

December 2015

## Literacy and Social Justice: Understanding Student Perceptions and Conceptions about Literature

Jennifer Marie Crosthwaite  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Crosthwaite, Jennifer Marie, "Literacy and Social Justice: Understanding Student Perceptions and Conceptions about Literature" (2015). *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*. 2529.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/8220097>

This Dissertation is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Dissertation in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Dissertation has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@unlv.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@unlv.edu).

LITERACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND  
CONCEPTIONS ABOUT LITERATURE

By

Jennifer M. Crosthwaite

Bachelor of Arts- Political Science and Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles

2005

Master of Arts- Teaching Multiple Subjects

University of Southern California

2007

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Doctor of Education- Curriculum & Instruction

Department of Teaching and Learning

College of Education

The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

December 2015

Copyright 2016 by Jennifer M. Crosthwaite

All Rights Reserved



## Dissertation Approval

The Graduate College  
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

November 13, 2015

This dissertation prepared by

Jennifer M. Crosthwaite

entitled

Literacy and Social Justice: Understanding Student Perceptions and Conceptions about Literature

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy – Curriculum and Instruction  
Department of Teaching and Learning

Cyndi Giorgis, Ph.D.  
*Examination Committee Chair*

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D.  
*Graduate College Interim Dean*

Chyllis Scott, Ph.D.  
*Examination Committee Member*

Christine Clark, Ed.D.  
*Examination Committee Member*

Linda Quinn, Ed.D.  
*Examination Committee Member*

Lisa Bendixen, Ph.D.  
*Graduate College Faculty Representative*

## **Abstract**

Literacy and learning is a social process, one that is both transformative, empowering, and can often lead to social change. The following study is based on the idea that literacy can be used as a tool not only to teach the basic skills of reading, but the skills for individuals to learn to be compassionate towards others, understand their individuality, and envision how their self can alter their community for a more just world. The frameworks that support these concepts are socio-cultural theory, reader response theory, and critical literacy theory. The intersection of these three theories highlight the importance of the reader as an active learner, while recognizing the influences of the social context and how it impacts literature discussions concerning issues of equity, justice, and empathy towards others. Within this critical ethnographic case study, I explored how students in an elementary classroom create meaning and respond to literature among their peers and how their perceptions and conceptions about their self and world change. The following dissertation begins with Chapter 1, highlighting the basic background information of the research and the study. Chapter 2 develops a framework, as mentioned, discussing the intersection between socio-cultural theory, reader response theory, and critical literacy. Chapter 3 outlines the details and central components of the critical ethnographic case study. Chapter 4 delves into the findings of this case study. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation including summary of results, implications, limitations, and future research. Through this investigation, I hope to extend the existing research and knowledge on how to provide a cooperative literary community that is transformative and empowering for young children.

## **Acknowledgements**

The journey towards this dissertation began in 2010, when I decided to further my education, career, passion, and dreams. The first step I took when I was accepted into the doctoral program was to immediately make an appointment during my assigned dissertation chair's office hours. Upon entering, I knew that I was beginning a long road of challenges, tears, and laughter, but somehow I found comfort in my dissertation chair's commitment to my success and educational journey. Dr. Cyndi Giorgis has been my professor, guide, mentor, supporter, and editor, to name a few, throughout this journey. Acknowledging her unrelenting effort and commitment to my work does not do justice to what she deserves or what I owe her. Dr. Cyndi Giorgis, I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done throughout this process.

This entire dissertation would not have been possible without my students. They were my light, my constant, the reason I am passionate about my work. Regardless of the analysis and results provided within this dissertation, I am overly content and satisfied knowing that I have instilled within my students a newfound appreciation for literature. Reading is no longer a task of decoding letters on a page. Instead, it has become a transformative endeavor that will continue to shape the minds and hearts of my students, for they now appreciate the power of language and the potential stories have on influencing their selves and the world in which they live. To my students, and in particular the participants of this study, I will eternally be grateful for your commitment, dedication, and passion towards learning and reading.

I would also like to show great gratitude to my co-chair, Dr. Chyllis Scott, for our endless meetings at local coffee shops and listening to my moments of panic. To my committee member Dr. Christine Clark, thank you for not allowing me to give up and always reminding me to trust the process. Finally, Dr. Linda Quinn, and Dr. Lisa Bendixen, your feedback and guidance enabled me to complete this dissertation.

## **Dedication**

To the most supportive and loving family, mom, dad, sister, thank you so much for being there and always calling to check in on my classes, progress, and “homework.” Mom, an educator of over 30 years, you inspired me to continue my education. I hope that one day I can give to others what you have given to me, which is the drive towards excellence and self-improvement. My two dogs, Daisy and Chewy, who laid by my side during endless writing nights. Finally to Eddie, thank you for watching me type, understanding my weekly library and coffee shop nights, and appreciating takeout and microwave dinners.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Classroom Context.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Purpose of the Study .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Background of the Study.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Philosophical Framework .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Reforming the Reading Curriculum .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Related Pedagogical Research .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Socio-Cultural Theory .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Reader Response Theory .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Critical Literacy .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Methodological Approach Overview.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Research Questions.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Significance.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Data Collection.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Preparing and Planning .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Context .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Socio-Cultural Theory and Engaged Learning.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Defining Culture .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Cultural and Environmental-Context of Learning .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Constructivism and Cooperative Learning .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Perspectives in Reader Response Theory .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>The Reader and the Reading Experience.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Socio-Cultural Context of the Reading Experience .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Critical Literacy and Democratic Education .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Recognition of Learner as Active Self.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Liberating Learning Context .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Multiple Voices and Shared Understanding .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Teacher as Facilitator.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Constructing a Larger Framework: Socio-Cultural, Reader Response, and Critical Literacy .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Democratic Classroom-Community Context .....</b>	<b>52</b>



<b>Related Research: Literature Circles.....</b>	<b>53</b>
Authenticity .....	53
Community Building.....	54
Written Dialogue and Oral Discussion .....	56
Content-Area Instruction .....	56
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology.....</b>	<b>62</b>
Introduction.....	62
Significance of Topic.....	62
Research Questions .....	63
Design and Method .....	64
Critical Ethnographic Case Study .....	64
Researcher Identity and Role .....	66
Demographics.....	67
Location of Study.....	67
Participants .....	67
Format of Participant Roles and Logistical Considerations.....	68
Procedures .....	73
Data Collection .....	74
Data Analysis.....	75
Ethical Considerations, Confidentiality and Generalizability .....	78
Summary.....	80
<b>Chapter 4: Research Findings and Analysis .....</b>	<b>81</b>
Research Approach.....	81
Our Story: Cultivating a Classroom Culture.....	83
Purposeful Learning .....	83
Community Building.....	85
Shared Goal.....	86
Building Citizenship and Democratic Ideals .....	88
Their Story: The Participants.....	90
Thomas, Age 9 .....	90
Sam, Age 9 .....	92
Trey, Age 9.....	94
Jocelyn, Age 9 .....	96
Sierra, Age 9.....	98
Carlos, Age 9 .....	99
The Stories: Children’s Historical Narratives .....	103
The Civil Rights Movement.....	105
Human Injustice .....	109
The Relocation Experience.....	110
Immigration.....	112

<b>Stages and Cognitive Framework.....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>Stage 1: Building a Framework.....</b>	<b>116</b>
Initial Perceptions through Retelling .....	117
Accessing Schema to Support Perceptions.....	119
Supporting Dialogue through Teacher Modeling and Mediating Discussions.....	122
<b>Stage 2: Questioning Prior Knowledge.....</b>	<b>125</b>
Wonderings as a Means for Clarification.....	126
Interrogating Characters in the Plot .....	128
Forming Judgments and Opinions Towards Characters .....	130
<b>Stage 3: Forming Conceptions.....</b>	<b>132</b>
Using Literature Circle Roles as Conversational Guides .....	134
Generating Socio-Politically Based Conversations .....	136
Apply Specific Reading Skills to Further Develop Social Justice Conceptions .....	139
<b>Stage 4: Developing Compassion.....</b>	<b>140</b>
Exhibiting Empathy as a Catalyst for Changed Perceptions.....	140
Demonstrating Sympathy through Personal Connections .....	142
Recognizing Self-Relevancy for Social Change.....	145
<b>Stage 5: Internalizing New Knowledge.....</b>	<b>148</b>
Advocating Sense of Social Change .....	148
Developing Optimism for Change and Just Society .....	154
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>159</b>
Negotiating Cultural Understanding.....	159
Changing Conceptions about our Self, Community, and World.....	160
Shaping Perceptions and Conceptions through a Cyclical Model.....	161
<b>Chapter 5: Summary, Implications, Limitations, and Future Research .....</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>Summary and Revisiting Research Questions .....</b>	<b>164</b>
Research Question #1 .....	165
Research Question #2 .....	167
Research Question #3 .....	168
<b>Implications of the Reading Process .....</b>	<b>169</b>
Collaborative Reading Structures .....	169
Collective Accountability .....	172
Empowering Historical Narrative through Literature Circles .....	173
<b>Limitations.....</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>Future Research .....</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>Appendix A: Initial Coding and Themes.....</b>	<b>178</b>
<b>Appendix B: Role Cards.....</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>Appendix C: Parent Permission Form.....</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>Curriculum Vitae.....</b>	<b>197</b>

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

As a child, my parents instilled within my sister and me the importance of education as a means for opening opportunities, having a stronger voice, and making a difference for the community and our self. Both of my parents were immigrants- my mother emigrated from Cuba, while my father emigrated from Panama. My mother's story is one that encouraged me to pursue education through a sociopolitical lens. At the onset of Fidel Castro's takeover, my mother's family fled from Cuba feeling stripped away from their rights, their voice, and all that my grandfather had worked so hard to attain (owning a home, being an entrepreneur, and raising a family). As a result, I have always held true democratic principles of individualism at the forefront of my beliefs, while simultaneously valuing collectivism, working together, and the existence of many voices. Through my mother's countless stories and her relentless efforts to ensure that my sister and I secured an education and maintained our identities as Cuban-Panamanian-American, I began to nurture my own passion for valuing the importance of individual experience and its effect on our perceptions, negotiations, and overall understanding of the world. These ideals and experiences have informed my own understanding and definition of social justice. As others have explained, social justice entails the idea that education must be transformative in the minds of students, allowing them to view education as a powerful form of social progress, which often includes the acceptance of multiple perspectives, questioning norms, and taking cognitive risks (Banks, 2003; Nieto, 2012). Undoubtedly, these ideals have transferred into my own pedagogy and teaching practices in the classroom. Similarly, this research aimed at transforming the minds of students so they can begin to have the ideological elements needed to enact social change for the future.

Growing up in California during the 1980s, my educational experience in elementary school coincided during a time when whole language philosophy of teaching began to flourish, greatly influencing the English Language Arts framework, pedagogy, and ultimately how literature was shared in the classroom (Freeman, 1988; Freeman, Freeman, & Fennacy, 1993). Specifically, I grew up in a small community, Lennox, bordering more commonly known cities such as Inglewood and Hawthorne. The majority of my peers were English Language Learners (ELLs), coming from families that had emigrated primarily from Mexico and Central America. Consequently, the new California Framework was a revolutionary approach towards teaching, especially for language minority students, as they would benefit from a less-restricted learning environment; one that had historically been dominated by a myopic perspective on literature analysis. The framework and initiative would provide an open and safe environment for students to move freely in their thoughts and ideas and one greatly influence my pedagogical stance years later. During this time, there were no worksheets, stories read from an anthology, or skills that were forced on a text to better *understand* a story. Visiting our school library resembled a fieldtrip where we were given the freedom to choose where we visited (setting), what we did (plot), and who we would take these adventures with (characters). As such, whole language was based on the belief that students were at the forefront of their learning, constantly creating meaning, and attempting to make sense of literacy and language around them (Wilson, 1997). Whole language was a form of empowerment as students took control of their learning and were encouraged to make decisions and question their interaction with text. Finally, whole language was based on the belief that teachers are empowered to teach in a way that values their judgment and are motivated to maintain an education that is centered on what is best for students.

A historical foundation of whole language is important because it is not a teaching philosophy that simply came out of the 1980s as school districts began to change their teaching approach, but in fact has a much longer historical background. The origins of whole language can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with the first children's picture book by John Amos Comenius, who believed children can discover new knowledge through the context of what is familiar and known to their own experiences (Goodman, Bridges, & Goodman, 1991). Similarly, John Dewey (1938) also wrote about many principles that resonate with whole language beliefs, without using the exact term *whole language*. Valuing the importance of individual experience and its effect on learning and meaning making were beliefs that formed the basis of whole language learning (Dewey, 1938; Rosenblatt, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). With this historical underpinning, the California Reading Initiative was launched in 1986, while the English-Language Arts Framework, which included guidelines for implementing the standards, was published a year later in 1987. Both the Initiative and Framework were developed as a response to research that focused on the importance of providing students literature, rich in content, with the objective of motivating students to develop a joy for reading. I was a byproduct of this movement, influencing who I was as a learner, who I am as an educator, and who I will become as a researcher.

### **Classroom Context**

In 2006, I began my career as an educator. I had always known I wanted to pursue a career in education, but was not sure which avenue I would take towards this goal. At first, I considered becoming an attorney within the field of education, taking the law school entrance exam (LSAT) and completing the application process. However, I quickly realized that if I wanted to make a difference in the realm of education, I could make the greatest change as a teacher. A short time after this decision, I received my Masters in Education along with my

teaching license. From the onset of my career, I was never a proponent of teacher manuals and literature anthologies. I believed that the foundation of a classroom begins with its library and rich choices in books that can be shared throughout the year. Although teaching a set of skills is important, it has never driven my instruction. Instead, books are shared and skills are naturally incorporated, maintaining reading the book and sharing our knowledge of it as the main goal.

Literature circles are an integral part of my teaching, both formally and informally. In my classroom, this reading format allows a small group of students (usually 4-6 students) to sit together to naturally discuss literature in an open and inviting environment with minimal teacher interruptions. Throughout the year, students become accustomed to the expectations of literature circles in how to ask thought-provoking questions, respecting others' contributions to group dialogue, effectively using post-it notes to track our thoughts, and ultimately understanding that the key to reading a book within a group is not simply to "finish" the assigned pages, but to delve into each page and simply enjoy discussing aspects of the reading that intrigue them the most. Every year, students leave my classroom having a newfound appreciation for literature, realizing that there is more to reading than just finishing the book and taking a quiz for a grade. Therefore, literature circles, or book clubs, became part of the structure analyzed throughout this study inclusive of its efficacy as a vehicle to drive students' meaning making, interpretation, and negotiation amongst their peers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Within the past decade, education has experienced monumental changes in its curriculum, pedagogy, and teachers' perceptions toward learning and cognitive development. The greatest concerns have focused on student assessment and teacher accountability. Questions such as: Are students meeting the standards for their designated grade level? How are teachers effectively teaching these standards to students? What curriculum is best to help students retain

the information needed? These questions presume that learning is based on mastering a specific set of skills effectively taught by an adult and regurgitated on a standardized state test by students. However, learning is a complex and dynamic process that must take into consideration the individuals, their experiences, and the process of negotiating new information. Therefore, the focus of this study was to specifically analyze the learner within the context of literacy and literary understanding and to better understand how students negotiate meaning of global texts within a group dynamic. This study investigated the meaning-making process that occurs when students are exposed to texts that focus on critical literacy.

This study is a critical ethnographic case study account of the teaching of literacy, based primarily on first person narrative texts of historical and experiential recounts from a variety of characters. The first chapter of this dissertation will provide the background for the study, a brief analysis of the theoretical framework incorporated to support the research, an overview of the research questions, the methodological approach, and potential limitations.

### **Background of the Study**

As a first year teacher, I entered a school supported by Reading First, a federally funded program aimed at implementing specific assessment tools and instructional teaching methods across states and school districts to ensure all children learn how to read by the end of third grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Translated into practice, this meant strictly using scripted, scientifically-based teacher manuals with fidelity. During administrative observations, teachers needed to have the manual in their hand as they followed through the daily routine activities, focusing on the specific skill for that week rather than the story itself. Students began to associate literature with reading skills, as opposed to referring to skills while reading as a means to better enjoy, interpret, and understand a text. Although I was a novice teacher, I knew that this was not the way literature and reading were supposed to be shared with students at such

a young age. Fortunately, after my first year of teaching, Reading First was no longer funded and although the teacher manuals were left behind for teachers to use, I had gained my administration's trust to simply teach the way I knew in my heart was the most effective and influential for young children. I began to exponentially build my library, the heart of the classroom, focusing on individual books as well as classroom sets. My passion for literacy and understanding the importance of building students' appreciation, love, and care for literature became the core of my teaching and ultimately my research. Undoubtedly, literature can be a life changing mechanism for students, as it can become a reflection of themselves, a window to their world, and a vehicle for social change. The following section will examine the philosophical changes within the field of literacy, the recent professional developments, and current research and methods that helped set the stage for this study.

### **Philosophical Framework**

Historically, the concept of literacy has been developed theoretically, changed in practice, and implemented in individual's lives for a variety of purposes. It is important to understand literacy's overall implications economically, politically, and socially. Brandt (2001) states, "Literacy is a resource in the way that electricity is a resource: Its circulation keeps lights on" (p. 6). Similarly, theories of literacy have been constantly *circulated*, altered, and reevaluated. Literary criticism has a long history of informing and guiding teacher pedagogy and reading instruction. Over the past decades, there have been many shifts in our understanding of literature education and what educators, researchers, and theorists deem as significant perspectives. For example, giving literature education a more scientific and formulaic method for instruction (Banton-Smith, 2002; Culler, 1997). It was believed that literacy should be standardized, formal,



and scrutinized in order to extract from it an objective perspective. As reiterated by Sloan (2002):

Flourishing in America from the 1930s to the early 1970s, New Criticism functioned in part as a means to provide literary criticism with a pseudo-scientific approach intended to endow the study with rigor, thus bringing respectability to the discipline. (p. 24)

This generalization assumes that texts are at the center of literacy education, furthering the notion that students' central role is to skillfully and closely analyze texts by disregarding their personal response and interpretation. However, during this same period and continuing today, other theorists emerged in the field of literacy arguing that literature and reading are a more complex and dynamic phenomenon that cannot be left to the text itself, independent and separate from any other subjective modes of interpretation (Karolides, 1996; Pradl, 1996; Probst, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1995).

A focal point of this study reinforced the aforementioned ideas that the reader plays a significant role during the reading experience. The transaction between the reader and the text cannot be simplified or reduced to a surface level understanding or through the identification of a re-taught reading skill. There is much to extract from a text, its depth and complexity, and what it can offer a critical reader. Clearly, one cannot underestimate how powerful and influential literacy can be and how it keeps our society moving and improving intellectually.

### **Reforming the Reading Curriculum**

As previously mentioned, literature circles within the classroom have opened up opportunities for students to freely engage in open dialogue with their peers around texts of personal interest, often chosen by students themselves. This pedagogical practice greatly supports literary theories that center the readers at the heart of the reading experience. The

purpose of literature circles are to engage students in open conversations beyond simply ensuring comprehension of a text. Often times, reading and literacy is centered on the teacher asking a question and eliciting specific responses from students that either fall under the category of right or wrong. By doing so, teachers are not recognizing the value of language within learning and the importance of talk, collaboration, and learning from one another (Vygotsky, 1978).

Literature circles, or book clubs, provide students with the fundamental context for a natural approach to conversation where acceptance and valuing of others is warranted and unrestricted by teacher questioning.

Not only is setting the proper context for conversation a necessity, but supporting writing as an extension to literature circles provides students with an opportunity to record their individual responses for reflection, summary, or to prompt further discussion during the next meeting. Eliciting student responses through writing primarily takes the form of dialogue journals or literary letters (Johnson & Giorgis, 2007). Although open journal responses are always invited throughout a literature study, students also engage in written dialogue between the teacher and other peers. These written conversations enable individuals to engage in an interactive conversation about text, record their thoughts, and exchange responses with others, while allowing teachers to guide and lead students to consider alternative perspectives or ideas when necessary (Nash, 1995).

Finally, whole group dialogue, or community share, provides opportunities for all students, including the teacher, to come together and share their insights, to generate further questioning, and to build a genuine literary community (Raphael, Goatley, McMahon, & Woodsman, 1995). This form of discussion can be used during any point within a literary block, including the beginning of literature circles to highlight important events or points of

discussions, during the middle to clarify any questions or misconceptions, and at the end to share and highlight findings and connections. It is necessary to not underestimate the importance of building a literary community. There is no doubt that individuals contribute to their knowledge, but it is also essential to consider and recognize the contributions of others in the construction of this knowledge. Learning then becomes an active process towards solving problems, developing a shared understanding, and allowing common experiences amongst members to support interpretation and responses to texts (Matthews & Cobb, 2005). Similarly, the act of reading is a social process; it is a phenomenon that not only occurs for an individual, but can also exist within a greater context that includes interpersonal aspects of community learning. As a teacher and researcher, it was essential during the course of this study to instill a strong value towards shared and common literary goals as a community as it can allow for a free and insightful learning environment to occur where ideas are exchanged and validated. Connectedly, this study aimed at providing a context for reforming literacy education methods and supporting further research that addresses the need for promoting genuine student conversations about text, one that will make them critical and productive global citizens.

### **Related Pedagogical Research**

Within literary curriculum, it is essential for students to have a voice and opinion in the type and direction literary experiences take (Serafini & Giorgis, 2003). Extensive research has been done on the purpose of read alouds within reading workshops and the value they bring into the classroom especially as a means of giving students opportunities to delve deeper in their understanding of texts and contributing to the dynamic yet complex nature of literature (Serafini & Giorgis, 2003; Wiseman, 2011; Worthy, Chamberlain, Peterson, Sharp, & Shih, 2012). As part of my overall approach to curriculum, read alouds have become a daily and consistent routine.

Reading aloud to students a chapter or two from a novel or book allows opportunities for modeling my own thinking and questioning, while simultaneously fostering students' own perceptions. Essentially, reading aloud paves the way for building on prior knowledge from the previous day's small group meetings, while constructing new knowledge, insights, and perspectives collectively.

Research related to literature circles often describe students gathering in groups to discuss a text after they have read it independently and responded through a variety of strategies prior to discussing (Avci & Yüksel, 2011; Batchelor, 2012; Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, Miller, 2010; Raphael & McMahon, 1994). In other words, students first record their thoughts independently and then bring those to share with others in a small group. However, few have addressed the need to add a group reading component to the overall method of literature circle discussions. I believe it is imperative that students are given immediate opportunities to share and connect their ideas when they are initially made during reading. In order to fill this gap, this study focuses on students reading and responding simultaneously. By allowing peers to read as a group, they were given more autonomy and freedom to respond within the moment as their curiosities and reflections spontaneously evolve. The wait time between reading and discussing was eliminated, taking advantage of the ability to promptly share and engage in a genuine discussion. Therefore, reading together enabled impromptu responses to be discussed by members, creating greater connectivity among members or opposing perspectives when necessary.

Book selection is an important aspect of literature circles. Studies have shown that teachers often select books focused on students' interests or relevant topics studied (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). Other research has reinforced the need to give students choice in their reading selection by presenting several reading options, allowing students to read the brief description in

the back of the book, and then choose their top three preferences (Batchelor, 2012). Another important consideration discussed in research is the need to effectively integrate social studies content within literary activities (McCall, 2010). Within the past decade, the teaching of skills in isolation has dominated our reading curriculum; however, by integrating social studies content and historical narratives within literature circles, it gives these necessary skills a meaningful content to be explored, applied, and ultimately mastered. Additionally, by teaching skills through social studies and literature it further allows students to build empathy toward others, develop personal connections to various topics, and become critical of interpretations of historical events, all elements associated with social justice. Regardless of the book selection strategies or text content, it is imperative for teachers to know their student's interests, their curiosities, and the forces that drive their inner motivation.

Particular to this study, I have had the opportunity to spend the 2013-2014 school year with students as their third grade teacher. Within that year, I came to understand each student's personal interests. I consistently welcomed their feedback and reflections after reading books as a class, allowing them to share their general likes and dislikes. By the end of the year, I began to consider possible books for the 2014-2015 school year, many of which had a historical basis. I shared with students the summaries of several books, constantly inviting their feedback and having discussions about the potential of sharing the book as a group in the future. Since I had read the texts beforehand, I was mindful of students' questions and thoughts about the plot, which signaled to me that such books would be of high interest to them. Therefore, the books selected for this study evolved from student suggestions and teacher recommendations collectively.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theories framing this study focus on socio-cultural theory, the transactional theory of reader response, and critical literacy, all of which highlight the importance of the individual as a reader and advocate. In particular, socio-cultural theory recognizes the importance of culture, teaching within a context, and understanding the connection between the individual and learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Paralleling these beliefs, Transactional Theory of Reader Response discusses the relationship between the reader and text, along with the various factors that influence this transaction (Rosenblatt, 1995). For example, a reader's life experiences, values, and beliefs are factors that greatly influence how readers make meaning, develop personal connections, and build a deeper knowledge about themselves and the world in which they live, further supporting major components of socio-cultural theory (Dewey, 1938). Finally, providing a framework for socio-cultural theory supports critical literacy as a pedagogical approach to teaching, including the creation of democratic classroom communities based upon students as advocates, challengers of text, and effective communicators (Banks, 2003; Cherland & Harper, 2007; Vazquez, 2008).

### **Socio-Cultural Theory**

Socio-cultural theory is grounded in the belief that students' lives and cultural experiences impact their learning, suggestive of the idea that learning should take place within this context to maximize its effectiveness and connectivity for all learners (Dewey, 1938). Additionally, socio-cultural theory contends that learning is maximized when students participate in cooperative learning, especially among competent peers as described by Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Building from this approach, creating cooperative literacy communities amongst students sets the context for thoughtful, supportive, and engaged learning. I define a literacy community as one that is based on continual positive interactions, a

shared understanding for literacy goals, and an appreciation for the dialogic process of student conversations as they connect and make meaning within literacy. Understanding the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) allows teachers to structure their literacy activities in a way that supports reciprocal learning, where students are guided to think in higher levels through peer interaction. More importantly, validating the connection between culture and learning creates an educational space that utilizes culture as a resource for student learning, as opposed to a deficit. The focus of this study and in particular the selection of books and methodological approach for discussion, emphasizes the need for implementing a transformative curriculum that is based on students' experience and encouraging of being critical of text and ideas. Through empowering collaborative discussions with fellow peers within a literary community, it enables a rich, productive, and just context for intellectual growth.

In relation to the aforementioned principles, research must be mindful of the current path education has taken. For example, education has become a highly controlled and politically driven system and institution, disabling the creative power of educators, while rendering students as voiceless and empty entities waiting to be filled with specifically delineated standards. During these times, it has become imperative for educators to develop a curriculum based on a pedagogical perspective of inclusion, equity, and justice. As a means to better understand this need, socio-cultural theory provides a framework that supports multicultural education and its connection to intellectual growth, an equitable classroom, and the socio-political context of learning (Nieto, 2012). From this perspective, socio-cultural theory does not simply include a discussion of identity, culture, and language, but one that is inclusive of its connection to power and privilege within our society. In other words, our identity frames the way we experience the world; however, affirming language and culture must also be supported through the lens of

equity and justice. Developing an educational framework that validates these principles can help realize change in the lives of our students, their communities, and, most importantly, their world—a central goal that informs this study.

### **Reader Response Theory**

Reader response theory is comprised of a set of beliefs and principles that help guide our understanding of how readers interact with text during the reading process. The question of where meaning resides is grounded within reader response theory, providing various perspectives for answering this question; all of which are highly interconnected and contribute to each other's basic framework (Karolides, 1996; Karolides & Rosenblatt, 1999; Rosenblatt, 1995). Reader response theory has several important influences both in teaching and research. Undoubtedly, the experiences students bring to the development of a text and the contributions that can be made in the classroom context by having students simply respond to texts has a significant effect on learning. Recognition that texts can have dynamic interpretations dependent on what students have to offer, allows teachers to be more conscientious of multiple perspectives. As part of this study, it was essential for students to take initiative in literature discussions and interactions with their peers. Developing an understanding of this notion and enabling students to recognize their coexisting roles as advocates for themselves and their thoughts while also supporting potentially different perspectives amongst their peers was critical. Regardless of the dynamics of their conversation and interactions during literature circles, encouraging students to recognize the value in their responses, voice, and meaning making was suggestive of a democratic education.

As teaching becomes more standardized and skill driven, there will be less of a focus on student thinking, interpretation, and self-reflectivity. Education will become an institution that promotes a one-sided view for learning experiences that will lead students to think of answers as



either right or wrong and narrowly focused on a teacher's approval. Students will become dependent and reliant on always looking to a higher authority for truth and answers, and less dependent on their own judgment, values, and sense of empowerment through thought. If literary theory within education hopes to create productive citizens, it will need to give students an opportunity to become confident in their thought process and provide a sense of security in their potential to think independently. Rosenblatt (1995) reiterates this idea by stating, "The individual who is still in the infantile state of needing an outside authority to make his decisions for him cannot be expected to participate constructively in the creation of a rational society" (p. 163). Undoubtedly, literature represents personal experiences, giving potential for freedom of thought for readers on many levels and it is this potential that paves the way for creative thinking and imagination- necessary components of a democratic and productive society, a strong foundation of this study's research and overall goals.

### **Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy entails instilling a sense of empowerment for all students in order to uncover injustices in their world and to act upon them for the betterment of society and positive change for our future (Vazquez, 2008). As Banks (2003) states, critical literacy must incorporate change in the mind and heart. Change must occur through the recognition and questioning of injustices in the mind, leading towards the motivation and empowerment within our hearts to make a difference to help those rendered powerless in hopes of a true democratic world. Teaching through a social justice framework should not begin in the adolescent years, but in fact should begin with young learners as they develop their opinions and values, which shape their actions and thoughts.

Critical literacy is fueled by the need for social change, to empower those marginalized and voiceless to take a stance and action against the inequalities that maintain society's power relations. As articulated by Cherland and Harper (2007):

...critical literacy projects are fueled by a belief that change can occur and by the desire to ameliorate social and educational inequalities, and in particular the school failures of significant groups of students, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status, those from ethnic and/or linguistic minority communities, and those otherwise marginalized.  
(p. 26)

Additionally, critical literacy is grounded on the ideals of individual and social transformation through the exploration and interplay of language, power, and action (Kuo, 2009). Facilitating student development of critical literacy is the foundation for building a democratic community.

### **Methodological Approach Overview**

The methodological approach to this study was based on a critical ethnographic case study. Within this method, the learning context is supported by a socio-political framework where critique, questioning, and new knowledge is negotiated amongst students. Since this study was also based on a small group literature circle of six students, a case study method was appropriate in order to understand the communicative and cultural patterns of students' interactions. The following section will briefly discuss the three overarching research questions guiding this study, its significance to education, methodological approach, and data collection approach.

### **Research Questions**

There is a strong correlation between children's and young adult literature and students' perception about themselves and their world. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how children's and young adult literature focused on local and global social justice themes can form, shape, and change students' perceptions and conceptions of their community and world,

and their efficacy in both. Learning is a dynamic process that involves the individual and the social context, including the interrelationships that are built among the learning community. The individual is not only influenced by their lived cultural experiences, but also how these experiences relate, change, and coexist with the experiences offered by others. Several guiding questions informed this study, including:

1. How do students negotiate cultural understanding within their literary communities in a small group setting?
2. By reading historical narratives, how do students' perceptions and conceptions about themselves, their community, and world change over time? How do students navigate and explore children and young adult literature on local and global social justice context?
3. How are such perceptions and conceptions shaped or influenced by collaborating with peers?

These questions informed my thinking and analysis as a teacher and researcher, influencing the decisions concerning the strategies and pedagogy involved throughout the study.

### **Significance**

Research in the area of multicultural education, particularly within the context of literacy and reader response theory, has a large emphasis on the role teachers play in building a community of learners, where students are able to validate their lived experiences and grow an appreciation for others. It is the teacher, at the forefront of instruction, who recognizes the importance of incorporating culture into the classroom curriculum in order to make learning for students meaningful. Research must focus on the overall effects of critical literacy and the need to have it utilized in classrooms, especially where the student population is composed of non-

dominant students. With the widening achievement gap between minority students and culturally dominant students, there is a need to find a solution to this educational issue. The intersection between socio-cultural theory, reader response theory, and critical literacy attempts to provide such a solution, as well as explanation for this problem. As a teacher in a culturally diverse school, I have always made a commitment to consistently validate students' backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences providing an open and accepting learning environment. Through this study, it was my goal to establish an understanding of the ways in which allowing students to immerse themselves in curriculum that is empowering, encouraging of group collaboration, and emphasizing a democratic classroom where diversity is celebrated and essential to our survival.

## **Methodology**

As a researcher, choosing a methodological approach that would be appropriate for this study meant that I would need to consider what the overarching goals of the research would be, both socio-politically and academically. Through a socio-political approach, I knew that a primary goal was to enable students to become critical about historical events, globally and locally based, and their relation to our current understanding of the world. Simultaneously, through an academic approach a primary goal was to create a transformative curriculum that would empower students to question, lead discussions, and see themselves at the center of their learning. Aligned with these goals, critical ethnography is a methodological approach suited for uncovering injustices and inequities and contributing to research for the betterment of individuals and society as a whole (Madison, 2012). In particular, this study focused on one specific literature circle group containing six fourth grade students, therefore, aligning itself with a case study methodology. Conclusively, critical ethnographers hope to make an ethical contribution to

society by uncovering social injustices and inequities and changing such conditions for greater equality and freedom. Within the realm of education, a critical ethnographic case study can translate into altering the curriculum, increasing student autonomy, and creating a learning environment that validates differing perspectives within a cooperative and supportive context.

