Fifty Days?

Derrick: Yeah.

Teacher: Okay, so, bad temper? It’s kinda like when things don’t go… the way they want? Or the way they’re used to? Or what should we say?

Zion: According to schedule?

Teacher (writing): Yeah. Okay, when things don’t follow their usual schedule.
Students also attempted to add to their understanding of autism. In the following transcript, Derrick attempts to clarify his understanding of autism.

Derrick: Does anybody really overcome autism?

Teacher: Hmm. It's not really something you overcome.

What they say is, with lots and lots of expensive one on one therapy, you can get much better.

Derrick: So, maybe he will still start talking more?

Teacher: Mm-hmm.

Derrick: Oh.

Finally, Brenda shows tremendous insight in the following excerpt. While I was focusing on whether the little brother in the story knew that Jason was autistic, she realized that we could be discussing a more important question, “Does he care?”

Teacher: Okay. How many people think Jeremy knows his brother is autistic? And, how many people think he doesn’t?

Brenda: I would say, does his brother care if he is autistic rather than does he know?

Teacher: Mmm. So he could know, and just not care.

Brenda: (Nods)

This thinking demonstrates a disruption of the commonplace. Society often sees and seeks disability, and an acceptance or a lack thereof usually follows. How different the
world would be if we did not care about disability; in other words, if acceptance was not based on disabled or nondisabled, but on the fact that the person is family, or perhaps, a fellow human.

Students worked to understand and clarify their definition of autism. The following section explains students’ quest to define what normal is.

**Normal: Everyone has a different way of thinking.** Here, Derrick and Zion debate over whether Jason is “normal.”

Derrick: And they wanted to kick him out of the school because they don't think he is normal… And he's not normal, because he's autistic.

Zion: He is normal.

Derrick: Well, he's normal, but he doesn't think like normal people do… Well he does, but he doesn't… He has a hard way of explaining things.

Zion: He has a different way of thinking.

Derrick: Yeah, like you. No, just kidding. Well, everyone has a different way of thinking.

Brenda: That's true.

Zion prefers to use the phrase “different way of thinking.” Derrick, who initially said Jason is not normal, verbalized that “everyone has a different way of thinking.” Derrick possibly begins to question his own perception of “normal” here. He seems to understand that we all think differently.
Power: I believe I have power. The following conversation occurred simply because I brought treats for a special occasion. Rather than starting right away, I thought we would chat while they ate. I asked about their trip to the Holocaust Museum the following day, and the talk quickly turned into a conversation about the recent police misconduct cases involving people of color. While discussing racial tensions in our community was not on the agenda for the day, I encouraged it, believing students should have opportunities inside the classroom to discuss issues of race and power (Bolgatz, 2005).

Their insight to the racism and power issues was interesting as was their desire to share their thoughts about it. The following excerpt demonstrates Brenda’s struggle with who has power, and essentially, what power is.

Brenda: And he (Freddie Gray) didn’t have any power or a voice to, you know, come out of the coma to say about what happened. And they were trying to, you know, cover up a situation, and say, oh, well, okay, just because he was Black, and you know, maybe he could have hurt the police officer, that he could have did something to them (police officers). But, they’re not focusing on the police officers.

Derrick: Wait. How do you break somebody’s spine?

Teacher: I don’t know... Maybe we’ll need to look more into this next time. You (to Brenda) brought up a word that now one has brought up, and that is power.

Derrick: What? Why? What did he do, run and dropkick him?
Teacher: I wish I had information on that. I can get an article.

(side talk)

Brenda: Wait, but um, wasn’t the police officers supposed to be wearing the little camera thingy to show-

Teacher: Not yet. Those are coming, but I don’t think it’s a law yet. It takes time when something becomes a law, for them to get the materials, the money for all that, so, in the future, police are going to have to wear cameras on them.

Brenda: But who’s the one who has the power the most? From what you think? Who has the power?

Teacher: That’s an awesome question. Definitely the police. So, we’ll see, though, what happens to those police officers because at least the police have come out, or was it the mayor, no. The police chief came out, I think, on the news and said, yes - there were issues with the way this man was arrested and treated.

The excerpt also shows a missed opportunity on my part to allow the students to grapple with an essential question related to social justice, “Who has the power?” Rather than looking to others to interject or turning the question back to Brenda, I quickly answered the question. I also answered with an extremely narrow answer, using the word definitely. This statement closed discussion on the subject.
The topic of power came up again a bit later in the same discussion, however, as we talked about what they could do in this era of police brutality and misconduct. My initial statement in the following transcript, intended to move students to focus on social action, prompts Brenda to bring up the term power again and clarify the concept. This shows that the aforementioned discussion on power left Brenda still questioning this idea of power, and who has it.

In the following part of the discussion, students begin to understand power as a two-tiered phenomenon. In other words, there is situational power and there is a broader, individual power.

Teacher: But, I say again, it almost sounds like you’re giving up when you just say – well, nothing’s gonna change and they’re not gonna listen.

Brenda: Well, we don’t have power.

(Lots of talking at once.)

Teacher (holding up finger): Uh-uh, so you say, “We don’t have power.” (Looks at Zion to let her know she may respond.)

Zion (to Brenda): We who? You?

Brenda: But am I the one that’s gonna be (inaudible)?

Zion: No, but I’m saying, are you speaking for yourself? Because we is all of us, and I believe I have power.

Brenda: Well, I’m just speaking in general, but it’s not me. I’m not the one that-
Zion: I mean, I might have that thought, like, no one will listen to me, or I might not have power, but I’ll still try. I’ll at least try to see what will happen.

Jane: Okay, Z. I got a question for you.

Zion: Okay, what is your question?

Jane: Let’s just say you was on the streets right now, and a bunch of police ganged up on you, and you was the only person. What would you do?

Brenda: And if they had a gun to you.

Zion: If they had a gun to me?

Jane: Mm-hmm.

Zion: I would get on the ground.

Jane: You wouldn’t run?

Zion: No.

Brenda: See, they might end up using the gun on you. You can’t do that.

Teacher: Oh, yeah. I definitely agree with you. But that doesn’t mean you don’t have power, right? I mean, I even as just a woman, I have been treated in ways I believe men will never be treated. There’s racism, and there’s prejudice, there’s all sorts of different kinds of prejudice, right? But just because I would get on the ground doesn’t mean I don’t have power.
Zion: Right.

Teacher: I’m saving my life.

Zion: There you go. You’re being smart.

Teacher: Yeah, you’re being smart. But then, after I get up, I don’t believe I have no power. I mean I understand what you are saying about the question of power, but I think that if we just assume we don’t have power…

Zion: We’ll never get anywhere.

Teacher: Yeah, yeah. Again, what if Martin Luther King and others said, “We have no power.” We would be segregated. We wouldn’t be able to sit around the same table at this school. Wouldn’t that be crazy?

Brenda: So, who’s the one… Okay, it’s like saying, okay, the police, they have weapons on them, and we’re like the weak because we don’t have, I mean, we can’t use any weapons on them. So, basically, we have to be there with nothing.

Teacher: That’s true, in that situation, they are the ones with the power.

Zion: I think that people in the street they think they’re less of a man if the police try to control them. That’s why they react with the police, but I think that power is not always
the gun. That’s not power. The gun is the power for you.

You’re not…

Teacher: Yeah, yeah. Without the gun, would that person be powerful?

Zion: Right. That’s what I’m saying. You shouldn’t use that. You should use words in court or whatever in that situation. Say what you have to say. Don’t use material things. The police, that’s why they use guns.

This excerpt clarifies power as multidimensional. When the police have guns drawn, they have a certain degree of power because of their weaponry tools that citizens do not have; however, Zion explains to Brenda and Jane that this is a limited definition of power and should not be equated with the broader individual power each of us has within us.

Students disrupted the commonplace by consistently describing how the world defines sociopolitical concepts such as autism, normal, and power. The next section describes the talk that falls into the second of Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy, Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints.

**Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints.** When we interrogate multiple viewpoints, we “stand in the shoes of others” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383) to consider multiple perspectives about a topic. Approximately 19% of students’ critical talk fell within this domain. In analyzing the discourse in this study so as to capture when students interrogated multiple viewpoints, I asked the following questions:

- Do participants consider alternative ways of seeing, telling, or constructing a given event or issue?
• Does activity involve attending to, seeking out, and/or considering silenced or marginalized voices?

• Does activity involve examining competing narratives or producing counter narratives?

• Do participants engage in activity that foregrounds difference?

Students routinely attempted to understand marginalized voices throughout the discussions. There were primarily three people who have been marginalized in whose shoes students attempted to stand. One was Jason, the main character of the focal novel who has autism. The second was Carly, a nonverbal autistic girl who appeared in a video we watched. She has been in the news recently for her ability to communicate using a word processor. Finally, students stood in the shoes of people of color, specifically those in the news for being victims of police brutality.

*Standing in the Shoes of Jason: Why are you crying? It’s just me.* The following excerpt is representative of discussions in which students attempted to understand Jason’s feelings and thoughts in order to better comprehend autism. In this transcript, students discuss whether Jason thinks of himself as normal, and whether he wants society to feel sorry for him.

Derrick: If Jason was here, I would cry.

Teacher: Why?

Zion: Cry sad or cry laughing?

Derrick: Sympathetically.

Jane: Why?

Derrick: I just told you why!
Teacher: Well, you said sympathetically.

Derrick: Because. He’s autistic. And he can’t think – well, no – thinking is his specialty. He can’t talk.

Teacher: Do you think Jason would want you to cry for him?

Brenda: No.

Teacher: Why?

Brenda: Because people who have a disease or a disorder, they wouldn’t want you to cry for them, and they would kind of like… that’s kind of rude or something like that? I mean, they wouldn’t like it, they wouldn’t like anyone to, um, what can you call it? Sympathy?

Teacher: Sympathize?

Brenda: Yeah, sympathize or crying for them, they wouldn’t like it because there are a lot of people who treat them like they’re slow. You know, or something like that.

Teacher: Oh because giving them sympathy would be sort of like admitting they’re slow or seeing it as a problem.

What do you think they do want? What kind of treatment from other people?

Derrick: To be normal.

