

2019

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Recommended Citation

Pollard, Barbara A.. "Utilizing a Critical Literacy Framework to Discuss Issues of Power and Privilege with Elementary Students." *Intersections: Critical Issues in Education* 3, 2 (2019).

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Utilizing a Critical Literacy Framework to Discuss Issues of Power and Privilege with Elementary Students

Barbara Pollard, *University of Windsor*

Abstract

This action research study utilizes a critical literacy framework to bring issues of privilege and power into critical dialogue with elementary students. The study is based on the idea that disadvantaged groups can eventually agitate for societal change if they are prompted to begin to critically question systemic inequalities from a young age. Thus, instead of allowing dominant culture to dictate unfair norms and practices by simply abiding to the status quo, this study suggests that elementary teachers should aim to be the vehicle for transformational change by implementing pedagogy that encourages students to think deeply and critically. Over time, the hope is that students will become active civic agents who question issues of power and privilege and become proponents of change. The results in this study support the premise that a critical literacy can prompt low-income and working-class students to become more aware of the implications of unequal access to power and privilege. In addition, critical literacy practice can enable students to be more aware of the power of their own voice, words, and actions.

Keywords: *Critical literacy, power, privilege, elementary students*

Introduction

Sociologists, economists, and historians have long been skeptical of the popular belief that schools have the power to counterbalance the structural inequities and the ability to break the cycle of inter-generational working class and lower-class status (Anyon, 2005; Katz, 1995; Rothstein, 2004). If there is to be any hope for change, the societal myth of social mobility for all, which ignores structural understandings of social class, must be brought to the teacher's and the student's critical awareness (Caro, 2009; Martin, 2008). Unfortunately, current educational contexts, as well as provincial and federal policies do not seem to acknowledge, nor attempt to address, how the broader socio-political contexts implicate student achievement (Levin, 2006; Rogers, Mosley, & Folkes, 2009).

Critical literacy, as a theoretical framework and pedagogical practice, explicitly recognizes the political nature of schools and the role of power and privilege in perpetuating inequitable structures and practices (Janks, 2009; Jewett, 2007; Shor, 1999). It teaches students to realize how their lives are shaped and affected by these larger social systems. By explicitly exposing students to the benefits of critical literacy, they can begin to understand how unquestioned and legitimized power differentials shape the multitude of

information that they are exposed to daily (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Furthermore, critical literacy also introduces new ways of presenting the curriculum which connects school experiences with real life experiences that occur outside of the classroom (Shor, 1999). Ultimately, the development of critical literacy skills may enable the students to question the existence and effects of power and privilege both inside and outside of the school context.

Inherent in critical literacy is an explicit and implicit instructional style that prompts students to explore the disparities that are constructed and re-constructed through class, race, and gender relations (Shor, 1999). Becoming critically literate means that students have mastered the ability to read and critique messages in a wide variety of texts in order to better understand whose knowledge is being privileged (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006). For example, by reflecting on a *series of questions*—including, “How is the understanding of the text influenced by your background?”—financially disadvantaged students may explicitly come to recognize that dominant texts often fail to account for their personal background, histories, and experiences. Through this process, students will ideally understand that white, middle class, dominant values are overemphasized in literature and media texts without being systematically questioned or critically examined (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Developing a critical stance will help students to critique and form their own judgments about this reality and begin to see the benefits and necessity of acknowledging and legitimizing multiple cultural perspectives.

Essentially, teachers who endorse critical literacy demonstrate how to evaluate the function language plays in the social construction of the self (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006). In other words, the practice of critical literacy prompts students to consider how their self-image and identity is shaped by society’s mainstream ideological language. For example, some working-class students may feel ashamed when they self-identify as belonging to the working class. Students begin to see that working-class families and low-income groups have been ideologically *positioned* as being *less than* that of middle and upper class groups. At this point, children can critically question the validity of this problematic ideological positioning and reflect on how they may have internalized negative stereotypes associated with the word “poor.”

When students become critically literate, they come to understand the roles they were supposedly assigned to play in the world (e.g., a working-class person takes orders), critically evaluate and make sense of these narrow and constraining roles, and begin to discover personal ways of resistance and becoming agents of change (Shor, 1999).

Study Objective

This qualitative, participatory action research study was guided by the overarching research question, *How do fourth and fifth grade students respond to critical literacy pedagogy?* During this study, critical literacy instructional approaches were facilitated as a means to prompt a group of elementary students to actively examine dominant ideologies, especially those related to social class. This study also sought out to answer the following questions: a.) How will the process of a critical literacy program enable students to understand how language shapes identity? b.) How will the process of a critical literacy program enable students to understand how language constructs cultural discourse? c.) How will the process of a critical literacy program enable students to understand how language supports or disrupts the status quo? d.) How will the process of a critical literacy program engage students to reflect on multiple viewpoints and contradictory perspectives? e.) How

will the process of a critical literacy program encourage students to take social action in an attempt to resist or change existing discourses? These questions were taken from an existing critical literacy research framework developed by Lewison, Van Sluys, and Flint, (2006).