### **Data Collection**

The study was conducted during a 13-week period during the spring semester of the 2014-2015 school year. Specifically, the study focused on analyzing students in several dialogic contexts: small group discussions in the format of a literature circle, the development of effective questioning in small groups, and literary letters and journal responses as a form of written dialogue. Through extensive field notes, audio recordings, and artifacts collected, I focused on students' interaction and engagement with others, as well as their change in perceptions and conceptions about the topic. Although this is a brief overview of the methodology, the detailed process for the data collection and analysis will be further discussed in the methodology chapter.

### **Preparing and Planning**

At the end of the 2013-2014 school year, I decided to transition, or “loop,” with my current class to the next grade level. These students were fully adapted to our classroom expectations, including establishing a set of norms amongst each other through cooperatively working together throughout the year. Our class was able to create an environment in which individual thought was supported, yet with an understanding of the importance of collectively working together. Establishing norms, expectations, and building a strong relationship amongst each other allowed for a smooth transition into the 2014-2015 school year. It is important to note that during the 2013-2014 school year, I had a total of 26 third graders. However, upon the new school year, and due to larger class sizes, six students were added to my roster. Nonetheless, these new students quickly acclimated to our classroom culture. The students from the previous

year welcomed the new students and immediately built strong relationships and bonds with the new students.

In order to establish specific expectations of group interaction within literature circles, it was important to model with students how to conduct themselves socially and academically. As a teacher, modeling my own metacognition, students would be able to internalize not only the importance of reading within a group, but also the value of conversation for a more productive educational experience. To accomplish this goal, read alouds were part of my daily reading instruction. Reading aloud a chapter or two everyday led students into greater conversations about the text, ultimately preparing them for the conversations that would take place within their literature circles. By allowing myself to model to students that the purpose of reading a book is not only to get to the end, but to delve into a meaningful conversation throughout, students were more readily prepared and comfortable to replicate such behavior within their own small group.

To begin the school year and to prepare for the study, I decided to use several novels that focused on first-person point of view, primarily a narrative told from a child's perspective about his/her life experiences. Books selected were based on student interest and choice, stemming from previously held discussions during the 2013-2014 school year in preparation for the upcoming school year. It was important to allow students to choose the books because it gave them ownership of their learning, while personalizing the literary experience. In other words, the experience of reading becomes part of the individual learning and growing experience within a personal context.

During the first six weeks of school, there was a primary focus on character analysis, as well as conflict (ELA Common Core State Standards). Novels read in class were part of a shared read aloud and small literature circles. Students read through several novels that were

specifically told through a first-person point of view, which focused on character development and analysis. For example, one of the texts read was *But, not Buddy* (2011), which introduced students to a different perspective on family, life challenges, and obstacles. As a historical narrative set in the past, many of the events and the experiences of the characters, which ranged from comical and lighthearted humor to more serious events, enabled students to connect the past with living in the present. This transition allowed students to broaden their perspectives on the experiences of children characters, while, setting the stage for upcoming novels that would be shared as part of this study. Consequently, sharing books at the beginning of the school year laid the foundation for future literary discussions, established a level of comfort among students, and provided a framework for dialogue, which were important components for the success of this study.

Finally, since the books our classroom would be preparing to read were focused on historical events such as the Civil Rights Movement, Holocaust, Japanese internment camps, and immigration, much of our social studies curriculum lent itself to analyzing issues of equity and fairness. Prior to reading our first novel for this ethnographic case study, we had spent a few months studying historical events pertaining to the American Revolution followed by a study of the Women's Rights Movement. These two units were a culmination of learning about how individuals in history have made a difference and paved the way for social change. Simultaneously, we developed a stronger sense of what an agent of social change is. Initially, students had such perceptions based on individuals they had learned from biographies read or individuals they had studied before. However, after our extensive study learning about the causes of such movements, what it means to "stand up" for one's beliefs, and the notion that it often takes bravery and courage by a group of individuals to make a difference in the lives of

others student conceptions became more solidified, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. These two units brought about the idea of actions taken in order to fight for basic human rights- events that have led us to the present day. Understanding this widened our perceptions to include more individuals, but also our conceptions about the need for it.

## **Conclusion**

As a researcher, I hope to expand teachers' understanding of critical literacy's applicability to pedagogy, bring to the forefront the need to transform curriculum to make it more inclusive of students' voices, and exemplify the importance of an education based on democratic principles. A democratic education that is built on providing students with a space for freedom of thought through literary practices necessary and vital for all students. Such education should empower students to question injustices that are present not only in their immediate realm, but to make them empathize with others' troubles and inequities. To prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one that is becoming increasingly diverse and interconnected, education must provide a way for students to see themselves in a worldly cosmopolitan context. The purpose of this chapter was to give a brief overview of the research, including background of the researcher, theoretical framework, and methodology. Additionally, Chapter 2 will delve into the three theoretical frameworks that support this research, as well as an analysis as to how these three theories, socio-cultural theory, reader response theory, and critical literacy, interact relate to one another. Chapter 3 will delineate the methodological approach to this study, including the data collection and analytical approach. Proceeding the methods section, Chapter 4 will provide the results of the study and the emerging patterns stemming from the data. Finally, Chapter 5 will summarize the results and include the research's implications and potential limitations for further research.



## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Context**

### **Introduction**

The central topic of this analysis focused on the notion that readers are at the center of the reading experience. Readers develop a relationship with texts that is influenced by many factors within and without the reader, which allows for the process of meaning making to take place, also known as reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995). This theory further emphasizes the notion that a reader's experience, background, social-context, and psychological abilities interact with the text and provides a reader with a deeper sense of not only the text, but also the world in which they live. Karolides (1996) further describes this connection by stating:

During the reading activity, the reader and the text mutually act on each other, each affecting and conditioning the other. The reader's persona infuses the text; the text impresses the reader. While thus engaged in this mutual involvement and exchange, they cannot be separated and analyzed. (p. 8)

This powerful transaction reinforces the concept that readers should recognize the role they play within reading and the importance of their self, identity, and lived experiences in the meaning making process. Paralleling this thought, socio-cultural theory furthers this concept by asserting the need to incorporate students' culture, as will be defined in the subsequent section, by providing a curriculum that draws from such experience in order to create a bridge between students' identity and learning. Finally, placing students in such an advantageous, empowering, and validating position creates an equitable learning context. Connectedly, critical literacy, as a pedagogical approach, supports creating a democratically justified learning environment in which students are encouraged to develop their individuality and voice, while also encouraging empathy towards the experiences of others who may differ. Bridging socio-cultural theory, reader response, and critical literacy provides the theoretical framework supporting this study.

## **Socio-Cultural Theory and Engaged Learning**

As briefly highlighted in the previous section, there is a connection between the socio-cultural context of the reading experience and how meaning is constructed within the reader. Clearly, not only is the individual recognized as an essential figure in the meaning making process, inclusive of their experience, culture, and beliefs, but how the individual interacts with others and negotiate their learning in a larger context is necessary to understand. Socio-cultural theory provides an approach that bridges these two concepts together. The following section discusses an in-depth analysis of the origin of socio-cultural theory and the major concepts associated with this framework. It will begin with a definition of culture, the role of the environment as a context for learning, and the idea of constructivist and cooperative learning.

### **Defining Culture**

Defining culture has never been a simplistic endeavor for researchers. Many times, the attempt to define culture has led to an inadequate interpretation with no depth. For example, when cultural communities are studied, it can often times lead to an overgeneralization of its members without taking into consideration the variations among individuals and group practices (Gutierrez & Correa-Chavez, 2006). This misinterpretation becomes evident among non-dominant groups, who are defined as new immigrants or historically marginalized individuals who do not have positions of power economically, socio-politically, or socio-historically. Educators and researchers should use caution when making assumptions about groups of people and instead focus comprehensively on the lived experiences of the individual. Therefore, socio-cultural theory provides a framework for studying the experiences of individuals and its contribution to cognitive and social development.

Another error often made by researchers is equating culture with race and ethnicity, making culture something that is broad in the context of its members, as well as static and

homogenous (Gutierrez, 2006). However, not all members of the same racial or ethnic group partake in the same cultural practices. For example, current instructional practices for immigrant children in the United States, specifically English Language Learners, receive a one-size-fits-all curriculum, despite their diversity in life, school experiences, parents' educational level, and home practices, to name a few (Gutierrez, 2004). Approaching education and curriculum through multiple lenses is also grounded on the theory of critical literacy. Nieto and Bode (2012) suggest that this notion of multiculturalism, or the need to view and appreciate the world through its diverse components, must be contextualized socio-politically, one that acknowledges the interplay between curriculum, students, teachers, critical pedagogy, and the reflective action for social change. As a result, it is important for researchers, educators, and policymakers alike to recognize individual differences and take this into consideration when developing standards, curriculum, and educational policies.

### **Cultural and Environmental-Context of Learning**

Culture is not contingent on race or ethnicity, but rather on the practices of the individual, home experience, history, and constant interaction between the learner and their surrounding (Gutierrez & Correa-Chavez, 2006). Paralleling this line of reasoning, Vygotsky (1978) develops the idea of the *general genetic law of cultural development*, which supports the notion that what is learned through social interaction or experiences within a culture is later transferred to the individual for application across other areas. As further defined by Meacham (2001), "Generalization occurs when a spontaneous conceptual understanding is dislodged from its exclusive identification with a specific local context and connected to a more general category of like concepts that integrate multiple contextual domains" (p. 192). In other words, information and concepts can be transferred, applied, and connected to other areas in order to attain a higher

order of conceptual understanding. This reinforces the need for teachers to be aware of these past experiences outside of school in order to support students' connection within content learning. Ultimately, incorporating culture and learning as a framework to study the reading process and the social context of learning, one will realize that the notion and definition of culture lies within the individual learner, reemphasizing the importance of placing the curriculum in the context of an individual's lived experiences and valuing their differences to create a robust learning environment.

Validating an inclusive cultural education, or multicultural education, is based on the idea that experience should be at the forefront of a student's education and learning. Dewey's idea of experience is a way of supporting the concept of connecting curriculum to the students' lived experience, which strongly underpins a cultural and environmental approach to learning. Dewey (1938) argues that educators "should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile" (p. 40). It is evident that learning, and in particular literacy, is a social process. As such, knowing, understanding, and utilizing a student's experiences and connecting it to education can lead to academic growth. More importantly, Dewey (1938) also contends that educators are not only responsible for developing a genuine understanding of their students, but also knowledge of subject-matter, which will enable activities and curriculum to be selected so that all students can contribute and participate. Utilizing students' experience and making curriculum culturally relevant consists of assuring that students have a sense of belonging in the classroom and that they are active participants of the learning process. This idea is reiterated through Gay's (2000) definition of the role teachers play in building a culturally relevant learning environment: "By building an academic community of learners, the teachers responded

to the sense of belongings youth need, honored their human dignity, and promoted their individual self-concepts” (p. 31). As such, teachers play a pivotal role in students’ learning experiences, as both Dewey and Gay contend. Educators, researchers, and policy-makers must recognize the responsibility of providing a connected, meaningful, and opportunistic environment for all students.

### **Constructivism and Cooperative Learning**

Learning is a dynamic process that not only exists within the individual, but also within the interactions of others in a given educational setting. In other words, individual understanding also exists in the social context of learning. There is no doubt that individuals contribute to their knowledge, but it is also necessary to consider and recognize the contributions of others in the construction of this knowledge. As Matthews and Cobb (2005) reiterate this point, “From a sociocultural perspective, therefore, learning is conceived as an active process directed toward solving practical problems with members of a given cultural group developing shared understandings of common experiences” (p. 328). There is a co-construction of knowledge, meaning making, and problem solving as individuals use knowledge built from others to form the foundation for learning and cognition.

In relation to socio-cultural theory and its focus on the co-construction and shared knowledge with others, the act of reading takes place in a paralleling social process; it is a phenomenon that not only occurs to an individual, but can also exist within a greater context that includes interpersonal aspects of community learning. An essential connecting question to ask is, “What creates the necessary foundation for this dialogic learning to occur?” The types of opportunities given to students to engage in collaborative learning greatly affect their academic achievement. Clearly, there should be recognition by all members of the learning environment

that there is a common goal of learning, one that is shared and collaborative, devoid of any rigid competition. Valuing a common learning goal influences students' cognitive development as it allows a free and insightful learning environment where ideas are exchanged and validated (Eun, 2010). Finally, the social context should also be grounded on the opportunity for supporting the role of students as reflective agents of the learning process. Eun (2010) further contends:

By taking on these various roles, students will not only come to understand the social and collaborative nature of learning and development, but will also begin to be reflective about the learning process itself. This reflection, in turn, will serve to mediate further learning process. (p. 408)

An understanding of collaborative learning within the framework of socio-cultural theory offers a greater appreciation for the need to have students take a more active role in the learning process and recognize a shared responsibility in order to be reflective about their learning. Such concepts are an aspect of a democratically progressive education based on social justice ideals.

In order to better understand the theoretical framework of socio-cultural theory and its ideas concerning the active construction of knowledge, it is essential to assess how individual student ability lends to learning. Currently within education, there is a strong reverence towards meeting specific skills and standards in an assessment-driven climate. However, Vygotsky (1978) does not believe that learning and development are based on acquiring specific skills, nor that these skills lead to further learning in other content areas. He contends that we must look at the developmental *levels* to better understand a child's true learning and capability, both independently and dependently. Vygotsky (1978) discusses at length the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He defines the ZPD as follows:

It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 86)

Related to reading, students vary in their independent reading level, however, they can read and comprehend at a much higher level when supported or guided by an adult or capable peer.

As Vygotsky (1978) notes, teaching based on a present level does not work towards attaining a new stage of the developmental process; it lags behind this process. Thus, the notion of the ZPD implies that there should be a transformative curriculum and instruction to reach heightened levels of cognition. Learning should not be directed solely on what a child is capable of in their present level because those levels have already been mastered to their potential independently. Instead, it should be directed on advancing those levels by focusing on skills and concepts that children will attain in the future.

The ZPD has been termed a *third space*. Gutierrez (2008) defines a third space as the space "...where teacher and student scripts- the formal and informal, the official and unofficial spaces of the learning environment- intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge" (p. 152). A third space provides an opportunity to expand the definition of learning, literacy, development and their various uses. More importantly, a third space provides a powerful and transformative relationship among individuals and their environment. This notion relates to Vygotsky's ZPD because it takes into account the need for a common vision as a means for attaining a shared understanding of learning and knowledge. In other words, "The curriculum and its pedagogy, then, are grounded in the historical and current particulars of students' everyday lives, while at the same time oriented toward an imagined but possible future" (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 154). This

imagined future within a third space is a product of the possibilities created by working with others and the potential for heightened cognition and learning, strong aspects associated with critical literacy and social justice. In fact, globally we are more interconnected and closer than ever before, therefore, the need to integrate advocacy for social justice is integral to curriculum and pedagogy. Socio-cultural theory evidently entails a bridge between understanding how a local context is bridged globally (Blackburn & Clark, 2007). This study aimed at developing an understanding of this phenomenon within an elementary school setting. Therefore, the ZPD and the third space described by Gutierrez establish a platform for a transformative literacy education that builds a community of learners with a shared goal.

### **Perspectives in Reader Response Theory**

There are many perspectives that attempt to explain the concept of reader and text by exploring the overall experience of how the reader becomes engaged with a text. Reader response theory has been significantly influential in our understanding and approach to literacy instruction for both educators and researchers throughout the world. In fact, it continues to be the foundation for many reading approaches used in the classroom to prompt deeper understanding and critical thinking. However, for the purpose of this study, my research is primarily aligned with the works of Louise Rosenblatt, Nicholas Karolides, and Norman Holland, as will be discussed in further detail. The proceeding analysis will highlight the role of the reader within the reading experience, including the relevancy of personal connections, setting a purpose, and developing expectations. Finally, this section will conclude with an analysis of an alternative perspective, that of the socio-cultural context of the reading experience, taking into account the reader's identity, role of authors, and the idea of intertextuality and universality.



## **The Reader and the Reading Experience**

Literary critics suggest that the reading experience can be interpreted as a continuum, in which the reader constantly negotiates meaning, purpose, and expectations of a text. As Karolides and Rosenblatt (1999) suggest, this transaction becomes an event over time, taking into consideration the various ways in which readers shift attention throughout. As reading evolves, impressions also change within a reading experience similar to a pendulum, as each motion affects the consecutive stroke. Undeniably, the role of the reader is often a pivotal argument or perspective that contributes to reader response theory. Readers must be able to experience literature in a genuine and natural setting, devoid of any specific technique or approach bestowed by teachers. The interaction between the reader and the text is what gives meaning to the work. Through the words on a page, memories, feelings, and thoughts are evoked, both on the part of the reader as well as the writer (Probst, 1990). Thus, reader response theory not only recognizes the author within a text, but also takes heed to the importance of what the reader brings to the text. The reader is therefore not passive; instead she/he now has the role of interpreting text through a critical lens. The following section will discuss the role of the reader, including their personal connections, purposes, and expectations as a source that informs their understanding and construction of meaning.

**Personal connections.** In order to effectively bring about a genuine appreciation for literature amongst readers, it is imperative for teachers to understand who their students are, what experiences they bring, and what their fears and passions are in order to bring about literature that will inspire them. Dewey (1938) reiterates this point stating that educators “should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while” (p. 40). Therefore,

having an in-depth understanding of our students' lived experiences and bridging this background with literature can make a significant impact.

Experiencing a text, the phenomenon of connecting a text by analyzing its influence as a reader, as well as the reader's influence on a text, enables us to dynamically engage our persona on various dimensions. For example, readers are able to engage in a text by developing an emotional involvement and empathic view towards others in a text. Readers are able to create this empathetic emotion by personally identifying with a situation portrayed in a text, whether they can directly relate or simply imagine such a situation in their own realm (Burke and Peterson, 2007). This construction of an alternative world helps the reader gain insight into others' worlds by experiencing the unknown. Holland (1975) describes this phenomenon by stating:

Readers enter into an inner dialogue between their experience with the text and their own conceptual framework, creating a dialectical tension between private experience and shared public knowledge, which leads to a change in perceptions. (p. 53)

Holland discusses this dialectical experience as being a process that readers negotiate, not only with the text, but also with others. As we experience a text with ourselves, this experience becomes public as we share our thoughts and understanding with those around us, allowing us to interchange, negotiate, and modify our perceptions. Thus, a reader's personal connection enables him/her to personally relate, empathize, imagine alternative worlds, and negotiate understanding with others, contributing to a complex phenomenon of literary responses.

As a final note, a reader's experience, which is molded by their cultural attitudes, values, ideologies, and beliefs, impacts the nature of literary responses. Readers engage in a constant reevaluation of their responses, based on a self-formulated criterion, one that often emerges from

their own insights about life, as well as the ones negotiated in a social context. As discussed in this section, reader response theory places the reader at the center of the reading experience, allowing their background, histories, and experiences to influence their understanding of a text. The relationship created between the reader and the text depends on the reader's ability to connect their own personal background knowledge with the text in order to make complex connections, ultimately demonstrating higher levels of understanding (Wiseman, 2011). Relating to Rosenblatt's (1995) concept concerning the role of a reader's experience, it becomes pivotal for students to freely bring to the reading experience their own background knowledge so that they can further understand the text and extract from this transaction a rewarding reading experience.

**Reader's purpose.** As a reader engages with a text, a purpose is set in the reader's mind. However, this purpose cannot be construed as static in nature and unchanging throughout the reading experience. In fact, it is agreed that a reading experience is set on a shifting continuum, allowing readers to shift their purpose as they are immersed within a text. Readers make conscious choices that enable them to alter their stance towards a text, empowering the reader at the center of the reading experience. According to Rosenblatt (1995), these stances can shift from efferent, one that is centered on academic purposes such as to gain further insight and understanding on a given topic, or aesthetic, based on an emotional connection with the text. As a result, readers are empowered to make conscientious choices regarding their stance, rejecting or accepting a text based on their personal interest and experience (Holland, 1976; Rosenblatt, 1995). Although reader response theory discourse encompasses the notion of an aesthetic-efferent continuum, many theorists within this domain of literary research have also cautioned against interpreting these stances as unyielding and static. As Karolides (2005) discusses,

educators and researchers alike must be aware of an *efferent-dominance trap*, where teachers often assign and overemphasize skills, giving precedence to learning to gain information (p. 61). However, the other extreme is that we rely solely on an aesthetic stance, which can often imbue a simplistic and surface level understanding of a text. As a response to this dialectical dilemma, both stances must be acknowledged as they support and lend to each other's potential development. Therefore, readers must be cognizant of the shifts that can occur during reading. In practice, this means eliciting responses from students that touch on their opinions of the text, questions and wonderings, or links between the characters and themselves. Unfortunately, these moments are quickly attended to and then refocused to a specific skill by the teacher. Reader response theory urges an approach that encompasses an acceptance of both, even simultaneous for some readers, as opposed to one or the other.

**Reader's expectations.** Along with setting a purpose for reading, readers also contribute to the reading experience by the emergence of their expectations of a text. Similar to the dynamic nature of stances and purposes, a reader's expectations also shift throughout a literary experience. As Holland (1975) contends, active readers bring to the reading experience specific expectations concerning what they hope to gain from a text. Our expectations as readers influence how we transact with a text. As such, when our expectations change, so does the way we experience a text and the meaning derived as we read.

According to Holland (1976), a reader's hope and intention towards a text is developed within a process governed by four major principles: Defense, expectation, fantasy, and transformation. We have a built in defense mechanism when approaching a text, in which we can either reject or accept a text. This is accomplished through observing the cover, reading a synopsis of the book, or gaining insight through other's opinions. Subsequently, once we have

accepted a text, we begin to build certain expectations, which inform the fantasies and pleasures that are created through reading a text. Finally, these fantasies are transformed into meaning (Holland, 1976). This reasoning places the reader in control of the reading experience- they can reject or accept a text. Our internal expectations guide how we interpret text, as well as what information we choose to maintain and make part of our internal literary experience. In fact, even if readers are dealt with objective ideas, the act of choosing those objectives entails a subjective process. Once again, this reiterates the concept that there is no distinction, autonomy, or separation between internal and external, minds and nature, our self and the world.

The notion that meaning is imbued within the reader is essential to understanding how a reader's expectation informs the meaning-making process that is central to reader response theory. Similar to Holland (1976), Iser also entertains the role of expectations as central to the inner conscious of a reader (1980). Expectations, however, are not always fulfilled for the reader and therefore are in a constant motion for modification throughout a reading transaction. Often times, this process will leave the reader with *gaps* meant to be fulfilled by the reader based on such anticipation, or conscientious expectations, enabling a text to have potentially abundant realizations and interpretations (Iser, 1980). Expectations or anticipations emerging from within a reader is often affirmed, reaffirmed, or rejected, however, the reader becomes an active agent throughout this phenomenon, enabling a transformation from text to literary reality.

### **Socio-Cultural Context of the Reading Experience**

Reader response theory takes into account the influence of the reader's connections, purpose, and expectations, as previously discussed. However, it is essential to additionally analyze the influence of the socio-cultural context encompassing the reader, which evokes a dynamic transactional process. Undoubtedly, a reader's background and experience sets a

context for the overall reading experience, justified through their personal connections, purposes, and expectations. As stated by Rosenblatt (1995):

The particular community background of the student, whether he comes from the North or South, from city or country, from a middle-class or underprivileged home, will affect the nature of the understanding and the prejudices that he brings to the book. (p. 89)

The social and cultural context of the reading experience can also have an impact on reader responses. Rosenblatt (1995) argues that readers' preconceptions and biases can often interfere with a genuine understanding of a text. However, it is imperative for readers to be aware of these preconceptions that have been shaped by familial, social, or political forces. The reader must develop a more dynamic sense of life and the world so that they can gain greater control for their own thinking. In other words, readers must be able to recognize the source of their thinking, preconceptions, and knowledge in order to find ways to develop their own critical thinking in literacy, one that is reflective of a more open-minded, accepting, and genuine understanding. The proceeding section entails an analysis of a reader's identity in respect to the socio-cultural context of reading, the importance of authors within a text, and the concept of intertextuality and universality- all of which are components influenced by the socio-cultural context of a reading transaction.

**Reader's identity.** Holland (1976) discusses the role of identity, in light of a reader's experience, as a mechanism for interpretation. Readers develop an initial identity or primary identity, which can take the form of many variations- all of which are dependent on the experiences interacting with the primary identity at that juncture in time. Consequently, this developed and varied identity allows the reader to interpret a text by finding a unity or central

theme within that text. As stated by Holland (1976), “Interpretation is a function of identity, identity being defined operationally as what is found in a person by looking for a unity in him, in other words, by interpretation.” (p. 340). One can extract from the aforementioned excerpt that there are two implications of the term interpretation: interpretation of our own identity and interpretation of text, both of which Holland (1976, 1980) deems as serving similar functions. Holland (1980) distinguishes a reader’s identity or unity, previously discussed, as paralleling the unity found within a text. In this sense, both the reader and a text have an identity or unity, of which both serve as a function for interpretation.

Along with the notion that texts and selves can have identities/unities, it is also recognized that identities/unities can be found across multiple sources. One may find a theme or unity across many texts similar to how we can find a theme or unity amongst many individuals. This lends itself to the importance and validation of subjectivity, so prevalently found within reader response theory. As readers, we constantly negotiate commonalities within texts, in as much as we can find commonalities amongst individuals. The mechanism by which we make these choices is what allows readers to provide rich and subjective variations among interpretations, of which ultimately reflect our self. Holland (1980) succinctly concludes this idea by stating, “...when I arrive at a unity in a literary text or the identity theme of a personality I am studying, I do so in a way that is characteristic for me- for my own identity theme” (p. 122). Therefore, our identity, or unity of our total self, cannot be extracted from how we interpret a text or our world, as it is how we contribute to a multitude of literary interpretations.

As a final note, it is important to caution that reader response theory does not allow or accept all interpretations as valid. Unfortunately, interpretation within the classroom is often too focused on what Culler (1997) considers as the *about game*- simply looking at what a text is

about as a surface level understanding for interpretation. Instead, Culler (1997) suggests that interpreting what a story is about should not be an obvious answer, but a speculation of a variation of ideas. Readers have certain dispositions, similar to the notion of identities/unities, which contribute to an interpretation of a text and allows readers to approach such texts from the reader's vantage point (Culler, 1997; Holland, 1980). Thus, what is important for interpretation is not the answer one comes up with, but what one does with the details of the text in relation to their answers, understanding, and overall experience. This process is clearly based on the social context of a text, therefore, reverting back to the aforementioned idea of responses developing within a social space.

**Recognition of authors.** The role of the reader is an undeniable component of reader response theory. This leaves the question- what is the role of the author within the scheme of interpretation and meaning making? Reader response theory provides an approach in understanding how an author contributes to a reader's literary experience. Authors are certainly recognized within this process, as well as their own identities and styles within their work, while simultaneously acknowledging how a reader's identity also interacts within the reading experience. Rosenblatt (1995) argues that students should understand the background of literary work, which will consequently allow for a deeper understanding of the author and the context of the written work. As quoted by Rosenblatt (1995), "Knowledge about the author's life and the literary influences acting on him will create the need for understanding the intellectual, philosophical, the social and economic conditions surrounding him" (p. 111). Understanding the context of a text, including the author's background, is part of the totality of a text- an aspect that brings the text to life and fruition for the reader, as they are able to better understand the socio-cultural influences that contribute to a text.



It is a common belief for readers to distinguish between the speaker in a text and the author as an extension of that speaker. Readers are most often moved and captured by the speaker of the text, also known as the *mock reader*, by which we are able to take on such new existence or experience through their words and language (Gibson, 1980). *Mock readers*, also considered as *fictitious readers*, are entities taken on by the actual reader. However, these roles are recognized by the real reader as being an extension of the author, who is regarded as a mysterious figure living behind the scenes of a text. Gibson (1980) furthers this notion by arguing that readers must be able to recognize the sophistication of the many mock readers they come to know through a variety of texts. There should be an awareness on the part of the readers to not see the reading experience as being a relationship between themselves, an author, or fictitious speakers; in fact, such fictitious speakers can often become an extension or projection of readers themselves.

Although an author's existence is recognized, it does not mean that there is a separation between such an existence, the world, and the self. Considering this perspective, Holland (1976) argues that the belief regarding the separation of the world and what we know, as well as the innate isolation of those who inhabit it, is falsely substantiated. In fact, this recognition of authors leads to the belief that there is no gap between external and internal reality. In other words, the reading experience consists of our selves acting on reality, while reality simultaneously acting on us. This logic of thinking leads us to believe that there is no gap between the mind and nature, ourselves and the world, respectively. Instead, they work within each other, which by decree acknowledges the world of the author and of the reader. Connectedly, socio-cultural theory supports an understanding that learning exists within a collaborative context inclusive of members' individual experiences, therefore, the recognition of

authors and their own experiences and contribution to literary knowledge, presumably can be incorporated within this definition.

**Intertextuality and universality.** Beyond the existence of authors, there is also the recognition of how texts relate to other literary works. For example, the idea of intertextuality ascertains that a work exists among other texts, allowing such work to be juxtaposed, challenged, supported, or transformed (Culler, 1980, 1997). As Culler (1997) states, “Literature is a practice in which authors attempt to advance or renew literature and thus is always implicitly a reflection on literature itself” (p. 34). As readers, we often recognize this idea as we constantly make connections across texts, looking for relationships, similarities, and commonalities of themes, characters, and plots. The ability to recognize the structure of a text, including its relevance to other texts, is considered *literary competence* (Culler, 1980, 1997). Readers employ certain techniques, whether consciously or unconsciously constructed, about the nature of texts and the effects of language. In other words, there is an implicit knowledge of the reader, as well as the implicit knowledge of the author, which should not be overlooked. The reader is equipped with a set of literary knowledge and understanding of text, as well as preconceived expectations, which often comes from knowledge of other literary works. Therefore, it becomes essential under reader response theory to acknowledge the role that literature, as an overarching context, plays on the reading experience and its influence on interpretative discourse.

Universality, the role of literature in society, parallels the principles of democracy by means of inviting a community of readers meant to inspire, imagine, and explore a range of possibilities. Literature invites readers to engage in inquiry, questioning, freedom of thought, and exchange of ideas among an open community of learners. As Culler (1997) contends:

The aesthetic object, cut off from practical purposes and inducing particular kinds of reflection and identifications, helps us to become liberal subjects through the free and disinterested exercise of an imaginative faculty that combines knowing and judging in the right relation. Literature does this, the argument goes, by encouraging consideration of complexities without a rushed to judgment, engaging the minds in ethical issues, inducing readers to examine conduct (including their own) as an outsider or a reader of novels would. (p. 37)

Literature as a social practice helps us become more mindful of differences, yet having a common ground for the appreciation of literary works and its liberating effects. As a result, this parallels the notion that literary reflection and openness to interpretation allows readers to experience texts through their own insights and contributions, valuing the reader as a subjective interpreter.

However, Culler (1997) presents the question of whether literature is a vehicle that carries out dominant ideologies imposed upon the reading process, or if it provides a forum for questioning such ideologies, as a democratic society inherently provides. Culler (1997) states, “Literature is the noise of culture as well as its information. It is an entropic force as well as cultural capital. It is a writing that calls for a reading and engages readers in problems of meaning” (p. 40). On the contrary, Fish’s (1980) *interpretative communities*, in where readers employ a set of widely accepted strategies that shape the responses of individual readers, lends more to the argument that the community in which we interpret meaning is an overarching power that can potentially diminish the role of the reader and the text. Consequently, Culler (1997) examines the question of what is literature and where does the meaning given to literature stem from, thus giving purpose to the importance of analyzing these various discourses. When

readers, as actively engaged social learners, recognize the existence of other texts in relation to themselves as well as among those texts, there is a greater appreciation for the larger socio-cultural context of a literary experience. Allowing this awareness further supports socio-cultural theory because it specifically distinguishes the need for placing all learning in a collective context, recognizing all aspects that contribute to the phenomenon of learning.

### **Critical Literacy and Democratic Education**

The reader is a vital aspect of the reading experience, empowered by their voice, as well as the direction in which meaning of a text takes place. This process certainly exists within a socio-cultural context, as explained in the prior sections. Connecting these ideas, literacy education can then be framed within a democratic perspective, affording students specific rights and pedagogical empowerment over their learning (Riley, 2015). Therefore, critical literacy frames learning within a social justice context and supports the need for developing a pedagogy that enables a democratic education to flourish (Comber, 2015; Janks, 2012). Additionally, critical literacy is fueled by the need for social change, to empower those marginalized and voiceless to take a stance and action against the inequalities that maintain society's power relations. As articulated by Cherland and Harper (2007):

...critical literacy projects are fueled by a belief that change can occur and by the desire to ameliorate social and educational inequalities, and in particular the school failures of significant groups of students, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status, those from ethnic and/or linguistic minority communities, and those otherwise marginalized. (p. 26).

Moreover, critical literacy is grounded on the ideals of individual and social transformation through the exploration and interplay of language, power, and action (Kuo, 2009). Facilitating student development of critical literacy is the foundation for building a democratic community.

Contextualizing education within a critical literacy context not only changes the definition of learning, but also that of the learner. In other words, critical literacy places the learner as an active producer of knowledge, one that takes risks, asks questions, and allows curiosity to lead their learning endeavors (Shannon, 2002; Vazquez, 2008). It is imperative for learners to understand the complexities of their world in order to better prepare themselves for navigating within this realm (Hasty & Fain, 2014). The following section will begin with a detailed discussion of the role of learners, the need to establish a free and liberating context for learning, the importance of validating multiple points of views, and then conclude with the transformative and newly defined role of teachers. These components are essential for creating a democratic classroom community, a foundation of this study.