Brenda: Normal. To treat them like they’re normal. You know, like they can do other things.
Teacher: So recognize that they have talents?

Brenda: Mmm-hmm.

Teacher: Zion?

Zion: I think the same thing as Brenda, but to add to that I think Jason would say, "Why are you crying? It's just me."

Like, he doesn't think anything is wrong with him so-

Derrick: Yeah, but he knows-

Zion: Well, he knows he's not normal…

Derrick: He says he knows he's not normal because he doesn't think like neurotypicals. So, he knows he's not normal. He knows he doesn't think normal… I don't think like neurotypicals either.

Teacher: How do you think you think different from neurotypicals?

Derrick: Because I think faster than y'all.

Teacher: Ah.

Brenda: (said with doubt) Really...

Derrick: Yes.

Brenda: Really?

Derrick: You think I'm playing?

Teacher: And should we feel sympathy for you?

Derrick: No!
Teacher: Or should we just try to understand? What do you mean you think faster?

Derrick: I can't actually comprehend stuff faster, but... I don't know.

Brenda: Well everybody learns at a different pace, so...

Through identifying with Jason, Derrick, who struggles with attention issues, understands that people with differences need understanding rather than sympathy or pity. In the next section, however, students demonstrate having pity for people with differences is a hard habit to break.

Standing in the shoes of Carly: She wants to be normal so bad. In an effort to connect fiction with real life, students were shown a fourteen-minute video about an autistic girl named Carly. Carly is a nonverbal, severely autistic thirteen-year-old girl who was thought to be cognitively delayed until she began communicating through a word processor. It became clear to Carly’s teacher, therapists, and family that Carly had average to above-average intelligence. Through the use of the word processor, Carly was able to explain why she and many other people with autism engage in what is termed self-stimulating behaviors as well as how she processes visual images and sound. While I expected the discussion following the video to focus on the exciting communication possibilities in store for people with autism, students primarily focused on their feelings of sympathy for Carly as follows:

Teacher: All right, so, this-well, tell me your thoughts about this video. About this girl.

Derrick: I think it was sad. I think like, I feel bad.
Teacher: You feel bad.

Derrick: Yes.

Zion: I do too.

Teacher: OK, can he expand on that? And then Zion.

Derrick: Because she wants to be normal so bad but they don't know how to control autism.

Teacher: OK. Zion?

Zion: I just feel sorry for her. It's kind of weird, but she says she's a normal person inside of this body. She doesn't know how to express herself and probably every autistic person is like that and they can't find a way to communicate-

Although the video was meant to be inspirational, most students were saddened by the video and stuck in their sympathy for Carly. However, in the next brief transcription, Jane demonstrates an understanding of the positive nature of the video. Most of the film focused on Carly’s new technology, and how it allowed for self-expression. It enabled her to communicate with the outside world and explain to people how it feels to be autistic.

Teacher (looking towards Jane): What did you think?

Jane: In the beginning, it was sad, but towards the end it was getting better because she was learning more and she was starting to express her feelings (using a computer).
Finally, students broaden their understanding of what it feels like to have autism by discussing Carly’s explanations of certain behaviors in the video.

Brenda: There are people that don't know what autistic people go through. They judge them a lot and really don't seem to get to know them better so they can understand. That's why autistic people have a hard time talking to normal people.

Teacher: And, so, when we see people flapping their arms or something, we just think—oh, there's just nothing going on in their head and they're just doing something—they don't even know that they're doing it. But she (Carly) said—we know that we're doing it.

Zion: It's just, what did she say, it's like a pop can. Like, when you shake it and it's all filled up.

Jane: Some people understand, some normal people, but some normal people don't. Some might think it's funny…and it's not.

Zion: Yeah, it's not.

Brenda: And when she was telling her parents about when she is in pain, and when she has headaches, and when she covers her ears with her hands or bangs her head on the floor. Because they always wondered why she covered her ears with her hands.
Through the video, students were able to expand their understanding of autism and negotiate why society sees autistic people as unapproachable. The next section demonstrates students’ abilities to stand in the shoes of others during discussions about police brutality.

**Standing in the shoes of victims of police brutality: He was just eating some Skittles.** As previously mentioned, a field trip to the Holocaust Museum prompted a discussion about oppression by people in power. Students related the treatment of the Jews during the Holocaust with the treatment of Black people by police officers in recent news stories. In the following transcript, Jane explains her dislike for the police as she identifies with Trayvon Martin, an African American youth shot and killed by a member of a Neighborhood Watch Association.

Teacher: So, it does kind of make you cautious about the future. Jane: I don’t like the police.

Teacher: You have been very quiet. Can you talk a little about that?

Jane: Yeah, I sure can.

Teacher: Now, do you say it from personal experience? Or, do you say it from things you’ve seen on TV?

Jane: Actually, it’s something I’ve seen on TV, but it’s something that did happen in real life, like, with the Trayvon Martin whole thing, like, the night he was going to get some Skittles in Arizona, but after he was coming out the store, and I guess he was just eating and stuff, and the
police approached him, and asked him questions, and they say he got shot for no apparent reason, like, on his way home, with some Skittles in Arizona, and I was just like, so if I went to like get some Skittles in Arizona one night, would the same thing happen to me?

Teacher: Does that worry you?

Jane: Hell yeah, it does. You know, he was eighteen. He didn’t get to see anything.

When given text or media focused on sociopolitical issues, students were regularly able to stand in the shoes of a marginalized person in order to better understand that individual. This practice is critical to being able to focus on the sociopolitical, the next domain; for how can I understand the impact of systems on marginalized people if I do not understand the people themselves?

Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues

When we focus on sociopolitical issues, we consider the bigger picture. We give attention to how sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and language are intertwined (Lewison et al., 2002). “We step outside the personal to interrogate how sociopolitical relationships and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions.” (Lewison et al., 2002, p.383). In analyzing the discourse in an attempt to capture when students focused on sociopolitical issues, I asked the following questions:

- Does activity move beyond the personal and attempt to understand relationships between personal experience and larger cultural stories or systems?
Do participants challenge power relationships and/or study the relationships between language and power?

Does activity include or create opportunities for subordinate group(s) participation?

Approximately 34% of students’ critical talk fell within this domain. First, students were able to recognize the relationship between language and power when discussing the true and fictional situations of nonverbal people with autism. Students were also able to discuss the role systems play in the marginalization of people. This occurred quite regularly, whether we were discussing autism, gender issues, or unfair treatment of Black people by law enforcement.

*Language equals power: On the computer, he’s free.* Through discussions about Jason, the fictional main character in the focal novel, students were able to realize relationships between language and power. Students recognized that Jason had the power to make and keep friends when his friendships were confined to the computer, where he could write to his friends, and they could not see him.

Derrick: He’s anti-social when he talks to people but when he’s on the computer, nobody sees him, so he’s free.

Teacher: What do you think about that, guys?

Derrick: Boring. No, I’m just kidding.

Teacher: That’s a really great statement, really interesting statement. He said he’s like antisocial in real life, but when he’s on the computer, nobody can see him, so he’s free.

Michelle: Cuz he’s on the Internet.
Teacher: What’s that?

Michelle: He probably says things through the Internet.

Teacher: Go ahead.

Michelle: I don’t know.

Teacher: So, on the Internet, why is it so different for him?

Jane: Cuz he’s not talking to them.

Michelle: Oh…

Derrick: And, plus, this cheerleader just start talking to him.

Brenda: Because they don’t know what he looks like and that he can’t talk, and they’re probably thinking he’s a normal person.

Students developed the idea that Jason was powerful when he was able to eloquently and effortlessly use language in a mode which hid his disability.

In the following excerpt, students demonstrate their understanding that Jason’s inability to use language in face-to-face social situations puts him at a disadvantage and leaves him open to harassment. At this point in the book, Jason’s cousin calls him names. Frustrated, and unable to react verbally, Jason physically lashes out at him. Michelle chose a passage from this section to discuss.

Teacher: So why did you pick, Michelle, “He is happy, but I know our parents will not be.”

Michelle: Um… I don’t know. I just liked it.

Teacher: Do you think his parents will be happy?
Michelle: No, they won’t be happy!
Jane: But it’s about time he stood up for himself.
Teacher: Do you think his parents are going to get the real story?
Jane and Zion: No.
Derrick: Cuz Seth is gonna lie.
Zion: And if - What’s His Face (Jason) tells the real story, they probably won’t believe him because he’s autistic.
Teacher: And is it easy or difficult for him to tell a story?
Zion: Difficult because he’s autistic. He has a hard time expressing himself.

Students explored the power relationship between Jason, who is nonverbal, and his cousin, who speaks. They demonstrated understanding that Jason’s cousin is at an advantage simply because of his ability to use language.

*Systems and autism: How can a person with autism scare you?* The following excerpt shows part of a discussion after students read an article about an autistic girl named Juliette and her family, who were forced off of an airplane because the pilot deemed the girl a threat (Shapiro, 2015). Derrick is the first to voice outrage at the airline’s inability to demonstrate understanding and empathy toward the family.

Derrick: What would she do, like? That's stupid! They're going to throw her off the plane just because she's autistic?

They think that she is a threat with her dad sitting right
there, right next to her? He's not going to let her get up and do anything.

Teacher: So why do you think they did it? If it is so clear to you that they didn't need to.

Derrick: But it's so stupid. She asked for a first class menu. You can't get her a first class menu so you don't start something? That's basically what they were trying to do. They were trying to help you out. But then you want to be defiant and kind of egg her on? And then you want to kick her off? So, that was the pilot's fault. He should be suspended for a few days. At least.

Derrick was so outraged he was unable to focus on my follow-up question. Later, I asked whether the students thought people on the plane might have been scared of Juliette. The following transcript shows the discussion that emerged:

Derrick: How can a person with autism scare you?

Michelle: They probably scared because they don't know what they going to do to them.

Teacher: Right. But you are pretty clear that she's not going to be a threat, right?

Zion: Because we know about autistic people.

Zion’s words demonstrate her understanding that knowledge of people who are marginalized leads to understanding, and that systems will not change until people within those systems gain knowledge.
In the following section, the students question the way schools deal with students with disabilities. This discussion emerged after students read a part in the focal novel in which Jason got sent home from school for having an outburst.

