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DEDICATION



This dissertation is dedicated to my children,
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ABSTRACT

Critical literacy is one application of critical pedagogy that focuses on the cultural and ideological assumptions that underwrite texts and discourses. While there is no simple, unified definition of critical literacy, instruction that aligns with this framework involves investigating the politics of representation and interrogating the inequitable, cultural positioning of speakers and readers within discourses. Critical pedagogy and critical literacy are often framed pedagogies of the oppressed with little attention to their relevance within the dominant Discourse. However, many theorists believe that such teaching within predominantly white and affluent populations is not only relevant, but *necessary* (Howard, 2003; Thandeka, 2002).

Drawing on teacher-as-researcher design, this study examines how the students in her all white class within an affluent suburb made sense the ideas of power and privilege and how they responded to critical literacy pedagogy. This action research utilizes grounded theory and critical discourse analysis to illuminate the complex and nuanced responses of students. Data includes video recorded class discussions, student work samples, fieldwork observation notes, interviews and surveys.

Findings from this study reveal the complex and sometimes thorny ways that critical literacy manifested itself in the classroom and in students' lived lives. The implications for teaching are presented in two themes 1) The need for teachers to build trust with communities outside of the classroom, namely, parents and administrators through strong communication, academic rigor, understanding, and 2) The need for teachers to increase awareness of the potential negative effects of critical literacy on students and minimize them. The intent of this study is to address the need for greater understanding of how students engage in critical literacy to better support teachers, students and to strengthen it as a pedagogy.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In sharing this study I invite readers into my 5th grade classroom where I had taught for more than a decade. The setting of Richmond schools provided an interesting backdrop for my growth as a progressive educator. Richmond demographics were 97% white and 2% Asian American, and the remaining 1% was Latino/a and African American. The socio-economic make-up of the school district was also skewed. 97% of students did not qualify for free or reduced lunch, which means that the district had very few students living in or near the poverty line. In fact, the district was comprised predominantly of families with considerable means. The demographics of Richmond were indeed interesting considering my growing interest in critical pedagogy and critical literacy in particular. The demographics, juxtaposed with the purposes and assumptions of critical pedagogy, provoked profound questions for me, my students, and my teaching.

In the few years prior to beginning this study I had begun to bring critical literacy, including the issues of race and privilege, into my classroom. Students generally responded with interest and curiosity. I recall vividly the observation of one student reflecting on the whiteness of Richmond, “Ms. Knutson, I feel like I’m in a load of laundry that’s been bleached.” And, another student comment expressing anger after we had critically examined a social studies textbook, “Why don’t [the textbook authors] tell us the truth? We deserve to know the whole story!” While this student’s exasperation implies the existence of one “True” version of American history, she was acknowledging her disappointment at feeling belittled by simplistic, superficial and one-dimensional narratives. Her frustration pointed a finger at the textbook authors, but I also viewed this

comment and similar ones as a healthy interrogation of my role as the classroom teacher. Was I ultimately responsible for the “stories” that were presented to students? Shannon (1992) and Kincheloe (2007a) argue that it is impossible for teaching to be apolitical. If this is so, what politics was I promoting?

I began to revisit the larger purposes of my work with fifth graders and more broadly, the purposes of schooling, and literacy. I interrogated my own pedagogical practices as a basis for understanding the relationship between school and society. In doing so, I considered how my work was actively and inextricably located in the larger socio-cultural and political landscape, and also the means and the ends of my work with young people in Richmond. It was my practices that influenced the degree to which students were positioned as dynamic participants, critical meaning makers and change agents. I was responsible for framing content as living, subjective and complex, and examining with students how it is productive in its effects on individuals and societies. Of course there were other layers that carried influence in my classroom because it existed within multiple contexts of schooling, the community, the school district, and the culture of the class. Race, class and gender also played a part in how learners and learning were constructed, but ultimately I came to recognize myself as a primary agent that framed the politics of learning in my classroom.

I began to assume a more critical stance in my classroom and incorporate the tools and aims of critical literacy into my teaching. Critical literacy is a framework with which to interrogate and investigate texts and discourses and the cultural and ideological assumptions that underwrite them specifically looking at the ways that they generate and reproduce social conditions (Morgan, 1997). In viewing texts and discourses through a

framework of critical literacy, students acknowledge that text construction can produce inequitable effects. Critical pedagogy goes beyond understanding and critiquing, however, and involves the students learning to act as agents in the reshaping, or transformation, of the world - and him/herself as an individual - into a more equitable one (Morgan, 1997).

Critical literacy, however, is not a singular set of routinized practices that can be transplanted across various settings (A. Luke & Freebody, 1997). Cherland and Harper (2007) argue that such pedagogy must attend to the contexts of teachers, learners and communities, and on their local particularities and situated histories. These contexts prevent the assumption of universal and predictable effects. Because critical literacy instruction relies so heavily on contexts, particularities and histories, teachers enter into a tricky domain as they navigate this pedagogy with their students. In fact, critical literacy is troubled by several undesirable effects in classrooms, including emotional distress, resistance to learning, positioning pleasurable aspects of culture or identity as negative, and apathy¹. Hence, critical literacy teaching requires awareness of these layers of meaning, and constant engagement in a dialogism and reflexivity. We must be attentive to how students respond and use those insights to continually inform our practice. Nevertheless, educators who are cognizant of these issues as they employ critical literacy engage in a constant struggle to navigate them.

Critical pedagogy has been framed and researched as a “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Freire, 1970). Most often, the research associated with this orientation has been conducted with underserved students in urban and diverse classrooms and assumes a

¹ These will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 2.

stance of liberation through and of the *oppressed*, rather the *oppressor*. Morgan (1997) suggests that, although critical pedagogies have had significant impact among the underserved and “economically oppressed... There is less agreement about how well such a radical pedagogy ‘translates’ into ‘first world’ schooling and whether the gains can be as far reaching with students who may be economically the ‘oppressor.’” In fact, Weiner (2007) has asserted that in settings of privilege, the benefit of critical pedagogy “remains at the level of an intellectual challenge with little to no transformative effect.” (p. 61)

With critical pedagogy intent on liberating the oppressed, how was it relevant to students in Richmond who benefited from socio-economic privileges and privileges of whiteness? And if I take Wiener’s assertion to be true, would critical literacy teaching amount to just another cognitive exercise with my students?

These questions inspired me to conduct further study of critical literacy, student response to learning critical literacy, and the inherent challenges to teaching within a critical framework. I became particularly interested in how critical pedagogy might affect students’ lived lives (i.e. their Discourses and attitudes about school and learning, about themselves, about the worlds/cultures in which they participate, and about their beliefs). From those inquiries and investigations, my research question developed; I am interested in the nature of Richmond students’ response to critical literacy, within the larger orientation of critical pedagogy.

Research Problem

Many school districts nationwide are experiencing rapid growth in the number of students of color, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and students from low-

income families. The United States is becoming an increasingly diverse society. Well-known demographer Harold Hodgkinson (2002), asserted that Census 2000 has changed the way we think about race. Seven million people chose “multiple ancestries” as the way to answer census questions about racial background. In fact, one-third of K-12 students are of racial or ethnic minority background and more than 1 out of 7 children have a home language other than English. These predictions and statistics would lead one to believe that the majority of K-12 schools across the country have been experiencing demographic transitions; however, this is not the case.

The distribution of this diversity paints a more segregated picture. Population growth has been and continues to be uneven with diverse populations residing in only about 300 of our 3,000 counties (Hodgkinson, 2002). Because of this segregation most white students in the United States still attend schools that are almost entirely white (A. Lewis, 2001; Orfield & Gordon, 2001).

This lack of diversity leaves many whites ignorant of the true nature and effects of racism. Political events such as 9/11, the economic downturn and consequent fear of job competition has repositioned certain groups of color unfavorably and created increased hostile attitudes toward diversity. These attitudes inculcate ignorance, suspicion, fear and mistrust and can influence feelings and beliefs about those who are different.

Gary Howard (2003) writes that whites should play an important role in healing the racial dissonance in this country. He states:

It is still possible to redefine the meaning of “America” by helping people learn how to bridge the chasms of ethnic, racial and gender differences and create new ways of honoring ourselves and one another. Moving on in this way for white Americans requires honesty, humility, respect and co-responsibility (p. 6).

Specifically, Howard states that whites need to learn a more inclusive and multi-dimensional view of our nation's past "even when the view presents us with the woeful immoralities of our forbearers." As others who write on issues of race and whiteness have noted, acknowledgment of how racial privileging systems work to the advantage of white people is another important aspect of bridging racial dissonance (Davis, 2005; McIntosh, 2005; Wise, 2005). Loewen (1995) would agree, stating that in order to understand and analyze past and present day racism intelligently, students need to learn about it in ways that make it visible. In as much as whiteness is a cultural orientation very much connected to systems of privilege, it too, must be addressed. It is often whites' lack of understanding of their own roles as racial actors that stands as a roadblock to further progress toward racial justice. Howard (2003) also suggests that whites develop a deeper respect for other cultures and take on a less Eurocentric view. Last, he suggests that in addition to taking on these dispositions whites assume co-responsibility and view the healing of racism and injustice as a collective, "inclusive human issue."

As a part of the social justice mission, whites need to understand racial privileging systems from which we benefit. But there is another reason why whites need to better understand whiteness and privileging systems. Whites need to acknowledge that those same racial privileging systems also have devastating effects *for whites*, including loss of European cultures and histories, a false sense of superiority, and a fear of people of color. Echoing the frustration in the student's question at the beginning of this chapter², Kivel (2002) states that, "We have been given a distorted and inaccurate picture of history..."

² "Why don't [the textbook authors] tell us the truth? We deserve to know the whole story!"

because the truth about racism has been excluded, the contributions of people of color left out, and the role of white people cleaned up and modified.” (p.46) In fact, Thandika (2002) uses the term *white shame* to refer to an emotional “hidden civil war” that whites experience as a result of being forced to “act white,” and be complicit with white privilege in order to survive in their own communities. Learning about privileging systems is imbued with emotional challenges; teachers need to understand this and let it constantly inform their work with young people.

What Howard and critical pedagogues promote is in line with Freire’s call for greater conscientization. This kind of teaching must be done with care, since it is deeply rooted in ideologies. Conscientization can be an abrasive process, raising strong feelings and difficult issues (Alvarado, Derman-Sparks, & Ramsey, 1999; A. Luke, 2004). For example, researchers who have studied the ways whites respond to learning about race, whiteness and privilege have documented strong emotions, including guilt, resistance and contempt. Ayers (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998) implored,

To teach consciously for social justice, to teach for social change, adds a complicating element to that fundamental message, making it more layered, more dense, more excruciatingly difficult to enact, and at the same time sturdier, more engaging, more powerful and joyful much of the time. Teaching for social justice demands a dialectical stance: one eye firmly fixed on the students... and the other eye looking unblinkingly at the concentric circles of context – historical flow, cultural surround, economic reality (p. xvii).

This study addresses the need for better understanding of the complex ways that students make sense of power and privileging systems from which they benefit. It also examines some of the unexpected ways that students responded to learning critical literacy, a pedagogy that supports students’ identification of privileging and marginalization and calls them to action.

This study is based in the belief that children can handle, and furthermore *deserve*, an education that expects them to think about texts in complex ways. Children can handle and deserve to explore the complexities of race, power, privilege and social justice. And, in the interest of social justice, healthier race relations, and the students themselves, it is incumbent upon educators to learn how to approach these topics with care and mindfulness. With this study I offer my insights and add them to the work of others with the goals of informing critical literacy as a pedagogy and better serving teachers and students who engage in it.

Research Questions

Situated in the tradition of action research, I was a full participant, performing the dual roles of both teacher and researcher. I examined students' response to critical pedagogy which, in turn, informed my pedagogical practices. Student interviews, my fieldwork journal, classroom video recordings, student work and surveys were analyzed using grounded theory to gain insights about the nature of students' response.

I am interested in how students respond to critical literacy teaching in a white, upper-middle class setting. How do they characterize what it means or feels like to be in a critical pedagogy classroom? Specifically looking at response to critical literacy and pedagogy about systems of power and privilege, how do students respond through what they say and how they talk about power and privilege? I also sought to learn more about the nature of students' embodied response. That is, how are students' responses evident in what they do and how they act? My research questions are:

- 1) How do students respond to critical literacy pedagogy in a white, upper-middle class setting?
 - a. How do students characterize their responses to critical literacy instruction?
 - b. How do students demonstrate their responses in their talk, writing, and actions?

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. In this first chapter I have explained how I came to be interested in this topic. I have argued the need for greater insight into the complexities of teaching critical literacy and the need to attend to student response in such teaching. I have outlined the problem and the research questions that call for this investigation. Chapter Two offers a review of research beginning with definitions of some of the key theoretical frameworks that inform this study, including *critical literacy*, *critical pedagogy* and *whiteness*. To help the reader situate this study in the scope of related research I will review some of the documented troublesome and unintended consequences for students.

In Chapter Three I discuss my methodology. Specifically, I will explain my stance as the teacher-researcher and how my insider positioning helped me to gain nuanced insights into students' responses that other stances would not have afforded. While practitioner inquiry allowed me to be present in ways that benefitted my research, it added a layer of complexity and struggle to my dual commitments to teaching and researching. Teaching is not only a professional endeavor, but a personal one. Thus, conducting research on my own practices and how they affected students was layered with self-judgment, regret and disappointment, which needs to be recognized within the framework of action research. After outlining the research design, I introduce you to the

community of Richmond, the parents, and the class. Last, I discuss data collection including sources of data, rationale and methods of analysis.

In Chapter Four I present a portrait of each of four students who are featured in this dissertation. These portraits will provide a basis for understanding the interpretations discussed in Chapters Five and Six. To provide further context I will also show how I, as the teacher, incorporated critical literacy into my curriculum and pedagogy. Chapter Five details some of the ways that students incorporated the ideas of power and privilege into their thinking by applying the concepts to their own social worlds. Chapter Six examines how critical literacy positioned students in ways that were troubling. Students expressed guilt, sadness, confusion, and frustration, reflecting what other researchers have found. There were also unanticipated student responses of feeling burdened, marginalized and positioned in ways that spotlighted them in the class in undesirable ways. Finally, in Chapter Seven I summarize the study and my findings and offer implications for teachers, teaching and further research.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Teachers who adopt a critical stance can access supportive literature to navigate the terrain in their classrooms. In addition to theoretical texts (e.g., J. P. Gee, 1996; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Scholes, 1985), there are many that focus on practical application this framework in the classroom (e.g., Appleman, 2000; Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Comber & Simpson, 2001). While the body of work in this field is rich and growing, most resources fail to adequately address the difficulties inherent in critical teaching. Considering the focus of this study, here I will review literature within the field of critical literacy and whiteness and also the literature that speaks to some of the difficulties in such teaching.

First, I will define and give an overview of the literature as it relates to this study. This will start with definitions and then move to a general overview of research of critical pedagogy, critical literacy and whiteness. Then, I will focus more specifically on research that addresses the complicated nature of students' response to these concepts in the K-12 classroom. This will include some of the ways that such teaching can affect students and their attitudes, specifically, students' emotional responses to learning experiences: resistance, troubling pleasurable aspects of their lives, generating cynicism, and troubling identity construction.

Defining Critical Literacy, Critical Pedagogy & Whiteness

Critical theory was initially defined in 1937 by Max Horkheimer, a member of the Frankfurt School of social science, as a form of Marxian, emancipatory, social theory

oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole. George Counts was an American educational philosopher also writing in the 1930's. Counts, too, advocated for education that was socially reconstructive. Paulo Freire was the first to formally frame *critical pedagogy* (bringing critical theory into schools) with his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970. Since then, numerous others have added to the growing discourse from their fields. The roots of critical literacy have drawn from such areas as social theory, cultural studies, feminist studies, post-structural theories, discourse analysis, and critical educational sociology. Critical pedagogy is rooted in matters of race, gender, ethnicity and class and espouses the view that our society is in a constant state of flux, competing for the possession of knowledge and status (Morgan, 1997).

Critical literacy is one application of critical pedagogy that focuses on the cultural and ideological assumptions that underwrite texts and discourses. While there is no simple, unified definition of critical literacy, instruction that aligns with this framework involves investigating the politics of representation and interrogating the inequitable, cultural positioning of speakers and readers within discourses. Critical literacy educators teach students to think about who constructs texts, whose representations are dominant, whose are marginalized and whose interest those representations serve. When representations are inequitable in their effects, students consider how they can be constructed otherwise (Morgan, 1997). Students also work to affect change toward a more socially just society. This “action” component of critical literacy is called praxis.

Critical literacy approaches are rooted in the belief that literacy includes the kind of thinking that explores the assumptions and perspectives both stated and hidden on which texts are constructed. Being aware of language use at this level allows for

conscious understanding of how words and grammatical structures shape images of the world and relationships within it (Morgan, 1997). Critical literacy aims to promote social justice by interrogating the relationship of words and implicit attitudes, beliefs and values in texts. Lankshear and McLaren (1993) theorize that the type of engagement in reading and writing that critical literacy demands, enables students to both understand and engage in the politics of life that leads to a more democratic society.

Freire argues that critical literacy offers a more accurate ‘reading’ of the world that serves as a basis for ‘rewriting’ the world that acknowledges interests and identities more equally, as well as reaches for a more democratic society in a new millennium (V. M. Vasquez, 2002). In essence, critical literacy is a framework that allows teachers and students to address issues of social justice and equity.

Critical literacy views students as active participants in literacy learning and promotes reflection, transformation, and action (Freire, 1970). Embedded in those levels of active participation are complex and deeply personal challenges, stemming from the ways in which educators and students must wrestle with power, identity and values which Alan Luke calls “a necessarily abrasive” process (2004, p. 4). Therefore, it is vital that teachers who encourage students to deconstruct and question ideologies (their own and those embedded in texts and discourses) do so in deliberate and mindful ways to maximize literacy empowerment and minimize potentially troubling effects on students. Educators who teach within this framework do so despite the challenges because of its potential to increase the consciousness and agency of students and the possibilities it offers for positive social change.

Critical race theory (CRT) holds that racism is a pervasive and enduring part of life in the United States and works toward eliminating racial oppression (R. Rogers & Mosley, 2006). CRT suggests an orientation, or way of looking at society, that sees “race first” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). *Whiteness studies* are related to CRT and bring together insights from fields as diverse as legal studies, history, cultural studies, anthropology, education and sociology.

Since the late 1990’s many authors (Barndt, 1991; Brown, 2002; Howard, 1999, 2003; Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, & Chennault, 1998; Kivel, 2002; Rothenberg, 2002) have focused on how whites perpetuate racism and how they might engage in anti-bias work. This work calls on educators and families to nurture white children’s identity and social-emotional development in new ways. Derman-Sparks and Ramsay (2006) argue that “It is not enough to teach [white children] to embrace racial and cultural diversity; children must also develop individual and group identities that will recognize and resist the false notions of racial superiority and racial entitlement” (p. 3).

Theorists who study whiteness examine and problematize the construction of whiteness, specifically identifying whiteness as connected to institutionalized power and privileges that benefit white Americans (Giroux, 1997; Karenga, 1999; Roediger, 1999; Stokes-Brown, 2002). Since whiteness is considered by whites the “norm”, these unearned advantages (or white privilege) often go unnoticed. In the effort of studying race relations, whiteness studies turns an eye to the socially constructed nature of white identity and the impact on whiteness on intergroup relations, as opposed to the traditional practice of studying the “problem” of “minority groups” (Doane, 2003).

When applied to education, however, Trainor (2005) contends that multicultural and critical approaches have tended to falter with white students “whose attitudes and beliefs, presumed to derive from their experiences of racial privilege and their interest in maintaining that privilege, present an ongoing challenge to education for social change” (p. 141). White students respond in various ways when confronted with value systems that question white privilege. Giroux (1997) found pervasive resistance on the part of white students, while McIntyre found that white participants in her study seemed to be “tranquilized” by white privilege and power. Lewis, Ketter and Fabos (2001) note in their study conducted in a white rural setting, that white students rarely examine their own racial identities.

Overview of the Research in K-12 Settings

Despite the interest in critical literacy at the scholarly level, there remain relatively few theorized accounts of enacted classroom practices in different institutional and geographic sites (Comber & Simpson, 2001), including white, upper-middle class settings. It is argued that discussions and practices of critical literacy are “often confined to being pedagogies of the *oppressed* and do not pay sufficient attention to how the consciousness of the elites is to be addressed” (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993 p. 50). Such settings offer unique challenges. For white, upper-middle class students, the act of interrogating the inequitable requires them to reflect on their own position of privilege. Within a critical literacy framework, students are challenged to transform the world – and themselves – in a more equitable way, which would require those within the dominant discourse to not only acknowledge their own privilege, but also, on some level, to

surrender it. Ideologies of race, power, privilege, and justice (the teachers', the students', parents', the administration's) complicate this process.

Critical literacy has been established as a substantial interest in academia, but it remains a pedagogy of the few. The focus on testing and accountability has left little latitude for teachers and systems to examine socio-political-cultural dynamics. But, for the sparse cadre of educators who espouse critical literacy as part of their calling, it is most definitely a pedagogy of the passionate.

I will review previous research suggesting a need for teachers to have greater awareness of students' response to critical pedagogy. For example, some student responses have indicated intense emotional involvement (Aaron et al., 2006; Janks, 1991) and resistance to learning (Ball, 2006; Dressman, 1997; McCarthey, 2002). In addition, due to the pluralistic nature of critical literacy, it has been suggested that students (especially very literal ones) can be more confused than enlightened (C. Luke, 1997; Morgan, 1997).

Student Response to Critical Literacy Education

Among the goals of effective teachers, enhancing student motivation and engagement are primary. The literature reviewed next addresses three layers of threats to these goals. First, while learning can (and should) feel uncomfortable at times, learning critical pedagogy can edge the affective component of learning from discomfort to distress. Examples of such experiences will be examined. The second area of concern to be discussed involves the resistance to learning and undesirable attitudes about learning that students may adopt as a consequence of distressing experiences. Third, educators

need to be mindful that our work may result in the removal pleasurable aspects of their ideologies, and/or ways of thinking and being in the world, thus jading students. The most well-intentioned efforts of critical literacy educators to facilitate students' examination of their ideologies and popular discourses can have undesirable effects on students. By raising our awareness of the effects of our teaching on students' lived lives, we can better navigate learning experiences with mindfulness and care.

Students' Emotional Response: There is a Fine Line between Uncomfortable and Distressing

While there is no recipe for how critical literacy should be applied in the classroom (A. Luke & Freebody, 1997), there are several principles that drive such instruction. Due to the personal nature of critical literacy, learning can be uncomfortable. Therefore, developing a classroom environment where students feel emotionally safe to take risks in their learning and thinking is paramount (Janks, 2001; Singer & Shagoury, 2006). To encourage risk taking is one reason to develop a safe learning environment, but another critically important reason to develop such a setting is the often overlooked emotional tension involved in critical undertakings.

The causes of students' emotional discord have a variety of catalysts. In a critical literacy classroom, students experience intense emotional involvement as they use texts to reconstruct themselves as critical subjects (Barnett, 2006). McLaren and Lankshear (1993) challenged critical literacy researchers earlier on in the critical literacy movement to:

...take an oppositional stance toward privileged groups within the dominant culture who have attained a disproportionately large share of resources, who are ceaselessly driven by self-perpetuating ideologies, and who are able to incapacitate opposition by marginalizing and defaming counter discourses while legitimating their own. (p.405)

The notion of taking an oppositional stance toward the self-perpetuating dominant culture plays out in many critical literacy classrooms as students examine discourses and power relations. Janks (1991) found that deconstructing ideologies can create “a profound sense of unease... Some [students] become angry, others become frightened as they resist the process” (p. 199). The emotional involvement can also manifest itself as stress when classroom discussions tap into students’ ideologies, resulting in students feeling attacked, frustrated and ridiculed (Aaron et al., 2006). With that, teachers must be cognizant of the emotional anxiety that may be created as students reconstruct themselves as critical subjects.

In Appleman’s (2000) study of a high school English class examining Virginia Wolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, she noted “an edge in the air, especially among the male students who were outnumbered by the female students almost two to one” (p. 81). She also remarked that some of the males appeared more “bored and contemptuous of that day’s activities than usual” (p. 81). As the feminist theory unit went on, she noticed that one student who had been fuming silently throughout the weeks was bursting at the seams. He exclaims during the discussion that “this stuff is *construed!* It’s BS!” In her account of the class discussion, Appleman observed that as the student is besieged by his female classmates, at times he is angry, clenching his jaw and shaking his head. He ended his participation in that discussion by stating that “I still think it’s *construed.*” Lively and sometimes heated discussions are a healthy part of any constructivist classroom.

However, teachers need to be aware that critical literacy frameworks can cast students in privileged positions in a negative light among their peers and even within themselves as they reflect on their own attitudes about race, class and gender.

Similarly, Fecho (Aaron et al., 2006) found that what he intended to be a dialogue among his students shifted to a debate, with each side arguing that they were “right.” At the point of impasse, it was perceived that some students had sealed themselves off. Those students had felt attacked, and that the discussion became too close to their personal comfort zone. Interestingly, the students preferred to move to an activity that would grant them some emotional distance. Learning can be uncomfortable yet exhilarating; as educators we must be vigilant that it does not become painful and/or distressing.

Resisting Learning/Developing Undesireable Attitudes about Learning

If students are apt to feeling an uncomfortable amount of stress in a given learning situation, they will likely want to resist those situations and/or develop negative attitudes toward learning. Dressman (1997) pointed out that resistance can take the form of “open acts of opposition” or more subtler acts. For example, some students may completely refuse to participate in a certain activity, while others may, in a more subtle act, shift the assignment to something with which they are more comfortable which indicates that critical literacy learning can be off-putting (McCarthy, 2002). When she asked her pre-service teachers to examine articles addressing race and class, Ball (2006) found that some “students’ unwillingness to...grapple with difficult issues...signaled a resistance that would be difficult to penetrate” (p. 79).

Teachers have reported other such negative reactions from students when experiencing critical literacy instruction. In order for students to work from a critical stance, they need to share, or at a minimum, understand its underpinning ideologies. Some students disengage from the class discourse when they don't feel their beliefs are in line with the "new" reading stance. They maintain an 'I disagree, but I won't say anything' attitude (Morgan, 1997). Other student resist more actively. Comments such as 'This doesn't feel like English. You are supposed to be teaching me grammar and stuff' (Aaron et al., 2006), 'Why should we worry about how women are represented?' and 'What is this going to do for me when I leave school?' (Morgan, 1997) exemplify that these students' lack of understanding the ideology kept them from finding value in critical literacy.

Another aspect of critical literacy that can leave students feeling resistant toward learning is the way that content is usually connected to students' personal worlds. Many proponents of critical literacy argue that curriculum must be designed with students' questions at the center (e.g., Harste, 2003; V. M. Vasquez, 2004). Vasquez (2000) has taken this notion one step further and asserted that curriculum stemming from "critical incidences" from students' daily lives allow her to make the curriculum critical for her students. To be sure, critical literacy involves the personal on many levels. However, researchers maintain that it is challenging for students to move beyond their personal experiences in a critique of their social worlds (e.g., Lensmire, 2000; T. Rogers & Soter, 1997). In addition, other researchers have asserted students may be distanced from literacy conversations rather than engaged in them by using students' personal lives as a basis for critical literacy (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1992; Moll, 2001).

There are strong postmodern and deconstructivist ideologies embedded in critical literacy. These nuances can result in confusion and frustration among students. Morgan (1997) writes about a dialogue with some of the teachers participating in her research about the pitfalls of critical literacy. Specifically, the teachers address their concerns about endorsing a sense of nihilism among their students, which stems from the valuing of cultural pluralism inherent in critical theory. Other critical literacy researchers and theorists share the teachers' concern, asserting that we must reject those elements of deconstruction and progressive pedagogies that value personal voice and difference (relativism) over principles social justice because they tend to inhibit any attempt to criticize a text or the world (e.g., C. Luke, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Scholes, 1985). For many students the mixed messages within critical pedagogy can leave them more confused than enlightened.

Another consequence of the destabilization of authority is that students may mimic teachers' beliefs (Aaron et al., 2006; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Children may tell teachers what they want to hear out of a sense of fulfilling teachers' expectations for a more critical discourse (Christian-Smith, 1997). And, although critical literacy educators may try to avoid pushing their own agendas, students may look to the teachers as the "knowers" and adopt their teachers' viewpoints as their own. This can inhibit or take the place of authentic learning. Ironically, the "transplanting" of ideologies is what critical literacy strives to discourage. Friere (1970) maintained that "a humane educator's fundamental objective is to fight alongside people for the recovery of the people's humanity, not to 'win people over' to their side" (p. 84). Furthermore, this dynamic is troubling when one considers how student-teacher rapport affects learning. Researchers

have indicated that the rapport that teachers have with students is a powerful influence on the shaping of students' thinking and their response to the curriculum (Doecke & Reid, 1994; McCarthey, 2002; O. A. Vasquez, 2006).

As Morgan (1997) pointed out, the authority in traditional English classrooms has been defined and justified by the text. In a critical literacy paradigm, Morgan contends that privileged texts lose their unquestioned authority and teachers may need to find a new basis for their authority. To this end, many teachers adopt a form of critique based on ideals of social justice. On the other hand, a negative result of the destabilization of authority "might be that the teacher's authority within this practice may become identified with a particular form of moral regulation" (p. 102). Teachers, given their role, are naturally in a position of power and influence. When coupled with a strong rapport, that power and influence intensifies. Furthermore, teachers who use a critical framework are a self-selected lot, fueled by a passion for social justice. Add in the fact that critical literacy is an abrasive and risky process and you have a setting ripe for ethical trouble. Herman-Wilmarth (Aaron et al., 2006) learned through course evaluations at the conclusion of her first year of working with students using critical literacy that students viewed her teaching stance as an imposition. In her starkly honest reflection she stated:

The course evaluations showed that they [students] felt that *only* my voice counted and that my 'liberal agenda' was too forced. My students were aware of the power that I held as the teacher and saw that as the only power working in the classroom. I was tempted to disregard the sometimes untrue ('The articles we read had to do with how white people are evil and racist, rich people suck, and that homosexuality should be taught in the classroom') and sometimes cruel words that my students wrote in their anonymous course evaluations; however, my semester long disengagement with student voice—my ignoring of student resistance to the topics raised in class—seemed to have ended any possibility of students seeing the power of their own social positions.

Herman-Wilmarth took a critical next step. She listened to the resistance of her students and tried to explore new ways to negotiate that resistance with her future students. It is imperative that educators who use an instructional approach that naturally involves more abrasiveness and risk to be reflexive. They must anticipate resistance in its many forms and be ready to respond in ways that reengage students within their academic or emotional zone of proximal development.

Removing the Pleasurable and Creating Cynicism

One of the more played out criticisms of critical literacy is the notion that the critical stance can too often overshadow the aesthetic (or pleasurable) purposes in reading. Despite the efforts of scholars to help teachers navigate this balance (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Lewis, 2000), teachers continue to struggle with the binary that is created when they introduce students to reading with a critical stance. To address this, teachers must walk the difficult and fine line of being critical without undermining students' engagement by positioning pleasurable aspects of students' lives in negative ways (Morgan, 1997; R. Rogers, 2002; Yenika-Agbaw, 1997). The fine line also extends to the study of discourses. In Christian-Smith's (1997) terms, "This can become a thorny issue when pleasures stem from socially problematic practices, as in some fans' endorsement of Beavis and Butthead's fascination with things ablaze, cruelty to animals or insensitivity to difference" (p. 56). For that reason, some students may resist taking a critical stance toward topics of which they are fond. One high school teacher discussed her students' reactions to a critical literacy poetry unit:

Kids are resistant to particular lenses for particular reasons. But some are resistant to lenses altogether? [sic] Probably the kids who don't want to analyze poetry to death. It's about breaking with the magic. And, as I've said before, I have very serious reservations about doing this (Appleman, 2000, p. 126).

Opening up student's minds to the critical can also cause student to feel cynical or hopeless. During Bigelow's study of socially unjust practices of big business (i.e. sweatshops, child labor), he observed frustration among his students (1998). One young woman commented "I am actually tired of analyzing everything that goes on around me. I am tired of looking at things at a deeper level. I want to just go with the flow and relax"(p. 34). The uncontrollable emotional component of critical literacy can sometimes cause teachers to "miss their mark" with a lesson or unit. Bigelow hypothesized that "the overall impression my students may have been left with was of the unit as an invitation to pity and help unfortunate others, rather than as an invitation to join with diverse groups and individuals in a global movement for social justice" (p. 35).