Methodology

Context and Participants

The study took place in an elementary school that was designated as a “high needs” school by the affiliated school board and situated within a low-income neighborhood. Although this community has a rather condensed population of low-income and working-class families, it reflects the many pockets of financially disadvantaged neighborhoods that are nestled throughout this urban Canadian city. With one of the highest unemployment rates across all of Canada, this city also has a high concentration of immigrants from a range of cultural backgrounds. Thus, this fourth/fifth grade classroom consisted of 27 children with rich and culturally diverse backgrounds (20 white students, 5 African-American students, and 2 newly immigrated Muslim students). Many of these students were living below the poverty line and two of the students were not currently living in their own home; rather, they lived with extended family members. One of the students shared a story about her brother being shot by a gang member, while another student confided that he often played a game called “survivor” with his extended live-in family members; this game entailed salvaging enough food from the community to last the weekend. It is paramount to note these children were very polite, intelligent, and inquisitive and seemed to possess a maturity beyond their biological age. These two students seemed to be especially warm and receptive to my involvement in this classroom, which was not always the case with some of the other students.

As mentioned by the teacher, and observed by me, there were many strong and spirited personalities in this group. The teacher had found that sometimes this created a great classroom dynamic, and at other times it had led to many conflicts throughout the school year within the classroom and the school yard. Getting along and treating each other properly has been an emphasized goal and focus for many of the students. In fact, the school board’s behavioral specialist had visited the class for 45 minutes each week to discuss the “character building traits” that revolved around establishing positive friendships. The classroom teacher, as well as the various teaching assistants that came in and out of the classroom on a regular basis, was a compassionate and high quality educator who strived to keep the students on task with their academic pursuits. The students were constantly reminded of the expectations and rules for listening and working, and had, for the most part, uniformly adapted to these expectations.

A very important part of the school community, was the *Back-on-Track* room. When students were uncooperative with the classroom and school rules, they were sent to *Back-on-Track* to deal with the issues at hand. When I arrived in the classroom each morning to work with the students, at least one student had usually been sent to the *Back-on-Track* room for something that occurred the day before. Physical fighting, verbal assaults, and uncooperative work habits were the main reasons why students were sent to *Back-on-Track*. There were only two instances in which a student was sent to *Back-on-Track* while I was working with the class. Therefore, even though I did not observe the many circumstances that justified a *back-on-track* visit, this program seemed like a highly-used space.

Researcher's Positionality

Influencing my perspective, research, and writing is my own positionality as a white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual woman who has worked extensively in the area of equity-based teaching and learning, theory, and practice. I have experienced privileges afforded by factors such as class, race, sexuality, and physical ability; however, as an immigrant ELL (English Language Learning) female student from Poland, raised in an impoverished, working-class community, I have also experienced forms of discrimination based on my gender, ethnicity, and social class. The interconnected and overlapping ways in which these complex factors have both helped and hindered my life were largely obscured prior to entering graduate school almost a decade ago. It was only after entering graduate school that I began to develop a mature critical consciousness and acquire a language of critique, which together helped me better understand how oppressive social relations work. Thus, my professional interest in social justice research and teaching originates from a personal history with gender and class inequities, and eventually led me to critical literacy and critical pedagogy to promote social change.

Study Design

Using Stinger's (1999a) Participatory Action Research Model (PAR) and Action Research Interacting Spiral Model (1999b) as a framework, my aim as researcher was to facilitate a critical literacy program that positioned the student-participants as critical inquirers of language; in so doing, I sought to guide students in the analysis of textual and social practices. Over a six-week period, I taught a critical literacy program every day of the school week; thus, I visited the classroom each day and worked directly with the students from 9:00am until 10:30am, which made up their daily 90-minute Language Arts block. I also conducted focus group interviews, which took place shortly after each Language Arts period.

The data analysis drew upon directed content analysis as described by Mayring (2000), as well as Lewison, Van Sluys, and Flint's (2006) critical literacy framework (see Appendix A). In other words, this study used a prior existing theoretical framework that depicted which phenomena should be coded and categorized within the context of implementing a critical literacy practice. The goal of the data analysis was to identify and categorize all instances of a particular phenomenon by reading over the focus group transcripts and then highlighting and categorizing passages, using the predetermined codes of the existing critical literacy framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006). When analyzing the data, I used both critical and social constructionist lenses to draw conclusions. In using a social constructionist theoretical framework to understand the experiences of students immersed in a critical literacy program, the data analysis was situated on the assumption that meaning is socially constructed, historically contingent, and contextually dependent (Britzman, 2003). Meanwhile, the critical lens focused on the issues of power and privilege, and emphasized that traditional teaching practices should always be viewed as problematic and in constant need of deconstruction and reconstruction (Giroux, 1994).