   Teacher: OK, hold on. We'll get to you. Go ahead, Jane.

   Jane: No, that’s all. Brenda: I think that it should not be up to the teacher. It should be up to him because he's the person who has the disorder, not the teacher. And if the teacher feels like—oh, the student is doing such and such, it should be up to the parent or the principal.

   Teacher: He said, “this time I'm sure it was me who thought it.” So maybe this time it was him who wanted to go home, but so Brenda is saying only if he thinks he can't handle it. What do you think Michelle?

   (Michelle shrugs.)

   Teacher: No thoughts? Jane, what do you think about that?

   Jane: Half yes, half no. Well, I'd say yes. Because people with disabilities can't cooperate with other students and the teacher has to make sure the other students are learning.

   Zion: I disagree because I think that if it was a regular child they wouldn't send him home. They would call his parents and tell them, give him a punishment or whatever, but I think they should be treated equal.

   Teacher: So now you're seeing this as a matter of equality.
Being treated equally. Do you want to finish it, Jane?

Because it seems like you want to say something.

Jane: I agree with what Zion is saying, but a child should be able to go home if he doesn't cooperate with other students. But no offense to him though, cuz he's trying so hard, but he can't get it all at one time.

Zion: But she has to help him get it all at one time.

Jane: Okay, Okay, all right. Can we bring a disability child in here? So we could get different points of view?

Brenda and Zion seem to think schools should not have so much power when it comes to sending students with disabilities home for behavior issues. Jane seems to disagree, considering the other students in the situation. Zion begins to see it as a matter of equality. She also sees the role of the teacher as one who must help students with disabilities behave differently when things get difficult. Finally, Jane wants to ask a child with a disability what s/he thinks – she wants to be informed through an insider’s perspective!

**Systems and gender roles: He’s got a little sugar in his tank.** Here, after reading a part of the focal novel in which the family dog dies, students discuss society’s perceptions of males crying versus females crying.

Teacher: So, it’s this whole thing about putting the dog to sleep and what did it say about the little brother. How did he react?

Brenda: He cried.
Teacher: And what about Jason? Did he cry?

Derrick: No.

Teacher: Interesting. (directed to D): Talk about that.

Derrick: No, I can’t talk about that. Because then it’s gonna remind me about Zeus, and then I’m gonna cry, and then it’s gonna get so annoying-

Jane: Derrick, we saw you cry one time…

Derrick: Yeah, that was cuz of basketball. They was trying to kick me off of basketball. That’s the only thing I really cry for – is basketball.

Brenda: When he cry?

Derrick: When they was gonna kick me off of basketball.

Brenda: Wow… And he cried because of that?

Derrick: Yeah! Any boy would cry over basketball.

Jane: The only person that hasn’t cried in the classroom that we have never seen is M, M, and F.

Teacher: Do you think it’s okay to cry?

Derrick: I don’t care. I just cried because of basketball because any boy is gonna cry if you kick them off the basketball team. That’s all.

Teacher: Do you think it’s worse for a boy to cry than a girl?

Jane: It depends. Emotions…
Derrick: I don’t cry, I’m not a sensitive person, that’s not me. I’m more of a basketball person.

Teacher: So, you cried about basketball because that’s what you cared about.

Derrick: Well, I cried about my grandma.

Teacher: Okay.

Derrick: But I wouldn’t cry about like little things. Like, someone punches me, I’d be like, “Okay.”

Teacher: How does society view boys crying? Versus girls crying?

Derrick: When they see a boy crying, they automatically think, like, he “like a boy.” (gesturing fingers in quotation marks). Like, he’s crying, he’s got a little sugar in his tank.

Teacher: Girls, what do you think about that?

Derrick: Girls, they like that type of stuff. They see a guy crying, they’re like, “Aw… Look at him. He’s so cute.”

(Girls laugh.)

Brenda: No, like um… especially if it’s like a woman or a girl or somebody you know, they might be like, “Why is that boy crying?” Because they expect them to be more mature about it? Because they would never expect a boy to cry? It was the same way, because remember um… when Jason was saying about his dad came when he was in
trouble and he was thinking about who was going to take care of him and that he would need to learn to live a normal life without his parents. That was sad.

Teacher: Did he cry at that point?
Brenda: No, he wanted to.
Teacher: Oh, that’s right. He wanted to talk about it, and he wanted to cry. But he didn’t.
Derrick: He’s a man. He’s supposed to be macho. There was a saying at the swimming center. They said if you belly flop… uh…. I can’t think of it right now, but, basically, if you belly flop, don’t cry about it because you will look like a girl.
Teacher: What do you think about that?
Derrick: Naw! Some guy belly flopped off a 30-foot diving board and his intestines popped out!

As a male, Derrick believes that society’s perception of a male crying is that the male is feminine or gay. Brenda confirms Derrick’s understanding of society’s perception by saying she thinks Derrick should not have cried over being kicked off of the basketball team. Even though she expresses this, Derrick also admits to crying when his grandmother died. He admits that a male crying because of pain is acceptable in his eyes. All the female students did not express thoughts as to the injustice of female crying as more acceptable than male crying.
Systems and people of color: I hate the police. During the aforementioned discussion about police brutality, students verbalized their distrust and anger toward law enforcement. The following excerpt shows students’ thoughts when asked if something like the Holocaust could ever happen again, during which Zion shared how the color of her skin may affect her future opportunities.

Teacher: What about the police and racial profiling.

(Many students try to talk at once.)

Derrick: It’s just going to get worse.

Jane: Mm-hm. Ms. Kearney, if I go to jail, you’re gonna have to bail me out.

(Everyone laughs.)

Zion: It’s not about jail; it’s just about my race. I think it’s going to be hard for me to do what I want to in my life because of how I look. I hope they don’t arrest me for something stupid, and then it affects my business life and…

Finally, Zion shares her distrust of political leaders to do what they say they will do.

Teacher: The police chief came out, I think, on the news and said, yes. There were issues with the way this man was arrested and treated.

Brenda: And how many was it?

Teacher: More than one. I don’t know.

Zion: Actions speak more than words do.

Teacher: Good point.
Zion: You don’t know if he actually mean what he says. He could just be saying to calm people down.

Through these discussions, students voiced their distrust, fear, and dislike of the police and political figures. They continually share their belief that the law enforcement system in our society holds power, and that members of this system misuse this power.

Zion was able to recognize the link between language and power. She understands that the police chief is in a position to use language to “calm people down.” She understands these words may be nothing more than just that.

Students were also able to discuss and question the treatment of people who are marginalized by our society as a whole as well as the systems within our society (airlines, schools, law enforcement). Some of this talk grew out of the focal novel; however, most of it emerged after reading or viewing related current events and discussing topics that emerged from talk on other topics.

**Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice**

While this dimension is often seen as definitive of critical literacy, it is rarely achieved without expanded knowledge gained in the other three dimensions (Lewison et. al, 2002). In other words, it is difficult for one to take action that promotes social justice if s/he has not problematized sociopolitical topics, questioned the status quo, and reflected on contradictory perspectives. Any action predicing such problematizing, questioning, and reflecting runs the risk of being shallow.

In analyzing discourse to uncover talk about this dimension, I asked the following questions:

- Does activity involve rewriting, redesign, or the taking on of new positions?
Do participants move from spectator to actor roles?

Does activity involve ongoing accessing and using language or image to change existing discourses?

Approximately 26% of critical talk fell into this category. The following excerpts show students rewriting their understanding of autism, expressing desires to move from spectator to actor roles, and verbalizing the desire to use language to change existing discourses.

**Redesigning our perceptions of people with disabilities: Don’t be scared of them.** The following discussion took place after finishing our focal novel. Taking on the role of the More Knowledgeable Other, I tried to help students see connections between their newfound understanding of autism and social action. In the excerpt below, with consistent questioning from me, students verbalize ways in which their attitudes toward people with disabilities have changed.

Teacher: OK. Can your better understanding of autism change, or could it change your understanding of life? Your everyday life? *(These were awkward questions. What I meant to ask was if the experience of reading and discussing a book about an autistic person had changed their understanding of people with disabilities or the way they would treat people with disabilities.)*

Jane: Well, I know that there are a lot of autistic people who struggle, and it's not OK to make fun of them.
Teacher: What about people with other disabilities? For example, you may not come into contact with a lot of people who have autism, but what about other disabilities and differences?

Zion: They probably feel the same way.

Teacher: OK, so how could that change your interactions with them? Or your perception of them? Somebody on this side of the table.

Brenda: To try to understand them. To know not to judge them. To try to help them and see like-do they need any help.

Zion: To not be scared of them.

Teacher: Mm. Not be scared of them. Don't be mean and talk about them because you don't know what's going on with that person. How about, remember how Carly's dad, and sometimes the people in the book just talk right in front of Jason like he doesn't think?

Zion: Don't think that they don't know- that they can't hear you and they don't know what you're talking about. Most of the time, they do.

Students verbalized their new positions on how to treat people with disabilities. They understand that rather than fearing their differences, they should work to understand and
respect them. Zion is able to verbalize that we should assume people with disabilities might be able to hear us and comprehend what we are saying.

*From spectator to actor: People with disabilities.*

“Well, you could make a website.” -Derrick

In the following transcript, students were able to create ways they might help others deepen their understandings of those with disabilities; however, this only happened with consistent questioning from me.

Zion: You can try to explain to them what their situation is, some people, they stick to what they think. People only change if they want to.

Teacher: Oh my gosh! That goes back to something that somebody said in one of our first meetings—people only change if they want to.

Derrick: Me. I think I said that. I don't know.

Teacher: When you say we can talk to people, how can we, or people in America, that agree with us about autism get it across to people? How can we talk to people? How do you do that when some people don't even want to listen? It's not like you can just go up to random people on the street and go, "Are you afraid of autism? Let me explain to you…"

Zion: Well. you could pull someone to the side and explain to them.

Teacher: Oh, you mean like in that situation with the lady
(on the plane)?

Zion: Yeah.

Teacher: How can we get others to understand how they should treat autistic people?

Derrick: Well you really can't do... Well, you could make a website.