Vasquez (2004) has worked with three to five year old students extensively, teaching them how to lead critically literate lives. In her words, she "constructed a curriculum that was socially just and equitable... where issues of diversity including culture, class, gender, fairness and ability were constantly on the agenda" (p. xv). Others have questioned the use of critical pedagogy with young children. Shani emphatically protests "Children inhabit a special place as children. We should respect their childhood and allow it to grow. They are not miniature adults, and the social structure, although it impinges on their lives, imposing limits and constraints, is still too distant to matter" (Shani, 2001, p. 32). She also notes that "children ...given their place in the sociopolitical power structure, feel too distanced, too far down on the power ladder to consider it within their reach" (p. 31).

McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) present a sample lesson for upper elementary students in their critical literacy “theory into practice” book for teachers. In this lesson the class read the picture book *The Wretched Stone* (1991) about a captain and his sailors who dance, play instruments and recite poetry. The sailors encounter an odd glowing rock on an island. As they watch the rock they lose all of their creative abilities and turn into apes. They turn back into humans when the captain reads to them and plays music. Nowhere in the book does the author indicate the intended symbolism, the students are left to infer on their own. After a lengthy class discussion the majority of the students believed the author was subversively criticizing their habits and they became emotional. Some of their written comments included, “The author is trying to make me think watching television is bad and it will make you not smart anymore,” (p. 84) and “The book ... is trying to imply that all books make you active and TV will turn you into a non-thinking animal... The author refuses to realize the truth about life. TV and entertainment isn’t [sic] bad, it’s how you use it” (p. 85). The demonizing of the author and the absolutist thinking in student’s discourse is also troubling. This teaching example begs the question, was the author trying to make students think that TV is bad, or was Van Allsburg simply trying to make students think? It is important for teachers to examine how we are positioning students to challenge texts and if those positions influence students to be overly skeptical.

While no teacher sets out to “jade” students, it can be an unintended consequence of critical inquiry. Students can also develop an emotional burden as they come to realize the ways that texts and discourse perpetuate an unjust power structure in their world. The work of several researchers has indicated that critical inquiry, absent the praxis

component can lead them to view the world with anger and hopelessness (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Bill Bigelow, 1998; Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). Some researchers (B. Bigelow & Peterson, 2002; Christensen, 2000), including Edelsky (2006, p. p.210) claim that critical inquiry, “without tying that investigation to action can be disempowering and can generate feelings of impotence and feelings of increased alienation” (p. 210).

Troubling Identity

Students in a critical literacy classroom are challenged to examine their world views, or ideologies. As such, teachers must be aware of the ways that such examination can impact identity development. While critical literacy experiences can help foster students’ identities (McCarthy, 2002) the experiences can also hinder their identity development. According to Bakhtin (1981):

One’s own discourse and one’s own voice... will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves... This process is made more complex by the fact that a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual’s consciousness... All this creates fertile soil for experimentally objectifying another’s discourse. Fertile soil for facilitating an ideological struggle that needs to occur, a struggle that will result in more inclusive attitudes toward diversity. (p. 348).

The ideological struggle to which Bakhtin refers involves the destabilizing of one’s own ideologies in order to consider others. Critical literacy students, as they move into new discourses may believe they must choose between old (often connected to family discourses) and new and this can cause personal strain (Edelsky, 2006). This thick and multi-layered process of deconstructing and reconstructing multiple identities

requires an environment in which it is safe to take risks on the classroom and the school level (Janks, 2001).

The questioning of one's ideologies can be confusing for students. After analyzing his identity within the lens of gender, one young man was at a loss for how to interact with women in a way that is in line with the principles of social justice (Appleman, 2000). He stated:

Last week I tried to help a girl carry a set of lights that were obviously too heavy for one person to try to carry. She did not want any help and almost dropped all of the lights. I think she was trying to show me that my masculinity was not needed and she could do it herself. Through a feminist lens one would say that I was trying to keep women down by helping her and it was not my place to offer...I was easily offended and very defensive. I feel I always have to be defensive nowadays. I am a Man. (p. 93)

Students may also be confounded in the process of examining their ideologies when they realize that the new belief systems they are "trying on" conflict with aspects of their Discourse that bring them pleasure. For example, in Shor's (1980) "deconstruction of the hamburger" activity, he and his students researched the nutrition, culture, politics and economics of the hamburger in American culture, ultimately criticizing the fast food lifestyle. Because critical literacy operates in the realm of the rational, it does not consider the diverse and complex ways in which people negotiate their culture (Giroux, 1992). If students who undergo critical examination of the hamburger, Disney, popular teen magazines or any of the many other features pop culture, students are likely to turn against some of the cultural elements that once brought them joy or equally concerning, turn against the value of mindfulness that critical pedagogues strive to develop (Bill Bigelow, 1998; Comber & Simpson, 2001; C. Luke, 1997).

In questioning their own discourses, students may develop a sense of guilt or self disdain. Students from privileged groups may begin to resent their own history and culture, and develop self-resentment as they come to terms with their discourses grounded in race, class and gender (McDaniel, 2004). Wooldridge observed an interesting complication with the students in her study. The class examined how masculinity and femininity were constructed through explicit and implicit messages in magazine advertisements. She realized the criticism and deconstruction of the female images (Comber & Simpson, 2001) could negatively affect the women in the class for whom that kind of female imaging aligns within their own identity. She realized that in their class discussions they were essentializing, or treating all women as if they have the same needs, experiences or desires.

Teachers need to consider critical literacies as potentially damaging-not in and of themselves, but because they help us see with more clarity and feel with more depth a world [both *in* and *outside* of ourselves] that is often brutal and complex (Barnett, 2006). Thus far, critical pedagogues' focus has been to find ways to help students develop a more mindful and socially just ideology. With the rich accounts of teachers and researchers experiences of using a critical stance in classrooms, we can continue to examine ways to engage students in critical practices while at the same time honoring their spirits and their identity development.

In addition to investigating the implications of student response to critical pedagogy in a white and affluent setting, this research also seeks to compliment the literature base with a deeper understanding of the ways students respond to critical literacy and in light of that, offer suggestions to support teacher practice.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I was a classroom teacher in the Richmond School District from 1993 to 2007³. This interpretive action research takes place during my final year teaching fifth grade and my final year in the district. The research questions that drive this study required the perspective and experiences of an insider. After more than a decade of teaching experience with students of this age, and within this school district, I was poised to conduct this study using practitioner inquiry. Drawing on Cochran-Smith & Lytle's (2004) analysis of the characteristics of practitioner inquiry, I will explain why this methodological framework was suitable for this study. I will also show how grounded theory compliments this study.

Following the overview of the research methodology, I will outline the design of this study in more detail. The nested settings of this study, the community, school and class, will be described as they bring to bear certain cultural inscriptions on the discourses that were active in our classroom. I collected data from several different sources and will explain how and why they were collected. I conclude with a discussion of the analysis process which began during data collection, as is common with qualitative research, and continued through the writing of this dissertation. In addition to using grounded theory to generate themes I also used critical discourse analysis to closely examine nuances of student response.

³ Minus one year on sabbatical leave.

Practitioner Inquiry

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2004) examined the relationships between the different types of practitioner research and suggested the following seven traits as commonalities among them:

- Practitioner as researcher
- Knowledge, knowers and knowing
- Professional context as inquiry site, professional practice as focus of the study
- Blurred boundaries between inquiry and practice
- Validity and generalizability
- Systematicity
- Publicity, public knowledge and critique

As the full-time classroom teacher and also the principal (and only) investigator in this study, my role was practitioner as researcher. Assuming the *practitioner as researcher* identity implies that teachers are “paying attention in a different way” (Mohr et al., 2004) as they study their own practice. My stance as teacher researcher both allowed *and required* me to pay attention in a different way, for wrapped into that dual role were dual commitments. I was motivated by my immediate goals as a teacher, that is, to affect change in and through my students. I was also motivated by a more long-term goal of informing not only my teaching practice but also contributing to the discourse, or *public knowledge*, about critical literacy education with students in similar settings to inform other teachers’ practices (*generalizability*).

Knowledge, knowers and knowing recognizes the value of the insider’s perspective, a strength well-known to practitioner inquiry researchers. It recognizes the teacher as a most valued knowledge maker and knower in her own context. In assuming the teacher researcher role, I experienced interesting epistemological shift that is a phenomenon observed by Miller and Pine (1990). That is, when teachers assume the role

of teacher researcher and of agents of change, their main knowledge shifts from one that is external, to one that is generated by the results of their inquiry. As Shulman (1986) points out, teacher researchers can grasp what is happening more fully when the context of the research is so well known to them. This principle of practitioner inquiry highlights the benefit using my *professional context as inquiry site*. I had taught for many years as a professional member of that community, teaching in that school at that grade level. I had taught many of my students' siblings, been involved in community events and had even participated on the curriculum steering committee that recommended the literacy curriculum/program that was now in use across the district. Use of grounded theory also complemented my role as teacher researcher because it acknowledges the benefits of the situatedness of the researcher. Charmaz (2006) argues that "situating grounded theories in their social, historical, local and interactional contexts strengthens them. Such situating permits making nuanced [observations]" (p. 180). My position in the class and community allowed me to better understand the social, historical, local and interactional contexts, and in fact, to experience them from the inside out.

My position in the community of study and my role as teacher researcher also allowed me to practice reflection-in-action, or critical reflection, which it has been argued is central to and present at every stage of action research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2001). My embeddedness also allowed me to have more intimacy with participants and their experiences throughout the study. As Hubbard and Power (1999) assert, "Teaching is filled with researchable moments – those instances when a question suddenly snaps into our consciousness. As observers of classrooms daily, we can unearth our questions by reflecting on what we see" (p. 23). This is exactly what happened when I noticed one

student, Jack, laughing during serious and sometimes personal classroom conversations. While facilitating the conversation, I noticed this as a pattern and also noticed other students taking note of the laughter, hedging their comments and backing off in their participation. At the time, I wondered if Jack's laughter was being used as a performance of power. Several aspects of my role of *practitioner as researcher* came into play. Being the teacher, I had been present enough to notice this as a pattern, I knew my students well enough to question Jack's motives and their responses. Moreover, I was able to recursively participate in the discussion as a teacher and researcher by interrogating Jake's laughter as a performance of power as you will read later in this study.

The dual roles of teacher and researcher certainly *blurred the boundaries between research and practice*. There are clear advantages to working with a network of people in the research process. Collaboration on study design, data collection and analysis strengthens the investigation by providing multiple perspectives and insights. My teacher researcher experience prompted me to take on the role of teacher and researcher alone. Being dually obligated and trying to perform both roles well made it virtually impossible to be in either one role or the other. For me, inquiry became an integral part of teaching. This perspective led me to a construction of knowledge that was nuanced and unique. My teacher researcher role enabled me to understand and examine the classroom happenings as fully and closely as possible.

Like other forms of qualitative research, teacher researchers are also concerned with the effect that their subjectivity has on the findings they produce (LeCompte, 1987). Subjectivity is a distinct benefit in teacher research and I embraced it as such, but I wanted to minimize its potential to narrow my vision. This is why I committed myself to

systematicity in data collection and analysis. Grounded theory holds that when you let generality emerge from the analysis you construct a safeguard against forcing data into your favorite analytic categories (Charmaz, 2006). Being ever present in the classroom I aimed to systematically collect my own thoughts and observations, student talk and work samples. Though this process was often complicated by my teaching role, I was nonetheless able to capture a substantial volume of data across each day and the entire year. I also shared my data to consider the insights of other researcher colleagues as I developed themes and conducted critical discourse analysis. As Bogden and Biklen (1998) have suggested, acknowledging personal biases is appropriate without permitting them to immobilize the researcher. I viewed my close involvement as a strength in this study and yet remained open to letting the data inform my thinking rather than my thinking informing the data, or allowing my subjectivity to overwhelm me.

The characteristics and purposes of practitioner inquiry supported the kind of research that I wanted to undertake and the questions that I wanted to examine. My position as a teacher logistically lent itself well to this methodology, and the methodology lent itself well to the nature of my inquiry, data collection and analysis. I wanted to get at the nature of students' response and the ways that students characterize their response to critical literacy education, specifically to learning about power and privilege. The principles of practitioner as researcher aligned with my study because it allowed me to engage in it uniquely so as to collect and interpret data and see the shades of response and meaning-making that I was seeking.

Research Design and Questions

This study took place over the span of one year in my 5th grade classroom, set in a community of 97% white and primarily upper-middle class students. I utilized the teacher as researcher framework as I incorporated social studies, language arts and critical literacy education. I collected five kinds of data: participant observation/fieldwork journal, interviews, surveys, student work/classroom artifacts and video. I analyzed this data using the framework of grounded theory as outlined by Charmaz (2006) and analytic tools of critical discourse analysis in response to the following research questions:

- 1) How do students respond to critical literacy pedagogy in a white, upper-middle class setting?
 - a. How do students characterize their responses to critical literacy instruction?
 - b. How do students demonstrate their responses in their talk, writing, and actions?

Research Site: School and Surrounding Community

One of the more unique purposes of this study is the idea of deconstructing ideologies that support the status quo within the culture of those who benefit from it. Therefore, it is vital that I establish, as clearly as I can, the culture and setting of the study. The settings within which this research is nested are the community, district and the classroom of Richmond schools.

Richmond staff and community members have referred to Richmond as a modern day “Leave it to Beaver” kind of place. It’s a small school district in an outer ring suburb of a Midwestern metropolitan area. For the most part, the student body is White (97%)⁴.

⁴ All statistics in this paragraph were taken from the Minnesota Department of Education website in 2007.

There are few English language learners (<1%). Most families have financial means (less than 5% of students are on free/reduced lunch). The median family income is \$107,000, which is approximately double the average for the county where it is located. The average home value is \$528,000. Another illustration of the community's financial wealth (and support of the school district) is the amount of voluntary funding that the parent alliance group is able to raise each year. In a district that graduates around 200 students per class, it is able to solicit more than \$275,000 per year.⁵

The students within the district are drawn from one working class neighborhood in town in addition to five other affluent areas surrounding the campus. One of those cities is located on a very large lake surrounded by multi-million dollar homes/mansions. The remaining cities where the students come from are more rural. The homes in these cities are often custom built with all the amenities, more than 4,000 sq. ft. of living space and three or four car garages. It is not uncommon to see these homes nestled into several rolling acres of land with impeccable landscaping. The financial and physical image of the larger community is important because it paints a picture of the community and it will help explain how the district has evolved into one that emphasizes a rigorous, college-preparatory education.

Many families within the district that are of means consider private and boarding schools as viable educational options for their children. In an era of open enrollment, Richmond must compete with private institutions and the kind of education private schools offer. Therefore, Richmond has had to construct an image of the district that

⁵ This is over and above the funds that are raised by the PTO organizations through their school-based fundraisers.

might appeal to parents who want a private school/college-preparatory setting and culture.

The school board and administration have worked hard at constructing the district's identity as a rigorous college prep K-12 institution. For example, a popular advertising slogan has been "Richmond schools: public schools in a private school setting." In a recent press release, the superintendent responded to the district's national recognition of having one of the country's best high schools by stating, "Our graduates are accepted into the nation's top colleges and universities and, even better, they tell us how well prepared they were for a rigorous college experience." In the district's annual report, the majority of the communication focused on testing and test results. The report highlighted a recent jump in the ACT scores of juniors attending Richmond High School, and that it is among the highest average in the country. On the mandatory state tests Richmond schools continually score among the top in the state.

Much of their success in these school based literacies could be attributed to the environments from which they came. In addition to the financial comfort that most of the families had, a great majority of the parents had advanced degrees and they viewed the school system as an ally. Richmond teachers typically expect to see parent representation for every child at parent-teacher conferences. The only exceptions were those families that left town on vacations. Absent parents usually rescheduled the conference for an evening when they returned from their trip.

Parents' involvement in their children's education varied but the support for teachers was overwhelmingly strong. At the 5th grade level, many parents continued to be highly involved and kept the lines of communication open. Often, parents initiated

contact with me in person (stopped in before or after school) and/or placed phone calls or emails on a weekly basis. Most checked their child's homework daily and to a large extent, assisted them with projects and assignments.

It was evident to me early in my years at Richmond that for the most part, parents trusted the educational institution and let the educational process take its course. Parents had a sense of confidence that the school district and teachers would provide a safe, rigorous and nurturing educational environment for their children. When concerns did arise, the parents didn't hesitate to advocate for their children. Parents were empowered within this system; they knew the avenues to take if they had concerns and they knew that the administrative leaders would take their opinions and requests very seriously. The parental support I felt as an educator in Richmond was very strong. If I needed classroom financial support for trade books, field trips or supplies for a celebration, parents readily donated. I felt supported in my pursuit of the best possible instruction I could provide. For the most part, parents trusted the educators and the system and that afforded me opportunities to incorporate innovative teaching methods in my classroom.

One additional characteristic of the Richmond School District was the lack of attention to diversity. There was very little diversity among the students in Richmond to address (2% Asian⁶ and 2% Hispanic), and this plays out in the discourse of the institution. For example, in the eight page yearly report (2006-2007) none of the following words could be found in the document: culture, cultural, race, racial, diversity,

⁶ This number represents students were adopted into White American families as very young children, as opposed to students who brought cultural or language differences to the school population.

diverse, ethnic, ethnicity or multicultural. The same lack of acknowledgement of multicultural issues/awareness was evident (in my experience) throughout all professional development, faculty and electronic communications. It seemed that these concepts did not exist in this environment, or that they were irrelevant since there were so few people of color.

Overview of Research Participants

The participants in this study consisted of the fifth graders in my class, their parents and me, the teacher-researcher. In the following pages I will introduce you to my class and their parents. This description will serve as an introduction to my class as whole. In Chapter 4 I will describe four key students⁷ in more detail, and provide additional background and context about me, the teacher-researcher.

The Class

The student participants in this study were the twenty-three fifth graders that were assigned to my class; ten girls and thirteen boys, all white. The top 20% of the 191 fifth graders in the school were assigned to the enriched language arts class and the remainder of the fifth graders was divided up heterogeneously among the other seven teachers. My class was a “non-enriched” group. In my class there were three students with learning disabilities, one who prior to that year had been homeschooled, and one with some very troubling social struggles. There were four students in the class who came from families who lived in the older, less affluent part of the district. Two of the students in my class

⁷ “Key students” refers to certain students who emerged in repeated and/or interesting ways throughout data analysis.

came from single parent homes. Thirteen of the twenty-three students came from families where both parents worked outside the home. Just under half of the students had mothers who, since they were not employed outside the home, were available to bring forgotten items to their child, volunteer at the school, etc.

Students viewed teachers as authorities and were generally compliant although, like most children, they employed a different code of conduct when teachers aren't around. Hence, the default attitude toward teachers was one of respect. In all of my years of teaching in Richmond I can't remember a time when a student was openly disrespectful to me. More elaboration on some of the key students in this study will be provided in Chapter Four.

The Parents

Parents of all of the students in my class were invited to participate as secondary participants in this study. In addition to signing the IRB consent forms for their children's participation, they consented to let me use their feedback and interactions with me as data in the study. I encouraged the parents to communicate to me via email, phone mail, or written notes. For the most part, parents emailed their feedback, thoughts and observations of their children's response to classroom learning. Some of the parental data came from casual conversations that occurred on a school bus (on a field trip), in the hallway or classroom. About half of the parents in the class volunteered comments intermittently throughout the study and slightly less than half responded to an on-line survey at the end of the study.

Teacher-Researcher Role

Being a teacher researcher added other tangential responsibilities to my role in the classroom. I needed students, parents and colleagues in the school setting to understand what I was doing and agree to participate.

Positioning the Study with Colleagues and Students

My students, especially as they got to know me, were interested in my studies at the University of Minnesota. I frequently talked about my work there, the books I was reading, the ideas I was thinking about, the professors I had. I was deliberate in positioning myself as a learner, someone who didn't have all of the answers, who enjoyed learning and who wanted to continue to grow as a teacher.

For several reasons, it was important to keep my grade level team (eight teachers including me) informed of what I was doing. I wanted to affect change by sharing critical approaches to teaching, though I am aware that one cannot teach critically unless one can think critically, and learning to do that is a deep and reflective process that I could not provide. I also felt it important to include my colleagues in case they received questions from parents or other teachers about what I was doing since, in some ways, it deviated significantly from the approach of other teachers. Considering the complex and personal nature of critical pedagogy, I also wanted to be able to discuss my teaching and the study with other educators. They provided sounding boards and I was able to seek their input when I needed guidance or support through sticky situations (with students or parents) as I did for them.

I had mentioned my research to my students casually during class and to the parents on parent open house night prior to introducing them to the idea more formally. I explained the study more fully about one month into the school year. In so doing, I was intent on being as clear and open as possible about the study and about students' participation in terms of what I was asking of them. I explained in very overt terms that throughout the year we would be learning to view language and texts more critically. We would explore the work that language and texts do and how that work affects people's belief systems and, in turn, constructs our worlds. I wanted students to understand critical literacy as a different way of reading and writing than what they were used to, one that might be confusing and complex, and one that is not expected lead to a single "right" answer.

In addition to explaining what critical literacy entails we also discussed how this study is similar to research they conduct in science class: Someone is curious about something and asks a question. That person designs a study that will help answer that question including collecting and analyzing data. Using this familiar model as a way to help them understand my study, I explained that I was the researcher and I wanted to find out what it was like to teach critical literacy to fifth graders in Richmond. I explained that I would use some of their work, surveys they would do on the computer, some of our class discussions and feedback from them in the form of group and one-on-one interviews. I also informed them that to better understand how parents make sense of this kind of teaching, I would include feedback from their parents as well. I explained that agreeing or declining to take part in the study would not affect their participation in the class, their learning, grade or our relationship in any substantive way.

After the thorough review of the parental consent forms and the student assent forms, students asked questions about the study. After fielding several questions, all students signed the assent forms and brought the consent forms home to parents (one for parent data and one for student data). All forms were returned within a few weeks and at that point I started to collect student data.

Dilemmas of a Teacher Researcher

It is important to note that I had no illusion about being omniscient or unbiased. My role as a teacher limited *what* students said and did in my presence, and *how* they said it and did it. I acknowledged that the sub-settings within their school sphere such as field trips, lunch, recess, hallway, bathrooms, the various structures within the classroom, etc. involved a multitude of dynamics and to which I had a very narrow scope. Nevertheless, as their classroom teacher, I spent four hours a day, five days a week, for thirty-six weeks with this group of children.

Building a rapport with students positioned me in a more trusting and respectful way, which is important in any meaningful relationship, including that of teaching and researching. My position also allowed me to participate in some very rich and provoking discussions pertaining to content, social issues or other related student observations. I was able to experience my participants as their personalities grew, transected and bounced off of one another. I was present to observe (and sometimes participate in) many social interactions as they unraveled in the classroom. I was a coach, a referee, a parent, a therapist, a mediator, an ombudsman and a mentor as they struggled to make sense of

ideologies that challenged their belief systems. It may have been a biased and limited view, but it was an intimate one.

Data Collection

As participant and observer I tried to function simultaneously in two parallel and sometimes incongruous roles. I was what some might call a “seasoned teacher” so the act of teaching and all of the decision making, planning, behaviors, and interactions came as second nature. More foreign to me, however, were the roles of critical pedagogue and researcher.

My experience using critical pedagogy as a teaching paradigm consisted only of the previous year’s intermittent pilot lessons and units. The year of this study was my first attempt at completely weaving together the two curriculum areas (language arts and social studies), while integrating a critical lens. Also new to me was acting as a researcher in my own classroom. With the help of my advisor and graduate student colleagues who had conducted classroom research, I employed many strategies that helped me to navigate both roles both roles.

For example, I kept post-it notes around the classroom in the areas that I usually found myself observing and working with students for example, the read-aloud area, the front of the room, at the small group table and my desk so that they were handy to jot down observations, thoughts, questions, etc. Of the multiple roles I assumed during the study, teaching was my top priority. Being present in the moment to help students process some issue or attending to a student need took precedence over setting up the video camera or capturing a student comment. Using post-it notes allowed me to

document my thoughts, observations and student talk/comments in the moment and expound on them later in my journal. This method was not always successful. The complex act of teaching, made it challenging to be fully present as a researcher. Moving between roles, my time to observe and reflect was more limited, my attention to data collection was limited due to the demanding and frenetic pace of teaching, and my perspective in either role was somewhat convoluted.

When I teach, my mind constantly cycles many thoughts. For example: Are students engaged? How am I positioning myself, my ideas, the text and the students? How accessible is the teaching activity to ALL learners? How can I make this more relevant? When is the right time to end this discussion? Is this discussion productive? What are students going to tell their parents about this? What are we doing next and how will I transition the class to the next activity? Then there are also the administrative tasks I need to attend to, like responding to emails, phone calls, and planning. It is a complex metacognitive process that is nuanced with aspects of both science and art.

Constructing myself as a teacher-researcher was, in a way, a schizophrenic and out of body experience. As I began to think like a researcher a new layer of thoughts complicated my thinking, for example: Did I turn the video camera on? Is what that student just said relevant to my study and should I make a note of it? Should I probe that comment for more depth? Where is a post-it note? If I probe that comment or lead the discussion in a certain way, will the data be too contrived? If I jot a comment on a post-it right now, how will my students interpret that and will it influence their comments or participation? What will I think as I study this aspect of my teaching later... will I be embarrassed and disappointed in what I failed to see or say, or what I *did* say?

Oftentimes, I found my researcher-self hovering over, observing and sometimes judging my teacher-self. There were no clear cut or consistent ways that I responded to these questions. I did the best I could to navigate each instance with my teaching as my primary concern.

Despite the sometimes uncomfortable experience of performing that dual role, it afforded me a very present and intimate participation with students and it made available to me contextual layers to which an outside-researcher would not be privy. While it was difficult, I don't believe that my teaching or research suffered due to this dual role; it offered different challenges and insights into each role that I would not have had otherwise.

Data Sources

Five main data sources were used to generate findings in this inquiry. I used a fieldwork journal to document my ongoing teacher and researcher observations and insights throughout the school year. I also conducted videotaped semi-formal interviews with four students who seemed to be emerging in the data as students who had unique positions in the class or who seemed to be engaging in more profound ways. While the interviews allowed me to get a closer look at some students' individual response, surveys helped me efficiently question all students using an online survey tool. In addition, I used student work samples and videotaped class sessions to generate themes and analyze student response more closely.

Participant Observation/Fieldwork Journal

Throughout the study I kept a fieldwork journal. I wanted to be able to note, in an ongoing fashion, my thoughts and observations as a teacher and researcher as the study unfolded. When I initially started to collect data I kept two journals; one to document my perspectives as teacher and the other as a researcher. Within the first few weeks of the study however, I found the journals to be too redundant. And, having been a teacher for many years, my teacher perspective is inextricably intertwined in any reflection or documentation of events in that context. Therefore, I decided to keep one journal and to write as thoroughly and as regularly possible to capture the richest documentation feasible.

I made entries in the journal about three to five times per week and they range from one or two paragraphs to several pages. Usually I wrote the entries at my classroom computer over my lunch period. It worked well to be able to do this right after the majority of a social studies and language arts instruction had taken place. Occasionally I made entries at my home computer in the evening as I recalled the events of the day or had further reflections. Each entry was dated for the purpose of associating the journal entry with any video that might have been captured that day.

The nature of my entries included:

- reflections of the students' social interactions
- reflections on my interactions with students in teaching and casual settings
- my teaching (i.e., reflections on class learning activities, teaching plans)
- observations of students' responses to and participation in planned learning activities
- thoughts about class discussions

- the nature of students' participation in the discussions
- thoughts about parent feedback

Interviews

I selected four students to participate in a videotaped one-on-one interview at the end of the school year. The day the fourth student (Natalie) was to be interviewed was the morning of the graduation.⁸ I had scheduled it to take place before school on previous days, but with the additional challenges at the end of the school year, report cards, locker cleaning, track and field day, and celebrations, for instance, this last one didn't come together as planned. Because it was also swimming day in physical education class, all girls but one⁹ brought notes from home to excuse them from swimming so as not to mess up their hair for the ceremony. Instead of interviewing the one girl I had planned to interview, I decided to conduct a focus group style interview with all of the non-swimming students. My need *as their teacher* was to find something to occupy these girls for an hour and my need *as a researcher* was to obtain additional interviews. To satisfy both needs, I decided to interview all nine non-swimming girls. This dilemma and its solution gets at the real challenges of being dually committed, as teacher and researcher.

In conducting interviews, I was interested in having more in-depth and direct conversations with my students to find out how they characterized their learning and experiences in our class related to topics of power and privilege. I used a small video camera to document the interviews (to potentially examine multi-modal dynamics). I

⁸ 5th grade is the highest grade at the school so we have a ceremony celebrating their graduation from elementary school.

⁹ The girl that was homeschooled.

selected interview questions from the list that was submitted to the IRB to guide our loosely structured conversations (see Appendix C). In the end, I had three one-on-one interviews with key students and one focus group interview, each approximately one hour long.

Surveys

I constructed and administered surveys using SurveyMonkey.com to get another angle on students' and parents' response to the critical literacy approach that I used during the study. They took place in May, toward the end of the data collection phase of the study. The student surveys were administered in the school computer lab on a day that I was absent. This was done deliberately to minimize the teacher/researcher effect that might influence their responses. Links to the parent surveys were sent to the parents of all students in an email.

The student and parent survey were designed differently since they are different audiences and had different perspectives in the study, but there was some overlap in content. Students were given the choice to participate in the survey or engage in an educational computer program. All students participated. Parents were sent the link once and eleven out of the 23 parents responded to the survey.

The surveys were a mix of multiple-choice, free response, short answer and likert-scale questions (see Appendix C). The survey questions centered around topics pertaining to language arts and social studies instruction: satisfaction, concerns, how frequently and what specific topics did students discuss outside of school, to what degree did students seem engaged in the content, other emotional responses students/parents may have had

(guilt, anger, sadness, a call to activism, confusion, outrage, apathy, etc.), and their personal response to the class content and approach. In my analysis, I used the likert scale and multiple choice data minimally. Surveymonkey.com, the online tool that I used, compiles and displays this data in bar graphs which I examined. This data was examined at the end of the year, and by then I had generated some of the initial themes using other data sources. The likert scale and multiple choice data was used as a comparison against existing themes, to confirm and/or refute what I had seen in other data sources or to raise new issues. The free response survey data was helpful in that it allowed me to efficiently capture the characterized responses of students who were not interviewed and to more directly solicit responses from every student in a way that was not public.

Student Work/Classroom Artifacts

Student work provided yet another insight as to how students responded to and made sense of ideas presented in the classroom. There were many open-ended type learning activities throughout the study that resulted in tangible products. I collected student work samples from about fifteen different activities as another data source. For example, there was a topic of study that integrated poetry and the clash between the colonial immigrants and Native Americans. As a culminating learning activity students wrote a poem for two voices, a certain style of poetry made popular by Paul Fleischman (1989) with his Newbery award winning book *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*. These poems are meant to be read by two people and often featuring two perspectives on the same topic.

The students could choose any two positions to feature in their poem. Some wrote poems for three or four voices. Many students presented opposing views of the Natives and colonists by choosing one voice from each perspective. Some students chose two colonial voices or two Native voices. Since students produced the final drafts of these poems on the computer, it was easy for them to print an extra for my files. There were several work samples that were similar to this example, and there were others that were hand written, pieces of art (drawings in response to an intense read aloud about the horrors of slavery), or journal entries which were collected. In all, I collected about twenty different class sets of work samples from students. Most of them were used during the coding process to develop themes. Three sets of student work were more instrumental for closer analysis once themes had been generated.