Methods and Procedures

The fourth/fifth grade classroom consisted of 27 children with culturally rich and diverse backgrounds. The student body was composed of 20 boys and 7 girls, 15 fifth graders and

12 fourth graders. Throughout the study, I took the position of both critical literacy teacher and the researcher, engaging in the role of a participant observer. As Spradley (1980) suggests, becoming directly engaged in the activities at the research site offered an ideal opportunity to observe the actions and responses of the participants. In order to document the format of each daily lesson and the perceived key events that occurred during each daily lesson, I kept daily field notes, writing them immediately after each visit was completed. I revisited the field notes to aid in the data-analysis.

During the focus groups, I used both semi-structured and open-ended questions, while documenting students' insights on the issues of gender, race, and class, as portrayed in the texts that we previously read and discussed, and gaging whether students were acquiring critical text analysis skills. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) assert, focus groups are unique and important modes of collective inquiry where theory, research, pedagogy, and politics converge. Thus, focus groups provided a democratic research and teaching method which aimed to increase the students' voices by encouraging personal and political opinions on the issue of social inequity. The focus group interviews each included 3 to 5 students and were fifteen to twenty minutes in length; these conversations were later transcribed and coded.

Within the context of daily classroom instruction, students read a series of nonmainstream and mainstream texts. To elaborate, I define mainstream texts as those that problematically portray historically dominant/traditional ways of being and knowing. Thus, in Canada, children's literature conveying stories featuring white, cisgender, monolingual, English-speaking characters, and plots that are founded on middle/upper class, Euro-Christian values and beliefs can be categorized as mainstream texts. Nonmainstream texts feature stories outside of this dominant ideological norm. For example, a children's story centering the lives of homeless families would fall outside of dominant ideological norms. Children's literature featuring stories about working-class and homeless families were very carefully chosen for this class; these stories effectively illustrated a challenging life experience and related to homelessness or being poor; however, all the characters conveyed qualities of dignity and integrity. (See Appendix D for the list of texts utilized in this study.) Using a critical lens, the students discussed the issues of class, gender, and race as portrayed in the texts, having been taught a series of critical literacy tools and prompted to apply and continuously rehearse their critical lens using these tools. (See Appendix C for a list of the questions used.)

The students also filled out a questionnaire that was administered at the beginning and at the end of the four-week critical literacy program. The pre- and post-test questionnaire served as a means to evaluate whether students' awareness of the relevant issues discussed had evolved over the course of the study. The pre-teaching questionnaire was also used to assess where the students, as a group and individually, stood in terms of previous knowledge on the specified topics. (See Appendix B.)

Findings

From the onset of the research, the Critical Literacy (CL) framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) for data analysis seemed rational, legitimate, and most importantly, essential. There was indeed evidence that the students in the classroom had become critical text analysts. And perhaps, as some students demonstrated the ability to apply some of the skills across contexts, one may assume that they had internalized the skill to critically examine how gender, race, and class were portrayed in texts. However, in using the CL

framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006), it became clear that, in the process of collecting data, the teacher/researcher should remain keenly aware of *how* the students are meeting the CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) criteria. Is the teacher putting information in the students' heads, and are the students simply regurgitating the information back to the teacher during discussions and on assignments and/or evaluations?

If we are to use a CL framework and truly endorse a CL pedagogy, we must encourage students to *find their own way* of meeting *some* of the CL framework criteria. Knowledge should be constructed by the students, not the teacher. When using this CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) as a guide, it becomes essential to continuously reflect on how the students' knowledge is being produced. By closely examining the process of how the CL program unfolds, one may be able to better ensure that both questions and answers are carefully crafted, allowing students to come up with their own conclusions and to choose the issues that concern them. The novice critical literacy teacher must be sensitive to the inclination to assume the role of authority and influence positive critical learning outcomes superficially. For example, I noticed in myself the tendency to tell students the answer, rather than lead them to discover their own answers, and this may have inflated at least some portion of the results. In other words, there were likely some students, who provided the critical answers that I *unintentionally* imposed and positioned as correct during whole class and focus group discussions. In the next section, I present the results of the data analysis and provide segments of the focus group transcriptions that support each thematic conclusion.

Directed Content Analysis: Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy Framework

Disrupting the Common Place: Broadly, within this section, critical literacy is conceptualized as seeing the "everyday" through new lenses. Throughout the duration of the study, the students' responses indicated that they had developed an implicit understanding of how language shapes identity. For example, the students' responses indicated that they understood that stereotypes, based on gender, race, and class, are prevalent in texts and are often unquestioned and naturalized as "normative ways of being." Therefore, a theme that emerged was the student's ability to understand that texts influence our ways of "being." The following statements, extracted from a focus group transcript illustrate one example of this new awareness.