Teacher: Ah. A website? About autism and what it is?

That's a great idea. A great idea. What else? You said you were looking at YouTube videos?

Zion: Mm-hmm.

(Pause)

Zion: What? You want me to tell you what I saw?

Teacher: Well, I was just thinking that we are talking about getting the word out there...

Zion: Well, I saw this video and it was about a lady who she was saying my baby is autistic and I don't know if she's going to have a happy life, and all of these autistic people they sent her stuff back showing them that they are happy and stuff like that even with their disease, well not disease, their condition.

Teacher: I like how you use the word condition rather than disease. It sounds like you learned a lot from that video. Like, it really impacted you. Do you know how to make a
Liberating Dialogue

YouTube video?
Zion: Oh! You mean we could make a YouTube video to
tell people about it (autism)!

While it took prompting, students were able to verbally create ways they could move from being spectators to actors so as to help others understand people with disabilities. Students realized they could talk to people, and they recognized they could use Internet technology to raise awareness about disabilities.

From spectator to actor: Bullies.

“If a person is messed with, give them your back.” - Jane

In this section, students discuss the issues that arise when considering whether to stand up for someone who is being bullied. Derrick and Zion express their beliefs that it is complicated, whereas Brenda sees the matter as somewhat straightforward.

Zion: They did pick him because he (inaudible).
Teacher: He’s what?
Zion: He was an easy target.

Teacher: He was an easy target. Yeah, that's a good phrase.

Have you ever seen anybody do something to anybody because they were an easy target?
Derrick: Yes
Brenda: Mm-hmm.
Derrick: I see it every day.
Teacher: So what's the decision you have to make when you see that happen?
Brenda: To step up and be the bigger person.

Teacher: To step up and be the bigger person, or not do anything, right? I mean-I'm not saying both of those are right.

Brenda: But you can't be a bystander.

Teacher: You can't be a bystander. I love that word.

Derrick: Yes, you can. You can be, but you choose not to be.

Brenda: No but sometimes you be like, you know, for the person to be a bad, I mean, being a bystander means they are a bad person because they are just sitting there watching the person getting-

Zion: No.

Derrick: Not necessarily. No, no, no.

Teacher: But you just said you could be a bystander but you shouldn't.

Derrick: No, but that doesn't mean they are a bad person.

Zion: Exactly.

Teacher: Oh, OK. Maybe just that they made a bad decision?

Derrick: No, it just means that they're not getting involved in something that they had no business in because some things, if it happened to someone else and you don't know
about it, like a shooting or something that's different. But like if somebody's doing something, and say somebody's having a conversation and you hop in their conversation, then you're wrong. You don't know what they're talking about, you don't know what's going on, you don't know like um, what's the setting? Why are they talking about it? You don't know.
Zion: Yeah.
Teacher: Like, the context.
Derrick: Yeah.
Teacher: That's a really interesting point. So, you have to make a decision about whether to get in the middle of something. I mean, do you agree with that (looking at Brenda)?
Brenda: Yeah. But you could be the person just to stop a situation from happening so it won't cause any more confusion or the other person won't get upset.
Teacher: What if it's out-what if it's really outright bullying like this, like, what if it's outright somebody picking on somebody that's an easy target?
Derrick: It's just bullying.
Zion: If you're- It's different. You could be a bystander just looking, then going to a teacher without getting involved
(inaudible).

Teacher: Okay, so there's degrees to what you can do. You can get in the middle of it, you can go tell somebody-

Brenda: Or you can just don't care and walk away.

Teacher: Yeah. Does this book, even though it's fiction, give you any insight into bullying, or easy targets, or what you would do in the future?

Jane and Zion: Yes.

Teacher: Go ahead, Jane.

Jane: No matter where you are, you should, um, if a person is messed with like that, give them your back.

Here, Derrick explains that one must know the context before intervening in a situation. He feels strongly that whether a person sticks up for someone does not determine that person’s character. While Brenda concedes that context is important, she feels strongly that people have a responsibility to at least stop a situation if it seems someone is being harmed. The group also considers the fact that there are choices to be made as one can personally intervene or seek assistance from an adult. Jane ended with a statement that summed up a theme of the book, “give them your back.”

From spectator to actor: Protesting police brutality.

“I want to be my own version of Martin Luther King” - Zion

As previously mentioned, students discussed police brutality at length. In the following transcript, Zion voices her desire to participate with the people of Baltimore in
the protesting of the police treatment of Freddie Gray, a Black man who died there while in police custody.

Zion: Let’s go to Baltimore!

Jane: Yeah! Can we go to Baltimore? Can you take us on a bus there?

Teacher: What would you do if you went?

Derrick: Nothing. It just makes things worse.

Zion: I would riot with them.

Teacher: Would you, uh… Okay. (getting up to write on white board) There’s protesting, and then there’s rioting. Do you know what I mean, there’s, there’s protesting and then there’s actual looting and stuff. So, do you see what Derrick is saying?

Brenda: So with rioting, there’s a lot of danger?

(Teacher writes danger? on board under rioting.)

Teacher: When the dangerous stuff starts, then the people in charge start to say, “Look, you know, look at what’s happening. They’re the ones who are wrong. Is that your point (to Derrick)? That’s how it makes it worse?

Derrick: (nods)

Derrick is less excited than the others about the idea of protesting and verbalizes his understanding that some people are rioting, and he would not want to be part of that.
In the next section, I challenge Zion because she began a phrase with, “If I were an adult…” My hope is that students, although they are young teens, will see themselves as possible actors in regard to the recent events with police brutality.

Teacher: You said that, you know, “If you were an adult,” and that kind of a thing. But, what do you have that some adults don’t have? When it comes to this? I want you to think about that for a minute.

Zion: I mean; I have most of what adults have. That’s what I think, personally. I’m as smart as an adult. Dealing with knowledge, not like…

Teacher: Experience, maybe?

Zion: Right. Dealing with that.

Teacher: What do you have over me?

Zion: What do you mean?

Teacher: If we both went to Baltimore.

Derrick: Youth.

Teacher (laughing): That’s for sure. More energy.

Zion: Yeah.

Teacher: But what do you have that I don’t have? I could go, and I could march with you.

Zion: Dedication?

Teacher: I may not have the same dedication, right? Why?
Zion: Because you’re not in that situation, or you’re not African American?

Teacher (nodding): Okay, so never forget that. So never forget that. You say, “Oh, but I’m a kid, so people…” and I understand where you’re coming from, but you’re also, an African American, smart, young girl. You are all African American, smart, young people. And if the world is gonna change, it’s probably not gonna be changed by people like me. Revolutions are started by people-

Derrick: Youth!

Teacher: That want the change, usually, for themselves.

A bit later in the conversation, Zion shares her redefined conceptualization of her possible role in protesting.

Zion: What I was saying was, I would go to Baltimore, and I would try to do what Martin Luther King did. Not exactly what he did - I don’t want to be him, I want to be my own version of what he did, and try to make it as a way of being a march, a protest, but don’t be violent because if we get violent, all they’re gonna do is get violent back.

Derrick: That’s smart.

Zion: And be mean back and whatever. So if we just protest and stand our ground, and don’t leave or whatever, and tell them what we want-
Derrick: That’s smart.

Zion: They, they might listen.

Derrick: That’s smart.

Zion: Because if they keep being violent, it won’t help nothing.

Teacher: Okay, so you’re saying violence begets violence.

So if they’re violent-

Zion: I think it will happen again where they (police) come out and start hitting the people.

Zion decided she would protest if she had the chance, but she would not partake in any violence. Derrick continually agrees with Zion’s view. Zion now seems to believe, although she is a young teen, she could be an actor rather than a spectator.

While much of the students talk revolved around comprehension of the text, side talk, and other noncritical talk, about 25% of all of the talk could be considered critical talk when using the four dimensions of critical literacy designed by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’s (2002) for analysis. Certainly, this was impacted by my presence. The next section discusses the possible influence of my presence on the talk that occurred.

The Presence of a More Knowledgeable Other

Vygotsky (1978) claimed that learning often hinges on the presence of a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) within the learning context. In other words, learning takes place when novices are guided by an expert. While many literature discussion models involve students discussing text without a teacher present, the model in this research was designed for me as an MKO, to be present during discussions; however, I perceived my
role to be one of clarifier and helper rather than leader. The analysis in this section focuses on the following research question:

*In what ways do the questions and comments of a More Knowledgeable Other affect the issues and ideas expressed as related to social justice (i.e., gender, culture, abled-ness, immigration, economics, social class, poverty, racism, oppression, and peace)?*

In order to answer this question, I combed the transcripts, looking for times when my presence had a visible impact on a discussion. I also asked students the following question during their exit interviews:

“In what ways do you think the discussions would have been different if I was not present?”

The presence of a More Knowledgeable Other had a variety of effects on the discussion that took place. First, my role was often to help students understand the story events so that they could discuss the deeper issues the book brought to light. Next, my role was often to prompt meaningful discussion. An important goal of this research was that students would bring up and discuss critical issues related to disabilities; however, students sometimes needed prompting to do so. At the same time, the table was turned at times, so that students served as the More Knowledgeable Others. This section explains each of these situations further, and explains how students felt the discussions may have been different if a More Knowledgeable other had not been present.

**Getting Stuck.** During student-led literature discussions, students who identify as having comprehension difficulties often have a hard time discussing the text at a deeper, more critical level (Hall, in press). For example, if they have misconceptions about characters
and events, they will struggle with analyzing and exploring related sociopolitical themes. This is one reason I chose to be part of the discussions. However, I attempted to limit my role as clarifier to situations when there were major misconceptions about the text.

Although the focal novel was written at approximately a fifth grade level, there were times when students needed guidance comprehending the chapters. Moreover, they often did not ask for help; rather, it was during discussions that I noticed their lack of comprehension. The following excerpt is a discussion that took place after students read an event central to the plot of the novel. Jason, the autistic protagonist, and his brother have finally stood up to their cousin for bullying Jason.

Teacher: Why did Jason tell his brother, “Good shot?”

(Pause.)

Derrick: What was the question?

Teacher: Jason tells his brother Jeremy, “Good shot.” What does that mean?

(Pause.)