Video

My research questions involve getting at the nature of students' response to critical literacy pedagogy. I chose to compliment my other data sources with video documentation of classroom interactions. I felt that my fieldwork journal, the survey and the interviews could not stand alone if I wanted to examine the complex nature of students' responses. The fieldwork journal had obvious limitations: memory loss and an inextricable teaching perspective that in the moment always seemed to obscure my view of the class as a researcher. Also, I recognized that students' responses to surveys and interviews were based on my prompts and that their responses would be naturally framed for me, their teacher. Classroom video data offered a more multi-dimensional perspective of students' responses to the learning activities. In addition, video data

allowed me to analyze multi-modal dynamics in the classroom and examine how power might be embodied in other ways; how it is tied into physical space, positioning, gestures, etc.

I videotaped a slice of the year during which the content focus was slavery. This was effective because I was able to capture a variety of activities in one unit. I tried to videotape every day that I was facilitating integrated Language Arts and Social Studies learning during this time but this was not possible. Again, my role as a teacher sometimes superseded my role as a researcher and the best laid plans were interrupted. In this footage I captured classroom activities such as: read alouds (wide angle lens captures all students sitting on the floor; I was partially in the field of vision), small group activities (I carried the camera about the room to capture student conversations and work or left it on the tripod focused on one group), whole class lessons (lecture style, I in front and students at desks or on the floor; wide angle lens captures majority of students) and class meetings (students and I sitting on the floor in a circle processing relevant class/social issues; about two-thirds of the class is visible). There were a total of twenty DVD's of classroom footage¹⁰.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began in the first few weeks of the school year. I was acting as teacher and researcher as I taught and as I processed classroom events in my fieldwork journal. I couldn't help but take notice of my own teaching decisions and students' discussions and behaviors and begin to see some potential patterns/themes. Some of those

¹⁰ Equal to about sixty-five hours of video footage.

initial themes panned out and some did not. I tried to set aside the conclusions of similar research I had previously read and be open to whatever unfolded in my classroom. At the end of the school year, the data collection was over and I deliberately set my data aside for a few months. I wanted to put some distance there, between me and the data, to dim my position as a teacher and to amplify my position as a researcher.

When I returned to the data in a systematic fashion, I decided to go first to the data that expressed my students' voices, not my own. I put my field work journal aside and dove into student work samples, interviews and surveys. I then examined each of the interview transcripts. With each interview transcript I followed basically the same process. First, reading through it in its entirety with an open mind, asking myself, "What's going on here?" I noted several initial themes in the margins as I saw patterns emerging. As I moved on to a new interview, I tried to disregard the themes from the previous interview to look at it with fresh eyes. I didn't want the patterns that I noted in the initial transcripts to influence my reading of the subsequent ones.

As I processed the data, I noticed that students responded in three different domains: personal (I called it in-self), social (I called it in-school) and world (I called it in-community). In each of these realms I noted there was evidence of students both struggling *and* changing. So, I began to code data and look for themes within these categories. I was excited to see how the structure of my findings might look. However, as I moved through all of the student survey data, parent survey data and classroom video data it became clear that these categories did not incorporate the breadth or complexity of student responses. Also, as I identified illustrative events and looked at specific students'

data across events it was evident that *struggle* and *change* were entangled as we challenged dominant discourses. I abandoned this framework and started over.

I reread each of the interviews and surveys and reviewed student work. For manageability, this time I began to sort the data into smaller categories. Smaller categories helped me get a clearer picture of what was happening in each area by removing unrelated pieces from view. The categories were: 1) How did parents respond? 2) How did students respond? 3) What did I learn as a teacher? and 4) What did students learn? I decided to create a graphic organizer to map my data. I built four small webs on a large poster board, the center of each web labeled with one of the categories. As I reread each piece of data I gave it a label (i.e., SS1= student survey number 1, PS9= parent survey number 9, etc.). As I read each transcript, survey, work sample and fieldwork journal entry again, I labeled each related section of data (i.e., utterance, sentence, paragraph, idea, etc.) with a number in the margin. Therefore, each piece of language that substantiated a theme had a code (i.e. PS12#16= parent survey number 12, item number 16). Throughout the process of rereading and re-coding I made a bubble off of the relevant category or sub-category on my web, summarized it with a short label (i.e., “aligned themselves with oppressors”, “frustration”, “mixed feelings”, “pushing back”, “emotional work”, etc.) and added the data code so that I could trace the theme back to all of the data that substantiated it. If a labeled bubble already existed for a certain piece of language I just added the data code next to that bubble. Some bubbles had just one or two data codes associated with it.

As a result of this work, I had a large poster with four multi-pronged webs. The bubbles with lots of codes (25-30) around them became the themes. The skeleton of each

web was a different color and each data source code was written in a different color so that I could see how different data sources were distributed across themes. (See Appendix D for a photograph of this mind map).

After establishing the codes in this manner, I reviewed classroom video footage. In my fieldwork journal I had documented the essence of each lesson and each class discussion. The fieldwork journal was dated, as was the digital footage, so I used the documentation of class events in my journal to help me focus on specific incidents in the footage for closer examination. While I did use my journal to guide my review, I kept in mind that the more “live” nature of video footage (multi-modal, in-process, less prompted, less crafted) may unearth additional themes or ones that were contradictory to my findings thus far.

In viewing the video data, I noted the start and end time of *critical events*, that is, events that illustrated the themes I had generated or activity that showed students responding in interesting or unique ways. Since the video was digital, I was able to edit the slices of related footage and have only those incidents transcribed. I reviewed all video data for critical events during theme generation and identified ten events that seemed more relevant to my question. I examined those events more closely, and coded them as I did with my fieldwork journal, selected work samples, survey data and interviews. I coded them and added them to my graphic organizer.

The themes discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 were derived from this data analysis and web-making process. I examined the sub-themes that stemmed from the bubble “How did students respond?” I could see that some of the sub-themes had accumulated more data points than others and that they were related. For example, “talking about

power to describe their world,” “using understanding of power to navigate their world,” and “applying structures of power and privilege to their own worlds” were related, and they all indicated that students were integrating these concepts in meaningful ways in their own lives. Likewise, the following sub-categories were loaded with data points and revealed that students were distressed in various ways: “frustration,” “shame, is this my fault?” “why do people oppress others?” and “struggle.” From these sub-categories I lumped similar responses together and these became the themes. I selected several data points from each of these themes to give readers a look at how each theme manifested itself in my classroom.

Critical Discourse Analysis

After I had established some of the general themes using the principles of grounded theory I chose two texts to examine using tools of critical discourse analysis. One was a work sample, a student’s written response to a field trip we took to the Race Exhibit and a homeless shelter.

On that field trip we visited the Race Exhibit at the local science museum and a homeless shelter, both extensions of studying power and privilege in our classroom. After the field trip I asked students to write their responses to this field trip. I reviewed all students’ written responses to the field trip and coded them. I saw evidence of the themes that I had generated thus far in most responses. I was particularly interested in Jack’s response. He was a student of high status in the class who typically seemed more emotionally distant. His response seemed to be reflective of the general student response and some of the themes that were emerging, but I was also interested in his response

because he comes from a position of power and privilege within the school community and within the larger culture . I wanted a better understanding of how Jack was constructing himself, his beliefs about systems that contribute to poverty and the residents at the homeless shelter.

To examine Jack's response I used Gee's (2005) approach to discourse analysis focusing on how his written response builds significance and identities, both his and others'. Gee (2005) states that "language has meaning only in and through social practices" (p. 8). My situatedness as teacher researcher allowed me to bring the contexts of culture, history, Discourse and participants to bear in this analysis. The tools of discourse analysis would allow me to unpack texts to better see the effects of language-in-use. According to Rogers (2004a), Gee's method of discourse analysis looks at "The Work of Language" in three main ways. It presents messages as texts in contexts, it looks at the simultaneous construction of reality and presents messages as ways of representing and a way of being. Because Gee emphasizes examining how individuals construct reality and "ways of being" in his method, it was an appropriate tool for my purposes and this kind of text. Meaning, Gee's method would help me examine Jack's text to interpret how, in that context, he represented himself and others, and to examine how his written text reflected the ways he was constructing reality as it was refracted through our experiences on the field trip.

The second piece of text that was analyzed using tools of discourse analysis is a transcript of part of a class conversation. I chose to use the tools of discourse analysis with this classroom discussion because it addressed what I perceived to be a power dynamic in the classroom that some students were beginning to identify and push against.

I could remember the tension between individuals as we addressed one students' laughter and how it affected the group. I wanted to "zoom" into that interaction and examine the language that was used, who was involved and in what ways, how students responded to one another as they pushed back and forth. Coming from an insider's position, this moment was significant and I needed to explore how power was working in this interaction.

Only a handful of students and I are active in this transcript however. In this conversation, participants' interactions are a vital to the interpretation. Rogers (2004a) identifies the work that is done by units of analysis in Fairclough's approach. She states that function of the *genre* of the text elucidates ways of interacting, the function of *discourse* and the *interpersonal* positions of participants show ways of representing - how social relationships are enacted from particular perspectives. The function of style reveals ways of being and how reality is enacted through experiences. Fairclough's approach illuminates interactions among social relationships from particular positions. I sought to unpack the tacit power relations in Jack's use of laughter and other students' responses to it. In doing so I divided the examination into Fairclough's three stages analysis: description, interpretation and explanation.¹¹

Reflections and Limitations of "Teacher as Researcher" on Data Analysis

Next, in Chapter 4 I will provide more about the context of the study, including an introduction to four students who play a more prominent role in data and to the background that I bring to the study as teacher researcher. Because it pertains to the

¹¹ A more detailed account of the analysis will occur in Chapters 5 and 6.

nature of this methodology, I will end this chapter with a brief personal reflection on this process of self-examination and critique in a highly personal and emotionally charged profession.

As many teachers do, I pour my heart and soul into my teaching. I strive to make a positive difference in the lives of students and families. That is why data analysis became scary for me. In studying my own practice and inviting criticism (from myself, my students, their parents, and you - the reader) I felt, and still do feel vulnerable to the reality that in so many ways I could have done better.

It was a joy, and very reaffirming to read the surveys from the parents and students who showed a lot of enthusiasm and gratitude and discussed the growth that they experienced. As I created a map of the data, I was excited to see the space around the initial/developing themes such as “ideological shift” and “pushing back against unjust behaviors” peppered with data labels. “Something happened here!” I thought as I gathered evidence that they were learning how to think against the status quo, against given ideologies, against stereotypes. In my past teaching experiences, I functioned on hunches, intuitions and informal evidence for how my students responded to my teaching. In this case however, the act of employing a systematic and thorough research process caused me to doubt the validity of my more informal read on students. I had hoped that the kinds of responses I was finding would be possible, but I was prepared to find little or none of this due to student resistance, the all-white setting, the comprehensive process that seems to be involved in ideological shifts as well as fixed and strong parental and societal discourses.

When it came to the parent surveys, of course, I read the “good ones” first and avoided the critical ones as long as possible. Eventually, I had to face the critical feedback that I had asked for. It included a survey from one mother and my hand written notes from a phone call with a different mother. I was appreciative for it, but it was difficult to absorb. I actually had a visceral reaction to some of the comments as I re-read them. I had to remind myself that this is valuable data (if not to answer my formal research questions, then valuable to me as an advocate of critical literacy education) and that it would help me understand how they perceived their daughters’ experience. I had to actively distance my teacher-self from this reading as much as I could, so that I wouldn’t take it too personally and let defensiveness get in the way of understanding where the parents were coming from.

Similarly, I discovered more evidence that was difficult to consider. I saw evidence that my teaching sometimes re-centered whiteness. I saw evidence of students’ troubled responses as we examined some very disturbing systemic injustices throughout history and in our present society. I saw evidence of students’ feelings of helplessness as they confronted hegemonic behaviors of their peers with little effect. I saw evidence that, in our deconstruction of social power, at least one student who was already having a hard time fitting in, “felt marginalized.” I felt a responsibility for all of this and that was certainly a feeling linked to regret and disappointment. I struggled to transcend the judgment that I imposed on myself and the data, and instead reposition my stance as one that sought to understand the complexities, the beautiful and textured complexities that are inherent in critical pedagogy.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANTS, CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

This study examines student response to critical literacy in a 5th grade class, within a predominately white and affluent community. In the following chapters I will share some of the more significant ways that students responded, based on students' characterizations, my observations, class discussions and in one case, a parent's characterization. In some instances, the data and themes are more nuanced, and it will be important for readers to have a familiarity with my teaching and with some of the students. So, in this chapter I will introduce readers to my students, and myself as the teacher and researcher. I will explain the curriculum and the approaches that I used to teach and integrate social studies and language arts. Critical literacy is a non-standardized and dynamic teaching framework that gets redefined across settings and participants. Therefore, understanding my approach to critical literacy in this setting, with this class, and this curriculum is integral in the consideration of this study.

Key Students: Derek, Jack, Carter and Marie

Derek, Jack, Carter and Marie¹² were four students in my class who were prominent in class discussions and in the social structure of the class. They were chosen after most of the data had been collected and analysis was well underway. They were *not* students that I set out to observe more closely throughout the study. Rather, they stood out as students who responded in unique ways, from their unique positions in the class

¹² These names are pseudonyms, as are all of the names of cities, schools, students and parents in this paper.

culture as I analyzed the data. They were also selected based on the way their particular responses illustrated some of the nuances and complexities in the data. So, I call them *key students*, as they are more visible in this dissertation but were not necessarily a predetermined focus throughout the study. The findings represent themes derived from the data collected with the entire class, but I will focus primarily on illustrative examples that involve these students so it is important that I offer a brief description of each one.

The rest of this section describes these students and their relationships to others in the class. Jack, Derek and Marie were from affluent families and Carter was from a working class family. Jack and Derek were considered by their peers (based on survey data) as having high social status. Marie was well liked within her small group of friends and seemed less invested in social hierarchy. Carter was a boy who by his own observation had little status in his peer group.

Table A: Key Students and Their Relationship to Others in the Class

Student	Social Position	Class Position
Marie	Marie had a small consistent group of friends, seemed to have a sense of belonging and social contentment in her peer group.	Upper-Middle
Derek	Derek had a large network of friends due to participation on sporting teams, others perceived him as being “popular,” seemed to enjoy his social position but at the same time often seemed to struggle with the insensitive behaviors of some of his “popular” friends.	Upper-Middle
Jack	Jack was considered the “most popular” boy in the class and was also very well-known by others in his grade. Others seemed to both revere and fear him to an extent. Also perceived to be insensitive by many of his peers.	Upper-Middle

Carter	Carter was perceived by himself and others as having low social status and he struggled all year to “fit in.” He self-identified as “different.” He helped establish and became part of a small group of boys on the fringe of the social scene.	Lower-Middle
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A more detailed portrait of each of these students will follow this brief introduction to how students began to think about social status, or *social power*. The social position of each of the students is important since, in our practice of critical literacy we examined how power works through words and discourses, and how it works through individuals and relationships. The concept of social power and the factors that constitute it will be a thread through each description. To that end, I will tell a brief story of how we developed the idea of *social power*¹³.

Toward the beginning of the year many students in the class were having social problems related to popularity and “the popular kids.” From listening to their concerns, it seemed to me that the issues they were really getting at were related to dynamics of power and marginalization. As a result, the students and I deconstructed what fifth graders in Richmond meant when they said and used the word “popular.” We discussed the dictionary definitions of the word “popular” and students decided that being well-liked is not synonymous with the meaning they intended. As a result of processing the idea of popularity the class decided that what they were characterizing as popular was, in fact, related to power discrepancies within their social group, based on a constructed valuing system. Many students began to use the words “having social power” to describe

¹³ The process we used that resulted in the term social power is also described in Chapter Five in more detail.

students and groups, in addition to “popular.” Students identified that there were factors that were associated with social power, in other words, aspects of cultural capital.

As part of that discussion, the class identified some of the key characteristics that correlated with social power. Some of the characteristics students highlighted were (in the students’ words): the kinds of vacations you go on, smarts, attractiveness, attending pro sporting events, ability to bully other students, being funny (in a good way), being a drama queen, the size of your house, having the right clothes, what technology stuff you have (i.e., iPod, cell phone, game system), athleticism, the shoes you wear, being liked by teachers and other kids, being kind, where you sit at lunch, what you read, what you eat for lunch, being friends with the “popular” kids, where you sit on the bus, how kind you are, what jewelry you wear and being social with others. According to students, having more of these characteristics gave a person more power in the fifth grade social world.

With that background, I can better describe the four key students, starting with Jack.

Jack

Jack, out of the approximate 200 fifth graders that year, was arguably one of the kids with the most social power. He had many of the characteristics the class associated with “social power.” He was a boy with a medium build, light brown shiny hair and brown eyes. Jack liked to have fun, play games and was very witty and I enjoyed that about him. He came from a home with two siblings and a mother who didn’t work outside the home. Jack’s father wore sharp-looking business attire and was very formal in his appearance and affect (the only time I met him at a parent-teacher conference).

Jack always had his work done well, done on time and he rarely needed help. He was also athletic, excelling in football, baseball and hockey. His father was the hockey coach. The clothes he wore were always in good repair and were brand-name. He positioned himself as a leader and often took charge during unstructured games or activities. His ability to navigate social situations to his benefit was very developed for his age. When a group negotiated who got to start with the ball in a game of catch, it usually ended up in his hands.

Jack acknowledged his status in the social sphere of his peers. In my interview with him, he observed that his social power kept him from getting teased or bullied by other students. He shared that he liked to joke around and liked people who knew how to “take” a joke. He found teasing humorous and when others took offense he often interpreted it as over-sensitivity on their part. Perhaps because he seemed to be immune to teasing himself, he didn’t seem to be able to distinguish between joking with someone and hurtful teasing. Jack’s teasing was a frequent complaint from his peers. He used the words “joking” and “teasing” interchangeably during my one-on-one interview with him, and when asked if his joking with other students ever went too far he replied, “Sometimes I do that, when I, if I have, like good jokes, sometimes and I say it, it’s like *too* good, kind of, it’s *too sensitive* and then I just kind of take it back a little bit, like just say forget about it and stuff like that.” Jack saw himself as “really nice.” Interestingly, however, others in the class described him as “mean,” “annoying,” “criticizing” and “makes fun of people” but they also acknowledged that he had the most power in the class. He seemed to be admired (and perhaps feared) by his peers while simultaneously being resented, due

to his arrogance and insensitivity toward others with little or no negative social repercussion.

As a class, we used the metaphor of a baseball diamond as one way to make sense of privilege. The metaphor was based on the quote “Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple” that hung on the white board for most of the year. When asked what base he felt he was born on he acknowledged his privilege by responding “third.”

Jack is present most prominently in the data likely due to his position of power in the students’ social worlds. His position of high status was entangled with the ways he responded, and the ways that others interacted with him. In the following chapters, his laughter during class discussions is examined as a performance of power that intimidated others.

Marie

Marie seemed to be of average social status in the class. She had long, straight, light-brown hair, and green eyes. She was a taller girl than most and had a very positive and cheerful disposition. Her attitude toward others was generous and empathic. She didn’t play sports (that I was aware of) but she was willing to participate in any activity. These qualities, in addition to the fact that didn’t take herself too seriously made her a great addition to the class.

Marie’s mother and father were professional in appearance, yet more relaxed than most. Her mother was a social worker and worked with poor whites in Appalachia and Native Americans in the Midwest. Her father was a business man. They seemed like

friendly and supportive parents and very attentive to Marie's school experiences, though I had many more experiences with her mother than her father. She was a bright girl and invested in her school work, though academics seemed to come easily for her.

Marie had many of the factors that students associated with social power, but she didn't seem to overtly engage or invest in that aspect of school culture. She was a conscientious girl, the kind of student that followed the rules and always tried to "do the right thing" as she put it, and she expected others to do so as well. This expectation may have led others to perceive her values too closely in line with that of the teacher. She was not readily accepted into what other students called "the popular group" but she was usually not marginalized either. Marie engaged actively in our study of critical literacy and social justice. She took issues of justice to heart and practiced her agency, both in and outside of our classroom. And, as you will see, she experienced some troubling dynamics as a result.

Carter

Carter had light brown hair with longer bangs that tended to hang in his hazel eyes. He often wore oversized clothes on his medium build. Carter was one of the more unique individuals I have had the opportunity to get to know in my teaching career. He was a philosopher and a thinker. He loved to draw and read, preferring fantasy books with grand battles of good vs. evil. He was a sensitive and compassionate boy and was especially vulnerable to others' judgment of him. When he shared aloud in class, his eyes often scanned the class, especially in Jack's direction, to detect any students who might be smirking or laughing. He and Jack had ongoing tension last year, reported by both

Carter and the 4th grade teacher. Jack acknowledged they had some issues last year but that mostly Carter imagined or exaggerated the problems.

Unlike Jack, Carter had very few of the characteristics that gave children status in this community. He came from a working class family and therefore lacked the technology gadgets, the clothes (though he didn't seem to care about that), the nice house, and other things in line with financial means. One boy in the class with whom Carter seemed to be forging a friendship commented to me in private, more out of bewilderment than judgment, that the front door on his house was falling off and the yard was overgrown. His mother was a teacher (who worked in an alternative school for pregnant and parenting teens) and a conscientious woman, but frequently expressed how tired and overworked she felt because of her job. Carter's father was a construction worker. He occasionally visited the school in his rusty and dented pickup truck to discuss how Carter was doing socially and academically. He arrived before or after school in his plaid work shirt, well-worn jeans and work boots, smelling of cigarette smoke. Carter's father seemed to care deeply for him and his success in school. He repeatedly told Carter, "Don't stand out in a crowd, try to fit in." Carter struggled with this message because he identified himself as "different." And, though he knew that would make life harder, he was comfortable with being different because, "that's just who I am."

Carter was very bright but he lacked the administrative skills required to make good grades (i.e. staying organized, writing homework assignments in his planner, remembering to turn in his work, etc.). His writing was insightful and he had command of a large vocabulary. His knowledge about science-related topics often far surpassed his peers.

Shannon and Shannon (2001) assert that “the discourses that students and teachers bring to school are inscribed with differing amounts of cultural and economic capital, privileging some and silencing others” (p. 124). Coming from a working class home, into a school culture where many of his peers were members of country clubs, yacht clubs, golf clubs, and they had nannies, European vacations and brand name clothes, Carter didn’t bring the Discourses to school that matched most of his peers. Socially, he started the year as an independent yet suspicious class member, mostly keeping to himself. He had a history of not “fitting in” as told to me in my interview with him and in conversations with his previous teachers. Other students positioned him as an outsider and this was troubling for him. In addition to not espousing the discourse with which this school was inscribed, and perhaps because of it, he seemed to lack the confidence, resilience and political savvy to navigate this social setting with much skill. As the year progressed, however, he reached out to a small handful of boys who seemed approachable and developed what seemed to me, mutually respectful and trusting relationships with some of them. Although Carter’s confidence grew, he was usually aware of Jack’s presence and actions in relationship to his own.

Derek

Derek was short and somewhat stout in stature. He had short, dark brown hair and dark brown eyes. He had a warm and friendly disposition and seemed to want to please others. He had a generous spirit and was quick to laugh, which made him a student that was fun to have around. He was socially well-connected and enjoyed that aspect of

school life. Derek had to work a little harder than others at school but he was able to feel successful with a good effort.

His dad owned a construction company and his mom helped with the administration of the company. In her spare time she was running a grass-roots campaign to establish a co-op grocery store that would be supplied with locally grown and organic food. Derek once told me that his dad reminded him every morning to “Go out and make a difference for someone.”

Students in “the popular group” were regarded with fear, jealousy, admiration or some combination of thereof. From my vantage point, Derek appeared to be respected by his peers. He was close friends with Jack but was not regarded in the same way. He had a sense of humility, vulnerability and empathy about him that Jack didn’t have. Throughout the school year Derek seemed to shift allegiances and wrestle with social politics involving his friendship with Jack. He seemed to enjoy being friends with Jack and possibly gained social status by being friends with Jack. However, I noticed that he sometimes deliberately, yet covertly distanced himself from Jack. For example, I noticed that on several occasions when students were to pick one or two students with whom to work, Derek quickly sought out students other than Jack before Jack could claim Derek as a partner. Derek would sort of sheepishly say, “Sorry, I’m with Corey.” Despite this occasional distancing, Derek and Jack were good friends and spent much time together. Derek’s struggle to politically align himself in the social world of our class was evident in one of the transcripts that I will analyze in Chapter 6.

Teacher/Researcher

Just as an understanding of the setting and participants are critical to this study, my stance as the teacher and researcher is also an important part of the context. My personal and professional history, positionings and goals inform how the study was implemented and analyzed.

I can identify with my students. My journey of conscientization started in middle-class white suburbia, not vastly different from the research site. I grew up in a very traditional family structure, with two parents who subscribed to white, traditional and ethnocentric ideologies. I grew up in what is considered mainstream American culture: a single family home in Midwestern suburbs, a heavy emphasis on sports, kick the can after dark, a lake home up north, Catholic church, a father and brothers who hunted... and all of the Discourse that goes along with it. However, I did not accept this ideology without question. There were moments, outward and inward, that I pushed back, but I learned quickly that this wasn't a good idea. Thandeka (2002) in her book *Becoming White* argues that many whites act in ways that are complicit with Discourses of whiteness and racial privileging systems in order to be accepted in their familial, professional and social circles, and suggests that for many, enacting these discourses is a means of survival in those groups. Much like clothing, I wore it because it was what was provided, it was the norm and it was expected. Within the culture, wearing it was probably a matter of survival.

I didn't push back against the Discourses of my family very often, but I knew there were other ways of thinking and being and I often wished to know more about them. I knew there were people who lived in places unlike the neighborhoods I knew,

who ate different kinds of food, spoke different languages and had different religious beliefs. There was a stirring to understand and connect with those other kids and worlds. For reasons I have not yet explored, probably embedded in my whiteness, I often wanted to *be* a person of color. The food and music and communication styles of other cultures seemed more alive and rich. I perceived mine as dull and flat and prescriptive. Because of this, I was one of the few kids who sought out the only two children of color in my grade, one African American and one Latina. I had culture envy (and I still do).

In addition to my cultural awareness, I also frequently questioned the ever present suburban/mainstream/conforming thinking that surrounded me. These kinds of questions were not understood or appreciated by my parents or teachers, so I mostly learned to ignore them or kept them to myself. As most kids do, I put on the clothes that were comfortable and handy and were part of belonging to that community and familial group. As an adult, a middle class parent and a teacher of white children, it has become important for me to challenge mainstream ideologies. I am motivated by my own personal growth and the growth of the young people in my life. I want to *encourage*, not discourage, such interrogations with the young people, hence, my interest in critical literacy.

In my early years, my teaching style was perceived as too far outside the norm of the traditional school district and met with resistance. There were complaints to the administration and overt harassment from a few my colleagues regarding how little I relied on the grammar text book in my teaching of writing. Such responses made me even more inclined to close my door to avoid scrutiny. Over time, I gained professional status by joining committees, earning my Master's degree, teaching summer and weekend

courses at local universities, continuing my education at the University, and participating in professional work at the Department of Education. This is important because I believe it gave me leeway to teach without the backlash that progressive teachers sometimes experience.

I learned to eventually trust and take risks with some of my colleagues by sharing my alternative ideas. While this was professionally more satisfying, I was never able to recruit comrades among my teaching team to my more recent social justice and critical multicultural classroom practices. I feel it is important to note that the foreign and political nature of critical literacy deters some teachers for fear of criticism from administration and parents. In addition to having a tenure of fifteen years in the district, I had a good reputation in the community, an association with the state University, adjunct teaching positions at local colleges, participation in state department activities, literacy consulting around the state, an appointment to the Minnesota Board of Teaching and a national Milken Educator Award. I mention this only because I believe these attributes afforded me more latitude with parents and administration to teach in non-traditional ways. In hindsight, I don't think I would have made some of the choices I made had I been a teacher newly establishing myself in the profession or community.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The class that participated in this study was with me for two and a half hours per day for language arts and social studies. The time was called the "language arts and social studies block." I decided to integrate the language arts and social studies instruction for several reasons. First, integrated teaching allows students to make connections between

disciplines and therefore, makes learning more meaningful. Second, it involves using reading and writing as vehicles to learn about social studies, and vice versa. Third, the efficiency of integration allows me to go into more depth when needed and allows for the detours that critical pedagogy requires.

In my classroom, I valued trust, mutual respect and freedom to make mistakes. That being said, I understood that the positions of power in my classroom and in the larger culture would make this a constant challenge. Students are continually wrestling with dynamics of social allegiances, social status and peer networks. Finders (1997) asserts that students' struggle to navigate the multiple social and institutional expectations that circulate the adolescent classroom, necessarily renders classrooms as sites of threat and vulnerability. I felt responsible, as the adult entrusted with these young people, to examine these social dynamics and expectations, not in an effort to create a safe haven but to teach students to examine social texts as active participants. I didn't deny that these conditions existed in my students' lived lives, rather, I attempted to recognize them and to teach through them.

I considered myself a constructivist teacher and enjoyed constructing new knowledge along with my students. I found much joy in this process. In particular, I enjoyed helping students view themselves, others and the world in more complex ways. My role allowed me to facilitate and participate in the growth of their confidence and competence; socially, emotionally and intellectually.

Next, I will discuss the social studies and language arts curriculum and my teaching approach in more detail. In this discussion I will describe some of the curricular

objectives and materials. I will also share how and why I combined the two disciplines, and how I integrated concepts of critical pedagogy and critical literacy.

Social Studies and Language Arts Curriculum and Critical Pedagogy

Social Studies

The sanctioned social studies curriculum was a list of nineteen benchmarks created and outlined by the state department of education and adopted by the district. The fifth grade content spanned American history from the time period of “pre-history” through the Civil War. To help facilitate this teaching many teachers at my level, myself included, piloted Social Studies materials called *History Alive! (2003)*. I used these materials to supplement my teaching because I found them to be much more inclusive and respectful toward the cultures/peoples that were discussed in the text. Also, *History Alive!* was not a very cumbersome program, so it served as a great starting point and resource that I could supplement with other texts. Other learning tools that I used were: on-line learning environments, videos, historical fiction novels, other non-fiction texts, the newspaper and the internet.

Language Arts and Integration

Since Richmond had recently adopted a comprehensive (or balanced) literacy model for language arts, I needed to include the following components/structures in my facilitation of Language Arts learning: read aloud, guided reading, independent reading, shared reading, and writer’s workshop. I was on the steering committee during that adoption cycle and was glad that the group had not recommended a basal reader. To me, one of the beauties of teaching was *creating* and *designing* the learning experiences in

ways that were connected to students' lives: authentic, inquiry based and co-constructed, and that is exactly what I tried to do. So, we read and wrote a variety of texts incorporating social studies topics within the required structures (read aloud, guided reading, independent reading, shared reading, writer's workshop).

To integrate literacy and social studies objectives I viewed the required literacy structures as different ways to *configure* learning activities. I used the social studies curriculum as the basic map of the content and designed American history learning within that framework. For example, during the study of slavery, I read aloud parts of the novel *Copper Sun* (Draper, 2006). We also read the *History Alive!* chapter on slavery as a shared reading (whole class reading and discussion). During the unit on Colonization we read picture books like *Thunder from the Clear Sky* (Sewall, 1989), *People of the Breaking Day* (Sewall, 1991) and *We Asked for Nothing* (Waldman, 2003) in small groups in a guided reading format. This approach allowed me to meet the objectives for teaching language arts and social studies in my school. In addition to the comprehensive literacy program and the content knowledge components of social studies and language arts, there was another layer that I integrated into this process: the critical.

Critical Literacy

It became clear early in the year that examining American history through a lens of critical literacy related to students' social worlds. Learning the different ways that words and texts work seemed to be engaging, especially when students found real life applications. The following story describes a cornerstone experience for our class that helped us to think about ways of conceptualizing history.

One of the tasks of a teacher during the first weeks of school is to teach students how to move through the hallways so as not to disturb other classrooms. The expectation in this school was to use “line basics.” Line basics meant keeping your hands to yourself, walking in a straight line, being silent, and keeping a distance of no more than an arms’ length between you and the person in front of you. My administrator was insistent on the use of line basics so I tried to teach my students to conform to this expectation as much as I could without sounding militaristic.