- Josh Most people stereotype, but they really don't realize it.
Mrs. P. Okay, can you give me an example?
Josh Like uhm.... In like, you showed us clips of Disney. All girls have to have long hair. All princesses have long hair, long dresses, mostly blond hair and they have to look good. And then there always has to be a prince to fall into their hands and live happily ever after.
Josh I think that more little, little kids think, yeah, like in grade two believe that one day, too, they'll become like Cinderella, have a carriage, go to the ball.
Mrs. P. Cinderella, you mean, right?
Josh Yeah, Cinderella and go to the ball and all that.

Sue Uhm, because if you watch, like, too much like of how princesses are all styled, like all the hair. Uhm, you might get brainwashed when you watch it- When you watch it or if you actually pay attention to it when you watch it you should say, “that’s not real.” Then stuff.

Throughout the study, many of the students came to understand, on some level, how language constructs cultural discourse. For example, many students realized that the majority of texts showed dominant ways of “being” and “living” and that these messages “brainwash” small children on how to “be” and how “they should live their lives.” *Therefore, another theme that emerged is the understanding that stereotypes “brainwash” everybody on “how to be.”* The following examples convey this understanding.

Dan Uhm, people, they do...people do what their gender is supposed to do, so that they won’t get teased. So that they can fit in with their friends, instead of doing what they want to do.

Mrs. P. *Good, I like that.* So, when you learn about stereotyping what is that? How can that help?

Dan It doesn’t really matter if you fit in or not. Just that you’re being true to yourself.

Sandra It’s like Dan’s, but say you read, like, the book of Olivia, like, lots of times/ You’ll be brainwashed and instead you’ll think that’s how I should live my life. I should be like Olivia, but you should be just like the way you are. But just because the story in the book says that, you shouldn’t be like that. It’s just their life.

Mrs. P. It’s one story, right?

Sandra IT’S LIKE...IT’S LIKE UHM, IT’S LIKE A Disney theme. All you have to do is watch and watch and watch it. And you think you have to be like that. And all you are going to do is read and read and read about one book like that and then you hold a book and you read *Tight Times* and then you realize okay, my life doesn’t revolve around money. I’m more like...loves around my family than more than just money.

Upon understanding how language shapes identity and how it constructs cultural discourse, the students also became aware of how stereotypical characters often limit and restrict “other ways of being” for children who don’t fit in with dominant ways of being. For example, while comparing mainstream and nonmainstream texts, the students came to realize that some authors intentionally resist the traditional gendered, raced, and class stereotypes by using non-stereotypical characters, settings, and plots as a way to show the reader that there is more than one way of being. Overall, the students agreed that stereotyping gender was wrong, hurtful, and potentially very damaging to individuals and groups. They seemed to understand that these stereotypes were constructed, and therefore could be deconstructed and reconstructed as evidenced in the nonmainstream texts.

The CL program had “disrupted the status quo” of everyday classroom practice as students examined the portrayal of stereotypes based on gender, race, and class, from a new critical lens which involved questioning these stereotypes, reflecting on whether these stereotyped messages are true and fair, and if we should look to some of these stereotypical characters as role models. *As a result, another common theme that emerged was the students’ ability to understand that stereotyping and dominant “ways of being” can be*

misleading and that these “limit” other “ways of being.” The following student statement exemplifies this point.

Leo If boys play with dolls, you shouldn't tease them about it 'cause then they won't feel good about themselves, and they'll think that the only thing is that they have to do all boy things and not what they really want to do.

Considering Multiple Viewpoints: This dimension of the framework emphasizes that critical literacy should include learning opportunities that enable students to understand experience and texts from their own perspective, as well as the viewpoints of others, and to consider these various perspectives concurrently. The students in this study were able to directly compare mainstream texts that portrayed stereotypical characters and/or stereotypical ways of “being” and “living” based on gender, race, and class, to that of nonmainstream texts which resisted the portrayal of these stereotypes and featured multiple ways of “being” and “living.” For example, *Fly Away Home* (2009) written by Eve Bunting, is a beautiful story about a young boy who is living in an airport with his homeless father; moving from terminal to terminal trying not to be noticed, the boy is given hope when a trapped bird finally finds its freedom. When reading and comparing nonmainstream texts, such as *Fly Away Home* (2009), and mainstream texts, the students were able to easily, though mechanically, answer the critical literacy question of “Whose voices do you think are heard, and whose voices do you think are missing?” Their responses to written assignments included a repetition of “white people, black people, Asian people, rich people, poor people, and the homeless.” However, there were very few students who were able to independently expand on some of the issues we discussed in class. Most of the students had answers that seemed memorized from the class discussions. *A common theme that emerged was the students' ability to identify whose voice was missing and present in texts; however, this was done in a rote and mechanical way.* The following statement illustrates a typical student response within this theme.

Zachary There's...the voices that are present are, uhm, a white family. Uhm, working poor...well, working.... Well, I don't know how to explain it, but their dad is working, but they're also.... They're homeless, so it would be put together as working-poor homeless.