### **Recognition of Learner as Active Self**

Historically, education has worked towards maintaining and upholding an authoritarian state of government in which the people made sacrifices for the common good and accepted their assigned role in society (Spring, 2008). As he explains:

People are educated to accept and love their place in the social order and to believe that they should sacrifice for the common good. The educational system of an authoritarian state wants to prepare citizens who are willing to die to protect the very state and social system that condemn them to a life of slavery and exploitation. (Spring, 2008, p. 24)

As such, it becomes imperative to dismantle such thought and create a system of education that empowers students to become active citizens in control of their lives, choices, and future, giving them the opportunity to break a system that oppresses them.

The learner, as an active self within literacy education, is one that takes ownership over meaning making, creative thought, and critical awareness of their self within the world. Shannon

(1989, 2002) writes about his concerns with our school system and its overemphasis on literacy success defined by students' decoding skills, rather than a literate active self. Whether or not decoding skills lead to critical reading skills is often times overlooked or not a concern within the discourse of education. Shannon (1989, 2002) highlights these issues, but also provides an alternative for researchers and educators to consider the urgency for education to push our students to read beyond letters and sounds placed together to make a word, but to look at that word and interpret it critically and creatively. As Shannon (2002) quotes, "Our literacy also helps us gain power over our lives because we use it to participate in the discussion and development of alternative actions in our daily lives" (p. 422). Literacy is a powerful tool that enables students to stand for themselves, defend their thoughts, and actively contribute to their world.

Developing a sense of agency amongst students instills a strong foundation for maintaining the recognition of the learner as an active self, where individuals listen to each other, empathize with differences, and take a stance for defending the qualities that build camaraderie amongst their members. In order to take action for social justice, students need to engage in critical inquiry through books to begin to formulate their questions, thoughts, and opinions needed to build a sense of agency. Critical inquiry is defined as "the active engagement of learners as they explore issues in the world around them" (Laman, 2006, p. 204). Along with the idea of critical inquiry is the notion of critique- a disposition towards analyzing our world, issues, and inequities in a way that propels us towards change. Shannon (2002) asserts, "The ability to name the world through critique and hope brings us some power in and over our lives" (p. 422). Therefore, critical inquiry and critique connects students' personal lives to politics,

engaging students to think about issues important to democracy making them an active self in the road towards a more equitable and just society.

### **Liberating Learning Context**

Teaching, based on a critical literacy approach, espouses a liberating and free learning environment where all students learn to express themselves in ways that validate their thinking and intellect. The word *liberating* is used because it is suggestive of a learning context that enables students to think independently, question freely, and take ownership of their intellectual growth. In other words, “Opportunities must be provided for students from different ethnic backgrounds to have free, personal, and cultural expression so that their voices and experiences can be incorporated into teaching and learning processes on a regular basis” (Gay, 2000, p. 42). Students are encouraged to engage in critical dialogue between their peers, while the teacher’s role is to assure that this is done respectfully, with a focus on the academic objectives across any content area. The effects are clearly stated in the following statement:

This freedom allows students to focus more closely and concentrate more thoroughly on academic learning tasks. The results are improved achievement of many kinds. Among them are more clear and insightful thinking; more caring, concerned and humane interpersonal skills; better understanding of interconnectedness among individual, local, national, ethnic, global, and human identities. (Gay, 2000, p. 35)

Accordingly, critical literacy aims at producing a learning environment where many different voices are heard and accepted in the classroom, thus embracing differences. As Gay (2000) further contends, this active engagement supports and enables students to find their own voices, to contextualize in multiple perspectives, to engage in more ways of knowing, and to become

more active participants in society. Students in such classrooms should feel engaged, liberated, and actively involved in the academic learning process.

### **Multiple Voices and Shared Understanding**

Reading becomes a dynamic relationship between our own views, perceptions, and values, which often can become engaged in a conflicting battle between others' perspectives or alternative realities. However, this struggle allows us to commit ourselves to a productive dialogue with others where exchanges of differing viewpoints flourish, acceptance of such alternative realities validated, and ultimately appreciation for a pluralistic society where differences can coexist thrive.

One cannot analyze the individual and their psychological state as a single unit. Instead, the individual is highly interconnected within the cultural context and the intellectual power levied to them. In other words, "Our culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation" (Bruner, 1990, p. 13). Meaning and the process by which it is constructed is socially situated and made within a publicly oriented space. Bruner (1990) proposes that there is an interpretive system that individuals take part. It is through this system, composed of specified and agreed-upon patterns in language and discourses, that meaning is negotiated between diverse thoughts. Therefore, it is imperative to raise our awareness about the world and make such interpretations open to others so that we allow others to learn from us, as much as we can learn from those who share their perspectives as well.

Instilling a sense of appreciation for multiple points of views amongst students leads to a recognition of who we are in a shared social context. Meredith, Steele, and Kikusova (2001) describe this phenomenon of building a literacy community as a form of individual healing or a



healing community. As suggested, “A literacy has evolved which allows for, in fact solicits, multiple interpretations of text, the integration of seemingly disparate fields, and the encouragement to express respectful disagreement, a literacy which acknowledges individual context and learning history (Meredith, et al., 2001, p. 194). Bringing in various voices, while validating the importance of our own and its contribution to broadening our understanding is emotionally uplifting, allowing us to value our own self-worth within the learning and meaning-making process.

### **Teacher as Facilitator**

There is an inherent distrust by society that students, especially from low-income backgrounds, can critically construct their own knowledge and that they lack the necessary background knowledge and experience to be successful in society; therefore, such students must have a knowledgeable adult with the necessary basic information to transfer to these less capable students (Nieto, 2010; Pradl, 1996). Similarly, Friere (2000) discusses the idea that students are in a constant submissive and passive position within education and therefore need a teacher to *narrate* the necessary information for memorization. Following this line of reasoning, teachers are meant to *deposit* or *bank* information onto the minds of the uneducated (Friere, 2000). However, a challenge to this notion is the proposition that an educators’ responsibility is to allow students to use their diverse experience as points of discussion and connection to the necessary content being taught. As Nieto (2010) reiterates, “It is no longer simply a question of transmitting important knowledge to students, but rather of working with them so that they can reflect, theorize, and create knowledge” (p. 36-37). Undoubtedly, teachers are mediators, inquirers, and responsive agents to their students’ learning. Friere (2000) suggests that the relationship between the educator and the educated should be one where both sides are

interchangeable: educators can be educated, while the educated can become educators.

Therefore, the role of a teacher is to not simply transmit information to passive receptors, but one that aids, supports, and mediates the co-construction of knowledge that takes place during learning.

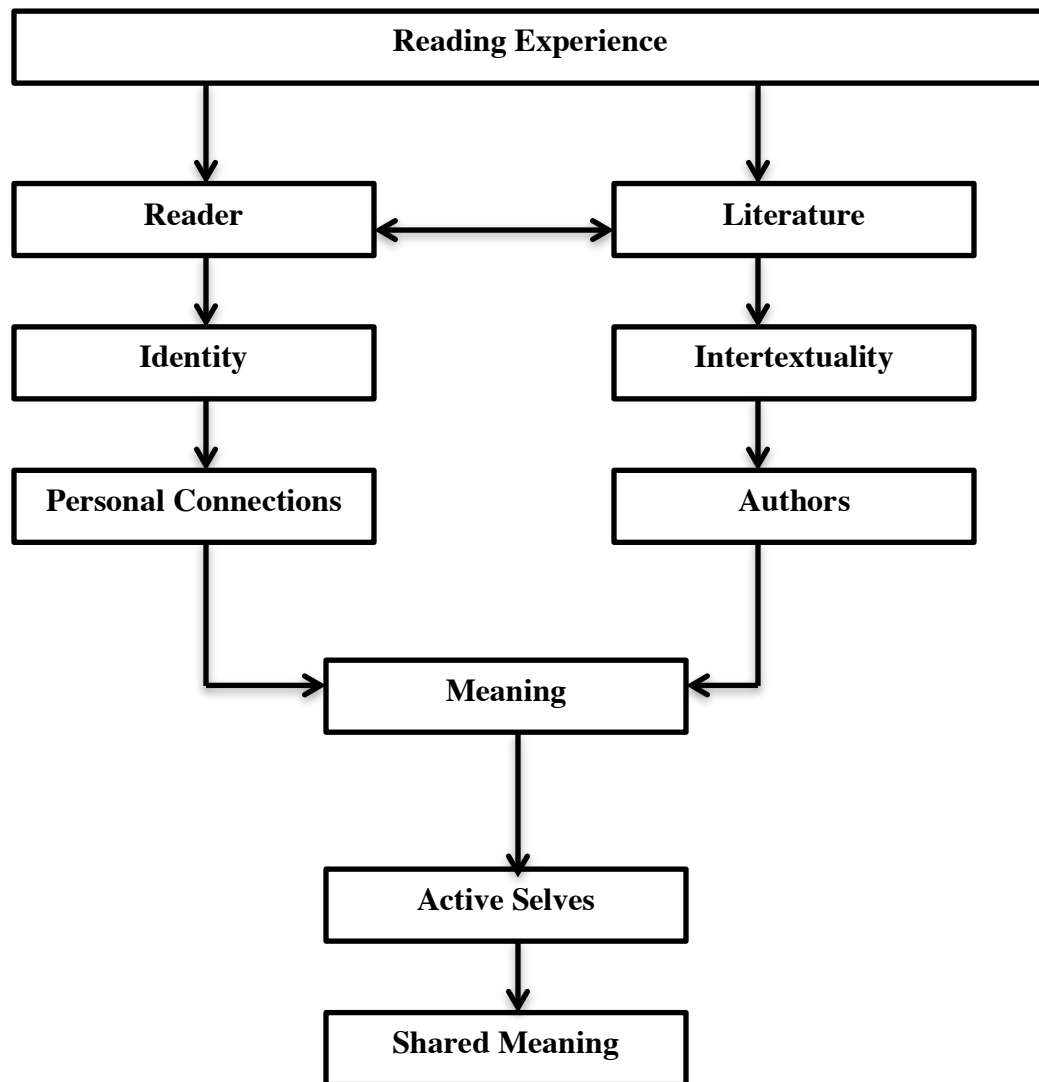
In order to instill a true democratic classroom, educators must relinquish the reigns of their control, empowering students to see themselves as essential participants of their miniature utopian democratic society. As such, educators must become more attentive to what students have to say- their thoughts, concerns, questions, opinions. In order for this dialogic space to be effective, we must be willing to be mutually accepting of other's opinions and perspectives, and modes of interpretation, especially in regards to literacy discussion. Pradl (1996) suggests a form of *active listening*, in where teachers are constantly aware of their self and role within classroom dialogue. By stepping back, teachers can truly recognize their usual overpowering control of classroom discussion, thus allowing students as learners to develop a stronger sense of self. Pradl (1996) cautions, "When no one listens to children, their initial burst of power and confidence with language inevitably withers" (p. 72). In essence, we are the advocates of our students, at the forefront of their defense, giving them a voice to not simply be used, but to be heard in all aspects of the word.

Finally, Nieto (2013) discusses the role of teachers as social mediators, individuals who create a social and academic space for students to interact, explore, and affirm one another. "Sociocultural mediation is important because literacy is not just about learning to decode; rather, it is a social practice that cannot be separated from the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in which it takes place" (Nieto, 2013, p.16). In order for education to embark towards the necessary changes needed for a just and equitable education for all, in its true sense of the

phrase, there must be a shift in ideologies concerning the roles of educators. No longer can educators be the source of the highest echelons of information, but rather become facilitators who guide their students to find their voice, create a negotiated space for this voice, and allow the recounting for each of their unique stories.

### **Constructing a Larger Framework: Socio-Cultural, Reader Response, and Critical Literacy**

Although there are various aspects from socio-cultural theory, reader response theory, and critical literacy that generally overlap conceptually, it is important to illustrate these connections through a diagram. Figure 1 explains how the overall reading experience, taking into account the existence of both the reader and the literature/text, dynamically interact. This transaction, as will be explained, prevails in a socio-cultural context.



**Figure 1. Connections of Theories.**

Illustrating socio-cultural, reader response, and critical literacy theory, it is necessary to begin with the reading experience, as it is the framework in which all other factors coexist. First, the reading experience is composed of the reader and literature, primary components of reader response theory. As previously discussed, both the reader and literature (text) transact with each other, constantly influencing the other throughout the reading experience. The reader in itself is

influenced by several factors: identity and personal connections. As such, the arrows indicate the movement between one's identity and personal connections, which ultimately influences the meanings we derive from reading. In other words, one's identity, inclusive of our experiences, beliefs, culture, and values enable a reader to create strong personal connections to texts. Connectedly, these concepts are also part of socio-cultural theory as personal connections and one's identity are closely tied to the reader's lived experiences.

Within literature, there is also a recognition that other texts exist (intertextuality) as well as the presence of the author, which informs how the reader makes connections or places their meaning, transaction, and understanding in a context. As exemplified in the diagram, these aspects influence the creation of meaning, which is then shared in a social setting (socio-cultural theory). Subsequently, readers learn how to support their voice in a social context, yet accept how others' views can often shape or inform their own meaning making and interpretation, which leads to the next factor in the diagram- shared meaning. As part of this context, students are able to express their voice, thoughts, and opinions allowing for a free and liberating environment, an aspect important to critical literacy and a democratic education. Finally, the recognition and validation of the reader and all they bring to the reading experience collectively creates active selves, one in which readers see their self as part of the reading process, producing an empowering self-identity for all.

It is critical to understand that although reader response highlights the role of the reader as an individual, while socio-cultural theory emphasizes the importance of the social setting, I propose that there must be a balance of both: In order to empower the reader as an individual, they must be able to recognize how others inform their own opinions, which can go through dynamic changes during the overall reading experience. There is a clear link, then, between the

reader (reader response theory), the social context (socio-cultural theory), and how these contribute to a democratic learning environment where individuals are validated and empowered to make a difference within their own active learning (critical literacy).

### **Democratic Classroom-Community Context**

In order to discuss a democratic classroom-community context, it is necessary to first provide a definition of democracy. Democracy stems from the belief that individuals have the ability to control their own destiny. Opportunities are presented to individuals in a democratic society, thus seizing these opportunities are determined by each individual. Democracy also stands for the idea that all individuals have a voice and encouraged to use their voice to be heard against elements that might be unfair, unjust, or discriminatory (Pradl, 1996). Through this belief, individuals are inspired to gain a sense of agency, in which their commitment to ensure democratic principles such as liberty, equality, and justice can enable them to have their voice heard and persevere.

Literature in the classroom can foster these same elements of democracy, allowing classrooms to be miniature replicas of our democratic society. It is within literature that individuals can freely and openly engage in meaning making. Moreover, it is within a classroom where multiple points of views can be acknowledged, reinterpreted, and respectfully disagreed upon yet accepted as an alternative reality, thus coexisting in a pluralistic platform of individual experiences. Pradl (1996) suggests, “By fostering human relationships that acknowledge the other’s point of view and place value on the multisided nature of human experience, democratic behavior in the classroom stays grounded in conversations to which we all feel comfortable contributing” (p. 11). Creating a democratic classroom is not based on a teacher’s predetermined agenda, but rather fostered through dialogue, often spontaneous, that alternatively motivates and encourages others to delve deeper into their own meaning making, thus eliciting critical thought.

### **Related Research: Literature Circles**

Literature circles have been an effective way to support students' interpretation of literature, providing them an open forum for authentic talk, sharing experiences, and raising questions in a small and cooperative group setting (Johnson & Giorgis 2007). Through research on the topic of literature and its role in literature circles, or book clubs as they are also commonly referred to, I have been able to synthesize my findings by the following areas: Authenticity, community building, writing as a form of dialogue, content-area instruction, and the role of the teacher. Contextualizing the empirical research will allow me to find gaps, limitations, and further needed research within these areas.

#### **Authenticity**

As we become further removed from the traditional notion of teaching literacy through the repetition of skills, reading instruction will take on a meaningful and authentic role not only for the institution of education, but for the lives of individual students. In other words, "Reading and writing develop through interactions with both adults and peers; students should not sit in isolation, working on individual worksheets to practice skills outside the social and cultural context of normal use" (Raphael & McMahon, 1994, p. 102). Allowing reading to have relevance within the lives of students is one of the many components driving reading research. Batchelor's (2012) study of literature circles based in a middle school classroom suggests that there is more to literature circles than just sharing a good book. As stated in the article, "Not only does self-esteem swell, but their ability to be empathetic increases" (Batchelor, 2012, p. 28). There is no doubt that literature circles evoke emotions and connections with characters that might not possibly exist if not given the proper dialogical space for these authentic conversations to take place.

Not only do literature circles promote a sense of relevancy within the lives of readers, it also encompasses the notion that students should be at the center of this instruction. As a result, this furthers student engagement and motivation within reading (Avci & Yüksel, 2011; Batchelor, 2012). Literature circles should provide students with an opportunity to be reflective about texts and its function in society. For example, in a two-year study by Raphael and McMahon (1994), their findings suggest that by the second year students began to create their own expectations, guidelines, and response forms allowing them to take more ownership of the book club's components. Students also began to ask more questions in order to increase participation among members. Therefore, these findings reveal the empowering effects and the sense of ownership that is created, allowing an authentic literary experience to thrive.

### **Community Building**

When given opportunities to work in cooperative groups, students are able to build a sense of camaraderie amongst their peers. In essence, they are empowered, motivated, and feel a sense of belonging. As stated by Batchelor (2012):

Literature circles have and will remain a key factor in students' discovery of reading as a pleasurable and social experience, as well as in their inclination and ability to forge new connections to authors, titles, and friendships along the way. (p. 34)

Within this same study, student roles also became an important aspect for book clubs. Roles are often used to help students focus on individual tasks as well as their own literary strengths, while receiving assistance from other peers (Batchelor, 2012; Daniels, 2002). However, these role sheets are not meant to be permanent, but used as an initial guide to help jumpstart goals and tasks. Similarly, in a study done by Thien, Guise, and Sloan (2011), specific roles that support critical literacy were effectively established. Urging for a reevaluation of roles, the article



recommends several roles, including *Problem Poser*, *Perspective Taker*, *Difference Locator*, *Stereotype Tracker*, and *Critical Lens Wearer* (Thien et al., 2011). Establishing roles in the beginning of the school year encourages talk and a sense of responsibility for each member.

Literature circles engage students in a shared understanding, especially in terms of setting goals and expectations for individuals and group accountability. In other words, students in literature circles have a shared understanding that the purpose is to promote conversation and questioning in a way that is encouraging and supportive. Avci and Yüksel's (2011) study of literature circles in a private school in Istanbul conducted student surveys to find out how they felt about the effectiveness of literature circles. According to such surveys, students stated that when they misunderstood aspects of the texts, literature circles provided opportunities for them to clarify their questions with their peers (Avci & Yüksel, 2011). It is through these small and intimate group settings where students can clarify their misunderstandings safely and therefore potentially be more effective when conversation is carried over into a whole group setting.

Although studies have shown the benefits and power of cooperative groups, other studies have shown how an unbalanced distribution of power can evolve throughout literature circles. For example, Clark's (2006) research centers on issues of gender and social class in a fifth grade classroom during a five-week literature circle unit. The purpose of the study was to explore the power structure between girls and boys in a book club. The researcher notes that during the first year, boys frequently used their discursive power to silence and marginalize girls. By contrast, during the following year the researcher observed the opposite in that girls were now asserting their position and dominant role, voicing their opinions more assertively while disempowering the position of the boys (Clark, 2006). The research suggests that this shift occurs due to the dynamic nature of their changing gender identities: girls become empowered through their

assertive dominance in learning, while boys resort to gaining other forms of power more closely aligned to masculine identities. Understanding the development of gender identities and how students negotiate these during literature circles can be a point for further discussion in future research.

### **Written Dialogue and Oral Discussion**

Writing is a powerful means for students to contextualize their understanding and misunderstandings in a nonthreatening environment. Many studies implement a form of reading logs for students to document their reading. For example, in Raphael and McMahon's (1994) study, one of the major components of their book club was the use of reading logs, which allowed their students to synthesize their understanding and connections. In other words, students focused on how to record their thoughts, how it can be changed throughout the year, and synthesized across texts.

The social context of reading cooperatively is an aspect that should be considered because the discourse patterns that emerges while a story is shared greatly affects the meaning making process. Dialogue is purposeful and gives students the capability of problem solving, rather than simply receiving information passively. Worthy, Chamberlain, Peterson, Sharp, and Shih (2012) focused on read alouds and dialogue in a second grade classroom, observing that students began to make personal and emotional connections driven by carefully chosen literature and open-ended dialogue. The negotiation of dialogue is undoubtedly part of the cognitive process that takes place when students make meaning.

### **Content-Area Instruction**

Literature circles, including the role of books as a supportive tool for teaching content should not be limited to its integration within the typical reading instruction block. In fact,

studies have shown that literature circles, as well as integrating books as an impetus for classroom dialogue, are also effective across content areas within a socio-political context (Burke & Peterson, 2007; Clark, 2006; McCall, 2010). In a study done by McCall (2010), the research developed a set of strategies to integrate reading, writing, and social studies effectively through literature circles. Specifically, the researcher used four books about the Columbus and Taino experience, providing differing perspectives for each experience. McCall (2010) contends, "...as students lead and participate in small, student-led discussions, they are preparing for their civic role in society by engaging in discussion about significant concepts and ideas with peers, which may also include social justice questions and issues" (p. 154). Therefore, literature circles can be an effective means for engaging students in powerful and transformative social studies contexts.

Historical fiction and nonfiction texts certainly provide a forum for critical conversation. However, an important question to ask is what does critical conversation look like in practice and how do students negotiate this understanding with their peers? Historical fiction and nonfiction texts can often position themselves as an authority, placing the reader as a marginalized and subordinate receiver of information (O'Brien, 2001). Since taking action for social justice begins with the questioning of texts, it is important to ask students to think about why certain topics are chosen by authors to be included in books as well as encouraging students to judge illustrations of nonfiction books as poor or adequate representations of the text. O'Brien (2001) shows that inviting students to question the validity of nonfiction text, including its illustration and layout, should prompt them to take action and think critically about social studies themes. Nonetheless, it is necessary for teachers as well as future research within this area to carefully select text that are authentic in their narratives and genuinely representative of individuals in an equitable way.

Similarly, other studies encourage students to contextualize the characters in historical fiction by analyzing the sociopolitical setting of the text. Laman (2006) incorporates *Freedom Summer* (Wiles, 2001), a story about a friendship between two boys set during the Civil Rights, to lead children to relate the book back to their social world. In other words, they put themselves in the context of the text to not only understand the characters' perspective, but to also question the events in the text that deal with social inequalities of race and power. The teacher in this study taught students how to identify characters through a critical lens, using identifiers such as *allies, bystanders, targets, or perpetrators* (Laman, 2006, p. 205). Within this classroom, the teacher was aware that students were familiar with these roles and invited them to think of ways they applied to their own action and interactions with others, in order to make sense of the text through their personal experiences. Students asked questions, wondered about the secondary characters, and discussed the multiple and competing perspectives in the text. From these activities, students dealt with issues of power and what occurs when people try to fight for social justice. Students gained the most knowledge through open conversations and reader responses, especially those that created tensions, contradictions, and prompted further questioning.

Incorporating texts based on historical fiction and other social studies themes are effective within literature circles, but studies have shown that they can serve a greater purpose than as a tool for discussion about pertinent social themes. Burke and Peterson (2007) use literature with 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders to teach historical events about World War II, particularly analyzing the narrative's text features to understand multiple perspectives, tone, and character emotions. As stated in the study, "Drawing on their extensive visual knowledge, readers have the potential to gain deeper sensitivity to the characters' emotions and intentions, and greater insight into the issues and struggles portrayed in the books, than may be possible when reading

the text alone” (Burke & Peterson, 2007, p. 74). This analysis suggests that students engaged in a deepened understanding about the events during WWII and enabled them to gain a more empathetic appreciation for those who lived through these events. Therefore, literature helped secondary students develop their visual literacy, response to literature, as well as their empathy towards others’ unjust experiences in war (Burke & Peterson, 2007). Gaining a deeper appreciation for others and a sense of empathy for others’ tribulations in life, paves the way for recognition that there are often more ways than one for knowing and understanding issues.

**Role of the teacher.** Although the role of the teacher is often limited within book clubs, they are nonetheless an important factor when it comes to modeling discussions, answering questions, and resolving uncertainties. As stated by Raphael and McMahon (1994), “Students or the teacher could initiate discussion of confusing or disturbing aspects of the books that they had not resolved with their individual book clubs” (p. 111). Batchelor (2012) reiterates this point in his study and urges for significant opportunities for teacher modeling. As recommended, “Modeling not only shows students what I expect, but it also removes the threat that another student will be negative, thus enabling a more communicative and democratic learning environment” (Batchelor, 2012, p. 30). Taking a more present role within discussions, teachers should model thinking aloud on how to question, pose problems, and challenge our own perspective.

Ultimately, a teacher’s role consists of one that asks for details and clarification from student discussions and responses in a nonintrusive way. It is important for teachers to elicit other possible viewpoints or the character’s viewpoints for interpretations of themes. Additionally, teachers must challenge student language and choice of words by asking them to elaborate on what they mean by certain terms. In order for this to occur, there needs to be a

reevaluation concerning what this may look like in practice. Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, and Miller (2010) focus their research on this reflective reevaluation of teacher roles. As suggested, “A shared goal is to replace the pattern of asking students to recite answers to questions focused often on mere facts or skills with a new pattern of collaborative meaning-making that promotes analysis, reflection, and critical thinking” (Certo et al., p. 244). Ultimately, teachers must take into account the complexity of how students construct meaning and respond to text, by valuing, validating, and supporting an accepting environment for multiple perspectives to coexist.

### **Conclusion**

Although reactions and responses to literary work are necessary, it is not sufficient. Students still need to learn how to critically analyze a text and develop ethical and social understanding about themselves and world (Rosenblatt, 1995). As students engage in a text, they must ensure their response takes into account the source of such a response, allowing each literary experience to build on each other. This is supported by critical literacy, an approach that allows the teacher to bring to the forefront of learning issues that deal with social justice and equality, in order to make students socially aware of such issues. In other words, students need to develop a sense of literary reactions so when social justice and equity issues arise in text, they can appropriately respond because they know how to connect and give meaning to the work and its context. As Rosenblatt (1995) states, student responses will be enhanced by having a “critical awareness of his own reactions and, on the other hand, a keener and more adequate perception of the potentialities of the text” (p. 73). There is a clear implication in reader response theory, as well as socio-cultural theory, in relation to critical literacy. By responding to text that have social justice themes and issues of equality, students are able to use their own personal experience to become empowered to make changes that are necessary. Through text, students

can become aware of inequalities that exist and become empowered by developing a critical response, to make sense of them and become change agents.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Education should instill an emotional connection with the curriculum among students. Attempts should be made to fight against the traditional and often prevailing thought that students must be taught a set of specified standards in a highly structured timeline. Curriculum needs to have a purpose beyond that of assessment and meeting the standards. Expectations for students should be high and beyond attaining a surface level understanding set forth by standards. In terms of literacy, reading a book is an experience, one of wonderment, adventure, and excitement, while simultaneously tapping into fears, worries, and bewilderment. As a result, sharing literature becomes a means of understanding our selves and our world, the known and the unknown. Bruner (1977) states, “Learning should not only take us somewhere; it should allow us to go further more easily” (p. 17). This quote can be interpreted within the context of critical literacy: Learning should be applicable in the moment, but also be an impetus for future use and social action. The content we learn in the classroom should allow students to think critically about the world, the experiences of others, existing injustices, power struggles, and ultimately the need for a better world, not just envisioned, but in action. As will be discussed and exemplified through this research, literacy can effectively serve this function.

### **Significance of Topic**

Children’s literature is a valuable asset to instruction, learning, and student engagement. When shared, children’s literature gives students the opportunity to inquire, engage, construct meaning, and connect with experiences that may further their empathy, understanding of others, and awareness of social justice. As a researcher and a teacher, children’s literature plays an important role in my teaching. Students are able to more readily make connections with other texts, extract meaning from text with critical and logical evidence, and understand character’s



perspectives more empathetically. There is research to be conducted concerning the role of children's literature, both in elementary and secondary education. There is also a greater need to research and discover the potential of children's literature through a globalized and critical lens.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of children's literature is not only to promote skills and language learning, but also to elicit genuine themes that are of interest and meaningful to students. This research focused on the various purposes for using children's literature as a means for maintaining a democratic education focused on preparing students to meet the demands of our changing, interconnected, and globalized world. There are many valuable books with various social justice issues and themes- these books should be presented to students in the classroom to motivate connections, questions, and the creation of agency for change. Therefore, the questions for this study are the following:

1. How do students negotiate cultural understanding within their literary communities in a small group setting?
2. By reading historical narratives, how do students' perceptions and conceptions about themselves, their community, and world change over time? How do students navigate and explore children and young adult literature on local and global social justice context?
3. How are such perceptions and conceptions shaped or influenced by collaborating with peers?

Through a critical ethnographic case study, these questions have been explored in hopes of providing insight into literary theory and application.

## **Design and Method**

As previously elaborated, reading is a social process that involves the individual reader, the experiences they bring to the meaning making process, and the negotiation of such meaning with others. In order to capture this phenomenon and how such a process may change or evolve over time given specific texts and context, the study uses a critical ethnographic approach, while focusing on a case study (Creswell, 2013; Madison, 2012). The following section will include an analysis of the methodological approach, demographics, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

### **Critical Ethnographic Case Study**

As a research method, ethnography deals with the study of the many cultural patterns, norms, habits, and perspectives of participants in their *natural setting* (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). The goal of ethnography is to gain insight about such members to better understand and ultimately describe how they make sense and contextualize their setting within a socio-political and socio-cultural framework (Creswell, 2008; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Specifically, this study primarily focused on the form of ethnography considered as critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996). Critical ethnography entails addressing issues of power, inequity, and injustices within society. Additionally, critical ethnography seeks to understand how a group, typically referred to as a culture, establishes and reproduces patterns in interaction, interprets various phenomenon that may occur, and negotiates meaning. Therefore, the goal of critical ethnography is to advocate for those who have been historically oppressed or marginalized and to help others understand these dynamics and how they contribute or reject structures (Campano & Damico, 2007; Cherland & Harper, 2007; Joseph & Duncan, 2007).

It is important to note that critical ethnography is closely tied to the nature of one's thinking, especially in regards to the origins of our knowledge and way they are constructed

(Carspecken, 1996). Similarly and in particular to this study, I sought to uncover students' own construction of knowledge in relation to their understanding about the world, historically and presently, and how they could contribute to positive social change. Much of our own knowledge about the world comes from our personal observations, and in regards to literature, I believe that reading is one avenue by which this can be accomplished.

Finally, using aspects supported by critical ethnography, including the advocacy for marginalized groups, the importance of dialogue among participants, and the empowerment of individuals towards social change, this study also incorporated a case study approach (Madison, 2005). Creswell (2008) defines a case study as an in-depth exploration of an individual or a group of individuals in a *bounded* setting, specifically referring to time, place, or physical boundaries. In particular to this study, the focus pertained to a group of six students within a literature circle, and in relation to Creswell's (2008) definition, bounded by time (school hours and reading block) and place (a classroom). Similarly, case studies with a focus on ethnography, consists of creating detailed descriptions about the setting, especially in regards to time and chronology of events (Creswell, 2013). Since this study analyzed the changes that took place over 13 weeks of discussion, engagement, and critiquing, it was appropriate to consider the elements associated with case studies (Creswell, 2013). More importantly, conducting research supported by a critical ethnographic case study approach allowed for a more advanced understanding of how a specific group of students' interactions within a group influenced their perceptions and conceptions about the world over time. It provided the ability for a greater commitment to document this change over time within the data.

## **Researcher Identity and Role**

During the course of this study, observations took place within a classroom setting. Specifically, as a researcher and teacher I became a participant observer, one who became immersed in the setting and fully participated in activities, roles, and group norms while simultaneously collecting data (Creswell, 2008; Gay et al., 2009; Spradley, 1980). Although as a participant observer I had greater access to the participants as I had a previously established relationship being their third grade teacher during the 2013-2014 academic year, there were still limitations to this role that must be adequately addressed. As a participant observer, I needed to balance the dual role of being the students' teacher and the participants' researcher. Additionally, as a researcher I needed to be aware of any biases or subjectivity that may have developed during the course of the data collection and during the data analysis (Creswell, 2008). It was important to engage in ongoing reflections throughout the process to be aware of my contributing dual role within the setting.

It is essential to distinguish the exact participant observant role that took place throughout the study. Clearly, as a participant observer I was provided a window to the participants and the setting on a daily basis for the 2014-2015 academic year, making the role intensive and personal. This insight allowed me to develop strong relationships between the participants and gain an in-depth understanding on how literature shaped students' self-perceptions and worldviews. This form of participation is termed active participant observer, one who negotiates the role of teacher and researcher throughout the study (Gay et al., 2009). Therefore, this role enabled me to have full access, entry, and previously established rapport with the school, staff, and administration.

## **Demographics**

### **Location of Study**

The study took place at an elementary school located in the southeast region of an urban school district in the western region of the United States. The school's demographics consisted of 815 students, of which approximately 80.2% qualified for free and reduced lunch (FRL) and 23.9% were considered English Language Learners (ELL). The school's ethnic demographics were also broken down by the following: 18.4% White/Caucasian, 48.6% Hispanic Latino, 14.5% Black/African American, 9.1% Asian, 8.2% two or more races, and 0.9% Pacific Islander (p. 1). These specific demographics are important because it represents the diversity of the school's population, which may have a significant impact on how students negotiate meaning with multicultural literature, which is an integral component of this study.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of six students from a fourth grade classroom of 32 students. It can be inferred that the school demographics mentioned above are reflective of the classroom representation. It is important to note that the student population for this setting was diverse, both culturally and socioeconomically. I believe that this diversity in student population enabled unique dialogue to take places, as a variety of experiences added to the content of the conversations. Consequently, books connecting with issues pertaining to social justice led students to recognize their individual role for change through empowering critical conversations.