Teacher: Uh-oh. I think we may need to reread this part together.

Brenda: Oh, when he kicked him?

Teacher: Thank you. Can you explain?

Brenda: I guess when, um, they were leaving out the room, his cousin ran after him, and I guess he touched him, and then Jeremy kicked him.
Teacher: Good. So, his cousin Seth… He kicked his cousin Seth. Why was, uh… Why would he do that? Why was Jason mad at Seth?

Jane: Because he kicked him?

Brenda: Because he called him weird, and he’s like, “What’s wrong with your brother? Why isn’t he responding?

Teacher: I think one person understood this part of the chapter.

At this point, I made the decision to reread the section aloud to the students while they followed along. Afterward, I looked up and paused.

Derrick: Seth is a bully.

Jane: I don’t think Seth is a bully.

Teacher: You don’t?

Jane: No, you know how people, they mess with they cousins. They still love them and care for them.

Teacher: Okay, so do you think it’s a joking around statement - Your defective brother? Or a real statement?

Brenda, Zion, Michelle, and Jane: Real statement.

Derrick: When I mess with my cousin, I don’t say anything personal.

Teacher: What else happened in that chapter that leads you to believe he meant it?
Brenda: When his mom was telling his aunt that Jason was very good with computers. You know, “Seth – show Jason your new computer.” And then he said, “No – it needs to be rebooted and stuff like that. And then when they went in his room, he was like, “Don’t touch my stuff.”

After rereading the section to the students, they were able to discuss a significant story event, which gets at a deeper concept, the mistreatment of the autistic main character.

In this next excerpt, students read a part of the story in which Jason was in a restaurant foyer by himself while his mother went to the restroom. He was doing fine for a while, reading a book until some girls started looking at him. The text implies that he got nervous and began self-stimulating, possibly blinking and flapping. The reader would need to infer this, and none of the students did.

Teacher: Okay, since we only have a couple of minutes. So, what happened? What’s the sad part?

Derrick: The girls bully him. Well, they don’t bully him, but they’re…

Teacher: What must have he started to do?

Derrick: He started smiling.

Teacher: But she said, “Is he smiling?” and the other girl goes, “No – that’s just his face!”

Derrick: Oh. Well, what is up with his face?”

Teacher: I think that – remember when he said he was looking in the mirror and he thought he looked normal?
Derrick: Yeah.

Teacher: But I think when he starts this – what words did he use? Flapping…

Derrick: Blinking?

Teacher: Blinking… Oh, and rocking. So, I think when he starts those things, I think his face changes. Do you know what I mean? And then the girls were like, “Gross! Ew!”

Zion: Oh. So he wasn’t smiling.

Derrick: Oh. Wait, wait, wait. If that was me, I’da been mad! I wouldn’t have been able to take it.

Through discussion with a More Knowledgeable Other, students came to understand the event, which allowed them to discuss the deeper issue of society’s perceptions of, and reactions to autistic people. Because Derrick clarified his understanding of what Jason went through, he was able to identify with him.

**Prompting the Sociopolitical**

The goal of literature discussions is that students will work together to discuss text at a critical level, moving beyond surface level comprehension (McMahon, 1997a). Oftentimes, however, students get hung up on story events and details rather than themes, or worse, misconceive the author’s intended theme (Thein, Guise, and Sloan, 2011). At times, students quickly identify with a character rather than considering the social and political dimensions of text (Lewis, 2000). Moreover, students may gloss over a point made by another student rather than fleshing it out. Students who struggle in the area of reading may run into these problems more often than those who do not struggle. Sadly, it
seems many teachers opt for entirely different instructional models, which limit student talk, rather than providing the simple scaffolding they may need. The following are examples of statements and questions I made in order to prompt more critical discussion.

- That’s a really great statement, really interesting statement. He said, “He’s like antisocial in real life, but when he’s on the computer, nobody can see him, so he’s free.”
- How does society view boys crying? Versus girls crying?
- What is your reasoning for that?
- You said that, you know, “If you were an adult,” and that kind of a thing. What do you have that some adults don’t have? When it comes to this? I want you to think about that for a minute.
- So, what can you do about it?
- OK. Has your better understanding of autism changed, or could it change, your understanding of life? Your everyday life?
- But, would you? Would you really? If you had no words, like him? No way to explain yourself?

Oftentimes, these types of questions and statements prompted students to elevate the level of the discussions into one of Van Sluys, Lewison, and Flint’s (2006) four dimensions of critical literacy.

**Who is the More Knowledgeable Other?**

Although I am a more able reader than the participants, there were times when they caught nuances in the novel that I did not. There were also times when students’ positions within society, being young and Black, positioned them to teach *me* about
topics, especially racism and fear of the police. These moments reminded us all that, although teachers may have more subject area knowledge, they are not the More Knowledgeable Others in all areas; students often know more about topics, and teachers can certainly learn from them.

The following excerpt portrays part of a discussion in which Brenda helped me understand the motives of the main character.

Teacher (to Brenda): And you said—it's because he saw Rebecca. Why do you think seeing Rebecca's birthed that in him?

Brenda: Because, Rebecca, she likes to see him write. She wants to see him write more. And she knows that he's going to become a writer, a good writer and stuff like that. So I guess, um, when she says she wants to hear more about Bennu, like, what's going to happen at the end?

Teacher: Oh, that's right, she did. So maybe when he saw her, he was like, “Okay… I need to write it?”

(Brenda nods.)

Teacher: You guys are helping me understand this chapter so much better than I understood it myself.

Zion: I know. We're smart.

Teacher: I remember, at the beginning of this book, I used to try to help you understand. Now you're helping me
understand.

Derrick: Really?

The students were proud that they were teaching me to understand the details of the book, which in this case, needed to be inferred.

The next excerpts took place during our discussions about police brutality, when my words were consistently leading students toward thinking about social action. I tried, time and time again, to help them understand that they have power to change the world. Certainly, from my perspective, as a White female, they are just the people for such a job! I believed their youth and race should prompt them to work for change within their community. What I did not understand, what I could not understand, is the fear that comes with thinking about taking social action as a young Black person in America. Several times, students conveyed their fear of trying to change the current system of police brutality.

Teacher: So, what can you do about it?

Jane: What can I do about it? There’s really nothing to do about it because if you do something about it, like, there’s just gonna be more people getting shot up.

Brenda: They don’t listen. They don’t pay attention to anything that anyone tries to say. That’s why everyone be… They wanna get their attention.

Teacher: Okay, I want you to think about- Somebody brought up Martin Luther King Jr. I want you to think about-
Michelle: And he got shot too!

Michelle’s statement silenced me. The following is a conceptual memo I wrote following this discussion:

“Michelle’s remark – and they shot him too! Wow! She is explaining to me that as I am trying to spur them to social action, it can be dangerous. She is telling me – Maybe I don’t want to go protest for good reason – because I’m afraid for my life! Certainly it is easier not to get involved, but there is more to it than that – there is preservation of well-being. I am pushing too hard. This idea of possible consequences that come with social action is something we should explore further?? She schooled me. Who is the MKO?

(Conceptual Memo 3-17-15)

My conceptual memos were written on my laptop on a two column table titled, “Problems and Setbacks,” and “Patterns, Insights, and Breakthroughs.” Although I chose to place this under the heading “Patterns, Insights, and Breakthroughs,” it is fitting under both headings. I had attempted to get students to think like Martin Luther King, and she reminded me - he got shot too! From my position of Whiteness, it was easy for me to project what these young, Black students “should” do. Until they shared their perspectives about the danger that comes along with addressing police brutality, I truly had not considered it. I had seen empowerment as equivalent to being ready to change the world. Empowerment for them could encompass staying safe, which might mean staying home rather than marching, protesting, or engaging in other activities focused on social justice.
This incident, and others like it, prompted me to reconsider my definition of a More Knowledgeable Other within a critical literacy framework. Freire’s concept of teacher-student and student-teacher (1993) became clear throughout the discussions and activities of the research. The role of the More Knowledgeable Other shifted as students demonstrated their desire to discuss certain topics as well as their insight and understanding of those topics. Within a critical literacy framework that honors the idea of teacher-student and student-teacher, the More Knowledgeable Other is not a single person; rather, it is a role that individuals take on depending upon their knowledge of a concept or a process. Being a literacy educator who consistently uses discussion as a classroom strategy, I had more experience with literature discussions than most middle school students. Further, I held the knowledge of which themes I hoped students would explore. However, when discussing the sociopolitical themes as well as other topics that arose, the students often took on the role of the More Knowledgeable Other. Students provided interpretations and perspectives that led to new thinking for me (Eeds & Wells, 1989).

**Perceptions of the Presence of a Teacher within the Discussions.**

In order to uncover how my presence affected the discussions, I asked students the following question during our exit interviews: “*In what ways do you think the discussions would have been different if I was not present?*”

All five students had similar answers in that they believed discussions would have been off topic with students talking over one another. Zion expressed her belief that some students might have actually made fun of the autistic people we studied merely because they believed that is what their peers wanted to hear.
Zion: Other people would have said something mean about her (Carly) and not have been positive.

Teacher: Why?

Zion: People do what other people expect of them. If you weren’t here, some kids would probably think other kids expect them to make fun of them. Not me, but…

Certainly, the students’ responses are tied to their experiences, or lack thereof, with literature discussions and student-led instructional models. Interestingly, students concentrated on how their behavior would differ rather than their comprehension of the book. The next section discusses how students perceived the literature discussions.

**Student Perceptions of Literature Discussions about Sociopolitical Text**

The final question this research addressed was, “*How will middle school students perceive literature discussions about complex sociopolitical text?*” In order to answer this question, I asked the following questions during each student’s exit interview:

- How did the book compare with other books you have read this school year?
- How did the literature discussions compare with other literacy activities you have participated in this year?
- What in particular do you remember talking about? Why do you remember this?
- I remember the group discussing… Can you tell me anything interesting you recall from that discussion?
While all students admitted to never before reading a book about autism, two students did see similarities between *Anything but Typical* (Baskin, 2010) and other books they had read this year. Michelle noticed that all of the books she read were about “struggles.” Zion said that with all of the books she read, “You learn a lesson.”