Focusing on the Sociopolitical: Broadly, this section of the framework emphasizes that traditional teaching practices do not bring awareness to the sociopolitical systems that we belong to and frequently do not address how these sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and language intersect and are inseparable from our teaching practices. In an attempt to assist the students in understanding the sociopolitical system to which we belong, I explained the concept of “social class” explicitly to students and thereafter, it seemed that the students were better able to see how class was implicated in the texts that we read. This enabled the class to move beyond the personal and to begin to understand the sociopolitical systems to which we belong. *A theme that developed in this dimension was the students' ability to use language that identified the different classes; as a result, the students acquired a “class consciousness” that they did not have before.* To illustrate this point, we turn to the student responses on the pre- and post-test questionnaire.

The pre-test questionnaire indicated that students weren't able to accurately define what the term ‘social class’ meant. When asked to explain what social class means, three students responded with “it is a class that talks a lot,” and the rest of the class responded with answers

like, “don’t know,” or “I have no idea.” In contrast, the responses on the post-test questionnaire indicated that almost all of the students understood that there was a working class, middle class, and upper class. Five of the students also identified the ruling class, working poor, those in poverty, and the homeless. Also, on the post-test questionnaire, most of the students indicated that social class was based on how much money someone has, while five students indicated that social class was based on income, education, and power (as emphasized in class). Also, on the post-test questionnaire, *all* of the students indicated that people do not choose the class that they were in. Answers in response to, “Do people choose the social class they belong to?” ranged from, “kids are born into the social class that their parents are in,” to “people don’t choose their social class because if they did, everyone would be rich,” to “not all people can get good jobs or have good educations to be like the upper class and rich people,” to “homeless people may have gambled all of their money away or did drugs and so they can’t have a home or money.” Although most responses varied, almost all of the students indicated that social class was not a “life choice.”

During the in-class lessons, the students were especially interested in the stories we read about the homeless and the working poor, and seemed to be very engaged in the conversations that followed the reading of each story. For example, the children were especially responsive to *A Shelter in Our Car* (2014) written by Monica Gunning, *The Lady in the Box* (2014) by Ann McGovern, and *Lily and the Paper Man* (2008) by Rebecca Upjohn. These stories featured diverse heartfelt experiences of homeless families and individuals. After reading and critically discussing these stories, the students were able to identify various scenarios as to who benefits from reading stories about the homeless and the working class, although the prominent answer seemed to be that homeless and poor people benefit because they can see themselves in the story and not feel so alone, and that rich people may benefit because they may come to understand how poor people live and they may want to help them in some way (e.g., give money to food banks, homeless shelters, and help in repairing the destruction of homes during natural disasters). *As a result, one of the main themes that emerged was the students’ ability to point out the differences between social classes, in terms of which family had more money, more options, and more privileges.* Within this theme, the differences between each social class was made explicitly visible by the students. The following student examples illustrate this point.

- Ray The upper classes have more privileges than the lower classes.
Mrs. P. Can you give me an example, Ray?
Ray Well, like, Joe said that you can just move it away. Ah...like, make money. The owners of the business, they can fire people and hire, but, uhm, the lower classes like, uhm, working-class...they can’t really do anything. They can try their best to get hired, but the middle class, they have like more choices or jobs to go to.
Mrs. P. And would you be able to describe what that upper-class person is like?
Joe Yep.
Mrs. P. What would you say?
Joe Well, I would say that they have a big house. They have, uhm, some power. Uhm, I would guess that they had a very good education.
Mrs. P. Good. And what about a middle-class person? What would you say they were like?
Joe Like me.

- Mrs. P. Okay. What about a working-class person?
Joe Uhm, I would say.... I just need a second to think about that.... I would think that they wouldn't have the best education like others. Maybe they didn't go to university or, ah, they would have a little, little amount of power.

Class conversations, such as the one above, occurred when we read stories contrasting mainstream and nonmainstream ways of “being” and “living,” and were asked to compare and contrast these stories. For example, *Tight Times* (2009) written by Barbara Shook Haze features a story about a working-class family experiencing financial difficulty. The young boy in the story does not understand when his parents tell him he cannot have a dog because of tight times. Eventually, however, the boy finds, to his surprise, a cat in a garbage can, and his wish of having a pet is met. After the parents reluctantly agree to allow their son to keep the cat, the climactic illustration shows this young boy and his parents embraced in a firm hug while his dad is crying. In my experience of reading this text, this scene incites tears among a few students, and the students remain in a state of deep connection and reflection for some time after the reading. In contrast, *Olivia and the Missing Toy* (2003) written by Ian Falconer is a mainstream story book with animal characters (pigs) that appear to represent a white, middle/upper class, stereotypical family life. The mother stays at home and provides a very comfortable and adventurous life for Olivia, while the father pursues a high-status profession outside the home. Similar to most mainstream children’s storybooks, this family does not experience financial struggle. Olivia has a dog and a cat, and she sometimes drags these pets around from one place to another; in other words, her pets are taken-for-granted. Olivia’s most pressing issue is that she has lost her toy.