All 32 students were grouped by using their STAR reading scores, an assessment used by the school to place students within an independent reading level score. This assessment is also used across all teachers in this school and throughout the year to guide small group instruction and monitor student growth and progress within reading. Students were then grouped (four

groups of six and two groups of four) heterogeneously with consideration to gender and ethnicity, allowing for diverse groups. The smaller groups with four students contained GATE (Gifted and Talented Education), and were therefore not included in the final group selection because these students needed to go to their GATE class twice a week, which could have led to inconsistency in the data. Therefore, one group of six students were selected at random from the remaining four groups of six to become the focus of the research and data collection. In order to gain access to the participants, letters were sent home to the parents/guardians informing them of the research, its purpose, and overarching goals. Finally, this letter informed parents/guardians of their rights, options, and the importance of anonymity throughout the study to ensure the protection of their children.

### **Format of Participant Roles and Logistical Considerations**

Establishing the research setting consisted initially of selecting the books that would be shared during literature circles. It was important to allow students to choose these books as a collective group so that it can be more valuable and meaningful. Once the school year began, modeling became important so that students understood expectations of the literature circles and modes of discussion. These discussions were centered on whole group discussions, which helped to bridge small group discourse and student connectedness with the classroom. Finally, literary letters allowed students to continue their analysis within written dialogue. The following section details these elements that were integral to the research context and data collection.

**Selection of books.** Book selection for this study was one of the most important decisions as it impacted and influenced discussions and generating data. The careful selection of books was determined by the content, its particular focus to social justice, and the format by which the story was told through first person narration. As the participants' previous teacher

during the 2013-2014 school year, I welcomed students' input on deciding what literature would be used for the 2014-2015 school year. Several titles were shared, discussed, and a short synopsis read aloud to give students insight into the content of the books. Through open dialogue and constant feedback, specific books were selected for the 2014-2015 school year. In particular, the selection of books for this study aimed at promoting the importance of collective action, the rejection of injustices, empowering students to help others, and the need to listen to untold stories, which are important elements within social justice. By listening to and reading quality literature, children developed a warehouse of knowledge and experiences and developed the skills to use language as a tool for change (Kolczynski, 1989).

An important question to consider when selecting books was what constitutes quality literature? The selection of books for this study were primarily ones that would be considered multicultural in their content. However, this does not simply entail a pluralistic lens that narrowly focuses on providing students information about the diverse experiences of others (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Instead, multicultural literature entails a discussion of the manifestation of power among groups and how these power struggles have affected our society (Nieto, 2010). Paralleling this approach, Ching (2005) invites educators and researchers to reconsider how equity and justice in multicultural literature does not simply affirm diversity, but also challenges systemic injustices historically and presently. Therefore, the books chosen portrayed not only the cultural, but the political developments and struggles of characters in intercultural contexts. The following is a bulleted list of books that were used for this study:

- Curtis, C.P. (1995). *The Watsons go to Birmingham- 1963*. New York: Random House Children's Books.

- Written as a first person narrative, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* is a story about a young boy and his family who travel to Alabama in 1963 during the burning of the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church.
- Williams-Garcia, R. (2010). *One crazy summer*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
  - *One Crazy Summer* is a historical fiction based on three young girls who travel to Oakland, California to meet their mother. While visiting, they are sent to a day camp run by Black Panthers, where they learn about themselves and their family.
- Gross, E.B. (2010). *Elly: My true story of the Holocaust*. New York: Scholastic Press.
  - Told as a short story through compelling chapters, *Elly: My True Story of the Holocaust* describes the experience of a holocaust survivor and how she lost her family, yet found a way to persevere and stay alive through tumultuous conditions.
- Conkling, W. (2013). *Sylvia and Aki*. New York: Yearling.
  - Told through a third person narrative, *Sylvia and Aki* depicts two seemingly separate stories that converge into one at the end of the novel. One story entails the experience of a Mexican-American girl who experiences educational segregation. The second story depicts the experience of a Japanese-American girl forced to live in an internment camp with her mother while being separated by her father and older brother.
- Flores-Galbis, E. (2010). *90 miles to Havana*. New York: Roaring Book Press.
  - A story about two young brothers who are sent to Miami from Cuba along with other children, *90 Miles to Havana* illustrates the experience of survival and protection in a new and unknown world.



These texts were cautiously selected. As they support, texts are designed to help us observe the world and better understand that which may have been unknown to us before. Additionally, they push us to see things about the world that could be improved by our own will. I believe that the aforementioned texts served this function for the participants of this study.

**Questioning.** As an initial activity, it is important to model for and with students the role of questioning in a discussion and how quality questions are asked to create in-depth conversation about a topic. In an attempt to answer our own questions, critical conversation can occur, enabling students to juxtapose their thoughts with their peers. Undoubtedly, we all come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, giving us an open forum for limitless pendulum-like conversation. As Bomer and Bomer (2001) describe:

No matter how strong the classroom discourse is, no two people will have identical concepts in mind as they discuss them, because their individual life stories, predispositions, and prior habits of thinking differ so much. The differences among people as they talk about these ideas is what makes the conversation endlessly interesting, inquiring, and unfinished. (p. 39)

Developing appropriate questions is the starting point for critical dialogue. Such questions can be used to initiate small or whole group conversation, while also helping students derive ideas for journaling. Anchor charts, teacher and student created posters, were posted throughout the classroom and used for students to refer to throughout the study. In a sense, anchor charts served not only as an artifact for data analysis, but also as a historical document of our cognitive progression throughout these novel studies. Therefore, extensive opportunities for modeling must be given so that students become comfortable devising their own questions.

**Whole group discussions.** It is essential for students to feel a connectedness to classroom discussions. Read alouds were a significant aspect of the whole group discussions, as I read to students daily. Therefore, our conversations attempted to connect to students' hopes, needs, and desires in order for group discussions to lead to powerful thinking and an open heart. Developing a strong rapport and getting to know students as individuals allowed myself as the teacher/researcher to become aware of such connections in order to support their thinking. Additionally, by engaging in whole group discussions, students began to see their peer's thinking at large, revel over parts of a text, show compassion for character's actions, and inquire about the endless possibilities for wonderment. Undoubtedly, literature builds a sense of community amongst students, and therefore the goal of this research was to better understand the complexities of a classroom culture and how it is maintained throughout the literary experience. Although whole group discussions were not recorded, it was still a significant element to the classroom community that must be mentioned.

**Small group discussions.** It was important for students to be given ample opportunity for sharing their insights and thoughts, as well as encouraged to react to the thoughts of others. Literature circles or reading clubs allowed students to negotiate differences, collaborate on decisions, and most importantly openly interpret and critique a text in a safe environment (Avci & Yüksel, 2011; Batchelor, 2012; McCall, 2010; Raphael & McMahon, 1994). As Kolczynki (1989) suggest:

A good program, therefore, is a well-planned continuing experience where children are read to by others and are encouraged to read for themselves. Such a program not only guides them in developing interests, knowledge, skills, and appreciation needed to enjoy literature, but opens up new vistas for their own self-expression. (pp. 76-77)

To be most effective during literature circles, students were placed in small groups of six, with consideration for reading ability, gender, personality, and race in order to provide an academically, socially, and culturally diverse group of students. Prior to initiating the first book club meeting, a conversation took place about expectations and social negotiations concerning roles, needs, and means for possible problem solving.

**Literary letters.** Reading and writing support each other and are the foundation for developing critical thinking and logic. Journals provide teachers with a unique opportunity to observe students' literacy processes (Roser & Martinez, 1995). Additionally, allowing students to write in their journals gave them an opportunity to convey their insights, personal and emotional connections, and other spontaneous reactions. Journal writing contributes to the development of reading strategies, understanding of literature, ability to communicate and share ideas, and most importantly motivation to read. Specifically, literary letters are a form of response in which students and teachers, or other peers, engage in an interactive written dialogue about a topic (Johnson & Giorgis, 2007). As an artifact and source of data, literary letters provided me, as the researcher, a window into the personal and interpersonal thoughts of the participants.

### **Procedures**

As described above, data was collected from various sources including small group discussions, literary letters, and artifacts from journals, and anecdotal notes. Collecting data from various sources improved the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All efforts were made to respect students' participation in the study. Within all these sources of data, questioning will be an essential component for each because it will provide a comprehensive understanding of how students generate their thoughts and wonderings, and ultimately how these questions are understood independently or collectively. Additionally,

effective questioning is a fundamental standard for the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards. Considering this study focused on curriculum and pedagogy, it is important to give a brief overview of the classroom's reading block activities. According to the district's curricular requirements, teachers are expected to allocate 90 minutes of each school day for reading activities. Essentially, each reading block began with a read aloud, either from a picture book associated with the literature circle topic or directly from the focused chapter book. Second, questions were elicited and discussed- these whole group discussions allowed students to discuss the previous day's ideas and responses and set the purpose for that day's reading. Third, students engaged in small group literature circles, in which they read and engaged in cooperative and engaging dialogue. Finally, students were given opportunities to write any findings, responses, or further questions in their journals. These written responses were often shared with others through literary letters, or used as a point of discussion for the following day. As such, these 90-minute reading blocks were the source of all data collection and analysis will be described in the following section.

### **Data Collection**

Class and participant observations were detailed in extensive ethnographic field notes, especially during small group and literature circle discussions. Frank (1999) urges researchers to differentiate their field notes between descriptive and interpretive notes, as a means of avoiding quick judgment and bias. Descriptive notes are those taken by genuine observation and inclusive of details that can simply be observed, not interpreted for meaning or significance (Frank, 1999). Interpretive analysis is completed after descriptive notes have been taken and an understanding of the complexities and nature of the setting have been understood, which also served as a means of engaging with the data as it evolved (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). During the 13 weeks of data collection, I took descriptive notes of students while they engaged in their small group

literature discussions. During this time, my role became interchangeable from simple observer to facilitator. An interpretive analysis ensued at the end of each day in order to begin coding observations and patterns. Marshall and Rossman (2011) maintain that observations are fundamental to qualitative inquiry because they allow the researcher to discover complex interactions that include body language and tone of voice. In order to supplement occasions in which I could not engage in field notes while facilitating whole group dialogue, audio recordings replaced note taking and became the primary source of data analysis. These audio recordings were transcribed for analysis throughout the study.

Finally, student journals were collected for analysis in hopes of understanding the progression of their thoughts throughout the study. In order to address the research's questions, it was essential to document the development of students' metacognition—written artifacts are personal and often allow students to discuss areas that they may not feel as inclined to speak freely about in a whole group or small group session. Documents such as journals are useful for learning not only about the participants' personal thoughts, but also about their lives and experiences in relation to literature.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was collected within a 13-week period during the spring semester of the 2014-2015 school year, in which initial modeling and the aforementioned books were shared as novel studies. Data gathered during this period was organized, coded, and analyzed through a systematic method for understanding emerging themes and categories (Glesne, 2016). First, I combed through the data, highlighting conversations or ideas that seemed to be particularly important. A Word document was created to build a collection of excerpts, phrases, or journal entries, accompanied with a short analysis or description detailing why I selected these items. This was done to help keep track of my thinking so that when I revisited these items, I had a

recorded preliminary form of coding reflecting my thought process (Glesne, 2016). The method of analysis was inductive, moving from detailed data to general themes (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In other words, I used all data collected to find major observations that may parallel or support each other, while also analyzing any overlapping patterns that may come from the data. In order for this to occur, it was important to read any notes, transcriptions, journals, or any other data source at the end of each day once data had been collected. Data sources were read through several times to find interconnecting themes, which are often used in qualitative research to display a chronology and sequence of events (Creswell, 2008, 2013). As an analytical approach, this was important in order to understand how student responses and understandings may or may not change within the study. Through an inductive analysis, my goal as a researcher was to note larger conceptual findings concerning students' thinking, interaction patterns with peers, and changes in responses over time. These major ideas were grouped together by similarities and then labeled within a larger idea, as represented in Appendix A. Since qualitative analysis is interpretive in nature, it was necessary to consider means for lessening potential biases, such as triangulating findings across all data sources (Creswell, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Hand analysis of qualitative data was the primary means of handling all collection of information (Creswell, 2008). This form of analysis allowed for a more hands-on approach and included specific coding when necessary and as themes developed. As an initial activity, it was necessary to engage in a preliminary exploratory analysis to gain a general overview (Creswell, 2008). Once this process begun, as was noted in the preceding paragraph, coding occurred, and an inductive approach allowed codes to be examined into general ideas, themes, and patterns. In other words, these general ideas and themes were written onto index cards, spread out, and then

grouped together by similarities (Appendix A). Next, these grouped index cards were categorized into five larger ideas that paralleled students' conceptual development and thinking processes. Finally, these five stages were then placed in a sequential order noting the changes that took place in student discussion, learning, and constructing meaning.

As a means of maintaining the accuracy of the codes and developed themes, data was triangulated using evidence from various sources (Creswell, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Although it was important to let the data tell the story for analysis, it was also necessary to recognize the initial goals and questions of the proposed story, especially in relation to social justice. Therefore, as a researcher I discovered possible themes pertaining to how students changed their perspectives of characters over time, connected with the content of a text with their individual experiences, and built empathy towards the experiences of characters and plot. Within a social context, themes that emerged dealt with how students negotiated meaning with their peers, points of disagreement and how they were mediated, and finally how their dialogue concerning social justice and change was enacted through their actions and behaviors. The following is a table illustrating the data sources, how they were collected, when they were collected, and the method of analysis.

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Method for Collection</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>	<b>Method of Analysis</b>
Small Group Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio recording</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio recording will be transcribed by researcher</li> <li>• Transcriptions</li> <li>• Rereading several times for emerging patterns and coding and written on index cards</li> </ul>
Journals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literary letters</li> <li>• Individual responses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closure of lesson</li> <li>• Student choice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial general coding using index cards in order to find themes</li> </ul>
Anecdotal Field Notes/Reflections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laptop on site to record field notes or reflections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Once a week or as needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Printed, analyzed, and coded for themes</li> </ul>

**Table 1.Data Sources Summary**

### **Ethical Considerations, Confidentiality and Generalizability**

A major issue in the field of critical ethnography deals with the validity and credibility of a study (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Taking this into consideration, it was essential for this study to triangulate data collection by using various forms of data to build a deeper understanding of the findings (Creswell, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As I elaborated in the previous section, data was collected from audio recordings of small group discussions, journal entries, and observational notes. Throughout the study as findings emerged, it was necessary to consistently reflect back on the initial research questions (Glesne, 2016). This was done by taping the research questions around my workspace for quick access.

Ethical considerations must also be made as this study focused on children as participants. It is clear that this study focused on themes of social justice, and therefore, understanding these similar themes in relation to the general conduct of this study is of value.



One cannot base research on social justice and issues of equity yet, conduct the research in ways that are unethical, harmful, and unjust towards the participants. Throughout this study, there was an extensive focus on the students' negotiation and understanding of text—their values, opinions, questions, and concerns were consistently at the forefront of this study.

Simultaneously, all efforts were made to respect the rights of the participants, including their anonymity and ongoing beneficence (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Finally, in accordance with the state's Academic Content Standards, all literary activities and selection of books were appropriate, adequate, and aligned with the standards set forth for fourth grade. The highest quality of teaching and practices prevailed throughout the study to ensure students attained an equitable and robust educational experience.

Studies that include children as participants must consider the rights they have, especially in regards to confidentiality and privacy of the individual. In order to maintain high standards of confidentiality, all names or other identifiable characteristics remained anonymous.

Pseudonyms, individually chosen by participants, were incorporated during the data analysis to assure student's privacy rights. Any form of transcriptions, notes, and audio recordings are currently stored in a computer that requires a password. Once the dissertation has been defended, all efforts will be made to discard and delete data files within three years of dissertation approval. It is important to the researcher and the success of the study to maintain and assure student privacy, confidentiality, and integrity.

Generalizability refers to the applicability of the current research's findings and analysis to other settings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Although future researchers or educators may choose a different selection of texts, one that appropriately fits the socio-cultural context of their students, the activities by which data was collected can nonetheless be replicated and used. The

purpose of this study was to contribute to current research and pedagogical practice, this research and its findings aim at helping those in practice understand the potential of engaging students in critical talk. More importantly, the research aims at allowing educators, as well as researchers within the field, to conceptualize an education that values critical literacy and the transformative effects it may have upon students' lives, both locally and globally. At the very least, this research hopes to initiate a conversation of what could be, where we can go, and action needed for change.

### **Summary**

This chapter provides a foundation for the study's purpose and methodologically approach, specifically through a critical ethnographic case study. The sources of data are detailed and explained, as well as the analytical approach. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the findings and data that evolved from the research.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings and Analysis**

Literature is a powerful tool that can be utilized to mobilize change and make a foundational difference in children's lives (Ching, 2005; Pradl, 1996; Ralfe, 2009). Through literature exploration, children are able to recognize the function and importance of language, and its' ability to be used effectively (Kolczynski, 1989). Literacy contributes to language and it is through language that children express their reactions, insights, and opinions in a meaningful and transformative way. The following section will revisit the participants, methodology, and guiding research questions that led to the subsequent analysis.

### **Research Approach**

This study consisted of six participants from a fourth grade classroom in a school located in the western region of the United States. The six participants were chosen at random and placed in a literature circle group for 13 weeks in which they consecutively read five historical novels with socio-political themes. The type of research method chosen for this study was a critical ethnographic case study, focusing on the sociopolitical implications of a group's cultural interactions, dialogical negotiations, and interpretation of information (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell, 2008; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Data collected included transcriptions from audio recordings stemming from students' literature circle conversations, journal entries as artifacts, and researcher anecdotal field notes. These three sources of data were then analyzed into stages according to patterns, topics, and unique interpretations. These major ideas and themes were grouped, labeled, and are represented in Appendix A. As Glesne (2016) states, "By putting pieces that exemplify the same descriptive or theoretical idea together into data clumps labeled with a code, you begin to create a thematic organizational framework" (p. 196). This description mirrored the analytical process that took place for this study, as codes were placed on

index cards, arranged, and rearranged, for meaningful interpretation within an organizational framework.

The three theories that informed my research questions were sociocultural theory, the transactional theory of reader response, and critical literacy theory. Briefly, sociocultural theory is the idea that students' learning is most successfully achieved when students are allowed to construct their knowledge with others and when the educational setting promotes and validates their lived experiences (Dewey, 1938; Gutierrez, 2008; Mathews & Cobb, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). The transactional theory of reader response encompasses the notion that readers experience a text by transacting with the words and developing meaning from their identity as readers (Culler, 1997; Holland, 1975, 1976, 1980; Iser, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1995). Finally, critical literacy further supports these ideas stating that education must provide students with a social transformation in where they are given the opportunity to critically question information in order to be advocates of change (Cherland & Harper, 2007; Friere, 2000; Gay, 2006; Nieto, 2010, 2013). The following questions were therefore developed from the aforementioned theories:

1. How do students negotiate cultural understanding within their literary communities in small group setting?
2. By reading historical narratives, how do students' perceptions and conceptions about themselves, their community, and world change over time? How do students navigate and explore children and young adult literature on local and global social justice contexts?
3. How are such perceptions and conceptions shaped or influenced by collaborating with peers?

These questions will be examined through the data analysis and will be referenced within the results in order to address the research's purpose. The following section describes the research findings from the study in order to tell the story of our classroom community, the story of the participants who worked to create meaning and engage in critical text, and the story contained in the books that were used as a tool and served as a platform for discussion and discovery.

### **Our Story: Cultivating a Classroom Culture**

It is important for this study to begin with the classroom as it provides the foundation for defining who we were as a community and the journey we took to arrive at our final results. This section will address the community's purpose for learning, in particular its connection to critical literacy. Community building is another component that will be detailed. As in any community, establishing a shared goal along with a shared responsibility to attain these goals provided students relevancy within their learning. It was important to model, discuss, and revisit our shared goals as a community at the beginning of the school year so that students were constantly reminded of our mutual, authentic, collective engagement with literature. Therefore, this section will continue to reference many of the basic tenants of socio-cultural theory as was discussed in previous chapters and will conclude with the formation of democratic principles and the cultivation of critical citizens as a result of engaging in meaningful literary practices. Essentially, the social context of a classroom during literary activities and the experiences of individuals come together to inform how meaning is derived.

### **Purposeful Learning**

Building from the tenets of critical literacy, purposeful learning within the context of this study posits that students meaningfully created knowledge by *renaming* what they read to fit their conceptions, offering multiple modes of meaning, and effectively exchanging this knowledge through dialogue (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Similarly, this study's results paralleled

these assumptions. As students progressed through the course of the semester, they continuously built on their knowledge base, both by incorporating their own conceptions and learning the necessary skills they needed to master by the end of the school year. However, students gained a sense of ownership of their learning as a result of the constant dialectical exchange of knowledge, which enabled the development of learning about life and the skills needed to be productive, yet critical citizens.

In order to establish a basis for purposeful learning, I taught weekly reading skills and modeled these skills at the beginning of each lesson. After the initial modeling of skills, groups of students congregated to continue reading the same novel, with a focus on a skill or strategy to guide their discussions. As I modeled a reading skill with students and engaged in a brief discussion of the text as a whole group, students would then gather in their literature circles to read the proceeding chapter, continued the whole group discussion, and utilized the skill taught as a starting point for discussion, if needed. However, these skills such as providing evidence, making inferences, analyzing characters, asking and answering questions, identifying conflict, and developing a theme or life lesson were tools that students later used to extend and build their knowledge while strengthening their ability to effectively analyze critical text (Common Core State Standards, 2009). As such, this laid the foundation for the building of conceptions and for imagining alternatives within the text and eventually the world. Luke and Woods (2009) suggest, “Texts are a means for constructing, shaping, and reshaping worlds in particular normative directions with identifiable ideological interests and consequences for individuals and communities” (p. 9). Evidently, purposeful learning is therefore created with the goal of transforming the curriculum, as well as those who engage within it— the students. By no means does this research urge educators to solely focus on skills. Regardless of the pressures of

accountability, students should have opportunities and access to use these skills as a tool for the purpose of combating past perceptions, questioning the unknown, and constructing new knowledge. In other words, “Critical literacy offers an important strategic, practical alternative that allows teachers and students to reconnect literacy with everyday life and with an education that entails debate, argument, and action over social, cultural, and economic issues that matter” (Luke and Woods, p. 16). In an era driven by tests and standards reform, education should create a balance where students can be given specific tools or skills to combat or tackle such information while also questioning the written word, text, literature, and other modes of communication. As analyzed, this study showed that critical literacy provided an added layer of critical thinking skills that students can engage in to better understand the world and generate constructive conceptions when confronted with new information, while also applying skills set forth by state standards.

### **Community Building**

A sense of community among students was a key factor in establishing norms, camaraderie, and a safe environment for open discussion. In fact, throughout the study there was an evident sense of equality. Students consistently started their discussions preoccupied with making sure each student had an equal amount of pages or paragraphs to read. In one particular discussion, students spent a significant amount of time negotiating page numbers and order of readers:

Jocelyn: We have to read pages 25-32. That is seven pages, but we have six of us.

Carlos: Is there a way to split the last page so we can at least read a paragraph or something?

Sierra: It is ok. I don't have to read.

Jocelyn: No, we all have to read so we have an equal time. I think Carlos is right, let's just get to the last page and then split the paragraphs or something. (Transcript, May 4, 2015)

Conversations like these became the norm at the beginning of all sessions. In a study done by Avci and Yüksel (2011) students who were engaged in literature circles, were effective in improving social interaction and communication, solidarity, and overall support among other things. Within this particular study, it was important to address expectations and build on what students felt was important in a literature circle. Although literature circles were commonplace during the 2013-2014 school year when students were in third grade, reiterating the expectations and building upon what students felt were important components for success was essential as a reminder and to help those students who were new to our community in becoming integrated into our classroom culture.

### **Shared Goal**

A focus of students' shared goals was to dig deeper within a text to build on their understanding while using critical reasoning for thoughtful dialogue. Researchers show that close reading is the foundation for the set up and practice of engaging students in meaningful and productive learning and text analysis (Beltramo & Stillman, 2015; Elliott-Johns & Puig, 2015). This shared goal of close reading translated into a shared responsibility where students deliberately checked in with each other throughout their discussion and reading time to ensure this goal was being met by all. For example, in one particular occasion students attended to each other's focus during a close reading:

Jocelyn: Wait, are you following along as I read?

Trey: I got distracted and lost my place. I am trying to find where you are reading.



*Jocelyn takes a moment to show Trey her placement on the page*

Jocelyn: We have to pay attention because then you won't know what we are talking about. Do all of you know where we are?

*Students agree in unison.*

Jocelyn: Ok, let's keep reading. We have like 5 minutes left, guys. (Transcript, May 7, 2015)

A simple conversation became the means for Jocelyn to ensure that her peers were listening to her read and following along. She paused during her close reading because engagement and on-task behavior was a group responsibility. As Elliott-Johns and Puig (2015) support in their research, "Close reading from a learner's perspective is a self-regulatory behavior intended to enhance and expand understanding. It is an in-the-head call-to-action proficient readers employ when they reread with critical purpose" (p. 26). Therefore, close reading as a literary practice was an appropriate choice for this study in order to capture the cognitive processes that occurred as students engaged in reading, while also supporting the social practices involved when students collaboratively read. Although close reading predominantly called for one text being shared amongst the group, for the purpose of this study each student had their own copy to effectively follow along.

Finally, there is a clear correlation between a child's learning environment and their achievement (Damber, 2011). Children who are immersed in a culture of learning based on positive cooperation with others are more likely to achieve greater levels of knowledge. In a study done by Damber (2011), in which third grade classrooms were observed to better understand the factors that lead to overachievement in low SES communities, it was concluded that students are able to perform at greater levels when engaged in a cooperative and positive

literacy community. As noted, classrooms were characterized as being positive, supportive, acceptant of all peers, encouraging of multiple voices, and self-reliant. When engaged in close reading, students often become self-motivated to read within a literary community such as literature circles. As Carlos, one participant in the study, proclaimed in his journal:

I always liked reading with my group. Reading with my group everyday was different because it made us become better readers. I couldn't fall asleep! We made sure we all read and listened to each other. I was never shy or scared to read with them because I knew no one would make fun of anyone. That was fun and it made reading easier.

(Journal entry, May 19, 2015)

Carlos' interpretation of his personal reaction to close reading within a literature circle supports Damber's (2011) thoughts on how such group dynamics promoted his excitement to read with others. As I read aloud to students at the onset of each reading block, I purposefully modeled my thinking, invited whole group discussions, and validated students' thoughts in order for these elements to carry through into their small groups. Although there were several literature circle groups occurring at the same time, I understood that I could not be present with all groups. Therefore, it was important to build a level of trust amongst myself and students, and to base this trust upon the shared goal we built and nurtured together as a supportive literary community.

### **Building Citizenship and Democratic Ideals**

There is no doubt that teaching history, especially through historical narratives or literature that conveys the experiences of children during significant moments in history, enables students to build compassion towards others while critically questioning and analyzing the world in which they live. In his analysis of the importance of social studies education based on the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), Hoge (2003) explains:

To be powerfully taught, history instruction, even that offered to young children, must move well beyond the level of a simple overview of a commonly embraced rendition of the past. Children in grades K-5 must be led to dramatically encounter the past and they must be helped to inspect and examine the citizenship messages that this history conveys. (p. 14)

Similarly, Osborne (2010) urges teaching across the curriculum to guide students in developing an understanding of what it is to be human, building a connectedness with others' thoughts, experiences, life challenges, and agency. As he contends, "If we approach the human story in this way— and all subjects can be taught in this way— then our students might come to see themselves as heirs to a tradition of human striving that connects past, present, and future" (p. 15). Our classroom, and in particular our various modes of communication, our constant concern throughout the year for each other's well-being, our strive for equity, and our unyielding motivation to create a better world through education was the foundation leading to the creation of our story and self.

During the discussions previously highlighted the students negotiated cultural understanding amongst themselves that was grounded on several factors including purposeful learning, community building, shared goals, and democratic ideals. The small literature circle of six students became the basis and foundation for their particular reader's culture to develop based on these factors. Purposeful learning enabled new knowledge to be co-constructed within the group, which was appreciated and accepted by all. Community building enabled a genuine concern for each other's participation as every participant knew and accepted their roles as active readers. Consequently, this shared goal validated democratic ideals of equitable learning and participation.

### **Their Story: The Participants**

At the heart of this study were the participants who often shared their personal experiences and stories with others, both within their journals and through discussions. The following section introduces the six participants, chosen at random, who composed the literacy community needed to tell our story. Without the rich and productive conversations coupled with their insights, experiences, and shared life stories, it would be impossible to observe how these interactions resulted in the findings detailed further in this chapter.

#### **Thomas, Age 9**

Thomas is an African-American boy from an urban city located in the Midwest portion of the United States. During the summer of 2014, Thomas and his family moved to the western region with his father, mother and three sisters ages two, five, and 11. As the only boy amongst his siblings, he expressed several times in his journal how he often had to share with his sisters. The following excerpt comes from a literary letter in an effort by Thomas to make a connection with a character by depicting a time he made a sacrifice in order to help someone else. As he states:

I once had to make a sacrifice when I wanted to play on my XBOX, but my sister wanted to listen to music and it was the only time I could play in two weeks. But I still let her listen to music and I didn't mind. (Journal entry, June 2, 2015)

Thomas' kindness and constant concern for others is self-evident in the excerpt and parallels his personality within school and toward his peers. Outside of the classroom, Thomas was observed engaging in games of four square and basketball, always ensuring he included anyone who wanted to participate. Many of my informal encounters outside the classroom with Thomas occurred in the multipurpose room while he ate breakfast with his sister. It was no surprise that he continually demonstrated the thoughtful persona he exuded in his journal. For example,

Thomas always made sure his little sister ate breakfast and would discard all her trash promptly. He also had no hesitation sitting not only with his little sister, but the rest of her kindergarten-aged friends.

When Thomas initially moved to the West, he lived with his grandmother and great grandmother in an apartment located near the school. During the spring of 2015 while he was still in fourth grade, Thomas and his family moved into their own home, in close proximity to the school and his immediate family. In casual conversation with Thomas, I learned that he loved to play outside and help his mother clean their home. Thomas enjoyed reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries*, both series appropriate for Thomas' reading level and his interest in humor as a genre. Providing these texts, or a varied selection of such graphic novels within the classroom, was an effective way to engage students with books in which they could aesthetically make connections. Graphic novels' recent popularity and children's affinity towards their comical illustrations have shown to increase student engagement and motivation to read (Jennings, Rule, & Vander Zanden, 2014). Throughout the school year Thomas' interest in reading continuously increased, maintaining his unyielding passion for literature.

An important point of discussion for Thomas was sharing with his literary group experiences from his hometown in the Midwest. One book in particular that provided this opportunity was *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995), which took place in Michigan, a state in close proximity to Thomas' home state. In one conversation while discussing the setting of the novel, Thomas described:

I remember having to help my family scrape snow off the driveway and the cars. I never got my tongue stuck to the car window like Byron did (*gently laughs at the humor of the*

*text*), but it does get pretty cold. I don't think it can get that cold here. (Transcript, February 10, 2015)

Chapters later, Thomas shared with his group how common it was for mothers to dress their children in layers of clothes, similar to the way the mother of the characters Kenny and his younger sister Joetta were wrapped like “mummies” by their mother:

I mean, it gets pretty cold out there that you have to wear a lot of clothes on top of each other. Every time you left the house it took a long time to put on your clothes and when you get somewhere you have to take all the layers off. It does feel like you're wrapped like a mummy, but it was the only way to stay warm. (Transcript, February 18, 2015)

Such connections were constantly shared and the other participants always welcomed his memories and experiences. Personal responses to texts were commonplace and a vehicle for further discussion, meaning-making, and thoughtful interpretation of texts for all.

### **Sam, Age 9**

Born in an urban city in the western region of the United States, Sam moved to the neighboring western state as a toddler with his father, mother, and older brother. Sam's parents were both immigrants from Mexico, leaving their country for greater economic, educational, and life opportunities. Although Spanish is their native language, English was also spoken at home amongst family members. Both Spanish and English were languages encouraged by his parents and considered a point of pride. Similarly, as stated by Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer, and Adamson (2006), “The majority of Latinos in the United States are bilingual and bicultural, with strong patriotic and family-oriented values combined with a deep desire to see their children succeed in the United States” (p. 132). Throughout the year, Sam's parents were often seen at school events including Math and Science Night, Literacy Night, Pizza and Progress Night,

parent-teacher conferences, and the fall carnival. In all of these school events, both academic and nonacademic, Sam's parents never hesitated to ask how he was doing in school, both in terms of his quality of work, behavior, and of course reading improvements. Poza, Brooks, and Valdés (2014) describe this form of participation as *attending* and *asking behaviors*. Their research shows that despite deficit models of immigrant families, it is a very common behavior for families to be involved in their children's education and be resourceful in seeking out information to better inform themselves (Poza, Brooks, & Valdez, 2014).

Sam was also an avid reader interested in fantasy novels such as the *Harry Potter Series*. I observed that Sam enjoyed his quality reading time and he expressed an interest in arcade games, often taking trips with his older sibling to the local arcade to play. Overall, Sam cultivated gratitude and recognition for himself and those around him throughout the study. As he stated in one of his final journal entries, "The books that we read this year made me appreciate what I have today: an education, a family that feeds me, and my great teacher. I am also thankful that my family was never separated" (June 1, 2015). His last remark stemmed from many of the texts we read in which several families had experienced separation due to tragedy, war, immigration, and politics. Research shows that it is important to introduce students to literature that not only reflects the lives of the reader, but that can also be culturally, historically, and socially foreign to their personal experiences as a means of creating empathy (Cunningham, 2009; Kelley, 2008). In other words, although Sam has never experienced familial separation and both of his parents are still married, reading books that juxtaposed this experience enabled him to simply appreciate his own life. As will be further discussed in this chapter, self-reflection, appreciation, and building an affinity towards texts is part of the cognitive processes that occur as students interact communally with literature.