All students shared they rarely discuss literature in their language arts class.

When asked how our discussions were different from those in her classroom, Zion answered, “In the other room, in reading, we write. Then we talk about errors. We correct errors. We don’t talk about the book, really. Here, we talked about what we learned from it.”

Jane also noted the difference; however, she recalled that “some discussions were good, and some were bad.” She noted that the good ones were the ones when everyone participated. Further, she voiced that she learned a lot about autism, so she was glad she participated.

Derrick also shared, “Here, we talk about how it relates to us. Like, how to treat people with autism, or if you see someone with a condition. There, we don’t talk like that. Well, sometimes, but not really.”

Without prompting, four of the five students recognized the discussions about police brutality as the most memorable.

When asked why she thought those discussions were so memorable, Zion answered, “I learned a lot about myself and how I thought. I learned what I would do in that situation to help him (Freddie Gray).”

When asked the same question, Derrick replied, “Because – They were about me!”
Conclusion

With prompting, when discussing sociopolitical text, approximately 25% was categorized as *critical talk* as defined by Lewison, et al. (2002). This critical talk occurred within all four dimensions, with most talk centering around *Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues*. The role of a More Knowledgeable Other came into play in a number of ways, including helping students clarify story events and prompting more critical talk. Students also acted as More Knowledgeable Others, clarifying the text for me and explaining what it felt like to be in their shoes. Finally, students were able to explain how the discussions were different from their everyday classroom literacy practices, and some even expressed without prompting they found them worthwhile.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Implications

The analysis of the critical discourse that occurred during literature discussions with five African American eighth graders who struggle with reading revealed many important insights into critical talk within the classroom. First, the analysis brought to light the amount of each type of critical talk (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys, 2002) that occurred with these students as well as what practices prompted critical talk. The analysis also uncovered significant understandings about the role of the More Knowledgeable Other in the students’ literature discussions. Finally, analysis of student interviews revealed insights regarding the students’ feelings about literature discussions of books with sociopolitical themes as a literacy practice.

Critical Talk Dimensions Reconfigured

The participants, five African American eighth graders who struggle with reading, were able to talk critically about sociopolitical issues in text with some interaction and prompting from a More Knowledgeable Other. Throughout the three-month period of this study, critical talk occurred in all four of Lewison, et al.’s (2002) dimensions of critical literacy. Table 5.1 shows the amount of critical talk within each dimension.

Table 5.1 Amount of Critical Talk in Each Dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disrupting the Commonplace</th>
<th>Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints</th>
<th>Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues</th>
<th>Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As mentioned in Chapter 3, after reading literature regarding the four dimensions of critical literacy by Lewison et al. (2002), my impression was that talk would occur within the first three dimensions before that of the final and most important dimension, *Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice*, could occur. The authors suggest that this final dimension is often seen as “the definition of critical literacy” (p. 163), and that students need a firm foundation of talk in the other three dimensions before meaningful talk in the last dimension can occur. My first impressions of this research are shown in figure 5.1.

![Figure 5.1. First Impressions of Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys’s (2002) Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy. This figure depicts my first impressions of the typical patterns of critical discourse.](image)

As evidenced in Fig. 5.1, my expectations were that students would spend lots of time in the first three dimensions before moving to the *top* dimension; however, the findings in this study suggest a different structure to these dimensions, depending on students’ prior knowledge of the sociopolitical issue at hand. First, when students had
limited prior knowledge about a sociopolitical topic, such as autism, their critical talk fell into the first two dimensions early on in the study, and the last two dimensions later in the study. Second, when students had a wealth of background knowledge about the topic, such as racism, their talk quickly fell into the last two dimensions, skipping the first two dimensions altogether. The following sections further explore these findings.

Moving slowly through the dimensions. The focal novel, Anything but Typical by Norah Raleigh Baskin (2010), was chosen for students to consider the topic of autism. Goals were that students would develop an understanding of society’s perspective and treatment of individuals with autism, as well as their own understandings of people with autism, to better empathize with, respect, and advocate for them.

Because of students’ limited knowledge of and experience with people with autism, they spent significant amounts of time during the first half of the study attempting to define autism and clarify their understandings of it (Dimension 1) by standing in the main character’s shoes (Dimension 2). Their talk fluidly moved between the first two dimensions during this time. Students negotiated understandings of concepts (Dimension 1) by standing in the shoes of others (Dimension 2), and vice versa. These two dimensions worked hand in hand as students explored, solidified, and expanded their understandings of key focal novel themes such as normalcy and autism. Examples of Derrick’s statements as he traveled back and forth through these dimensions are provided in Figure 5.2 below.
As students’ personal understandings on these concepts became clearer, they were able to advance into the third dimension, *Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues*. In other words, once students solidified their understandings of key concepts and themes, they could consider how they fit into a bigger picture. For example, when students had clear understandings of autism, which occurred through problematizing it and standing in the shoes of the focal novel’s main character, *then* they attempted to discuss how autistic people are viewed by society, and the power struggles with which autistic people must deal. Finally, after clarifying understandings of the treatment of autistic people by
society, then students began to create ways in which they might transform society. Finally, with prompting from me, students spoke about explaining autism to others, treating people with disabilities with respect, and creating YouTube videos to teach others about disabilities. The talk that occurred fell into these dimensions of critical literacy in a hierarchical fashion as portrayed in figure 5.3.

**Figure 5.3.** Talk about autism and normalcy. This figure illustrates students’ discourse patterns when discussing the terms *autism* and *normal*.

*Jumping into the last two dimensions.* While critical talk about the sociopolitical themes such as autism in the focal novel fell into the dimensions in the hierarchical structure seen above, critical talk about racism occurred on an entirely different trajectory. These discussions occurred after students informed me they would be visiting the Holocaust Museum. I asked students if they thought a situation like the Holocaust could ever occur again. Students immediately equated the treatment of Jews by the Nazis with the treatment of African Americans by the police.
Because these African American students have had significant experience with racism, their critical talk quickly fell within the third and fourth dimensions. They came into the discussions with personal understandings of racism and did not need time to define and conceptualize it. Very quickly, students were able to discuss how racism fit into sociopolitical systems, and without prompting, discussed taking action in the world to address the problem of racism as shown in Figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4. Talk about racism. This figure illustrates the cyclical discourse pattern between Dimensions 3 and 4 that occurred when discussing racism.

However, it is important to note that while some students discussed marching in protests against police brutality, others spoke about fear displacing their desires to get involved. As shown in Figure 5.5, students’ decisions to act were based on their individual levels of comfort, responsibility, and the current climate of racial tension in America. Here, Zion shows a strong desire to be engaged in social action regarding
police brutality, while Derrick explains his unwillingness to be part of the process since he does not believe it will make a difference. Finally, Michelle shows her fear of being part of the process, remembering what happened to Martin Luther King Jr.

Figure 5.5. Students’ differing attitudes toward social action. This figure illustrates three students’ different attitudes about moving toward social action against racism.

As a teacher, I can encourage students to move into what is considered to be the most important dimension, Taking Social Action, (Lewison et al., 2002); however, the decision to act must be theirs alone. In The Politics of Education, Culture, Power, and Liberation (1985), Freire explains that the radical teacher must understand students’ oppression, including the specific problems that oppression causes. In this case, students’ fear of the police was something I did not expect to stand in their way of social action. I had not considered it. In this instance, it was my job to listen to students’ fears, and learn (Freire, 2000). In listening, I gave power to students. My silence allowed them to take the
power and validated their lived experiences. It was both a humbling and enlightening experience.

Moving fluidly through the dimensions. While students spent much of their time moving back and forth through Dimensions 3 and 4 when discussing racism, their discussions on the topic of power moved through the four dimensions of critical literacy in a unique way. As some students expressed a desire to demonstrate their own power in relation to racism, others questioned their ability to do so. This brought talk back into the first dimension, Disrupting the Commonplace, to reconsider the definition of power. Spending time in the first dimension allowed students to re-conceptualize power as multidimensional, which then allowed students to move forward again. When considering sociopolitical topics, talk may need to move fluidly through the dimensions – re-conceptualizing, challenging, and reflecting - in order for students’ talk to move to the fourth dimension, Taking Social Action, so as to have the grounding and strength it needs (Lewison et al., 2002). Figure 5.6 depicts this cyclical process.
Figure 5.6. Talk about Power. This figure illustrates the fluid discourse pattern when students discussed power.

**Catalysts for Talk**

Students took part in 22 discussions ranging from nine minutes to 38 minutes in length. An analysis of the longer discussions shows they occurred for the following two reasons: students’ interests and the use of the discussion strategy Save the Last Word for Me (Vaughan & Estes, 1986).

The discussion about police brutality was started by Derrick and continued for 38 minutes with all students participating. As the following transcript explains, the discussion was only stopped because students had to get to their next class.

Teacher: I wanna stop, because we have to stop, but I want you to just analyze this conversation compared to, say, the first one we ever had. First of all, that was 38 minutes long. Thank you very much – I have to transcribe that! (laughs)
But, think about what was said here. Wow. You all had a lot to say – a lot of really, really cool stuff to say. And you listened to each other, and you disagreed with each other – nicely – (laughs), and maybe some of you changed your thinking on some things. I know I did.

This topic was obviously relevant to students, so I pressed play on my audio device and put the focal book aside to encourage the discussion. Although it was not spurred by a text, it was a necessary discussion, and I was open to this divergence. Students were feeling fearful about the recent police brutality in the news and had questions. They deserved to work through these emotions in a safe space (Bolgatz, 2005; Brooks & Hampton, 2009).

The strategy, “Save the Last Word for Me” (Vaughan & Estes, 1986) asks students to mark passages of the text that interest them. During the discussion, students take turns reading their quotes, allowing group members to comment, after which they shared their own thoughts on the quotes they read aloud. This strategy led to longer discussions since all students were asked to comment on each passage. It also led to more student talk and less teacher talk, a worthy goal in student-centered classrooms.

**Catalysts for Critical Talk**

While some degree of critical talk appeared in most discussions, there were texts that served as catalysts for larger amounts of critical talk. While the focal novel spurred some critical talk, informational texts were able to bridge sociopolitical topics to reality, thus allowing students to dive into the third and fourth dimensions of critical literacy,
Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues and Taking Social Action, that asked students to consider topics in light of society’s views as well as their own action.