From our class discussions, and in response to my leading critical literacy questions, a few students seemed to understand that mainstream books, like *Olivia*, represent the white, middle/upper class voice and ways of being, and that working class, working poor, and homeless voices and ways of being were rarely, if ever, represented in the texts they were exposed to at school.

Taking Action: This dimension of the critical literacy framework emphasizes that, in order to take informed action against oppression or to promote social justice, one must have understood and gained perspectives from the other three dimensions. The data provided several examples of how students used language to exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question the practices of privilege and social injustice. *A common theme that evolved in this dimension was the students’ ability to deconstruct and reconstruct the stereotypes associated with gender, race, and social class.* For example, students reflected on whether or not the homeless are at fault for their circumstance. The class posed various scenarios of why a homeless person may have become homeless, and the tendency was not to blame the homeless person for their circumstance. Furthermore, on the post-test questionnaire, about half of the students said that homeless people may not be responsible for their circumstance, as they may have lost their job, as well as their money, or may have become sick, addicted to drugs or gambling. Almost all of the students said that we should help those who are homeless by giving them money or donating to shelters or food banks. The following student examples further illustrates this point.

- Mrs. P. Uhumm...and what if I asked you about homeless people and asked you, Is it a homeless person’s fault for being homeless? What do you think about that? Whose fault is it?

- Toni Well, if you're homeless I- You would have to listen to [their] story because then you'd understand whose fault it was.
- Mrs. P. That's right, and what do a lot of people do in terms of homeless people [how do most people respond to homelessness]?
- Toni Instead of... uhm... listening to [their] story? [Most people respond with] Okay, it's your fault, *deal with it. Find a job.*

Overall, the analysis showed that the students became more consciously aware of stereotypes based on gender, race, and class over the duration of the critical literacy lessons. However, I cannot attest to the depth of this awareness. Some of the students' responses were mechanical in nature, and it was sometimes difficult for me to figure out if they were responding with what I wanted to hear. Ideally, I would like to believe that after concluding my work with the students, they will continue to question the normative discourses that oppress 'other' ways of being and living, especially as this pertains to issues of gender, race, and class. There were a few incidences that would support this long term critical literacy goal. For instance, on the post-test questionnaire, in response to the question, "Do you ever think about your own social class?" one student answered, "I never really [thought] about my social class very deeply until you came and [taught] us a lot more about it." Comments such as this lead me to believe that the "critical questioning" will continue to blossom.

Conclusion

Critical literacy is one school-based instructional approach that has the potential to a.) increase awareness of the issues of gender, race, and social class inequity; b.) give students a voice to speak freely about the issues that deeply affect their daily lives; and c.) begin the process of changing the existing gendered, raced, and classed stereotypes that devalue 'other' ways of being while creating new societal norms that value difference. The critical literacy practice that I suggest in this study has the potential to address these issues.

The attempt to create equitable and inclusive classrooms by utilizing a critical literacy pedagogy will likely include some messiness in the process, as was experienced in this research study. However, one way to positively view this is to appreciate the cultural collisions within this pedagogy as a driving force that may remediate and more justly represent our diverse world (Janks, 2010). In order to begin this process of change, we must first bring a critical awareness to the issues of gender, race, and social class inequity. This study has attempted to achieve this goal and suggests that critical literacy pedagogy is complicated and needs to be continuously fine-tuned. Nonetheless, we must all start somewhere. The following section will address how the research findings can be utilized and explored in future studies, and makes recommendations as to how certain aspects of this research can be improved upon.

Improving and Building on the CL Framework

This existing CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) provided a sufficient amount of predetermined codes in terms of categorizing most of the data set. From here, I was able to develop at least two or three themes within each of the four CL critical literacy domains. These themes are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The Themes Found in Each of the Four Domains of the CL Framework

<p>DISRUPTING THE COMMON PLACE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The students’ ability to understand that texts influence our ways of being. • The students’ understanding that stereotypes brainwash us on “how to be.” • The students’ ability to understand that stereotyping and dominant “ways of being” can be misleading and that these limit other “ways of being.” 	<p>CONSIDERING MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An explicit and implicit awareness of the fact that there are many viewpoints and perspectives that are silenced and not portrayed in most of the circulated texts shared and read within the school or home setting. • The students’ ability to identify whose voice was missing and present in texts. (This was done in a rote and mechanical way.)
<p>FOCUSING ON THE SOCIOPOLITICAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The students’ ability to use language that identified the different classes; as a result, the students acquired a “class consciousness” that they did not have before. • The students’ ability to point out in texts the differences between social classes in terms of which family had more money, more options, and more privileges. 	<p>TAKING ACTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The students’ ability to deconstruct and reconstruct the stereotypes associated with gender, race, and social class. • The students’ ability to cross cultural borders and gain a better understanding of ‘other’ ways of being and living.