## **Trey, Age 9**

Trey is an African-American whose mother and father immigrated to the United States in 1995 and 1993, respectively, from Eritrea, a northeast country in Africa. Guided by strong family ideals and the importance of an education, Trey often self-disclosed the sacrifices his parents made in order for him and his brothers to have a better life. Md-Yunus (2012) suggests many effective strategies for immigrant parents, including disclosing with their children the importance of education as a means of succeeding as adults, become increasingly involved in their child's education, and providing a learning space at home for school work or reading. As further supported by Comber's (2015) research, "For some 'working class' and immigrant baby boomers, completing high school and going on to higher education was indeed the ticket out of the kinds of poverty experienced by our parents and grandparents" (p. 363). It is self-evident that Trey had a strong support from home, regardless of his parents' immigrant status. In fact, I would often encounter Trey's mom in the multipurpose room during breakfast hours sitting with her youngest son helping him with his meal.

As the middle child of three boys, Trey usually made references to his older brother throughout group conversations with his peers, citing information his brother was learning in middle school, the various social media outlets his brother used to communicate with his friends, or their teasing relationship. When asked about his perception of the older brother, Byron, in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995), Trey stated:

My perception is that the family is funny. Byron reminds me of my big brother because my brother is a teenager and he acts like he's the coolest person in the world. I am like Kenny because I always get teased by Byron (my brother). (Journal entry, February 10, 2015)



Self-identification within text is part of the cognitive processes cited within the findings, as will be discussed in Chapter 5. Making such connections support socio-cultural theory in that readers will develop a lasting impression about a text when they are able to make personal connections (Eun, 2010; Larson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). During the initial stages of the research, Trey often made these claims as a means to engage with the text and share his thoughts with peers.

A devoted reader of nonfiction historical texts, Trey became increasingly engaged with the novels that took place during historical time periods. In particular, while reading the book *Elly* (Gross, 2010) that was part of the research and based on the events of the Holocaust, Trey showed an increased interest and often made connections with other texts depicting this time period. Significantly, Jordan (2004) insists that teachers should be mindful of the texts chosen to help young readers understand the events of the Holocaust. In other words, book selection must balance the importance of remembering and respecting the individuals and events surrounding this monumental moment in history without disturbing the minds of readers. As Jordan (2004) further explained:

Through fictionalized accounts, often told through a child's point of view, children today can take on, for a moment, the perspective of a child who lived during the Holocaust and perhaps begin to address their own questions of what it was like and how it could have happened. (p. 198-199)

Trey initiated his own research on this topic by reading *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne (2007) and watched the motion picture based on the book. During several occasions, Trey would reference this book to support his connections or questions. After reading a chapter in *90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010) where the main character was being sent to an orphanage after immigrating to the United States from Cuba, Trey wondered:

So, wait a minute. Julian is being sent to this like camp or orphanage without his family, or like, just with his two brothers, but what if it is like in *The Boy with the Striped Pajamas* when the dad was watching the videos of the concentration camps that they used to show off and make the camps look all nice and fun, so what if they did that to the Cuban families? Like show them how great the orphanage is in America so they can send their children, but what if they turn out to be like the ones in the Holocaust? Did the parents just trust to send their kids to another country? Did America and Cuba have beef like we did with Germany? (Transcript, May 7, 2015)

In Trey's elaborated conversation, he attempted to make a connection by expressing concern for what the character, Julian, would encounter being sent away to America without his family. Given that he had recently read about the horrors of the Holocaust, Trey was curious whether or not the same situation could be possible for Julian, the possibility of America having a "beef" (conflict) with Cuba. He understood that the camps were portrayed by the Nazi's propaganda positively, and therefore wondered if this could be the same situation for those immigrant children who were unknowing of what to expect. During the study, Trey continued his curiosity for the past.

### **Jocelyn, Age 9**

Jocelyn, born in a western urban city, had attended the school since kindergarten. Living with her four-year old sister, a newborn sister, and mom, who was born in a midwestern city, but of Mexican parents, Jocelyn took pride in speaking English and Spanish "equally," and often used her Spanish in helping others during literary discussions. For example, when reading *90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010), Jocelyn explained to Trey what the word *querida* meant in the text by saying, "Querida means loved one, Trey. You say it to someone when you want to

show love to them” (Transcript, May 7, 2015). Not only did Jocelyn help others by translating, she also helped those who were curious about pronouncing the word appropriately. Sayer (2008) urges educators to welcome the use of students’ language skills as an added tool and strategy for learning or, as in the example above, support the learning of others. It was clear that Jocelyn had no qualms in helping others by using her Spanish as a means to help others and being both American and Mexican was a source of pride. The use of Spanish and English was evident in the home, as she spoke both languages equally in a form described as code-switching or mixing two languages between or within sentences (Sayer, 2008). Code-switching is a common form of communication within the bilingual community and often times will go unnoticed within a conversation.

When Jocelyn was in first grade, she received the devastating news that her father, who had been living in Mexico for some time, had passed away. Jocelyn seldom made references about her father, but it was clear through casual conversation that she was the source of her mother’s strength throughout this difficult time. This personal information offered an explanation or insight to Jocelyn’s reluctance to discuss her father, either in literature circles or during informal conversation with me or her peers. Although children grieve differently and go through processes to cope with their loss, Jocelyn never lost sight of the importance of her education. After her father’s passing, she continued to excel academically, always receiving positive comments from all her teachers.

As fourth grade came to an end, Jocelyn wrote me a letter quoting Nelson Mandela (a framed poster displayed in our classroom), “Education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world” (speech, July 16, 2003). Jocelyn continued by saying, “Thank you for giving me the most powerful weapon to change and make a difference.” She proceeded to

write in her journal at the end of the school year expressing, “I want to be a future leader. I think it is important to use everything I know so that one day I can make a difference too” (Journal entry, June 1, 2015). Jocelyn’s expressed agency to one day make a difference was the result of insights gained through her exposure to texts with children whom have experienced difficulty, but have exuded moments of bravery and resolution. Similarly, Jocelyn exemplified these traits throughout the study, which contributed to the cognitive processes and changes that took place.

### **Sierra, Age 9**

Sierra is the eldest of three other younger siblings, ages four, one, and a newborn. Although Sierra was born in a western state, her father was born in Mexico and her mother in Nicaragua. Sierra’s parents spoke minimal English, therefore, Spanish was the language predominantly spoken at home. Through casual conversation, Sierra shared that although she speaks to her mom in Spanish, it was very hard to pronounce certain words or come up with words she may only know in English. As a result, Sierra found herself mixing both Spanish and English throughout her conversations.

At home, Sierra enjoyed entertaining her younger siblings with games and sports, although she mentioned casually that she can be very competitive with her siblings. This outward and jovial behavior at home was in contrast to Sierra’s classroom behavior. In school, Sierra was seen keeping to herself or amongst her small group of friends whom she played with during recess. In the classroom, she seldom raised her hand or participated during whole group discussions. Although the small literature circle provided a comfortable and less intimidating environment to engage in discourse, Sierra was the participant who spoke least. Nonetheless, it was during literature circles where she most often spoke in comparison to whole group discussions. Additionally, many of the other participants who were more open to critique,

question, or build on new knowledge, often asked Sierra questions to simply give her an opportunity to agree or disagree with their discussion. In speaking with Sierra outside of the classroom, she informed me that she was hesitant in answering questions or raising her hand to give her opinion because she was afraid of being wrong or judged by her peers. Relatedly, if students expect that they will complete the task incorrectly, they will lack the motivation to attempt it in the first place, also known as *performance avoidance goals* (Miele & Wigfield, 2014). Sierra's beliefs about the fear of being incorrect and potentially judged by her peers led her to withhold from participating in classroom discourse. However, for students like Sierra, literature circles were an effective means for providing a safe environment for the practice of constructive and cooperative learning.

### **Carlos, Age 9**

Carlos self-identified himself as being American and Mexican. His mother was born in Mexico, while his father was born in the northeast portion of the United States. Carlos' father has two older children from a previous marriage. Carlos lived with his mother, father, and his seven-year old sister. He considered himself being in the "middle," not identifying more with one culture, but balancing both his Mexican and American heritage as important to his own identity. Although his mother was bilingual, Carlos seldom spoke English at home because he has a difficult time fluently speaking in Spanish. Additionally, Carlos was not part of our class during the 2013-2014 school year, but he quickly acclimated to our classroom culture. The transition was also smooth because Carlos had been enrolled at the school since kindergarten and therefore knew many of the students from prior years.

Carlos enjoyed reading fiction texts, in particular stories of survival such as those written by Gary Paulson. Throughout the study, Carlos shared many points of connections between his lived experiences and those from the text. In one incident he wrote:

My first impression of Kenny's family kinda seemed like me. Byron seemed like my brother which is 19. Kenny's parents are alike because my father was born somewhere different than my mom. When Byron and Buphead threw Kenny it made me think about when Kevin knocked me right in the sky in the trampoline. The Watsons seem very average not too rich not too poor same with my family. They're car is old like my mother's car. (Journal entry, February 10, 2015)

Although *The Watson's Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995) is a depiction of an African-American family living during the tumultuous era of the 1960s, Carlos immediately found a connection to the family's socioeconomic status, origin, and familial activities, exemplifying the importance that students can easily make self-identifications with historically and racially diverse characters from the past. In fact, Carlos noted that one of his favorite aspects about reading was that it allowed individuals to experience other forms of knowing, living, and being. Particularly, stories of survival offer this form of literary experiences because he was able to personalize with the unknown. Sipe (1999) suggests:

For children with a similar culture, a book may act as a mirror, allowing them to see themselves in the story. For children from a different culture, a book may act as a window, allow them a vicarious experience of what another culture is like. (p. 122-123)

Literature in this sense can provoke students to myriad interpretations, both reflective of their self and supplemented with opportunities for new knowledge.

In conclusion, these six students comprised the research participants within the literature circle groups. Table 2 summarizes the participants' information and traits. Their stories are important as it personalizes the data and analysis. Additionally, each student provided a unique literary experience for the group as they were able to build on each other's contribution to the discussions, learn from one another's perspective, and gain respect for each other as critical readers and social advocates. The following section will introduce the stories and delineate the major thematic concepts that developed from the stories.

Participant	Age/Grade	Family	Language	Siblings	Traits
Thomas	Age 9/4 <sup>th</sup>	Born in Midwest	English Only	3 siblings	- Only boy, who enjoyed caring for younger siblings - Reads graphic novels
Sam	Age 9/4 <sup>th</sup>	Born in the West	Bilingual	1 sibling	- Reads fantasy
Trey	Age 9/4 <sup>th</sup>	African descent	Bilingual	2 siblings	- Reads historical fiction, primarily on the Holocaust
Jocelyn	Age 9/4 <sup>th</sup>	Born in the West, mother from Midwest	Bilingual	2 siblings	- Single mother, father deceased
Sierra	Age 9/4 <sup>th</sup>	Born in West, Parents from Mexico and Nicaragua	Bilingual	3 siblings	- Shy, but competitive with siblings
Carlos	Age 9/4 <sup>th</sup>	Born in West, mother from Mexico and father from Midwest	English Only	1 sibling	- Reads books on survival, including Gary Paulson

**Table 2. Participant Summary**



### **The Stories: Children's Historical Narratives**

This study gave students a platform to explore the benefits of literature and responses. During the fall semester of the 2014-2015 school year, the students and I embarked on an extensive study about the American Revolution, and the varying perspectives that defined the events that took place during this monumental time in history. By reading primary sources about historical figures and secondary sources that retold the events, students began to interpret text with a critical approach. They assessed point of view and voice, issues of inequities and unfairness, and the potential of individuals as change agents. More importantly, they learned about the power of one person to make social changes and the importance of perseverance during difficult times. These same themes and concepts were woven into students' conversations within the following data analysis. Similarly, as we studied the Women's Rights Movement, we began to validate the idea that one must take risks to enact social change. In order to give students a point of reference as they engaged in the historical novels that were the focus of this study, I believed it was important to develop students' understanding of what change means in a historical context, how individuals become agents of such change, and how those historical events have shaped who we are today. Finally, studying these historical time periods introduced students to the terms *revolution* and *movement*, which merged into our first two books based during the Civil Rights Movement and Black Panther Movement.

The books read for this study were carefully chosen during the 2013-2014 school year, while students were in third grade. These books were casually discussed with students, showing a high interest in the topic as well as authors. The participants began to imagine, construct meaning, and critique the words they encountered through the interaction with texts set in historical time periods featuring characters offering themes that are relevant to readers today. Participants were given the opportunity to engage in reading together, which prompted emotional

reactions. The books that were read, the point of view that was portrayed, the time period or historical milestone presented, and relevant themes that were generated are shown in Table 3. First, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995) and *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010) are discussed within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, the former alluding to tragedy, while the latter alluding to the revolutionary movement of the Black Panthers. Second, *Elly* (Gross, 2010) is described within the context of Human Injustice, as this text depicts deception, courage, and survival. Third, *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013) was analyzed within the context of Relocation, as the story illustrates Aki's relocation and Sylvia's segregation. Finally, *90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010) is described under the heading of Immigration, as the main character must navigate a new world away from his family. However, it is important to note that each book had its unique themes told through the experiences of children. These themes were navigated and explored by the participants, enabling both local and global social justice contexts.

Book	Point of view	Time period	Themes
The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963	First-person: Kenny, youngest sibling	1960s Civil Rights Movement	Family Intolerance Hate Tragedy
One Crazy Summer	First-person: Vonetta, oldest sibling	1960s Civil Rights Movement (Black Panthers)	Identity Revolution Social Change Empowerment Prejudice
Elly	First-person: Elly, Holocaust survivor	Holocaust	Hate and Deception Human Injustice Prejudice Courage Survival and Hope
Sylvia and Aki	Third-person Omniscient	World War II, Japanese Relocation, Educational Segregation	Unfairness Stereotype Relocation Identity Perseverance Social Change
90 Miles to Havana	First-person: Julian, youngest sibling	1960s Cuban Revolution	Revolution Immigration Separation Trust Sacrifice

**Table 3. Summary of Books**

### **The Civil Rights Movement**

The American Civil Rights Movement depicts a moment in history where many pertinent and influential individuals came together to fight against an ingrained ideology amongst many Americans in this nation that sustained the unequal and unjustified disenfranchisement of Black Americans. I chose to use *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995) and *One Crazy*

*Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010), representing the infamous bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church and the influence of the Black Panther movement, respectively, as a means to teach my students about the collective power of individuals to combat stereotypes and violence against the innocent. According to Pearman II (2014), these two novels can be categorized as *resistance stories*. As described, “Resistance stories are the most straight-forward story type for confronting and altering issues of oppression and, likely, inspiring social change” (Pearman II, 2014, p. 7). In other words, they bring to fruition how individuals resist and counteract oppression by challenging stereotypes and fighting for a more equitable and inclusive society (Pearman II, 2014). In an intended humorous scene, the mother of Kenny, a rebellious teenager, got caught dangerously playing with matches even after his mother’s incessant warnings. As a result, the mother chased him down the living room to burn his fingers in order for him to understand the effects of playing with matches. Although this particular example does not exemplify the resistance to oppressive behavior experienced during the Civil Rights Movement, its undertone and the reactive nature it provoked exemplify their internalization of resistance, even in everyday life situations. The following is a written response from Sam, documented after reading this scene:

I don’t agree with the mom’s reaction because burning your own son is very overreactive especially since he was just putting the flames in the toilet. Also because she could get put in jail for burning her son and I’m sure she would regret it then. I also think Byron learned his lesson. He seemed to be very scared of his mother but maybe there could have been a different way of teaching him this same lesson besides trying to burn him. I think Kenny was scared because Mrs. Watson swore to God she would burn Byron. Also

I think Joetta was spitting out the flame on purpose and I'm glad she was trying to save her brother from Mrs. Watson! (Journal entry, February 20, 2015)

Although this is an example from a scene intended to be funny, many of the students were in awe of the severity of the mother, Mrs. Watson's, fanatical reaction. Students, as seen in Sam's response, were empathetic yet proud that another character, Joetta the younger sibling, had intervened to resist and defend her brother from what they deemed an unjust consequence.

Not only did these novels create opportunities for dialogue concerning resistance and inequality, they also paved the way for a classroom discussion on the consequences of stereotypes. After reading a chapter in *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010), where the three sisters, Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern, enter a store in San Francisco, becoming targets of a stereotype by having the store employee follow them around to ensure no items were stolen, I decided to have a discussion about stereotypes and the importance of dispelling those that we might even unintentionally perpetuate. In this whole-group class activity and in order to make it relevant to students' own experiences, they collectively created a list of ideas or stereotypes they thought were particular to boys and girls, some that they believed and those they heard from others such as family and friends. The following excerpt from Sam exemplified his reaction and counteraction to dismiss his own presumed gendered stereotypes:

One stereotype I use is boys don't like pink because I would rather get a blue or green suitcase than a pink or purple suitcase. But the stereotype I want to dispel is boys can't cook. I'm going to do this by asking my mom to buy cake batter or cookie doe then bake one of those two things. Another stereotype I want to dispel is boys don't like shopping. I'm going to do this by going to the mall this week. People should not feel bad about doing things they want to do and people shouldn't think things about others without

really getting to know them. Just because you are a boy I now understand that it does not mean you cant do things girls do. It is rude to be mean without knowing people. (Journal entry, March 24, 2015)

In Vasquez's research on critical literacy curriculum, the topic of gender was used in class to discuss how McDonalds restaurants use toys in their Happy Meal™ to appeal to boys and girls. Students in her class discussed the possibility of boys liking the girl's Happy Meal™ toy, and likewise, girls liking the boy's Happy Meal™ toy. As Vasquez (2008) contends in her analysis, "In this way the children are able to begin to make new ways of being and acting that involves resisting dominant practices such as giving girls Barbies™ and giving boys Hot Wheels™" (p.132). The discussion regarding McDonalds allowed students to explore gender construction in dominant practices and gave students an opportunity to challenge this construction and disrupt these taken for granted norms. By offering students a platform for discussion, they were able to understand the norms, or stereotypes, regarding Happy Meal™ toys, resist this norm by expressing their desires to have toys of the opposite gender, and share their reluctance to just accept the toys that are given to them due to their gender. Within this argument, Vasquez makes the point that students were able to recognize the dominant structure for gender, in relation to happy meal toys, and deconstruct it to redefine it and change it within their lives. Similarly, our activity allowed students, like Sam, to deconstruct his own stereotypes coming from his lived experiences, in order to begin resisting future stereotypes meant to marginalize others or often ourselves. Clearly, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995) and *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010) are two novels that provided open platforms for discussions focused on fairness, stereotypes, resistance, and racial inequalities to name a few. Allowing students to

engage in practices of confrontation, interpretation, and meaning making enabled them to, at best, envision a world where resistance and change are possible.

### **Human Injustice**

Historical narratives provided students with an opportunity to engage in real interpretations of the past through a personalized account. Jordan (2004) suggests:

Modern readers are easily able to see that children who lived half a century ago are not so different from themselves, which makes history seem not so far away. When modern readers realize that they easily could have been in a situation they read about, the events of the past are not so unbelievable. (p. 201)

In an attempt during a discussion to select a phrase from the text that held significance to their understanding of the experiences of Jews during the Holocaust, the following conversation ensued:

Jocelyn: I found something crazy. The Nazi's, well, let me read to you the part, "...the slogan kill the Jews was music to the ears of the Nazis." I mean, what could that mean? Music is something that is good.

Sam: Yeah, like I like to listen to music and it makes me happy when I hear my favorite song, so probably it means that killing the Jews made the Nazis feel good.

Jocelyn: How can killing people make anyone feel good? It just doesn't make any sense. That is crazy.

Sam: That is why this is all pretty sad. (Transcript, May 6, 2015)

The following day, students read more about the treatment of Jews, in particular told through the view of Elly, and responded in the following way:

Jocelyn: Do you think they actually put them in the shower room? Like, it is hard because they were lied to.

Sam: Well, she survived, but it is a shower room, right?

Trey: What if they were trying to kill them? Like it is so sad, they would make them bend down and *pop!* Like in the back of their heads.

Jocelyn: Yeah, that was just sad. What do you think happened to the people who were selected to go to the right?

Sam: I don't know. Maybe they were taken to the gas chambers or the crematorium. They were taken somewhere bad. (Transcript, May 7, 2015)

The inquisitive nature of this conversation leads to the idea that by not unveiling all the gruesome details of the Holocaust is a way of shielding young readers from graphic details when told through a child's perspective, as in *Elly* (Gross, 2010). In other words, "Elementary grades offer the opportunity to build a strong community of learners throughout the school year that can support thoughtful and thorough learning engagements regarding topics as challenging as the Holocaust" (Jennings, 2010, p. 36). Consequently, and as will be discussed in Chapter 5, literary texts with a historical basis are a way to teach responsible citizenship, tolerance for humanity, and overall acceptance- democratic ideals illustrated as the foundation to *Our Story*.

### **The Relocation Experience**

Teaching about the Japanese internment camp created a dichotomy between two separate and contradictory, ideals: the idea of fighting intolerance of unjust behaviors towards a group of people and the importance of maintaining our national security during tumultuous and unstable times of war. McGhee Banks (2007) suggests:



Teachers can help students understand that the American Creed values of freedom, justice, and equality are often pitted against other important cultural values and goals related to economic and physical security. Giving students the opportunity to grapple with real questions and issues that give prominence to the tension between diversity and unity can help them understand that there are no easy answers and that while they may not find immediate solutions they can help create an environment where the issues can continue to be explored and ultimately resolved. (p.6)

Students reading *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013) grappled with the fact that our government, meant to protect all citizens and promote a just and equitable democratic system for all, was also unjustly incarcerating and ultimately disenfranchising their citizens. When asked about the meaning of freedom, Carlos wrote:

The meaning of freedom to me is to be able to do anything with few major rules. Like I can go hang out with my friends but I can't get home late. People need some rules so that we are safe. I do not think that all the characters in the book had freedom. It was unfair that Sylvia had to go to a separate school because of the way she looked and Aki had to leave her home because she was Japanese. This would be the opposite of freedom and it just seems weird that [the United States] fought for freedom during the revolution but won't let everyone have freedom. (Journal entry, April 28, 2015)

In this excerpt, Carlos grappled with the meaning of freedom by combining his personal background, literary experience, and historical knowledge. More importantly, while reading *Elly* (Gross, 2010) several important skills and standards were taught including, theme and analyzing important details in order to support our conceptual understanding of the text. By doing so, these

skills served as tools for students to engage in conversations that built on their negotiation of meaning as a literary community.

## **Immigration**

*90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010) was the final story read and one that combined themes of separation, tolerance, and change within the context of immigration. Teaching about immigration, as in any experience that may be unknown to students, enables them to experience through text what others' life may be when immigrating to another country. Bersh (2013) warns:

The neglect or superficial coverage of complicated social affairs, such as contemporary immigration phenomenon, only perpetuates misunderstandings and biased perspectives. Children and adolescents who are denied the experiences of grappling with these complex social controversies grow up developing intercultural misunderstandings that often lead to discrimination and bias. (p. 47)

Therefore, when students are given opportunities to immerse themselves in text pertaining to immigration experiences they become more adept to sympathizing, respecting, and accepting those who may be different from them, tenants necessary for participating in an increasingly diverse society. The following excerpt depicts one of the last chapters in the text where Julian, the narrator of the story, finally begins school in America:

Jocelyn: Well, he is going to school and trying to fit in.

Trey: Yeahhh, that is how most kids are when they start a new school.

Jocelyn: Because that is a big thing.

Thomas: Well, he knows English, but let's say if they say like challenging words or something like that, he might not understand it. He is probably gonna feel really outta place.

Jocelyn: I was scared when I started kindergarten, but not anymore. I barely even do my hair in the morning.

Carlos: What is the point of matching your clothes? Who cares if his mom dressed him in weird colors, maybe that is all she had for him.

Sam: Who cares if you wear red with green!

Carlos: I don't care wearing opposite colors.

Sam: I know! Me neither. You just gotta be yourself. (Transcript, May 28, 2015)

Participants connected to the character Julian in the story, but also internalize the idea that one can and should be their self in all situations. They recognize that individuals have different experiences, therefore teaching them the necessary social skills for communicating and interacting with others. Finally, it teaches the complexities and challenges of relocating, which many children may experience within a smaller degree, such as changing schools, districts, or sometimes states.

These themes or socio-politically based contexts, were discussed amongst students within a broader global context of the text, but are also connected locally to the lives of students. Although these themes may seem foreign, students needed ample opportunities to personally connect, or at minimum, recognize their own disconnect from these themes.

### **Stages and Cognitive Framework**

It is necessary to precede the stages and cognitive framework with an approach that depicts the three elements that made this study feasible, in hopes of ultimately providing insight into current educational trends and implications for the future. Our story, building on the principles of a democratic community with shared goals, created a platform in which students academically and socially thrived. This platform also enabled students to negotiate cultural understanding within their literary communities. Each student that participated in this study had

their unique story to tell and their own way of connecting and making sense of the texts within the context of their lives. Finally, although these stories each teach different aspects about our history, children's experiences, and intolerance, they all enabled a new understanding about who students are as individuals, and who they are within this world today and possibly for the future.

The following section will conclude with an analytical approach that informs our understanding as educators and researchers on how readers cognitively evolve during a dialogic reading process in which they are involved in constructing meaning. This approach came about during the data analysis as themes were coded. It became apparent that many of the themes or reoccurring patterns continuously came up in the form of a cycle and paralleling a progressive process that evolved throughout the 13 weeks. Additionally, it seemed as though cognitive processes of meaning construction occurred in chunks during certain books, and then evolved as students became more exposed to the skill of literary analysis. Therefore, this analysis will be framed within five major cognitive stages that students built on and progressed as they constructed meaning and engaged in thoughtful conversations. For the purpose of this research, the terms *stages* is defined as a developmental phase that evolves and changes over a period of time and is built on past knowledge, collaboration within a group, and the development of new learning and meaning formation. Below is a graphic representation of the five cognitive stages that readers experienced. It is necessary to note that the arrows leading through the stages are continuous on both ends, which indicates that it is acceptable for students to fluctuate and oscillate between stages. For example, students who exemplified the traits associated with Stage 5: Internalizing New Knowledge can often display cognitive and dialogical traits defined in Stage 1: Building a Framework. Consequently, the data will show that students' responses to

reading and meaning making represents a cyclical developmental motion that is constantly changing yet exemplifying consistent patterns of thinking, talking, and knowing.

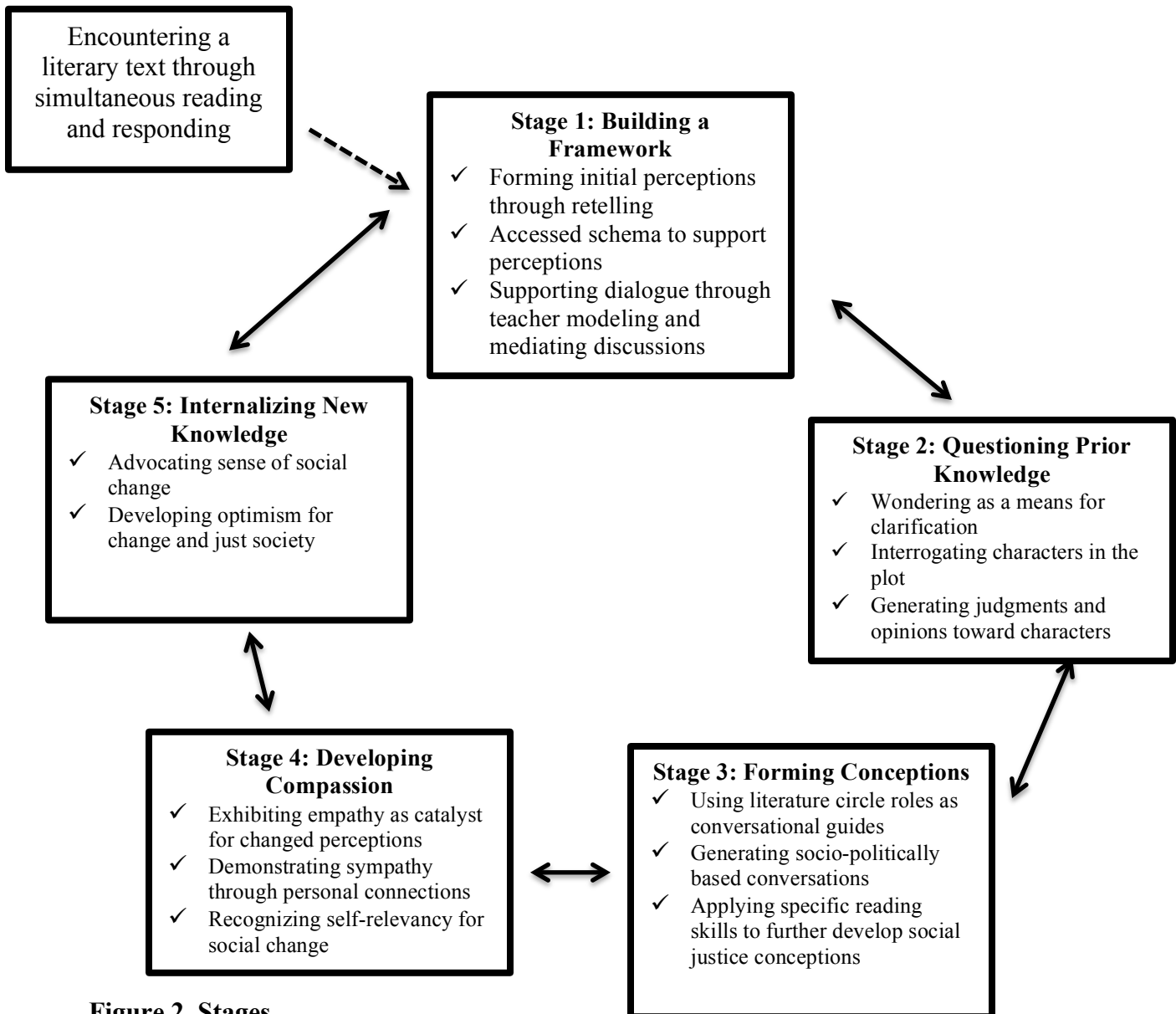


Figure 2. Stages

The following analysis will detail these stages and provide examples from the data to support how students created meaning while they simultaneously read the stories together, allowing ample opportunity for spontaneous dialogue.

### **Stage 1: Building a Framework**

The term framework within this analysis is defined as a solid cognitive foundation and dialogical space where meaning is derived and talk is supported, respectively. It is the idea that as readers, we often refer to a framework, or a basis of prior knowledge to extract further knowledge, so that we can better comprehend literature. By accessing their schema, students built this framework from the dialogue derived. During this initial stage, one that served to be critical as it created a basis for students' progression, I made a point to often visit with the literary group in order to monitor, mediate, and facilitate student dialogue. Finally, it was during this stage where students most often referred to our social studies units on the American Revolution and Women's Rights Movement taught during the fall semester, which served to be purposeful within students' schema.

The first book read in this study was *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995), a story about a family traveling from Michigan to Alabama in order to help their oldest delinquent son, Byron, learn the values of life and adulthood. Centering the main event of the story depicting the infamous 16<sup>th</sup> Street Church bombing, what the family learned is that life in the South is tumultuous, violent, and hateful. Similarly, *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010), the second book read following *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995), offered students the opportunity to build on their initial perceptions of this time period in history and to make connections between both texts. Within the context of this study, perception refers to the intuitive thinking that occurs spontaneously and based on what students are able to discern, understand, and process when given information at that point in time. Often, this may take the

shape of simply retelling, connecting with most recent processed information, or through the guided assistance of others. As students began reading these texts, the dialogue centered on retelling the events in the story. However, as the weeks progressed, students began to incorporate fragments of interpretations moving their perceptions forward with concrete analysis. In analyzing students' discussions and thoughts throughout these texts, it was evident that it was commonplace for students to begin their meaning making by building a framework grounded on their initial perceptions, their schema, and the need for teacher support through modeling.

The proceeding section will discuss how building a framework for discussion encompassed developing the importance of initial perceptions through retelling, accessing student schema, and the role of the teacher.

### **Initial Perceptions through Retelling**

Students' initial perceptions exemplified literal interpretation of texts, in which students recounted the events in a story as the basis for their conversations. Meaning making evolved from simply retelling the texts to creating new interpretations as they did during the latter part of the study. The following is an example of a conversation that took place while reading *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010):

Jocelyn: So basically right now she is talking to other members of the Black Panthers.

Trey: Yeah, she is giving away the children, to the Black Panthers, but I don't think they are going to just take her children.

Jocelyn: She is giving away what? The children?

Trey: Well, she is not giving them away. I think she just wants them to take them for a while so she can make flyers for them.

Sam: She just said, *you have to take my children*.

Trey: Yup, exactly they are gonna take them for a while. (Transcript, March 17, 2015)

The conversation above exemplified a minimally analyzed interpretation of the text. Students simply restated what was said in the text, with one student offering reasoning behind the character's action, followed by a restatement of the text's explicit information. Many of the conversations paralleled the example above, as students' main focus was to retell the main event, as a means of keeping track of the events in the texts. Additionally, students also used the strategy of retelling in order to ensure that other students in the group were adequately maintaining their attention and focus. The following conversation dealt with students discussing the chapter in which the mother in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995) is threatening to burn her son with a match in order for him to learn the dangers of playing with fire in the house:

Jocelyn: So what part of him is he going to get burnt by?