As students read and discussed the focal novel, Anything but Typical by Norah Raleigh Baskin (2010), they grew in their understandings of autism; however, deep, critical talk falling into the third and fourth dimensions of critical literacy occurred after reading an article about the family of an autistic girl getting thrown off of an airplane (Shapiro, 2015). It is this kind of text that, when students had a foundation of knowledge on the topic, spurred them to action.

Similarly, an email from a Black colleague encouraging students to work for racial justice moved discussion directly into the fourth dimension, Taking Social Action. The following is an excerpt from her email:

> Change begins with the people. It starts at the bottom until those at top are forced to follow the masses. We as individuals harness the potential for immense power… They know that if every person harnessed their individual power into collective power the status quo would be dismantled (Jones, 2015).

Her words, which referred to our previous discussions about power, prompted further discussion about taking action by using collective power.

If students have foundational knowledge about sociopolitical issues, placing them in text situations that prompt them to consider society’s views and their own actions results in deep, critical talk.
The Role of the More Knowledgeable Other: The Interplay Between Vygotskian and Freirian Constructs

Vygotsky’s construct of a More Knowledgeable Other has obvious implications for the classroom situation. A More Knowledgeable Other refers to someone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990). Therefore, it seems natural that a teacher in a classroom is the MKO. Even in student-centered models of instruction, such as literature discussions, the teacher assumes the role of the MKO in the broad sense; that is, she has more knowledge about discussion practices, the literature that is being discussed, and the goals she has for that unit. This idea is central to this research in that it is claiming that readers who struggle deserve authentic, student-centered literacy practices, but that they may need more scaffolding from the MKO. However, in student-centered models within classrooms interested in social justice issues, Freire’s construct of the teacher-student and the student-teacher also must be considered. While I embraced most general tenets of critical literacy, that students read about social, political, and multicultural issues and that they analyze these texts in terms of power structures and underlying themes, I had not considered how Freire’s notion of student-teacher and teacher-student would play out within the context of a Vygotskian model, which includes an MKO. Certainly, this is an important consideration for teachers interested in social justice. Can Vygotsky’s notion of the MKO and Freire’s notion of the student-teacher and teacher-student coexist? The answer is a resounding yes. In a social justice oriented classroom, the teacher can unapologetically retain the role of MKO while simultaneously embodying the role of teacher-student. In literature discussions, this not only does happen, it should happen. This is what leads to the richest discussions. When students
are able to assume the role of student-teacher during a discussion while the teacher simultaneously assumes the roles of teacher-student (listening and learning) and MKO (facilitating, probing, clarifying), liberating dialogue evolves. When students share their perceptions and knowledge while the teacher carefully listens and responds with questions and statements that clarify, probe, and empower students to recognize their lived experience as valid, new thinking about sociopolitical themes emerges that would otherwise have been lost. It is the students’ insight that leads to the most meaningful critical talk because it is theirs. Further, students might have insight into topics such as racial injustice that teachers do not have (Moller, 2002), particularly when s/he is of the dominant culture and race, in this case, White, middle class. Moreover, it informs the MKO, who now is even more knowledgeable about her students.

**Student Perceptions**

Overall, students expressed positive thoughts and feelings about the chosen text and the discussions. They enjoyed learning about autism, and the opportunity to talk freely, and discuss how the topics related to their own lives and experiences. Most students believed the discussion on racism was most memorable. Most students noted how the experience was different from their regular class, which often did not allow for talk or application of reading material to their lives.

**Implications for Practice**

This section contains a discussion of implications from researchers and teachers who wish to better understand and create classroom communities that inspire liberating dialogue.
The power of texts with sociopolitical themes. Certainly, the texts chosen for this research prompted the liberating discourse that occurred. Current, award-winning young adult novels with sociopolitical themes are available in abundance, and they should be considered for curriculum in English and reading classes rather than being relegated to the role of independent reading. They contain themes worthy of study that has the potential of creating liberating discourse that leads to social change.

Literacy instruction in the CCSS era: Preparing students for life. Literacy teachers must create environments and instruction that enable students to grow in all areas of literacy. While Common Core State Standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1 is among the easiest to assess (Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), it is not by any means the most important. Certainly, it does not prosper individual thinking; it leads to activities in which students cite others’ thoughts. In this era of CCSS, which lends itself to high-stakes testing, it is important to recognize the limitations of such standards, as well as the power of others. Not directly tied to high-stakes testing, anchor standards such as CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. CCRA. SL.1, Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), offers students experiences to share their thinking about text, listen to others, and alter their thinking. While the CCSS were created to increase the rigor of state
standards, and thereby increase the time spent in activities requiring higher-order thinking, an overconcentration on high-stakes testing has the power to negate any such benefits. Further, while the CCSS call teachers to prepare students for college and careers, discussions about sociopolitical texts help prepare students for both these and for life. If a child is academically prepared for college but does not know who s/he is, the educational system has failed. If a child is academically prepared for a career but does not respect the diversity in her place of employment, again, the educational system has failed. Students should not need to fail life as productive U.S. citizens in order to pass tests.

**Equity for readers who struggle.** Student-centered discourse is a powerful educational practice as it allows opportunities to change thinking and form identities. However, in many inner-city schools, often attended by students of color who struggle with literacy, teacher-directed talk is more common than any other (Applebee et al.; Kohn, 1999; Kozol, 2007). Yet the power of student-centered discourse is well documented (Cazden, 2001; Daniels, 1994; Freire, 1993; McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Shor & Freire, 1987; Vygotsky, 1986), so that the lack of discussion activities with students who struggle with literacy must be viewed as a matter of educational equity. Such students need student-centered literacy practices that promote critical thinking and foster identity development as they deserve opportunities to share in liberating dialogue and remake their realities (Shor & Freire, 1987).

Another reason that students who struggle with literacy should engage in discussion-based literacy activities is that they deserve opportunities to show what they know in ways that do not involve reading and writing (Hall, 2013). Student-centered discussion has the potential to provide equal ground for students. If such discussion
becomes a common literacy practice, it has the potential to create spaces that redefine how struggling readers’ view themselves as well as how others view them (Hall, in press). While students who struggle are often the recipients of few authentic literacy practices (Kozol, 2007; Kohn, 2012), they deserve classrooms grounded in them.

**Critical discussions: The path to social action.** *Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice* is often seen as the definition of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2002). Watching students discuss how they will work against social inequity as it relates to gender, culture, race, abled-ness, immigration, economics, or social class is a dream come true for a teacher coming from a critical perspective. However, teachers cannot simply provide students with texts, allow them to talk, and expect them to be there. The following sections describe practices in the research that seemed to create a path for this type of talk.

**Allowing time on a topic.** If we want students to move toward social action, we must give them ample time with the topic. Students must be given opportunities to define and redefine concepts, grapple with their thoughts about it as well as society’s thoughts about it, and see themselves in relationship to changing the world in terms of it. We must guard against *quick leaps* into the fourth dimension, *Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice*, since they may be indicative of shallow understanding. “Students cannot take informed action against oppression without expanded understandings and perspectives gained from the other three dimensions” (Lewison et al., 2002). Developing these expanded understandings and perspectives takes time. Had we covered more reading material in this study as was intended, the discussions would not have been as rich, nor the learning as significant.
A faster path: Tapping into prior knowledge and interest. Learning begins with the known and travels to the unknown. The road to social action is faster when students deal with topics about which they have significant background knowledge. When students learn about a topic which is unfamiliar to them, they must construct the new knowledge. This can be time consuming; however, when students have significant prior knowledge on a topic, constructing or reconstructing meaning happens more rapidly. For example, when reading about autism, a topic about which students had little prior knowledge, students took considerable time in the first three dimensions: conceptualizing autism, considering viewpoints on the topic, and attempting to understand society’s views of autism. In contrast, when dealing with the topic of racial prejudice, a topic which students had considerable prior knowledge, student talk jumped quickly into the fourth dimension, Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice.

Similarly, if students are motivated to learn about a topic, learning may occur quickly, given that they may have already conceptualized and problematized the issue. They may have also considered multiple perspectives as well as power relationships. If so, they have a foundation on which to take action and promote social change.

Use nonfiction and current events. Nonfiction text, especially current event articles tied to the themes being explored, can serve as powerful tools for discussion focused on social action. While fiction allows for thoughts and talk about someone else’s world, viewing it through their eyes, nonfiction text brings the theme into students’ worlds, allowing for thought about social action. For example, student talk about autism lingered in the first two domains, Disrupting the Commonplace and Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints, as we were reading the focal novel. However, when students read
an article about an autistic girl and her family essentially being kicked off of a passenger flight (Shapiro, 2015), they were outraged. It is this type of emotion that spurs social action. My purpose of bringing in nonfiction text was to have students read a variety of texts, and I underestimated the impact it would have on students’ movement towards social action.

Utilizing discussion strategies. Using the discussion strategy “Save the Last Word for Me” (Vaughan & Estes, 1986) does not create a naturally flowing discussion; however, if it is used during initial group discussions, it has the potential to do two powerful and positive things. First, it gives everyone permission to speak, thus establishing each group member as a participant. Because the strategy asks all students to comment, students see themselves and others as speakers. Because crosstalk is not allowed, students do not have permission to dominate the discussion. Although the discussion is contrived, it serves as a model for participation. The expectation is that each person will talk, and that no one member will overpower another. Second, using this strategy allows the teacher to situate herself as a group member rather than a facilitator. If the teacher “sticks to the rules,” her role is not authoritative. She takes her turn, as all group members do, providing feedback about passages and sharing her own.

The role of the More Knowledgeable Other. Teachers who strive to promote social justice through curricular practices must embrace both the role of teacher-student and MKO, while empowering students in their roles of student-teachers. Embodying this theoretical mindset means being constantly sensitive to the talk that is occurring and responding in ways that move the talk toward liberating dialogue. Teachers must
facilitate, while carefully listening, always considering the most effective response. Indeed, it is a delicate dance.