It was about the second week of class (right before lunch) and I shared a humorous email with my class to lighten their mood. I recognized the students had experienced a structured and demanding morning and some laughter was in order. The email suggested several ways to stay sane in an insane world. One suggestion was to pull over on the side of the road and point a hair dryer at cars as they pass by so they would think you are monitoring their speed (like a police officer). Another suggestion was to skip instead of walking, whenever possible. So, moments later, the student teacher I was working with asked some students at the end of the line if they were going to skip on their way to the cafeteria. That endorsement was all that this spirited group needed to lighten their steps and proceed to giggle and bounce down the hall. The skipping spread to the front of the line where I was like the fuse on a firecracker. The principal came around the corner just as I was trying to contain the energy of the group and return them to proper “line basics” decorum. Her face was red and disapproving as she sternly and loudly reprimanded the class (and me, by extension). I felt shamed and so did the students.

Over my lunch hour I processed my frustration with my administrator's response. When I got past my anger, I puzzled over this event. I tried to think of ways to process it with my students and make it a learning experience because I definitely couldn't ignore it. I decided to turn it into a lesson of how history is constructed. I wrote an account of the event as I imagined it from the principal's point of view, one from an imaginary student's point of view who was sitting in a different class listening to the commotion in the hall, and one from my point of view. I also had one of my students write an account of her experience of what later became "the skipping incident." My plan was to read and examine these various accounts of the same event and discuss how and why they are written differently. We examined the details that some accounts included and excluded. We also considered the word choice and emphases within each account. We looked at the ways that the accounts positioned the participants in the event (me as the teacher, the students, the principal, the student teacher). After a long and rich discussion we established a list of things to remember when studying history. The following guidelines are statements in students' own words that hung on the classroom wall throughout the school year:

- 1) You aren't going to get the *real* story – there is no such thing as the *real* story.
- 2) People have different "sides" and perceptions... they see different things and see things differently.
- 3) Different people have different values and they experience things differently and remember them differently.
- 4) History changes over time because different people retell it and because people can't remember.

- 5) History is COMPLICATED... so we really have to THINK when learning history, what values are showing, who is telling the story, who is missing, etc.

Having this shared experience gave us a class-generated framework with which to interpret texts as we progressed through some of the defining periods in U.S. history and how they were characterized. It also introduced a more pluralistic frame for thinking about other issues that we discussed throughout the year.

What I did to integrate reading, writing, social studies and critical literacy was messy, to be sure. I attempted to plan each unit of study using one or two of the big ideas in the time period that we would address as a class. My angle was to teach the material using a critical approach. In other words I did my best to teach students from a critical pedagogy stance. For instance, I deliberately focused on issues of power, colonization, and ethnocentrism throughout American history. Using social studies as our content framework our main focus was American history from indigenous cultures and pre-colonization through the Civil War. Studying events that took place hundreds of years ago didn't naturally lend itself well to praxis. So, in many ways my emphasis was aligned with Australian advocates of critical literacy. At its heart is

...a view of language and text as always operating within and on, for or against, the inequitable sociopolitical arrangements of society. Central to its work therefore is the scrutiny of the linguistic and visual forms of representation and the implicit or explicit struggle over meaning within the available signifying systems. (Morgan, 1997, p. 23)

Despite my lack of emphasis on praxis students naturally gravitated to it. I was impressed when Carter and some of his classmates became relentless in their pursuit to become informed about homelessness, raise others' awareness and manage a fund raiser

for a homeless shelter in a nearby urban area. It started on a frigid February day with Carter's question during a class discussion, "What do homeless people do when it's this cold?" Led by Carter and his friends¹⁴ and with my guidance, the class organized a school-wide awareness campaign and fundraiser that raised more than \$1,500 for an organization that houses people and gives them support to gain necessary skills and secure jobs.

I think it is important to illustrate the critical and co-constructed nature of the pedagogy employed during the study, so the following is a brief account of how I responded to the interests of the students. I facilitated a mini-unit around the topic of homelessness: we researched the root causes of homelessness, discussed the statistics (tying in related issues of race and privilege), acquired educational materials from local agencies, invited a speaker (the director of the organization which received the fundraiser donation), and visited the shelter¹⁵. In an effort to publicize the fundraiser, we discussed ways to educate other school community members about homelessness, which became another form of praxis. The class made posters citing statistics about homelessness and crafted short announcements to read over the PA system during announcements.

Class conversations also brought praxis to the fore when we discussed standing up to racism, sexism, homophobia or occurrences of marginalization in their worlds (the lunch room, the classroom, their community, and their homes). So, while praxis was not a

¹⁴ They were a group of boys who lacked power in their social sphere. I suggested that they requested support from the principal and the student council to help facilitate this campaign and fundraiser. When they were turned down by both they still didn't give up. We decided to take class time and do it as a group with my guidance.

¹⁵ This field trip to the homeless shelter is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

formal focus of my teaching I remained open and supportive to forms of praxis that arose out of our class discussions and learning.

In designing the units for the Language Arts and Social Studies block I selected the big ideas on which we would focus and go into more depth. I selected the ones that would lend themselves best to critical kinds of teaching. I relied heavily on *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (Loewen, 1995) to identify the themes that have been are misunderstood and misrepresented in the American narrative. With my students I wanted to examine counter stories. Some of the big ideas that we examined more closely were: Indian Nations, Exploration, Colonization & Conflict, and Slavery. Table B below breaks down the four ideas, my rationale for choosing them as focal units including how the ideas incorporate aspects of critical literacy.

Table B: Focal Units in Social Studies, Rationale and Critical Literacy Connection

Big Idea	Why I Chose It	Example of a Critical Literacy Connection in that Unit
<p>Indian Nations: Learn about the sophistication and cultures of the many, varied native tribes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To foster respect and admiration for Native Americans • To humanize Native Americans; to challenge essentialized perceptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine two videos as texts that portray Native Americans during colonial times. Students document their observations about how Native Americans were portrayed and talked about in each video. Process as a class, noting the differences and their impacts on the viewer.

<p>Exploration: What could have been motivating European explorers? How did the explorers treat the indigenous people and what happened?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To recognize capitalism as an ideology • To learn how power was used and gained by Natives and explorers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare two different approaches to interacting with North American Indigenous people using picture books (<i>We Asked for Nothing & Thunder from the Clear Sky</i>)
<p>Colonization and Conflict: What happened and why?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To examine the causes of conflicts between Natives and Europeans • To learn how power was used and gained by Natives and colonists • To understand the historical and modern implications of colonization • To examine the beliefs and values that underlie colonization; to understand colonization as an ideology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine the positions and motivations of colonists and Native Americans using primary or secondary sources. Compare our findings with the textbook account.
<p>Slavery: How could it happen and why</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To better understand the history and the complexities of modern day race relations • To explore the realities and horrors of the middle passage and slavery • To invite discussions of race • To humanize African Americans; to challenge essentialized perceptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine two textbook accounts of the Middle Passage. Compare how many paragraphs are “spent,” what words are used, what details are included or left out. How do the accounts affect the reader and what values are hidden in the accounts?

There were some common strands, or themes, that arose as we progressed through the four big ideas. The strands were: resistance, power, respect, multiple perspectives, and critical discourse analysis (CDA), though we called it “looking at language.” For example, when we learned about exploration we read two different texts that depicted the battle of Montezuma: an old social studies text book account and an account that Howard Zinn included in his book *A People’s History of the United States* (1999). We used critical discourse analysis by comparing the words that were used in each version, how the different authors focused on different details of the battle, and how the authors positioned the actors in the event (as victors vs. perpetrators, conquered civilizations vs. victims). Students noted that there were differences in the ways that texts addressed colonization in early America. In one text it was portrayed as an effective tool to claim territory for one’s country and the other version it was discussed as an act violence, domination and thievery. The students asserted that an author values by omitting certain details. For example, one text noted that thousands of innocent people were tricked and killed and the other simply referred to it as a battle. Students discussed the ways that those authoring choices position us as readers.

We explored how the story might have been told differently if told from different perspectives in the event. Throughout our studies, I was aware of the temptation to think in terms of binaries. I tried to avoid implications of good and bad, right and wrong, black and white. I tried to challenge thinking by introducing thoughts that would illustrate the *complexities* of historical and social events.

In addition to weaving together language arts, social studies and critical pedagogy, I also made deliberate efforts to examine the recurring themes in multiple

settings. Oftentimes, our recurring discussions of resistance, power, respect, multiple perspectives, and CDA were applied not only to the historical concepts, but also modern day society, our community, our school or our classroom culture. For example, when we studied colonization, we applied colonizing thinking/behaviors in our modern day society and our community. One brief example of that was when students initiated a discussion about the Mexican American immigrants who work at the local McDonalds. The conversation focused on how they and their parents respond in various ways to the limited English proficiency of the Mexican American employees when placing orders and their frustrations when they receive the wrong items. Several students said that they and/or their parents believed the McDonalds workers should learn better English. Some moments of this conversation seemed to take on a ridiculing tone, which made me feel uncomfortable and judging by the looks on their faces, some students as well. Student comments included “immigrants should learn the language if they are going to move here” and “why did they come here if they don’t want to be American?”

This was one of many moments when I struggled. I knew what I wanted to say in response to this conversation that was reifying narrow and essentialized beliefs about Mexican Americans and attitudes about immigration. I wanted to model a response that would disrupt this kind of thinking. I also considered that any criticism of the “Mexican immigrants should learn English” discourse would also be criticism of the parents who espoused it. In addition, I understood that one criticism of critical literacy and social justice education is that teachers, in their authoritative positions in the class, often underestimate their tendency to impose certain views without allowing students to

challenge and redefine their own beliefs. For these reasons, I hoped that a student would model pushing back against this “group think.” So, I waited it out a little while longer. I was relieved when one student took the conversation in a different direction. One girl raised her hand (our conversations were combinations of hand-raising and natural piggy-backing flow) and looked at me with an expression that was apprehension mixed with determination. She said, “But Ms. Knutson, isn’t that like colonizing that was done to the Native Americans? Remember, they were forced to learn English and they were here *before* the Europeans.” That led to a rich and complex discussion and framed colonization as a relevant concept that impacts their lives, not only something that they read about in books.

Finally, the last concept that was an integral part of our learning was the concept of democracy. One of the challenges that critical literacy advocates have written about concerns the dangers of pluralistic or relativistic paradigms. Some theorists have claimed that we must reject those elements of deconstruction and progressive pedagogies that value personal voice and difference (relativism) over principles of social justice because they tend to inhibit any attempt to criticize a text or the world (e.g., C. Luke, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Scholes, 1985). Though the pedagogy that I employed was focused on deconstruction, as opposed to personal voice and difference, these frames impacted our thinking as we came to study history and society in more pluralistic ways. I decided to find a framework that aligned with critical literacy and social justice paradigms that we could study and use as a point of reference.

I considered different texts that outline the principles of democracy and social justice. I ended up drawing on a three documents: “The Principles of Democracy” and

“The Responsibilities of a Citizen in a Democracy” and “Human Rights” (see Appendix B) that I found online on a U.S. Government website. Having the principles from these documents as a tangible reference point would aid my teaching in two ways. First, it would help minimize the confusion brought on by a pluralistic lens. The framework of a well-defined democratic ideology could serve as a cornerstone as we interpreted and made sense of the history of our country. Second, it was a strategy that I employed to proactively defend myself against any potential backlash from administration or parents (which I half expected, considering the premise of the focus of this study – students’ response to teaching that critiques dominant discourses). These documents grounded our learning in values that I thought would be difficult to dispute. As it turned out, the backlash that occurred was minimal and will be addressed in the findings only to the extent that their feedback addressed the research question, their children’s response to the pedagogy I was employing in this study. The frameworks of democracy and human rights were useful for their other intended purposes, and were referenced occasionally after our initial study.

Conclusion

In this chapter I described some of the more contextual information needed to understand and interpret this study, including students, myself and my teaching. I introduced four of the students whose voices are more present in the following two chapters that detail my findings. Because I was dually involved in this study, as the researcher and as full participant, I explained some of my beliefs, background and motives. This inquiry focuses on student response to critical literacy education, so it was

important that readers understand what that teaching looked like. I outlined some of the curricular expectations in language arts and social studies and then described my approach to the two disciplines while also integrating critical literacy.

Teaching is a very personal endeavor. In this profession I have often heard the phrase, “You teach who you are.” As described in this chapter, my experiences and my own conscientization had an influence on my interests in critical literacy and, consequently, the development of my research questions. Clearly, my teaching and this research are both tied very deeply into who I am. In the process of data analysis I came to a point where I was to decide what major themes I would share with readers. Choosing to focus on the ways that critical literacy, critical pedagogy and our study of power and privilege was troubling for students added yet another layer of complexity to the analysis. I was not only examining students’ responses but also attempting to account for my own responses, which included second guessing my teaching decisions, self-criticism, and the vulnerability of sharing with an informed and critical audience the decisions I made behind the closed door of my classroom. These personal responses were active during the teaching, during analysis and writing of this study.

In turning a critical eye on my teaching practices and how I navigated very complex issues with ten and eleven year olds (not always well) I realized that this can be a scary process. I could plan decent lessons to teach practices of critical literacy, but I could not plan how this new analytical way of viewing texts would impact them as individuals and our class culture in such personal ways. In the next chapter, I will tell how students began to think about, or make sense of the concepts of power and privilege by thinking about them in relation to their own social lives.

I will start by sharing how the hierarchical social structure of the school became the vehicle by which we began to think about power and privilege. Then I will explain four themes that pertain to students' response to critical literacy as they applied analytical concepts to their own social worlds. First, I will examine the idea of "popularity" and the process by which students began to frame the social hierarchy differently. Second, I will share a metaphor that Carter entered into the discourse about power, called the "bull's eye" metaphor. Third, I will analyze how students began to think about privileging systems within their own social culture. Last, I will look at Jack's laughter during class discussions and show how it is used as a performance of power. Within that analysis I will also show how Marie and Derek responded to the laughter from their own unique places in the struggle.

CHAPTER 5: STUDENTS RESPOND BY READING THEIR OWN WORLDS

In Chapters 5 and 6 I share some of what I learned about students' response to critical literacy education in my classroom. Power and privilege are two key ideas embedded in critical literacy education and are complex and sophisticated concepts, even for most adults. Chapter 5 focuses on the ways students wrestled with understanding the concepts of power and privilege by thinking about how these systems function in their own social worlds. To do this, I share the four main threads of discussion related to students' struggle to understand power and privilege and the related tensions that we experienced. Initially, I discuss three ways that students applied conceptions of power to their own social worlds, which appeared as threads in the class discourse. The first centers on students' concepts of popularity and how their conceptualizations were reframed in terms of power. The second thread illustrates how one student's "bull's eye" metaphor became an image that he and others used to make sense of power systems at Richmond Intermediate School. The third addresses how we wrestled with and navigated privilege in our own classroom. The fourth theme looks at one student's laughter and how some of his peers and I came to view it and confront it as a performance of power, despite my initial hesitance.

In Chapter 6 I continue the discussion of my findings by examining some of the knotty issues directly related to students' *emotional responses* to learning to read the world and their worlds more critically. This includes a look at how such work with

students can position them in unintended and troubling ways and some of the ways that critical literacy education can potentially re-center classist and racist views.

Introducing Power and Privilege

Here I explain how I began to introduce my students to the concepts of power and privilege. I facilitated these lessons at the beginning of the year, from September through November. This introduction will help to establish additional context about the curriculum and my teaching before I share the significant themes that I noted in my students' response to learning about power and privilege.

The ideas of power and privilege are enmeshed in US History, which made them topics pregnant with possibilities for discussing these concepts. The content standards of the Social Studies curriculum included the study of indigenous peoples, explorers, colonization, the Revolution and Westward movement. In addition to the school district's content standards, it was my professional objective to also teach students habits of critical literacy. Being mindful of critical pedagogy principles, I was deliberate about incorporating several accounts of historical events (including primary and secondary sources) and ensuring that perspectives across different groups, specifically Native American, Latino/a and African American, were presented. Also, being attentive to the goals of critical literacy, I introduced students to the general concepts of Critical Discourse Analysis. For example, as we embarked on our study of US History, I facilitated several lessons, which illustrated that words, language and pictures do powerful work. Specifically, readers' interpretations are influenced by the details that are

included or omitted, the amount of “airtime” that some issues are given, the way words position people and ideas. And, as a related concept, students learned through telling their own personal historical narratives, that the author’s memory, perspective, bias, motivations and values affect the representation of history.

It was through the teaching and learning of US History that the idea of power was explicitly introduced. As we studied each negotiation or shift in power, for example the power shifts between the Native Americans and Colonists, we analyzed how and why the shifts took place. The class also identified some of the tools of power and privilege present in these shifts (Table C). We generated a list of these tools, posted it in the classroom and added to it as the year went on. Students began to use the words “power,” “oppression” and “marginalize” which were also explicitly taught. We also discussed, through CDA explorations, that the *way* a history is told is, itself, a form of power¹⁶.

Table C: Class-Generated List of Ways That People Gained Power throughout United States History

Stereotyping groups	“Power in numbers”
Making others look bad	Knowing the language that people in power use
Agreeing with people in power	Excluding others
Having weapons/fear	Knowing the climate/land/how to survive
Trickery/stealing	Make your way seem like the best way
Knowing war tactics	

¹⁶ See Chapter 4 for examples of CDA learning activities.

The conversations we had in Social Studies often addressed power dynamics, sometimes due to my facilitation and sometimes due to students' comments that would lead the conversation in a critical direction. Over time, class discussions got deeper, and from my standpoint, it seemed that students were getting accustomed to thinking about history in terms of deconstructing power. We focused on such questions as: Who gets to define it? Who has it? Who wants it? Why? How did people gain power during that time, in that culture? Whose voice is being left out? Who is benefiting from this? Who is being marginalized or oppressed? These questions became habits of thinking that were also applied to students' own experience as ten and eleven year olds immersed in their own social worlds and a result of this more personal application, the natural tension involved with learning from a critical stance was intensified.

Applying these habits of thinking to their own worlds helped students make learning about power and privilege more meaningful. However, in doing so students initiated threads of discussion that made them the subjects of examination. The complexity of their social worlds – whiteness, affluence, social status - became difficult for all of us to navigate.

Popularity as a Power Construct at Work in the Classroom

We began our study of power in historical contexts yet, after some time, students began to recognize nuances of power dynamics in their own social contexts. I first began to notice students' shift in thinking about power in early December in a conversation that I facilitated with them. This conversation was sparked by an interaction that I had with a student named Carter that morning.

While working with a small group of students on one side of the classroom I noticed Carter hastily exiting the classroom. This wasn't the first time he had left abruptly. This time I found him with his head in his hands in the corner of the stairwell just outside the classroom. I sat next to him and initiated a conversation about what was upsetting him. He explained his frustration with the "popular kids" citing that they exclude him, look at him funny and laugh at his ideas. Several other students' had expressed similar thoughts, which led me to believe that the way students conceptualized popularity and the ways it was working in their worlds was a broader and more permeating issue that needed to be addressed.

Throughout the previous few months, the term "popular kids" had been referenced in several one-on-one and small group conversations I'd had with students in my class when sorting out social issues. In addition, I had noticed the term "popular" used in several of the essays students had recently turned in. The essay topic I had assigned was *barriers*. Students were coached to write a personal essay on a barrier, or obstacle, in their life that they had overcome or were trying to overcome. Within the guideline of writing about a barrier, students chose their own topics. Almost one half of the students chose topics related to the negative impact of peer group dynamics, or pressures. Some essays addressed the difficulties associated with fitting into the 5th grade popularity hierarchy. Other essays touched on the social angst associated with teasing, marginalization and bullying that they were experiencing from other students, including their own friends. The following are four excerpts from student essays; the first three authors are boys and the fourth is a girl.

"Why are those kids looking at me? Are they talking about me? I don't know. I never felt like I was popular enough and feeling like I am not as important as

others. People thinking I am not as cool as others. And having friends think I'm trying to be cool but I'm just trying to make new friends. I feel like I have some popular friends and some not so popular friends and my not so popular friends, sometimes I think they are jealous because I have the ability to hang out with other people.... My friends can be a great friend, but sometimes they are mean. You have to be careful who you are friends with.”

“Sometimes I feel like an ant getting squished.... We are playing video games. I am having a great time with my friends. Then my friend makes a joke about me and it hits me like David Ortiz hitting a homerun. A lot of my friends tease me. I always tell them to stop. They never listen except for one of them ... I don't get why they don't stop! Sometimes I think they don't know the word stop. Sometimes I feel like a fish in a tank and people are laughing, banging on the glass. I remember when one of my friends said a joke about me in front of the whole hockey team including all the coaches. One of them was my dad. I felt like crawling into a deep hole.”

“I don't have a great deal of friends because of my favorites. A lot of people think that the things I'm interested in are for babies. I only have four friends. I feel like I have a bad personality about me that makes me feel like I am an unappealing kid.”

“My grade has all the ‘popular’ people in it. But there are also just the regular kids. The “popular” kids are kind of mean in my opinion. I have never wanted to be their friends until now, fifth grade. They always get what they want like the groups to be in, the prize, the desk... it truly bothers me. I would like to be the “popular” kid's friends but I am not sure if I can be my true self! ... I wish sometimes I could become skinnier like the popular girls because I am not as skinny as them.”

Throughout my own K-12 experience and my career as a teacher of adolescents, the social hierarchy has indeed been a powerful presence in schools. Students in previous years had raised issues related to popularity, but rarely, if ever, had they characterized them as overtly troubling as was the case this year. The high percentage of students who identified peer group dynamics as barriers in their lives concerned me and students' preoccupation with the so-called “popular group” caused me to ask myself new questions: How are students defining this popular group? Is this a fixed hierarchy in students' social worlds? Are students who don't consider themselves in the popular group

vilifying those who they consider in that group? How is the creation and use of the “popular group” construct working for and against students? Are the kids at the bottom of the social ladder feeling demoralized? Is there another way that I can help them understand and frame their social worlds? How can I help students become agents to construct their social worlds in more just ways? Students’ frustration and my self-questioning caused me to have a heightened awareness of social dynamics and how it was affecting students.

Shortly after the essay unit, I was present to listen to an informal discussion that, again, introduced issues of popularity and power. The conversation was in response to the method the physical education teacher used to choose teams that day. She had used the “captain” method, which means that the teacher picks two students to be captains and the captains then take turns picking students from the class to be on his or her team. Some are chosen in the first few rounds and of course, someone is always chosen last.

An impromptu conversation took place during unstructured snack time when we returned to the classroom. I listened from my desk with a notepad and did my best to capture some of the students’ comments.

- Captains are usually wanted to be popular. Is it because of athletics or because they have bigger groups of friends? If someone picks all the cool kids they get a major shove up the cool line.
- Why do people care about who is popular?
- I saw last Friday when the girls played soccer with the boys that if Zac tried to play or kick the ball other boys would say, “Zac, come on, you can’t play.” I know that Zac plays soccer and that he’s good, but even the boys who don’t play soccer were saying that just because Zac likes Pokémon.

- I was picked last. The only reason is that the guys think I'm not athletic. Chelsey was the first girl to get picked. Chelsey's popular.
- Teams are a lot of times "popular" against "not popular."

The essays and the overheard conversations, in addition to classroom observations and discussions with students about recess, lunch, hallway behavior and student journals, indicated that the "popularity" hierarchy in 5th grade was on the minds of, and in fact troubling, many students. I recognized it not only as a hierarchy but as a larger hegemonic structure that students themselves bought into and reified, even though many of them were disserved by it. Throughout my years working with adolescents, many students had come to me to express their pain as a result of being marginalized by or denied entrance into the "popular group." Until this year, I had responded by identifying and emphasizing those students' strengths and encouraging them to further develop their own friend groups. I'm sure there were other things I said to help them minimize the importance of the "popularity" dynamic; I don't remember what they were, but could empathize, yet I felt helpless in helping them navigate what was a real burden. I'm sure that students appreciated my care, concern and support, but my words simply could not deny the impact that "popularity" had on their sense of belonging and value within their peer group. Many adults minimize or disregard this as a natural adolescent reality that kids need to "get through." I fervently challenge this notion. Through the lens of critical literacy I began to view this issue as an issue of social justice. I would serve students better if I could help them analyze, resist and begin to transform their social worlds.

It was my conversation with Carter in the stairwell, however, that prompted me to examine this idea with the entire class as a concept related to power.

I facilitated a discussion with the class later that day, asking students to define “popular.” We started with a discussion about the assumption of “popular” meaning “well-liked.” I believed there were nuances of power embedded in the way students characterized popularity and I wanted to see if students would agree. After about 15 minutes one student proposed a new term, *social power*. She suggested that “popular,” the way they use it, really referred to kids who have power in their social group, not necessarily those who are well-liked. The new term hadn’t yet been defined, but many students agreed that some students had more power than others and *social power* was a better term than “popular.” Students began to question the idea of popularity and as they did, some students used the terms *social power* and *popularity* interchangeably. My understanding of this shift was that students were challenging the notion that individuals are in fixed positions as *popular* or *unpopular* and rather, students can access varying degrees of social power. Social power seemed to also imply a more dynamic or fluid relationship between the individual and his/her peers, similar to a currency to which everyone has access, albeit some more readily than others.

I saw parallels between students’ characterization of social power and the way we discussed the workings of power throughout US History. In the case of US History we identified specific strategies that people used to gain, or construct, power in a given setting. Often, during social studies lessons, students made connections between the power struggles they discussed in American History, struggles in our modern day society and their own social worlds. As such, they began to talk about power in terms of how it is gained, or constructed, based on social conditions, motives and values.

I wanted to continue with this discussion of the power structure of 5th grade and I felt that students did as well. I wondered if through continued examination students would begin to recognize popularity (the way it is oftentimes thought of and used) as a systemic power structure at work, as opposed to a value judgment of their worth as individuals. I also wondered if students might in fact construct a new way of thinking about how they understand and appreciate each other as individuals and as a group leading to a less stratified and more community-oriented classroom. While I hoped that it would be possible for us to rethink the concept of popularity in this way, I understood the pervasive nature of the popularity discourse in adolescent communities. I also understood that the meaning of popularity continued to be reified daily outside of the classroom: on the bus, on the playground, larger Richmond community and in the media (popular television programs, magazines, etc.). I recognized that a sense of belonging and feeling valued by your peers is a natural and powerful need regardless of how popularity is framed. In addition, I acknowledged that, as an ideology, it operated tacitly and within the group and in turn, within each individual student. In as much as we would attempt to dismantle the popularity discourse that was troubling many students, it would continue to exist in the community and within individuals. My aim was to suggest an alternate way to conceive of their social group and their place in it, a way that would push against the idea of popularity.

Just as we examined how power worked through United States History, we examined our own culture. As a large group, we began to list all of the factors that led to social power at Richmond Intermediate School. During the brainstorming, students pointed out that some factors that were listed *should* rightfully give social power in their

view of how their community should be (such as being “nice to other people” and some do give social power but *shouldn't* (such as “the size of your house”). I transcribed while the class generated that list which is shown in Table D.

Table D: Qualities that Student Associated with Social Power in 5th Grade at Richmond School

- Good Looks
- Attending pro sporting events
- Making fun of others
- The right clothes
- Having lots of friends
- Being athletic
- How nice you are
- Smarts
- Where you sit at lunch
- Vacations
- What you eat for lunch
- What shoes you wear
- Where you sit on the bus
- Being close with your teacher
- Being social with others
- “Stuff” that you have (iPod, etc)
- Being friends with the “popular” kids
- How generous you are
- What you read (i.e. sports books, teen books)
- Good jewelry
- Hobbies (Pokémon vs. Xbox)
- Bullying other students
- Being funny (in a good way)
- Being a “drama queen”
- The size of your house
- How rich you are

After this conversation took place, many students adapted the construct of power that had been established during US History discussions and found further parallels to

their social worlds, which will be examined in the next section. Another component to students' growing understanding of power and how it functions in groups was their recognition of a negotiated social structure and how it affected students at Richmond.

The social class signifiers identified by the class in Table D were acknowledged as part of their reality, but in this discussion and in several subsequent conversations, some of the signifiers were contested. For example, at the time of the drafting of this list, the common understanding was that playing Pokémon was an activity that was considered uncool. Students who participated in this activity only discussed it with their small group of friends when they had privacy. Other students openly teased this group of boys when they learned the group was interested in Pokémon. Months later in a whole-class discussion about mutual respect, Derek made a comment that took me by surprise. Derek, a student who was well-liked, yet associated with Jack who students characterized during interviews as "popular, but can be mean" interjected, "I think Pokémon is cool. I mean, I don't play it, but I think it's cool if other kids do. Kids should be able to play what they want." Other students who were not in the Pokémon group nodded their heads in agreement. In that moment, I was unsure whether Derek's comment was a brave move or one protecting his self-interest, or perhaps both.

Acknowledging his position of social power, he may have been using it to reposition Pokémon as a socially acceptable activity, publicly rejecting it as a tool of marginalization, thus redefining "cool" to include the group of students who play it. It was a deliberate move to disrupt and redesign the assumptions that drove the social class valuing system. It also occurred to me that Derek's comment may have been motivated by his desire to please me, the teacher and my motivations (equality, justice and respect)

and one who communicates frequently with his mother. Furthermore, he may have taken this stand to be considered favorably by others in the class who openly promoted the ideals of equality, justice and respect, especially the some of the girls. In that moment, I perceived his comment in the spirit of sincerity, as he was known to show compassion and attempts at leadership despite risking Jack's approval. Through further analysis, I recognize that all of the factors mentioned for Derek's motivation were likely at play, which illustrates the complex nature of student response to critical examination of students' own social worlds. Derek's stance shifted frequently, as you will also see in an exchange examined toward the end of this chapter, as he struggled to make sense of the workings of power and privilege and his roles therein.

This contestation was one of several of which I observed. However, as individuals within the group occasionally pushed to redefine the social class signifiers in ways that were more pluralistic, there were also counter movements to maintain the hierarchical status quo. Redefining how students can think and talk about their own social worlds in a way that would construct a less stratified and more community-oriented classroom culture aligned strongly with what Janks (2005) calls the "design" aspect of critical literacy. Using students' social worlds as the text, we examined the concept of popularity; how it was understood, constructed and how it functioned to reproduce beliefs about and positions of social status. Critical literacy helped us to unpack and examine this discourse to which they/we¹⁷ belonged. It has been said that texts are created

¹⁷ When I refer to students' social worlds, I acknowledge that while I am not an equal member of their world, I am also not separate from it. It is a culture of which I am inextricably a part but my participation occurs from an authoritative and limited position.

moment by moment, as the writer or speaker selects from a range of possible language, visual and gestural options... In making choices we draw on the discourses we inhabit such that many of the choices we make are social choices that are learned and often unconscious... These ways of making meaning become so natural for us that they seem inevitable – simply the way things are meant to be. We stop thinking of them as socially constructed realities (Janks, 2005, p. 4).

It was my belief that the way students understood, characterized and enacted social status actually reified the stratification among them. By examining students' social worlds as texts, critical literacy allowed us to begin to make the familiar, unfamiliar. It helped us to examine the norms, expectations and beliefs within our culture. In doing so we could explore how power was working in and through relationships, positionings and actions to potentially transform the norms, expectations and beliefs for a more just culture. In addition, students could learn, and actually be apprenticed in, capacities for critical literacy beyond studies of American history and social studies.

Next I will show how students began to make sense of power and privilege by applying the concepts to their own social worlds. First, I will share Carter's metaphor of the bull's eye which he and others used to describe the social stratification at Richmond School.

The "Bull's Eye" Metaphor

During the school year of this study there were many more student complaints about the disrespectful behavior of their peers than was typical, in my experience. I often wondered if students' sensitivities were heightened due to conversations we had had about the construction of social power/popularity. Sometimes, if the issues brought to my attention seemed to be broader or more permeating, I initiated a discussion with the entire class with the intention of constructing new learning about how to better respect and

understand one another. We discussed some of the broader issues that had been affecting students and some of the ways students could act as agents for social justice in school settings. The students raised a spectrum of social issues. It was reported that some students repeatedly laughed at other students, excluded them, resorted to name calling, gave menacing looks and made derogatory comments. More often than not, during the reporting of the complaints and the subsequent class discussions, students related the social issues with issues of power.

During one of the large group discussions a student presented the “bull’s eye” that became a touchstone metaphor in ensuing discussions. Carter referenced a quote from Barry Switzer, a well known football coach who once said, “Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple.” It hung near a drawing of a baseball diamond that was posted in the front of the room. I used this baseball diamond metaphor and visual in discussions related to privilege. Carter tied the idea of privilege and the baseball diamond to social class in fifth grade:

It’s kinda like the baseball diamond thing we talked about... that thing on the whiteboard. But with this [draws a bull’s eye on a notebook paper and points to the center] some people are born at the center of the bull’s eye and others are more toward the outside.