Trey: Ok, so she was talking to Joetta about whether or not to burn him and then Joetta thought about her fish and her cat and then so then she was thinking about it and then her mom said that she swore she had to do it for the sake of the family to keep them safe, even her animals, from having the house burned down.

Jocelyn: That is crazy. Then she said she was just going to burn his fingers so he wouldn't be tempted by fire.

Trey: Ok, so let's talk about it. She is holding a match...

Jocelyn: It hurts, but it doesn't hurt that much...

Trey: I would just keep blowing (makes a puffing sound) and just push her arm and run, but Byron didn't even try to get away.

Carlos: He just froze there.



Trey: And she is only using one hand, right, isn't she still holding his leg?

Carlos: No she is sitting on him, you didn't hear it?

Trey: Huh? No. I am not sure how this is all happening.

*Carlos rereads the section for clarification*

Trey: Oh, yeah yeah, she sat on his chest. That is why he just can't move and he froze. I missed that part. (Transcript, February 19, 2015)

Asking questions and retelling for clarification are effective reading strategies proficient readers use, but not sufficient for critical analysis and new meaning. However, these were the common themes and trends during the first stage of the cognitive process as students were more concerned with concentrating their conversations on summarizing. Regardless of the literary skills utilized by students to aid their comprehension, it was during these initial talks where students established a cognitive framework, which they constantly referred to as a basis of their conversations. Simply in the act of retelling, students used their understanding to judge what was deemed important enough to retell and this can sometimes be done when they encountered something within the plot that sparked an initial interest.

### **Accessing Schema to Support Perceptions**

Students' initial perceptions of historical leaders were based on our preceding social studies unit on the controversial events leading to the American Revolution and the Women's Rights Movement, both of which sparked the need for those during this period to lead others into social change. Students were exposed to the idea that individuals who make a change to improve the lives of others are considered leaders of change. This knowledge laid the foundation, consequently solidifying students' framework, for better understanding book characters as many of these characters can be analyzed and interpreted as leaders of change within their community,

time period, or family. A guiding question for students to begin their conceptual understanding, which later concretely evolved within student dialogue was the following: How do everyday individuals within books rise against challenges in order to survive through tumultuous times? I consistently posed this question throughout the beginning weeks as a reminder of how we should be thinking as critical readers. By doing so, students were able to frequently make reference to these units while engaging with the historical narratives read. Concepts of theme and life lessons were also being developed and taught through discussions of characters and their life events, in particular through the first novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995). As a result of this question, students recognized that people change during times of difficulty. Similarly, as readers their perceptions of characters also developed throughout the first few novels as characters encountered, resolved, and survived difficult times. The following example illustrates dialogue that occurred after concluding *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995). Students discussed and negotiated possible themes and life lessons:

Jocelyn: It is tragedy and family and...

Thomas: Hatred and unfairness is pretty much in the whole book...

Jocelyn: Yea, but so is tragedy and family

Trey: And the cops they're all white so they didn't care when the Ku Klux Klan killed all of them and it was unfair for all the people, but they never gave up. Ok, who thinks it is tragedy and family, raise your hand.

Thomas: It is pretty much both.

Jocelyn: So, what was the other one? Hatred and unfairness? Yea, if we were to pick that one what would your life lesson be?

Carlos: Hatred and unfairness is, what I would do is, even when treated unfair it is important to persevere and never give up. Like when treated unfairly, always, like always stick through it. Like if your friends are making fun of you because you're doing something...

Jocelyn: Ignore it

Carlos: Or just don't let it get to you. (Transcript, March 4, 2015)

Through this conversation, students negotiated their understanding by building on each other's idea, a pattern that became more apparent and common as the weeks continued. However, the previous conversation exemplified students' first attempts to develop a different understanding from the text that is not implied by the author. Students continued to work on the idea of how characters overcome difficult situations, such as bullying in the following dialogue:

Trey: Like the bully, I forgot his name.

Carlos: Larry Dunn.

Trey: Larry Dunn, he was bullying Rufus, the country kid, the two country kids.

Thomas: Cody and Rufus.

Carlos: Because when that happened, Rufus didn't really care...

Sam: Yeah, he didn't really care until Kenny laughed.

Carlos: He didn't really care until his friend, that he thought was his friend, laughed at him, but he decided to walk away.

Trey: Alright so that is important for overcoming hatred and unfairness. Other kids hate on kids all the time, but you have to learn to step away and ignore it.

Jocelyn: Well, I think tragedy and family.

Carlos: A life lesson for that is even when tragedy strikes your family is there for you.

You can choose to write about that too. (Transcript, March 4, 2015)

In the example above, students developed a life lesson based on the explicit information in the text. Although students had different perceptions, they allowed each other to defend their idea. Finally, after reading *The Watson Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995), students developed an understanding that life challenges can often be confronted with passivity or through familial support, an idea later challenged in texts.

### **Supporting Dialogue through Teacher Modeling and Mediating Discussions**

It was necessary at certain points within the study to guide students' conversations through questioning and establishing numerous writing opportunities with specific prompts. Each day before students engaged in their literature discussions, I spent time within my reading instruction to read aloud parts of the novel and model my own thinking and questioning. My role during this first stage was to help students lead the way into thoughtful conversations because I understood that simply handing books to a group of students to read would not naturally create critical conversations. During this time, I would also give students an opportunity to write in their journals to either reflect on the previous day's discussion or to prepare for the literature discussion for that day. Additionally, I often monitored students' conversation, since I was already present taking anecdotal notes, and made myself available to answer their questions or clear up confusion about the story, especially in regards to questions about historical events. Therefore, teacher assistance and guidance was needed to mediate the conversation toward one of instructing meaning and ultimately achieving understanding, as the following conversation illustrated:

Carlos: There is no racism. That is where a different kind of skin color is treated unfairly compared to another.

Teacher: Racism is when one individual or group of people specifically dislikes another group of people that may be different. Obviously, in the story the Black Panthers are there to help everyone because they have Puerto Ricans, White people, Chinese people. They are all there for the same cause. That word keeps coming up. Do you know what cause is?

*Students nod*

Teacher: It is something you are fighting for. It is what causes you to do something. So what is their cause? What is the Black Panther's cause?

Thomas: To earn civil rights.

Teacher: Ok, to earn civil rights. So what are the civil rights that they are wanting?

Thomas: To make everybody equal, so that others are not being treated unfairly.

Carlos: Basic civil rights like to be able to own a house, get a job ...

Teacher: Yeah, it is just to be treated the same just as everybody else. You can buy a house wherever you want, you can eat wherever you want.

Trey: The government has to help too, not just the Black Panthers, because a lot of people were hating and bombing us and the government didn't do nothing.

Teacher: What do you mean bombing us?

Trey: Like in the south the government didn't do much to protect people. Like in *The Watson's Go to Birmingham* people bombed the church and it wasn't until years later that people were arrested for it. (Transcript, March 10, 2015):

Students were in need of this initial frontloading and guidance so that they could utilize the

correct terminology for future conversation and to understand the relationship between one text and another. Additionally, Trey made a reference to *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995) and placed himself within the context of the plot and story by referring to the characters as “us.” Often times, students will immerse themselves in a text where they may take on the role and experiences of those within the story. Cai (2008) labels this transaction as the association mode, where readers may connect with a character or event in the plot, which consequently can lead to critical reading of a text with a socio-political foundation, similar to Trey’s recognition above.

Posing open-ended questions during discussions and passively asking students to interpret the question began the initial steps of reinterpretation in order to eventually move away from retelling, as seen in previous examples. As will be implied below, students discussed events within *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995) where Kenny witnessed two new students on the bus being teased by others:

Teacher: Did you guys find any intolerance, yet?

Thomas: Not really...

Jocelyn: Well, they were making fun of them because of what they were wearing.

Teacher: So, that’s intolerance! When you make fun of somebody else just based on something, like, from their outside features, something they can’t control, right?

Trey: Yeah.

Jocelyn: They can’t control that they don’t have any clothes for both him and his sibling. So kids making fun of other kids just based on what they look.

Carlos: Now I think the kids are making fun of Kenny because his mom dresses him up in layers of clothes and they look like mummies. They call them the Weird Watsons, so

that's intolerance.

Jocelyn: Oh yea! (Transcript, February 18, 2015)

Teacher interjections, although minimal, were needed during the early stages of discussions to ensure students were maintaining a dialogue that enabled them to apply new knowledge. As in the example above, I briefly paused the reading to ask students if they had encountered examples of intolerance. Consequently, students were able to effectively identify other examples in the text. Nieto (2013) defines this role of the teacher as a *social mediator*, one who guides without limiting or imposing on students' thoughts.

Conclusively, initial perceptions focused on retelling basic facts explicitly stated in the text, accessing students' developed schema from deliberately taught historical content, and ultimately sporadic intervention by the teacher enabled students to associate beginning social justice concepts within texts. These three patterns defined the first stage of students' cognitive development and approach toward literature circles and aided in developing a framework based on collaborative interpretations and students' perceptions.

### **Stage 2: Questioning Prior Knowledge**

As students progressed through the weeks, their discussions based on retellings and eliciting background knowledge to develop understanding and comprehension began to evolve into a succeeding stage. Within this second stage, students began to question their developing perceptions through wonderings as a means for clarification, interrogating characters' intentions in the plot, and asserting personal judgments and opinions toward those characters. Their perceptions, based on spontaneous and intuitive thinking, began questioning that helped to elicit new and fresh thinking. Students began to explicitly explore characters situated by their own wonderings, assessing intentions, and asserting their judgment as opinions.

## Wonderings as a Means for Clarification

Proficient and critical readers often engage in broad wonderings, allowing them to expand their literary imagination and understanding. Within this study, students would pause their reading to ask impromptu questions. The following is an example of dialogue focused on students' wonderings about a shirt described in the text, worn by one of the Black Panthers, which had an image of a pig:

Trey: Why do you think he had that dead pig on his shirt? Maybe there is a meaning for that? The pig.

Sam: Yeah, you know like if you don't give equal rights, then *off with your head*.

Carlos: The flies are buzzing around the pig and the pig is food. Don't give him food is what the shirt means. The flies are eating the pig which is food.

Jocelyn: But what if the pig means something?

Carlos: And the shirt says *off with the pig* meaning get rid of bad things.

Jocelyn: Yeah. Oh, I get you. (Transcript, March 17, 2015)

Although the students attempted to question the significance of the shirt in order to construct meaning, students had no conception about the symbolism of the pig representing the authority of the police. However, their active perception or imagined perception of what it could be served as an important point of their dialogue. Critical analysis is evident in the example above because there is an apparent attempt by students to question as a means to better understand the implied message of the character's clothing. Pausing their reading to discuss this character's shirt, Crazy Kelvin, an outspoken Black Panther from the community center, would serve as a future point of discussion. In later chapters, students would revisit this dialogue as they find out that Crazy Kelvin was in fact a spy and informant for the police. As



they discussed later chapters:

Jocelyn: So, that is what Fern was talking about when she said she saw something. She saw Crazy Kelvin talking to the police!

Trey: Oh, so remember, why do you guys think that pig, well, remember Crazy Kelvin had the dead pig on his shirt? What is wrong with pigs? Did that have something to do with it?

Carlos: I think that what that represents is that the government or some kind of authority, that might be what it repr (*has difficulty saying the word*) I can't say that word.

*Students help out*

Carlos: Represents (*pauses*) the government or the cops, but some kind of authority.

Sam: So, maybe that is why the flies are buzzing around the pig because they don't want to eat it.

Carlos: Because they think of the government as a pig or authority.

Sam: Yea, because they are lazy and they don't do anything for the black people.

Jocelyn: And so are pigs, they are lazy.

Trey: Yea, but this whole time he kept wearing that shirt to make a point like he hates the cops but behind everyone's back he was lying to them and taking the side of the police.

That's messed up. You gotta be careful who you trust. (Transcript, March 17, 2015)

It became clear to students the symbolism for the pig on the shirt. Comparing these two conversations, it was evident that having a previous discussion where students attempted to make sense of the pig initially through wonderings would later lead to an ultimate understanding and realization of the true meaning of the pig symbol and what it meant for the character to be wearing the shirt. The idea of social justice entails uncovering unfairness in

order to discover the truth. The characters realized that it was unfair to the Black Panthers to entrust an individual whom had no respect or support for their cause. This truth was uncovered first by the youngest sister in the story and then by Black Panther members, yet the participants understood how powerful it could be to trust others, while understanding how powerless one can feel to know that those they trusted either did not contribute to the cause or were too scared to do so. It was through these conversations in which perceptions were shaped and influenced by collaborating with peers and engaging in meaningful discussions.

### **Interrogating Characters in the Plot**

Interrogating a character's intentions or attempting to understand a character's action became an important aspect within this second cognitive stage of development. Students no longer simply restated or summarized what characters do within a text, but began to analyze possible intentions that may not be explicitly stated. This allowed students to develop their perceptions, or first impressions of characters, within a different context. In the following excerpt from their discussion after reading a chapter in *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010), students asked about the intentions of the mother:

Jocelyn: I am still thinking why she took Delphine's money away.

Trey: Yeah, that was kinda mean. Wow.

Jocelyn: Yeah, like they wanted to go to Disneyland, but she is not that type of person or mother to take them.

Carlos: She could have said like, at least give me half of it so that I can afford to buy you food and then you keep the other half for souvenirs or buying things they see or like. I thought that was kinda selfish.

Trey: And then she only gave them \$10 and keeps the rest. I just cannot imagine that a

parent would do that. My mom and dad are not selfish with me or my siblings.

Thomas: Uh huh, like for what? What is she going to use that money for? (Transcript, March 10, 2015)

At first, the mother was a figure that was not easily understood. Her actions, tone towards her daughters, and lack of affection were difficult aspects for students to grasp as they were unable to connect with this experience. Although students were unable to make connections with the character or their actions, such questioning of character's intentions is a means to construct new meaning or develop possible explanations or alternatives for why characters do what they do or what they could have done.

Over a week after this dialogue occurred, Sam and Trey exchanged literary letters and further assessed the mother by recalling previous information gained from the novel and attempting to interpret her actions:

If I were Delphine I would go to the rally because I would want to fight for the rights of black people. I remember in the begin[n]ing Delphine's dad said that Cecile wanted to see the three children but now it seems Cecile didn't even want the children there. Cecile doesn't want them to be in her kitchen but when Cecile lets Delphine in her kitchen it doesn't seem she has anything important or anything to hide. I wonder if Cecile knows or thinks that the People's Center is dangerous? (Sam, Journal entry, March 19, 2015)

Trey responds:

Dear Sam,

I agree about going to the center and all but, I think Cecile might know the center is dangerous because maybe Cecile wants to teach them a lesson of growing out over there.

Sincerely,

Trey (Journal entry, March 19, 2015)

Although the excerpt above shows student's wonderings, the interaction between the two students further supported the cognitive process of wondering in order to assess, in this case, the character of the mother. In fact, Sam juxtaposed what it may "seem" the mother is trying to hide with what may in fact be reality, which Sam suspected that she may not have anything to hide. Trey responded by offering a new perspective or way of assessing the mother's intention by saying that she might want to teach her children a lesson about growing up, or as he stated "growing out." Consequently, the mode of dialogue was the beginning attempts of reading with critical purpose.

### **Forming Judgments and Opinions Towards Characters**

Students did not hesitate placing judgment or stating clear opinions about the characters and plot. Opportunities were provided for students to respond about the mood and tone of the text. By doing so, students developed their judgments about characters. In reading *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010), much of the dialogue centered on the character of Cecile, the mother of the three young girls. During the middle of one conversation, Jocelyn asked the group, "If Cecile knew the People Center was dangerous, would she still send her daughters?" (Transcripts, March 10, 2015). Providing this question and similar to Sam's question in his literary letter to Trey, students drew on their perceptions or basic judgments about Cecile. Carlos responded, "Of course she would. She is selfish and isn't very caring about the girls" (Transcript, March 10, 2015). The negative perceptions or judgments toward Cecile were based on her initial actions and demeanor towards her three daughters. In one journal response, Sam shared:

I think that Cecile is a very bad mother because my mother always cooks food. The mood

that I am getting is depressed because Cecile doesn't take very good care of her children.

The mood would be happy and joyful if Cecile would be happy that she has her daughters.

If the tone was happy, the mood would probably be joyful. (Journal entry, March 19, 2015)

Sam quickly judged Cecile and her actions and labeled her as a *bad mother*. Citing evidence from the text, connecting with their own expectations, and focusing on tone and mood based on actions enabled students to develop their opinions, biases, and judgments. Cai's (2008) analysis of reader response theory states:

Readers' misconceptions, biases, and prejudices revealed in their aesthetic reading of a multicultural literary work should be seen as subject matter or analysis, interpretation, and criticism. They may appear as barriers to critical reading of multicultural literature, but in fact they can serve as the starting point for critical reading. (p. 217)

Although readers may disagree, question, or judge characters in a text, this should not be interpreted as students' lack of understanding or of any particular reading skill. On the contrary, it is the starting point for critical discussion and interpretation.

Therefore, Stage 2 was a phase in students' cognitive process where three main modes of responses took place. First, students developed broad wonderings to expand their understandings. Second, assessing character intentions allowed students to make sense of character actions and how such actions may affect their own perceptions. Finally, students did not hesitate to judge the characters, primarily the mother in *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010), in order to more accurately inform their perceptions. These are necessary modes of dialogue because it allowed students to think critically, yet broadly for more imaginative forms of interpretation and meaning making.

### **Stage 3: Forming Conceptions**

As students began to question their perceptions and move toward a more inclusive discourse of their reflections towards plot and character, they became more open and comfortable as their conversations progressed to concrete conceptions while being cognizant of abstract thinking. At this point in the study, students were given literary roles to guide their discussions. However, these roles were not specifically assigned to students as it had the potential to limit students' thinking. In other words, specific literature roles can lead to an over-focus on the task or role given. I used the roles created by Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2011) but modified slightly for the purpose of this study and based on what I believed would be most effective for the participants. These roles were also given to students as a means to help guide their conversations in concrete ways and to allow them to use specific social justice vocabulary to help describe their thinking and interpretations. This was a decision I made as a teacher and as a researcher because I observed that students lacked the necessary vocabulary for effective discussions. Additionally, I felt as though students needed a structure to build dialogue that was socio-politically focused. From this juncture of the study, students held these cards describing the roles and rotated them between each other. Sometimes students were observed turning the cards facedown and having each member choose a card to hold. When this was done, students tried to make one connection with the text using the card they chose at random and then later allowed to discuss freely using the other role cards. Other times, students picked cards at random and then immediately traded for their favorite. I allowed this freedom of choice because I wanted students to feel ownership of their conversations and to allow them to negotiate how the cards would be used.

Therefore, I created the following six fluid roles that were adapted by Thien, Guise, and Sloan (2011), but modified with an additional role and by changing two out of their five

suggested roles to accommodate the needs and focus of this study (See Appendix B for student literary role cards):

#### Equality/Inequality Investigator

- Look for parts in the plot that show equality and fairness OR inequality and unfairness.
- Investigate characters' actions towards other characters.

#### Sympathy Seeker

- Look for how characters think about other characters during difficult times.
- Ask yourself, "Does this character feel bad for the other character?"
- How do characters show feelings towards each other.

#### Problem Poser

- Look for problems or conflicts for which there are no easy answers or solutions.
- What problems do characters face?

#### Perspective Taker

- Represents perspectives of characters whose actions are confusing.
- Describe another character's point of view.
- How do their point of view differ from other characters?

#### Stereotype Tracker

- Look for ways in which other characters stereotype others or judges them.
- Stereotypes are assumptions made about other people without knowing them.
- Find ways this can be fixed or solved.

#### Freedom Fighter Finder

- Look for characters who fight for freedom and independence.
- What choices or actions do characters take in order to achieve freedom?

As will be later noted, these literary roles were meant to be fluid with the ability for students to actively seek evidence in the text that may be appropriate for any role, regardless of what role may be in their possession. The excerpts to support this approach will illustrate how students actively sought out each other's role to provide further examples. Finally, these roles enabled students to engage in socio-politically based extended conversations while also allowing students to apply specific reading skills as a means for developing social justice topics.

### **Using Literature Circle Roles as Conversational Guides**

Reading literature that allowed students to incorporate literacy skills for analysis supplemented, supported, and molded their conceptions about the world. When supplemented with critical literary roles, students were encouraged to further develop and evolve their thinking and analysis. The following example illustrates a conversation where Trey used the role of Problem Poser to unravel the problem in *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013):

Trey: Ok, I have Problem Poser. Like, why would Japan bomb Pearl Harbor if they, America, didn't do nothing? Why would they want to start this war?

Sam: Maybe it is because, I think maybe it is because Hitler...

Trey: You predict...

Sam: Yeah, I predict that Hitler didn't want England, France, Russia, or America to know that he was killing the Jewish people, so maybe he, so maybe he asked Japan, one of the country's friends, to destroy Pearl Harbor, to bomb Pearl Harbor so they can't go into the ocean and then go to Germany. So, that might be why. (Transcript, May 18, 2015)

There was an attempt by Sam to offer Trey an inferred explanation about the reasoning behind the bombing of Pearl Harbor, an event described in *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013).



Therefore, although Trey prompted the discussion by identifying a problem, Sam continued the conversation by providing Trey with a possible reason.

In a separate discussion, students continued to navigate the text *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013) in an attempt to look for examples to support the given roles. For example, the proceeding dialogue exemplified Carlos' identification of a Freedom Fighter within the text:

Carlos: I have Freedom Fighter.

Jocelyn: Ok, do you have anything related?

Carlos: Sylvia's father is a Freedom Fighter because he wants to go against the school board to stop school segregation.

Jocelyn: Right.

Sam: The workers, um he doesn't want to sign the letter but he feels sorry for Sylvia's dad because they can't help him. Her dad also isn't scared of what might happen if he tries to get the petition signed. He is fighting for what he thinks is right, like Susan B. Anthony when she voted even though it was against the law.

Trey: Yeah, I think that is what a Freedom Fighter is, someone who isn't afraid.

(Transcript, April 28, 2015)

Both Carlos and Sam built on each other's understanding of what a Freedom Fighter entailed. As Carlos gave an example, Sam followed up with an alternative idea. Trey concluded this conversation by providing an overall observation he made based on the examples given by Carlos and Sam stating a Freedom Fighter is "someone who isn't afraid." Roles were actively utilized in developing these conversations. The following section will continue this discussion and illustrate how roles continued to play an integral part in developing extended socio-politically based conversations.

## Generating Socio-Politically Based Conversations

Negotiated meaning developed through conversations and students' attempts to unravel injustices within the text. Negotiated conversations means students took breaks between readings to engage in discussions about topics that would often take various turns and directions. Allowing students to use literary roles as a guide enabled deeper conversations that were socio-politically based. For example, while reading *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013), students engaged in a discussion focused on the historical trial Gonzalo Mendez v. Westminster School District of Orange County, where the plaintiffs, including Sylvia's family, argued that separate white and Mexican schools were unconstitutional and illegal. In this portion of the book, Sylvia was unfairly forced to enroll in Hoover School, a *Mexican school* on the opposite side of town that lacked the necessary resources and qualified teachers to offer students a successful education. Although this enrollment practice was determined by giving students a language test, Sylvia and her brothers were never given an exam and were directly sent to Hoover School based on their Mexican appearance, instead of attending the local school Westminster School. The following is an example of students' conversation:

Sierra: I think they should call Sylvia to testify and give her a language test to see if she only speaks Spanish. Then she would show everyone that she does speak English and that she shouldn't have been taken to Hoover School.

Sam: I feel if her Aunt Soledad was there she would tell Sylvia's dad to call Sylvia and her to the stand so she could tell the judge that, um, that they didn't give Sylvia and her brothers a language test.

Sierra: I think that if the schools were equal then Hoover School would be as nice as Westminster school and it wouldn't be all dirty and rusty with used books.

Carlos: I wonder if she isn't allowed to testify will she scream it out? *No one tested me!* If it wasn't a felony to do that.

Sam: I would do that if it wasn't a felony.

Trey: Yes, but sometimes you have to do something bad to get something good out of it! Like Susan B. Anthony broke the law just so she can change it.

Jocelyn: And to say they want to teach the Mexican kids to be clean, like what was that about?

Trey: I think it is funny that they said they have to learn cleanliness, but Hoover School isn't even clean. So, how are they supposed to know how to be clean if their school looks like trash?

Carlos: Yeah, that is irony. (Transcript, April 29, 2015)

The extended conversation exemplified dialogue centered on uncovering injustices within text. Sierra and Sam began the conversation discussing the unfairness found in schools segregating students based on their language abilities, although no language test was given to many of the plaintiffs, including Sylvia, to determine if Hoover School was a better educational fit. This conversation continued as students recognized the unfairness in educational segregation, and more importantly, the need to speak up against injustice even if doing so is illegal in a courtroom. Finally, Trey recognized the irony in the school's claim that Mexican children needed to be taught hygiene and cleanliness, even though the school they are being sent to is not a representation of this need.

During the students' next literature circle meeting, the discussion continued to focus on the trial in the attempt to uncover further injustices within the text. It seemed as though once students caught on to the purpose of questioning, described in the previous cognitive stage, a

level of comfort was developed that enabled students to seek out more examples of unfairness. In the following example, students continued this conversation, but began to guide others to uncover and dismantle these injustices:

Carlos: Ok, he just lied. It is obvious that he just lied! He was asked if he believed Mexicans were inferior to white and he said NO, then he comes over here and says, *yes, I think whites are superior*. What the heck is that? He is saying that they are equal and then he says that whites are morally superior to them. Come on. How did the judge not know he was lying?

Sam: Doesn't inferior mean like...

Carlos: Less superior. Like back in that time people thought that Mexicans were inferior to white people. They thought that they were less. Like Hitler thought that Jews were inferior to a cockroach, they were less than a cockroach. That is what he thought. That is what inferior means, it is the opposite of superior.

Sam: Oh, ok. I get that. (Transcript, May 28, 2015)

Carlos was able to use his understanding to guide Sam in his own interpretation of the meaning of the word inferior. He did this by accessing his schema from the text we read prior to *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013), which was *Elly* (Gross, 2010). Accessing schema was a cognitive process described during the first stage of building a framework for initial perceptions, but as evidenced through the data, students often reverted back to previous forms of processing their understanding as a means of helping others move forward in their own meaning-making and critical understanding. Building on each other's responses illustrated how students' conception began to change over time, especially in regard to how students first used their schema and

background knowledge. Finally, students' conception about the unfairness of stereotyping others broadened their understanding about the world, specifically in a historical context.

### **Apply Specific Reading Skills to Further Develop Social Justice Conceptions**

The following data analysis highlights how students negotiated their conversations by applying specific skills to allow social justice topics to emerge within student discourse. In this excerpt, Carlos responds in his journals about important details he chose from the text, which enabled him to analyze the problem in the story *Elly* (Gross, 2010):

The four details I picked were Elly's father was burned alive in a trailer, Jewish people were an easy target for hate, all the rights of Jewish people were gone, and None of Elly's friends wanted to play with her. These details help me understand the problem because it exemplifies how Jewish people were discriminated against and had no rights to even stand up for themselves. (Journal entry, April 13, 2015)

Although simple and straightforward, Carlos chose four explicit details from the text in order to make an inference on the overall conflict in the story. However, this analysis of conflict allowed Carlos to think about the sociopolitical implications of discrimination and rights. Such application of skills, in particular choosing important details, did not just allow better overall comprehension of the text, but provided students an opportunity and cognitive space for complex thinking within a sociopolitical framework.

As discussed in Stage 3: Forming Conceptions, the importance of allowing students to read together as a group provided a space for instant dialogue and reader reaction. This instructional strategy was unique to this study and of particular importance to the initial purpose as it enabled in-depth conversations. As an added instructional approach, roles were introduced, but not assigned in order to offer other ways of thinking. Finally, skills as a means of unraveling

socio-political themes, was an important step for students to grapple with difficult issues within the literature.

#### **Stage 4: Developing Compassion**

The previous three stages exemplified students' effort to further develop their sociopolitical understanding of texts by seeking out explicit examples and using roles to guide their discussions. In particular, one of the roles was Sympathy Seeker, which enabled students to think critically about others and by providing a cognitive space to utilize this role to form stronger connections with themselves and characters. This was done through their extended conversations about unfairness, applying specific skills to construct inferences about conflict, and using literary roles to enhance their ability to look for examples using critical vocabulary. The following section describes how readers projected their feelings to accurately understand others by empathizing with experiences that may be unknown to us as readers, building sympathy and compassion towards character's experience, and appreciating one's self through self relevancy, which are key to forming new conceptions about the world.

#### **Exhibiting Empathy as a Catalyst for Changed Perceptions**

As readers engaged with literature, they began to identify with characters and the plot, and often vicariously experienced specific emotions through the story, which is defined by empathy. When readers developed feelings of empathy, their perceptions began to change into concrete conceptions of knowing. In the three prior stages, students had a negative conception of the mother in *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010), as she left her children with their father at a young age to move to Oakland, California, the setting where the story begins. However, through continued reading and discussion, students finally came to an empathic understanding towards the mother, as demonstrated in the following conversation:

Trey: Ok, so Fern was happy because Cecille finally called her by her real name.

Carlos: Cecille always called Fern *Little Girl*, that isn't very nice.

Trey: Right, and her actual name was Afua, but she doesn't wanna tell her that yet cuz they are...

Carlos: Kinda new. They barely know each other.

Trey: Yeah, and that's why she left her. She left her because she didn't get to name her Afua.

Carlos: She wanted to name her Afua, but she also told Delphine she didn't have any money to raise three girls.

Trey: And she wanted to be a better person than her mom was to her and so that is why she left the three girls. (Transcripts, March 25, 2015)

In this conversation, students reassessed their feelings toward the mother, Cecille, as they began to see her as a mother who made a sacrifice at a young age in order to provide her daughters with a better life. This new revelation enabled students to rethink their previous perceptions about Cecille, and to nurture an empathetic view towards her.

As a culminating activity, students were given opportunities to write Haiku poems to express their feelings toward the stories read. They were allowed to choose themes of the stories, elaborate on characters, or provide an empowering message. In one particular poem written by Carlos, he expressed his empathy toward the experiences of Jewish people during the Holocaust:

The Camps

Darkness, death is here.

Hitler is here to kill all.

No where to run here.

Jews were deceived too.

Helpless Jews don't outlast flames.

No one can escape.

Torture is gone now.

The Allied have saved us now.

We are free to roam. (June 2, 2015)

Carlos exemplified sincere sadness for the experiences he read from *Elly* (Gross, 2010), yet he was able to come to terms with their injustices by the end of his poem. Although he had no direct experience with the Holocaust other than that provided by reading *Elly*, he was able to form compassion and empathy toward those who did, as well as relief for those who survived.

### **Demonstrating Sympathy through Personal Connections**

Demonstrating sympathy, or the act of being able to directly identify with characters and share an emotional bond became an integral part to developing powerful conceptions in Stage 4. Participants began to make emotional connections with characters and to think that they too shared similar feelings. For instance, as we concluded *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013), both main characters realized that being American or Americanized meant something different for everyone. Sylvia felt conflicted because she did not fit the picture of what it meant to look American, and was therefore enrolled in a segregated school for Mexican children. Similarly, Aki felt that maintaining her Japanese culture in America made her less American, even to the point of being labeled Anti-American according to the government at the time. It became clear that the question of being Americanized left students wondering about the meaning of this term



and how it directly related to them. In a literary letter between Trey and Jocelyn, Trey wrote:

Americanized means that you are all-American and not foreign. An Americanized child looks like a white person or black. I feel Americanized and sometimes not because I still speak English and my language and eat American food and my food. (Journal entry, April 29, 2015)

In this example, Trey referred to his family's country as "my," both in regards to his language and food, validating both his American culture and that of his family's African culture. He nonetheless recognized the balance of both. In response to Trey, Jocelyn's literary letter stated:

Dear Trey,

Same! I feel Americanized but at the same time I don't feel it because I eat different food. I don't think I need to pick a side. I feel like Aki had to for her safety, but I wouldn't.

Sincerely,

Jocelyn (Journal entry, April 29, 2015)

Jocelyn validated Trey's thoughts by sharing her own sympathetic feelings that paralleled his own. By discussing their conceptions about the term Americanization and what it represented to them, students sympathized with the characters, Sylvia and Aki's, experiences.

Sympathy was not only a sentiment felt amongst students, but it was one they were able to identify between the characters in the story. For example, Sam recognized that Sylvia's father was not only one who was fighting to make education equal for all, but his decision to do so stemmed from the fact that he sympathized with all those struggling for an equitable and just education. The following conversation took place as Sam identified a Sympathy Seeker within

the text regarding this scenario:

Sam: I have a Sympathy Seeker. Sylvia's dad feels sympathy for all the kids that have to go to Hoover School that could, if the law was changed, could go to Westminster school.

Trey: And the, what's it called, Hoover School expects them to fail, drop out, go to the fields, and work for them. Get paid like \$2 an hour.

Sam: Yeah, and that's why the dad feels sorry for all those kids because people just expect them to fail.

Sierra: He doesn't want that for any kids or his children.

Sam: Yeah, that is why I am saying he feels sympathy, he wants his children to have more opportunities than he had.

Jocelyn: Well \$2 is a lot, that's a lot!

Sam: That's horrible!

Jocelyn: If you work like, 20 hours, that's a lot for \$2 an hour.

Sam: That's only \$40! The dad wants more for Sylvia than just that.

Jocelyn: True, I guess that is not a lot. (Transcript, April 24, 2015)

Sam expressed to his peers that sympathy is a feeling that is not only felt by those who read a text, but can also be identified within characters themselves. In this example, Sam described the father of Sylvia, a farm worker who is avidly working towards making political changes to the educational system for his daughter and those children directly affected by education segregation. Sam was quick to identify Sylvia's father's sympathy towards the unjust circumstances facing Mexican children during this time. It was also apparent that although Jocelyn seems to agree, she also perceived the pay rate for farm workers to be adequate compensation. After a quick reflection instigated by Sam, Jocelyn rethinks her perception

about the worth of \$40 and concluded that this pay was unfair. This dialogical exchange exemplified students' quick reassessment of their thinking and perceptions and with the help of literary peers, their ability to develop conceptions about farm workers, labor, and educational opportunities all in one conversation.