**Limitations & Future Research**

The aim of this study was to explore the discourse that occurred during literature discussions about sociopolitical text by eighth grade, African American students who struggle with reading. It attempts to offer literature discussions as an alternative to more teacher-directed practices for marginalized groups. A number of limitations occurred as I worked to reach initial study goals. The limitations are similar to those found in many qualitative research studies.

One element of this research that deserves consideration is my role as both researcher and teacher. Because of perceived power differences, student behavior might have been affected. For instance, while meant to enhance discussion, my presence within the literature discussion might have deterred it at times, or lead to superficial student responses. Future research involving More Knowledgeable Others who are not necessarily viewed as teachers is needed. This might include older reading buddies, parent volunteers, or non-education undergraduate student volunteers.

Because the data collection period was restricted to 28 sessions over three months, this study cannot be expected to yield results that might emerge if the data collection period covered an entire school year or more. While a goal of this research was for students to be empowered through liberating discussions, the short time period might have constrained the goal so that results showed only *glimpses* of what would be seen more consistently if the data collection period was longer.
This study did not intend to correlate the literacy model used to reading achievement. In other words, it was not interested in tying discussions about texts with sociopolitical themes with struggling students to their reading achievement following the study. Further research tying the literacy strategies used in this research with achievement may increase the credibility of these strategies in the eyes of education stakeholders.

As a teacher coming from a sociocritical perspective using a qualitative analysis tool, namely Lewison et al.’s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy, I acknowledge the possible bias that could have occurred during data analysis. Because I value discussion as a literacy strategy, viewing students’ dialogue as significant, when other researchers might not, was a possibility. Further, categorizing students’ dialogue into the four dimensions is a subjective process. For example, I might have placed a part of a discussion in the fourth dimension, *Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice* while another researcher might have placed it in the third dimension, *Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues*. The reader should recognize the subjectivity involved in categorizing talk during discourse analysis.

**Conclusion**

The five African American students, who struggle with reading, were able to maintain discussions in all four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2002) with some prompting from a More Knowledgeable Other. The role of the More Knowledgeable Other was flexible as students moved in and out of this role during discussions about racism. Students also moved through the four dimensions in different patterns depending on the depth of their background knowledge about the specific topic discussed. More talk occurred when students discussed topics that interested them as well
as when they participated in the “Save the Last Word for Me” strategy (Vaughan & Estes, 1986). Informational text with the same theme as the fictional text served as catalysts for critical discussion, allowing students to apply their knowledge of the topics to real-life situations.

Implementing a model which incorporates texts with sociopolitical themes and discussion with readers who struggle has many positive teaching implications for a classroom grounded in critical literacy. Teachers and students can work together to construct knowledge about texts, consider how that knowledge applies to the world through liberating dialogue, and ultimately take action and promote social justice. In the era of Common Core State Standards, educators must maintain authentic literacy practices, especially when working with readers who struggle, rather than fail students for life so they might pass standardized tests.
References


ACT. (2006). Reading between the lines: What the act reveals about college readiness in reading. Iowa City, IA: ACT.


Hall, L.A. (in press) “I don’t really have anything good to say”: Examining how one teacher worked to shape middle school students’ talk about texts. *Research in the Teaching of English*.


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References

Young Adult Literature


Appendix A: Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Conversational Interview

Name ____________________________________

A. Emphasis: Narrative text
Suggested prompt (designed to engage student in a natural conversation): I have been reading a good book. I was talking with...about it last night. I enjoy talking about what I am reading with my friends and family. Today, I would like to hear about what you have been reading and if you share it.

1. Tell me about the most interesting story or book you have read recently. Take a few minutes to think about it (wait time). Now, tell me about the book.
   Probe: What else can you tell me? Is there anything else?

2. How did you know or find out about this book?
   (Some possible responses: assigned, chosen, in school, out of school)

3. Why was this story interesting to you?

B. Emphasis: Informational text
Suggested prompt (designed to engage student in a natural conversation): Often we read to find out or learn something that interests us. For example, a student I recently worked with enjoyed reading about his favorite sports teams on the Internet. I am going to ask you some questions about what you like to read to learn about.

1. Think about something important that you learned recently, not from your teacher and not from television, but from something you have read. What did you read about? (Wait time.) Tell me about what you learned.
   Probe: What else could you tell me? Is there anything else?

2. How did you know or find out about reading material on this?
   (Some possible responses: assigned, chosen, in school, out of school)
   Assessing adolescents’ motivation to read
   3. Why was reading this important to you?

C. Emphasis: General reading

1. Did you read anything at home yesterday? What?
2. Do you have anything at school (in your desk, locker, or book bag) today that you are reading? Tell me about them.

3. Tell me about your favorite author.

4. What do you think you have to learn to be a better reader?

5. Do you know about any books right now that you’d like to read? Tell me about them.

6. How did you find out about these books?

7. What are some things that get you really excited about reading? Tell me about....

8. Who gets you really interested and excited about reading? Tell me more about what they do.

9. Do you have a computer in your home? If they answer yes, ask the following questions:
   - How much time do you spend on the computer a day?
   - What do you usually do?
   - What do you like to read when you are on the Internet?
   If they answer no, ask the following questions:
   - If you did have a computer in your home, what would you like to do with it?
   - Is there anything on the Internet that you would like to be able to read?

D. Emphasis: School reading in comparison to home reading
1. In what class do you most like to read? Why?

2. In what class do you feel the reading is the most difficult? Why?

3. Have any of your teachers done something with reading that you really enjoyed? Could you explain some of what was done?

4. Do you share and discuss books, magazines, or other reading materials with your
friends outside of school?
  - What?
  - How often?
  - Where?

5. Do you write letters or email to friends or family?
  - How often?

6. Do you share any of the following reading materials with members of your family: newspapers, magazines, religious materials, games?
  - With whom?
  - How often?

7. Do you belong to any clubs or organizations for which you read and write? Could you explain what kind of reading it is?
Appendix B: Discussion Guidelines

Name________________________

Discussion Guidelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
<th><strong>DON’T</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participate! Your thoughts are valid!</td>
<td>Zone out. We want to hear what you think!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wait until there is a break to start talking.</td>
<td>Interrupt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider the person who spoke before you:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-I agree…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-I see what you are saying,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Also…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at the speaker.</td>
<td>Look down.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Poem by Marianne Williamson

Our Greatest Fear — Marianne Williamson

*it is our light not our darkness that most frightens us*

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, Our presence automatically liberates others.

— Marianne Williamson
Appendix D: Discussion Self-Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Great Job 😊</th>
<th>Some Improvement Needed :I</th>
<th>TONS of Improvement Needed ☹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I participated in the discussion.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I waited until a break to start talking.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I looked at others to show I was listening.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I considered the person who spoke before me.</td>
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</table>
Appendix E: Letters of Consent

Assent Form

My name is Ms. Kearney. I am trying to learn about the discussions middle school students have about literature because I want to help teachers understand how to make language arts class more meaningful. If you would like, you can be in my study.

If you decide you want to be in my study, you will read novels, write about them, and discuss them in small groups. I will audiotape some of the discussions.

The project will not take any extra time on your part. The lessons given as part of this study are already a part of your instruction.

Other people will not know if you are in my study. I will put things I learn about you together with things I learn about other students so no one can tell what things came from you. When I tell other people about my research, I will not use your name, so no one can tell whom I am talking about.

Your parents or guardian have to say it’s OK for you to be in the study. After they decide, you get to choose if you want to do it too. If you don’t want to be in the study, no one will be mad at you. If you want to be in the study now and change your mind later, that’s OK. You can stop at any time.

My telephone number is (847) 767-4471. You can call me if you have questions about the study or if you decide you don’t want to be in the study any more.

I will give you a copy of this form in case you want to ask questions later.

Agreement

I have decided to be in the study even though I know that I don’t have to do it. Ms. Kearney has answered all my questions.

_____________________________  _______________________
Signature of Study Participant  Date

_____________________________  _______________________
Signature of Researcher  Date
Informed Consent by Parent/Guardian of Student Participant

Dear Parent or Guardian,

This consent form outlines the purposes of the study “Liberating Dialogue: Literature Discussions of Novels with Sociopolitical Themes by Middle School Students” and provides a description of your child’s involvement and rights as a participant. The second copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

I understand that a research project will be conducted by Elizabeth Kearney, student at National Louis University, located in Wheeling, Illinois. The study will take place in my child’s school with ___________________________ (name of child) from December, 2014 through June, 2015.

I understand that this study is entitled “Liberating Dialogue: Literature Discussions of Novels with Sociopolitical Themes by Middle School Students.” “The purpose of this study is to describe middle school students’ thinking about issues of social justice evidenced in their oral and written responses to literature. These students will participate in a semester-long literacy unit involving the reading and discussion of complex texts with sociopolitical themes. I understand that the following may happen during this study:

1. My child’s written assignments may be collected and analyzed by Elizabeth Kearney.
2. My child’s written assignments may be analyzed by peers of Elizabeth Kearney within the Reading and Language Doctoral Program at National Louis University.
3. Elizabeth Kearney will be audiotaping literature discussions that may include my child. These audiotapes may be analyzed by Elizabeth Kearney and peers of Elizabeth Kearney within the Reading and Language Doctoral Program at National Louis University. My child’s identity will in no way be revealed to others.
4. The project will not take any extra time on my child’s part. The lessons given will take place during language arts periods three hours per week.
5. The lessons will take place in a small group format in a classroom near my child’s classroom.

I understand that my child’s participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time during the period of the study without penalty.

I understand that only Elizabeth Kearney will have access to a secured file cabinet where all field notes and audio-tapes from classroom lessons in which my child participates, and copies of his/her work will be kept.

I understand that the results of this study may be published or otherwise reported to professional groups of educators, but my child’s identity will in no way be revealed.

If I have any concerns or questions before, or during, participation that I feel have not been addressed by the researcher, I may contact the researcher, Elizabeth Kearney, 925 W 31 Place, Chicago, IL. Email address: emkearney@cps.edu; or the chair of NLU’s
I grant permission for my child’s work to be used as part of this study.

Name of Student:__________________________________________________________

Parent’s Signature:________________________________________________________
Date:____________________

Researcher’s Signature:____________________________________________________
Date:____________________