Carter added that “knowing how to get along with others, how to make friends, having games, the right clothes” are some of the factors that land students at the center of the social bull’s eye. Many students nodded and a few students extended Carter’s bull’s eye theory. The factors that Carter cited were similar to those listed as factors leading to social power (Table D). This indicated to me that students were beginning to understand power and privilege as similar and related concepts.

Jeff was one student who used the bull's eye metaphor in subsequent conversations to help him understand and articulate his thinking about his social world at Richmond school. Another student in the class, JP, was a disabled student who had been identified at the outer ring of the target, perhaps due to behaviors related to his disability. Though I was usually able to talk in ways that didn't directly identify students by name during conversations about students' social worlds, students were less able (or less willing) to craft their language in non-identifying ways. Jeff observed in a matter-of-fact tone, "It seems like the kids at the center of the bull's eye stick up for JP but they don't stick up for the kids in the middle circles." Another student added, "That's because the kids on the outside of the target aren't that close to being able to take away [the students at the center's] power."

In a videotaped interview with Carter toward the end of the year, I asked Carter about his bull's eye image. Carter had said that it helped his thinking.

Maggie: How does it help your thinking?

Carter: I would guess that it helps because, it helps me with, what I would think is, besides the fact that you have to aim and do all that, the arrow, if it's straight and everything like that, which kind of represents your money and stuff, um, you would more likely hit the target, and also the bow, which would represent being like someone who's really got like everything, like looks and the other things to fit in, I think that would kind of represent that bow part, and the last part is you.

In a later segment of that interview with Carter, I asked him if he thought there were groups, or cliques, in our class. He responded:

Carter: Can I draw? [Carter draws a target] So I think like the center, right here [points to the center of the target] would be kind of people who were friends with Jack and Derek, so Jack and Derek. So that's people friends with them, and then people in this part of the circle right here [points to the target, midway between the center and the outside ring] are kind of people who are friends with me and Jeff...

Maggie: Um, where were you last year?

Carter: Still in line to use the bow.

Students used Carter's bull's eye metaphor as a means to understand and articulate their thoughts about power and privilege at Richmond school. The metaphor was also incorporated into students' comments as a way to attach their ideas and experiences to the larger conversation about the workings of social power at Richmond. The metaphor also served students as it seemingly gave them a framework to talk about power working through relationships, as in Jeff's case when he observed strategic allegiances between the students at the center and the outer rings of the target. On one level, then, I observed the usefulness of the metaphor for students in their understanding and articulation.

Upon further analysis, I noticed another level of meaning in the underlying assumptions in the metaphor. In Carter's characterization of the bull's eye, there are four factors at play: the arrow, the bow, the target and the archer. The arrow and the degree to

which it is straight represent one's wealth, the bow represents having "looks and other things to fit in," the target is a static and layered social placement system with the most desired position at the center, and last, the archer, which represents the student.

At one point Carter states that the factors that "put you" at the center of the target are a combination of an individual's social skills and his/her family's wealth. He asserts that "knowing how to make friends" how to play games (sports) well are also factors, which implies that he believes that students do have some influence on their social position. This level of control could be what Carter associates with "aiming." But, he also states that having wealth makes you more likely to hit the center because you can then afford the "stuff" that gains respect in this culture. When Carter refers to his peers' placement on the bull's eye, his language implies that students have a fixed placement on the target, for example, he stated "Jack and Derek *are in the center*, me and my friends *are here*." At no time did Carter ever suggest within the context of the metaphor that the rings of social power could change, but he did state that students' positions on the target can be altered (last year he was still in line to use the bow). Carter sees himself as an unfortunate player in a game of social archery where some students are privileged with better equipment to land at the center, a game over which he has very little control in his placement on the social target.

Privilege Associated with Social Power

Privilege was a concept that naturally tied into discussions of power. When students made sense of privilege in classroom discussions and characterized it to me in interviews, the conversations were focused on the privileges of wealth. I found it

interesting that, despite their participation in explicit learning activities that looked at privileges of whiteness, only one student, on an end-of-the-year survey, acknowledged whiteness as a form of privilege. The responses below (Table E) list the responses to the question “Think back to the baseball diamond metaphor about privilege on the whiteboard and the discussions we had about it. What privileges put you at the base you were born at?” Most students understood privilege as being a combination of factors and therefore, listed more than one. Student responses were broken into factors and sorted into four categories: wealth-associated factors, family-related factors, whiteness, and other. Fourteen students out of twenty-four responded by listing ways they characterize privilege in their lives. The remaining seven students gave responses that didn’t answer the question. In those cases, students told what base they thought they were born on but didn’t tell why, commented on the power they or others have, and one stated that he didn’t understand the question. The number in parentheses indicates how many students cited it as a factor when there was more than one.

Table E: Students Characterize their Privileges

Wealth-associated factors	Family-related factors	Whiteness	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living a nice lifestyle • My dad/mom has a good paying job (4) • I have a lot of stuff (2) • Not being homeless (2) • The clothes I wear (2) • My money (3) • Good house (4) • My family is wealthy (2) • Being able to go places and see the world • All of the things I have (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loving mom and dad (3) • Nice family (2) • Encouraging parents • The amazing, wonderful, talented, beautiful people in my life • My parents had great lives that made me start out better • Education of parent(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was born white 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health (3)

Markers of wealth were clearly connected to social status, which emphasized consumerism. This is important considering that consumerism affects children's priorities in ways that undermine the development of authentic identity and the ability to connect with other people (Kline, 1993). Children learn to judge themselves and others by the desirability and quantity of toys that they own, often setting off competitive comparisons between peers. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2006) assert that valuing others according to material possessions potentially reinforces the internalization of class superiority, further undermining children's capacity to relate caringly and justly with others. Students overwhelmingly tied personal and familial wealth to class privilege, claiming that students with wealth have an easier time attaining social status and navigating difficult social predicaments. They conceived of this social privilege as a combination of several external factors. When students talked about privilege and how it works in their 5th grade social worlds, there was evidence that students recognized who had certain privileges (and who didn't) and what effect privilege had.

Carter was perceived by himself and others as someone who had little social power or privilege. His family was of little means, which was a big social marker in this community. He had a small group of friends who also did not possess many of the factors that students at Richmond valued. He characterized the power structure using his bull's eye metaphor, which implied that he understood the power structure to be a static organization of social structure. Carter recognized that if a student was deemed in the "popular group" then he/she benefited from certain privileges. In the following interview excerpt I asked Carter to tell me more about the groups that he had referenced.

Maggie: What makes the groups different?

Carter: Money, power and the ability to wear and act what you like. If they just get what they want when they want, I don't think I'd like them very much, but if they actually earned what they got, I think they'd be a lot better.

Carter' comment shows that he distinguishes between earned social power and unearned social power, or privilege. Several times, Carter implied that in his opinion, some students were socially privileged, insulated from social repercussions to which others were vulnerable. One such statement regarded school bus interactions:

In the bus, I think it's kind of a gamble game, because um, if you're really popular you only have to watch *a little bit* of what you say. If you're *not* popular, if you say a single thing out of line, you are kind of out from the back [of the bus] for like a minute or a day.

Another statement that Carter made during a class discussion indicates his understanding of how privilege worked in the social world at Richmond. Those who have power, also have the luxury of moving in their own reality, protected from the struggles of less powerful others:

Even though the power issue was a little different in history, it still goes on right now. Like whoever is the most popular kids, they're the ones with the most power and the same things happen like leaving some people out and including other people and not respecting other people because if you are in power, you really don't have to.

Jack, the student considered by himself and others as one who has much social power acknowledged his own social privilege, or protection from social vulnerability:

- Maggie: In your survey, questionnaire thing, you said that you think you have a lot of social power in 5th grade. What does that mean for you? I mean like, what effect does having social power have on you?
- Jack: Helps me because a lot of people don't like tease me that much at all, except my friends, but they are just joking.
- Maggie: You don't get any bullying or teasing?
- Jack: No. Probably [pause... thinking] I don't think I've had that *at all* this year.

McIntosh (2005) claimed that “privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate.” It became clearer to me as the year progressed, that there was an advantaging system at work in the subculture of my students, similar to the privileges enjoyed by men and whites in our society. The students who were considered of low social power endured more social maltreatment from their peers, and some of those who were considered of higher social power showed more domineering behaviors toward peers. Jack and some others who were considered of high social power were granted certain permissions to escape ridicule, judgment, and marginalization and exercised their ability to dominate others in overt and sometimes more tacit ways. Of course, this wasn't surprising, but our focus on power and privilege brought it to the forefront. Closely observing, experiencing and openly discussing these dynamics added a new level of awareness and understanding for both me and the students.

The ways that students characterized family-related factors of privilege in Table E is also of note. They reported “parents had great lives that made me start out better,” “parents' education” and “nice family” as factors that they associated with privilege. At

the time, I looked at the nature of these associations as an indication that students understood privilege to be Discourse-related and perpetuating. However, after further thought, I now wonder if these associations in some way reify negative beliefs about families who do not benefit from privileges of wealth, whiteness or an upbringing in the dominant discourse. Juxtaposed with the short list under whiteness (one student observed whiteness as a factor of privilege), I sometimes question whether I should have found additional ways for students to make connections between whiteness and privilege. Or perhaps they couldn't easily connect with ideas of white racial awareness in an all white setting. Or did they tacitly resist such connections? Reflections about my teaching practices during this study such as this line of questioning have extended beyond the school year and throughout the process of analysis. They illustrate the internal, professional tension that critical pedagogues can experience as we navigate our way through teaching and learning that is profound, complex and personal in nature. Another example of this internal tension is presented in my struggle to understand an especially complicated performance of power in my classroom - laughter.

Laughter as a Performance of Power

Laughter is usually associated with joy, humor and fun. That is probably why it was a struggle for me as I began to identify it as a means to dominate others. I like to see students laughing, having fun and enjoying school. I appreciate students as fellow human beings who want to be happy. I also acknowledge the complexities of laughter. I know that some people (including me) use laughter to diffuse stressful situations or inadvertently respond with smiling or laughter in uncomfortable situations. With that, I

was also cognizant of the way that critical literacy and the study of power and privilege can bring students deliberately to uncomfortable places. The discomfort was in the context of the learning we did as a class and within themselves (especially in this context of White, predominantly upper-middle class community) and I wanted to create space for students to respond authentically. So, given the variety of reasons for laughter and the uncomfortable nature of critical pedagogy, I tended to be passive to students' laughter even when I observed that it made other students uncomfortable.

As time passed, however, I began to consider whether the laughter was being used as a performance of power causing other students to feel judged, inhibited and marginalized. Again, Jack was a student identified by himself and others as a powerful student in the school. He and a few of his friends laughed after certain students spoke during class conversations, and usually a handful of other students turned to Jack to see if he was laughing. This usually occurred during conversations regarding social dynamics/issues related to the troubles students had navigating the unstructured spaces in their day; at recess, in the hallway, or on the bus for example. As students constructed their understanding about power and privilege they seemed to want to analyze social scenarios as texts. They told about their experiences in those spaces, and others added their own experiences or shared their thoughts and insights. The conversations positioned students in vulnerable ways because they were struggling to understand difficult concepts within an act of public self-examination of themselves, others and their culture.

In setting up for class discussions I was deliberate about how we organized ourselves. We were seated on the floor in the shape of a large oval in an open space in the classroom (about twenty four students, an occasional Educational Assistant and I). I

asked students to sit in this way for class discussions so that we could all see one another and was overt about my purpose, which was that everyone felt physically to be an equal part of the group. I was clear with students about my purposes and when someone chose a chair or sat on a desk I responded by reiterating the expectation that everyone sit on the floor, in the circle. I was aware that the ways students position themselves in the classroom influences, and is influenced by power (C. Lewis, 2001), so it was important to me that students cooperate with this norm. Sometimes students came in late or couldn't find room in the circle so they sat outside the circle. If students didn't naturally form an opening in the circle I stopped what we were doing and asked everyone to create room for him/her. When some students found a place in the circle but on a chair or a bean bag, I insisted that they sit directly on the floor like everyone else with a gentle reminder such as, "I need you to sit on the floor like everyone else so that we are all sitting equally." Of course, there were plenty of times that impromptu class discussions occurred at times when students were situated physically in other ways, but when a conversation was planned or anticipated, we conducted the conversation in the oval structure.

The oval formation served the group well in terms of keeping students engaged. It was a space where every student was front and center, no one could hide. This also meant that every action was visible to everyone else, which made students' responses to each other's comments more noticeable.

What I began to notice was Jack smiling and slowly shaking his head and/or snickering during or immediately after another's comment. I observed his body and shoulders shaking as he looked down and could also sometimes hear his laughter. He often also partially covered his face with his hands and sometimes put a hand to his

mouth to whisper to a neighbor. Laughter wouldn't have seemed odd if his peers' comments were intended to be humorous, but the laughter I'm referring to occurred after certain students shared sincere and thoughtful comments that were *not* intended to be funny. When he laughed, other students noticed and I began to note a pattern. I observed students looking to him to see if he was *going to* laugh when certain students shared, and often times he did. Others sometimes participated, but it was clear that Jack was the common denominator and the initiator of this behavior. In addition, though I never noticed Jack laughing at *me*, I observed other behaviors that seemed to resist my authority during those conversations. When all students were expected to sit in the oval and participate in the discussion, Jack, much more so than others, resisted the norms of the group. For example, he played with a trinket (ball, marble, wheel from a toy car) until I intervened, sat in a chair or chose to lay down versus sitting. Though I considered that Jack's behavior could be related to an undiagnosed attention disorder, I rejected that notion because they only seemed to appear in settings that interrogated the social dynamics of Richmond. These behaviors undermined the serious tone of the discussion and challenged me as the authority in that setting. Coupled with his "high power" position and the pattern of other disrespectful behavior toward his peers, his laughter had a marginalizing and intimidating effect on others.

There were four students who received this reaction from Jack more so than others. Three of the four had expressed to me their frustration with Jack's behavior toward them, referring to derogatory comments, name calling, excluding, etc. that occurred in the hallway, at recess or at lunch where there was limited supervision. In addition to considering attention disorders, I wondered if Jack's laughter was simply

insensitivity or typical fifth grade “squirrelyness”. After all, it is not uncommon for students to be off task, interrupt others or whisper to those around them. This seemed different. Due to the nature and timing of the laughter, and how other students were responding, I began to recognize it as a form of intimidation that he was using to mark and maintain his social status. I wondered, to what degree he was aware of his behavior, his motivations and the effects that it had on others.

When I recognized a pattern of Jack laughing after other students’ comments, I decided to make it part of the discussion, since it was clear that all or most of the class was aware of it. I asked him why he was laughing. He stated that he didn’t know why he was laughing and that he was “probably uncomfortable” and that he “can’t help it.” I explained to him that no matter what his reasoning, his snickering during class discussions made others uncomfortable and that it was disrespectful, and therefore it was not acceptable. I conceded that his laughter might have been due, in part, to his discomfort with the topic but that he needed to try his best to refrain. I felt somewhat torn in this admonition, because I wondered if the deconstruction of power that we had undertaken had somehow created a dynamic where he felt he needed to redefine or protect his status. I was compelled to model for students what it looks like to recognize, name and discourage instances of marginalization, but I also recognized that Jack was a ten year old boy who was put in my care to teach and nurture. As the teacher, I understood that decisions I made in the classroom and how I treated students could have great impact on how they were positioned (and not always in a predictable way). It seemed to me that Jack was not going to be willing to give up the behaviors that gained power for him. While I recognized that the causes of laughter are complex I also

acknowledged that those complexities made laughter a means to engage power relations that is challenging to detect and confront.

When I witnessed Jack's marginalizing laughter, part of me wanted to minimize Jack's power using the power I had as the teacher, but I knew I couldn't... and shouldn't. What I decided to do was continue to question it and help the class think about how certain behaviors position others. In response to such laughter, I often asked Jack and anyone else who participated in it, in a non-shaming manner, to step outside the classroom if they were feeling the urge to laugh due to "discomfort." They were to reenter the discussion when they felt they had regained composure. This sent a message to all students that I noticed it, that I perceived it as intimidating and that it was considered outside of our norms. The topic of Jack's laughter arose several times as we continued our study of power due to the connections students were making to their social worlds. I reasoned that our examination of laughter and discussion of it as a tool used to marginalize or intimidate others would make it a less desirable behavior, though I anticipated that it would not stop completely. It didn't stop, nor seem to decrease at all. I questioned him about it one-on-one, in addition to some students directly confronting Jack during class discussions.

One such instance occurred toward the end of the year when we were having a class discussion reflecting on events of the school year and what we had learned. The exchange took place between Jack, Derek (the friend sitting next to Jack), Corey (Jack's friend who Jack picked on frequently), John and Marie (both students who seemed to be relatively less affected by the tension of the social hierarchy and were beginning to push against social norms that marginalized others).

Critical Discourse Analysis of a Conversation Involving Laughter as a Performance of Power

I was perplexed by Jack's laughter and how I could gain insight into whether it was related to critical pedagogy, specifically our study of power and privilege, and if so, how. I decided to examine the network of discourse patterns related to Jake's laughter and his peers' response to it and thus employed the tools of critical discourse analysis (CDA). I chose CDA because it enables researchers to examine identities within social practices and discourses. The analysis allows researchers to better understand how language functions within the context of the study to disrupt or reproduce status quo and power relations (Rogers, 2004, p. 4). In fact, Rogers (2004b) argues that

...CDA explicitly addresses social problems and seeks to solve social problems through the analysis and accompanying social and political action. The intention of the analyst in this view of 'critical' is explicitly oriented toward locating social problems and analyzing how discourse operates to construct and is historically constructed by such issues. In this perspective, analysts believe that analyzing texts for power is not enough to disrupt such discursive powers. Instead the analyst must work from the analysis of texts to the social and political contexts in which the texts emerge. (p. 4)

It is important to give some context before sharing the excerpt and the analysis.

The following discussion begins with a reference to a previous instance of Jack and Derek's laughter, but they also laugh during this discussion. Marie begins this excerpt by reflecting on the previous class discussion when we addressed some events that took place during lunch and recess that day. Leading up to that previous discussion, Marie and a few of her peers were upset and crying as they entered the room after recess. After some initial investigation it became clear that this warranted a whole-class discussion.

We gathered in a large circle for a conversation that lasted about 20 minutes. During much of that time Jack and Derek laughed, and it became disconcerting considering the vulnerability that some students were showing. I interrupted the flow of the discussion two times to remind Jack and Derek that their laughter seemed out of place and that it made me, and probably some others, uncomfortable. They responded by sharing that they felt uncomfortable with the high level of emotion that was being shared and that was the reason for their laughter. It was a very awkward discussion and I could see how this could be the case, so I asked them to leave the room if they felt they needed to laugh to relieve their discomfort. They were invited to re-enter the classroom and the discussion at any time they felt they could productively listen to or engage in the conversation without laughing. In the following conversation¹⁸ Marie starts by referencing that conversation:

Marie: It's kinda like when that whole crying emotional thing went on, I was kinda like, embarrassed because I didn't know what people were gonna say, you know? But then it's like, people, they understand.

Derek: Sometimes I wish I didn't laugh in those moments. It's like weird, I was like, it's like everyone just comes in crying, and then/

Corey: What happens is that, it seems like some people, like when they, like it's like about race, let's say you're white and you dislike blacks, like it seems like the reaction is like, like we *should* just, the reaction was more like, we're all humans, we're all of value.

¹⁸ See Appendix B for CDA transcription notation key.

((In the video footage of this event, one can see Corey take visual note of Jack's laughter. Jack also puts his hand to his mouth and whispers something to Derek sitting next to him. Derek smiles but tries not to engage with Jack.))

And like a lot of people's reactions, when they're, like when they, when they, when they feel uncomfortable, they laugh, they don't even think bad about it, you would think, like you'd kinda regret it, wish they could take that back.

Maggie: What's so funny?

Jack: (unintelligible...) like just something funny, it looked like - ((continues to laugh))

Maggie: What was funny about it?

John: Jack, you think whenever *Corey* does something, you think its *funny*!
((said in an accusatory tone))

Jack: ((Says while still laughing)) Derek started laughing and/

Derek: *Jack!* Why do you blame it on *me*?

Maggie: You guys were both kinda chuckling. Why do you laugh when he is making an intelligent comment?

Marie: Yeah! I kinda like/

Jack: I don't know, it's like, I don't know, he just went like this-

Maggie: You guys, we already talked about how it appears to other people when you laugh, if you're making a comment and you see, let's say, the girls

over there laughing, you know how it would make you feel so why do you do it to your own friend?

Derek: He knows we're joking.

Marie: Yeah but maybe that's not always/

Maggie: I don't know, ((turns to Corey)) did you see them laughing?

Corey: Yeah, and I was wondering why they were laughing.

Maggie: I was wondering why they were laughing too.

I employed Fairclough's CDA framework for this analysis¹⁹, which is divided into three levels of analysis: description, interpretation and explanation. Appendix A is a breakdown of the dialogue according to the three levels of analysis.

What struck me most in this dialogue was the ways that students (and I), turn after turn, attempted to disrupt the social status quo, namely Jack's persistent laughter, by identifying it as a performance of power that intimidates others. Corey was at times socially embraced by Jack and other times marginalized, frequently by means of laughter. Corey's submissiveness toward Jack shows in his language. His repeated use of the word "like" and the lack of fluency (verbal clutter: repeated words and phrases, multiple attempts at stating his thought) indicate that he was carefully crafting his message so as to make sure that he didn't offend Jack specifically. In fact, he made a point to avoid naming Jack. He indirectly called attention to Jack's marginalizing laughter using vague language and renaming. His use of "some people" and the indefinite pronouns "you/your" and "they" allow Corey to state his observation without implicating Jack. He

¹⁹ Chapter 3 reviews why I chose to use Fairclough's approach for this analysis.

also uses the pronoun “we” when he draws a parallel between the laughter and racism, including himself as a white person and indicating that he considers himself someone who, as a white person, could be guilty of marginalizing others. Shifting use of indefinite pronouns and the use of the all inclusive “we” are words that make his confrontation less accusatory. These strategies are often engaged when people want to avoid a conflict or when they want to discuss the bigger issue without triggering defensive responses. According to Fairclough (2001), the pronoun “we” “serves to corporate ideologies which stress the unity of a people at the expense of recognition of the divisions of interest” (p. 106). In this sense, Corey indirectly confronts Jack’s behaviors and at the same time uses language that establishes unity with Jack and others in the class. Corey’s language is indicative of his conflicted relationship with Jack.

Corey’s comment also avoided confrontation when he implied that “others” laugh because they “feel uncomfortable” which framed it as innocent rather than deliberately insensitive or marginalizing. However, although Corey implied that the laughter is not deliberate, at the same time there was an underlying contradiction because he also stated that it is a behavior that one should “think bad about,” “regret” and “wish they could take back.”

The turns of Marie and John both confronted Jack and his laughter. John also uses “whenever” to show that, in his perception, Jack laughs in response to *everything* that Corey does, whether it’s funny or not, which calls into question Jack’s motives. John’s interjection disrupts Jack’s performance of power. John and Marie’s willingness to confront this issue so boldly in front of Jack and the rest of the class demonstrate their agency in advocating for a more just classroom environment. This was interesting to me;

neither of them held positions of high social power in the class, yet they were willing to take a stand by questioning Jack's behavior. Marie and John had both demonstrated agency in other instances as well, more so as the year went on, especially in regard to advocating for highly marginalized peers. They did this subtly, by resisting the norms of exclusionary practices, thereby helping their peers gain entrance into social groups, and by publicly valuing the comments and possessions of their marginalized peers. Whether John and Marie were more influenced by the community norms and expectations that I encouraged or by their own sense of justice, I do not know.

Interestingly, Derek's turns in the dialogue are conflicted. Derek initially brought the topic of laughter-as-oppression into the conversation by acknowledging that his laughter during a previous discussion was regrettable. He expressed remorse for that behavior, which indicates that he understands it as a behavior that is harmful to others. Then, a moment later, he engages with Jack's laughter during Conner's turn, despite some effort to resist it. I questioned Jack and him about the cause of their laughter. Jack indicated that Derek started the laughing to which he replied, "Jack, why do you blame it on *me*?" The notion that there is blame involved shows that the laughter is a behavior with which he does not want to be associated; it is wrong, or at least that others perceive it that way. In his next turn however, he switches back to defending the laughter stating that Corey "knows we're joking." This dialogue is illustrative of the uncertainty and shifting that I observed in Derek. He wavered between his desire to please Jack and hence, strengthen that allegiance and his desire to "do the right thing" according to the norms that had been constructed. Derek's inconsistency illustrates the complex, recursive

and sometimes paradoxical nature of critically examining class ideologies and structures while also maintaining desired personal relationships and identities within the class.

Jack's turns in the exchange minimized the seriousness of this behavior. First, he continued to laugh while he offered a glib reason for his laughter, "...just something funny..." Second, he deflected blame toward his friend Derek, which can be interpreted as a lack of accountability but it may also show that he wanted to avoid potential backlash from classmates. This would help maintain his ability to treat others poorly while minimizing negative social repercussions. Third, considering that Jack laughed *at the exact moment* that Corey was addressing laughter as something that is hurtful is worthy of note. Is Jack's laughter a deliberate attempt to showcase and maintain his power within the group? Does Jack laugh in the face of Corey's comment so as to show that he is unaffected by the moral implications of his actions? Or is he oblivious to the affect that his laughter is having on other students? I also wondered if gender was playing a role here and if Jack is subverting my authority as a female by repeatedly disregarding class norms that I was trying to reinforce.

Jack's Laughter as Resistance

Laughter is a normed behavior, especially in child settings. Because of this it was more tacit and often unclear as a performance of power. Laughing is a simple response to a complex interaction of the body, incorporating dimensions of cognition, emotion, pleasure and social inter-connectedness. Laughter is considered a normal and healthy human reaction. It can be viewed as negative if it is deemed inappropriate or impolite due to social context (i.e. at a funeral), excessive (i.e. giggles at the dinner table) or if it is

being used in an overtly mocking or ridiculing manner. The last of those instances is what complicates Jack's laughter in this study. By laughing, but doing so in an indirect way, Jack's motives were suspicious, but ambiguous enough to go unchallenged for a period of time. Over time, I began to recognize Jack's laughter as a performance of power brought on by challenges to his masculine identity and resistance to the goals of critical literacy.

In the initial stages of my analysis I disregarded gender as a factor that was influencing Jack's behavior. His male teachers the previous year reported similar behaviors, stating that they also observed Jack acting in ways that were "above the rules." However, it has been asserted that the role of "teacher" (whether the teacher identifies as male or female) is inscribed with feminine expectations and discourses (Finders, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Walkerdine, 1990). My perception of Jack was strongly associated with activities and positionings that are considered part of the masculine engendered body. For example, Jack was the quarterback on his football team, a key player on both his hockey (his dad was the coach) and his baseball teams. He had an independent disposition and exhibited a lack of vulnerability. In addition, I observed many dominating behaviors, such as insisting on being the captain, deciding on what game should be played and who gets to play, and assigning positions in the games. Jack's identity, being so strongly connected to masculine ideologies, was likely threatened and in conflict with male or female teacher authorities who espouse values of caring, community, nurturing and egalitarianism.

I believe Jack's laughter was also in response to the goals of critical literacy. Critical literacy is grounded in the view that social contexts are in constant states of conflict for power, status and resources. Those struggles are carried out by unequal

participants, for some groups are privileged by, and to some degree, control the ideologies and discourses that create their dominant position. But, since these ideologies and discourses are *constructed*, they can be reconstructed. Individuals can more effectively resist and change ideologies that perpetuate privilege through critical literacy. Thus, it stands to reason that some of those who benefit from privileging ideologies and discourses would disrupt and resist critical literacy processes.

This clearly complicates the idea of resistance. Within the context of social justice education, resistance is often viewed as an important effect as educators strive to empower individuals to identify, resist and challenge injustices. Resistance is often viewed as revolutionary in its effects. In this case, however, I argue that Jack's laughter was a different kind of resistance. It was a reaction; a complex response to the larger dynamics and movements going on in our class that challenged the very social systems from which he benefitted. In the example of critical discourse analysis, Jack laughed *while* students interrogated this kind of performance of power (without naming Jack directly). I view this as attempt to disrupt the trajectory of the discussion, to intimidate the students who were interrogating it and to challenge me, as the authority, as I had previously deemed that that kind of laughter offensive.

I argue that Jack's laughter was a reaction of the body, a subversive act of resistance to critical literacy and its aims and their potential effects on him. I was encouraging and participating in the interrogation of school discourses, their effects and potential reconstructions of those discourses for more equitable effects. In the transcript, Jack's laughter was being challenged first indirectly and then directly. I now question whether Jack was capable of articulating his response or if perhaps the norms that were

created through class discourse and through my passion for critical literacy established an environment that inhibited open resistance. Cherland and Harper (2007) discuss the body as a site for the inscription of power and culture and also, the ways in which the body resists regimes and discourses to which it is exposed. They assert that the body is a site for resistance which could explain Jack's laughter. Additionally, Grosz (1994) argues that the body is "the field on which the play of powers, knowledges and resistances is worked out... yet its materiality also entails a resilience and thus also (potentially) modes of resistance to power" (p. 149). She comments further:

...[But] bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable. It is the ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their means of control, which fascinates me. (pp. x-xi)

I approached the issue of Jack's laughter, despite its complicatedness. My goal was to examine laughter (in this context) and its effects on others in the classroom. This required vulnerability and, potentially, courage on the part of students who were being negatively affected by it. I identified it as a behavior that caused others to feel uncomfortable and even intimidated some students in class discussions. I considered that the laughter may not have been intended to intimidate or be hurtful, and possibly his body's resistance to the alternative discourse that challenged the social status quo. Also, I realized that I was not omniscient about students' intentions. I reasoned that when this behavior had been publicly positioned as a performance related to power, intended as such or not, that Jack would acknowledge its harmful effects and discontinue it, or at least begin to rethink it. So, while I and some students did make clear that the effect for others was negative, I didn't want to position Jack or Derek as students who desired to

hurt others. As discussed earlier, Jack's laughter continued and it was something with which I struggled the entire year.

Personal Reflection

As the teacher I was an embedded member of this culture. I also felt a strong moral obligation to mindfully facilitate the class by honoring each child as an intellectual/scholar, a vulnerable person trying to navigate their social world and as a work in progress. In addition, I felt responsibility to incorporate the skills, rigor, and content in academic disciplines, including critical literacy. These multiple roles and obligations created feelings of paradox. As a result, when we entered into discussions about their social worlds in attempt to question and challenge social injustices, individuals could feel singled out or spotlighted. In effect, interrogating students' social worlds as texts (as both they and I began to do) caused many students to feel *more* vulnerable and threatened.

I was mindful about trying to navigate these conversations in ways that minimized potential negative impacts on students and the group, but this was a constant struggle for me. With careful facilitation I attempted to approach discussions in ways that would allow us to confront and analyze issues of power in our classroom as texts through a lens of critical literacy without spotlighting or blaming specific students. I was not always successful, but I tried to choose my words and guide conversations carefully so as not to frame issues around specific students and actions, rather to examine how motivations, norms and expectations within the group functioned with privileging and marginalizing effects and how they could be redesigned. Using social worlds as texts for critical literacy

also allowed students opportunities for engagement in praxis that impacted a world in which they were invested and in which they could affect change. Students' acknowledgement of their participation in the construction of norms and expectations in their social worlds also positioned them as potential change agents.

Conclusion

The deconstruction of power and privilege was a complex, paradoxical and iterative undertaking. Events throughout United States history served as our backdrop to study power and privileging systems. The troubling issue of "popularity" became a central focus for our study, as we struggled to navigate it and demystify it. So, as a group we analyzed and questioned the workings of Richmond class system of popularity, or social power. Carter's "bull's eye" metaphor was useful for him and others as a means to better understand and articulate their thinking about social power. The metaphor also helped me to gain insight as to how students were thinking about social power. Students identified that some of their peers had certain privileges that allowed them to avoid oppressive actions of others and permissions to treat others poorly without social repercussion. It was also noted that socially privileged students also had the benefit of veering outside of the social norm without negative consequence. I began to notice that Jack, a socially powerful and privileged student enacted his position using laughter, what I deemed a performance of power. This realization magnified some of the complexities that I encountered as the teacher and researcher.