### **Recognizing Self-Relevancy for Social Change**

As readers became aware of their role and began to appreciate themselves, it created a newfound perception about the world we live in and what our role as individuals can be to empower change. If we know ourselves and appreciate our importance and capabilities, we are more willing to become change agents or individuals who are actively involved in making a difference for themselves and others. The following example originates from Jocelyn's response to the books we have read. In her response, she reflected on the impact these books have made on her conceptions about herself and those around her, including family and friends:

Elly has changed my life because it taught me that to always persevere even when its hard. For example, the Nazis took away Elly's life but she still went to college and started her life after she was rescued by American soldiers. I think that if she can do it and become a stronger person I can too. Sometimes me and my family have to survive things that are hard but if we can persevere then we are stronger. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* changed my life because Byron was really rude to his little brother but he still loved him no matter if he was really mean to his brother (Kenny). So, that taught me to love my siblings! LOL! (Journal entry, June 1, 2015)

When literature makes a positive impact on readers, it can teach them to improve themselves in many aspects of their life. In the excerpt, Jocelyn wrote an open response about how her

conceptions and feelings toward the books we have read changed the way she sees herself. In this response, she recognized the difficult circumstances characters go through, which taught her an important lesson about life—the impact perseverance has on our choices and outcomes. Finally, reflecting on the family dynamics of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995) enabled Jocelyn to appreciate her role as an older sister.

Self-relevancy, an appreciation for ourselves by analyzing the experiences of other characters, developed within student dialogue as they questioned the actions and motivations for others' unfair behavior. In other words, puzzled by unfair actions of others enabled students to realize the changes they want to make in themselves to not perpetuate unfair treatment:

Jocelyn: I just don't understand how people can do that. Did you see what they did to Pavel?

Trey: Who is Pavel?

Jocelyn: The guy who peeled potatoes.

Sam: Yeah, the chef.

Trey: What Chef?

Teacher: Read the book!

Sam: But it is in the book too.

Trey: Oh ok, he peels the potato and puts the band-aide on the boy. I remember him now.

Jocelyn: Exactly! He was so kind to the young boy and the father just had him sent to be beaten. That's unfair.

Trey: Yeah, you just don't treat people like that who are innocent and kind. People were just brainwashed. I wouldn't let that happen. No one can tell me how to think or what to do.

Jocelyn: Well, your parents can! (Transcript, May 4, 2015)

Students made a reference to a text that they all had read and shared, but was not part of this study, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Boyne, 2007). Motivated and curious to read more about the experiences of individuals in the Holocaust after reading *Elly* (Gross, 2010), students borrowed and rotated this text so they all had a chance to read it. As this discussion illustrated, students were actively aware of the inhuman treatment of Jewish people in the Holocaust, even of those who were used as servants in the household of military officials, as in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Boyne, 2007). However, students were quick to express concern over treating those who are kind to you unfairly, hatefully, and unappreciatively. Specifically, Trey was very adamant about expressing his frustration, but also supported it with the fact that this was not and would not be his role within his community or world.

In Stage 4: Developing Compassion, enabled students to create emotions of empathy, sympathy, and self-relevancy towards characters' experiences as they formed sympathetic conceptions. This motivated students to seek out their own role as change agents and created a socio-political space to critique the world through an open heart. The various means of developing feelings and connecting with characters provided students with a vehicle for reinterpreting their community and world. Simply in the ability to value their own worth allowed students to view themselves as individuals who can and should make a difference for their community and world. As discussed in the final stage, students were able to concretely express their conceptions for a just world, not only imagined, but enacted for change.

### **Stage 5: Internalizing New Knowledge**

During the final stage of students' cognitive progression, conceptions ultimately became new knowledge that was internalized and expressed by readers through various forms.

Students built confidence in socio-political discourse through social action discussions and powerful questions. Students also assessed unfair elements to derive a possible resolution, which are necessary steps towards social action and envisioning a just world. The following section demonstrates these ideas supported through student examples.

#### **Advocating Sense of Social Change**

During the final weeks of the study, students actively engaged in posing questions to others about their own perceptions, which allowed the swift movement towards a solid conception or interpretation of the texts. At the onset of *90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010), the book begins with the outbreak of the revolution in 1959. As the scene is described by Julian, the narrator of the story, the students immediately paused during their reading to make inferences about the text:

Trey: Why do you guys think there are gunshots right now?

Sam: Maybe some people got into a fight. Maybe they are disagreeing about something.

Let's think about what is going on. Its New Year's day, people are going crazy lifting the parking meters off the ground, throwing furniture out the window of the president's house. He isn't there anymore, so he must have gone in right before the protestors came.

Trey: Yeah, yeah, like, maybe they are protesting. Kind of like they protested in *One Crazy Summer* when they wanted to name the park after the boy was killed. Bobby something.

Sam: Yeah, he was killed by the police in Oakland and they wanted to name a park after him.

Trey: Right, so they protested for it. People were angry. Seems like people are angry here too.

Sam: Oh yeah, maybe against the government.

Jocelyn: Well, sometimes you have to do something crazy to get attention for what you want.

Sam: Ohhhh, I like that. (Transcript, May 4, 2015)

Trey quickly, without hesitation, interrupted the group to get their opinions. Responses were developed as students added to each other's knowledge. Trey made a connection with the previous text *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010), which made a reference to a protest where Black Panthers wanted to name a park after Bobby Hutton, a Black Panther killed by the Oakland police department. Both Trey and Sam were able to carry this conversation by validating each other's responses. Ultimately, Jocelyn interjected with the powerful statement, "Well, sometimes you have to do something crazy to get attention for what you want." The questions during the final stage were less focused on simply retelling and more focused as a vehicle for explaining unknown circumstances in text.

Students developed confidence in asking questions as they came to realize questions are a powerful form of dialogue. In the following example, students read a section in *90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010) where Julian, the main character, is getting ready to leave on a boat with Tomas, a fellow Cuban on a mission to free 14 other Cubans in Havana by bringing them to the United States on a secret mission. In this situation, Tomas, an older friend of Julian, entrusted another individual named Dog to help him get the boat ready for the excursion, however, they quickly realized that Dog had stolen from them:

Trey: I put, why would Dog want to sabotage the boat? Like take out the compass, but what did Tomas do to him?

Carlos: Maybe he wants him to get caught by the Cuban and American government.

Trey: So, what is the second question?

Carlos: I put where is Dog while all of this was happening?

Teacher: Why would he want to sabotage the whole mission though?

Jocelyn: Yeah! What did they ever do him?

Sierra: Its kinda like Caballo. He was a bully. Why would he want to make everyone's lives miserable and be a bully?

Carlos: Maybe someone when he was little did the same thing to him, or his dad, or his parents?

Sierra: Maybe somebody betrayed him, so now that is how he treats people.

Sam: I think that he might be a spy from Cuba and he has been trained to betray people.

Trey: Ohhh! All of that makes sense. (Transcript, May 22, 2015)

In the example above, the group confidently developed their questions to guide discussions in hopes of understanding Dog's motivation. Carlos attempts to provide the group with a possible explanation by stating that Dog's behavior and character may stem from his past experiences and how others may have treated him. Realizing that our actions are affected by our experiences, Carlos is able to bring his peers to the consensus that who we are today is an expression of our history. Students were developing their conceptions through open conversations in an active attempt to understand characters and the actions that may not be clear. This is an example of students exemplifying confidence not only in their personal interpretation of text, but their competency to help and guide others through collaboration.



At this point of the literature circles, students expressed confidence in their ability to use vocabulary developed through their social justice and socio-political exposure and understanding. In the following case, students initiated a conversation about stereotyping among characters. In this part of the novel, Julian enters a hotel with a bellman at the door whom he feels is dressed as a circus monkey, inclusive of the brimless hat and broad shouldered buttoned down coat. He quickly tries to pass by him in order to discretely make his way to the beach, which was located behind the hotel. Students attempted to make sense as to why this *Monkey Man*, as termed in the text, stopped Julian to interrogate him:

Carlos: I found something for Inequality Investigator.

Teacher: Let's hear it.

Carlos: Maybe when the Monkey Man made Julian give him half the money he earned.

Teacher: Explain.

Carlos: It sort of is unfair because maybe the Monkey Man thinks that because he is Cuban and young, you know, so he can be easily be tricked like that.

Thomas: That can also be like a stereotype because he thinks that since he comes from another country, he might not know a lot, and so he can be tricked easily.

Carlos: Like when Hitler judged Jewish people and he thought they were weak.

Jocelyn: Also when the Monkey Man made Julian empty out his pockets. He may have thought this kid is young, he is probably a crook, so he didn't trust him.

Carlos: He is assuming Julian is a dishonest kid from the streets. That is stereotyping him.

Teacher: But, was that true?

*Students disagree*

Teacher: So then it is a stereotype.

Sam: Like when he first walked into the hotel, just because he looks weird and different people were staring at him.

Carlos: The hotel stereotypes Cubans because remember the guy who was guarding the front door? Like he didn't want to let Julian in because the guy in the front door was guarding it and because he said he was Cuban he said *get out of here*.

Sam: Maybe it was because of his clothes. Like his clothes were damp. (Transcript, May 22, 2015)

Carlos initiated this discussion as a means of finding inequality within the text, but then is quickly supported by Thomas' perspective as he interpreted Carlos' examples as a stereotype. Both of these interpretations are an adequate analysis and are simultaneously supported by the rest of the group. The evidence used by Carlos to support his claim of Inequality Investigator is a legitimate analysis, but can also be an example of a stereotype within the text. Either way, students confidently supported their claim, while also validating those claims that differed from their own. Additionally, teacher affirmation supported students' thinking and helped in their willingness and confidence to continue to share comments focused on finding the socio-political context and implications in the texts.

Not only was stereotyping a common pattern in the novel *90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010), but also in *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013), the novel that preceded. In the following example, students discussed the trial Mendez v. Westminster School District of Orange County as described before, where the superintendent of the school district testified on the stand:

Trey: I think that superintendent is wrong. He is stereotyping. I mean, Sylvia spoke English but they sent her to Hoover School without getting to know her or testing her.

Sierra: Not all Mexicans are like he is explaining them.

Carlos: It kinda reminds me like at the beginning of the book when they were at Westminster school and the lady was typing she just automatically looked at them and said, *you have to go to Hoover School*. She didn't even ask them questions, like the test was supposed to do. Like the superintendent said that they are supposed to talk to them and the only thing she said to them was *you have to go to Hoover School*.

Sierra: I think Sylvia should have talked up for herself to say that she does know how to speak English.

Thomas: You mean spoken up. (Transcript, June 1, 2015)

As the students read this section, Trey did not hesitate to pause the reading to bring attention to the fact that the superintendent, as well as the actions underlying the case, implicated unfair and unfounded stereotypical conduct towards children and their educational placement. Sierra, who is often the participant most apprehensive in participating within group discussions, does not shy away from the importance and need for Sylvia to speak and stand up for herself as a vehicle for fighting against the unjust policies in place. Although Sierra was a shy student and refrained from participating as often as her peers, when it came to *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2013), she had no reservations in supporting the character's need to stand up for herself. This is an illustrative case of the power of socio-political discourse where students, even those who seem the most reclusive and shy, are willing to speak up for those characters in the book whom are disempowered by inequities.

## Developing Optimism for Change and Just Society

Social change is an outcome of agency and the result of individuals coming together to create fundamental change towards our community in hopes of changing the world.

Recognizing that this is no easy feat or a result of a one-step process, students began to personalize these ideas more consistently within their discussions. Often times, students chose aspects of the plot with no easy solution, which allowed readers to internalize a life idea, one that required them to be critical, take action, and persevere, paralleling the prerequisites of being a change agent. As they read *90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010), students shared their ideas as to how the character, Julian, should handle Caballo, another child in the orphanage. All the children from Cuba were sent to an orphanage in Miami, and Caballo exhibited extreme bullying behavior prompted the following discussion.

Carlos: I think that they are going to do a pedition, I really cant pronounce that word, pedition.

Trey: A petition.

Carlos: Yeah, yeah, I can't pronounce that. Pediton.

Trey: With a T, petition.

Carlos: Yeah, so they are probably going to sign it so that they can get Caballo out of there.

Jocelyn: He is so annoying just because he is older and has been there longer he thinks he can boss everyone else around. He needs to go!

Trey: Yeah, I think Julian and Angelita will convince the other kids to sign it so they can give it to the director so Caballo can leave. (Transcript, May 18, 2015)

In the aforementioned example, students recognized the power of petitions and collective

action that those with less power, Julian and his friends, felt towards those with the most power, Caballo. Evidently, students' questions and comments became less about comprehending the events in the story, and more about assessing unfair elements and providing a resolution. As students continued to read this story, they realized that the director of the orphanage enabled Caballo's power within the orphanage and refused to listen to those who are being disempowered by his behavior, ultimately leading to Julian's escape:

Sam: So, Caballo is innocent. So, the director thinks Caballo is innocent and thinks Alquilino, Gordo, and Julian are the troublemakers.

Carlos: Julian is the victim!

Jocelyn: Why did he say you have a call from Denver?

Sam: Because ...

Jocelyn: You think they're leaving and being sent to a foster home?

Sam: Yea, Denver is where the orphanage is that Alquilino and Gordo are going to.

Trey: Isn't that, wait who has the Equality/Inequality card, you do?

Jocelyn: Yeah, I think that is unequal.

Trey: Yeah, like why would they blame Gordo and Angelita and not Caballo?

Jocelyn: Yeah, the director guy, like he think he is just mean.

Teacher: He took his side without really thinking about who really started it.

Jocelyn: Yeah. (Transcript, May 13, 2015)

In the excerpt, students showed an increased level of emotional response as they became upset over the director's reaction and means of handling the character of Caballo. Although Trey did not have a specific role card, he was able to make a connection with the text by applying the vocabulary related to a social justice framework of seeking out inequality within the text. This

active participation exemplified students' understanding of the importance of social change through questioning as a means of uncovering injustices and identifying "victims" or those persons unjustly treated.

Toward the end of *90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010), Julian made an important sacrifice in order to allow Tomas' mission to succeed. For example, Julian gave Tomas a valuable pin depicting a golden swallow his mother had given him before he left Cuba. However, after Tomas' compass was stolen by Dog, he no longer had enough money to buy all the necessary supplies needed for the mission. Julian offered the golden swallow to help fund the supplies for the covert mission that would save 14 people waiting to escape from Communist Cuba. In the following example, students discussed the character of Julian and his selfless action to help save others:

Trey: So, I think that is an important one to the family. Like he is willing to give it up for the spare parts, compass, whatever he needs.

Jocelyn: Why would he do that? If he doesn't even know if his parents will be there.

Trey: Because, it is an important thing to do.

Carlos: What do you think Julian would have done if Alquilino and Gordo were there?

Sam: It might make his mother proud because he is making the lives of 14 people better.

Trey: Maybe his mother will be proud of him for being generous and giving it up. Maybe proud maybe mad.

Sam: I think that maybe she will be proud of him for making the right decision on his own.

Carlos: The swallow. Julian is willing to give up the golden swallow!

Trey: To Tomas, Julian is willing to give the golden swallow to Tomas. (Transcript, May 28, 2015)

Students recognized that the sacrifice made by Julian to give up his mother's swallow was of great importance, but that his mother may or may not be as quick to approve his decision. In responses later written at the end of the book, the students self-reflected on Julian's action of giving up the swallow in order to provide the 14 Cubans a better opportunity. Jocelyn wrote:

One of the many choices that Julian sacrifices is that he gives up the swallow to help the 14 people to the United States. I would've done the same thing because those 14 people needed a life to start and so they could have a brighter future. I've came to school because it's the right thing to do. For exa[m]ple so I can learn and talk to my friends. Sometimes I'm sellfish with my sister.

Dear Jocelyn,

I agree I would've done the same thing. They needed a life with their family so did Julian but he helped them. But the good thing is that Toma's kept a promise to replace the swallow. Isn't that good? Then Julian's mother will have enough money to get his father out of Cuba.

Sincerely,

Sierra (Journal entry, June 2, 2015)

The literary letter above displayed a conversation between Jocelyn and Sierra, in which they validated Julian's action as necessary for the greater good of helping others. Jocelyn realized that in order to have a better world and help others, we must often act in ways that are selfless. Jocelyn further connected this to her own life, as she felt she acts in ways because it is "the right thing to do." A changed world often requires action, and agency, but these must be

grounded on acts of kindness and a genuine desire to help others. In the following example, Thomas synthesized the books read by finding a common theme:

In the books we previously read are about rights. In the books Elly she had tried to survive the Holocaust. In One Crazy Summer Delphine, Fern, and Vonetta had fought for rights with the Black Panthers. Sylvia and Aki: Sylvia went to a segregated school and Aki went to a camp. 90 Miles to Havana; Julian lost his family and the[n] found them. They all have something in common, they all lose something, but start a new life.

In response to Thomas' journal entry, Sam wrote:

Dear Thomas,

I have one question: You said in the previous book are about fighting for rights but you don't clarify how Ellie fights for rights you just said she tried to survive the Holocaust so how does she fight for rights? The books you said were all common because the characters start a new life is true, except for One Crazy Summer. They don't start a new life they just think differently.

Sincerely,

Sam (Journal entry, June 1, 2015)

It is important to note that within these literary letters, the students exemplified an understanding for the purpose of literature as a vehicle to better understand the difficult circumstances of others, while realizing the impact hope has on situational outcomes. Finally, Sam's response served as a challenge toward Thomas' thinking, as he questioned his interpretation and offered a suggestion for his own understanding. Undoubtedly, this form of literary and cognitive challenge did not occur within dialogue until the end of the study when students' comfort level and approach became a source of broadening students' conceptions,



interpretations, and critical analysis of texts- the ultimate goal for this study.

New knowledge internalized in Stage 5 was exemplified by readers as they imagined new perspectives and self-possibilities. Students built confidence in their use of new vocabulary and sought examples of explicit unfairness within text. Dialogue integrated the need for one's actions and agency in order to enact positive change, which consequently developed a sense of optimism and the fact that difficult situations can change people. These patterns evolved and formed through students' discourse as they read the final book *90 Miles to Havana* (Floris-Galbis, 2010). Ultimately, students realized that they do not have to be complacent or accept the way things are in their world. They can seek out the truth in order to change it.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the 13-week study, students engaged in literature circles where personal choice was valued and freedom to question and create new knowledge was support by both peers and teacher. Everyday students anxiously awaited our reading block so that they could quickly join their peers to read the next part of the story and participate in a friendly and nonjudgmental environment. All students were aware that their literature circle time was one where there were no intellectual limits and that they were free to interpret in ways where they understood that creativity to think and critique were one in the same. These literature circles were not dictated by comprehension questions with objective responses, but more with guiding questions, either developed on their own by peers or by myself, with subjective responses. This chapter will conclude by revisiting the three research questions of interest from the onset of the study.

### **Negotiating Cultural Understanding**

Reading in a supportive literary community, like literature circles, shapes students' responses and is an effective way of providing students with a platform for dialogue to nurture

as knowledge develops, builds, and ultimately shapes our conceptions. Within this setting, students were able to successfully negotiate cultural understanding by developing norms that consistently permeated throughout their conversations and were evident in data collected from audio recordings. For example, students always initiated their literature circle discussions by counting pages and figuring out how many pages or paragraphs each participant could read so that all members had an equal and fair turn. This procedure became part of the cultural norm for students, as they became aware of the importance of being equitable to all members. Additionally, students often asked each other questions to help those who may be confused refocus their thoughts and reading. This was consistently done in a positive, supportive, and respectful manner. Participants valued each other's presence, commitment, and talk. In essence, the term *culture* referred to the shared norms that became the basis for perceptions and conceptions, as well as conversations and questions, to be formed and shaped by all members.

### **Changing Conceptions about our Self, Community, and World**

As students read, discussed, and owned their conversations concerning the texts, their conceptions about self, community, and world began to change. Initially, students made many connections as well as disconnections between the characters and themselves. They recognized the differences amongst those characters described in books, as well as the similarities between them regardless and despite the historical time periods. Within their communities, both in the classrooms and familial, there was a clear change in how they responded to each other, supported one another's goals, and respected each other's individuality. Ultimately, students found a new appreciation for our past as they recognized how history can shape the world we live in today. They understood the meaning of survival, hope, courage, and change within a socio-political context. As mentioned, Jocelyn often talked

about the importance of her education as a *weapon* to make a difference for her self and others (N. Mandela, speech, 2003). Beyond my role as a researcher, I am an educator at heart. Consequently, my goal for this study was to open my students' minds to a new future; one where they are empowered to change their life's outcomes so that they may create a road ahead that will inspire them to be change agents. I believe that powerful stories of our past and the individuals who collectively and courageously made a difference within the context of their lives allowed my students to see how one brave action alternatively and often unknowingly change who we are within the community and the world.

### **Shaping Perceptions and Conceptions through a Cyclical Model**

Talk was stimulated, moved, challenged, and recreated through many formats within the five detailed cognitive stages of responses. The progressive, developmental, and cyclical stages described, illustrated how students' thinking of literature was dynamic. These consistent changes throughout are molded by the dialogical space provided, one with multiple interpretations by each reader's individuality, experiences, and unique connections. As an initial stage (Stage 1: Building a Framework), students built a foundation, which guided their fundamental perceptions through basic retelling of explicit facts. Additionally, students' responses were supported by their schema as well as teacher modeling. Stage 2: Questioning Prior Knowledge in students' developing responses focused on questioning such perceptions through reflective practices about characters and plot. Student dialogue built on wonderings, assessing intentions, and developing judgments or quick opinions towards characters. Stage 3: Forming Conceptions was built on negotiating meaning through extended conversations and initiating literary roles. At this stage, students prolonged their discussions and used their literary roles to initiate socio-politically framed conversations in order to move their dialogue

further. In Stage 4: Developing Compassion students developed feelings towards characters through the emotions of sympathy and empathy, which consequently allowed a newfound appreciation for themselves as readers and individuals within the world, otherwise termed self-relevancy. Finally, Stage 5: Internalizing New Knowledge, students embodied new knowledge by building a strong sense of confidence for agency and social justice as a means to unravel complex texts. There is consistent evidence to conclude that critiquing and articulating broad connections to the world, recognizing the power of the individual is the foundation for social change.

## **Chapter 5: Summary, Implications, Limitations, and Future Research**

The results from this research are derived from a 13-week critical ethnographic case study in where I, as the researcher and teacher, chronicled the literary journey of six students who took part in literature circles during the spring semester of the 2014-2015 school year. As noted in previous chapters, the setting for this study took place in a fourth grade classroom in an urban elementary school located in the western region of the United States. The six participants, two girls and four boys, were selected randomly to participate. Each participant provided a permission slip signed by a parent or guardian (Appendix C). In order to set the context for the study, the literary curriculum, or reading instruction, consisted of establishing a community based on mutual respect and concern for enrichment and growth. This was done by reading novels during the fall semester in which students participated in literature circles and engaged in dialogical practices. Additionally, fourth grade English Language Arts standards were taught, including character analysis, theme, and important details, to give students literary strategies for discussion. Finally, a social studies unit focused on the American Revolution and Women's Rights Movement were the basis for introducing social justice education. These foundations and settings established the context for the spring semester as we engaged in reading five historical narratives with a socio-political purpose.

Learning about "famous people" in history leads to surface level understanding of who these individuals were and how aspects of their lives can be taught within the curriculum as disconnected concepts with no relevancy to our contemporary self. Through my observations and data collection, which included audio recordings, journal entry artifacts, anecdotal notes, and observer reflections, strong conceptions were formed when we envisioned ourselves within complex situations and saw how others have affected the world we live in today. Therefore, transitioning to the genre of historical fiction allowed students, in particular the participants, to

conceptualize that people who make a difference are not only famous historical figures, but also individuals we find within literature whom are created or embellished by the imagination of authors. An overarching goal of this study was for students to see a connection between themselves and the characters they meet through literature. Historical figures aren't born famous, but are cultivated by a series of events that shape them into individuals who envision a better world and work towards attaining that goal. Characters encountered by the participants within the various texts we read had a pertinent influence. Similar to the characters, the participants are the youngest siblings who were picked on by an older sibling, felt insecurities about how they looked, often felt ashamed about things they do and should have done, and more importantly among my students were individuals who persevered during critical and challenging times. Identifying with characters certainly developed their conceptions as literature became increasingly relevant within their own lives. The following sections chronicle how these conceptions evolved through time and were developed into five cyclical stages that illustrated the cognitive processes that evolved during reading and discussions.

### **Summary and Revisiting Research Questions**

The three research questions developed for this study were supported and based on the three theoretical frameworks outlined within Chapter 2. For example, sociocultural theory suggests that learners achieve the most within an educational setting when they are given the opportunity to construct their own knowledge (Dewey, 1938). More importantly, as students build knowledge cooperatively and constructively, norms are set, or cultural understanding is developed amongst the group where a common understanding enables a supporting community based on trust (Mathews & Cobb, 2005). This thinking is the foundation for the first question, which investigated how students negotiated cultural understanding within their small group literature circles. Next, transactional reader response theory advocates for the importance of the

reader as the interpreter of text and the role of reader's values, cultures, and experiences as influential factors towards interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1995). Since transactional reader response supports the notion that reading is a dynamic process and that readers can transact differently over time, the second research question investigated how students' perceptions and conceptions changed over time, encompassing the idea that literary responses vary, develop, and progress. Finally, critical literacy encourages the idea that learners must be empowered to be reflective and critical of all information presented to them, including those in literature and those they encounter within life (Vazquez, 2008). These concepts were the foundation for the second research question's subsidiary question, which investigated how such perceptions and conceptions are navigated and explored within local and global social justice contexts. In order to bridge these theories and ideas, the final question explored how perceptions and conceptions are shaped by reading cooperatively in a group setting and how ultimately the potential for critical thinking can stem from these interpretive and interactive reading communities. The following paragraphs further develop these guiding questions in order to summarize the overall findings of this study.

### **Research Question #1**

The first question, *how do students negotiate cultural understanding within their literary communities in a small group setting?*, is built on socio-cultural theory, in which students' culture, including the one negotiated within their classroom and small group, is a focal point of responding to literature as it defines the space created for such dialogue to occur. Bruner (1990) defines this phenomenon as an interpretive system, where meaning is socially situated and negotiated through diverse thoughts. As implied within the data and discussed in Chapter 4 in the section Our Story: Cultivating a Classroom Culture, students lacked a sense of competition

between each other and instead became supportive of each other's learning, responses, and reflections. Eun (2010) supports this concept and argues that students engaged in cooperative reading groups often share common goals. The supportive dialogical space created by readers provided opportunities for critical thought and questioning. In other words, a third space was created where new information was fostered, disputed, and validated (Gutierrez, 2008). In reference to the data results, Stage 5: Internalizing New Knowledge, this cognitive stage enabled students to create and solidify old and new conceptions, while using such conceptions to support their understanding of the socio-political implications of a just world. It is clear that students created a collective unit of supportive readers. Similarly, Fish's (1980) interpretive communities paralleled this phenomenon as readers employed a set of expectations, collectively. However, it is important to note that their individuality was still maintained. In other words, readers did not lose their identity within the collective group, but instead created a balance of both.

Reflecting on the results, specifically the transcriptions, the findings illustrate a change in patterns of communication among the participants. At first, Jocelyn was a vocal participant within the literary community, often initiating each discussion. Even before their daily reading, Jocelyn would take command of counting the number of pages and assuring each participant read an equal number of pages or paragraphs. However, over time the other participants began to increase their participation and the discussions became more equally distributed. Even Sierra, the most reluctant participant to share her opinion, made apparent efforts to speak during the third book, which occurred during the middle of the study. Part of the negotiated cultural understanding among the participants included a strong sense of respect for each other's opinion, voice, and participation within the dialogue. Students' voices exemplified an improved state of confidence and, one that resonated with a stable and secure sense for the value of reading. This



turning point took place as students were given literary roles to assist their discussions, which provided purpose and motivation. This observation expands Thien, Guise, and Sloan's (2011) study related to roles that support critical literacy classroom structures. I deviated from their research, in that the roles in my study were not assigned but rotated among participants to assist in enhancing their conversations when they believed it was appropriate.

## **Research Question #2**

The second research question, *by reading historical narratives, how do students' perceptions and conceptions about themselves, their community, and world change over time?*

The follow-up, or supporting question guiding the aforementioned question was, *how do students navigate and explore children and young adult literature on local and global social justice themes?* From the data described in Chapter 4, students' thinking changed over time and was represented in a cyclical diagram where old information and new information came together to alter students' current perceptions about themselves and the world. Within the five stages, which are progressive, evolving, and interchangeable, students' responses and reactions began with a framework focused on retelling and minimal analysis. Such initial perceptions were then based on what students perceived as an immediate reaction or intuitive thinking. Much of their conversations evolved through these immediate reactions that came from intuition and their connections with schema. Over time and with substantial exposure to social justice literature, this served as a tool to expand their thinking and understanding and, students eventually built their conceptions. This also enabled concrete thinking focused on combining broader cognitive ideas about literature and the world beyond them.

In response to the supporting question, students were able to make sense of their responses both on local and global levels. In particular, local level alludes to students' personal,

familial, and home experiences. Students often made reference to themselves, their relationship with their family members, and friends as a means of connecting with characters and their experiences. This created feelings of sympathy and empathy toward the characters and their experiences, that were challenging, devastating, and hateful, as well as those experiences that were empowering and life changing. On a global scale, students were immersed in historical narratives that dealt with issues of racism, hate, separation, segregation, and war, to name a few, which enabled them to embrace their current world and understand the active role they influence in changing it.

### **Research Question #3**

The final question asked, *how are such perceptions and conceptions shaped or influenced by collaborating with peers?* Students' initial perceptions were shaped by their schema, as well as their prior knowledge constructed through our social studies unit prior to the study.

Rosenblatt (1995) supports this idea, stating that readers preconceptions, or as I label initial perceptions within the data, can interfere with genuine understanding of the text. However, the data supports that these preconceptions, or initial perceptions provided a framework for their discussion and eventual developed conceptions, which were then created, negotiated, and questioned through peer collaboration. Often times, and as seen primarily in Stage 1: Building a Framework, students overly focused on retelling the story, which parallels Culler's (1997) concept, *about game*, an overt focus on what the story is *about*. Eventually and through consistent dialogue with peers, these perceptions and the focus on retelling was altered with concrete analysis, as detailed within the final stages.

The ability for students to simultaneously read and respond with peers was purposeful for the intent of this research. Giving students opportunities to immerse in immediate discussion

and then allowing dialogue to ensue and further develop within their journals fostered deeper and richer understanding beyond what could generally be reached when students read in solitude. Holland (1975) discusses the dialectical exchange of knowledge, in which students share their understanding publicly, alternately allowing their perceptions to change. It is certainly a unique experience to engage in literature with peers. As supported by research, readers approach a text with specific expectations, as Iser (1980) defends, stating that such expectations of readers are either confirmed, rejected, or reinterpreted. During the cognitive reading stages provided by the data, this notion was supported as students also created specific expectations of the characters and plot, contributing to their conversations and development for their initial perceptions as readers.

### **Implications of the Reading Process**

The following section discusses the implications of the reading process. Specifically, allowing students to collaborate with one another was foundational in building a structured reading process. This collaboration was grounded on validating the need for background knowledge, built from life experiences and classroom learning. Next, students developed a sense of collective accountability where they shared fluid roles that built a dialogical space for social critique and text analysis in a socio-politically based realm of talk. Finally historical narratives, which was a unique element of this research, was a valuable tool for understanding the past and valuing those moments that led to our present world. By doing so, we gift students a window of the past as a vehicle for broader conceptions about the world today and espoused with a clearer imagined outlook on the future.

### **Collaborative Reading Structures**

The reading process is an evolving experience that is personal and individualized by each reader. When supported with peer collaboration, the reading process becomes a dynamic

transaction among active readers. Supporting this rationale, Christ, Wang, and Chiu's (2015) eight week study of preschoolers exploring the effects of buddy reading on comprehension processes concluded that children who used collaborative interactions where both readers processed meaning together, were more likely able to make inferences and emotional responses. There is a definite advantage in providing students a dialogical space for responses and reactions. Similarly, the results of my study illustrated that new knowledge is cultivated when students are allowed to freely discuss a novel. Not only is it more enjoyable for those participating, but it also gives students a sense of ownership over their learning with peers. It is important to keep in mind that these six participants were together, reading, discussing, defining, and negotiating for 13 weeks. Traditionally, I believe in the power and importance of allowing students various opportunities to cultivate relationships with other students, providing them varied modes of working with others. Surprisingly, these six students only developed a deeper appreciation toward each other and never once complained about having to read in the same group. I believe it is important to keep students together in reading groups as this helps them cultivate and build a stronger reading community. Finally, what the final question suggests regarding the influential factors of cooperatively working with others, is that reading together enabled student's thinking, understanding, and vision of themselves and world. Students' overall conceptions evolved over time through the exposure of powerful historical narratives. Readers in this research study developed prerequisites for critical discovery and overall motivation to become individuals who want to make a difference for others, as exemplified in Stage 5: Internalizing New Knowledge. The notions of perseverance and challenges during difficult times were themes explored within their conversations, but became personalized for each reader. The cyclical progressive stages enabled this level of thinking and rationale for readers.