There were some sections of the data that did not fit into the predetermined codes and thus did not enable me to develop additional themes. For instance, several students’ responses did not directly answer the critical literacy questions that I had asked, but rather veered off into a completely unrelated topic. Additionally, there were times during our focus group conversations that the dialogue seemed to get off topic. Therefore, perhaps a new predetermined code entitled, “Unrelated Responses” could be incorporated into this CL Framework. This would be a good way to keep track of how often the students digressed onto nonrelated topics; perhaps, those nonrelated responses could be further analyzed after more contextual student information is gathered.

Also, some of the other uncategorized data could have been categorized or coded under titles such as, “Did Not Voice Opinion,” “Had Trouble Putting Thoughts Into Words,” “Contradictions,” and “Not Sure.” There was a significant amount of responses, within my data set, that would have fit into these categories. For example, “Did Not Voice Opinion,” seems to be an especially important category as the researcher may want to keep track of which students are not contributing to the dialogue and then potentially figure out ways to encourage these students to have a voice. This would be especially important in the context of a critical literacy pedagogy, as students’ voices have the potential to lead to transformational action.

The predetermined code of “Contradictions” may also reveal how students struggle with resisting certain stereotypes. For example, in responding to the story, *William’s Doll* (1972) by Charlotte Zolotow, one of the students said that William should be allowed to play with

dolls so that when he grows up, he will be a good dad and will be able to take care of his baby when the mom is not around. In discussing gender stereotypes, one student responded, "There are no such things as girl things; it is just that more girls choose to do girl things." Furthermore, the newly developed themes (Table 2) created as a result of the utilizing the predetermined codes in the existing CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) may be used as a new CL framework when working with students in the junior grades. The language used to describe these new themes/predetermined codes are more practical and concrete for this age group and seem to lessen the abstraction that was present in the CL framework developed by Lewison, Van Sluys, and Flint (2006). A teacher may find this framework more straight forward and adaptable to his/her group of *junior* grade students. Personally, I found that using the term "stereotype" was productive with this age group as they have been exposed to this term and have applied it to other contexts. In addition to utilizing the CL framework provided by Lewison, Van Sluys, and Flint (2006), I would suggest that future researchers add the other predetermined codes suggested earlier, such as "No Opinion Voiced," and "Contradictions."

While utilizing the pre-existing CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006), there were times where the focus for me became, *what the students will learn* at the expense of *how they will learn it*. Even though, I had planned on using Freire's (2000) problem posing method of teaching and learning, some of the questions I had posed were leading questions, and if the students did not come forth with answers that fit my notion of the correct answer, I sometimes imposed the answer I wanted to hear. When the students did say what I wanted to hear, they were positively reinforced. In fact, the EA's and the teachers in the classroom wanted, so kindly, to assist me in *my* agenda, that they imposed my message on the children when they were not able to produce answers themselves, when they struggled, or if their answers seemed off topic. I frowned upon these interactions while I had observed them occurring. In retrospect, I had no right to pass judgement on these frequent occurrences, especially when my own actions sometimes paralleled this type of controlling and domineering teaching environment. My description of the personal struggle to teach in alignment with critical literacy pedagogy, while at the same time using a CL framework for teaching and researching critical literacy, has been complicated and messy, yet also productive and worthwhile.

In light, future researchers may benefit from conducting a self-check and student-check to examine *how* the students are learning throughout the CL program. Are the students empowered to self-generate the knowledge by being prompted and explicitly taught only when necessary, or is the teacher imposing his/her agenda on the students in order to create the data results that are needed to fit the framework. This is significant, as within the context of critical literacy pedagogy, we must try to avoid a scenario of the "oppressed" teacher further "oppressing" the students by engaging in an authoritarian pedagogy and imposing his/her agenda onto the students.

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APPENDIX A: Critical Literacy Framework

Four Dimension of Critical Literacy

(Based on the work of Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006)

DISRUPTING THE COMMON PLACE

This section describes critical literacy as seeing the “everyday” through new lenses and offers the following criteria to achieve this goal.

- 1.) Studying language to analyze how it shapes identity.
- 2.) Realizing how language shapes cultural discourse.
- 3.) Disrupting the status quo.

CONSIDERING MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS

This section emphasizes the ability to understand experience and texts from our own perspective and the viewpoints of others, and to consider these various perspectives concurrently. The following criteria are offered to meet this goal.

- 1.) Reflecting on multiple and contradictory perspectives.
- 2.) Using multiple voices to interrogate texts by asking questions such as, “Whose voices are heard and whose are missing?”
- 3.) Paying attention to and seeking out other voices of those who have been silenced or marginalized.
- 4.) Making difference visible.

FOCUSING ON THE SOCIOPOLITICAL

This section examines how socio-political, power relationships, and language are intertwined and inseparable from our teaching. The following three criteria help in achieving this aim.