My positioning and limited viewpoint as the teacher and researcher caused discord for me about how to respond to Jack's laughter and other behaviors that overtly

and tacitly marginalized others. I had an ethical responsibility as a teacher and researcher to bring no harm to my students. By making workings of social power explicit with students I hoped to be a participant in the construction of a more equitable and empowering climate for all students. The examination of power: how it works, how it is maintained, who benefits from power systems, etc, was messy work. It caused students to explore their own belief systems and valuing systems and to turn a critical eye on their own culture, their peers and themselves. I navigated the multiple roles of facilitator of learning, authority figure, classroom member, and researcher. While these multiple subjectivities gave me insights into students and contexts, they also limited my ability to fully participate in any one role. I attempted to shift among these sometimes competing roles and to attend to responsibilities inherent within each, and especially regarding my obligation to students to “do no harm.”

This chapter gave an overview the four main threads of discussion related to students’ struggle to understand power and privilege and the related tensions that we experienced. In Chapter 6, I will focus specifically on students’ emotional responses to those struggles. I deliberately evoked the affective as it is requisite to critical literacy education. The affective makes us care about things and Cherland and Harper (2007) remind us

...advocacy work in literacy education must always be a cognitive-emotional, mind-body experience... Thus, teacher’s, learner’s and researcher’s, pleasure... are embedded in advocacy work in literacy and need to be considered even as such feelings defy control ... But even attending to such particularities, research and pedagogy liberatory or otherwise cannot be entirely predictable in its effects because notions of pleasure and other emotions and affects are embedded in how we read the word and world and troubles even our most innocent efforts. (p. 244)

The next chapter will examine the unpredictable nature of students' response specifically looking at some of the thorny issues that arose throughout my study. I illustrate ways that our study of power and privilege inadvertently caused students to feel, at times, shamed, frustrated, and burdened. I also show that conversations about race and class may have re-centered beliefs in ways that were counter-productive to social justice education. These conversations spotlighted particular students and caused increased social discomfort and marginalization. As I transition to Chapter 6, I am left with the unsatisfying feeling that stems from having identified the ways that students were troubled and having to move on without the opportunity to use these insights and navigate differently with my students.

CHAPTER 6: CONFESSIONS OF A CRITICAL PEDAGOGUE

My aim in teaching about systems of power and privilege to students who benefit from these systems was to open up new conversations that would enhance the likelihood that they will grow up to recognize, resist and challenge inequities. This involves broadening students' critical consciousness, or "conscientization." Conscientization engages learners in questioning the nature of their historical and social situation, which Freire (1970) addressed as "reading the world." Conscientization also helps students become aware of how they experience social reality and how they operate in circumstances that they don't understand (Kincheloe, 2007b). Students begin to appreciate the complexity of social practices and structures. The process of conscientization also involves students in problematizing historical and social dynamics through classroom dialogue and enacting their own agency to take action against social injustices in their worlds. The skills and habits of critical literacy are instrumental in such problematization.

Related to the concept of conscientization is the idea of racial identity development, or the process of anti-racist identity development. This involves recognizing the implications of whiteness and undoing learned racial superiority and entitlement (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006) and is begun when the silence about whiteness is broken (Tatum, 1992). There are several theories about white racial identity development (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Helms, 1995; Tatum, 1992). These theories can be helpful in understanding the complexity of anti-racist identity

development, and should be considered part of a fluid, iterative and circuitous way of learning.

This research does not use leveled identity theories to explain or examine student response, but Helms' description of her disequilibrium phase is insightful as it describes the emotional dissonance that some whites feel as we struggle with concepts of race and whiteness. She asserts that whites often experience disequilibrium as part of the process of developing a white racial identity. Disequilibrium is associated with guilt and a sense of feeling overwhelmed. It is essential to help people understand how they were socialized into racism from a very early age without their personal consent and to assure them that they do have the power to change their attitudes and behaviors. She adds that people in this phase benefit from expressing feelings of guilt and of being overwhelmed (without getting stuck in those feelings) and exploring ways that they can begin to make small changes. Further, she suggests that guilt and discomfort should be directed toward a positive outcome so as to keep the individual from being paralyzed by it.

At its core, Critical Literacy is about examining ideologies in forms of representation, how they work to privilege and marginalize groups. Researchers have documented many of the ways that this process can be troubling for students. Emotions can range from discomfort to distress as students become mindful and critical of the ideologies associated with their parents, literature, pop culture, peers, schooling, history, mainstream culture and their own beliefs (Aaron et al., 2006; Appleman, 2000; Ball, 2006; Dressman, 1997; Janks, 1991; Morgan, 1997). In addition, especially for younger students, it comes with the learned awareness that the world is perhaps more complex than they thought. This complexity can prove to be disturbing, and it can also be an

empowering motivator when they learn there might be something they can do about it. Integrating tools of critical literacy and critical pedagogy into my teaching was not a safe or simple endeavor, as I knew it wouldn't be. The potential complex and troubling effects that such teaching can have on students were at the forefront of my thinking as I carefully navigated my way through the year.

Learning can (and should) be uncomfortable at times. When students venture out of their comfort zones they are stretching and connecting with the experience on a deeper level. Alan Luke called the examination of one's own and others' ideologies, a foundational skill of critical literacy, and "a necessarily abrasive" process (2004, p. 4). It is the teacher's job to orchestrate an ebb and flow between comfort and discomfort so that students feel safe and grounded, yet also challenged to think and wrestle with concepts in new ways. This kind of teaching seems counter intuitive for most teachers who aim to avoid, minimize and solve social problems in their classes, "The need to keep everyone happy or have harmony at any price is not compatible with the strong feelings and knotty issues raised by anti-bias curriculum" (Alvarado, Derman-Sparks, & Ramsey, 1999, p. p. 198). Being mindful of the ways that critical literacy can be troubling for students, teachers can watch for signs of negative effects and try to ease tension when necessary. Despite my mindfulness, I learned that navigating the zones of comfort, discomfort and distress was complicated. The lines between these zones are fine and easily crossed. They are different for every student and from the teacher's perspective, not always clearly evident.

Shani (2001) speaks to the ethics of how we as critical pedagogues can potentially position students in ways that undermine the innocence and joy of youth. Shani, as a

result of her work with critical literacy and young students, has argued that critical literacy can objectify and instrumentalize students, viewing them primarily as “national resources or political agents” whereas schooling should “nurture their growth as persons and help them appropriate literacy for their own purposes” (p. 34). Shani has protested the practice of critical literacy with children because we, as educators, should “respect their childhood and allow it to grow” (p. 32). These notions and the work of others in the field have identified ways that critical literacy can position students in undesirable ways inspired me toward a more acute state of mindfulness and protectiveness of my students’ spirits. However, it is my belief that students of any age can and want to understand complex issues of justice and agency.

Taking on the multiple roles of critical pedagogue, trusted classroom leader and researcher, I had the task of balancing multiple responsibilities: designing quality learning experiences, guiding students through challenging academic, ideological and social challenges, and viewing the teaching and learning process from several perspectives. My view of students was also multi-dimensional. They were research participants, but as their teacher I also came to know them as sisters/brothers, sons/daughters, friends, learners, and athletes. They were individuals situated in full and complex lives of their own, trying to find their way through adolescence. I interacted with my students and understood them as whole and vulnerable, yet resilient people. My relationship with them as their classroom leader was rooted in trust. As I conducted this study, it was of utmost importance to me to maintain that trust. I attempted to create space in the learning process that honored their students’ experiences and were conscious of their vulnerabilities. I wanted my classroom to be a place where students could

develop skills and habits of critical literacy and to help them recognize their own potential as agents of change where they observe or experience injustice. As Giroux (2007) stated, “Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critical agents; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question is central to the purpose of [schooling] if not to democracy itself” (p. 1). I came to learn that my goal of creating an environment where students experience an unconditional freedom to question sometimes sat in opposition to my goal of maintaining an emotionally safe and trusting one, considering that the subject of this study addressed students’ own ideologies and social worlds. Regardless, I tried to maintain attentiveness toward the students, the discourse and social dynamics for indications that students might feel distressed, troubled or overburdened. Mindfully, I also reflected on my actions and choices as critical pedagogue, teacher, researcher with sensitivity toward undesirable effects.

Considering that this study was located in a culture where individuals benefit from various forms of privilege, and a subculture affected by its own forms of power and privilege, there were different layers of emotional response, such as guilt, frustration, confusion and discomfort. In Chapter 5 I shared some of the ways students began to apply ideas of power and privilege to their own social worlds. These findings caused me to question my desire to insist that children rethink their roles in dominant discourses and renounce them. Were these goals too steep? Were they appropriate? Were they liberatory?

This chapter examines some of the ways that I observed unintended consequences of critical literacy on students’ lived lives that also caused me to reconsider

the employment of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. First, I will show how guilt manifested itself in several ways as students studied both history (e.g. colonization, slavery) and current privileging systems associated with racial, class and cultural groups. In addition, using tools of critical discourse analysis, I will examine the multiple layers of response to a field trip that focused on race and homelessness. Second, I will discuss the ways that students experienced frustration as they gained a deeper understanding of racism, becoming more aware of the overt and tacit ways (behaviors, values, beliefs, assumptions) that groups and individuals are marginalized and oppressed. I will share the ways that many students felt a burden at the larger societal level and within their own social worlds as they attempted to locate themselves in the struggle for justice. Third, I will share indicators that, as students came to deeper understandings of power and privilege, the classroom discourse sometimes positioned students in precarious ways, re-centered whiteness and classism, and reified “*us* and *them*” binaries associated with whiteness and classism.

One final note before this critique ensues; there are certainly extraordinary and far reaching benefits to incorporating critical inquiry into literacy instruction (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Morgan, 1997; V. M. Vasquez, 2004). Thus, this research is not meant to discourage any scholar, teacher or theorist from pursuing ways to promote critical literacy education. On the contrary, the intent is to encourage researchers and educators to engage in reflective practice, specifically how critical literacy instruction affects students. This can only serve to strengthen it as a pedagogy. This research should be interpreted in the spirit of Socrates - the unexamined pedagogy is not worth teaching.

Guilt, Sadness, Confusion: “We Were the Ones That Did That to Them”

Like many of Thandeka’s (2002) interviewee’s in her work *Learning to be White*, I too have memories of learning to be white. As an American and a white woman, I have experienced shame as I have come to better understand the atrocities (e.g. slavery, colonization) that different groups have had to endure throughout history. In addition, I feel shame about being a member of a group that unjustly benefits from modern day privileging systems (e.g. ideologies, Discourses) and living most of my life being little aware of their pervasiveness and doing nothing to change them. This shame is complicated with anger and frustration. As my own conscientization evolved, I often wondered why my family, community, school/teachers, media feed me beliefs of white superiority and Other inferiority? Why has it taken so long for me to challenge them? And, why, despite my conscious efforts and rational beliefs to think and move in ways free of these deep seeded white-centered ideologies, do they sometimes creep out, in unexpected ways (of course, never to be discussed)? These questions are not unlike the questions my students asked in their own process of racial awareness.

Othering, as I use it here, refers to an ideology that sanctifies white, Protestant, middle-class, heterosexual male norms while devaluing those individuals who do not fit the definition of the dominant group. It essentializes by portraying dominant cultural ideologies as the one, true, legitimate knowledge. There were several parallels between my subject positioning and my students in their 98% white, upper-middle class suburban community²⁰. In some ways, I guess I wanted to disrupt their Othering trajectory by

²⁰ See Chapter 4 for an in depth description of the teacher-researcher.

troubling the traditional American History narrative, troubling students' whiteness and providing more complex and dialogic experiences in the development of their critical consciousness.

The standard district curriculum for American history included a textbook and several units including: Pre-Colonial America, Colonial America, the Revolutionary War, Slavery, and the Civil War. The units seemed to present history in a rather distant manner, focusing on events rather than people. My teaching was guided by the notion that for students to engage in conscientization, my teaching of American history would entail learning about the people; Native Americans, Africans and enslaved African-Americans, in ways that appealed to students' sense of humanity. To do this, I used two main approaches. One of the approaches I used to help students create connections with the groups we were studying was to conduct an exploration of the groups' cultural features (family structures, irrigation systems, farming methods, religious practices, etc.). At the beginning of the year, students' perceptions of these groups tended to be narrow and simplistic. A deeper understanding and appreciation for Native Americans and Africans would lay the groundwork for students to examine historical events and power struggles from multiple points of view and through a lens of social justice, practices commonly associated with critical literacy.

Read alouds such as *Copper Sun* (2006) helped students relate to and appreciate Others as people who are similar to themselves with families, heartache, crushes, worries, and chores, etc. Students got to know Amari, the main character in all of her teenage complexity. Amari's story begins in a village where she lives with her family. Students made several connections to the characters and their lives. In doing so, students gained an

understanding and appreciation of the culture and lifestyle of Amari's tribe and the students began to care for her.

Another approach I used to was to teach students basic Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Students analyzed various texts that addressed Native American/Colonial relations (including two student text books) and issues of slavery²¹. Students learned that in the retelling of history, we as readers are positioned in ways that minimize our full understanding of the oppression that groups have endured, thus encouraging unquestioning acceptance of historical events as necessary conditions in a new and growing country. Students were offended to learn that textbooks provided a narrow and shallow characterization of history when they read accounts from other perspectives. These two approaches were successful in that I was able to appeal to their sense of compassion/humanity and to enhance their understanding of the ways beliefs about groups are constructed. Joe Kincheloe (2007b) writes about critical pedagogy in the 21st century, and specifically about cultivating critical consciousness that is aware of the social construction of subjectivity, emphasizing engagement of students' affective domain when doing so:

Indeed, our education promotes a critical consciousness of self-production that not only understands the many planes of history on which an individual operates but how subjectivity is specifically colonized on these various planes. In this context, questions of the social construction of identity are viewed through the lenses of affect and emotion. Empowered by such knowledge, individuals with critical consciousness are able to use their insights to overcome alienation and construct social and individual relations with other social actors. (p. 38)

My purpose in this chapter is to discuss the complexities of such teaching, specifically looking at students' emotional engagement. I found that in deliberately

²¹ See Chapter 4 for a full description of this activity.

engaging the affective domain, students experienced perhaps deeper levels of guilt, shame and frustration. As we learned about the consequences of American colonization on indigenous cultures students' responded in ways that indicate that they wrestled with locating themselves in relationship to that historical struggle. I was careful not to address concepts in a dichotomous fashion (e.g. Native Americans vs. White Colonists) thereby implying that since they were not indigenous they must be aligned with the colonists. Nonetheless, students did align with oppressors throughout our study of American history. This phenomenon was evident in all data sources (e.g. parent interviews, student interviews, student surveys, classroom discourse and observational data).

In one case, a parent shared feedback regarding a conversation they had about the horrifying conditions of the middle passage which we had studied in class. She wrote, "We also talked about the conditions on the boats when bringing Africans back here. Our response, as was the girls' was embarrassment of the people who could have done this and that we are their descendants!" In a one-on-one interview at the end of the year a student shared similar feelings. In her initial response she resists aligning with the colonists but indicates that Native American students would respond emotionally from an informed racialized position.

Maggie: Okay. Do you think that being white affected how you responded to the slavery unit? Or learning about Colonial America?

Lauren: Well, not really, because we learned from different points of view, but if I was Native American I would probably just be mad. I probably wouldn't want to learn about that because I would know that was my ancestors and stuff, but like, since I'm not, I kind of think like I want to learn about it

because I want to know what happened, because they, if I was Native American, I'd probably already know that that happened. But, I didn't know much about it so I kind of wanted to know what was going on and stuff.

Then, in the next few turns, Lauren does clearly show her alignment with Colonial oppressors. In addition, she contradicts herself by expressing both resistance and direct acceptance of oppressive acts and the shame associated with them.

Maggie: So you're saying that Native Americans know about it because that's part of their culture, their history, but being white, you wouldn't know much about it?

Lauren: Yeah, that's part of it. I knew about it because we were the ones that did that to them. I was just kind of ashamed that people of my own race would kind of do that.

Maggie: Do you feel, um, did you get past that shame ever or do you still feel ashamed?

Lauren: I know that I'm not doing it, but I still feel like, why would we do such a thing?

Even though she knows she did not personally engage in Colonialism in early America, by racial association she includes herself as a member of the responsible parties with her use of the word "we" ("Why would *we* do such a thing?").

Carter's response to the Early America unit mirrored the shame that Lauren felt. Reflecting on the ways that the Europeans treated Native Americans, he reported that he

felt “sad, embarrassed and kind of ashamed that they would do that. If Native Americans weren’t there the Colonists wouldn’t have even lasted the first winter.” Although he did not overtly associate himself with the oppressors using the words “we” or “us”, the emotions of embarrassment and shame indicate associative culpability for what the Native Americans endured.

Students’ guilt, shame and frustration were even more evident when we studied modern systems of oppression. One particular morning I arrived to school with a phone message on my voicemail system. The parent did not indicate the reason for her call but her voice had a tone of concern and urgency so I called her back immediately. She unloaded her thoughts and concerns regarding learning about fair trade practices. She shared that she felt the study of modern day slavery in the chocolate industry “criminalized her [daughter] every time she eats a piece of chocolate.” She felt that her daughter was too “naïve” and “impressionable” to be able to process these heavy issues and it was placing an undue “burden of guilt” on her. Because I wanted to be open to her concerns and the possibility that it really was too troubling for students, I probed further.

Maggie: Can you tell me how you know she feels guilty? Does she actually say “I feel guilty” or are there other ways you can tell?

Mother: Well, Claudia said to me as she was lying awake in bed the other night, “What if I wasn’t born *here*, and instead I was born *there*, *and that’s what I was forced to do.*”

Maggie: Do you think that it’s a burden of guilt or could it be that she’s troubled because she is viewing it with a sense of justice or more compassion?

Mother: I don't know, I just know that I don't think she'll ever look at a candy bar the same again, and I don't know if I like that.

Claudia's response was viewed by her mother and me in two very different ways. From her mother's perspective, this burden of guilt was too much for a ten year old girl who should be able to enjoy the pleasurable aspects of life without considering their wider effects. I viewed Claudia's response as a shift in thinking. She had reached what Foucault (1981) describes as the moment we are unable to think the way we usually do and involves a commitment to move beyond who and what we know, and perhaps so had her mother. This mother shared that she, herself, eats a lot of chocolate. She said, "Sure, you can feel guilty every time you eat chocolate, or when *I* eat chocolate, I mean, I buy my Hershey bars by the six pack!" Her comment speaks directly to the concern about critical literacy education, whereby critique of pleasurable aspects of students' lives frequently causes students to lose enjoyment in them. This change in subject (her daughter → herself) indicates that not only was she concerned that her daughter was taking on a burden of guilt, but that this unit of study had forced her (the mother) to look at her own practices and how she may be complicit with modern day slavery and privileging systems. Her daughter was moving toward action and to her this meant that she would have to change her behaviors as well, which the mother seemed to be resisting.

Howard (1999) contends that many of the privileges that flow to whites are invisible, unearned and not consciously acknowledged: "That our privileged dominance often threatens the physical and cultural well being of other groups is a reality that whites, for the most part, have chosen to ignore. The fact that we *can* choose to ignore such realities is perhaps our most insidious privilege" (p. 59). Jensen (2005) explains,

“That’s part of white privilege – the privilege to ignore the reality of a white supremacist society when it makes us uncomfortable, to rationalize why it’s not really so bad, to deny one’s own role in it. It is the privilege of remaining ignorant because that ignorance is protected” (p. 10). As students learned and talked more about privileging systems like Claudia did, would it open up difficult conversations with parents who were being asked to confront their privilege by their children? Also, I wondered if our studies related to critical pedagogy were placing children in a difficult position as they began to think in ways that were not always in sync with their parents’ politics. How are students positioned in this dynamic and are these conversations too much to expect a ten or eleven year old to navigate? The tensions created for Claudia, her mother and me as a result of critical pedagogy get to the heart of the politics of such teaching.

Other examples of students’ guilt-related responses to modern day privileging systems show that they also wrestled with strong emotions as the awareness of their wealth, juxtaposed with others’ poverty increased. Most students expressed a combination of compassion, puzzlement, discomfort, gratitude, guilt and sadness in the process of becoming critically conscious. One student reported feeling “sad and happy” at the same time, “sad that some people have to work harder than others for the same amount” but “glad that there are places [organizations] that try to change that.”

Some students questioned whether their comfort was at the expense of others’ poverty and began to evaluate their own class positions and value systems and consequently considered how other groups perceive them. During a class discussion, one student shared, “I feel kinda weird. I come from a family that has enough money for stuff and they don’t even have a house” after which many students nodded in agreement. This

same student later shared in an interview that she believes marginalized groups project disdain or contempt for her, “I kind of feel like we’re kind of, I’m kind of just like, they probably look at me and be like, well I don’t really like you because you’re just like rubbing it in my face. You have such a nice home and I’m here like working my butt off trying to get food every night.” Another student, Marie, expressed self-criticism in her comments at the end of the year, “Before I really didn’t care about Native Americans and slavery. Now I feel like I was being so selfish to not care, and to want this and that, when millions of West Africans [slaves in the chocolate industry] have had everything taken away from them and their life.” Similarly, another student reflected, “The learning this year made me feel that I was selfish on getting games and such when some lack the necessities to live.” Chelsey’s response to learning about homelessness echoes many others’ responses and illustrates the intensity of emotion that some students felt, “How terrible would that be! Oh god, I am so lucky and I feel bad how I take it all for granted all the time.”

The themes presented were drawn from data gathered across students and across learning experiences. A closer look at one student’s response using analytic tools of critical discourse analysis allows us to see that some of those themes (guilt, shame, mixed emotions, aligning with the oppressor) were reflected in the subtleties of his language.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Student Response to the Homeless Shelter and Race Exhibit

In the spring we had a field trip to the Race Exhibit at the Science Museum and the homeless shelter, People Serving People. The central idea of the exhibit was to explore the idea of how race is constructed, how white privilege has been created and

sustained, and how white privilege plays out as institutionalized racism in our society. After the Science Museum we toured the homeless shelter, People Serving People. The day we visited was a typical working day in the life of the shelter and many of the residents, both adults and children, were going about their business. We were not allowed in anyone's personal apartments, however. The reason we visited the shelter was two-fold. First, we had a connection with this shelter. In February, our entire grade had done a fund raiser for the homeless stemming from a group of students' concern for the homeless in such cold weather. I researched shelters and decided that People Serving People would be the recipient of the student-driven fund drive. After learning about our project the president of the organization visited our school to discuss the causes of homelessness and who is most affected (children). He invited our class to visit the shelter to better understand how the funds will be used. The second reason for visiting the shelter was a desire to have students see the struggles of poverty and complicate their understanding of class. The community of Richmond and its nearby communities offer very little low-income housing and certainly no visible effects of poverty.

The bus trip on this excursion out of the boundaries of Richmond led us through the city where students witnessed men and women under the bridge overpasses. They saw people with clothing and other personal belongings set up in a makeshift living area. Most students had never experienced anything like this and were moved to see homelessness first hand, especially on the heels of our tour at the shelter.

This analysis focuses on Jack's free-response writing that took place immediately after returning from the field trip. Jack is one of the most athletic and socially powerful boys in the grade. By all obvious accounts, things seem to come pretty easy to him.

While he is admired for his social prowess by many, he is also considered fairly insensitive by most of his peers. He comes from a very traditional and upper class family. Free-response writing means that students are at liberty to write about anything they choose pertaining to the topic (e.g., their feelings, lists of things they learned or saw, thoughts, frustrations, what they enjoyed). Using Gee's (1996) approach to discourse analysis, I focus on how Jack's response builds significance and builds identities (his and others'). In this analysis I refer to stanzas loosely, not as a technical term associated with the tools of critical discourse analysis. Here, stanzas refer to chunks of language for the purpose of referencing certain parts of Jack's response.

Jack's Response:

(word processed verbatim from his hand-written work)

In the museum it was very shaming what the white people used to do to blacks and ladies and being a white boy I feel very disappointing.

On the bus ride I saw clothes under bridges a few times people and that's pretty heart breaking.

At people serving people it [was] weird seeing all those homeless people in one building. We I smelled the food. I knew it was a lot worse food from home. I imagine how hard it would be. It's very very nice to be a person that works there.

Stanza One:

In the museum it was very shaming what the white people used to do to blacks and ladies and being a white boy I feel very disappointing.

Jack's response provides insight into how he responded to this experience. Jack started his free write by immediately focusing in on his affective response to the race exhibit. When Jack was at the exhibit he felt that the exhibit "shamed" him because he is "a white boy." The shame stems from what other "white people," not him or anyone he associates with, "used to do." This points to the belief that racism and sexism are things of the past and aimed at "blacks and ladies." The fact that Jack mentioned only "blacks" as experiencing racism implies that he sees racism as a black/white binary. Interestingly,

he connected the groups “*blacks and ladies.*” Perhaps his acknowledgement of shame was associated with being male in a patriarchal society.

His use of the word “*disappointing*” is an interesting grammatical error, and many researchers might choose to view it that way. Tobin (2000) argues that confusing or puzzling remarks can “reveal slippages or doublings of meaning” and warrant further examination (p. 12). He explains this process:

To look awry at a section of interview transcript, I begin by locating key clues or symptoms, or what deconstructionist literary theorists call *aporia*, sites of doubt or perplexity where the apparent coherence of the text can be unraveled. . . .the slightly odd but unspectacular sorts of comments that even a skilled textual interpreter at first might overlook. But the more we think about these comments, the stranger they become. (p. 14)

Jack’s use of *disappointing* could indicate several potential meanings. It could indicate that he himself is *disappointing* to blacks and women by virtue of being a white male, thus identifying with the oppressors? Or, it could point to his disappointment, learning that racism still exists. Was his use of the word *disappointing* revealing both meanings.

Stanza Two:

*On the bus ride I saw **clothes** under bridges [and] **a few times people** and that’s **pretty heart breaking.***

Jack’s choice to note the clothes under the bridge indicates that that was a powerful image for him. Most of the other students wrote about the “gates” (which were really barbed wire installed in the sheltered areas under the bridge to discourage people without homes from using those areas as a shelter), but Jack first wrote about the clothes and then “*a few times people*” under the bridges. Perhaps seeing the clothing, a collection of personal objects that he normally associates with a closet or bedroom, arranged in a living space under a bridge, created a sharp visual for him. His reaction to

this situates him as someone who has never considered the realities of people who don't have homes.

There is expressive modal meaning in Jack's use of the word *pretty* which lessens the intensity of the idea that follows, which in this case are the words *heart breaking*. His use of the words "*heart breaking*" is particularly interesting, considering his more typical identity which tended to be less emotional. His use of these words might indicate that the experience of seeing "*clothes under the bridges and a few times people*" was emotional and therefore had an impact on the way he understands homelessness.

Stanza Three:

At people serving people it [was] weird seeing all those homeless people in one building. We I [sic] smelled the food. I knew it was a lot worse food from home. I imagine how hard it would be. It's very very nice to be a person that works there.

This last stanza is thick with meaning. Jack's use of the word "*weird*" indicates that this was a strange or foreign experience for him and that he was not within his comfort level. Three words he used distanced himself from the residents at the homeless shelter: "*all*", "*those*" and "*homeless*." We intruders (students, teachers and chaperones) by far outnumbered the amount of residents that we encountered at the shelter. Yet, Jack's use of the word "*all*" indicates that he may have felt overwhelmed by the number of "*homeless people*" he saw "*in one building*." This word also situates him as someone who has never seen, or possibly considered, that there might be more than a few people surviving without homes. For most students in this school, the common image of homelessness is the occasional pan-handler they encounter when they come into the city for theater or sporting events.

“Those” is a distal demonstrative. It is usually associated with objects that are removed from the speaker. It is in the family of descriptors called deitics that indicate location or relationship that are dependent on an external frame of reference, such as *this* or *that*. The word “*those*” in Jack’s statement does the work of distancing himself from the residents to whom he was referring and distinguishes the residents as different from him.

Next, Jack states that he smelled the food and that he “knew it was a lot worse food from home.” He was comparing the meals he gets at his house to the meals served at the shelter. His omission of the attributive pronoun “my” before the word “home” does not distinguish these peoples’ home (the shelter) from his home. This indicates that he may not recognize the shelter as a “home.” He then writes, “*I imagine how hard it would be [to be homeless, living in the shelter]. It’s very, very nice to be a person that works here.*” Jack completes his free-writing reflection with a statement that shows sympathy (or an attempt at empathy) for the residents’ situation by trying to imagine the difficulty of their struggle. In the last statement Jack indicates that he considers the people who work at the shelter are doing something very “nice.” He seems glad that some people are working at the shelter, and perhaps his concluding thought brings him some level of peace (that the underprivileged are being helped) after wrestling with the impact of seeing people living under bridges and imagining the struggles of people without homes of their own.

Embedded in Jack’s writing and the writing of other students was personal guilt for the plight of people who are victims of systemic racism and classism. “I feel so bad for them” was the repeated response. It seemed positive that students engaged in the

learning using a lens of genuine emotion and compassion (expressing empathy and discontent with Others' plight). After all, in order for privileged people to enact change, we must first *acknowledge injustice* and *care* that some people are being treated unfairly. Through our project to educate others about fair trade chocolate and coffee, students demonstrated an understanding about how purchasing power can systemically impact the modern day use of slaves. In my analysis of student response, however, I also noticed a lack of recognition for the privileging systems in our society. Students tended to focus on finding ways to "help" those living in poverty, and most felt it was their responsibility to do so. So, circling back to the baseball metaphor ("Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple" -Barry Switzer), it seemed that students tended to respond to the injustices of privilege closest to home by assisting others to advance around the bases more easily versus changing the inequitable workings of the game.

In addition to expressing guilt and related emotions of shame, sadness, discomfort associated with acknowledging their position (white and privileged) students experienced other frustrations. The next section will examine how students questioned assumptions in belief systems, those of early Colonial America, modern mainstream America, their parents and themselves. I will show that as students began to examine the economic roots of racism they began to express confusion and ideological disequilibrium. Also, students came to realize that social justice work is not simple and cannot be solved with quick fixes. Though students were moved to praxis, they felt dissatisfied that they could not make a greater impact.

Frustration: “Why?! Why Do People Think That Whites are Better Than Blacks? I Mean,
How Did That Get in People’s Minds?”

I remember when I read Howard Zinn’s (1999) book, *The People’s History of the United States*. Many times, the disappointment and exasperation that I felt caused me to have to break from it. I felt disappointed as it became clear that the version of history that I had learned and that is such an integral part of the mainstream ideologies (e.g. meritocracy, capitalism) had been misrepresented and actively worked to marginalize some Americans while privileging others. This realization was disturbing on both an emotional and cognitive level.

Most of my students had rarely, if ever, had critical conversations (regarding power, privilege, representation, etc.) in school. Whether that was due to their young age, the curriculum or the cultural norms of the institution tied in with cultural norms of whiteness, entering into the realm of *disrupting* belief systems was new territory. Part of that process involved students questioning held ideologies and constructing new ones. This created tension internally, and within some students’ families.

I facilitated the learning of American history by teaching the habits of critical literacy, specifically, looking at the language of representation, power (how it was used and to what ends) and examining events through multiple perspectives. This interrogative frame led students to construct a more pluralistic, counter narrative representation of history, which in some ways disrupted their understandings and beliefs about the United States and in other ways prompted new and deeper understandings not previously held. Students’ responses throughout this process indicate that taking on this questioning and nontraditional view of American history was disturbing.

Students struggled with making sense of some early Americans' beliefs. I aimed to help students view history in complex ways and steered class discourse away from simplistic, binary (good and bad) thinking so that they would construct their understanding in a deep and rich context. Still, students were almost paralyzed at times by their emotional response. Many students could not fathom the treatment of Native Americans or Africans or the idea of slavery. There was no place in their understanding of the world to fit this information. The class discourse about these topics was tricky and challenging to navigate. As the teacher, I attempted to respond with probing questions, not judgment, as students wrestled with their own beliefs and came to new understandings. I came to view these discussions as places to question some of the most difficult topics, with the goal of helping students challenge mainstream ideologies, not to find answers that fit neatly into their thinking.