It is evident from Stage 1: Building a Framework that effective collaborative reading structures are founded on building basic background knowledge, either created by the students themselves or supported by the teacher's instruction. Barone and Barone (2012) suggest that an *investigator role* plays an important part in literature circles because it allows students to research topics outside of the text in order to build their background knowledge. Although this may be an effective tool, especially for those students who have access to a computer with internet at home, it may also be an impediment for those students who simply do not have this access. Since this study focused on students who were primarily from a lower socio-economic status, many of whom resided in weekly apartment rentals, it was important for me to provide students with the necessary background knowledge through prior whole group classroom instruction and as a mediator within small group literature circles. Consequently, the social studies unit preceding this study about the American Revolution and Women's Rights enabled students to widen their perspective on the concept of heroes and their contributions to social change. Regardless of how background knowledge is accessed, readers are curious beings and when exposed to new information through literature, their quest for answers continuously expands. As seen in Barone and Barone's (2012) study, students will actively engage in researching topics outside the classroom in order to provide answers to their wonderings. However, there are multiple modes of investigating and approaching individual student wonderings, including accessing personal experiences both lived within the home and learned within the classroom, as well as continuous exposure to conversation and dialogue which naturally contributes to enhanced knowledge. This study demonstrated that building background knowledge does not solely need to come from an *investigator role*, where students seek out

information to support their reading, but can and should be provided and supported by constructing this knowledge collectively as a group from classroom lessons and life experiences.

### **Collective Accountability**

The reading process, especially one that centers on readers coming together to engage with a text, creates a sense of collective accountability. Many literature circles participants are often assigned roles to support this sense of accountability, but these roles must be used with caution (Daniels, 2006). Daniels warns of overusing roles and that they should only be a steppingstone for students to eventually guide and cultivate their thinking and discussions (2006). Within this study, roles were used in the same format, as a means to help further students' discussions and engage them in socio-politically based talk by Stage 3: Forming Conceptions. Additionally, it was at this point in the cognitive stages where explicit reading skills were incorporated to further social justice conceptions. Paralleling this idea, Daniels (2006) notes that teachers are more commonly using specific reading strategies to help students guide their discussion in literature circles, such as questioning, inferring, visualizing, or determining important details. Therefore, as illustrated in Stage 3: Forming Conceptions, students incorporated specific reading skills to enhance their discussions and the meaning derived from their conversations.

This data suggested that when reading literature with underlying or explicit social justice themes, educators and researchers cannot expect for immediate results of new meaning, collaborative structures of critical analysis, or effective questioning for exploration of comprehension. It is a gradual process that takes time and commitment from teachers. As Daniels (2006) suggests:

We now realize that peer-led reading groups need much more than a good launching; they require constant coaching and training by a very active teacher who uses mini-lessons and debriefings to help kids hone skills like active listening, asking follow-up questions, disagreeing agreeably, dealing with “slackers” and more. (p. 13)

Further research must take into account the various pedagogical instructional elements that were in place. Within the classroom, and uniquely over the course of two school years, students formed a strong sense of community among each other, which included understanding, support, and empathy for and toward each other. Modeling, although limited, was presented and necessary for students to know what was expected for their interactions and responses with each other. Gradually, students developed a strong sense of ownership for themselves and their peers for dialogue and learning.

### **Empowering Historical Narrative through Literature Circles**

Sharing powerful narratives set in the past that portray historical events that in some way altered or enhanced the world we live in today is a vehicle that broadens students’ conceptions about our social world. Through the five books shared within this study, students read about issues of hate, racism, collective action, educational segregation, prejudice, and immigration. Not only did they build on their historical knowledge, they also used specific reading skills to enhance their construction of meaning such as determining important details, inferences, assessing character motivation, visualizing, and building academic vocabulary focused on content. Additionally, historical narratives offered students a variety of perspectives about our past. As McCall states, (2010), “Literature circles can be a valuable social studies teaching strategy because they can be used to bring out different perspectives on historical or current topics” (p. 153). Similar to this study, the books shared among students were told from a child’s

perspective, which enabled readers to concretely connect with the characters or find commonalities between their lives and those told from the story, regardless of how foreign the experiences may be or seemed. The efforts by students to create meaningful connections with historical texts not only enhanced their conceptual learning about the world, but empowered them to assume ownership of their conversations in democratic ways, valuing their own ideas while building empathy and respect for others (McCall, 2010).

Empowering historical narratives also created a space for students to utilize language within a social justice context. As was elaborated in Stage 3: Forming Conceptions, students were given specific roles meant to be rotated and used as a guide to develop their language and to frame their dialogue and thinking toward a critical stance. Lau's (2013) year long study of critical literacy practices with middle school English Language Learner (ELL) who were recent immigrants to Canada explored how to structure classrooms in order to facilitate and empower competent learners for building a sense of efficacy and social change. Students engaged in social justice texts that supported critical conversation and effective use of language for students to become self-reflective on social issues pertinent in texts and within their own experiences. As Lau (2013) suggests from her findings:

The study showed that with careful language scaffolds and guidance as well as classroom structures and conditions that facilitate open and critical discussions of real student concerns, beginning ELLs were quite capable of cognitively challenging literacy work. They started as passive language learners, reading and writing to find the "correct" answer. As the program progressed and as they became more involved in reading and writing about real life issues, they came to understand that literacy is about formulating, evaluating, and questioning opinions. It is about participation in a learning community



which they have the responsibility to shape and transform to make it a more just and equitable environment. (p. 25)

This lengthy, yet powerfully descriptive quote captures the importance of interpreting critical reading as a process that is in constant change and motion in order for readers to eventually reach the goal of critical awareness and critique for social change. Similar to my research, Lau (2013) suggests that students begin text interpretation by looking for the *correct* answers, which is consistent with Stage 1: Building a Framework as the readers in my study were overtly concerned with retelling the story for comprehension. Through consistent and repeated exposure, readers eventually became more aware of the power of interpretation, reflection, and questioning when given the appropriate texts and language practice to support critical literacy. Therefore, historical narratives as well as other forms of critical literacy texts are vehicles for powerful and transformative practices. Literature circles are one platform for readers to become critical language users and interpreters of texts and it is upon the teacher to facilitate and support these educational platforms.

### **Limitations**

As a teacher and researcher within this study, I had access to being an insider to the participants. It was advantageous to know the participants a school year before as their third grade teacher and continuing this role as their fourth grade teacher. I was aware of their likes, dislikes, abilities, and limitations. However, having this advanced knowledge and expertise may be a limitation to future researchers or practitioners who wish to use this research as a guide for their own pedagogical framework or curricular decisions. Simply selecting novels or texts based on what we, as teachers, think is suitable or appropriate may not align to what type of texts students need to genuinely engage critically in text. In addition, knowing my students a year in advance provided me with the opportunity to welcome their opinions on the selection of texts

that would be used, but can be a limitation to those researchers and educators who do not know their participants or students. Future researchers or practitioners must take into consideration how students may approach new text and how this may later affect their responses, meaning-making, and critical reactions.

The five books chosen for this study were particular to the personal interest of the students. These five books are not the only social justice novels available to students, and therefore this research presented data that was limited to the five books chosen for this study. Researchers must take into account how using other novels may alter or change how students respond to literature and what implications it may have on the five cyclical stages presented. Along with book selection, this study was also limited within its setting. The results discussed specifically focused on fourth grade reading practices and standards. This presents the question of how reading practices may change depending on the grade, especially for beginning readers in earlier grades. Although the stages discussed are limited to a fourth grade classroom, the current results for this study may not be comparable to an earlier grade setting. This does not mean that critical literacy and reading response structures are solely adequate or limited to intermediate elementary school students or that one must be able to read to think critically. Research has shown that critical literacy can be developed across grade levels, even with primary grade students (Stribling, 2014; Vazquez, 2008). Therefore, in order to foster critical literacy, classroom conditions, social structures, modeling, and guidance will be limited and consequently differ across grade levels.

### **Future Research**

There are many questions left from this study that can be developed further within future research. Journaling through open responses and literary letters exchanged among peers provided another space for students to react and discuss. Future research could delve into this

process in order to understand how written dialogue supports students' meaning making.

Another aspect focused on written responses is the idea of note taking during literature circles. Note taking through sticky notes or other formats is a way for students, as well as future researchers, to document to students thinking and can provide data to analyze supportive trends reading responses (Daniels, 2006). Therefore, an extending question may be, *how do students document their thinking during literature circles and how do various methods support or alter their discussions?* Moreover, reading together as an interactive process, is a means for student stories, both in the sense of the text being read and the stories students provide based on their lived experiences, to interpret their world, and construct meaning. Consequently, future research may ask, *what ways can students' lived experiences become a guide for interpretation?* As Short (2012) suggests, "This web of stories becomes our interpretive lens for new experiences so that story is our means of constructing the world- of world making" (p. 10). Researching this phenomenon can provide educators insight into the value of this approach to literature, and into the life-long impact it may have on students as consumers of information in our evolving and complex world. Literature is powerful and future research must continue to explore the various roles literature plays in the lives of our children. Future research must move beyond the exploration of literature as a means to teach a specific standard, and strongly advocate literature as a vehicle for social advocacy, critical conscious, and simply understanding the world for a transformative experience. I hope that this research and its findings welcome, encourage, and excite future researchers to explore the power of critical literacy and the emotional, political, and intellectual power it can evoke on our self.

## Appendix A: Initial Coding and Themes

Stage	Specific Themes Initially Coded	Condensed Ideas	Final Stage Label
Stage 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of leaders from social studies</li> <li>• Exposed to idea that <i>people who make a change to improve the lives of others are considered leaders of change</i></li> <li>• Students build a framework</li> <li>• Readers have expectations of characters</li> <li>• Literal interpretation/Summary</li> <li>• Recognition of injustice and how historically individuals have taken chances to change situations</li> <li>• Initial teacher modeling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forming initial perceptions through retelling</li> <li>• Accessed schema to support perceptions</li> <li>• Supporting dialogue through teacher modeling and mediating discussions</li> </ul>	Building a Framework
Stage 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wonderings/Questions</li> <li>• Choosing images that make an impression</li> <li>• Questioning Character intentions through questioning Character/Actions/Motives</li> <li>• Character intentions through questioning</li> <li>• Negotiate causes to support forming and evolving perceptions</li> <li>• Judge/Give opinion</li> <li>• Active role in posing questions to others about their own perceptions</li> <li>• Questioning for rightfulness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wondering as a means for clarification</li> <li>• Interrogating characters in the plot</li> <li>• Generating judgments and opinions toward characters</li> </ul>	Questioning Prior Knowledge
Stage 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of irony in injustice</li> <li>• Seeking out unfairness within text</li> <li>• Representation of stereotypes within dialogue</li> <li>• Negotiation of meaning</li> <li>• Use of role cards</li> <li>• Application of skills for a wider/complex understanding</li> <li>• Reader's begin to look at other possibilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using literature circle roles as conversational guides</li> <li>• Generating socio-politically based conversations</li> <li>• Applying specific reading skills to further develop social justice conceptions</li> </ul>	Forming Conceptions

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended conversations</li> <li>• Application of social justice-themed vocabulary</li> <li>• Negotiation of meaning through extended conversations</li> <li>• Social justice topics discussed</li> </ul>		
Stage 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People change during times of difficulty</li> <li>• Internalize character's feelings</li> <li>• Appreciation of character actions</li> <li>• Negotiation of character motivation through tone</li> <li>• Relating to characters</li> <li>• Making connections with characters in order to understand their actions</li> <li>• Compassion toward character's past action in plot</li> <li>• Sympathy leads to questioning which is needed to form conceptions</li> <li>• Character traits- empathizing with character emotions</li> <li>• Perceptions of characters change as they develop throughout a novel and encounter, resolve, and survive difficult moments.</li> <li>• Identify and Empathize with characters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exhibiting empathy as catalyst for changed perceptions</li> <li>• Demonstrating sympathy through personal connections</li> <li>• Recognizing self-relevancy for social change</li> </ul>	Developing Compassion
Stage 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internalize life ideas</li> <li>• Seeking to understand other text from independent reading</li> <li>• Optimism: Acceptance that life events can change individuals</li> <li>• Change, alternative possibilities, comparison</li> <li>• Character lessons change the plot</li> <li>• Integration of one's actions leads to social change</li> <li>• Theme of survival</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocating sense of social change</li> <li>• Developing optimism for change and just society</li> </ul>	Internalizing New Knowledge

## Appendix B: Role Cards

### Equality/Inequality Investigator

- Looks for parts in the plot that show Equality and Fairness OR Inequality and Unfairness. Investigate characters' actions towards other characters.



### Sympathy Seeker

- Looks for how characters think about other characters during difficult times.
- Ask yourself, “Does this character feel bad for the other character?”
- How do characters show feelings towards each other.



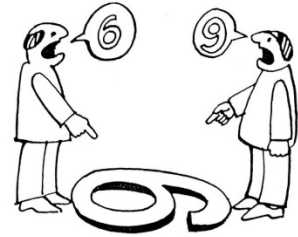
### Problem Poser

- Looks for problems or conflicts for which there are no easy answers or solutions.
- What problems do characters face?



## Perspective Taker

- Represents perspectives of characters whose actions are confusing.
- Describe another character's point of view.
- How do their point of view differ from other characters?



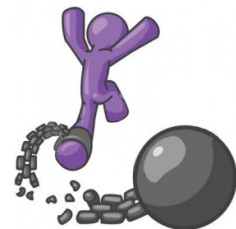
## Stereotype Tracker

- Looks for ways in which other characters stereotype others or judges them.
- Stereotypes are assumptions made about other people without knowing them.
- Find ways this can be fixed or solved.



## Freedom Fighter Finder

- Looks for characters who fight for freedom and independence.
- What choices or actions do characters take in order to achieve freedom?





## **Appendix C: Parent Permission Form**

### **PARENT PERMISSION FORM**

**Department of Teaching and Learning**

---

**TITLE OF STUDY: Literacy and Social Justice: Understanding Student Perceptions and Conceptions about Literature**

**INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Chyllis Scott and Jennifer Crosthwaite**

**CONTACT PHONE NUMBER: Dr. Chyllis Scott- (702) 895-2961, Jennifer Crosthwaite- (310) 908-9095**

---

#### **Purpose of the Study**

Your child is invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to promote skills and language learning and elicit genuine themes that are of interest and meaningful to students within literature. This study will focus on the various purposes for using children's literature as a means for creating and maintaining a democratic education focused on preparing students to meet the demands of our changing, interconnected, and globalized world. There are valuable books with various social justice issues and themes- these books can be presented to students in the classroom to motivate connections, questions, and the creation of agency for change.

#### **Participants**

Your child is being asked to participate in the study because they are enrolled in Ms. Crosthwaite's class for the 2014-2015 academic school year. As part of the class, they will participate in various reading activities and novel studies that are supported by Nevada's Common Core State Standard requirements.

#### **Procedures**

If you allow your child to volunteer to participate in this study, your child will be asked to do the following: Engage in literature circles in where they will read and discuss various novels, write daily in their journals, and discuss novels as a whole group, while applying Nevada's Common Core State Standards to improve comprehension. The aforementioned activities are part of the research and will be used as a source of data, although they will also be part of the regular classroom practices. These discussions will be audio and video recorded for transcription and analysis.



### **Benefits of Participation**

There *may* be direct benefits to your child as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn how students engage with their peers to discuss novels, while understanding how their perceptions and conceptions about the world change by reading historical narratives. Additionally, we hope to learn how students meaning-making process is influenced by cooperatively working with peers.

### **Risks of Participation**

There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. *The minimal risk that may be involved is that some students may find the text difficult as these selected texts are at grade level reading or above. However, although these texts may be above grade level, students will be guided through these reading with other capable peers. Additionally, the teacher's role will be to assist students' comprehension during the whole group discussions to help clarify any plot or comprehension misunderstandings. The reading, although a grade level higher, are part of the classroom curriculum, regardless of the research. It is understandable, and will be taken into account, if some students find the vocabulary and complexity of text difficult.*

### **Cost /Compensation**

There *will not* be financial costs to you to participate in this study. The study will take 90 minutes of your child's time per day, which is the amount of instruction time required by the Clark County School District. Your child *will not* be compensated for their time.

### **Contact Information**

If you or your child have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Jennifer Crosthwaite at **310-908-9095**. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact **the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794, toll free at 877-895-2794, or via email at IRB@unlv.edu.**

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. Your child may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university. You or your child is encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

### **Confidentiality**

All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link your child to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded.

### **Participant Consent:**

I have read the above information and agree to allow my child to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

---

Signature of Parent

---

Child's Name (Please print)

---

Parent Name (Please Print)

---

Date

***Participant Note: Please do not sign this document if the Approval Stamp is missing or is expired.***

I agree to allow my child to be audio or video taped for the purpose of this research study.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

---

## References

- Avci, S., & Yüksel, A. (2011). Cognitive and affective contributions of the literature circles method on the acquisition of reading habits and comprehension skills in primary level students. *Educational Science: Theory and Practice, 11*(3), 1295-1300.
- Banks, C. A. (2007). Teaching for tolerance and understanding during the Japanese internment: Lessons for educators today. *Educational Practice, 40*(1), 3-6.
- Banks, J. (2003). Teaching literacy for social justice and global citizenship. *Language Arts, 81*(1), 18-19.
- Barone, D., & Barone, R. (2012). Building background knowledge within literature circles. *Voices from the Middle 20*(1), 10-15.
- Batchelor, K. (2012). The “Us” in discuss: Grouping in literature circles. *Voices from the Middle, 20*(1), 27-34.
- Beltramo, J. L., & Stillman, J. (2015). Why should students want to do a close reading? *Voices from the Middle, (22)*4, 9-14.
- Bersh, L. C. (2013). The curricular value of teaching about immigration through picture book thematic text sets. *The Social Studies, 104*(2), 47-56.
- Bomer, R., & Bomer, K. (2001). *For a better world: Reading and writing for social action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Brandt, D. (2001). *Literacy in American lives*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1977). *The process of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Burke, A., & Peterson, S. (2007). A multidisciplinary approach to literacy through picture books and drama. *English Journal*, 96(3), 74-79.
- Cai, M. (2008). Transactional theory and the study of multicultural literature. *Language Arts*, (85)3, 212-220.
- Campano, G., & Damico, J. S. (2007). Doing the work of social theorists: Children enacting E\epistemic privilege as literacy learner and teachers. In M.V. Blackburn and C.T. Clark (Eds.), *Literacy research for political action and social change* (219-233). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Carspecken, P. (1996). *Critical ethnography in educational research: A theoretical and practical guide*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Certo, J., Moxley, K., Reffitt, K., & Miller, J. A. (2010). I learned how to talk about a book: Children's perceptions of literature circles across grade and ability levels. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 49(3), 243-263.
- Cherland, M., & Harper, H. (2007). *Advocacy research in literacy education: Seeking higher ground*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Ching, S. (2005). Multicultural children's literature as an instrument of power. *Language Arts*, 83(2), 128-136.
- Christ, T., Wang, C. X., & Chiu, M. (2015). Emergent readers' social interaction styles and their comprehension processes during buddy reading. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 54(1), 45-66.
- Clark, L. (2006). Power through voicing others: Girls' positioning of boys in literature circle discussions. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 38(1), 53-79.
- Comber, B. (2015). Critical literacy and social justice. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*,

58(5) 362-367.

Creswell, J. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Creswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Culler, J. (1997). *Literary theory: A very short introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Culler, J. (1980). Literary Competence. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader- response: From formalism to post-structuralism criticism* (pp.101-117). Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.

Cunningham, D. L. (2009). An empirical framework for understanding how teachers conceptualize and cultivate historical empathy in students. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 41*(5), 679-709.

Damber, U. (2011). Literature and empowerment: A study of multicultural grade three classes overachieving in reading. *U.S.-China Education Review, A*(1), 88-102.

Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Daniels, H. (2006). What's the next big thing with literature circles? *Voices from the Middle 13*(4), 101-115.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Elliott-Johns, S. E., & Puig, E. A. (2015). Collaborative read-alouds: Engaging middle school students in thoughtful reading. *Voices from the Middle, 22*(4), 26-30.

Eun, B. (2010). From learning to development: A sociocultural approach to instruction.

- Cambridge Journal of Education*, 40(4), 401-418.
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*.  
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Frank, C. (1999). *Ethnographic eyes: A teacher's guide to classroom observation*.  
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Freeman, Y. (1988). The California Reading Initiative: Revolution or merely revision? *The New Advocate*, 1(4), 241-249.
- Freeman, D., Freeman, Y., & Fennacy, J. (1993). California's reading revolution: A review and analysis. *The New Advocate*, 6(1), 41-60.
- Friere, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed (30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition)*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Wesport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gay, L., Mills, G., & Airasian, P. (2009). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications (9<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Gibson, W. (1980). Authors, speakers, readers, and mock readers. In J. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response: From formalism to post-structuralism criticism* (pp. 1-6). Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Glesne, C. (2016). *Becoming qualitative research: An introduction (5<sup>th</sup> ed.)* Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Goodman, K., Bridges, L., & Goodman, Y. (1991). *The whole language catalog*. Santa Rose,

- CA: American School Publishers.
- Gutierrez, K. (2004). Literacy as laminated activity: Rethinking literacy for English learners. In J. Worthy, B. Maloch, J.V. Hoffman, D.L. Challert and C.M. Fairbanks (Eds.), *53<sup>rd</sup> Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp.101-114). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.
- Gutierrez, K. (2006). *Culture Matters: Rethinking education equity*. New York, NY: Carnegie Foundation.
- Gutierrez, K. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43(2), 148-164.
- Gutierrez, K., & Correa-Chavez, M. (2006). What to do about culture? *Lifelong Learning in Europe*, 3, 152-159.
- Haisty, M. M., & Fain, J. G. (2014). Emergent understandings: Multilingual fourth grade students generating close readings and multimodal responses to global and informational texts. *Penn GSE Perspective on Urban Education*, 11(2), 10-20.
- Hoge, J. D. (2003). *Teaching history for citizenship in the elementary school*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
- Holland, N. (1975). *The dynamics of literary responses*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Holland, N. (1976). Transactive criticism: Re-creation through identity. *Criticism*, 18(4), 334-352.
- Holland, N. (1980). Unity identity text self. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader- response: From formalism to post-structuralism criticism* (pp. 118-133). Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.

- Iser, W. (1980). The reading process: A phenomenological approach. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader- response: From formalism to post-structuralism criticism* (pp. 50-69). Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Janks, H. (2012). The importance of critical literacy. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 11(1), 150-163.
- Jennings, K. A., Rule, A. C., & Vander Zanden, S. M., (2014). Fifth graders' enjoyment, interest, and comprehension of graphic novels compared to heavily-illustrated and traditional novels. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 6(2), 257-274.
- Jennings, L. B. (2010). Challenges and possibilities of Holocaust education and critical citizenship: An ethnographic study of a fifth-grade bilingual class revisited. *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Comparative Education*, 40(1), 35-56.
- Johnson, N., & Giorgis, C. (2007). *The wonder of it all: When literature and literacy intersect*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Jordan, S. D. (2004). Educating without overwhelming: Authorial strategies in children's Holocaust literature. *Children's Literature in Education*, 35(3), 199-218.
- Joseph, G., & Duncan, G. (2007). Language, Literacy, and Love: The Denial and Restoration of Coevalness at an Urban Elementary School. In M.V. Blackburn and C.T. Clark (Eds.), *Literacy research for political action and social change* (pp. 199-218). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Karolides, N. (1996). *Reader response in elementary classrooms: Quest and discovery*. New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Karolides, N. (2005). Scholar, educator, advocate: The range and richness of Rosenblatt. *Voices from the Middle*, 12(3), 59-62.



- Karolides, N., & Rosenblatt, L. (1999). Theory and practice: An interview with Louise M. Rosenblatt. *Language Arts*, 77(2), 158-170.
- Kelley, J. E. (2008). Harmony, empathy, loyalty, and patience in Japanese children's literature. *Social Studies*, 99(2), 61-70.
- Kolczynski, R. (1989). Reading leads to writing. In J.W. Stewig and S.L. Sebesta (Eds.), *Using literature in the elementary classroom* (pp. 75- 90). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Kuo, J. (2009). Critical literacy and a picture-book-based dialogue activity in Taiwan. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 10 (4), 483-94.
- Laman, T. T. (2006). Changing our minds/changing the world: The power of a question. *Language Arts*, 83(3), 203-214.
- Larson, J. (2009). New literacy studies: Literacy learning through a sociocultural lens. In C. Compton-Lilly (Ed.), *Breaking the Silence: Recognizing the Social and Cultural Resources Students Bring to the Classroom* (pp.13-23). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Lau, S. M. (2013). A study of critical literacy work with beginning English language learners: A integrated approach. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 10(1), 1-30.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lui, M., Robles, B., Leondar-Wright, B., Brewer, R., and Adamson, R. (2006). *The color of wealth: The story behind the U.S. racial wealth divide*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Luke, A., & Woods, A. (2009). Critical literacies in school: A primer. *Voices from the Middle*, 17(2), 9-18.

- Madison, D. S. (2012). *Critical ethnography: Methods, ethics, and performance* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2011). *Designing qualitative research* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Matthews, M. & Cobb, M. (2005). Broadening the interpretive lens: Considering individual development along with sociocultural views of learning to understand young children's interactions during socially mediated literacy event, *Journal of Literacy Research* (37)3, 325-364.
- McCall, A. L. (2010). Teaching powerful social studies idea through literature circles. *The Social Studies*, 101, 152-159.
- Md-Yunus, S. (2012). For parents particularly: Immigrant parents: How to help your children succeed in school. *Childhood Education*, (85)4, 315-318,
- Meacham, S. (2001). Vygotsky and the blue: Re-reading cultural connections and conceptual development. *Theory into Practice*, 40(3), 190-197.
- Meredith, K., Steele, J., & Kikusova, S. (2001). Critical issues: Democracy, self, literacy, and the value of global conversation. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 33(1), 169-202.
- Miele, D. B., & Wigfield, A. (2014). Quantitative and qualitative relations between motivation and critical-analytic thinking. *Educational psychology review*, 26(4), 519-541.
- Nash, M. (1995). "Leading from behind": Dialogue response journals. In N.L. Roser & M.G. Martinez (Eds.), *Book talk and beyond* (pp. 217-225). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Nevada School Performance Framework. (2012-2013). *School Performance Report*. Retrieved from:

[http://tc.ccsd.net/cunningham/documents/201213\\_Nevada\\_School\\_Performance\\_Framework.pdf](http://tc.ccsd.net/cunningham/documents/201213_Nevada_School_Performance_Framework.pdf)

Nieto, S. (2010). *The light in their eyes: Creating multicultural learning communities*. New York NY: Teachers College Press.

Nieto, S. (2013). Language, literacy, and culture: Aha! Moments in personal and sociopolitical understanding. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*[Online], 9(1), 8-20.

Retrieved from: [http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Language\\_Literacyculture.pdf](http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Language_Literacyculture.pdf)

Nieto, S. & Bode, P. (2012). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

O'Brien, J. (2001). I knew that already: How children's literature limit inquiry. In S. Baron & B. Comber (Eds.), *Critiquing Whole Language and Classroom Inquiry*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Osborne, K. (2010). Political education and citizenship: Teaching for civic engagement.

*Education Canada*, 45(1), 13-16. Retrieved from:

<http://www.ceaace.ca/sites/default/files/EdCan-2005-v45-n1-Osborne.pdf>

Pearman II, F. A. (2014). The political nuances of narratives and an urban educator's response. *Democracy & Education*, 22(1), 1-8.

Poza, L., Brooks, M. D., & Valdés, G. (2014). Entre familia: Immigrant parents' strategies for involvement in children's schooling. *School Community Journal*, 24(1), 119-148.

Pradl, G. (1996). *Literature for democracy: Reading as a social act*. Portsmouth, NH:

- Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc.
- Probst, R. (1990). Literature as exploration in the classroom. In L. M. Rosenblatt, E. J. Farrell, & J. R. Squire (Eds.), *Transactions in Literature: A fifty-year perspective*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Ralfe, E. (2009). Policy: Powerful or pointless? An exploration of the role of critical literacy in challenging and changing gender stereotypes. *Language of Learning Journal*, 37, 305-321.
- Raphael, T., & McMahon, S. (1994). Book club: An alternative framework for reading instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 48(2), 102-116.
- Raphael, T., Goatley, V., McMahon, S., & Woodman, D. (1995). Promoting meaningful conversations in student book clubs. In N.L. Roser & M.G. Martinez (Eds.), *Book talk and beyond* (pp. 66-79). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Riley, K. (2015). Enacting critical literacy in English classrooms: How a teacher learning community supported critical inquiry. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 58(5), 417-425.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1995) *Literature as exploration* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, NY: The Modern Language Association.
- Roser, N. & Martinez, M. (1995). *Book talk and beyond: Children and teachers respond to literature*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, Inc.
- Sayer, P. (2008). Demystifying language mixing: Spanglish in school. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 7(2), 94-112.
- Serafini, F., & Giorgis, C. (2003). *Reading aloud and beyond: Fostering the intellectual life with older readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Shannon, P. (1989). *Broken promises: Reading instruction in twentieth-century America*.  
Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc.
- Shannon, P. (2002). Critical literacy in everyday life. *Language Arts*, 79(5), 415-424.
- Short, K. G. (2012). Story as world making. *Voices from the Middle* 90(1), 9-17.
- Sipe, L.R. (1999). Children's response to literature: Author, text, reader, context. *Theory into Practice*, 38(3), 120-129.
- Sloan, G. (2002). Reader response in perspective. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 28(1), 22-30.
- Smith, N. B. (2002). *American reading instruction*. Newark, DE: International  
Reading Association.
- Spradley, J. (1980). *Participant observation*. Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart, Winston.
- Spring, J. (2008). *Wheels in the head: Educational philosophies of authority, freedom, and culture from Confucianism to human rights*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Stribling, S. M. (2014). Creating a critical literacy milieu in a kindergarten classrooms. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 10(1), 45-64. Retrieved  
From: <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu>.
- Thein, A., Guise, M., & Sloan, D. (2011). Problematizing literature circles as forums for discussion of multicultural and political texts. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 55(1), 15-24.
- U.S. Department of Education (2014). Reading first. Retrieved from:  
<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/index.html>
- Vasquez, V. (2008). *Negotiating critical literacies with young children*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Wilson, L. (1997). Defining whole language in a postmodern age. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 20(2), 26-32.
- Wiseman, A. (2011). Interactive read alouds: Teachers and students constructing knowledge and literacy together. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 38, 431-438.
- Worthy, J., Chamberlain, K., Peterson, K., Sharp, C., & Shih, P. (2012). The importance of read-aloud and dialogue in an era of narrowed curriculum: An examination of literature discussions in a second-grade classroom. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 51, 308-322.

## Curriculum Vitae

**Jennifer Crosthwaite**

1539 Little Dove Ct. • Henderson, NV 89014

Phone: 310-908-9095 • E-Mail: [crosthw2@unlv.nevada.edu](mailto:crosthw2@unlv.nevada.edu)

### Education

Ph.D. (Curriculum and Instruction-Literacy), University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Expected Fall 2015

M.Ed. (Teaching Multiple Subjects), University of Southern California, 2007

B.A. (Political Science and Sociology), University of California, Los Angeles, 2005

### Experience

- Intuitive Thinking in K-3 Mathematics MSP Grant 2015
- Review Board for Georgia Journal of Reading 2012-Present
- Nevada Cooperative Teaching Improvement Program (NeCoTIP) 2011-2013
- Southern Nevada Writing Project 2012
- Urban Teacher Mentoring Program 2010

### Presentations

- National Council of Teachers of English Convention, *The Power of Questions: Picture Books and Responding about the World* November 2013
- National Council of Teachers of English Convention, *Global Connections are our Future: Encouraging Intercultural Understanding through International Children's and Adolescent Literature* November 2013
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Convention, *Discovering Geometric Concepts through Children's Literature* April 2013
- International Research Association Convention, *Awakens with Tears on Her Cheeks: Teaching Global Young Adult Literature Through a Cosmopolitan Lens* May 2012

### Publications

- Smith, A., Crosthwaite, J. & Clark, C. (2014). Institutional racism. In S. Thompson (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of diversity and social justice: Volume 2* (pp. 413-6)
- Smith, A., Crosthwaite, J. & Clark, C. (2014). White Privilege. In S. Thompson (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of diversity and social justice: Volume 2* (pp. 743-4)

### **Teaching Experience**

Clark County School District, Cynthia Cunningham Elementary School, Third grade teacher, Grade level chair	2015-2016
Clark County School District, Cynthia Cunningham Elementary School, Fourth grade teacher	2014-2015
Clark County School District, Cynthia Cunningham Elementary School, Third grade teacher.	2007-2014
Los Angeles Unified School District, Science Center School, First grade student teacher.	2007

### **Professional Development**

Performance Zone 7, Reading Rangers WIPR Instruction, Certified Trainer	2015
National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Convention	2013
National Council of Teachers of English Convention	2012
International Reading Association Convention	2012
Kagan Professional Development, National Conference	2011
Staff Development for Educators, National Conference for Differentiated Instruction	2010
Write from the Beginning, Certified Trainer	2010
National Council on Education Black Children Convention	2010

### **Affiliations/Memberships**

International Reading Association	2012
Children's Literature Assembly	2012
National Council of Teachers of Mathematics	2012

### **Interests**

Reader response theory  
 Critical literacy within children's literature  
 Integrating Common Core State Standards for mathematics with children's literature to provide a more rigorous background and context for application



**Awards and Honors**

Rudolf and Hazel Hatton Endowed Scholarship	2006
Joseph T. Parker Scholarship	2006
Gates Millennium Scholar- Scholarship recipient	2001- 2007
UCLA College of Letters and Science Honors Program	2004- 2005
UCLA Chancellor's Student Service Award	2005

**Grants**

Bonnie Campbell Hill Literacy Leadership Award	2012
World of Words Literacy Grant	2012