- 1.) Challenging the unquestioned legitimacy of unequal power relationship by studying the relationship between power and language.
- 2.) Going beyond the personal and attempting to understand the socio-political systems to which we belong.
- 3.) Using literacy to engage in the politics of daily life.

TAKING ACTION

The last section emphasizes that in order to take informed action against oppression or to promote social justice, one must have understood and gained perspectives from the other three dimensions. Thus, the ability to enact the following criteria may show how students may be taking action or moving toward action.

- 1.) Using language to exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question the practices of privilege and social injustice:
- 2.) Using diverse forms of language as cultural resources and realizing how social action can change existing discourses.
- 3.) Encouraging students to be border crossers in order to understand others.

APPENDIX B:
Student Pre-Test and Post-Test Questionnaire

Name: _____
Date: _____

Please read the following questions carefully and respond to the best of your ability.

Please feel free to ask any questions at any time during this assessment.

1. What is social class?
2. Do people choose the social class they belong to? Please explain your answer.
3. How does a poor person become poor?
4. Should people help the poor?
5. What can people do to help the poor?
6. Can you name a person from the upper class? If so, describe this upper-class person. Explain what they look like, act like, and talk like:
7. Can you name a person from the middle class? If so, describe this middle-class person. Explain what they look like, act like, and talk like:
8. Can you name a person from the working class? If so, describe this working-class person. Explain what they look like, act like, and talk like:
9. Why are some people homeless?
10. Does a person's social class really matter to you?
11. Do you ever think about your own social class?
12. Do you compare your social class to that of others?
13. What does the word "stereotype" mean to you?
14. Do you believe that girls should wear pink and boys should wear blue? Explain why or why not.
15. Do you think that all girls should play with girl toys like dolls and that all boys should play boy toys, like trucks? Explain why or why not.
16. Do you believe that girls listen to instructions more than boys? Explain why
17. or why not.
18. How do you think girls should act in school? Explain why you think so.
19. How do you think boys should act in school? Explain why you think so.
20. Based on your experience, please explain how girls play together at recess.
21. Based on your experience, please explain how boys play together at recess.
22. What does the term "racial discrimination" mean to you?
23. Are some cultures sometimes treated differently? Please explain.
24. Do you believe that all people, regardless of their race, culture, gender, and social class are treated the same?
25. Do you ever stop to think about an author's story and question why the author wrote the story in a certain way?
26. What is meant by the term "point of view" and why is it important to think about the "point of view" when reading a book or watching T.V.? Please explain.
27. Do you believe that some "points of view" are more used in texts and media, more than others? Please explain your answer.
28. Have you ever read a story and rewritten it, so that it makes more sense to you? If so, explain why you did that and how it made you feel.
29. Do you ever want to be like any of the characters that you read about or see on T.V. Please explain which character and why you want to be like them?

30. Do you ever read a story and think, that is not the way my family is? Please explain.
31. Do you ever see messages in texts or the media and know right away that that the message does not include your “point of view,” or that it does not apply to you? Please explain your answer.
32. When your classmates and you read a story, with the teacher in small reading groups, do you think that everyone in the group hears the same message or thinks about the same things that you do? Please explain.

APPENDIX C:
Critical Literacy Questions

QUESTION SERIES #1:

- Who authored this text?
- Why did the author write this text?
- Who benefits from this text?
- What voices are being heard?
- Whose voices are left out?
- Is there another point of view?
- How is gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, etc. portrayed in this text?
- What if this story were told from the perspective of a different character?
- How is the reader positioned in the text?
- What are the design features of this text? Why were they included?
- How does the message in the story relate to your own life?

QUESTION SERIES #2:

- How is your understanding of the text influenced by your background?
- How is the text influencing you, e.g., does the form of the text influence how you construct meaning?
- How does the language in a text position you as reader, e.g., does the use of passive or active voice position you in a particular way?
- What view of the world and what values does the text present?
- What assumptions about your values and beliefs does the text make?
- What perspectives are omitted?
- Whose interests are served by the text?

APPENDIX D:
Sample List of Nonmainstream Children's Texts¹

Gender Equity Resources:

Oliver Button is a Sissy by Tomie dePaola
The Princess Knight by Cornelia Funke
Cinder Edna by Ellen Jackson
The Paper Bag Princess by Robert N. Munsch
William's Doll by Charlotte Zolotow

Social Class Equity Resources:

Fly Away Home by Eve Bunting
A Day's Work by Eve Bunting
A Shelter in Our Car by Monica Gunning
Tight Times by Barbara Shook Hazen
A Kids' Guide to Hunger and Homelessness: How to Take Action! by Cathryn Berger Kaye
The Lady in the Box by Ann McGovern
Lily and the Paper Man by Rebecca Upjohn

Racial Diversity Resources:

Willie's Not the Hugging Kind by Joyce Durham Barrett
Amazing Grace by Caroline Binch
Back of the Bus by Aaron Reynolds
The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson

¹ See References for complete bibliographic information.