My students were accustomed to traditional schooling that involved teachers and text books disseminating history in a way that is matter-of-fact and validates mainstream discourses. Students were also accustomed to teachers having “answers” to their questions and in a way, perhaps that predictability feels comforting. This more pluralistic approach proved to be unsettling for students because it troubled the notion of “one right answer” that the teacher or textbook tells them. We considered the complex political, religious and economic dynamics of Europe at the time of exploration and slavery (using the History Alive curriculum and resources) to put some context around them.

Though students seemed to understand and appreciate these contextual forces, our conversations tended to circle back to ethics. Here I will share some of the ways that students questioned and struggled to construct new understandings of historical events.

Carter's questioning is illustrative of students' indignation about the unethical treatment of Native Americans, "If Native Americans weren't there, they [colonists] wouldn't have lasted the winter. I'm just wondering why would they put those people in slavery after they *helped* so much." Another student asked during a conversation about the slave trade, "Why did they have to *steal* other people? Why not just ask your neighbor to help you out on your farm, or plantation if you need help, or get the community to work it together? Who thought this up? I mean, how could anyone possibly think that slavery was a good idea?"

Students were horrified to learn the sad realities about the capture of slaves and the middle passage. Expressing her puzzlement and cognitive dissonance, one student wrestled with the idea, "They should have used more humane ways to get the Africans on the boats. Couldn't they just talk them into getting them on the boat, or trick them? Or tell them, we'll take care of you if you come with us? Or tell them how great it is in America and persuade them to come?" Her outburst prompted a longer conversation about ethics of wanting the Africans to get on the boat to be sold into slave labor in the first place. One student blurted out in anger, "Plantation owners were too lazy! Why even own a plantation if you are too lazy to work the land yourself?" In response, a student guessed, "Maybe they were so mean to the Africans because they [the slave owners] had to work really hard as children and now they were taking it out on them [the Africans]." Another suggestion was that having slaves gave the plantation owner status and power. One student suggested that it was due to greed because plantation owners could make much more money if they had free labor to work more land. In several interviews that took place at the end of the year, students discussed how they ended up making sense of

this. This response was representative of many students' thinking, "...people were back then kind of selfish and greedy and only thought about themselves and money, and how they would live, which is kind of happening today." In class conversations, there was an air of sadness and distaste in the room as many students agreed that selfishness and the desire for wealth prompted some people to do what these students considered unthinkable.

In some discussions students began to connect slavery with racism. The question "Where did/does racism come from?" was asked and became a recurring question in the class conversations as students' conscientization evolved. One student proposed in the discussion about slavery, that it "was easier for the traders to capture and kill Africans because they viewed them as lower class people." This established the idea that believing some groups are "lower class" or somehow worth less than other groups allows us to rationalize unjust treatment. But that begged the very straightforward question to which I had a hard time responding: "Why do people think that whites are better than blacks? I mean, when did that start? When did it get in people's minds that white people are better than blacks?" I don't recall how I responded, but it was that question that prompted me to read *Learning to Be White* (2002).

I considered critical literacy to be an approach that honored students as learners more than traditional approaches, but it also led to frustration, theirs and mine. Our inability to come to satisfying "answers" to these kinds of questions troubled us all. I had read Thandka's (2002) and others' (Barrett & Roediger, 2005) work on the roots of whiteness and racism in the United States, but these thoughts are not easily translated into

fifth grade terms. Students' thinking about this triggered theories relating to power and how privileging systems in their own social worlds (see Ch. 5).

The discomfort I felt in not being able to offer comforting "answers" to my students when I sensed their struggle was becoming too disturbing. I considered myself an active participant in the learning process and tried to maintain a democratic culture in the teaching and learning process and made overt my place as a learner. However, I also valued my position as the facilitator and guide in the community and wanted students to feel a sense of trust in knowing that I would honor them. I would not intentionally cause them to be overly disturbed by a burden of guilt, disillusionment or ideological confusion. I know that I didn't always successfully walk that fine line.

Frustration Discouraged/Burden: "I Think I Should Try to End Modern Day Slavery"

Another fine line that I struggled with was the one between helping students realize their capacity as change agents and helping them understand that change is usually an iterative, difficult and complex process *and* that it is not their responsibility, alone, to change the world. Consequently, students experienced the frustration of wanting to become agents of change but felt a lack of efficacy to make a real or sustainable difference. As previously stated, I purposely engaged students' affective and emotional lens. I reasoned that for the people who benefit from privilege to be willing to understand, work and sacrifice for greater social justice, empathic capacity would be prerequisite. Students, to different degrees, expressed empathy and discontent as they came to understand the injustices of systemic racism. There was an overall tenor in the class that was ready to move to praxis. The students were willing to act as agents of

change and throughout the year we executed several projects including raising funds and awareness of homelessness in the metro area and of fair trade practices in the chocolate and coffee industries. Students shared what they learned about fair trade goods with other classes in the form of poster presentations, with friends and family, and with retailers that they frequented. We discussed how they might approach such a conversation and decided it was important that they refrain from judgment or condemnation and instead focus on education.

When we began to discuss the ways students could affect change they became very excited. A critical mass of the students was highly engaged and expressed a sense of personal commitment to these activities. When I witnessed this enthusiasm it verified what I had read in the research about the importance of praxis in critical literacy education (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Bill Bigelow, 1998; Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). One of the often cited tensions that arises from consistently confronting privilege and taken-for-granted values is that students begin to experience critical literacy as a negative stance. In Richmond schools, it was just as important that students have the experience to design, or enact their agency in positive ways as it would be in a setting that serves students who are underserved in privileging systems. Although students experienced, and in some cases *created*, opportunities to affect change, they still expressed frustrations rooted in the desire to “do the right thing” coupled with disappointment at “not being able to make more of a difference.” This frustration was expressed in comments such as, “It’s my obligation to help... I *want* to help, I *feel* like that,” “when I see things in the world that seem unfair and I feel like I should do something but sometimes I really don’t know what I can do” and “I used to see things

and I would feel bad and now I feel like I have to do something.” To this line of thinking I often reassured students that the way they think and treat people every day is a way to make change, in addition to the projects that they invested in throughout the year. Students were not always satisfied with my consolation. In a class discussion, one student replied, “Yeah. Yeah, I think we’ve made ourselves known that we want to help, but we can’t make a difference for everybody and I just wish we could.”

Students’ recognition of injustice and desire to act on it was not limited to conditions outside of Richmond Schools. When the discourse in class discussions often focused on issues of justice, it raised the awareness and expectation of justice in students’ social worlds. As discussed in Chapter 5, students translated their understanding of dynamics of power and privilege to their own social worlds. Here I will discuss the ways that students advocated for justice in this realm and its consequent frustrations. There were several kinds of scenarios in which students recognized marginalizing behavior. It greatly frustrated some students that their classmates acted in these ways, and in some cases that students continued to act in marginalizing ways even after it was brought to their attention that it was hurtful.

What some classes call bullying behaviors (name calling, intimidation, laughing at someone) came to be seen as acts of injustice. Within the context of bullying, students don’t often feel the need to intervene, but reframing within the context of social justice positioned onlookers as agents. For example, students viewed Jack’s laughter in class discussion (discussed in Chapter 5) as a power-related behavior. They witnessed me question Jack about it directly and identify it as an act that intimidates others. From that point on, other students also confronted Jack when he laughed at other students. It

became irritating to some students to see Jack purposely mock certain students in this way. Some students became perceptive of this, and to other instances of marginalization. Jack was often involved in other bullying acts with students as well. And, though onlookers and victims learned to stand up to these acts, they voiced frustration that they could not successfully stop them. A group of girls approached me after recess one day to tell me another instance of Jack bullying Corey. They were irritated and relayed the whole conversation: that Corey told Jack that he was being mean and he should stop. One student shared in exasperation, “Then he [Corey] goes, ‘Stop, Jack, STOP!’ and Jack just keeps on like, doing it. We even told him to stop. I don’t know why he does that.” Some students’ standards for social justice in their community seemed to intensify throughout the year, which made them sensitive to the marginalizing or intimidating treatment of their peers.

These students became vigilant about confronting maltreatment. In the next section I will show how some students’ vigilance created an emotionally charged tenor in the classroom. I will examine how taking on social justice dispositions can be burdensome for some children and that focusing on issues of power and privilege can uncomfortably spotlight students in negative ways. Last, I will discuss how students’ comments at the end of the year show that in some ways our study of power and privilege may have re-centered whiteness and classism.

Uncomfortably Positioning Students

Marie: “I Get Tired of Making Sure She’s Always Included!”

Deconstructing popularity and reframing it as a system related to power and privilege helped students to question their assumptions about popularity and how they assign value to others according that system. These conversations openly analyzed and interrogated the indicators of popularity (e.g. wealth, style of clothing, beauty). One frank comment from a student at the end of the year caused me to revisit the negative impact this process may have had on some students. On her end-of-the-year survey, Sally shared, “It made me more and more marginalized, talking about power and oppression.”

Sally was a student who seemed to consistently struggle with finding her place in the social network. She had been homeschooled until fifth grade and came from a working class family, both factors that set her apart from her peers. Her mother shared her perceptions of Sally’s engagement with me in an email:

“... amazed at how strongly Sally felt about race and whiteness... she was very interested and felt very strongly about what she had learned. We had long conversations about this with her initiating the conversations... She told me of her commitment not to eat any chocolate that didn’t have that symbol [fair trade] on it. I have been amazed at her ability to keep that!!... She eagerly told me about her experience at the shelter and that when she is old enough she wants to volunteer there.”

She was very bright, but didn’t often share in class discussions. In the way she presented herself to others (clothing, choice of literature, hair style, mannerisms, etc.) she was unique, and yet seemed fairly confident with herself. She was often on the social periphery and I learned through a conversation with her that she was mostly comfortable with herself, and with being on the fringes. Despite her independence, she shared with me and others in the class that she often desired to be a part of the group.

On one occasion, it was a beautiful day and I brought the whole class outside for a break. The class broke off into two groups, each organizing a different game. I observed as Sally hovered about fifteen feet away from the group playing “red rover,” watching her peers scream, laugh and play. I approached her and asked her if she wanted to join in. She said she did, she confided in me, “I don’t know how to be in the group. Sometimes I don’t know what to say or do to get in. And, I feel scared because I don’t know if they’ll say yes.” As many teachers do, I struggled, unsure of how to navigate Sally’s predicament. In the past, sometimes I had coached Sally and other students in similar situations, giving them suggestions on how to approach uncomfortable social challenges. Other times I chose to let it play out naturally, and occasionally I covertly approached a student in the group, drew his/her attention to the “outsider” and gently asked the student to consider inviting him/her into the group.

In our classroom, I expected students to be inclusive, not exclusive, and to consider and respect others’ perspectives. When dividing in self-selected groups for collaborative learning as we sometimes did, I reminded students to invite individuals to their group who might want to work in a group but didn’t have one. I also gave those who wished to work in a group the language to approach their peers and ask “Hey, can I work with you guys?” To encourage inclusiveness, I framed the working groups around the educational task as opposed to framing groups around friendships. Of course I realized that the friendship dynamic would exist to an extent and I accepted that as natural and healthy. So, considering the construction of class norms of inclusion as a form of social justice, Sally’s existence in the margins was unsettling for some of the students in the class and perhaps even more uncomfortable for Sally.

I became aware of the consternation this was causing for some of the girls, Marie in particular. Marie was a student who very much took on the ideals of social justice. This was evident in the way she engaged during classroom conversations and projects, in the information that her mother shared with me about conversations they had at home and in the ways Marie engaged socially with other students. She confronted bullying behavior and went out of her way to ensure that others felt valued and included. Marie shared her feelings about Sally with me on several occasions. In one instance, she and a friend recalled a conversation they overheard between Sally and a parent and relayed it to me. Marie's friend said, "I heard [Sally] talking to one of the parents and the parent asked her if she felt left out and she's just like, 'yeah, I feel left out a lot'." Marie inserted with a tone of frustration, "Well, we *try* to include her." She wanted Sally to be part of the group. She understood that Sally had a hard time integrating herself and wanted to help her but didn't want to create the expectation that she would always invite her into the group. On this occasion she was very upset, and for the first time I wondered whether our focus on inclusivity in the name of social justice had placed too much of a burden on some students and an unintended focus on others.

Having a place to sit in the lunchroom is a big deal. Marie had used this setting to include Sally with her and her friends routinely. On one particular day, for some reason, she didn't. Other students noticed that Sally was sitting alone and asked her why she wasn't sitting with Marie. The story was related to me by several different students, but the gist of it was that Marie did not take Sally under her wing that day and it triggered a very publicized and uncomfortable dynamic for both Marie and Sally. Some students characterized Marie's lack of inclusion that day as mean and told Marie and others how

they felt. Marie came to me later and shared her feelings. Her frustration had brought her to tears when she came in early from recess to talk to me about it. She said (as best as I could recall and capture it), “Ms. Knutson, I like Sally, I mean, she’s nice and all, but sometimes I get tired of always making sure she is included. Today I just wanted to sit with Eloise and my other friends. Everyone was telling me that I was being *mean* by not talking to Sally today. I don’t know why they were calling *me mean*; *they* never invite her to sit with them!” I counseled and affirmed her as best I could confirming that she was doing the right thing by including Sally, but that it’s okay to balance looking out for others with her own needs and desires, like eating or playing without Sally some days. Also wrapped into my conversation with Marie, was an acknowledgement of the frustration that can arise as a result of wanting the world to be a more just place and knowing that these kinds of issues don’t have quick or easy fixes. As I suspected would be the case, this topic was being discussed widely when the rest of the students came in from recess and had probably festered more since lunch.

This was a complex social situation and of course, this impacted the whole class. For the purpose of this study, I am particularly interested in Marie’s response. It seemed to echo a frustration similar to the way some students responded to injustices that occurred outside of Richmond. Marie felt that continually attending to Sally’s inclusion was the “the right thing to do” yet it became burdensome. She made a personal decision to be free of that burden for the day after learning that other students characterized it as “mean” she felt both guilty and angry. She felt guilty that she hadn’t included her and angry that other students expected her to do so.

Students translated their understanding of power and privilege to their own social worlds, which helped them engage in the learning and apply it in meaningful ways (as discussed in Chapter 5). What I didn't anticipate, however, were the ways that studying these topics would negatively position some students in direct and pointed ways within that discourse, which is the focus of the next section. The ways that students talked about power indicate that our class discourse may have unwittingly re-centered students' conceptions of their hierarchical social class structure and further marginalized some students. In the example just discussed, Marie expressed her frustration and one can imagine that with the class' focus on the issue of social power, Sally was also uncomfortable.

Sally: Inadvertently Spotlighting Students in Uncomfortable Ways

While students may have entertained new and more equitable ways of thinking about how they value others, some of the students' characterizations of power at the end of the year indicate that conceptions of hierarchical social class structures still existed and were perhaps reified. Students seemed to use the concept of power as a way to help them understand, navigate and describe their social worlds, yet oftentimes when they did so, their language implied a hierarchical power structure. Many students cited power as a factor that related to social issues. Students thought about their own and others' power, expressing thoughts such as "I have more power than I thought I did" and "a lot of people in this class have more power than others." One student referred to "three levels of power" (high, medium and low), while another noted the discrepancy of power as major factor in the classes' social struggles. In one-on-one conversations students occasionally

identified by name, peers who have much power and others who have little. In a reflection at the end of the year, four students identified Jack as having a lot of power and Sally as having little. Most glaring, and quite troubling for me as the teacher, was Sally's own insight, "It made me more and more marginalized, talking about power and oppression." Students' language, coupled with Sally's testimonial, indicated that many of the ways they conceived of power fit into old hierarchical paradigms of "popularity" rather than more democratic, egalitarian paradigms. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 5, students understanding of power shifted between being an attribute that a person can possess and understanding it as a dynamic and shifting function within relationships and interactions. In the next section I examine the way students' characterization of power as a static attribute may have re-centered whiteness.

Re-centering Whiteness/Reinforcing Racism

Educators who work with white students must be concerned with the ways that addressing issues of power and privilege can re-center whiteness as opposed to challenging or complicating it. Rogers and Cartertian (2007) cite re-centering whiteness as a central tension in whiteness studies. I considered this as I planned and facilitated learning experiences aimed toward evoking and constructing greater racial consciousness with my students. I was under no illusion that through these experiences students would come to full understandings of whiteness, white privilege, racism, etc. After all, adults who have been studying these concepts for many years still struggle to understand them and to understand their own racialized identities.

I approached race and whiteness through the lens of critical literacy, the central focus of this study. By teaching students to use tools of critical literacy, including critical discourse analysis, students would encounter concepts of race, power and privilege mainly through their own observations and inquiries. The foundational experiences drew on ideas about how texts work, in terms of how certain voices, representations and events can be privileged or marginalized in texts. Through this critique, students learn that texts work to construct readers' beliefs about others, the world and themselves. When readers learn the ways that texts do this, they can begin to question the texts, the authors, the discourses, and even themselves.

It has been argued that focusing on white people's growth places whiteness at the center of anti-racism which undermines the psychic, discursive and material realities and the negative consequences of racism for people of color (hooks, 1995). In light of this, I attempted to balance our learning about others, Othering, and whiteness. In other words, I wanted students to construct deeper and more complex understandings of people who students perceived as different from them, the social construction of race and whiteness and their effects on people of color. My assumption was that more complex understandings could interrupt the conceptions that had previously been shaped by mainstream texts, mainstream discourses and whiteness.

As evidenced in student talk about social power at Richmond School, students' characterization of power was, at least in some ways, expressed as an *attribute* rather than as a function of privilege or marginalization at work. Students' talk about race incorporated similar concepts about power. Students' understandings of racism were understood in the way power is both *possessed* by individuals and can also be

manipulated and attained. For example, students recognized ways that society is set up in unjust ways that makes it easier for whites to access power than people of color. One student commented in a written reflection, “Learning about privilege makes me think that I was born in more power because I was born white. Being white takes out many barriers that it seems like I would have if I was born black.” This comment acknowledges a society that is set up in ways that have negative consequences for people of color. This students’ use of the word “power” hints that perhaps students’ conceptions of power and privilege were interchangeable. Both terms were used by students in ways that show that students understood that whites received systemic, unfair advantages. They were able to identify ways that texts, discourses, institutions, empowered some and took power away from others.

At the same time, however, a closer look at students’ characterizations of power and privilege brings about troubling questions about their understandings of race. Were students identifying “blackness” as the barrier rather than people of color *experiencing* barriers as a function of systemic racism? Furthermore, were students associating whiteness with power and privilege as an inherent relationship, as opposed to the idea that white people *access* power more easily as a function of unjust, systemic privilege? The following student comments suggest that the answer is yes. When asked at the end of the year about the social issues that we worked through that year one student commented, “A lot has to do with that kids that have power and same with white people and people without power like blacks.” There were other student comments such as, “... blacks don’t have power, white’s do” and “...at the race exhibit I learned that whites have the most

power” which indicate that students did, at times, understand power as an attribute of race.

There were other problematic ideas relating to understandings of race and racism underlying students’ conceptions of power and privilege. Perhaps as a result of the class having no racial diversity, moving students out of their white positioning was difficult. As in the above quotes, students often incorporated racial binaries of black and white, which indicate not a more complex understanding of others but a more essentialized one. There was one African American boy in the grade (though not in this class). When discussing slavery or other historical events/dynamics specifically involving African Americans, students referred to Jonathan. They referenced him in ways that tokenized him, for example, “I wonder what Jonathan thinks of that. I wish he was, like, in our class so we could see what he thinks” and “The slaves are Jonathan’s ancestors. How does that make him feel, I wonder?” I explained that not all people in a given group think the same way or have the same opinions about things and as to process it in a way that might have more meaning, we discussed that not everyone in our class (who were all white) had the same opinions about things. I did consider the paradox in this, however and did struggle somewhat with my response. After all, I was trying to teach them to consider multiple perspectives, so my students naturally wanted to hear the thoughts from what they considered a different perspective. So, despite their burgeoning appreciation for multiple perspectives, having only one African American student in the grade did not allow them to learn that within any given group there are multiple perspectives, and may have in fact reified essentialism.

Conclusion

In this chapter I shared some of the ways that teaching about power and privilege presented thorny issues for me and for students. Consistent with Helms' stage of disequilibrium in anti-racist identity development, students felt guilt, frustration and burden as they realized that racism is real and pervasive and affects many lives, including their own. I could relate with the guilt and shame that students felt as they processed some of the unthinkable periods of United States history. Jack's response to the learning about racism and homelessness on the fieldtrip represented a multi-layered response indicating emotional responses of guilt, shame and "heartbreak."

In addition to guilt, students expressed frustration on many levels as they began to question ideologies. In asking, "Why do people think that whites are better than blacks?" students interrogated not only the roots of racism but also their own ideologies. Many students began to practice agency by designing and/or participating in activities that aligned with social justice ideals. Learning that systemic change is incremental and very difficult was a hard lesson for some students. There were indicators that, to different extents, students began to feel personally burdened to change social dynamics and injustices that were out of their control.

Some students felt they needed to change the world and to end modern day slavery, for example. For other students the burden was felt more personally. Marie felt she needed to ensure that Sally was included and valued at times when Marie knew Sally struggled to fit in. That expectation resulted in Marie feeling constant pressure to advocate for and include Sally, but also marginalized Sally by spotlighting her.

Learning about power and privilege proved to be tricky as well. While it seemed that students' had a growing understanding of how power and privilege work, they also used the terms interchangeably and sometimes translated them into static and hierarchical social class models. Also concerning was students' characterization of power and how it aligned in simplistic ways with black and white categories. These characterizations associated whites with more power and blacks with less power.

Despite the troublesome issues raised in Chapters 5 and 6, I maintain my stance that teaching about power and privilege has an important place in all-white settings. All students must develop critical literacy skills that will help them recognize and resist false and unjust notions within texts. In addition to developing critical literacy skills, students need to have places to take risks, to share their thoughts and be willing to participate in the give and take of a caring learning community. However, these skills and classroom spaces cannot be created without a teacher who is mindful of the many ways this kind of teaching impacts students. It is my hope that these findings will add depth to our understanding of the complexities of critical literacy and critical pedagogy with young people, especially white students.

CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview of Study

This research was designed to examine how fifth grade students in an all white class, and within the dominant Discourse respond to learning about power and privileging systems. Students practiced studying texts and Discourses using the tools of critical literacy. Though critical pedagogy is typically framed as a “pedagogy of the oppressed,” this study is grounded in the belief that there is a place for critical literacy within dominant Discourse settings. Students within the dominant discourse deserve this kind of education and the changing demographics of our country call for it. However deserved or needed, critical literacy should be employed with thoughtful consideration. In fact, Edelsky (2006) asserted that critical literacy is

understandably rare – and certainly risky. It is clear how such transgressive instruction might be risky for teachers: they feel pressure to give up what they believe is right in favor of favor of what NCLB [No Child Left Behind] demands; they are demoralized; some are even pushed out of the classroom. It is less immediately obvious that instruction that is simultaneously welcoming, engaging and provocative might also put students at risk. (p. 197)

In this final chapter I will discuss some of the implications from this research that educators of critical literacy might consider in their work with young people and their communities.

As teacher-researcher in this process I was a full participant, which allowed me to reflect on my struggles from a teaching standpoint and to gain insight into the students’ experiences and responses. I was not focused on whether this framework was “successful” or “engaging” but rather, *how* students made sense of the ideas of power and

privilege and *how* students responded to critical literacy pedagogy. I used the principles and practices of action research and grounded theory to illuminate the students' responses. For instance, to collect rich data I used the practices of participant observation and teacher-researcher recursivity, and I employed systematicity in data collection, coding and analysis to identify emerging categories. Also consistent with grounded theory practices, I collected data that might reveal more nuanced student responses, including video recorded class discussions, student work samples, fieldwork observation notes, interviews and surveys (Charmaz, 2006).

My critical literacy teaching was rooted in the content areas of language arts and social studies, which were taught in an integrated way. While there is not one singular definition of critical literacy, I utilized a version of critical literacy that involved the following principles:

- Deconstructing the structures and features of texts and Discourses. We ask questions of them. We consider: For what purpose has the text or Discourse been constructed in this way and who is it serving?
- Viewing texts and Discourses as social constructs that reflect some of the ideas and beliefs held by some groups of people at the time of their creation. As we examine the underlying values and consider the ways in which we, as readers and viewers, are positioned to view the world, we are able to develop alternative interpretations.
- Exploring alternative readings. We consider what has been included and what has been left out. If we were to view the text or Discourse from different perspectives, would it be constructed the same way? Does the text or Discourse present unequal positions of power?
- Focusing on the beliefs, values and possible motivations of the author. We consider the time and culture in which the text was created. In what ways might the views represented in the text be similar to or different from the views that we hold today? Are there psychological, social, cultural and/or political reasons for the differences?

- Working for social equity and change. As we begin to analyze the powerful ways in which texts and Discourses work and we discover the ways in which our feelings, attitudes and values are manipulated by language, we begin to operate powerfully within our world. We are able to become agents of social change challenging of inequalities and injustices.

Synthesis of Findings

Taking on these ways of viewing texts and Discourses can be difficult for anyone, including ten and eleven year old students. Although students responded to this learning in a myriad of ways throughout the year, in this dissertation I focused on the themes that were the most strongly suggested by the data in terms of student response to critical literacy. Here I offer a synthesis of the findings which will lead to implications for teaching and future research.

One of the main ways that students seemed to make sense of critical literacy practices and the concepts of power and privilege was to think about them in terms of how they fit into their own 5th grade social worlds. Often, during social studies lessons, students made connections between the power struggles we discussed in American history, struggles in our modern day society and the power struggles they experience in their social worlds. As such, they began to talk about power in terms of how it is gained, or constructed, based on social conditions, motives and values. Students identified *popularity* as a pervasive hierarchical social structure that many struggled to navigate. As a class we analyzed how power functioned within the system of popularity similar to how we examined how power functioned between groups historically. We interrogated the underlying values of *popularity*, how it positions individuals and to what ends, and

contrasted it with a new idea, one that renamed the structure in terms of social power.

Deconstructing popularity in this way helped students to identify social injustices in their social worlds and challenge them. It also helped students reframe the structure as one that was socially constructed, rather than an inherent system that assigns value and determines “winners” and “losers.”

One student, Carter, developed a “bull’s eye” metaphor that helped him and others think about popularity as a power structure. The metaphor also illustrated the ways that he and others were thinking about privilege. Carter likened students to arrows that aim for the center of the target, which I interpreted as students who were popular, or had “high social power.” Carter observed that in his social world, cultural capital such as “looks” and “money” indicated a straighter arrow and predisposed a person to more easily hit the center of the target. Carter’s metaphor speaks of a system, or bull’s eye that was static, but that students did have some degree of agency to alter their position on the target. Carter was also able to articulate the ways that being at the center of the circle perpetuated those students’ privileges in that they were less likely to endure the negative experiences associated with having “low social power” such as teasing or marginalization. Jack, a student who was considered as very popular, acknowledged that having a lot of social power allowed him to avoid teasing and marginalizing behaviors of his peers.

As the social world of students became a focal point, it served as an active model to examine the workings and effects of power and privileging systems in a very intimate way. Consequently, the students and I became even more aware of the social dynamics within the group. One behavior that I noticed having an intimidating effect on others was

Jack's laughter. I recognized it as a performance of power, as did others in the class, yet I struggled in my decision of whether and how to address it. Public condemnation of Jack's laughter was complicated by my understanding of laughter as a natural reaction of the body to many kinds of stimulus, including discomfort, resistance, and nervousness. Jack's laughter was intimidating to others, but I could not be sure if that was his intention. I recognized that our interrogation of the social hierarchy from which Jack benefitted could feel troubling or threatening for him. He was a child entrusted to me as the teacher and this speaks to the ethics of teaching. This illustrates a paradox that occurred for me in the teaching of critical literacy. I was participating and encouraging the disruption of the social status quo that seemed to be troubling many students, but in doing so, I was also threatening Jack's position in the class and potentially repositioning him as an oppressor-like "actor" in their world.

Jack's laughter was just one of the ways that students' response to critical literacy in this setting was complicated. Studying American history using a lens of critical literacy brought about feelings of guilt, shame and frustration. There were many instances of students sharing their feelings of guilt as they aligned with the oppressors of Native Americans and African Americans as we studied systems of colonialism and slavery. Using American history as content, it was difficult to move them through these emotions to praxis or transformation, from what Giroux (Giroux, 1988) calls the "language of critique" to the "language of possibility."

Studying modern day injustices, such as slave labor in the chocolate industry had greater potential for students to enact agency, but it opened up different, unexpected tensions. Students organized a "compact" and asked their peers to commit to abstaining

from eating non-fair trade chocolate for one month. While this contemporary issue held more possibility for transformation or praxis, it also caused tension for some students and parents as it led discussions of parent and family ideologies. Students began to inquire about purchasing fair trade chocolate, coffee and other products. One parent called me on the phone and defended her choice to “buy Hershey bars by the six pack.” If part of white privilege is the ability to ignore injustices then perhaps, in this teaching, I was requiring parents to give up an aspect of their privilege as well.

Students experienced frustration as a result of several different factors. Richmond is, at the time of the writing of this dissertation, a relatively isolated and homogeneous suburb. Students learned about poverty and studied homelessness, and though they organized a fundraiser for a shelter in the city, they learned about it as a function of systemic racism over which they felt they had little control. Students expressed a desire to change the world and regret that they could not do more. Students also experienced frustration as they began to identify racist thinking in the media, in their families and throughout history and could not understand how it originated and why such thinking still exists. This frustration led to another struggle for me as the teacher, as I did not have the easy answers that it seemed they wanted to hear; answers that would make it all make sense.

Another unexpected outcome related to student response was students’ characterization that they were positioned in undesirable ways. Marie took on a role of social advocate in the class to combat the marginalization that some students experienced. This positioned her in her peer group, and to some degree in her own mind, as one who is always expected to play this role. Doing so became burdensome for Marie

and when she backed off of this role, even temporarily, others criticized her, which exacerbated her conflicted feelings of guilt and relief in letting go of being the caretaker. Similarly, Sally, a student of little social power felt positioned in an uncomfortable way that was equally as unexpected. Using students' social world as a model to understand the how power works in and through Discourses, made Sally "more and more marginalized." As unintentional as it seemed, I suspect that class discussions directly or indirectly spotlighted her and her social position in the class.

The last theme that I identified in students' response was strands of re-centering static, hierarchical social class models and whiteness. As I analyzed student talk about social class I noticed a pattern that referred to the social power structure in their world as a fixed and pre-determined construct that sorts students into levels based on certain criteria over which students have little control. When students referred to social class in this way it implied a lack of personal agency and seemed to deny their participation in the construction of it. Similarly, student talk about race indicated that sometimes students aligned whites with more power and blacks with less, which implicates race as the cause of struggle rather than unjust systems of privilege.

In this study I looked specifically at student response to critical literacy, specifically, the study of power and privilege. What I found was that embedded in this kind of teaching is tension, struggle, frustration, discomfort, spotlighting of students and the potential to re-center ideas that are antithetical to social justice ideologies. I do not believe that these findings are as dooming as they appear, for, requisite to these responses is students' engagement, concern, desire to understand the world in ways that are alternative to the dominant Discourses, the willingness to have necessary discussions

about race and privilege, and a motivation to understand and to enact one's role in a more just world. These are threads that were not discussed at length in this dissertation, but are nonetheless reasons that compel educators to continue the work of critical literacy and social justice education. What this research offers to this end is perhaps a better understanding of critical literacy teaching within the dominant Discourse. Those who espouse a liberatory agenda and engage critical pedagogies in their classrooms learn that "More often than not, things do not go according to plan: objectives reappear as too simple, too complicated or get lost; concepts become glossed over, require long detours or go awry... In short, pedagogy is filled with surprises, involuntary returns and unanticipated twists (Britzman, 1991, p. 60). It is my hope that this research offers insight that might help others navigate this tricky but necessary and powerful pedagogical terrain.

Implications

While I can't generalize my experiences in ways that translate directly for teachers in other settings with other students, my findings suggest implications that may inform the work of other teachers of critical literacy or critical pedagogy. I offer two main categories of recommendations. The first one focuses on establishing a foundation of communication with communities outside of the classroom. Parents and administrators are parts of the larger community and it is vital that critical literacy educators have as much support from them as possible. This support stems from strong communication, academic rigor, trust and understanding, and this is the purpose of the first set of implications. The other category of implications directly addresses some ways that teachers might minimize the negative effects on students.

*Critical Pedagogy Must Consider Parents and Administrators Important Members of the
Learning Community*

Although this was not the central focus of my study, I feel compelled to begin the discussion of implications for teaching by sharing some of the ways that teachers can think about proactively framing critical literacy and critical pedagogy within the community outside of the classroom, namely, the parents and administrators. These groups are directly relevant to critical literacy pedagogy for several important reasons. First, critical literacy is not customarily found in the scope and sequence of K-12 education and it is therefore not a part of the sanctioned curriculum. Teachers who incorporate this framework most often do so independently and may find themselves in a position that requires justifying or explaining its use and purpose to administrators and parents. The implications suggested here recognize the need to establish trust, understanding and communication with these two groups. Second, there are significant deliberate ripple effects that occur outside of the classroom, in homes and other spaces in the school. The students in this research initiated several formal praxis-related projects that were school-wide, including an information campaign and fundraiser for the homeless and an initiative to educate and raise awareness about child slave labor in the chocolate industry. It was crucial that administration and parents understood what the class was doing and why we were doing it. Third, the effects of critical literacy reached to communities outside of the classroom in ways that were not deliberately planned. As this research has shown, students' respond to this kind of teaching in sometimes emotional ways and the adults in students' lives need to be privy to classroom discourses to better

support students. There were also other unintended ripple effects outside of the classroom, namely, lunchroom and playground issues. My position as teacher researcher allowed me to incorporate some of what I did to minimize potential negative repercussions with parents and administration into the following implications. My teacher researcher reflexivity also allows me to incorporate implications based on decisions I would have handled differently. So, I share the following implications for teaching with the intention of helping fellow educators minimize tensions, troubles and misunderstandings with parents and administrators and ultimately build strong and supportive communities that support critical pedagogies.

Educators need to do a better job of educating parents and administration about the principles of critical literacy and framing it as basic literacy skill. Critical literacy allows readers to analyze and understand texts on a deeper level by uncovering the assumptions and motivations in texts. Parents and administrators need to understand that the habits of critical literacy will help students be able to understand and critique texts in more sophisticated ways. Be transparent about your themes/units of study and how practices of critical literacy will be integrated into them. At times, I thought that it would be easier to teach potentially controversial topics behind closed doors in the hopes that any parents who might object would either not hear about what we were studying or hear too little to want to inquire further. This approach did not serve me well over the long term because I was not able to fully understand and address the concerns of two parents who voiced them directly. At the end of the year when I asked for feedback in the parent survey it seemed to me that those festering concerns could have been worked through at an earlier stage. This may have minimized some of the tension that those

students felt as a result of conflicting politics between class discourse, home discourse and their own changing beliefs. I don't know that I would have drastically changed my ways of teaching, but clearer communication would have helped parents better understand the nature of critical literacy so that they didn't feel broadsided by potentially controversial topics when students discussed them at home.

Building in overt rigor in teaching and learning of critical literacy would help educators build trust and support. As in many other communities, parents in the community of Richmond wanted to see that their children were making academic progress. Parents wanted to see that their children could read and write well and that they were authentically engaged in reading and writing. At home, they enjoyed hearing their children talk enthusiastically about sophisticated topics that they were exploring in school. I made a point to share students' work with parents on a regular basis. Building in overt rigor in my teaching and learning helped to gain and maintain parent approval and trust.

Clearly connecting critical literacy work to curriculum objectives would help teachers bolster their case for additional support. In this study, one of the main ways that we practiced critical literacy was to compare texts that discussed the same event or period in history. This teaching required me to be resourceful in acquiring materials from a variety of sources, including picture books, novels, videos/DVD's and newspapers. Funds to build libraries of texts that teachers could access more easily would be helpful. Critical literacy also requires a more unique kind of support, specifically, emotional and professional support. There was one instance not discussed in the data that a parent questioned my approach to teaching about slavery and showing segments of the Steven

Spielberg film *Amistad* (1999). Though I had carefully edited parts that were age appropriate, a parent was concerned that I showed *any* part of this film. Students had come to the conclusion that the written textbooks we studied undermined the severity and politics of slavery. We contrasted some of the images of slavery from the video with the written accounts from the text book. When the administrator of Richmond school was contacted by the parent about this part of the curriculum, she supported me in my decision because she understood the aims of critical literacy²². More important to me at that time was the emotional support she gave me personally and her response that supported my teaching in the face of parent concerns. Oftentimes, in my experience, administrators take the road of least resistance, so an administrator who values critical pedagogy is a great asset. Educators can build these alliances with administrators by showing them clearly how critical literacy aims support the curriculum.

Implications for Working with Students

Because critical literacy teaching and learning can be intense, teachers must monitor stress levels and offset the intensity with an eye on the whole child.

Privilege, power and other critical literacy related ideas are concepts with which students must grapple in order to understand, and they challenge individuals in personal ways. In this study I was interested in student response to critical literacy. I was intent on getting sufficient and rich data to be able to adequately answer my research question. This may have caused me to focus on critical literacy to a greater extent than I otherwise would have. For example, there were times that students came in from recess and wanted to

²² She did recommend that I get parent permission to allow students to view the movie in the future.

discuss an event that happened on the playground. Most of the time, I chose to have the discussion because I was interested in how students perceived and talked about those social workings because they often talked about power relationships and systems, either directly or indirectly. Some of our best discussions were generated out of an event or frustration associated with students' social worlds so I was inclined to play them out. Some of these discussions however seemed to occur too often, for too long, with a great deal of emotional intensity, causing me concern that students may have felt overwhelmed.

One time in particular I remember discussing a difficult concept with regard to critical discourse analysis. Students had compared two texts and were writing their analysis. I began to notice some students becoming frustrated with the mental load that was required of this work. Although they had seemed to be engaged at first, they began to shut down. There were other times when I had noticed this response as well and I usually tried to reengage them. In this case, it was a beautiful day so I decided to take a break outside to play group games and run off some tension. When I watched them dart out the door onto the grass and observe their playful spirits²³ it was a telling reminder of their youth. I believe that teachers of young people need to be aware of how serious and intense critical pedagogy can be and its potential effects on students' learning. Teachers need to monitor for signs of students becoming stressed or overwhelmed, and offset the intensity by integrating breaks, humor or play.

Discomfort, or disequilibrium, needs to be viewed as a natural and healthy state of learning and conscientization. For many teachers it goes against our instincts to

²³ It was the end of the year so some of their joy was probably attached to that.

embrace struggle when oftentimes comfort, “safety” and harmony are aims for our learning communities. I found that overlaying American history topics such as colonization and slavery and the dimension of analyzing students’ own social worlds added to the agitation of critical literacy learning. Teachers need to monitor when students’ discomfort might be turning into distress, and be mindful of ways to circumvent it, minimize it or help move students through it.

Teachers need to better scaffold the process of praxis, or transformation, so that children can learn multiple ways to access their agency and move through discomfort. Critical literacy theorists have asserted that transformation is a necessary part of the practice of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1988; Janks, 2001). The act of transformation not only serves the aims of social justice, but equally as important, serves to move students through the distressing emotions that can accompany critical pedagogy. I wrestled with this aspect of critical literacy because I wanted to, whenever possible, let ideas for praxis arise from the students, rather than imposing my ideas for transformation. Students followed their desire to transform (e.g. homeless shelter fundraiser, slave labor in the chocolate industry awareness campaigns) and move through the guilt and feeling of injustice. Teachers must recognize that critical literacy requires transformation and it is crucial that we model and support that.

As critical literacy educators, we need to help them discover **HOW** to identify instances of injustice in their worlds and respond in ways that challenge them. Students need to also understand that while it is healthy to take responsibility for social change, they don’t have to change the world. Some of my students voiced their frustration at not being able to do more. They had the desire to “make things right” but felt personally

disappointed at not being able to do so. For these students, examining how power and privilege work systemically and tacitly made it more difficult to understand how they could challenge it. When engaging critical pedagogy with young people, educators must be aware that this may be the first time students study injustices. We must be prepared to help them understand that they don't have to fix all of the injustices that they encounter, they just need to do what they can, that it's okay to do *something* and not *everything*.

Critical literacy educators need to remember that conscientization and learning critical literacy practices are unpredictable and recursive processes.

Students don't take on these practices as discrete skills and they can't be assessed in measureable ways. They are habits of thinking that are deeply tied to ideologies, which are difficult for any of us to examine. As students grapple with the ideas of race, whiteness, justice, responsibility, guilt, etc., responses can be unpredictable and recursive. Also, educators can better serve children in this process if they understand that, because students all have their own histories, family ideologies, values, and approaches to learning, students will respond differently. While one student may feel a sense of agency about a certain topic, that same topic might be threatening to a different student. And, while a student might respond in a socially conscious way one day, the same student may take a different stance the next day.

Teachers of critical pedagogy must be willing to examine their own practices and be open to potential negative effects. Usually, when teachers reflect on their practice they consider learning objectives and student progress. Teachers examine what they do instructionally to get desired student outcomes. I believe that teachers of critical literacy need to challenge themselves to reflect on their practice in alternate ways.

Teachers need to consider the ways that students might be affected in undesirable ways. This includes reflection on teacher practices but also very close observation and awareness of students' responses in all of their nuance and complexity. For instance, there were three students in my study who expressed that they questioned racist comments or assumptions made by their parents at different times throughout the year. One student told about a time when she and her mother were at a convenience store in Richmond and they saw a young African American man dressed in a way she described as "gangster-ish"²⁴. The student described the incident:²⁵

My mom was kinda like rolling her eyes at the way he dressed and I'm like, Mom, why are you rolling your eyes? She's like, I didn't. And I'm like, yeah, Mom, I just saw you roll your eyes, and she's like, because look at the way he's dressed, and I'm like, who cares? I mean, maybe he just wants to dress like that. She's like, oh, he's probably like hooked on drugs. I'm like, mom, maybe he's a really nice guy because when I was in [the city] there were a lot of guys dressed like that, and she's like, she's just kind of like, didn't really believe me that they would be really nice and everything, because she wasn't used to it.

She told this story to the class with pride and frustration. This student seemed proud to have addressed her mother's racist thinking, but also frustrated with her mother's unyielding response. This story illustrates one of the ways that critical pedagogy, in this setting, can position students in uncomfortable ways²⁶. I tried to recognize this and help students understand that changing beliefs is difficult. When a few other students had similar concerns I tried to draw students back to some of the texts we

²⁴ When I asked her what she meant by that she described his pants low around the waist, his baseball hat on sideways and a gold necklace.

²⁵ This story was told during the all-girl focus group interview which was videotaped and transcribed.

²⁶ Discussing parents' beliefs can also position teachers in uncomfortable ways.

had analyzed and to recall the ways that our beliefs and ideas are influenced. Teachers must also consider what re-centering of classist, racist, homophobic, misogynistic, etc., views might look like in their own settings. Teachers must be watchful for them and learn how to interrogate them in gentle, yet direct ways.

Teachers need to include student and parent feedback in their reflexive process. This research revealed that examining power and privilege by focusing on students' social worlds can have negative spotlighting affects for some students. Although I suspected this effect several times with different students, it was confirmed in a student survey at the end of the year. Because of the unpredictable nature of critical pedagogy, it is critical that teachers solicit feedback from students in ways that allows them to be honest and have privacy protected.

Implications for Further Research

While there is much research addressing curriculum and “how-to’s” of critical literacy instruction, there is scant research specifically examining the implications for students. Research areas that will add depth to our understanding of the ways students might be affected in troubling ways and how teachers can better negotiate them include the following two recommendations.

First, qualitative researchers need to continue to explore issues of employing critical pedagogy in different K-12 settings. Considering some of the potentially troubling ways that students responded and the ways they were positioned in this study, teacher-researchers would be poised to examine these issues further. For instance, there may be certain aspects of the critical literacy framework or certain teaching approaches within

the framework that better suit students at the elementary, intermediate, middle or high school levels in terms of age-appropriateness. Likewise, researchers need to further investigate the ways that students in different cultural settings (i.e. predominately white predominately of color, urban, suburban, rural) engage in critical pedagogy and anti-racist education. Qualitative research and teacher-research especially, is well suited to capture the complexities and variations of how students engage in this kind of framework. From this further research, conclusions may be drawn that would help educators navigate their instruction, students, parents and administrators to better support teachers and students.

Second, it is important to increase our understanding of how our own discourses and teaching methods, not only our curriculum choices, affect our efficacy as critical educators. As Rogers (2002) critically analyzed her own discourse with students and found that nuances of her teaching methods and interactions were antithetical to her own belief systems, so too must educators take hard and critical looks at their own teaching. Through this critical self-examination we can also learn how to navigate the learning experiences that can foster climates that lead to student resistance. When teachers examine the micro and macro levels of our own teaching and discourses we can uncover the potentially negative ways we may be positioning students.

Final Thoughts

It is imperative that young people learn habits of thinking to help them thrive in an increasingly multicultural world. My students asserted that they deserve to learn ways that honor their intellect and challenge mainstream historical narratives. In light of some

of the findings of this study one might assume that teaching critical literacy is too risky, and potentially too disturbing for young people. I would argue that teaching that *does not* incorporate critical practices undermines students' potential to understand concepts of power and privilege. As this research shows, students already live in a social world imbued with power and privilege, and we would better serve students by helping them understand and navigate it. If students can identify ways that power and privilege are at work in their communities, they are better able to challenge discourses that unjustly marginalize and disempower.

This kind of direct examination has liberatory potential in both communities and individuals. As one critical literacy teacher explained, "In untying the knot [of racism and other isms], you're unraveling the web of lies that each of us has inevitably experienced [and] that have taken their dehumanizing toll... in unraveling even a bit of the whole, we feel tremendously excited. We have only to unravel more of it so to reclaim ourselves more completely" (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997, p. 137). Employed with care and within larger frameworks of justice and compassion, critical literacy and critical pedagogy better serve young people and our society.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: CDA of Class Discussion about Jack’s Laughter using Fairclough’s Approach (*Language and Power*, 2001)

	Description	Interpretation
Jack	Repeated word: like Contested word/euphemism: funny, Interruption: exerting power	Student/Child Perceived by self and others as powerful
Derek	Contested words/ euphemisms: weird, joking Agency: Sometimes I wish I didn’t laugh in those moments Lack of agency: everyone Interruption: exerting power	Student/Child Friend of both Jack and Corey
Corey	Repeated word: like Rewording: Regret it/ wish they could take it back Sentence structure: Stuttering, stammering Lack of agency: some people, you, a lot of people, they Shift in agency: you’re/you → we & you → they Renaming: feel uncomfortable	Student/Child Well- liked Lacks agency Friend and Target of Jack
Marie	Repeated word: like Overwording: Emotional/crying Lack of agency: crying emotional thing went on; people Interruption: exerting power	Student/Child Well-liked Exhibits agency Frame/Script/Schema: Collaborated in the challenging of the laughter
John	Contested word/ euphemism: funny Agency: Direct and naming	Student/Child Exhibits agency Frame/Script/Schema: Collaborated in the challenging of laughter
Maggie	Contested word/ euphemism: funny Markedly formal: intelligent comment Avoiding agency: what’s so funny? Assigning agency: Why do you do it to your own friend? Assumption: What is so funny (assuming something is funny) Enforcing explicitness: What is so funny?/What was funny about it? Interruption: exerting power	Authority figure Adult Evaluator Researcher Teacher Concerned with a just classroom Has agenda/purpose for discussion: to summarize and touch on what was learned

	<p>Showing solidarity: I was wondering why they were laughing too Identifies the laughter as something negative that is “do[ne] to somebody” Pointed question in front of class: accountability, setting an example</p>	<p>throughout the year Hoping to hear students reflect on critical literacy learning Frame/Script/Schema: Challenging Jack and Derek on their laughter showed control of the topic of discussion and redefined a norm of the group</p>
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	Explanation (Social determinants, Ideologies & Effects)
Jack	<p>High social power; laughs at Corey, shows no regret, Jack states that Derek started and participated in the laughter in an attempt to deflect/distribute negative attention Jack does not offer a reason why he was laughing and whispering to Derek while Corey was talking</p>
Derek	<p>Medium social power; contradiction: expresses regret at laughing at others in the past, however did laugh in this instance, then emphatically denies Jack’s claim that he (Derek) started the laughter Derek challenges Jack’s attempt to deflect/distribute the negative attention</p>
Corey	<p>Medium social power; laughed at by friend/foe Jack, passive about the laughter Lack of speech fluency indicates Corey’s struggle to maintain thought pattern and confidence while noticing Jack and Derek’s laughter Change in pronouns indicates that Corey is referring to certain people who laugh at others but does not want to name them</p>
Marie	<p>Medium social power; attempts to support/collaborate in challenging Jack about his laughter</p>
John	<p>Low social power; attempts to support/collaborate in challenging Jack about his laughter accusing Jack directly</p>
Maggie	<p>Within the institution of schools: The knower, guide, the authority and facilitator Overtly challenges Jack (and Derek) about their of laughing at another student Shows solidarity with Corey (protection? consolation?) through agreement with him, challenging the laughing behavior and disapproval of it implying it is disrespectful behavior Recognizing my power position as teacher, I validate Corey’s comment (which the class had observed Jack laughing at) as an “intelligent comment” to save face for Corey</p>

Appendix B: Transcription Notation Key

(())	Teacher-researcher comment or observation
()	Unclear talk
<i>emphasis</i>	Raised voice or emphasis
/	Interruption
-	Discontinued comment, self-interruption or break in flow of sentence
?	Interrogative or upward intonation
...	Material deleted
(was)	Best guess for words spoken

Appendix C: Interview Questions

(Interviews were conducted using this list of questions as a guide. Not all questions were used. Other questions were incorporated based on student responses.)

Power

1. How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you?
2. What would your IDEAL classroom be like?
3. What would your IDEAL teacher be like?
4. Who do you hang around with at school?
5. How is your school year going so far? Can you tell me about some of the highlights? Any experiences that weren't so great?
6. Is there anything we have learned about (in my class) that stands out in your mind? Why does that stand out? How did you feel/react to that learning? Did it cause you to think differently about _____? In what ways?
7. What are your favorite parts of the school day? Why?
8. Do you see our class as a bunch of different groups? If so, what are the groups? How do they differ from each other? Which group are you in? Why are you in that group?
9. Can a kid change from one group to another? Can one person be a member of more than one group?
10. Do groups shift depending on where you are (school, boy scouts, recess, lunch, bus, classroom, halls, etc.)? Does "popularity" shift depending on where you are?
11. How is it determined which group is the _____ group?
12. In class we have discussed the idea of "popularity" and "social power". How would you use these terms to discuss the kids or groups of kids in our class?
13. Based on this list that we made in class (of the factors that contribute to one's "popularity") which factors do you think are the most influential? Would you add any others to the list that aren't there? Do any of the factors on the list describe you?
14. What is the opposite of "popular" or "socially powerful"? How do you think those kids feel/how does it make you feel? Have you **ever** felt that way?
15. How do you (think the "popular" kids) feel about the kids who are "unpopular"? Do they/you seem to care?
16. How do the popular kids/you feel about being "popular"?
17. Does it matter what teachers think about "popularity"?
18. I want you to think about all of the places you are throughout the day/week. Where do you feel that you have the most "power"? Why? Is there anyone who doesn't have power there? Who?
19. Where do you have the least amount of "power"? Why? Is there anyone who does have power in that setting? Who?
20. Can you describe a time when you felt that you had no social power? What happened?
21. Can you describe a time when you felt that you had a lot of social power? What happened?

22. Do you ride the bus? If so, how is it decided who will sit where? Draw me a picture and show me where you sit? What happens on the bus?
23. How does it get decided who gets to talk during morning meetings? At the lunch table? In book club discussions (like during *The City of Ember* discussions)?

Curriculum

1. How do you like learning about history this year?
2. What are some of the most important things you have learned this year?
3. Looking at this pile (show cards representing topics) of things we have learned about this year, can you put them in order what you felt most comfortable learning to least comfortable? Discuss.
4. Can you now put them in order of what you enjoyed learning about the most to the least? Discuss.
5. Have you talked to kids in other classes about what they are doing in social studies and language arts? What do they tell you? What do you tell them we are doing?
6. How do you think what we do is different from what other classes are doing?
7. Do you ever talk about what we learn in class to your parents? If so, what have you talked to them about?
8. What would you tell someone who has very little knowledge about the times when colonists first came to the New World. On a scale of 1-10, how comfortable were you learning about the conflicts between the Native Americans and the Colonial Americans?
9. Were there any parts of that history that made you feel uncomfortable? Were there any parts that made you cringe? Feel sad?
10. When learning about how the Colonists and Native Americans treated each other, were there any parts that made you feel disappointed? Proud? Confused? Which parts... tell me more.
11. Did you associate yourself with either group as we were learning about that time period?
12. Do you think that being white affected how you responded to that part of history? Can you tell me more?
13. How do you feel so far as we are starting to learn about the United States' involvement with slavery? Why?
14. Do you think you would feel differently (during class) if there was a black student in our class? If so, why?
15. How do you think you are going to feel discussing slavery in our class?
16. Have you had any experiences outside of school that connect with (or made you think about) ideas about power? Slavery? Race issues?
17. Can you tell me about how what we have learned this year has affected what you believe about groups, society, kids in school, how you treat others, etc?

Other

1. How would you explain “history” if someone asked you to?
2. What is important to remember when learning about history? If you could change any parts of history, what would you change?
3. What do you remember about the responsibilities of a citizen?
4. What do you remember about the principles a democracy?
5. What does mean to be “in America”? What does it mean to be an American?
6. What did power do for or against whites during the time of slavery? Blacks?
7. What does power do for or against whites now? Blacks?
8. How did slave owners keep power over slaves?
9. Do you think that anyone today is trying to keep power over others? How? Is it working?
10. Do you think power is a good thing or a bad thing or neither? Both?
11. In class we have talked about what 5th graders do to get power. How do you get power in our society?
12. Do you think that you have power? How did they get it?
13. Do your parents have power? How did they get it? Do you think it was easy or hard?
14. How might some people be born with more or less power than others? Were you born with some power?
15. What kind of person is born with little power?

Appendix D: Principles of a Democracy

(This is taken from a one page document that we studied at the beginning of the year to develop a lens and ground our thinking as we examined US History. The full document can be found at the website listed at the end of the text.)

Democracy comes from the Greek word, “demos,” meaning people. In democracies, it is the people who hold sovereign power over legislator and government.

Although nuances apply to the world's various democracies, certain principles and practices distinguish democratic government from other forms of government.

- Democracy is government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all citizens, directly or through their freely elected representatives.
- Democracy is a set of principles and practices that protect human freedom; it is the institutionalization of freedom.
- Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule, coupled with individual and minority rights. All democracies, while respecting the will of the majority, zealously protect the fundamental rights of individuals and minority groups.
- Democracies guard against all-powerful central governments and decentralize government to regional and local levels, understanding that local government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible.
- Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society.
- Democracies conduct regular free and fair elections open to all citizens. Elections in a democracy cannot be facades that dictators or a single party hide behind, but authentic competitions for the support of the people.
- Democracy subjects governments to the rule of law and ensures that all citizens receive equal protection under the law and that their rights are protected by the legal system.
- Democracies are diverse, reflecting each nation's unique political, social, and cultural life. Democracies rest upon fundamental principles, not uniform practices.
- Citizens in a democracy not only have rights, they have the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms.
- Democratic societies are committed to the values of tolerance, cooperation, and compromise.

Democracies recognize that reaching consensus requires compromise and that it may not always be attainable. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, “intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit.”

<http://www.america.gov/st/democracy-english/2008/May/20080609194207eaifas0.8688013.html#ixzz0It8fVZhH&D>

Appendix E: Citizen Responsibilities

(This is taken from a one page document that we studied at the beginning of the year to develop a lens and ground our thinking as we examined US History. The full document can be found at the website listed at the end of the text.)

Unlike a dictatorship, a democratic government exists to serve the people, but citizens in democracies must also agree to abide by the rules and obligations by which they are governed. Democracies grant many freedoms to their citizens including the freedom to dissent and criticize the government.

Citizenship in a democracy requires participation, civility, and even patience.

- Democratic citizens recognize that they not only have rights, they have responsibilities. They recognize that democracy requires an investment of time and hard work – a government of the people demands constant vigilance and support by the people.
 - Under some democratic governments, civic participation means that citizens are required to serve on juries, or give mandatory military or civilian national service for a period of time. Other obligations apply to all democracies and are the sole responsibility of the citizen – chief among these is respect for law. Paying one's fair share of taxes, accepting the authority of the elected government, and respecting the rights of those with differing points of view are also examples of citizen responsibility.
 - Democratic citizens know that they must bear the burden of responsibility for their society if they are to benefit from its protection of their rights.
 - There is a saying in free societies: you get the government you deserve. For democracy to succeed, citizens must be active, not passive, because they know that the success or failure of the government is their responsibility, and no one else's. In turn, government officials understand that all citizens should be treated equally and that bribery has no place in a democratic government.
 - In a democratic system, people unhappy with their leaders are free to organize and peacefully make the case for change – or try to vote those leaders out of office at established times for elections.
 - Democracies need more than an occasional vote from their citizens to remain healthy. They need the steady attention, time, and commitment of large numbers of their citizens who, in turn, look to the government to protect their rights and freedoms.
 - Citizens in a democracy join political parties and campaign for the candidates of their choice. They accept the fact that their party may not always be in power.
- They are free to run for office or serve as appointed public officials for a time.

- They utilize a free press to speak out on local and national issues.
- They join labor unions, community groups, and business associations.
- They join private voluntary organizations that share their interests – whether devoted to religion, ethnic culture, academic study, sports, the arts, literature, neighborhood improvement, international student exchanges, or a hundred other different activities.
- All these groups – no matter how close to, or remote from government – contribute to the richness and health of their democracy.

<http://www.america.gov/st/democracy-english/2008/May/20080609201741eafas0.765484.html#ixzz0ItAPJTW4&D>

Appendix F: Parent Participation Consent Form

CONSENT FORM Students' Response to Critical Literacy
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You are invited to be in a research study on how students respond to critical literacy instruction. Your child was selected as a possible participant because your child is a student in my class. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Maggie Knutson, University of Minnesota & XXXXX Schools

Background Information

The main goal of this study is to examine the ways that students respond to critical literacy instruction. Critical literacy is an extension of basic reading and writing that involves looking at texts in more complex ways. Critical literacy learning involves considering social, historical, political and cultural relationships within texts, authors and readers. Critically literate students learn to think about who constructs texts, which representations are dominant, who is marginalized and whose interest certain representations serve. When representations are inequitable in their effects, students consider how they can be constructed otherwise.

Procedures

If you to participate in this study, you may be asked to do the following:

- 1) Participate in one individual interview with Maggie Knutson about your perceptions of your child's literacy learning. .
- 2) Communicate with Ms. Knutson about particular observations or conversations you witness about your child's literacy learning.
- 3) Participate in an on-line survey about your child's learning experiences in Ms. Knutson's classroom.

Risks and Benefits of the Study

There are no risks associated with this study. Several measures will be taken which assure the confidentiality of your and your child's comments/work. These are described in the section of this form entitled "confidentiality".

There are no known benefits to participating in this study.

Compensation

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept confidential. Your/your child’s name will not be used on any documentation. In any sort of report that might be published, there will be no information that would make it possible to identify any individual participating in this study.

Any audiotape or hard copy records collected for the purpose of this study will be stored securely and only Ms. Knutson will have access to the records. Video and/or audio recordings may be viewed by others strictly for the purposes of transcription and/or video editing and those individuals will not be given access to any information that could be used to identify you or the students. The records may be shared with other researchers only for the purposes of help in data analysis and they will not be given any identifying information about the students. All data will be destroyed after seven years.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your child’s grades or your/your child’s current or future relations with Ms. Knutson, XXXXX Schools or the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you/your child may withdraw at any time with out affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Maggie Knutson. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact her at XXXXXXXX (cell) or XXXXXXXX x6125 (classroom) by phone at any time during the study. You may also contact her by email at maggie.knutson@gmail.com or by post at 4139 Lyndale Ave S, Minneapolis, MN 55409. In addition, you may contact her adviser Dr. Cynthia Lewis at 159 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, by phone at XXXXXXXXXX or by email at lewis@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or her adviser, **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line at D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, MN 55455; 612.625.1650.

You will be given a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent participate in this study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____ Date _____

Appendix G: Student Assent Form

To: The students in Ms. Knutson's class

From: Ms. Knutson

Regarding: Study on Critical Literacy

I am conducting a research study on teaching and learning. I am trying to find out more about teaching critical literacy. Critical literacy is similar to learning how to read, but in critical literacy you think about more than just understanding words on a page. As you may already know, critical literacy can involve examining power relationships (like between the colonists and the Native Americans), comparing how different authors tell about history to affect how readers think about events and it can even involve reflecting on how we think about our world today... even how we get along with others in our class.

I am interested in learning more about how students think about critical literacy. If you agree to participate in this study, I **may** ask you to:

- Participate in up to three interviews (one-on-one and/or in a group)
- Allow me to collect samples of your work (photocopy assignments or work done during class activities)
- Allow me to audiotape class and/or small group discussions

Being in this study is totally up to you. Our relationship will not be affected in any way, no matter what you decide. If you agree to be in the study you don't have to do a thing unless you want to be interviewed. If you do want to be in the interview group, the interviews will take place before or after school.

You can ask me any questions you want about the study or about participating in it. You can ask me now or anytime throughout the rest of the year.

Signing here means that you have read this paper or had it read to you and that you are willing to be in the study. If you don't want to be in the study, don't sign. Remember, being in the study is up to you and no one will be mad at you if you don't sign this or even if you change your mind later.

Signature of participant _____

Signature of person explaining the study _____

Date _____

Assent form

Appendix H: Student Participation Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Students' Response to Critical Literacy: A Case Study

You are invited to be in a research study on how students respond to critical literacy instruction. Your child was selected as a possible participant because your child is a student in my class. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Maggie Knutson, University of Minnesota & XXXXX Schools

Background Information

The main goal of this study is to examine the ways that students respond to critical literacy instruction. Critical literacy is an extension of basic reading and writing that involves looking at texts in more complex ways. Critical literacy learning involves considering social, historical, political and cultural relationships within texts, authors and readers. Critically literate students learn to think about who constructs texts, which representations are dominant, who is marginalized and whose interest certain representations serve. When representations are inequitable in their effects, students consider how they can be constructed otherwise.

Procedures

If you to participate in this study, you may be asked to do the following:

- 1) Participate in one individual interview with Maggie Knutson about your perceptions of your child's literacy learning. .
- 2) Communicate with Ms. Knutson about particular observations or conversations you witness about your child's literacy learning.
- 3) Participate in an on-line survey about your child's learning experiences in Ms. Knutson's classroom.

Risks and Benefits of the Study

There are no risks associated with this study. Several measures will be taken which assure the confidentiality of your and your child's comments/work. These are described in the section of this form entitled "confidentiality".

There are no known benefits to participating in this study.

Compensation

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept confidential. Your/your child’s name will not be used on any documentation. In any sort of report that might be published, there will be no information that would make it possible to identify any individual participating in this study.

Any audiotape or hard copy records collected for the purpose of this study will be stored securely and only Ms. Knutson will have access to the records. Video and/or audio recordings may be viewed by others strictly for the purposes of transcription and/or video editing and those individuals will not be given access to any information that could be used to identify you or the students. The records may be shared with other researchers only for the purposes of help in data analysis and they will not be given any identifying information about the students. All data will be destroyed after seven years.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your child’s grades or your/your child’s current or future relations with Ms. Knutson, XXXXX Schools or the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you/your child may withdraw at any time with out affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Maggie Knutson. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact her at XXXXXXXXXX (cell) or XXX.XXXXXXXX x6125 (classroom) by phone at any time during the study. You may also contact her by email at maggie.knutson@gmail.com or by post at 4139 Lyndale Ave S, Minneapolis, MN 55409. In addition, you may contact her adviser Dr. Cynthia Lewis at 159 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, by phone at 612.XXXXXXXX or by email at lewis@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or her adviser, **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line at D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, MN 55455; 612.625.1650.

You will be given a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent participate in this study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____ Date _____